



down in the dirt  
revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

**068**  
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old equipment  
photographed in  
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## Untitled Haiku

Lynette Shoup

winter tears fall  
forgotten wishes vanish  
in the snow

# Awe

Domenica Martinello

Pull the static by its wire  
The sound of emptiness is crisp  
Ruffling leaves, blowing dust, a lone bird...  
With contempt you realize  
You can hear the ocean's tides  
Roaring up from the depths of the earth through the iron barred sewer.

Only navigating around life  
Like hamster in a wheel  
Spinning 'round  
And 'round and 'round, getting worn down  
Traveling through a fixed patch of scenery.

Such intricate organisms  
Wandering towards a simple existence  
Push out a piece  
Crumbling without a witness  
Humanity scurrying back to their dim-witted caves  
To tune back into the static.

# Careful

Bryan M. Huizi

An airliner stains the sky as gentle voices  
wander along the cement sidewalk. Blank canvas  
eyes stare at the faded yellow house across the  
avenue as street lamps sing a quiet song in the  
early evening. He looks booth ways as she asks  
him about something. A puzzle piece answer and  
she smiles, he carries video cases in his hand. He  
unlocks the automobile and she climbs in back. I  
watch them go, aware that some memories are  
similar to land-mines.

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playing th'

Devin Wayne Davis

easy  
to figure, i'd guess.  
why you're trying  
—lying to me ...  
as if i had my want ad  
already placed ...  
with a small word like  
serious, it's obvious—  
especially,  
when backed up  
by the modifier *not*.

In an obscure little part of the city, a place which rarely received any visitors, Adam, a man of forty, stood before what appeared to be an old and rusty office building. It was easy to overlook the building in all its shabbiness but Adam knew what precious secrets lay within. His lips curled into a slight smile as he pushed open the front door and stepped in.

He entered a plain white room completely devoid of any decoration. Directly across from him stood a set of doors, flanked by a pair of loudspeakers.

"Ah, our guest graces us with his presence at last," a voice greeted him from the speakers. "We've been expecting you, Adam. If you'll please wait a moment while we make some security scans... Alright, all clear. Please proceed through the next set of doors."

A lean figure dressed in a white lab coat was there to greet him. "Welcome to the Third Heaven Research Facility," the figure said, extending a gloved hand. "I am Dr. Neumann, the chief scientist in charge here."

"A pleasure," replied Adam, returning the handshake. "Do you have what I came for?"

"Of course. We hate to keep our customers waiting. I'm sure you've waited long enough. Now, if you'll please just follow me..."

The two walked along a bland hallway, as unremarkable as the room before. "You'll have to excuse us for the lack of adornments. They tend to attract needless attention from curious souls and are...excessive. Nevertheless, I believe you will find the work we've been conducting here nothing short of fascinating." They arrived at an elevator, with which they descended into the deeper levels of the facility.

"You see, most of our work is conducted underground, for various reasons, most of which cannot be disclosed. Suffice to say it is much easier to conduct our work away from prying eyes."

"I see..." There was brief moment of silence. "You're sure this is entirely legal? I have a reputation to uphold, you know."

"Well, not exactly. But rest assured, there is no danger of discovery. Our clients' privacy is one of our top concerns. That's one of the reasons why I only know your first name." Dr. Neumann peered at him with an odd smile.

"Besides," he continued, "who do you think our main customers are? High-ranking government officials and the wealthy. The government would be in for quite a mess if news of this facility ever got out. So, you see, it is in their best interests to keep us *hidden*." The elevator doors opened as it came to a stop, revealing a vast, circular chamber. Adam blinked in surprise at the bundle of trees that stood in the center of the chamber, feeding off the artificial light emanating from the ceiling. Ripe red apples gleamed alluringly from the branches.

"This is what we like to call 'The Garden,'" said Dr. Neumann as he swept

his arm in a broad gesture. "Perhaps I misspoke before when I said there were no decorations, if this sparse pocket of trees counts. Still, I assure you these apple trees are here for purely utilitarian purposes. They spare us tiresome trips to the surface for food. Useful, no?" The two men passed the garden and moved into another hallway.

"Just a little further..." Adam followed the doctor through more corridors.

They arrived at yet another set of doors. "Ah, we have reached our destination." The doors opened to reveal a sterile white room, much like a morgue, with several beds lining the walls. All of them were empty with the exception of one, which was occupied by a young-looking woman. A thin white blanket covered her naked body, not quite hiding the gorgeous curves of her body.

"She's beautiful!" gasped Adam as he rushed towards the bed. "Can I touch her?"

"You're free to do whatever you want with her. She was made for you after all."

"She's beautiful," Adam repeated, stroking her silken hair.

"Isn't she?" said Dr. Neumann, his eyes glistening with a new intensity. "Specimen 73 is the best we've created so far. The Creator himself couldn't have done better. She's just as you specified: appearance of a twenty-year-old, green eyes, black hair, top physical condition, type 3 lips..." Dr. Neumann went on to list an assortment of details.

"She's perfect!" Adam's expression was one of pure joy. "I must have her!" He continued to eyeball the serene and lifeless figure.

"Of course, of course. Have you settled on a name?"

"No, I haven't actually. I was hoping you could help me with that."

"Hm. I've never been good with names. But why not call her Eve? You'd be the perfect match."

"Eve. Yes, I like that. I'm going to call her Eve."

"Good. Creating perfect matches, it's what we do. Yes, the name's quite fitting. Quite fitting indeed. I'm sure you'll find her most satisfying." He pulled out a PDA from within his lab coat. "Now, there's still the matter of financial payment. If you'll just transfer the money to the specified account, she's all yours."

"Yes, I'll transfer the money right away..."

"Excellent. You're doing a noble thing here, Mr. Adam. We couldn't have accomplished this without customers like you. Together with you and our other clients, we'll be able to create a new Paradise on Earth. Just imagine it, a world in which everybody has a perfect partner. No more fights, no more divorces. True love restored."

"That's the future, isn't it?"

"That's how we've planned it. This is but a taste of what is to come. The work conducted here will change everything. Everything will be...perfect."

Dr. Neumann stood in silence as he watched Adam caress the figure. "Perfect."

# How Far Must I Travel?

Mel Waldman

I met this strange fellow just a few minutes ago. I was walking down the street and suddenly, this guy grabs my left arm and whispers in my ear about some place where one finds a secret. I asked him: "What secret?" He replied: "Anyone you have."

I started to rush off, but he didn't let go of my arm and we swiftly moved side by side. This peculiar interaction continued for a few minutes until I stopped and said: "Are you nuts, man?" And he said: "Of course."

Now, what kind of answer is that? I know there are all kinds of weirdoes in the city. But this guy really bothered me. He was very short, though not a midget, and dressed well, though not exactly the Madison Avenue type. He was his own type, and persistent to say the least.

I stared at him, and he stared back. And he asked me what my secret was. I simply laughed in his face. He didn't care, for he laughed in my face louder and with total delight. When I asked him why, he roared.

I didn't know what to do. Could easily have belted the guy with a left jab, or kicked him in the balls, but he was so small that any form of violence seemed inappropriate. Since I really didn't want to go to my original destination, I decided to join the creep for a while and try to figure him out.

Later, I weakened a little bit. "Okay, I've got a secret," I confessed. "But I won't tell you what it is. Can you take me to this place anyway? You know, where you find a secret."

Now he gets goofy on me and says in a quiet voice: "If you have a secret, why do you want to find one?" I tell the fellow he's talking nonsense. He replies: "Nonsense?" Once again, I try to escape. But he's with me all the way.

"Hey, what do you want from me?"

He grins sardonically and leaps into an abyss of silence. I wait.

"A secret," he reveals from far away.

"Okay," I whisper in his ear: "I'd like to touch my soul for a second, and remember."

"Come with me," he orders.

It's a mystery and a journey into the unknown, exciting and adventurous. I'm going to a strange place, I think. Yet he takes me into the cafeteria across the street. I'm disappointed and I tell him.

"Must we travel far to arrive?" the odd fellow asks.

"Arrive where?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"Maybe to a place where I can touch my soul."

We drink coffee. He has his black and I take mine regular. We talk about nothing much for a few hours. I tell him about myself and he listens. One thing about this guy-he's a terrific listener. Well, I tell him a lot. And from time to time I say: "I'd give anything to touch my soul."

He drinks the coffee and suddenly he laughs, boisterously, delightfully, magnificently, horribly, and painfully into my surprised face. I'm stunned. Don't know what to say. Yet before I have a chance, he's gone. Where? Anywhere, I guess. He left me sitting in the cafeteria, alone with my cup of coffee.

I feel unreal. Maybe I'm nuts. I mean, no one vanishes 1-2-3 when he's sitting next to you in a cafeteria. Am I *seeing things*? Was the stranger a figment of my imagination? Or was he *real* and did he actually vanish? But no one vanishes in a fraction of a second.

Now I feel very tired. For a moment, I believe, I close my eyes. Can't be sure. Time's an illusion. But in any case, I travel far away and discover...I'm a prisoner sitting in the center of a small cell. Yet when I look around, there is a surreal metamorphosis and I'm trapped in a dark labyrinth from which there is no exit. Perhaps, I am dreaming, for events flow into other fluid events in a rapid stream of phantasmagoria...

Soon, I'm in a small rectangular or square room. My vision is blurred. The atmosphere is foggy. It's not a cell or labyrinth. Yet I feel smothered by the dark mood it evokes and I gasp for breath in this miasma.

I float above a small crowd of people. Looking closer, I see the strangely familiar fellow stretched across this tiny room. Is he lying in a coffin? Am I in a funeral parlor or underground, hidden in ancient catacombs? Am I witnessing a group of mourners? Or are they members of a cult or cabal participating in a dark ritual? Is the man dead or alive?

Slowly, I descend toward the ghostly figure sprawled out in this tomblike space. His face is a blur but soon, I see clearly...his familiar face evokes terror...I recognize the man...in an uncanny moment of surprise and revelation...I meet my double...or perhaps, even weirder...myself-my moribund self, unconscious, comatose...surrounded by a team of doctors trying to resurrect me.

Suddenly, I merge with the other, vanishing inside his corpselike being. And I drift off again to a distant shore, as my medical team struggles to bring me back to human consciousness and life. Far away and nearby, I watch their heroic efforts. The room is filled with noble men and women with a calling. And although there are no humans in the room who really know me-no relative or friends waiting for my return, this team of strangers refuses to let me die, even though I tried to kill myself. To them, my life is precious. Isn't that incredible?

Far away, in a beautiful place I can't describe, I'm at peace. In the distance, I see the stranger. "I love you!" he cries out. And for a magical

moment which seems to span eternity, I touch my soul. Don't know why I wanted to die-what made life too much and death so appealing. I'm happy here-on the other side of reality and yet... The others beckon me to return and maybe, it's not my time to go. This place...whatever it is...will always be here if I choose to leave...if I...

Now, I travel on a mystical path through a mysterious labyrinth. Perhaps, I am dreaming, for events flow into other fluid events in a rapid stream of phantasmagoria and...on one side of reality, I see the enchanting weirdo waving to me, blessing me with majestic words of hope and redemption, and on the other side of reality I see a team of strangers still struggling to resurrect me. Whom shall I join?

How far must I travel to touch my soul? It is almost time to choose. Yet I fear...if I choose life again... Will a veil of darkness cover me once more? What shall I do if I am swallowed again by the Shadows that lurk beneath consciousness? What shall I do?

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## Wanna Hear Something Weird

Dudley Laufman

## Stratosphere

Jane Stuart

Snowflakes  
floating under  
clouds with silver linings  
drifting under autumn's light wind  
falling

How about she's your corner in a quadrille set and you can tell by the way she squeezes your hand on the promenade. You ask her for the next dance and after take her to her seat and she pats the one beside. You ask Where do you live? Would a cup of coffee be possible?

So you follow her down a dirt road and down a dark hallway with her shouting out Do you want to fuck now or after coffee? And then you're in the kitchen. An old man sitting there in bathrobe, gray hair thinning.

