

071  
June '09

revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

down in the dirt

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Scars art, pages 28.

Cover art of a cow in Pennsylvania.

# By the Numbers

Sean MacKendrick

It was late. She should have been at Mother's over an hour ago. And God help the poor sap that let down Mother.

The tall, almost anorexic young woman sucked the hot, sour city air through her teeth, impatiently scanning the horizon. Unconsciously she twisted the hem of the thick white blouse clinging to her, as if she could wring the nervousness from her clothing. After an eternity a yellow spot appeared in the distance and grew quickly into an approaching taxi, and she released a shuddering sigh of relief, wiping the thick sheen of sweat from her ashen face with her sleeve. *It's going to be all right*, she told herself, wanting desperately to believe the words her mind spoke. *You just need to visit Mother for one hour, and then you can go back home and crawl into bed and hide. Fourteen average minutes for travel, for eighty-eight minutes total. You can survive for eighty-eight minutes.*

The taxi slowed in response to her frantic wave and pulled over to the curb. Phoebe squinted at the vehicle, trying to make out the license plate number as it approached. That turned out to be okay, so she waited impatiently for the cab to pull up alongside her so she could check out the rest of the cab. *They really ought to place their numbers on the top where everybody can see them*, she thought, and not for the first time. *It really would make things easier on everyone.*

The cab was coated with dirt and grime, probably as an attempt to hide its number. Phoebe could still pick out the digits 3-0-1 through the grime, though, and stepped back quickly, almost tripping over her own feet. The driver stared - no, he *glared* at her from under a dirty crop of dark black hair, frowning when she continued to edge away from the vehicle and its driver. Three-oh-one was just thirteen in reverse with a zero thrown in, and a zero really didn't count for anything anyway. The evil creature behind the wheel scowled and motioned impatiently, urging her forward. Phoebe could only shake her head, feeling the blackness trying to smother her senses. The excuses she usually had prepared for these occasions slipped from her mind, crowded out by the darkness. Eventually the taxi sped away, spitting gravel onto the sidewalk.

Once the blackness seeped out of her mind, Phoebe glanced nervously at her watch while the churning in her stomach settled. Mother was going to have a fit. Fortunately another taxi was already approaching in the distance. Phoebe waved to get its attention, more courageous and ready to face the numbers after her last success. The license plate was clean, and safe from any bad numbers. Phoebe watched the door carefully, waiting for the cab number to come into view.

Twenty-three. Phoebe looked up at the driver, who smiled. A good, honest smile. Could he actually be unaware of the danger surrounding him? He seemed genuinely at ease; no sense of danger was coming from him, only from the car. Two-three. The squares of which were four and nine, summing up to thirteen. A clever disguise, but one with which Phoebe was familiar. Apparently it had fooled its driver, though. This time Phoebe was able to fight off the blackness long enough to pat the pockets of her jeans and throw her hands up in mock despair.

"I'm sorry, I forgot my keys," she said, struggling to keep the waver out of her

voice. “I have to go back.” She turned and walked directly away from the taxi, not daring to look back.

As soon as the sound of the cab’s motor faded into the distance, Phoebe jogged back to the curb, frantic now. It was three minutes before another cab approached, and by that time Phoebe was fairly terrified for herself. She waved it over, did some quick calculations but found nothing wrong with the number 117 printed in fading digits on the door, and hopped in the back.

Ten minutes and five dollars later Phoebe hopped back out and raced up the eight steps of the Lakeside Retirement Homes, building 2, so panicked by the information on her watch that she ran right by room 130, usually terrifying because of its lack of even the most basic attempts to hide its evil, on her way to the elevator. She punched for the sixteenth floor, dragging rasping gulps of air into lungs quivering from a combination of fear and physical fatigue. She really needed to start exercising again, especially if she wanted the strength to run from the numbers when it was necessary, as was so often the case lately. The numbers were getting bolder and more deadly, and no place was completely safe anymore.

The floor numbers flashed by on the display above the door, a small bell ticking off their passage. Eight. Ten. Suddenly Phoebe forgot about feeling tired. She forgot about the need to make it Mother’s on time. She forgot everything but the digits on the display.

Twelve flashed briefly before turning directly into fourteen. The darkness threatened to descend over Phoebe and blind her. The architects or whoever it was that numbered the floors had known enough to skip *that* number, but the floor was still there. It knew which floor it really was and it sat there, waiting for her, hoping that she would fall for the disguise and step off on the wrong floor so it could devour her.

Phoebe watched the display above the door, fighting a losing battle against the darkness. The number wasn’t going to change. The elevator was stuck on the damned floor, and she was going to die. *Change!* she screamed with her mind. The stagnant air in her metal coffin was suffocating. This was the end.

After an eternity the number did change, to fifteen and then sixteen. Phoebe stumbled through the doors as they opened, still blinded by the veil of blackness draped over her brain. Only Mother could force her to go through this hell once every week. Only She could terrify Phoebe enough to drive her past an entire floor of pure evil waiting to kill at the first available opportunity. Phoebe hurried to room 1620 and knocked on the door, sucking the cold recycled building air into her aching lungs.

There was no answer, so she knocked again, louder. Still no answer. Phoebe covered her face with her hands and turned away from the door. Either Mother was so angry that She refused to answer the door, or She already left. In either case Phoebe was in serious trouble. If Father had still been alive, He would’ve beaten her senseless and locked her in the cellar for a week for letting down her Mother. “Piss!” spat Phoebe before she was able to bite off the word. Warmth flooded into her face as she waited to see if Mother heard the language and was going to open the door with her fist already swinging.

The door never moved. Phoebe shuffled back to the elevator after exactly four minutes, wishing there was a hole in the ground so she could crawl into it and hide forever. The doors opened immediately when she pressed the down button, almost as if the elevator was waiting for her. She walked to the back of the elevator after punching for the first floor, pressing her forehead against the cold metal wall in the back.

The bell pinged once as it passed the fifteenth floor, pinged again as it passed through the fourteenth. Then the lights went out and the elevator shuddered to a halt. Phoebe turned slowly to the front of the elevator, too much in shock to be afraid. The red emergency lights flared on, illuminating the elevator in the color of blood.

The number fourteen was on the display, flickering every second or so to twelve and then back again. The thirteenth floor had captured her. And not the floor that needed to hide its number. She was trapped on the *real* thirteenth floor.