This is my husband it's ok. And he says You clean? Go for it. So you go into the next room. She's ready for you and after, she uses the bidet, washes you off. Back in the kitchen he says Sounded good to me now gid oudda here. She waves two fingers doesn't even kiss you goodbye.



# The Challenger, The King, and the Cook

*Liana Vrajitoru Andreassen*

“How are you going to win that contest if you don’t train for it at all?” said the sturdy woman who had been her cooking teacher for years. “Go right away to the Castle and ask for ingredients, and go home and start your practice. If you need any help and advice, you know where to find me.”

That was the turning point for Benya, the talented, rebellious ten-year old. Even though she had pushed the thoughts of the upcoming contest to the dark recesses of her mind, she realized that it was time she took her cooking seriously. From then on, she was the only cook in her family, and she made daily trips to the school to practice at the big ovens. The children always gathered around her when she cooked, and she became the schoolyard star. She learned to make bread filled with sweet cheese, and she even cooked meat once a week. She learned new tricks with spicing the meat, and with making it juicier by stuffing it with duduk fruit, then wrapping it in duduk leaves.

She cooked furiously, all day long, for her own family and for the school. She seldom had thoughts of the King, her long lost friend, as if their last encounter had killed the warm place in her heart where their friendship used to be. Still, deep down she made a secret vow: the contest would decide how she felt about him. Heavy with her burden, she could have sworn she had grown older by years, not months, awaiting the contest. She never questioned her decision, although she was painfully aware that the fate of her new family was in her hands. Their lives would change forever: either they would live a life of luxury at the Castle for the rest of their lives, or they would be banished from the Diamond Town forever.

Hours went by. Days and weeks passed in the blink of an eye, and there was no going back.

On the day before the great challenge, unspoken fears swirled above the quiet houses, for no one was indifferent to the fate of young Benya and her family. To keep worries at bay, the town looked for little things to do even when all the work was done in the late afternoon. After all, when the sun set and rose again, five destinies would change forever, and no one could foresee which way the wind would blow.

In the early evening, the town was alive with dances and feasts, as was the custom before a big contest. After the performances, everybody shared the food they had brought, and the hours snuck away into the evening. As the festival went on, Benya’s blue eyes watched from behind untamed locks of short, dark hair. The dancers and singers came and went, but she could not bring herself to smile at their joy. Finally, she retreated to the schoolyard – now empty, since

every carefree soul in town was at the festival.

Only the two guards who had watched her every move all day long followed her to the school kitchen. They settled at a respectful distance so they could observe without standing in her way. Benya carefully started a fire in the oven, then gathered around the ingredients she was going to need. She had mixed some of the juices and had made some of the dough the day before, and other guards had watched over them at night, to make sure nobody would temper with them. Strangely, the girl was not afraid, as if, were she to think about it, she would be crushed by the enormity of her task, so being brave was a choice she had made. She started chopping and rolling, mixing and boiling, as if she was born doing that. For a fluttering moment, she wondered if the King was watching the festival from afar, although she had the feeling that, quiet and distant, he was watching her instead, from a nearby window.

Somehow, she pondered, her first two months of freedom had been two months of torture. She had felt ready to prove herself, but what drove her crazy was not even the contest itself, but seeing everybody whisper when they saw her, and people bowing to her, as if concerned for her fate, but watching her every move and ready to laugh if she fell. It would all be over soon, however. She watched her own hands sprinkling grain powders on the meat, adding spices to the broth, cutting and piling, and a feeling of emptiness came over her. She barely cared about the outcome anymore. Away from the cheering crowd, she was all alone again, in the kitchen that had seen her mistakes and her successes year after year, and she could not even bring herself to think that that was the most important moment in her life.

As she was taking a pan out of the oven, and hurrying to get another pan in, Benya saw three figures approaching. It was her cooking teacher, who had brought her brother and sister to give due encouragement. For a while, the three watched quietly as Benya rolled the dough with expert jerks of her hands, but then the big woman came closer and said:

"Well, my child, I can't really ask you about what you're making, but I want you to know that whatever happens at the contest, you will always be my favorite, and you're a marvelous cook. I'll let you talk to your brother and sister now."

She gave Benya a hearty embrace and walked away, shaking her head and mumbling. Soell and Aluna drew closer to their adopted sister, under the careful eyes of the guards.

"Benya, don't be scared," said Soell, her twelve year-old brother, shaking his long locks of hair away from his eyes. "We will be happy, no matter what happens after the contest."

It was the first time that either Soell or Aluna mentioned the "after the contest," which Benay had always assumed to be too terrible for them to talk about. She looked at him sideways and didn't respond.

"Yes," added Aluna, the wiser, older sister. "Don't be too worried about losing, because... because we're ready for anything and we're not really scared of... of what will happen if you don't win."

Benya's eyes widened:

"Why are you saying this to me?" she asked, almost burning her hand at the oven. "You know, it can happen, too! I can cook, but the King's cook knows much more about meat, and about bread, and... and I burned this dish..."

Soell and Aluna looked at each other as if they were sole possessors of some mysterious knowledge.

"Maybe we should have taken her to see the edge before the contest," said Aluna.

"No, she could have gotten scared. She shouldn't think about it. Let's go, we shouldn't upset her right before the contest."

"Yes, right. And they're probably starting to roast the meat – we shouldn't miss that! Benya, we're sorry that you can't come..."

Benya looked at them again. She did not understand why they would say such disturbing words. Maybe they only wanted her to be calm, but their words had the opposite effect. She watched the two disappear through the gate, then returned to her frantic cooking.

A few more hours passed, and she finally heard the signal to stop. She had a little time to go change her clothes and clean up, and then she would face her challenge – and not a moment too soon! She placed the dishes on wooden platters and covered them with warm clean sheets, then ran home, leaving the guards with the food.

When she came out of the house, her family was waiting for her outside, along with a few of her friends, and her teacher. They gave her words of encouragement and walked her to the Castle. When they reached it, the parents waved good-bye, all the color gone from their cheeks. Soell and Aluna watched her with tense expectation, and no one else knew that in their thoughts were wishes for their sister to lose. The sun was going down, and the diamond rocks surrounding the town were subdued to the flickering soft shades of dusk. Benya wanted to run and hide, but she said nothing: she kept a steady pace, and her frown made her look as if she knew exactly what she was doing. In her heart, she was less sure than ever.

She left everybody at the gate, and only the guards came with her into the Castle. They led her through many corridors and she walked silently behind them, until they reached a huge room. Its walls were adorned with green branches and luxurious oil lamps made of diamond bowls, glittering with a secret light. In the middle of the room, King Alidor was seated at a large table, watching in deep solemnity as the newcomers arrived. He was dressed in yellow, with a red cloak falling on his back. Benya had never seen such clothes before. For a while, all she could do was stare at the bright colors. The King did not look her in the eye, but signaled to the guards and then motioned for her to sit to his right. Across the table from Benya was a young man in his late teens: the royal cook. He seemed self-possessed, except that now and then he glanced behind, as if something frightening might enter the room. When he looked at Benya, she saw scorn in his eyes. She could not know that his heart was beating fast, for he, too, had to cook dishes that he had never cooked

before, and he knew how particular the King was.

"All right, everybody is here, so let the contest begin!" said the King, too pompously for his young voice. He tried to sound deep and low, but his youth betrayed him and he finished the sentence in a squeal. He cleared his throat and went on:

"The rules of the contest are simple: each cook will present ten dishes to me, and I will taste them and decide whose dishes are the best. If the challenger wins, she will immediately become my personal cook, and her family will move into the Castle within three days. If the challenger loses, she and her family have ten days to prepare for their banishment, and then they will be escorted out of the Diamond Town forever."

Benya looked at him, trying to find a flicker in his eyes, to let her know, "*It's me, Alidor! I'm just playing a game. We'll laugh so hard at this later.*" But he simply would not look at her, even now that they were close at the table.

One by one, more guards entered the room from the opposite side. The guards dressed in green brought the royal cook's dishes, while the guards dressed in brown brought Benya's dishes. Her food looked pretty now, carried glamorously to the King's table on the wooden platters that she had arranged with her own hands. A wave of pride came over her as she watched busy hands placing them on the table. Her platters were lined up on her side of the table, while the other dishes sat on the royal cook's side.

"You will take turns. Introduce your dishes to the King, one dish at a time," said a woman standing behind the King. "Benya, let the King taste your first dish."

Benya stood up. She chose one of the platters, and walked with it to the King. The dish was round, reddish-brown, and sprinkled with green. The outside looked floury and had a soft filling on the inside, with floating slices of vegetables.

"I call this meat-and-rumbi pudding," she said and placed the dish in front of the King.

With a wooden fork, the King cut a piece and placed it in his mouth. He closed his eyes and chewed with infinite gusto, as if extracting all the tastes from the very core of the food. He put the fork back on the table. Benya had invented this dish, inspired by the younger children. Every time the meat that had cooked for a long time was left to cool, there were sweet gelatinous bits that the babies always stuck their fingers into. Benya's pudding had gelatin in the middle, sweet and sour, with spicy sprinkles from the rumbi herb. The taste was divine, but the King said nothing about it.

"Next," he thundered, with no explanation.

The royal cook rose and picked one of his own platters, taking it to the King.

"Meat bits with baked cheese sauce and candied breadding," he announced. This newly invented dish was thick and chewy from the baked cheese, while the sweet breadding and the meat bits were flavorful surprises among the smooth sauce. The cook had added a touch of powdered tree bark, which made the sauce very slightly bitter – a perfect combination, given the more expected sweetness of the breadding.

The King ate the second dish in the same ritual as before, and then placed

the fork by his side. Everybody was watching with great interest, licking their lips as if they could taste the food. The tension grew.

"Mushroom balls in berry sauce, with marinated salcheek tree marrow," said Benya, touching her moist forehead. The berries were sweet and sour, and they changed the taste of the mushrooms in such a way that their usual bland sweetness became a burst of flavor. The King, however, was still hard to read, and that seemed to give the guards and other Castle people new impetus to whisper speculatively. With one look, the King stopped them.

Then followed a green, round dish; its taste was delicately spicy, while the tripe gave it a fatty texture, to complement the grafi vegetable: "Sweet grafi and tripe soup with duduk leaf brine," said the royal cook, his voice less and less controlled.

As the contest progressed, the royal cook, Benya, and the King became more intense in their countenance, as if the King played equal part in the protracted battle. Their fists were clenched and their gestures were abrupt. Their tireless eyes watched the dishes make their way to the table and out of the room. One would have thought that the King was also being judged, for, even though he was careful to control his moves, sudden jerks of his hands betrayed his fears.

Finally, he tasted the last two dishes: the royal cook brought a beautiful loaf of bread shaped to resemble the Castle itself. He had built walls out of carefully rolled dough, and had sprinkled the bread with seeds from the aloola flower, which gave the bread a sharp taste, invading the taster's mouth with wild colors. Benya announced her last food as "the greatest ball of energy." It was a ball of grains much bigger than the ones that people ate in the morning, and to make it she she had combined not just grains, but countless ingredients, as if she had tried to contain in it all the foods that she could think of. Its taste was so rich, seeping mysterious combinations, that one bite satisfied like an entire meal.

When all the foods had left the room, the King rose. Benya and the other cook rose too, and were ushered into an adjacent small room, where they could see through the window: the King was pacing in dreadful silence, while the others murmured around him. After an agonizing quarter of an hour, the woman-aid waved the two cooks to come in. Benya's feet were giving away. All she hoped was to be strong enough to make it into the great hall. Everything was a blur. She wondered if she was dreaming, for it was as in a dream that several hands pushed her further when she stopped without awareness, and it was as in a dream that she sat on the chair. As in a dream, she saw the King's intense eyes on her but saw nothing behind them, not the Alidor that she once knew. As in a dream, she heard his words pour out into the room:

"I have made my decision, and it is final. I have decided that the winner of the contest is the royal cook!"

He looked at her again, and she thought she saw in his eyes a singular flicker that was meant for her only: was it pity, or was it triumph? Was it sadness? She could not tell. She rose from the table and, as required, she slowly went to the King and touched his hand and then her own chest. Her heart was still beating,

although she was certain it had stopped. Among the blurred noises of the heartless room, she walked out, followed by the same two guards, and she found her way to the front gates, where a thick darkness greeted her.