No. This could not be happening. She had been too careful for this to happen. She spent most of her adult life preparing. She was too smart for the numbers to catch her like this.

Phoebe shook her head slowly. No, she couldn't lie to herself. She hadn't been careful; she had let down her guard. Worrying about missing Mother had made her forget to be careful. She hadn't been thinking, and the number reached out and grabbed her when it saw she was vulnerable. But the blackness hadn't smothered her mind yet, and she could still think clearly enough to escape. Above her was a hatch that led to safety. Now how to unlock it...

A heavy thump on the door drove the thought from her head. She backed away from the door, trying to push herself through the back wall as the thing scraped at the door. Still the blackness hovered in the air, just above her.

Phoebe closed her eyes as the doors began to open, forced apart by the thing on the other side. They scraped open slowly and the thing stumbled in, choking Phoebe with its rank odor. Wheezes rattled through a rotting throat as it placed a stiff hand on Phoebe's shoulder. She could feel bones exposed through the decayed flesh of the thing's hand. She knew what it was even before it spoke.

"You've been bad, young lady," her Father rasped. "You've let your mother down." His grip hardened, sinking into her shoulder. Although her eyes were still closed, she could feel His face drawing closer, His other hand twisting its dirty snake-like fingers in her hair.

Finally, the darkness descended.

# Because of No

Luis Cuauhtemoc  
Berriozabal

Because of no I am not a transient.  
Because of no I am not a millionaire.  
No stops me from harming myself  
or others. No keeps me from love  
or opening my heart.  
I cannot imagine a world without no.  
What if is a refrain I hear in my head.

No overwhelms what if  
like Big Brother, constantly  
ready to put down rebellion.  
Yes is dragged to a cell deep in the mind  
and beaten to a pulp a thousand times.  
I could live with no, but better with silence,  
especially when no demands silence.

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# Brian's Thing

Michael Schmidt

Standing in line again at the QuikMart, there was a lady standing in front of Brian that got him going. Not sexually. She was ultra thin, had on a see-through top with a black bra underneath. He could see almost all of her. Very freckled. Skin just about to begin wrinkling from old age. She was moving out of her middle-ages. Breasts hardly to speak of. Buttocks non-existent.

All that aside, the thing started to get him. She was one of those few that give him the thing. She left the line, then came back in line behind him.

"Wanna go back up front?"

"Oh, well," she stammered, as she thought about how she wanted to fuck him just because he was young. "Oh, well, okay. Thank you."

The thing really started to get rolling. It was all flooding into his mind. Her whole life, from beginning to just a little after that moment. Her husband was cheating on her at that moment. She was off to cheat on him with some other guy. The names even came.

When the thing hits, he has to tell it. It's an irresistible urge and a very rare thing, and some people think he's a god at the time and others get dangerous. But still, he had to tell it.

"Excuse me, Miss. Claire, right?"

"Why, why yes. Do I know you from somewhere?"

"No. It's...it's complicated. But..." He often had this problem of starting it up and telling. The line moved forward. He had little time. "You see, I have this thing with some people and..."

"Oh, brother. Move along, buddy. Another pick up line. I drive a Mercedes. My husband makes a six figure salary."

"No, no. Nothing like that. I have this thing with people that I get and I just suddenly know them. Like really know them and...you happen to be one of those people."

"What are you talking about? Get lost."

He decided to just let her have it.

"Your husband is cheating on you. With uh...a Mindy. They're at her place right now. His name is...Brady. Tomlinson."

"How dare you presume such things about my personal life. Are you stalking us? What do you want? My husband would never cheat on me!"

"And you're going to meet a...Charles Schroeder. Right now. And you'll be doing the thing today, too."

He took a sip of his extra big soda.

"The nerve! The nerve!"

"Okay, how about this. You grew up upper middle class, but your dad got laid off and you had to move into an apartment. Sold off the house. Lost the dog, too. Skipper. And your family slowly crumbled financially until your grandfather died and left your family a large sum of money and some land. So you all moved to the

house out in...Westerfield, where you went to school and was miserable. Once you were eighteen, you moved out quickly and back to the city. You bummed around, living at friend's houses. Then, when you were old enough, you started bar hopping. That's how you met your now husband, at a bar..." He snapped his fingers, trying to bring it all in. "The bar was...Chamberlain's. Anyhow, there isn't really an end to the story, I just pick up on these things for certain people once in a while and I just have to tell. You understand, right?"

"Miss?" the clerk prompted. She was slack-jawed.

She snapped out of it and paid for her Red Vines and little soda out of her three hundred dollar purse.

"You were totally wrong about everything. I'm not going to get tangled up in whatever scam you're playing."

"No scam. Just...whatever. I mean, I even knew the name of your childhood dog."

"Guesswork. You better not follow me or I'll...I'll...call the cops."

She stormed out in her six hundred dollar heels and got into her Mercedes. He got up to pay for his refill.

"Damn, man! Was that all true?"

"Yeah."

"Damn, that was incredible! Of course there's no way for me to know, but you got some sort of gift. How about me? What to you have on me?"

"Not a thing, buddy. Maybe in another space, or time. I'm not sure what makes it happen."

"Okay. Sure. Sure."

He started to walk out of the place. Claire squealed out of the parking lot.

"Hey," the clerk said. He stopped and turned. "Where's she going now?"

"She's going to try and prove me wrong and go home instead of her lover's, but she'll find him waiting there at her place because they had an argument yesterday over the phone and he suspected that she might not come over."

"You're crazy."

"I know."

Claire pulled up her drive to see Charles' SUV parked in front. She got out and stomped over to where he was waiting on the porch.

"There you are! I was just going to call you!"

"You know better than to be here, let alone parked in front of my house!"

Charles was a deathly good-looking man and she had a hard time staying angry at him.

"You know old Brady is over at Mindy's right now. Relax."

"I know."

"Still mad at me?"

She tried to keep playing the angry game, but it was quickly falling apart. As soon as they got inside, they were kissing and soon after that, were fucking on the couch.

Brian walked slowly home, trying to shake off the last of the shivers he gets when he gets the thing, drinking his big soda and quietly laughing to himself.

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## Confession

Theresa Lee

She was to confess her love.  
The words quivered upon trembling lips.  
And she shivered with what was within her heart.  
A tiny creature in a quaking frame –  
with a pulse that beat inside a quaking heart.  
So much, inside so little.  
She spoke.  
Small trembling words, in soft trembling voice,  
from tiny lips upon a tiny creature.  
So small – to express so much.

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## Woo In My Garden

K (Franceè Bouvenir) McSpadden

I decided that the only thing red stays in my body is blood “no more red meat for this sister” after told about my high cholesterol, I excluded the pig and cow out of my life.

I want to honor my body with the nature elements that the same way mother nature created for me.

I keep myself healthy by taken multi-vitamins and eating appropriate foods because I refuse to be classified as another vital statistics.

Although I'm nearsighted and takes vitamin **A** to prevent my vision to worsen because I refuse to wear thick bifocals.

I keep my skin soft and smooth by taken vitamin **E**, to prevent wrinkles because I refuse to have plastic surgery.

I keep my breast firm and tight by eaten yogurt and drink milk to prevent sag-giness because I refuse to get breast implants.

I keep my abs flatter, hips curve and butt round, by eaten fruits and vegetables because I refuse to get a tummy tuck.

I keep myself in shape by taken **B12**, to prevent me from gaining weight because I refuse any wolf callers who solicit me, when they definitely won't get any.



# My Brother's Keeper

Kerry Petrichek

Henry's thick hair bounced wildly as he moved. Finally the day had come for him to leave the place where nurses and doctors watched his every move. He opened his worn leather suitcase to begin packing the few belongings he had with him – clothing, toiletries and a straightedge razor that he had been allowed to use only in the presence of a nurse. The rest of the time, it had been locked securely in a closet with belts, pens and other objects patients could use to hurt themselves or others.

Lying on his bed were a white cotton dress shirt, a blue jacket and a pair of tan pants, pressed neatly by a helpful nurse – the clothes Henry would wear as he was readmitted to society. His doctor sat in a chair next to the bed, reading the thick binder that contained Henry's file. Henry quietly picked up the clothes and the razor and ducked into the bathroom connected to his room. He quickly dressed, then wrapped one of his socks around the razor and slid it into his jacket pocket.

Henry Smithton had been admitted to the hospital four years earlier on the night his brother, Lonny, had died. He had experienced severe memory loss, blocking out many details of the night, but he had remembered enough to know that Lonny had been shot. On the night of his arrival, he had been extremely upset, demanding to be released in order to find his brother's murderer and kill him. For the first two years of hospitalization, Henry made little improvement, but in the two years that followed, he had convinced the staff that he was a changed man. They believed he had come to terms with his brother's death and no longer wished to seek revenge. His homicidal ideas had diminished, and then vanished altogether. He made such significant progress, the doctor determined, that treatment at the inpatient facility was no longer needed. He was scheduled to be released that day.

Henry returned to the hospital room and began to remove his remaining clothes from the drawers of a small built in closet.

The doctor closed the file and asked, "How are you feeling, Henry? Excited about going home?"

"Sure," Henry answered, giving him the required smile. "It's been so long, I don't even remember what my place looks like." He shifted his weight from one thin leg to the other. "Can't wait to get on with my life, Doc. I'm just glad to be getting out of here."

"I have to admit, I was worried about you for a long time," the doctor said, leaning back slightly, raising a foot and crossing it over the opposite knee. "I thought you might be here to stay, but you really proved me wrong."

Henry nodded his head. He had fooled the staff easily. For a long time, he had told them the truth, but they would never let him go. If he was to ever be released, he finally realized he would have to lie, and so he told them what they wanted to hear – that he no longer planned to kill the man who had taken his brother's life.

Henry smoothed the wrinkles on a blue striped shirt before folding it neatly and placing it in his bag. He wished the doctor would leave and allow him to pack in peace, but he made sure to maintain a jovial tone.

“I had a rough time of it alright, but I got through it. I can finally start living my life again.”

Henry could not quite remember the night Lonny was killed. He remembered parts of it, but not the whole ordeal. He remembered Lonny was at his house and they were celebrating something, but he could not remember what. He remembered that suddenly a man was there, but could not recall his features. He remembered that he watched as the man shot Lonny square in the chest. And the blood. He could not forget the blood that poured through his fingers as he held on tightly to his brother’s body. He knew he grabbed something sharp with the intent of stabbing the man in the heart, and then he remembered people, having heard the gun shot from outside, rushing into his living room. It was then, he figured, the gunman had slipped away unnoticed. After that, his mind had gone blank until a week after the incident when he realized he was a patient in a psychiatric hospital. The doctor told him he had been in a state of shock.

The doctor was speaking again. “You’ve made great progress, Henry, I wish you the best.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Henry answered, carefully laying the last pair of pants inside his case and zipping it up. He was glad when the doctor finally left the room.

Henry had no relatives that lived in the area, so his medical team had agreed to allow him to make the trip home on a public bus. He was comfortable with the decision, having taken the same bus route to work for twenty years before his hospitalization.

A nurse’s aid stood beside him as they waited at the bus stop, just outside the hospital grounds. Henry’s body stiffened as he waited on the sidewalk. The killer could be anywhere, and although his doctor had told him his lost memories would most likely never return, Henry was sure that somehow he would recognize the man if ever confronted with him again. He would stay alert and attentive, letting no one go unnoticed.

A few minutes later, he saw the bus approaching. He held out his hand and it made its way to the curb. He climbed its three steps, walked the narrow path between the seats and sat down toward the back. He reached into his pocket and wrapped his fingers around the sock-covered blade that would be his weapon. He was ready.

The bus was almost empty. Only five people were riding, including himself, and only two other men – a tall, muscular man, stuffed into a blue suit, reading the newspaper, and the bus driver. He studied the blue-suited man who sat just one seat ahead of him on the opposite side. His hands, curled around the paper, were large and calloused. Henry’s chest tightened, squeezing his lungs, and a sudden memory came crashing into his head. The man who killed Lonny had skinny, smooth hands. He remembered seeing them tightly grasping the gun. The sudden surge of memory startled Henry, but he welcomed it eagerly. He closed his eyes and begged his mind to reveal more. But it would not. He opened his eyes again and stared at the

man in the blue suit. He was not the killer. Henry was disappointed, but not deterred. He turned his attention to the bus driver.

At first, Henry saw only the back of the driver's tan uniform and his gray hair peeking out from under his cap, but then he noticed his hands and thickly charged excitement rushed through him. The bus driver had soft, thin hands. Henry raised his arm above his head and grasped the metal bar above the seats, sliding his hand across it as he inched his way to the front of the bus, gripping the blade as he walked, until he was standing directly behind the driver.