Ten days later, the family was ready early in the morning. They had spent the time before their banishment amongst those dearest to them, with countless tears shed by the parents, by the nurses and the cooks, by friends, and by the three children. On the fated day of their departure, the King came out of the Castle to bow to them, and he left as quickly as he had come. Benya could not even look at him. A small procession was formed: the family and the friends who were to walk with them to the forbidden forest, where they would begin their journey into the unknown. They circled the entire town, and then those closest to the family held hands to form a circle around them, while walking and singing the song of the departed friend. Everybody had known the song ever since they could remember, but they had hoped never to sing it in the ritual of departure:

“Oh diamonds full of light and life  
I came into your world  
I came to share the joy and strife  
Of people young and old.  
I thought I'd spend a lifetime here  
But little did I know  
My joy was short, my time was near  
When I would have to go.  
Don't cry for me, my lovely friend.  
My neighbor, wipe your tears.  
I wish more time with you I'd spend  
Until my old age years.  
Now these green trees and town of sun  
I'll leave into your hand.  
Be kind, be happy when I'm gone  
And think of me, my friend.

Some could not sing along, choked by sorrow. The song rose in the solemn morning, while the whole town hid their tears as they watched and waved at the small procession. The procession walked past the salcheek trees, past the school gate, then past the fruit trees, and finally they were in front of the Castle again.

Here, the family picked the few belongings that they were taking – not much to speak of. Sadly, what had been most precious to them were the people and the trees; those, they had to leave behind. Their friends had convinced them to take enough food, wrapped in cloth, to last them for a week.

Everybody had gathered to see the twenty guards take them away to the forbidden forest: all the school children, most of them crying, all the nurses and cooks, and families holding their children close to them. Suddenly, an old woman in rags came out of her house, limping forward in great haste: the town knew her well, for she always spoke in riddles and gave nightmares to the children. Gathering her rags

around her, she shouted hoarsely through the others' gasping silence:

"Yes! Go see where all the stories are made!" she waved her cane in the air. "Don't ever return to this town where a mad child rules, and there's nothing but diamonds everywhere you look! You're going to see all the mysteries of the world, and we" – she pointed her cane at everyone – "we are going to rot here on this rock!"

Her words sounded like sacrilege on that doomed day. Somebody gently took the old woman by the shoulders and led her back to her house, while the procession resumed their ill-fated journey into the frightful woods where the townspeople never went. At the edge of the woods, it was time for the family's friends to turn around.

"All right," said one of the guards. "Let's move, let's get it over with. Enough goodbyes. What is done is done."

The mournful family quietly embraced their friends and followed the guards to the trail that snuck into the heart of the most hated of all the trees. Led by the twenty guards, they walked for an agonizing half hour, until they reached an entrance to a small crevasse shaped like a natural tunnel. It slanted abruptly, leading them downward on a treacherous path. They descended for another hour, zigzagging and turning through sharp rocks, until they finally came out on a platform. A blue trail glistened in the sun, right at the bottom of the rock, and one could see even from that distance that it was moving: the blue trail was a river.

The raft was waiting for them, so the family and their provisions were placed on it, and the lowering began. The ropes were finally relieved of their weight, and the guards watched the raft take off rapidly and begin moving down the river. Soon, it became a mere dot and disappeared into the mysteries of the world below. The guards pulled up the ropes and, one by one, they started to climb the rough rocks. Not a single word was said about what had happened, although the guards, and everybody else in the Diamond Town, would always remember this day as one of the saddest in their lives.

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## There Are Different Ways

*Glenn W. Cooper*

There are different ways of looking at your death. There is the way of saying at least you are now free of pain (though we can't be absolutely certain of that). There is the way of saying you didn't deserve to die (though death may well lead to something better than life). There is the way of asking why this happened to you and not to somebody else (though somebody else's someone else would surely be asking the same question). There is the way of looking at your daughter and understanding you have not gone anywhere but into another body. There are different ways of looking at your death, and each of them has its own logic and its own illogic. None of them make it hurt any less, however. Even the knowledge that perhaps in some other realm or dimension you are awaiting me is no comfort today – for I want you here, now.

# Jimmy Dee Likes His Gravy

Dave DeVal

Jimmy Demarco and his family moved to Rye in 1972. It was a month or so after the school year had begun. The Demarcos moved into my friend Sal Tigli's house down the street. Sal and his family had moved to Florida a few weeks before. Sal's younger sister Sophia was the first girl whom I had ever kissed. Sophia was really cute. I was sorry to see them leave.

I was raking leaves in our yard a few days later when Jimmy came over to introduce himself. He was shorter than I was and heftier. He looked as if he had never missed a meal.

"I'm Jimmy Demarco," he said. "Everyone calls me Jimmy Dee." He held out his hand for me to shake. He had a strong grip.

"My name's Dave."

"You and I are gonna be friends, Dave," my new neighbor told me. "Jimmy Dee's a good friend to have."

"I don't doubt it," I said.

Jimmy Dee had been living in town for only a couple of weeks before he got into his first fight. The guy that he got into a fight with was named Charlie Banks. Charlie was even heavier than Jimmy Dee. He would eat anything. One time I saw him swig a mouthful of ketchup from a Hines bottle. I almost vomited. Charlie just beamed. Roughage, he said. It does a body good.

Charlie and Jimmy Dee got into it when they were in line at the cafeteria. Charlie accused Jimmy Dee of butting in front of him.

"Jimmy Dee ain't no scab," Jimmy Dee said. "Youse is wrong."

Charlie corrected him. He was not subtle.

"Hey, stupid! I said you cut ahead of me," were his exact words.

Whereupon Jimmy Dee decked Charlie with an uppercut to the nose.

"Jimmy Dee does his talkin' with his fists," Jimmy Dee said. He looked down at Charlie. "You wanna talk next time, see a priest."

Jimmy Dee winked at me. "Nobody messes with Jimmy Dee," he said. "Now, where's my grub?"

The cafeteria line had stopped. Everybody was looking at Jimmy Dee. There was a lot of whispering. I shot a glance at Charlie. His shirt was caked with blood. So much for roughage, I thought.

Jimmy Dee motioned to one of the startled women behind the cafeteria counter.

"Hey, sis, how's about an extra dose of mashed potatoes?" he said. "Plenty of gravy, too. Jimmy Dee likes his gravy."

A few minutes later he was wiping his plate clean.

"Jimmy Dee loves his food," he said. He looked at the saltines packages that were on my tray. "You gonna eat 'dem?" he asked.

The principal and a security guard came to our table soon thereafter. They led both of us away. I was a witness.



"I know you won't rat me out, Dave," Jimmy Dee said, confidently. He took the packages of saltines from my tray and stuffed them in his sweatshirt pocket. "Okay, G-man," he said to the principal. "Lock me up."

They let me go within the hour. I had not done anything wrong, after all. Jimmy Dee got off with a stern reprimand.

"Jimmy Dee don't suffer fools," he told me that night. We were sitting on the curb in front of my house. My parents were sitting on the front porch. They were keeping an eye on us. My dad had told me earlier in the day that Jimmy Dee was trouble.

"That kid's nuts," he said. "Steer clear of him."

"Oh, he's just misunderstood," my mother said.

"They said the same thing about Mussolini," my father said.

Jimmy Dee was hauled into the principal's office again six months later after the money from the class bake sale had disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

"Jimmy Dee earns his dough," Jimmy Dee informed everyone present.

"By hook or by crook," said the principal.

Jimmy Dee snickered. "That's a good one, G-Man," he said. "Youse should be on a stage, one leavin' town real soon."

Nobody laughed.

"What the hell's a few weeks, anyway?" Jimmy Dee told me the next day. "A suspension ain't forever."

"What will you do in the meantime?" I asked.

"My cousin Chooch and me got some irons in the fire," Jimmy Dee said. He rubbed his hands together. There was a big smile on his face. "Yes, sir, the dough's gonna flow."

That night at dinner my father told me that he didn't want Jimmy Dee in the house ever again.

"I know you don't hang around with him, Dave, but if he comes over here, just talk to him outside," my father said. He shook his head. "That kid's on his way to the Big House."

"You sound like Jimmy Dee yourself," my mother said.

We all laughed.

A few years later Jimmy Dee got caught breaking into someone's house. Turns out that he had been robbing houses and stealing car stereos for years. He had to go stand before the judge. Jimmy Dee was 16-years-old.

"Young man, you have a choice," Judge McCarty told him. "You can join the Navy, or go to jail."

A hush fell over the courtroom. Or, so I heard.

Old McCarty paused a moment to let that sink in. He took off his spectacles and leaned forward.

"You see, it's a simple matter, Jimmy me boy," he said. "You get to choose between the cell or the sail. Now, what'll it be?"

Jimmy Dee shipped out soon thereafter.

"Beats pumpin' gas," he told me the day he left town. We were standing on the sidewalk in front of the Demarco's house. "Maybe they'll make me a general."

We shook hands good-bye. His grip was stronger than ever.

"You're all right, Dave," he said. "All these years youse never done Jimmy Dee no wrong no way no how."

The last I heard Jimmy Dee was in Guam. It was two years after he had joined the Navy. Mr. Demarco showed me a postcard he had received from his son. The spelling and penmanship were abysmal.

Dull place, this here Guam, Jimmy Dee had written. It ain't no Vegas. Not yet, anyway.

"James was never much of a student," Mr. Demarco said. "He's got a lot of street smarts, though." He warmed to the idea. "That's what he has. Street smarts."

I told my dad that night about the postcard and what Mr. Demarco had said. We were sitting on the front porch watching television. The Yankees were beating the Red Sox 7-1. Bobby Murcer had just hit a homer.

"Jimmy Hoffa had street smarts, too," my father said. "He shared his last ride with a spare tire."

A wise man, my dad.

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## Birding down the wire

Kirsten B. Feldman

While I was growing up, I ate breakfast with the chickadees. Usually nuthatches joined us as well, and sometimes a downy woodpecker or a brilliant cardinal. My favorites were the nuthatches making their silly, backward way up and down the tree trunks. Self-absorbed as children often are, I doubt I would have paid them much attention or known one from another if it hadn't been for my father.

His first action every morning, after putting on the coffee and lighting a cigarette, was to check the feeders. He had a tray feeder and a tube feeder and usually a block of suet in a cage. Once he got those set, then it was on to the business of making breakfast, almost always hot, and the classic bag lunch. He wasn't much of a talker in the early hours, but he always pointed out a new arrival at the feeders as we ate our oatmeal. He kept a pair of binoculars next to his chair at the window for ease of identification; he still does. Then in summer, like us, he took summer vacation (from the feeders in his case) and moved his chair outside to watch the birds forage for wild food.

In those days his constant companion was the *Birds of North America*. He didn't mark it up or make life lists, but he lovingly referred any question to his well-thumbed, broken-backed edition. A few years ago he upgraded to Sibley's, and he, a normally taciturn fellow, can go on for quite a time about the genius of the man who assembled so much information about so many birds in one place. He has always talked more easily with his eyes on the sky than on the face of the person in front of him; perhaps he has a bit of the winged creatures' skepticism of the importance of two feet on the ground and feels it is safer to show his emotions with winged creatures than with grounded ones.

His interest in all things avian and his encouragement of ours has ensured that my brother and I can identify most “regular” New England birds in the woods or at the shore. Sure, he can do it faster, and we’ve never once beaten him on the calls, but we have learned just the same to appreciate this simple pleasure. I’ve tried in my own way to pass this on to my children. It thrills me to hear them talk about the ‘pipers at the beach or the owl they heard as they were falling asleep or their delight in the discovered name of the yellow-bellied sapsucker, as it thrills my father to hear these reports down the wire.

In retirement the grandparents have gone rural, relocating to a haven for birds and for children to play outdoors without traffic or strangers, and the birds are more present in their lives than ever. Taking a tour of their yard that borders on acres of maple woods and shoulder-high blueberry bushes, we learned that my father’s avian enthusiasms had fixed on bluebirds. He showed the grandkids piece-by-piece how he had built three nest boxes and mounted them on poles. He regaled them with tales of siting the nest boxes, checking them daily for intruders (sparrows like these boxes, too), and finally, joy, witnessing bluebird moving-in day. Anyone might have thought he was talking about his own children when he talked about saving the first nesting pair’s eggs from a scavenging squirrel. Nah, he never talked about us like that, but he sure can spin a nail-biting tale.

The sky-dwelling species about which he never talks fondly is these squirrels; even in their form of flight they do not please him or remind him of his beloveds with wings. To some bird-watchers this is a skirmish with advances and defeats, but to him it has become a full-on war. After trying seemingly every baffle on the market, he has resorted to weapons. I picture him out there with his BB gun, intent on his quarry; he is surely the epitome of the term beady-eyed. The fury that these little gray critters arouse in the devoted birder that is my father is without parallel in either politics or religion, the supposed bugaboos of polite conversation.

I have had to beg him not to squirrel hunt when we visit. The thought of having to console my daughter, who adores all things cute and fuzzy, because her grandfather has dinged one, is something I’d like to avoid. As it is, her rolling eyes show that she doesn’t appreciate his jokes about squirrel stew. Somewhat petulantly and, I think, temporarily, he has agreed to hold off. I can see his mind working. What if the buggers go after the bluebirds again? What other defense do I have when I see my best tube feeder being used a jungle gym? How can I stomach the humiliation when the cheeky b-d winks at me and waves his tail while he polishes off the sunflower seeds, again? He reminds me of a bird himself, his feathers all ruffled, his shoulders hunched up around his ears, whenever he speaks of the latest skirmish. But like Elmer Fudd, he rarely beats his rabbit, or in this case, his squirrel.

Regardless of the multitude of squirrels, he did get his tenant bluebirds, and they return annually now to nest through the summer. When the bluebirds come back to the boxes each spring, home sweet home apparently, all is well in the neighborhood and in my father’s universe. As for the fall and on into the winter, especially if the acorn crop is plentiful, even as greedy as squirrels are, then Dad happi-

ly reports the comings and goings of the various finches, woodpeckers, hummingbirds, and, of course, my nuthatches, without having to resort to violence, much.

At home we have our own sightings to report over the phone lines, a goldfinch one day and another, we're pretty sure, a hairy woodpecker. The fallen seeds from our tube feeder come up a mass of sunflowers, and the finches adore them and adorn them. And so the cycle continues, with the birds as one of our communication lines through the seasons and over the years, keeping us connected across states and across generations.

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## Priority Flight

Richard Vaughn

First-year doctor-in-residence Arch Lamb stared at the artifact of a bygone era—the clear glass airplane filled with colored candy pellets. Of all the nostalgic things his grandfather cherished, this was the most peculiar. But, given Gavin Archibald Lamb's fascination with flying, not unusual after all. It wasn't an authentic replica of anything that might fly. Its hollow fuselage with a metal screw cap to hold the sugar treat had a thick rudder and stabilizer, with fat wings that would never lift such a travesty off the ground. Its triviality was a mockery of Lindbergh's 1927 *Spirit of St. Louis* monoplane.

"Is that all you brought from home?" Arch asked as he looked in on the frail man during hospital rounds. "There must be something else of value for your nightstand."

"Not at all, my boy," Gavin said, ghost-pale and thin in the upraised bed. "I've had that toy plane for seventy years. After I fly off, it's yours."

Arch laughed. "Thanks a lot. Some legacy to remember you by."

"Ah, yes, well. If this heart thing hadn't come up, I'd leave you more."

Arch explored the glass airplane with its red, yellow, blue, green, purple, and pink candy pellets that filled the fuselage. He didn't try to twist the metal cap off to see if the candy was still edible. Even modern medicine, made to exacting standards, degrades in a year or so and must be discarded. He put the airplane on the nightstand and gazed at the flaccid face and thin lips of the man who was all that remained of his family.

"I don't think you're going to depart soon," Arch said in his most sincere bedside manner. "Dr. Sebart is a superb surgeon, and once you've built yourself up you'll receive a top notch bypass."

"Ah, my boy, but at the cost of everything I have left in the world."

"The reverse mortgage on your house will more than cover the cost."

"But that damned money was meant for you, to allow you to go on and become a surgeon. That's what you wanted, what you need. Your mother's dream."

"What matters now," Arch said, "is for you to get well. Build stamina till you're strong. If you were farther along, this pre-op ritual wouldn't be necessary."

“Wrong priority. I don’t want to waste what’s left of my estate. That money’s for *your* strong future, not *my* feeble present. I’m ready to fly in my own way.”

“You’re robust, and a good investment. Besides, you’ve been my champion since before Mom died.” He could add that Gavin was the significant male who’d replaced the man that disappeared before Arch ever knew what a father should be. “There’s no reason why you shouldn’t stick around longer.”

“You’re stubborn, and that’s good. Got it from me. But I’m not your priority. You know resources must go where they’ll create the most return. A hundred thousand to buy a bit more time for me is a bad buy. As a surgeon you could save younger lives.”

“It’s a clever argument, but won’t work. You helped me become a doctor, and my first duty is to preserve life when it’s worth doing so. This isn’t a constructive discussion. You have to gain strength, follow Dr. Sebart’s medicinal regimen.”

“Those damned pills,” Gavin muttered. “Six of them four times a day. They didn’t do me one bit of good at home, and won’t in this hospital either.”

“Did you really take them as prescribed?” Arch checked the pulse, thinking of the many clever ways Gavin might avoid doing what he should. “Be honest.”

“Do you think I’d play you false over something this serious?”

“Why don’t I believe you?” Arch said, knowing that Gavin hated pills, a holdover from his childhood with a Christian Science mother and sugared turpentine and molasses in milk-based home remedies. “The meds should have built you up a month ago.”

“Lot of damned fuss over nothing. I told you, those pills don’t work.”

Arch had visited often enough at medication time to ensure that the nurse brought the assorted pills in the paper cup and observed as Gavin tossed them into his mouth and sucked water from a straw. It was passing strange, therefore, that he not only didn’t gain strength but declined. So much so that the heart bypass surgery was postponed until one day Gavin, in the lethargic metabolic interim just before dawn, died in his sleep. It was a bitter disappointment, and the handwritten note was not consoling. It asked forgiveness, but for what, Arch didn’t understand. He was praised for his desire to be a doctor. Lastly, Gavin admonished him to become a surgeon—priority one in living and doctoring.

Arch gathered Gavin’s personal articles: safety razor, soap bowl and brush, comb. He spied a blue pill on the floor by the nightstand. In an instant he *knew*: The old fox had outwitted him. When Arch was a boy, Gavin ate peanuts from a dish that never emptied using sleight-of-hand. Where were the untaken pills? He looked beneath the pillow and mattress, in the nightstand drawer, and checked clothes pockets in the closet. Finally, he picked up the glass airplane. The screw cap was loose. At first he didn’t believe his eyes holding the crystal toy aloft as if in flight. Against the sunlight, colored pills sparkled in the fuselage just like candy pellets. He grinned, shook his head and tightened the cap of his treasured legacy keepsake.

# The Festival

Marvin McAtee II

Worthyville is a beautiful town. The birds are always chirping as the sun warms their nests. The lush green grass tends to pop out as if it were painted on a canvas. Every home in the small town is surrounded by a freshly painted white picket fence, and the happy disposition of the locals fits its atmosphere to a tee. To a person driving through it may remind them of a small town from all of those cliché 1950's sitcoms.

It is a town rich with its own history. Its villagers pride themselves on upholding all the traditions established by their founders. Like the "Festival of Freedom" it holds every year. The roots of this festival can be traced back to the 1800's while the town was still being developed. Legend has it that the town's founding fathers faced constant turmoil and attacks from a local native tribe, The Gamconians.

The men had brought their families out west during the gold rush. Even though they did not have much luck in their attempt at finding infinite riches many of them fell in love with its scenic view. It was a beautiful prairie valley surrounded on all sides by a beautiful mountain landscape. They decided while the gold may not have been bountiful the land had a lot to offer. They decided to stay and build their campsite into a flourishing community.

This upset the Gamconians greatly. They had tried countless failed methods of thwarting the budding town's efforts. The townsmen kept building and the village kept growing, but a rogue native devised a heinous act to scare them off once and for all. He convinced his tribe that his idea was the only way.

With the support of his tribe they set out under the cover of night. In an attempt to scare the white men off they snuck into the town while everyone slept. Creeping around in the shadows cast by the moon they made their way through the village. They entered each dwelling stealing away the town's children before retreating back to their land.

This only infuriated the normally docile townsmen. The villagers were unsure as to the Gamconians intent with the children, but many of them kept entertaining the idea that they had slaughtered every last one of them. They swiftly formed a lynching mob and set out to find those who had executed the vile deed.

The townspeople stormed the Gamconian village cutting through it a chaotic path of destruction. They fought the primitive people in an attempt to save any of their children that might still be left alive. Men, women, or children it did not matter as they murdered all that tried to stand in their way. They set fire to their village burning up their homes as well as their food supply; wip-

ing away any signs of their previous existence. Gamcoa had violated the good people of Worthyville, and were going to pay for their sins.

During the massacre they found where their children had been stashed. Releasing them from their holding cell the townsmen started to capture any of the natives they could. They managed to detain several.

Once back in Worthyville they chained the natives to trees. Unable to do anything the natives were forced to endure humiliation and punishment. The women and children poked them with sticks and kicked the defenseless men, while the men went to the center of town and began constructing the gallows. They wanted it big enough to execute all seven of them at once.

When they finished they paraded the malnourished natives through the town singing, "There's gonna be a hangin' tonight!" They banged on pots and pans as they danced around the humiliated starving natives. The women and children would join in by laughing and throwing stones at them as the Gamconians passed by.

The townsmen celebrated all the way to the newly constructed death device in the center of town. The Gamconians were proud and showed no fear as they stared Death right in his face. Their arms were tightly bound behind their backs.

The town was blood thirsty; a quick death was out of the question. They did not place the large knot of the noose at the side of their necks. This would have bettered their chances of their neck snapping as their body weight caught the rope. Instead, the masked executioner slipped the noose around each of the sentenced men, placing the knot at the back of their necks.

When he opened the trap doors the men dropped. The rope instantly sealed off their air passages as gravity pulled at their bodies. Their bodies kicked and convulsed as they became more oxygen deprived. Even through all this their faces never showed any fear slipping off into the great unknown. They left the dead men hanging by their ropes. Letting their bodies send a message to all who would dare try to transgress against them.

This story along with the famed gallows became a staple of the town's heritage. The legend that surrounded these actual events was enough to keep the town safe for many years to come until the great depression hit.

The great depression brought with it a great famine. As the barren fields produced more dust than crops starvation caused the world's population to act out. The food that was around was too expensive causing certain countries to seek out new sources to fill their bellies.

Worthyville managed to stay self maintained. The few fields that did allow seeds to grow were spitting out puny harvests. The livestock were withering away, but it seemed as if the small stream that ran through the village was as bountiful with fish as ever. The town worked together to make sure no one died without. Even so, their food supply was spread very thin. That was when a small country from the north, Hardesia, made its presence known.

It had had its eye on the peaceful village for some time. Their lack of defense caused the Hardsesians to view them as weak. With hunger controlling his actions the king of Hardsesia sent in a small battalion of his best seven soldiers as an expedition of the town. He wanted to make sure they were as feeble as they portrayed.

The band of Hardsesians made its way through the town harassing women, vandalizing property, and searching for food. The soldiers were taking what they wanted and destroying the rest. They cut a path of destruction through Worthyville trying to strike fear into the hearts of its residents. They were hoping to get the unprotected town to surrender or retreat, but that was not what they got.

Instead of fear the Hardsesians stirred the town's violent temper. While the town chose to portray a quaint peaceable village it still had an ugly side that only the Gamconians had previously known.