Henry almost fell into the back of the driver's seat. Another bolt of memory ripped through him. A tattoo! The killer had a tattoo – a red heart with an arrow through it – on his forearm. Henry's heart beat faster. His memory was returning. The doctor had been wrong. A current of exhilaration shot through his veins. He would find the murderer! He was sure of it now. Henry's eyes quickly scanned the bus driver's arms, revealed by a short-sleeve shirt. There was no tattoo. Henry's head fell to his chest and he released the blade, allowing it to fall to the bottom of his pocket.

The driver turned and saw Henry standing behind him.

"Can I help you buddy?" he asked.

"This . . . this is where I get off." Henry stammered. He stumbled onto the sidewalk, still a few blocks from his stop, in front of an old time grocery store with an awning hanging over its glass front. Wooden carts, overflowing with fresh vegetables, lined the sidewalk underneath it. A man was examining the vegetables. He picked up a cucumber and gave it a good squeeze. Dissatisfied, he put it down and picked up another.

Henry picked up a tomato and examined the man. The tomato splattered to the ground as another memory came coursing into his mind. The killer's skin was pale, ghostly pale, almost white. The man beside him had dark olive skin. Henry sighed and turned away. He left the grocery store discouraged, but determined. He would not give up.

After walking for a few minutes, Henry came to his house. The two trees in the front yard had grown tall and ivy he had not seen before had taken over their trunks. But nothing else had changed. The man, who had been hired to maintain Henry's property in his absence, had done his job well. Henry took the key from his pants pocket, opened the door, and breathed in deeply the scent of pine, from the man's recent cleaning. He exhaled loudly. At last, he was home. Suddenly, he was very tired; he would continue his search in the morning.

As Henry walked through the house, the familiarity of each room welcomed him. In the small kitchen, an aluminum table and two chairs were pushed up against the wall. White cabinets that had begun to yellow at the edges hung above almond colored appliances. A doorway led to the living room that housed a green velour couch and a matching chair, both protected by plastic slipcovers. Rabbit ear antennae perched on top of a TV that sat in the corner. A hallway led from the living room to his bedroom.

He walked through the bedroom's narrow doorway and sat heavily on the bed. His bedroom had always been a sanctuary to which he had retreated on many occa-

sions, when he needed to get away from the world. And now, it would become his sanctuary again. He needed to rest from his thoughts of the murderer. He would take a nap after unpacking.

The suitcase. He glanced around the room before he realized that he had left the suitcase on the bus. He shook his head, but he wasn't really concerned. He still had his most important possession. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the sock-covered razor and unwrapped it, revealing the shining blade. Carefully, he placed it on the nightstand, before lying down under the blanket and waiting for sleep to come.

The sound of thunder woke Henry in the middle of the night. He grabbed his blanket and flung it over his head. Henry hated storms. He was frightened by the bursts of light and the blasts of thunder that followed them.

Lifting the covers slightly, he peered into the darkness. Lightning filled the room for an instant and he reached for the lamp bedside his bed. Thunder exploded as he pulled its dangling cord, but the room remained dark. The bulb was burnt out.

Another splash of light overtook the room and he dashed into the hallway. He flicked the light switch, illuminating the hallway and the living room. And then he screamed. He stood unmoving, staring straight ahead. He could hear his scream – a deep guttural sound that grew to a howling wail, but was unaware he was making the noise. Standing in front of him, in the living room, was the man who had killed Lonny. Fear enveloped him as memories tore through his mind. Suddenly, he remembered everything that had happened the night Lonny had died. Every last detail. His heart beat frantically. His legs trembled and he almost fell. Then, anger replaced his fear and his strength was renewed.

“You,” his voice vibrated as he yelled. “How could you have done this to me!”

Running forward, Henry lunged at the killer, punching him with both fists. The man cried out in pain. His blood splattered Henry, as he continued to hit him again and again.

The razor! Just then, Henry remembered the razor. He turned to retrieve it, crawling over the chair in his way and sprinting for the bedroom. He dove for the weapon and struggled to his feet. The killer made his way into the bedroom, but the blade fell from Henry's hand. As much as he wanted to, he could not kill this man. Overwhelmed with grief and anger, he could do nothing but expel a deep and anguished sob.

The police arrived a few minutes later. A neighbor had heard the screams and called them. In the emergency room, Henry lay strapped by his arms, legs and chest to a stretcher. His doctor stood beside him with one hand on his shoulder.

“Why didn't you tell me, Doc?” Henry pleaded. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“Oh, Henry, the doctor's voice quivered as he spoke. “We did tell you on several occasions, but you refused to believe us. Remembering had been so unbearable that later you would forget we had even spoken to you about it. You even blocked out the investigation that proved your brother's death to be an accident.”

“But, how? Why? If I had blocked it out for so long, what made me remember tonight?”

"I'm not sure, Henry," the doctor answered. "But, I'm guessing that being away from the hospital and back into familiar surroundings jogged your memory. I'm sorry, Henry. I was certain your memory wouldn't return. If I had only known."

The doctor shook his head as he examined Henry's bandages. "You really did a number on yourself when you put your fists through that mirror!"

Henry's voice was weak and wavering. "When I came out of the bedroom and saw my reflection in the living room mirror, my first reaction was to destroy it. It was then that I remembered that I was the one who had killed Lonny. It was Christmas day and he had gotten me a present – a 9mm handgun – so we could go to the shooting range together. I loaded it in my living room and it just went off. Henry tried to raise his arm, bandaged from the knuckles to the heart-shaped tattoo just below his elbow, but the buckled straps prevented him. He clutched the stretcher with his pale, thin fingers. "I killed my brother, Doc; I killed my brother."

The doctor interrupted him, "It was an accident, Henry. A horrible, horrible accident."

The next day, Henry lay tied to his bed screaming and crying. The doctor flicked the syringe containing a sedative, forcing air from the liquid before sliding the needle into Henry's arm.

"Doc," Henry screamed in despair. "You have to let me out of here. I have to find the man who killed Lonny," He squirmed violently trying to break free from the straps, but they were secured tightly and wouldn't budge. "He's out there somewhere, Doc. Please, help me. We can't let him get away with murder!"

## Stranger in the Mirror

Mel Waldman

She used to know me before her vanishing memory, once whole, split into fragmentary shards of awareness and partial delineation.