Worthyville appeared to them as a town of sitting ducks as the outsiders paved their path of plunder. When they hit the middle of the town they saw the infamous gallows. The tale of the gallows had made its way even to their village. If it was not the gallows that had turned the tables and drove the steak of fear into their hearts it was the mob of angry townspeople that suddenly surrounded them. As they stood there in the midst of their ambush the Hardsesians could not believe that the small backwoods town had gotten one over on them.

Men, women, children were all around with the barrels of their firearms fixed on the intruders. Defeated they dropped their weapons and surrendered, but this was not enough for the locals. They believed that not only should the men ultimately pay for the carnage they brought with them. They also thought that a message needed to be sent out to strike fear into all future would be conquerors. A message so significant that it would stretch far passed the mountains that surrounded them.

The gallows had been a landmark that the locals took pride in. Although, they may have not used it in decades they still maintained it for historical significance. It had remained unused until that fateful day.

The seven men up were quickly strung up. The locals watched as the fierce warriors begged and pleaded for their lives. They placed the knot at the backs of their necks before triggering the trap door.

After the ropes took their lives the townsmen cut them down. They restrung them by their ankles from the gallows header. The town butcher stepped forward to perform his job. He ran his knife along their throats to drain the blood from his carcasses. He then gutted them taking the blade and making a rough incision from the pelvis to the chest. The cut immediately allowed their entrails to drop to the wooden platform. He reached in with bare hands and pulled out the organs that gravity could not get. After he had ridded the bodies of what he couldn't use he grabbed a second knife. It was the same knife he used to skin the beasts brought to his shop. He began to peel back their flesh



like the hide of a hog. His sharp blade made it a simple task.

Once the game was ready to be butchered he had them brought to his shop so he could properly prepare them. He cut: slabs of ribs, steaks, chops, and also ground some up to make hamburgers for the kiddies. With the meat ready to be cooked he took it all back to the gallows.

The townspeople had not left. In his absence they had set up and decorated their downtown for a festival of massive proportions. There was music playing while the children danced, they had their cookers warming up, and everyone was gathered around to partake of their feast. For the first time the struggles of the depression were far from their minds. They enjoyed their cannibalistic cuisine and laughed until the late twilight hours, and on that day the "Festival of Freedom" was born.

While now, in modern times they do not face the same hardships of their forefathers they still honor the traditions that they created. The gallows are still maintained, partially for their historical importance.

They no longer face the threats of other civilizations trying to overtake their small community. From time to time, however, a straggler will blow into town and try to disrupt their harmony, or a grungy vagabond will try to make a home in its clean streets. Once a year for the festival they clean out their jail, homeless shelter, and anywhere else the unwanted may find themselves; for a good old fashioned bar-be-que.

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Blah, blah, blah!

*Chad Newbill*

The academia world suffocates us real folk with fluffy jabber to amuse themselves.  
The academia superstars are the same kids that were scared to get naked and shower  
after gym class.

I suppose this is their passive aggressive way of punching their former bullies in the face.  
Sometimes, I get caught up in the fuzzy clouds of long, unneeded words.

The words you have to look up in the dictionary.

I'm too lazy to use this book; I know all the words I need to make it in this world.

But I sometimes use these words to prove that I ain't that dumb.

Although, I do believe that words can flow together and make a ripple into the  
realm of art and beauty.

But prose and poetry that are considered beautiful can be a subjective game for the  
jealous and ignorant.

One person's beauty can be another mans ugly girlfriend.

# After Beth

Laine Hissett-Bonard

"I'm sorry, Mr. Geary. We couldn't save her."

Everything for about a month after I heard that sentence faded into a sifting gray fog, through which I caught mere glimpses of life going on around me: the drive home from the hospital, my wife's funeral, the helpless looks and vague, sympathetic comments from my co-workers – "She's in a better place now" and "Everything happens for a reason" and the even less sincere "Let me know if you need anything" – not to mention my own ghostly existence in a house that was suddenly too big for me. I could hardly reconcile the events I barely registered with reality, since I could no longer pinpoint exactly what reality was.

I avoided the garage altogether for that first month, as I had no desire to inhabit the space where my wife committed suicide by overdose after the cancer she kept secret from me for a full year was diagnosed as terminal. We shared everything, or so I thought, until I found the documents from her doctor's office and insurance company detailing the treatments she had undertaken without breathing a single word about her condition to me, her husband of nearly twelve years. By that time, it was too late, of course; Bethany was already eight days dead by the time I found the file folder containing those documents, an innocuous manila file in a filing cabinet drawer full of the same, this one marked simply "Beth" in black Sharpie, the B slightly lopsided and the t crossed with her usual short, girlish double-curve.

She never told me she was dying.

I was grateful for the fog for those first five weeks, during which it camouflaged any emotion I may have felt. I had an idea that anything I might feel during that time was probably too much for my fragile heart to bear. In my thirty-five years, I had never lost anyone close to me, and I had certainly never fathomed that my beloved wife, just ten months my junior, would come to the end of her life any time before we reached our eighties, least of all by her own hand.

When the fog began to seep away and emotions began to trickle back into my life, I found myself first harboring a vague sense of betrayal – how could she keep such a thing from me? How could she kill herself without first telling me what was going on? – underscored by a feeling of emptiness so deep it might as well be bottomless. Beth and I had been trying for at least three years to get pregnant, and nothing she said or did in the year prior to her death indicated anything to the contrary. For all I knew, we had simply been unlucky – missing the fertility window each month, or however they explained the inability of two seemingly healthy thirty-somethings to conceive. I had no idea Beth had been rendered sterile by the cancer and the treatments that did nothing to slow its savage growth inside her. Now that she was gone, I would never know if our children would have her dark, wavy hair, my blue eyes, her perfect, creamy skin, or the dimple in my left cheek.

After several months of alternating anger and depression, I discovered a new emotion within myself. I probably should have expected it as the next logical

step beyond that vast, howling emptiness I felt, but its presence never occurred to me until the twenty-seventh Friday evening I spent without her, watching a psychological thriller Beth would have loved – would, most likely, have watched curled up beneath my arm with her spine straight as a board as she shoveled popcorn into her mouth from the bowl resting on my lap, looking away from the movie only long enough to pop a few kernels into my mouth, too.

I was lonely.

Not lonely for female companionship, necessarily; at that point in my life, I simply couldn't imagine myself remarrying or even casually dating. I was merely lonely for human connection, something I hadn't allowed myself to feel since the moment that fateful sentence was uttered at the hospital. I had closed myself off completely, refusing to see my friends, my family, anyone outside of my normal working hours, and even then, I had nothing to say beyond work-related topics. I had almost begun to feel inhuman, at least until the revelation of my loneliness struck me partway through the movie that Friday night, when my only companions were a beer in one hand and the remote control in the other.

It took me a few more weeks to dig myself out of my hole of self-imposed seclusion, but I spent those few weeks actively searching the internet for others like myself, who, I felt, would be much better equipped to provide the support and companionship I needed than even my most well-intentioned friends or family members. I finally convinced myself to get out of the house for a non-work related purpose when I discovered a local group called the Widowers of Suicide, a name that sounded a bit heavy-handed even to me, but the description of which seemed to suit my purposes nicely.

I attended my first W.O.S. gathering on a cold, drizzly mid-October evening. Unlike my confident, easy-going former self, the Jason Geary who walked into the downtown library's conference room was timid and unsure of himself; I had second thoughts all the way there, and stepping into that room to find a small, ragtag group of mostly middle-aged or elderly men with the same slumped shoulders and sad eyes I bore was strangely more discouraging than comforting. The promise of free coffee – and surprisingly good free coffee, at that – kept me there, however, and once the meeting hit its stride, I forgot about my misgivings and immersed myself in the company of these men so very much like myself.

Abandonment... betrayal... grief... anger... loss. The same emotions were present in each of these men, whether they had been married to their dearly departed wives for three years or forty-three. Whether these men had children or not, whether their wives had been ill, stress-laden, depressed, or all – or none – of the above, the common thread of bereavement ran through us all, and I began to feel a certain kinship with several of the men in the first hour-long meeting alone.

The group met once every two weeks, always in the same place, and I was the youngest member by a good ten years until about two months after I started attending the meetings. That night, as several of us waited for the rest to arrive, I was talking about the weather with an eighty-six-year-old man whose wife hung herself a

dozen or more years before, when a man I hadn't seen before entered the room with his hands stuffed uncomfortably into his pockets and his eyes nervously scanning our faces as if expecting to find hostility there. When I nodded welcomingly in his direction, he offered a relieved smile and took a seat next to me.

The newcomer was Oliver Edgerton – Olli for short, he informed us during his uncomfortable introduction – and his wife had been gone for almost a year. I was startled at how similar his story was to my own; his wife had kept a brain tumor secret from him until he found out about it in the suicide note she left next to the bathtub, where he found her after an overdose of pain medication. They, too, had been planning to have children, he told us, choking up a little, and my heart surged with sympathy for the man, who looked to be about a year younger than I was, although it was hard to tell through the drawn expression he wore and the longish black hair that covered his eyes as he spoke.

After the meeting, I caught up with Olli as he headed slowly down the library's front steps. "Hey," I said, glancing over at him, and he looked up from his feet and offered me a wary smile.

"Hey. Jason, right?"

"Right." Surprised at the question that was about to come out of my mouth, as it was a question the Jason of *before* would have had no problem asking, I managed it anyway. "Want to grab a beer across the street?"

Olli looked at me strangely for a second before nodding, his smile reappearing, more natural this time. "Yeah, actually, I do."

So grab a beer we did, and then another beer and another, talking about our loves lost until our server had to chase us out. As I drove the short distance home, I marveled at how easy it was to talk to someone who had gone through an experience so much like my own, and how good it felt to spend time with someone other than myself.

Olli and I met for beers again after the next meeting, and again after the next, making somewhat of a small tradition out of it. Our conversations gradually moved from our wives to other, less depressing topics, and that turned out to be even more healing than the endless rehashing of our losses. One night, when the bar closed down for the night, Olli followed me home, where most of a case of beer waited in the fridge.

When the beer was gone, our conversation was anything but over, although by that time, I doubted either of us would remember in the morning much of what we talked about. It was nearly four in the morning by the time Olli finally stood up from his chair and tottered toward the door, but I blocked his progress with a hand on his shoulder, turning him back in my direction.

"You can't drive like this," I said, somewhat amused at the way my words fumbled drunkenly over each other as if my tongue had become partially paralyzed. "C'mon, I'll pull out the couch for you."

"Aw," Olli replied, possibly a weak attempt to argue with my logic, but he didn't get much farther than that, because suddenly, somehow, our lips were mashed

together and I was pinned against the wall by a body not much smaller than my own. Part of me cried out to stop it, to push him away, maybe even to punch him in the face and knock him onto the floor, but some other part merely let it continue, simultaneously the driest and the most emotive kiss I had ever been a part of.

It lasted mere seconds, and when Olli pulled back, he wouldn't meet my startled stare. "I better get home," he mumbled, ignoring the fact that I knew no one was there waiting for him, and before I could formulate any kind of argument against his driving home clearly drunk, he was already gone.

Olli did not attend the next W.O.S. meeting, or the one after that. It may have been a good thing he didn't, since I had no idea how I could ever face him again after what happened, but on the other hand, I found myself missing our post-meeting conversations, which flowed as easily as the beer that accompanied them. For that reason, I was glad to see him walk into the third meeting after the drunken kiss incident, even if he did drop into a chair a few seats down from mine with his eyes pointed directly at the table in front of him. He didn't have much to say during the meeting, but at least he was present, and because he made a quick escape when the gathering adjourned, I was surprised to find him waiting on the library steps when I left the building.

"Hey," Olli said, his eyes still averted and his tone more sullen than I was accustomed to hearing from him.

A more eloquent response eluded me. "Hey."

"Have time for a beer?"

I nodded slowly. "Sure; why not?"

We didn't speak of the awkwardness between us or the reason behind it as we sipped our beers on our customary barstools at Abby's that evening. Neither did we speak of it as we drove back to my house, or as I led Olli into the kitchen and handed him a beer, which he placed, unopened, on the counter before turning back to me and kissing me again.

This time, I kissed him back.