She used to know me and the face in the mirror too. Then the storm of forgetfulness arrived and buried her fragile memory in the deep snow.

Slowly, insidious changes within her tempestuous brain are stealing her identity, but still she recognizes the face in the mirror.

It is a familiar face—a friend who protects her. Yet now, although she recognizes me too, especially my gold eyes, she no longer knows my name.

Soon, I suspect, she will gaze into the mirror and see a stranger. Her friend will be gone. Who will protect her *tomorrow*? When will she vanish forever in the deep snow?

I've got five minutes before the end.  
My hand shakes as I flick the lighter  
the only light in the room  
Subconsciously I lick my lips before stamping the cigarette  
this drool DNA will be the only identity  
in four minutes thirty seconds  
The more I think the faster I dismember  
if only I could die from the heart before -  
I flick out the floating moss filming the top of my whiskey  
it dries before I have finished my sip.  
four minutes.  
My severed fingers tap impatiently on the moldy bar table top  
warped behind the dirty glass.  
The skeleton of the bartender is still stooped over a half full pitcher  
of some American brew of maggots  
I take my nub fist and smash one of my pregnant fingers  
it explodes across the wood in an array of bright color  
three minutes before these words disintegrate  
Harvey lays at my feet with blood on her snout  
her back feet twitching  
as she is eaten from the inside  
I pick another tick from my tongue  
tick tock it laughs  
its little face is a flashing sign  
YOU'RE FUCKED  
I drop it in my glass and watch it burn alive  
I rub my own pregnant belly  
feeling the stillness  
the death  
the stool caked with my own dripping blood.  
monster, it would have said  
is a synonym for mother  
in times like this  
in a world  
created by one stupid mistake  
one minute  
I have enough time to finish the mold in my glass  
drop the cigarette on Harvey, a tribute  
grab the limp vine of a shotgun  
and reach for the door  
just as it busts open-  
insert the big bang.

## Mother Earth

Rachel Boddy

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## Brushing Teeth

Amara Williams

She brushes her teeth trying to erase  
Words she wants to say  
But should not have to say  
Rinse the screams away  
Spit out the frustration  
As words blood and self defense  
Disappear down the drain

# The First Time I Heard The Future

Don Kunz

The first time I heard “The Future” sung by Leonard Cohen I was sprawled across the broken springs of a faded white love seat in our living room. Leonard Cohen seemed clear about the future. I wanted to be, too, but I wasn’t. I understood vaguely that I was going to have to deal with the past first. My present was a pile of crushed Miller High Life cans on a three-legged Formica coffee table, an orange shag rug that smelled like a mildewed shower curtain, an embarrassed lover in the kitchen, and a fresh copy of *The Providence Journal Bulletin* in my lap. I read the paper, studying the past of others for clues.

According to *The Journal* Beatrice Delgado, eighty one years old, of 221 Gano Street in Fox Point had been beaten to death with the cast-iron frying pan she was using to cook pork chops when someone kicked in her back door. She had been found lying on the kitchen floor by her twelve-year-old granddaughter who had been doing homework in an upstairs bedroom when she heard sounds of a struggle. The kitchen floor was littered with the contents of Ms. Delgado’s purse—cosmetics, receipts, family photos, an empty wallet. I drank to the memory of Beatrice Delgado and thought about the effort it must take to lift a cast-iron skillet over and over. From my own kitchen I heard a plastic spoon being slammed repeatedly against the edge of a stainless-steel sauce pan. Leonard Cohen’s husky baritone was insistent:

And now the wheels of heaven stop.  
You feel the devil’s riding crop.  
Get ready for the future.  
It is murder.

I kept reading. Angel Washington, four years old, of 362 Foster Street, Apt 7 located in the Tonomy Hill housing project in Newport had died of bullet wounds she had suffered yesterday about four in the afternoon. She had been playing on the jungle gym in Turo Park when shots were fired toward the basketball court from a black van west-bound on Pleasant Street. Witnesses noted that the young man firing from the van was wearing a red bandanna on his head. Police suspect that the Bloods, a Los Angeles’ street gang are trying to move into the Tonomy Hill area, home of the Latin Kings. I popped open another can of beer and thought about buying a handgun. Farther down on the page D & B Guns on North Main Street was advertising a fall special which included a free hunting license. Leonard Cohen sang:

Give me absolute control  
over every living soul,  
and lie beside me, baby.  
That’s an order!

I read on. Phrith Sanaugn, 37 years old, of 779 Irving Street in the Armory district had died in his sleep of unknown causes. An accompanying article on the Op Ed page written by Gail Armonson, a physician who worked with the local Southeast Asian community, noted that such unexplained deaths were common in Cambodia. They believed one could die from a curse; an enemy could invade ones dreams and transform them into nightmares. The victim died of fright, or, alternatively, of the belief that such things could occur. I rolled some Miller Highlife around in my mouth slowly; after the first six pack, beer tastes mostly like yeast and dreams. I tried to think what I believed in enough to die for. After seven years I knew it wasn't the sanctity of marriage that Father Mellor was always yammering on about. Leonard Cohen understood more than my priest:

There'll be the breaking of the ancient western code.  
Your private life will suddenly explode.  
There'll be phantoms.  
There'll be fires on the road.

I read about Andrew Williamson Jr., 11 months old, of 46 Pitman Place in Hope Valley, who had been brought to the emergency room of South County Hospital in Wakefield by his father around one am. The infant was unconscious and upon examination by the physician on duty was discovered to have twenty one broken bones. The father reported that the boy had been crying excessively, could not be restrained, and had fallen from his crib around midnight. Andrew Williamson, Sr. was being held for questioning by Rhode Island State Police at the Hope Valley barracks. Leonard Cohen had seen it coming:

I've seen the future, baby:  
It is murder.

I noticed that Sojourner House in Cranston was seeking escorts and safe houses for battered women. Their facility (at an undisclosed location in the city) was filled to capacity. The director, Shirley Mckinney, referred reporters to the work of Sociology Professor Richard Gelles of the University of Pennsylvania, a nationally recognized expert on family violence. Gelles' research indicates that a woman is assaulted (beaten, raped, murdered) in the United States every six seconds, and 96% of those assaults are perpetrated by a family member. The article ended with an 800 number that could be called by victims of family violence. They called it a hot line. I memorized it for future reference. Leonard Cohen sang to me:

You'll see the woman  
hanging upside down,  
her features covered by her fallen gown.