An hour later, we continued to avoid the subject at hand as we sat side by side, naked, in my bed with the sheet draped across our lower halves, unable to look at each other, the only sound in the room my soft intake and exhale of smoke from the stale cigarette I found in the drawer of Beth's nightstand. She never told me she smoked, either.

Olli left soon after calling a taxi to take him back to his car, and I wondered if I would ever see him again – wondered, in fact, if I ever wanted to – but for all my needless wonder, I was both pleased and chagrined to watch him walk into the next W.O.S. meeting and take his seat next to me, even going so far as to glance my way, the corner of his mouth flicking briefly upward in an uncomfortable little smile. We didn't even bother meeting for beers afterward that night, opting instead to head directly back to my house, where we repeated the events of two weeks prior, with one small variation: this time, Olli spent the night.

Further breaking tradition, we didn't wait for the next W.O.S. gathering to

meet again; Olli showed up at my front door a few evenings later, and this time, there was no awkwardness when he kissed me, no unspoken discomfort as I led him to my bedroom, and no undefined uneasiness as he settled into my arms afterward, his body melding against mine as we drifted into sleep.

Maybe Beth wasn't the only one in our marriage hiding something from me.

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## The Ringer

Barry Davis

Kevin Temple's obsession with vampires began at an early age.

It was a Wednesday night in 1971 and Kevin, eight years old, watched the ABC movie of the week with his three older brothers. The movie, called the Night Stalker, unlike the usual crap the networks played, was actually pretty decent. Darin McGavin was a loser of a Vegas reporter who was the first to discern that it was a vampire ripping people throats out and draining their blood. That it was set in Sin City obviously raised the degree of difficulty in terms of identifying a vampire as the culprit as opposed to, say, the thousands of casinos that perform the same act day after day.

The next day, Mother left the boys alone. She said she had to pick up a few things at the store but Kevin never believed it. This was a set up, pure and simple. Kevin made the mistake of leaving the couch to handle a personal hygiene issue. Upon his return, he found his eldest brother Derrick lying straight as a board on the couch, arms neatly folded in front of him. The other brothers had disappeared. Derrick, eyes closed and face expressionless, slowly bent at his torso to raise his upper half from the couch. His eyes opened with a flash and he growled and bared his teeth.

Kevin, believing his brother was a real vampire, ran for his hiding place, the underside of his bed.

Kevin refused to come out even after Mother had whipped Derrick and made him smile at Kevin while explaining that he was just playing.

Kevin knew the truth - his brother *was* a vampire. Years later and he's still not comfortable around him wearing a shirt with an exposed neck.

The nightmares began that night. Over the last thirty-six years, the nightmares have morphed into their own genres.

There is the political genre, where the vampire makes some type of stump speech, then to Kevin's horror begins to rip the throats out of his constituents until, finally, he discovers Kevin at the back of the room. This dream, like most others, usually ends with the vampire in hot pursuit, its saliva and hot breath reaching Kevin's neck.

The zombie genre is a crossover of sorts. You have the typical Dawn of the Dead type creatures roaming about but, instead of brains, they want to suck your blood.

There is the barricaded in your own house genre. Typical in this, Kevin is holed up in his house with a brother or his wife. The waking point, when Kevin screams or flails himself awake, is when the brother or wife turns into a vampire and comes for Kevin.

With fatherhood, Kevin developed the juvenile genre, where his six-year-old daughter is the star. Kevin either has to save little Bethany from the vicious night creatures or, and this is truly sad, he imagines the poor child as a vampire, trying for her father's neck after a loving embrace.

There are many others that I won't tire you with. Needless to say, Kevin Temple has vampire issues. It could be argued, and the trained psychologists among you surely will, that Kevin is expressing deeply held anxieties through his dreams.

Despite it all, Kevin has been reasonably successful in life. He has married a dependable if not overly bright or beautiful or clean or rich woman, Audrey, and they have the above mentioned daughter, regrettably already on her mother's path to mediocrity, and a fine single family home on .45 acre in the far suburbs. Kevin works as an area manager for a satellite TV company, a position of little duty or accomplishment but sufficient cheddar to keep the bills paid.

This evening, Kevin Temple has come home to an empty nest - Audrey and Bethany were at the Y for a Brownies meeting. After cleaning up the dishes lovingly stacked in the sink by his wife, Kevin changed into his lay around the house clothes, fixed himself a plate and ate in blissful silence. He tidied up the kitchen, grabbed a book and proceeded to fall asleep in his comfy chair.

The doorbell woke him. Who would be at the door at this hour? In the burbs, the only people who showed their faces at your door after dark were the police. Kevin, remembering his wife's attraction to the side doors of other passenger vehicles, stood up as if electric shocked. His concern was for his daughter, already the survivor of more accidents than a veteran NASCAR driver.

Kevin undid the double locks and opened his front door. A man stood there, an unremarkable man dressed plainly in a black suit, white shirt and red tie.

"Can I help you?" Kevin asked.

"I'm here to help you," the man said. His thin lips barely moved as he spoke.

"Who are you?"

"I've been sent to help you," the man said.

"Sent by who?" Kevin looked past the man. There was no one else out there, not even a vehicle.

"I've come because of your dreams."

"My dreams?" Kevin vaguely remembered last night's nightmare, the one where the vampire pimp turned Kevin out as a gigolo before sucking his blood. "Did Audrey send you? Damn it, I told her I don't need any shrinks."

"I was sent by my fellows."

"What's that mean?"

"I would be glad to explain, inside."

"Screw this!" Kevin shouted and slammed the door shut.

Some time later, Kevin had the occasion to use the upstairs bathroom. After he concluded his business he washed his hands. As he dried them he felt that someone was watching him. He turned to his right and just outside his window, hovering a dozen feet above the driveway, was the man.

Kevin watched him calmly. He understood now what the man was. He was saying something. Kevin opened the window so that he could hear the words.

"I would like to come in to discuss your dreams." The man's mouth opened wider than before and Kevin could clearly see the man's enlarged incisors.

Now Kevin, the consumer of media images of vampires from Christopher Lee to Buffy, knew that he was in control here. He, the homeowner, had to invite the vampire inside or he couldn't enter.

"How do I know you won't just suck my blood?"

"You don't. You have to have faith."

"Faith. Are you God?"

The man seemed to consider the question.

"No, I don't believe he is one of us."

"I don't want to let you in."

"If you don't, I'll simply wait for your wife and daughter to return and ask them if I may enter."

It was the first aggressive, threatening statement the man had made. It chilled Kevin, the thought of his daughter accosted by a vampire. Admittedly, some part of him thrilled at the image of his wife lying in the boysenberry bushes with her throat ripped out.

"I'll let you in," Kevin said and walked downstairs. The man was waiting as Kevin opened the front door.

Kevin opened the door wide. The man didn't move. "You have to say the words," he said calmly.

"Please come in," Kevin said dryly.

The man walked past him and Kevin shivered.

The man stepped into the family room. "Mind if we get comfortable?" he asked.

"No," Kevin replied and, before he could catch himself, he asked if the man wanted something to drink.

The man's fangs extended well past his lips, his eyes took on a yellowish, bestial glow. The two stared at each other for a half-minute, each torn between primordial responses.

The creature sighed and the teeth retreated and his eyes looked as bored and benign as before.

"You may want to avoid that particular invitation," he said dryly.

Kevin, a bit shaken, motioned for the man to sit on his couch. Kevin sat opposite in his comfy chair.

"So, what do you want?"

"My name is Richard Frump. My fellows have sent me. My objective is to stop your dreams."



Kevin's face turned sour. "Richard Frump? I thought a vampire could come up with a cooler name. Like Ricardo Jett or something."

"Hardly. This is what I was named three hundred and forty seven years ago and this is what I am still called today."

"Who are these fellows? Are you guys like a club or frat?"

"I refer to my fellows in the legion of the undead."

"You mean vampires?"

The man winced like he had just suffered a paper cut.

"We don't use that term. We prefer the undead. If you must, call us nosforatu. We kind of like that, it sounds vaguely exotic. But vampire..." He shook his head. "That phrase is sooo...demeaning."

"How do y'all know about my dreams?"

"Who doesn't know? You even told the parts supplier at your job."

"Bennie?" Kevin shook his head. "Nah, don't tell me Bennie is down with you guys?"

"Yes, Bernard is one of the undead."

"Little Bennie? My God, he wears glasses and walks with a limp."

"The undead are very inclusive."

"Who else do I know is a vam...uh...undead?"

"You're wife's best friend Velma is one of us."

"That bitch! God damned pain in my ass for years! How about my mother in law? She's gotta be an undead."

"We did look at her but some among us thought her too vicious to admit."

"I hear Bin Laden said the same thing." Kevin laughed.

"We have many personalities, Kevin, just like any other group of people."

"People?"

"We're people too, Kevin, just different."

Kevin nodded.

"Anyway, on to the issue at hand."

"My dreams."

"Yes, they are becoming a problem."

"How can something going on in my head be a problem for you?"

"If they just stayed in your head that would be okay. Unfortunately you tell everyone. Frankly, Kevin, you're hurting the image of the undead."

"You guys have an image?"

"Sure. Bram Stoker got the ball rolling in the mass media with a fairly bleak image, one we've been trying to recover from for over a hundred years. We've had some success in the recent past with positive images, where the undead is a sympathetic character, even heroic. Have you seen Angel?"

"Sure. The vampire with a soul."

"There goes the v word again."

"Sorry."

"Old habits die hard, I know." He shrugged. "Anyway, it's been brought to

our attention that you are considering mental health care.”

“Damn Bennie.”

“Actually it wasn’t Bernard who told us. Ethel Smith informed us.”

“My librarian?”

“Yes. Did you know Ethel came to the New World at Jamestown?”

“Jamestown? Isn’t that where an entire colony disappeared?”

“She went on a little binge.”

“Oh.”

“Kevin, if you see a psychiatrist, he or she will be compelled to write about your strange compulsion in a well read journal. Right now, the negativity you spread is localized. By the time you die, you may have infected a couple hundred people with a negative image of the undead.”

“If the shrink publishes something, thousands of people may read it.”

“If it hits the Internet, millions may read it, canceling out all of our hard work over the centuries.”

“I get it but why do you care about an image anyway?”

“A bad image leads to an unhealthy fear of vampires, which will lead eventually to some wacko leading some kind of war on the undead.”

“If it goes as well as the war on drugs or war on terror, you won’t have a worry in the world.”

“We don’t want to take that risk.”

“So what are you going to do, kill me?”

The man smiled. “Nothing quite so dramatic. We thought, my fellows and I, that if you got to know us, see that in many ways we are just like you, regular people, your dreams may end.”

“Regular guys who tear people’s throats and drink their blood.”

“Celebrate people’s differences Kevin, don’t put them down.” Kevin nodded.

“Sorry, I’m a little prejudiced against murder.”

“We’re just trying to survive.”

“Whatever. Okay, you and your fellows want to come over, hang out, watch the game or what?”

“Do you bowl?”

Kevin sat forward in his comfy chair.

“Are you kidding? I’ve led my league six years straight! I kill at bowling.”

The creature’s teeth protruded a bit then hid back behind his lips. “Sorry,” he said. “Words like that excite me.”

“I’ll make a note of it.”

“So, why don’t you meet my friends and me at the Glasgow Bowl-a-Rama Tuesday night? We have a league game and could use a fourth man.”

“Okay.”

Kevin showed Richard to the door. He opened the door and his guest stood on the front stoop.

“Well, I hope to see you Tuesday night.”

“Sure, just one more thing. My brother Derrick. Is he...?”

“A nosforatu?” He shook his head. “Your fears have been misplaced.”

Kevin smiled. “There goes one nightmare.”

“Wonderful, hopefully we can rid you of the others.”

Kevin opened his mouth to reply and found himself looking at a bat. The animal flew around his head then disappeared into the darkness.

Two nights later Kevin, in his red and black custom bowling shoes and holding his fire red custom ball, strolled into the bowling alley. Richard Frump stood in lane one, wearing the alley’s worn shoes, watching Kevin walk in. He had a smile on his pale face and was flanked by two men, each more non-descript than the other.