Somehow my clothes had gotten all twisted beneath me on the love seat. I twisted, too, trying to fit into them better, but I couldn't get comfortable. So, I straightened up and folded the newspaper as neatly as I could (there had been arguments about this in the past). I could hear water boiling over and turning to steam on the coils of the electric stove, the splatter of hot grease in a skillet, and my spouse muttering. Some parts of the news wouldn't lie flat. I laid them to rest carefully on



the empty half of the love seat. Then, I swallowed the last of my beer and tried to stand up. It was harder than I thought. Part of my body seemed numb, like it had fallen asleep a long time ago. I rose up stiff and went into the kitchen sore.

My “domestic partner” (a term I remember from therapy) wouldn’t look at me, just asked, “how’s the eye?” then turned back to the stove and stirred the stew boiling furiously on the front burner.

I didn’t say anything. I’ve learned it’s better not to. My hand touched my face, swollen and tender. I looked down, squinting through the soreness at a plastic cutting board beside the sink. Its surface was badly scuffed from years of rough treatment, and it was deeply scarred in the center. A chef’s knife rested there. I read the fine print on steel: “Gerber Legendary Blades.” I thought of the toothless Gerber baby smiling on the label of the baby food jars. I wondered if they were part of the same family. Then I watched my hand skitter across the cutting board tracing the scars, hunting for what would come next. Leonard Cohen already knew:

Your servant here, he has been told

to say it clear, to say it cold:

It’s over.

It ain’t going any further.

There wasn’t much blood. The wound opened like a smile between the first and third ribs where I stuck the chef’s knife into my husband while he was standing in a cloud of steam. He seemed surprised. He must have thought that by feeding me he was earning my forgiveness. I guess it wasn’t the future he had imagined. But he might have, if he had listened. It’s just like the past.

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## Wishful Dreams

Sarah Mallery

“Bottoms-up!” Peter chuckled, watching Susan, the girl of his dreams go skinny-dipping in the glassy night lake. He knew he shouldn’t be spying, but he couldn’t help himself; the magnetic draw was too powerful, even from a distance.

He had met her at the tail end of last summer, when the leaves were hinting at vivid fall-colors, and their two cars had nearly collided on the Old Fisher Bend Road.

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## Necessity and Excess

Kenneth R. Fox

The common man is content with a roof,  
Simple sustenance, clean water and air,  
To be taught the ways of the world,  
Someone to tend to him when he aches,  
And someone to love.

Others who clamor electronic  
Gadgets, fast cars or fancy adornments,  
Have an unrequited fear that  
Without those excesses they would  
Be just the common man.

Both of them had emerged simultaneously, rushing over to make sure the other wasn't hurt, and in the sun, he'd noticed how her dark brown hair networked into red straw highlights, and when she smiled, her teeth flashed, they were so bright. In fact, he remembered soaking up so many details about her he had trouble concentrating and had to ask her to repeat herself several times.

That had made her laugh, and when she laughed, it resonated, deep, full, without a care in the world. But as it turned out, maybe she *wasn't* so carefree. As they walked back to her car, she had explained how sorry she was for the near accident, but she was distracted by her personal problems, and could she make it up to him by buying them both a cup of coffee at a local hangout?

"Of course," he muttered, his face warming.

Coffee with her lasted over three hours. They talked about everything—her family, what movies they liked, books, food, politics, and the weather, eventually winding down to their love lives.

"So, I assume you're with someone, right?" He measured his voice carefully, trying to be casual.

"Not any longer. I used to be, but not now." She looked down and fingered her paper napkin, shaping and reshaping it into a crushed ball.

"I don't mean to intrude...sorry."

She nodded curtly, her hair doing a little flip forward, then fell silent. But when the bill was placed on the table, she did a 180 and perked up. "Hey, do you want to come to my place to listen to music? I've got a great stereo system."

His eyebrows arched; he couldn't believe his good luck. What were the odds of someone that fine even noticing him, much less showing an interest? Suddenly, his palms turned wet.

Her apartment was obviously a reflection of her. Bold purple, magenta, and blue pillows were strewn across a lush green sofa against a wall covered with photographs: family gatherings, childhood pictures, college cap-and-gown pictures, and photos of her with the same young man. A boyfriend, no doubt.

Surprised at feeling such a sharp stab, he zeroed in on the boyfriend's face and kind eyes, and he could feel his jealous pangs melting. At the very least she had good enough taste to spend time with someone who appeared to be decent and caring.

She came in from the kitchen carrying a wicker tray full of ginger snaps, rice cakes, grapes, orange slices, and a full tea service prepared for two. Setting it down on the coffee table, he could tell she was a little nervous because the cups clattered when she let go of the handles, and a ginger snap slid across the shaky plate onto the floor.

He pointed to one of the photos. "Was this your boyfriend? He looks nice."

She nodded and blinked several times as she edged towards the couch. When the phone rang, she flinched at least an inch but made no move to pick up the receiver.

"Don't you need to answer that?"

She shook her head, but before she looked away, he caught her frightened eyes.

Six months later, hiding behind the thick Cottonbush shrubs surrounding the lake, he realized she still remained a mystery to him. No matter how hard he had

tried, he could never get close to her; her friendliness always had its limits—he was never permitted to step into the trusted inner circle. That suited her wishes, but of course, frustrated the hell out of him. So now, feeling like a stalker, he watched her movements like a hungry puppy, coming around for more. He concentrated on her grace in the water, gliding through its flat stillness: perfect, like a professional swimmer, confident, strong.

Crussssssh! Crussssssh! Crussssssh! cracked nearby leaves. He sat up, ramrod straight. Crussssssh! Crussssssh! Crussssssh! Who was *that*?

He strained to see in the darkness, barely moving, careful not to give away his own position. After a few seconds he could see a man, silhouetted against the moon's half-globe, start to slowly climb down towards the water, holding on to the wet ground and moss-covered rocks.

Peter followed from a safe distance, worried for her safety as well as his own. It seemed to take forever to get down to the lake, much longer than the other man apparently took because by the time he got there, he could hear the man and Susan talking animatively. He ducked down behind another Cottonbush, and heard their conversation reverberate across the water as if he were in the same room.

“Why won't you answer my calls?!”