“Fellows, this is Kevin. Kevin meet Howard Fineman...” The taller non-descript man with the balding head and thick black glasses stepped forward and shook Kevin’s hand. His palms were sweaty.

“....and this is Julius Fenkel.” The other man was like a walking fireplug. “What’s up?” he said as he extended his hand.

Kevin shook the man’s hand. It seemed strangely dry, almost like sun-baked leather.

“Let’s bowl!” Richard shouted and they did. The team they played, although each man wore his hair a little long, appeared normal. Kevin wondered if they knew they were playing a bunch of dead men.

Kevin started hot and stayed hot. Howard was the best of his hosts with Richard bringing up the rear.

Richard’s team, with Kevin bowling a 290, won the match. Richard invited Kevin to join the team and he accepted. The team, called the UnHoly Rollers, easily won the league title.

There was a celebration at the Newark Holiday Inn and Richard and Kevin shared drinks at the bar as the others partied to their rear.

“So, has this helped your nightmares?”

Kevin gulped down his beer and raised his hand for another.

“Yes, I haven’t had a nightmare in weeks.”

“Very good. So, there will be no shrink?”

Kevin smiled as the pretty bartender handed him his beer. He watched her backside as she sashayed off.

“No shrinks for me, man,” he answered finally. He took a long pull on the drink.

“I have spoken to the fellows. They would like you to stay on the team.”

Kevin thought then shook his head.

“I like you guys and all but it still creeps me out that you suck blood.” He said this quietly so that the bartender would not hear.

Richard’s fangs extended, prompted by the mention of either ‘suck’ or ‘blood’.

“Sorry, man,” Kevin said.

“That’s okay.” His fangs retreated back where they came from.

Kevin finished his beer and stood.

“I gotta go, Rich. See you around, okay.” He clapped Richard on the shoulder.

Kevin walked for the door, which now was blocked by several of the celebrants. Two dozen men, women and children were striding very purposely in his direction.

Kevin backed up until he bumped into Richard.

"I'm sorry, Kevin. My fellows have decided – you are too good of a player to let off the team." His fangs were fully extended and his eyes had that yellowish glow.

Faced with this moment he always feared, Kevin felt supernaturally calm.

"This was never really about helping me was it? You just wanted me to help your team."

"We did want to help you, Kevin. But you can't blame us if we helped ourselves in the bargain." Richard smiled and saliva dripped from his fangs.

Kevin pointed to the bartender, whose fangs were showing as well. "At least let a brother be turned by her," he said.

Richard nodded. The bartender flew over the bar. She and Kevin went off to a private room where she kissed Kevin with an animal intensity and allowed him to make love to her. At the height of their passions she made him one of the undead.

Kevin divorced Audrey and sees his daughter every weekend, Kevin being careful to stay indoors until it gets dark outside. He married the bartender, Venus, thoroughly enjoying the company of a woman who sucks the life out of other men, not him.

The UnHoly Rollers continue to play and win championships but after their last title Howard Fineman ran into a wooden stake held by a vampire hunter in Argentina. Howard was down there looking for a new market for the rubber sole shoes he manufactured.

The UnHoly Rollers are looking for a new fellow. Are you an excellent bowler with minimal prejudices? If so, there is room for you on the team.

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## The Scales of Causality

*André Braga Cabral*

You weigh 100 lbs and discover that if you cleared the doubts about your own existence, you'd weigh only 50. A heavy piece of concrete plummets on your head and you're under no ceiling. Comatose, you dream of things which never occurred to you (neither in happening nor in thoughts). Your doctor's expertise is a gift from God, no degrees or cum laudes. The woman who doesn't let go of your hand holds "ill-WILL" in her heart: 10 lbs of ill counterbalancing with 20 lbs of will. She WILL remain by your side, regardless of how ill you render her.

# Preserved for Eternity

Jon Brunette

Wendy Hamilton walked through Midwest Science Museum, inspecting the exhibits and writing when the latest items will move from her business and when the next major showpieces will ship to her business. She held a clipboard, and pen around a necklace. Her heels clicked loudly on the tiled floor. Her eyes looked up and down the exhibits like the hidden security cameras that followed her movements. Finally, she stood inside the room that housed the Tyrannosauns Rex. It towered mightily, and almost touched the vaulted rooftop with a small tilt of the head. Wendy inhaled deeply, shook her head slightly, and walked quickly into the large showroom.

Off a ladder with a wood-and-metal ledge, one man placed cloths around the hefty fossils to protect them. Dust and debris always formed naturally. People walked through Midwest Science Museum hourly, in mixed bunches. Dust accumulated quickly. Now, the place just closed and Wendy and the janitor stood alone. He failed to hide the attraction that burned his eyeballs when he looked upon Wendy in the white jacket worn loosely. Her body bounced lightly with her walk, and added sexuality to the jacket. With her voluptuousness, the laboratory jacket just barely hid her carnality. Now, the janitor stood just below his boss, and he failed to concentrate on his job anymore.

Anyhow, the janitor understood sensuality when he looked upon her body. Truthfully, he had never witnessed sexuality as intensely inside his body as beside Wendy Hamilton. Quickly, his blood pumped wildly, almost painfully, in the same room.

Looking down from the ladder at Wendy, the janitor yelled, "Maybe I deserve a raise. After all, I have worked punctually for a few weeks. Almost I month, I have worked beside you. And you have never complained vocally." He winked, but Wendy just looked at her clipboard. "I performed my job beautifully. Every room has been mopped thoroughly. Trash has been brought to the bins. In thirty minutes, I will be able to leave." With a laugh, he said, "Only to return in six hours." Then he said, without the laugh, "Maybe I should wait for you before I leave." She failed to hear him, like a robot that just wrote continually on paper. "Should I wait for you before I take off?" Still, she offered no response, but walked into the hallway. The janitor walked off the ladder, and followed Wendy to the hall. Three exhibit rooms joined the hallway, but Wendy had already finished with them.

Quickly, the janitor took Wendy by the arm. She told him to take his hands off her or he would need to look for another job. He said, "You shouldn't take that tone with me. You shouldn't take that tone with anyone." Cocking her head, Wendy presented a look that told him he had been hired to work. She didn't socialize with the help in any manner. "Intelligent people hate janitors. Wherever I work I find people who hate me because I mop floors, wash toilet bowls. Maybe I have no idea what you do on your job, but I work like an animal. Only animals should wash toilet bowls. Would you like to scrub a toilet bowl?" Disinterested, she tried to leave the hall, but couldn't budge her arm.

Holding her cellular phone, Wendy began to dial 911. "I never assaulted you," the

janitor said. "Maybe I just wanted to feel your jacket. It looks like the type your staff wears continually. Maybe I just wanted to bring you back to the Tyrannosauns Rex room for a little kiss! Police would believe that, looking at your low-buttoned blouse above that stylish skirt!" She raised an eyebrow that announced repulsion. Finally, he said, "Maybe I just wanted to kill you. Did you think before that I kill people like you?"

Thirty minutes later, the buzz at the front door told the janitor that someone wanted entrance into Midwest Science Museum. He placed the final sheet over the final fossil, and went to open the door. Two police officers stood in the lighted walkway outside the windows. The janitor allowed them into the hall, where Wendy had stood moments before, when she had rejected the janitor. Beside his bareheaded partner, the officer in the black hat said, "Dispatcher told Red Arrow Police Department that a telephone patched into Midwest Science Museum called 911. Anybody need help?" The janitor shrugged lamely. The officer said, "Maybe we should look around anyhow."

They found Wendy below white sheets placed over the Tyrannosaurus Rex, across the hall from the final fossil that got the sheet by the janitor. Splayed like an insect, the curator of Midwest Science Museum had blood pooling thickly around her mouth, off a jagged laceration in her throat, hair pulled tightly, tied to the fossils, reddened by blood, and no clothes but her laboratory jacket. That blanketed her body, adequately, but not completely.

One officer looked at the janitor, at Wendy Hamilton, and back at the shaggy-haired janitor. He said, "Now, I recognize you." He raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you just leave Arrowhead Asylum about two weeks ago?" Reluctantly, the janitor nodded. "Didn't you play baseball in the courtyard of Arrowhead Asylum?" Nodding, the janitor looked at his wristwatch and tried to look hurried. The officer in the black hat said, "One man just escaped from Arrowhead Asylum. He had black hair, stood about your height, and held a build like yours. Actually, he looked like you, but you left Arrowhead Asylum before he did." Looking at his buzzed-haired partner, and at the janitor, the officer added, "No—you had already left Arrowhead Asylum."

The employee of Midwest Science Museum said, "You want to arrest me, I assume." The beefy officer in the hat shook his head. The janitor said, "Don't you suspect me in her murder? I spent the last two hours with Wendy Hamilton, alone, and before that, six hours until we closed." He stiffened and said, "By the way, she treated me like filth, like a lot of people treat janitors."

The elder officer said, "Looking at Wendy, I would assume the killer would be blanketed in blood. Tying Wendy Hamilton to the fossils, her killer would be sweating profusely. We nabbed the man who escaped from Arrowhead Asylum, before we knocked by the windows. He walked across the lot of Midwest Science Museum. On routine patrol, we arrested him. He looked wet, bloody, and nervous, like a man who realized he would sit in jail for fifty years. Yearly, he had killed women who looked medical, with laboratory jackets, and blonde hairdos. In childhood, he suffered trauma from a female physician who had touched his body inappropriately. Now, he will sit in jail eternally because Wendy Hamilton wore her laboratory jacket. Treated psychiatrically or not, he will never leave Arrowhead Asylum anymore."

The officer without the hat brushed his badge until it shone brilliantly. He said, inquisitively, "Why did you stay at Arrowhead Asylum? You look just like anyone off the

streets. What—did you feel empty after some girlfriend broke off the relationship?”

The janitor said, “It began innocently, with my family. They found no abusiveness, but isolation abused me. When they behaved abusively, they instilled guilt when I tried to punish them for it.” The officers lifted their eyebrows impatiently, and nodded restlessly. The janitor said, “After ten years, I walked away from Arrowhead Asylum, finally, but psychiatrists told me to blame my family. They instructed me to never speak to my family anymore. People respect their families, but I cannot anymore.” Cocking his head, he said, tearlessly, “They never visited me in Arrowhead Asylum.”

Clearing his throat, the janitor continued, “I hate people who ignore me. Some people behave like I don’t exist. It bothers me—always has, always will. To land in Arrowhead Asylum, I killed a coworker. What could I do? After all, she ignored me. And I hate when people ignore me.” With a sparkly light behind his eyes, he said, “I pounded her until she confessed loudly about her admiration for me. According to her, that attraction added to her alienation. It got attention, not from my family, but attention anyhow.” He breathed slowly, and said, “Unfortunately, I spent ten years in Arrowhead Asylum.” Turning his back, the janitor walked to his floor buffer, pushed the handle into the hallway, and said: “Naturally, I wanted attention, like anyone. Anyhow, why wouldn’t I?” Below his breath, he said, “Attention like that which I wanted with Wendy Hamilton, like anyone would. Why shouldn’t I have it anyhow?”

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## Quick Sand

Jliana Vasquez

Today she felt desperate, crazy and out of her mind. She tried so hard to make him understand, however, the more she tried the more insane she became. Was she talking to herself? Was there an invisible wall between them? The sounds of her words resound and bounce back without piercing through the air. It made her feel without breath, without Soul and hopeless. How and when was she going to escape the voices that kept telling her she was crazy. That she was creating a problem where none existed. When was she going to realize that the Hell she dwelled in, was created by her imagination. The air was getting thicker as she tried to make sense of it all. But she felt it, she dreams it, she yearns it. If she could shut off the switch of her heart, she could continue to live without feelings. Without wanting someone or something to put that smile on her face. If she could deny herself the satisfaction of someone else’s smile upon her appearance, she could finally be free of the lonely she caressed. Why couldn’t she live without the fantasy yearning? Looking out for something in the distance while what was presence was dead in front of her. Maybe it was her perception of what was happening that deceived her? She ran fast, hoping she would not be caught up by her truth that tortured her. She wanted to turn around and say, Am here, catch me, I give up. But instead she ran faster the other way. The road turned into quick sand beneath her feet, her hands grasped on the mush around her and it gives in, her nose lingers there.