“We've been all over this, remember? I can't be with you anymore. You've changed. You *know* that. And if you won't get any help, there's nothing more I can do! *Nothing!*”

“But I still love you. You're still my girl!” The man began pacing back and forth, kicking small stones and pebbles out of his path and into the water, making tiny half-moon ripples.

Susan's voice sounded odd, different, reminding Peter of when he was little and tried to face up to his angry father. “Did...did... you take the medication the doctors gave you?”

“Nah, it turned me into a zombie.” The man kept fiddling with something in his jacket pocket. Then he came towards Peter's Cottonbush and stood stock-still, only five yards away.

Peter inched up higher to take a closer look. In an instant, an odd feeling of familiarity washed over him and he tried to comb through his brain to figure out why. Then it hit him. It was the man in the photos, only his eyes didn't seem so kind.

By now, Susan had come out of the water, dripping, pleading. “*Please* go back to the VA, and try to talk to your counselor. I can't solve all your problems, I *can't*.”

She reached out to stroke his arm, but he batted it away. “You don't *get* it! You weren't over there. You'll *never* know. *Never!*”

She started to cry; little soft mewling noises that had no strength to them, but he wasn't listening to her. He was too busy stomping around in a tight circle, like a penned-in Mustang getting ready for a rodeo.

Peter stood up, prepared to leap in front of Susan, but before he could move, the soldier in his Desert Camouflage uniform drew out his gun, placed it against his closely cropped head, and as Susan screamed “*No!*” squeezed the trigger.

# In The Candy Store Thomas Sullivan

Watching CEOs walk away from the carnage on Wall Street with million dollar severances, those of us who earn less than \$17,000 per hour find ourselves asking a simple question: who are these people? Our curiosity is driven by watching men on television who seem to have burst into contemporary life like an undiscovered pack of aboriginals emerging from a rainforest. We know we're not looking at the common, mundane criminal who holds up liquor stores or shakes down a business, but rather at something truly mysterious and entirely unique, like a serial killer. Where did these guys come from, we wonder, and how do they sleep at night? Do they even need sleep?

I grew up in a well-to-do suburb north of New York City, where almost everyone went to college. Working in the trades was quietly scorned as a form of downward mobility, though the skills of tradesmen were in constant demand by professionals who were too busy or unskilled to fix things around the home. I didn't run in the Wall Street circles, but these figures occasionally drifted into my world. What most surprised me in Wall Street types was their utter indifference to things not money related. There was making money, and then there were all the things that *other* people cared about. Useless burdens like responsibility and community. In short, these people held a callous value system with regard to what actually matters in life.

For how globally the web of wealth and influence on Wall Street spun (Hong Kong, London, Tokyo), the people managing that money were surprisingly provincial. Most attended elite graduate schools after a trip to college. Most of the parents were well off and hoped to continue this situation with their offspring – excessive wealth and opportunity always aim to breed greater wealth and opportunity in a vicious, tumor-like pattern. The path to Wall Street was straight forward: from good neighborhood to good college to good MBA program to Wall Street. With big money to be made there was no time or interest for venturing into the real world, where working people dwell.

Consider for a moment two prominent examples, who shall remain anonymous here (the press has already done a sufficient job chastising them for their misdeeds). Both men headed Wall Street brokerages that recently imploded. One finished college in 1969, joined his firm the same year, and got an MBA in 1973. He stayed put in his corner of the financial jungle for the next 35 years until a firestorm burned it to the ground. The second finished college in 1975, received an MBA from Cornell the following year, and headed straight to Wall Street. Herein lies the problem. Like so many others on The Street, they never went out into the real world and actually did anything.

Kids who grow up in affluent settings tend to develop little real understanding about money, similar to the way non-farmers don't really understand the reality of producing food. The money just seems to come from somewhere, like frozen peas in the supermarket, dependable and abundant. The net effect is an outlook that treats the generation of wealth like a game of Monopoly. You can sink paper money into four hotels on Boardwalk, and if your plan blows up in your face you just walk away and start the game again later. On Wall Street reality is largely a game.

Out in the real world, the people who understand the true value of money actually go to work and create wealth. They build companies where losing a million dollars results in serious human consequences, not a write off. They scrimp and save, reinvesting gains in productive assets. While mechanical engineers design bridges and homes, the folks on Wall Street act as “financial engineers,” designing fantasy products. Despite claims to the contrary, investment banks don’t create wealth, they just shuffle existing wealth around. As we are now learning, this shuffling is largely a self-serving game that can’t be “won” despite the best minds and computer models on Wall Street.

We now hear cries about “the dangers of greed,” but this doesn’t get to the heart of the matter. Everyone is greedy to some extent. But on Wall Street it’s different. It’s deeper, more dysfunctional, and more disturbing. It’s fully accepted and even encouraged, with caution being scoffed at. After much thought on the matter, my conclusion is: these are privileged children who never developed the necessary understanding of money and where it comes from, something absolutely essential to their work.

Think about a kid in a candy store with an unlimited budget and no parental oversight. We can tell the kid to self-regulate, but he’s still going to buy and eat until he pukes. And then a week later do it again. In a nutshell, this is what Wall Street did with everyone’s money. When they ran out of real money to consume they started in on candy money, fictional wealth in the form of derivatives, credit-default swaps and the like. If not for the market implosion, someone on Wall Street would probably have tried to sell derivatives backed by a pool of lottery scratch tickets.

Wall Street is currently in the middle of a “time out,” with the most egregious offenders being sent to their rooms. But like kids everywhere, the folks on Wall Street will ignore the warnings and come back for more if we let them. To believe that they will ever put the interests of Americans ahead of the interests of the banks is pure naivety. Consider a few recent events: Executives at AIG (a “double-dipping” bailout recipient) are found poolside at a luxury retreat after being derided for a similar retreat a few weeks earlier; JP Morgan buys Washington Mutual to pick up a deposit base but tries to offload its toxic mortgages onto Freddie Mac; banks receiving government money intended to generate loans for mainstreet hoard the money, saving it for use in future takeovers, etc.

The crisis on Wall Street manifests itself as a financial problem, but the root of the crisis is a cultural problem. These guys don’t care about anyone but themselves, they never have, and they never will. There is no remorse or sense of responsibility for their misdeeds and there never will be. There is no heart or soul in this culture, only greed.