# Landlord Attack

*Gary Beck*

Jaime Perez crept up the fire escape as quietly as he could and stopped at the third floor. He leaned over the guard rail to the kitchen window that he had been told didn't have a gate. He waited patiently to be sure that no one on the street had noticed him, while vapor from the cold steamed out of his mouth. He pressed his short, skinny, drug ravaged body against the wall until he felt ready, then he took a metal tool from his pocket and stealthily pried the window open. He couldn't hear any sounds from the dark apartment, so he carefully slipped over the rail and climbed inside. The landlord had assured him that they didn't own a dog, so although still alert, he began to relax. The landlord had also carefully instructed him how to place paper next to the pilot light of the stove, run a paper strip to the nearest inflammable material and ignite it so it would appear to be an accident. There was a cardboard cake box on a table next to the stove and he ran the strip of paper to the box. He paused and listened intently, his body a menacing hulk in the darkness, then greedily opened the box. It was some kind of pound cake, not his favorite, like chocolate or pineapple, but better than nothing. He broke off a chunk with a gloved hand and stuffed it in his mouth, crumbs dribbling on the floor.

The landlord had insisted that he not take anything, but a piece of cake didn't count. Besides, the greedy pig would never know. Jaime needed a hit on the crack pipe and the sugar from the cake would settle his jangling nerves. He silently cursed the landlord for a moment. He knew why the landlord wanted this family out. Then he could renovate the apartment cheaply and triple the rent. When the tenants rejected what must have been a low offer and other pressures failed, the landlord sent for him. Jaime was known as 'the torch' to a few pitiless landlords on the lower east side, whose lust for profit at the expense of decency was aroused by gentrification. He could smell the paper by the pilot light smoldering, so he lit a match, put it to the middle of the paper strip and made sure it was burning both ways. Then he slid out the window to the fire escape and closed it behind him. As he hastily went down the metal steps, he thought: 'To hell with those gringos. Let them burn. They forced my people out of the neighborhood. Now they'll get theirs.'

Some kind of noise brought Peter to the surface from a deep sleep. He groggily stretched, not sure what happened, then suddenly smelled smoke. He leaped up and dashed to the kitchen and saw the fire. The flames were high enough to keep him from reaching the sink with its flexible water hose, so he tore off his T-shirt and tried to smother the flames, but this only fanned them higher. He rushed back to the bedroom, pulled the covers off his wife and shook her arm. "What's wrong?" Beth sleepily asked. "It's a fire," he yelled. "We've got to get the kids out." She instantly snapped awake and took charge: "I'll take Jen and you take Andy." They hurried to the children's bedroom, where Jennifer and Andrew



were sound asleep. As the children gradually awakened, they wrapped them in their blankets and carried them out of the bedroom.

The smoke was rapidly spreading through the apartment. "Should I try to grab my wallet?" Peter asked. Beth looked around and quickly decided: "Let's get the kids into the hall, then you can see if it's safe to go back inside." Flames were pouring out of the kitchen and the acrid smoke was blurring their vision. The children were wide awake now, frightened and crying. They made their way through the living room into the hallway that led to the front door. The room was rapidly filling with smoke and when Peter opened the door, smoke billowed into the hall. They paused at the head of the stairs and Peter looked back, considering if he should risk returning for his wallet and other valuables. Beth realized what he was thinking and said firmly: "No way you're going in there." He protested: "All our money and credit cards are in there, and our coats. It's freezing outside." She shook her head. "At least we're not hurt. We'll manage the rest."

Officer Herminio Corrado was just carrying a container of coffee to his partner in the patrol car, when he saw the flames burst out of the window from a house down the block. He knocked on the hood to get his partner's attention, pointed, then set off at a run. He moved faster than the usual officer's cautious approach to danger, since fire couldn't attack him from a distance and rapid response was essential. But he was already trembling and his insides were churning, because he was terrified of fire. He leaped up the steps of the building and knocked loudly on each door as he passed, shouting: "Police. Fire." When he got to the third floor, he found a family of four at the landing and yelled: "Get those kids out now." The man started mumbling something about losing all their possessions, but there was no time for that nonsense. "Get going. You can worry about your things later." He gave the man a shove and watched him start downstairs, as the woman tugged him along.

The flames were shooting out of the apartment door and smoke was filling the hallway. He hesitated, afraid of being trapped by the fire, then started upstairs to warn the other tenants. He was halfway up the flight of stairs, when someone grabbed him from behind and he almost jumped out of his skin. He turned around and saw that it was a fireman in full protective gear, looking like a giant insect, ready to dip its proboscis. The fireman pulled up his mask and said: "I'll take it from here." Relief zoomed through his body. "Thanks, buddy." He watched the alien figure hurry upstairs and thought: 'Thank you, thank you. I don't know how you do it, but better you than me.' He quickly went downstairs and out of the building. His partner was waiting and congratulated him for his fast reaction. "You did good, Coro." He nodded thanks, then confided; "I could never be a fireman. It scares the shit out of me. I'd rather face a gunman any day." His partner grunted agreement. "Me too."

Firefighter Eugene Jones was dozing in his seat, heading back to the firehouse after shopping for dinner at an expensive grocery. When the call came in they were only a few blocks from the scene, so it only took a minute or two to get there. He put on his gear as they went, holding on to the safety bar with one

hand as they tore around the corner. They were the first truck on the scene and he adjusted his mask and rushed into the building, followed by the rest of the crew. Tenants were streaming out and he carefully forced his way upstairs through the panicky flow. He saw the cop ordering some tenants out, caught up to him on the stairs and told him that he'd take over. As the cop started downstairs, he thought: 'I could never be a cop. I'd be terrified if someone was shooting at me.' He shook his head at the distraction, then went and knocked on each door on the fourth floor. By this time, the commotion, sirens and smoke had awakened everybody and he calmly urged them to leave the building.

One of his partners had evacuated the fifth floor and came down and beckoned him to help check the apartment directly over the fire. The door was ajar and they entered warily, concerned with a sudden blaze through the floor. They knelt and felt the kitchen floor which was hot, but not incendiary. They carefully checked the walls, then the rest of the apartment and followed the same procedure in the hall. They didn't find any indicators that the fire had spread upstairs. The smoke was already dissipating, so they went downstairs to the apartment where the fire started to help the rest of the crew. By the time they got there, the fire had been extinguished and they joined the search for any further hot spots. The kitchen and part of the main bedroom were thoroughly burned, but the destruction to the rest of the apartment was moderate. Gene studied the scene and thought the damage looked peculiar, but left it for the fire marshal to examine. He saw that he wasn't needed, so he began to lug fire hose downstairs.

Peter was freezing in his pajamas and Beth wasn't much warmer in the bathrobe she had managed to put on before their rapid escape. They had been able to snatch down coats for the children, so at least they were warm, but they were still traumatized by the sudden evacuation. The organized chaos that had followed the fire had shattered the once calm night for them. Neighbors had poured out of their houses, eager for the spectacle of disaster. Although disappointed that no one had jumped, a fiery meteor plunging to earth, or had been carried out blackened and smoldering, the crowd avidly gaped at the building, faces tense with expectation, still hoping for something titillating. The flashing red lights on the fire trucks and police cars cast incandescent glows on the savage spectators, who didn't seem overly evolved from their ancient ancestors. Peter watched in utter bewilderment, unsure of what to do next. Beth sensed his confusion: "Ask someone if we can go back to our apartment, now that the fire is out."

Peter looked around and saw a fireman coiling hose nearby and called to him: "Excuse me. Can we go back to our apartment now?" The fireman turned his head and looked at him tiredly. "Sorry, sir. The fire marshal has to inspect the premises to determine the cause of the fire. Then they have to check the building for safety and stability." Peter's voice was getting shrill. "When do you think we can get in there?" "Maybe tomorrow afternoon, depending on the damage." "Can't we just get some clothes? We're freezing our butts off." "That's just not possible," the fireman said. "But I can give you some blankets that'll at least keep

you warm." The fireman walked to the truck and pulled out some gray, heavy wool blankets and handed them to Peter, who just stood there and asked dumbly: "What do we do now?" "Do you have somewhere to go for the rest of the night?" "No." "Friends? Family?" "No." "Why don't you bring these blankets to your family," the fireman said. "I'll see if I can get someone to help you." Peter shuffled back to Beth, lugging the blankets, dazed by the distressing events.

Gene saw the cop from the stairs leaning on his patrol car and walked over to him. "Hey, pal, how're ya doin'?" The cop's face was streaked with soot, but he looked cheerful. "O.K. What about you?" "Good. We didn't lose anybody." They grinned at each other in the instant camaraderie that shared danger brings, especially to the uniformed services. The cop extended his hand. "I'm Coro." Gene took his hand. "I'm Gene." They stood there for a moment, reassured by the bond that helped them protect civilians. Coro said confidently: "I almost pissed my pants." Gene whispered: "When you're a firefighter, they spray so much water on you that no one notices." They laughed comfortably together. "Thanks, buddy," Coro said. Gene smiled. "That's O.K. Listen, there's a family that doesn't have any place to go." "Where?" Gene pointed. "There." Coro recognized them from the stairs. "I'll see what I can do. Take care, buddy." "You, too." Gene waved cheerfully, then went back to coiling hose.

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## Suffering

Peter A. Tetto

It is the absence  
    the non-presence  
    the void  
like the snapshot snipped  
that jogs the memory  
and cuts it short.  
More acutely and precisely  
drawn to the edge  
of some warm comfort  
that's been expunged  
                                erased  
                                removed  
to better nag and drag  
the psyche or mind  
into the whirlpool of the turmoil  
that though known, is gone  
departed  
                                and yet still known.

I was evicted from the womb two and a half months too soon  
Born small enough to snug in the palm of a grown man's hand  
My single layer of smooth baby skin was scaling and cracking  
My limbs were wrapped in oven mitts so I couldn't peel myself  
As I lay trapped inside my clear plastic tomb.

My mother was detoxing down the hall  
My father was nowhere to be found  
I was encircled by nurses and doctors  
Ensuring my chest continued to rise and fall  
Keeping me alive through impending doom.

As soon as I was discharged my mother was put in charge  
And she affixed me directly in front of the TV  
But my caretakers were primarily Barney and Sesame Street  
As my mother sat comatose on the edge of her bed  
Or she was wasting her WIC checks on cigarettes.

At the age of two my mother would drag me to day care  
And propped me up at the bar in the tavern on the corner  
I couldn't stop crying as I choked on stale cigarette smoke  
So she dipped my pacifier in a pitcher of Miller Lite  
And slipped it into my mouth.

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## surgery

Richard Lopez

I am a very healthy man, as far I'm concerned:

I walk the dog most mornings, eat fruit with my coffee,  
maintain a level of activity as far as I want to be active.

but there is this plant that is brown that I roll up

in white leaves, these papery joints connected to me  
through fire.

and I know I should know better, but dear doctor you don't know the half.  
if I were to breathe all the smoke of me into the air  
my heart would run away. nowhere else. just away.

# After I Wrote What You Read

Randall K. Rogers

I want to make a poem snap  
like Saddam's neck

make it zing like an  
AK47 round ripping  
through your mind

blowing your brains out of your head  
but you still alive  
not dead

after I wrote what you read.

# Your Grandfather Tells Stories

Lauren Wescott Dobay

He liberated some eggs in World War 2,  
Found them rolling beneath the broken leather

Seat of an old jeep, the men laughed; good  
Eats tonight. Shared them in the shades of

Okinawa, scrambled, over easy; no ketchup,  
Goes with beans, musty cornbread, no butter.

He missed the pickled pig's feet Hazel from  
Home would send, the macadamia cookies.

Fifty years later he says he remembers every meal,  
Tells me he looks good in everything he eats,

Some sauerkraut left over on his turtleneck  
Mustard on his khakis, steak sauce on his shoes.

His laughter booms; I lean in closer, seem to see,  
The bewildered generals looking for their eggs.

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