But The New Kids on the Street have given us a great learning opportunity. We don’t necessarily need to punish them for their mistakes, but we do need to find ways to prevent their errors from re-occurring. President Bush’s oversight of Wall Street was similar to a parent throwing a key party for the kids. Our new president is a responsible adult who may be able to keep the kids in line. But, despite his many talents, he won’t be able to do it alone. He’ll need an engaged public that demands real reform that benefits ordinary people. He’ll need people who call senators, mail letters, write articles, and don’t stop pressing until things are done right. He’ll need people who

understand the meaning of money and the value of honest work to back him up. Those people are us.

We are retaking control of the candy store, but we can't afford to get complacent and lose our hold again. If we do, we may never be able to afford the good things talked about so fervently and hopefully during the past election.

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## The Freedom of Music Jon Brunette

When Billy Marcus finished at the hospital, he stood proudly atop his low roof, in his two-level house built just off a small hillside, and strummed his Gibson Les Paul until his fingers bled. When sunlight broke, he entertained early commuters before he slept. Without music to play, he would never sleep peacefully. He would never be able to hold scalpels steadily in his job. He would never please his family with wealth from that job. And he would never find happiness, not truly anyhow.

Atop the flat roof, he played skillfully, like always. Quickly, his fingers blistered painfully, and bled into red blotches over the wood neckpiece. Still, he played beautifully, like no way existed but beautifully, soulfully. Notes waltzed through his fingers, into metal wires, to bleat loudly from the amplifier. Through the fuzzy microphone, he bellowed as loudly, but joyously, too, and not just from the larynx but the immortal soul. Perspiration poured heavily, and frigidly, off his forehead and body, and wetted his ripped T-shirt completely. Between lengthy tunes, he waved to people below. They enjoyed his play-list immensely, applauded thunderously, like masses in open auditoriums, but probably enjoyed the music less than his mind.

Below him, Billy saw sunlight off the mirrored badge. It blinded him briefly, not by the brilliance but the point behind it. When the officer walked to the roof, Billy kept playing aggressively, until his play-list finished. The officer pointed firmly, like a burly nun about to paddle to his wrists, and Billy laid the instrument into place and followed reluctantly. They found the wide-eyed body of Leslie, by a leaky pipe, below the basement window.

“He killed quickly and cleanly.” The policeman said, “I believe the professional murdered medically—if such a way exists.” With blood on Billy, the man behind the horrible kill attempted not to hide but instead looked longingly into the sky. That compelled the buzz-haired officer to state, “Her life ended by a professional.” Looking into the face of Marcus, the husband, the blue-uniformed male said, “As will yours—by a legal professional.” He held metal to Billy's tired arms and found little resistance.

Billy Marcus had played his final chords. He would never bleed joyously, and never entertain musically, anymore. Still, he smiled, like he had planned to live in jail always and would now. Without job and family, he had no actual reason to play anymore. What the Gibson Les Paul had accomplished before, jail would now. It would allow him to live without responsibilities, how he had always wanted to live.

# Honor Up

Ken Dean

There were four of them in the foxhole. A one o' five millimeter German howitzer shell had dug it out when it had exploded. Four American Marines were hunkered down inside, hugging the dirt walls as closely as possible for maximum protection. The Battle of the Bulge had produced some good-sized artillery craters from both sides of the front. With bullets and shrapnel flying around, beggars couldn't be choosers. They had all dove in after a few close mortar blasts nearby. Fragments of metal exploding outwards from artillery or mortars were deadly as bullets. You could smell the cordite and almost taste the razor sharp shards of metal in the air. Paul had seen one guy from his squad whose head exploded like a ripe melon after being struck by a piece of shrapnel. In this God-forsaken war, when shit happened, it was real.

The four of them had made it to the front lines just in time for the Bulge to break out. Lou had been around since D-Day, and had invaluable experience. No matter what the rank lines, they all looked up to him for advice and leadership. His real name was Luigi, but he insisted on being called Lou. One newbie private kept calling him Luigi after being corrected. Guess he thought it was funny. It wasn't so funny when the newbie lost two teeth. Lesson learned. Everyone in their squad made sure to call him Lou after that. Lou hailed from the Bronx, where his Italian family had been in the olive oil business for generations. It was rumored he had a lot of pull with the Mob, but he would never confirm or deny that fact. Georgie was from an upstate New York farm where life was more idyllic, and his innocence and naivety were well known. Given enough time and the war would shred his innocence away like wet confetti. Charlie was from Detroit, and had been exposed to life in the streets enough to have a bad boy attitude. But the war was the great churning pot. It could turn a badass into a baby or cowards into heroes. It all depended on the situation, the desperation, and frame of mind.

Paul was from a small farming town in Ohio, which was quite a switch as to where he was now. He remembered his mother begging him not to go, but his father had a look of pride on his face. After encountering some real battle action, he realized he was part coward and just wanted to keep his head down where it was safe until all this madness was over.

Lou had just peeked over the edge of the fox hole and ducked back down just in time to miss the bullet that came whizzing across where the top of his helmet had just been a half-second ago. "Guys," Lou whispered, "I just saw three krauts inching their way towards us, about fifty feet away." There was desperation in his voice. "I don't want them to reach us. A grenade on top of them danger close should do the trick. That good with you guys?"

The three all looked at each other with round eyes. Danger close meant just that, *dangerously close*. They all nodded.

“If that’s what it takes, give ‘em a pineapple,” Charlie answered.

“Okay, take cover against the wall of the foxhole, as tight as you can.”

In this situation, you wanted to be as insulated from the shrapnel of the grenade as possible, it would be powerful and close.

Lou pulled out a grenade as they hunkered against the wall of the foxhole. He pulled the pin with his left hand, while still holding the handle in place. Being a damn smart soldier, he also kept hold of the pin until the grenade left his hand, in case it had to be put back in. He looked at the three others wide-eyed, let the handle flip free of the grenade and counted one, two, three, and tossed it up above the Germans in a shallow arc. He immediately dove into the dirt wall of the foxhole. It was close. One second later it went off with a loud ‘WHUMP’. It had been a perfect airburst. Several pieces of shrapnel dug into the far side of the foxhole, leaving small smoking holes. The explosion left their ears feeling numb even though they had covered them with their hands. Paul opened his eyes immediately after the blast and saw pieces of clothing, an arm, and a pair of spectacles fly overhead. There were immediate, multiple screams of agony. Lou scrambled out of the foxhole. There were three rifle shots, and the screaming stopped abruptly. Lou jumped back in, showering them with dirt, and hunched down for cover.

“Three dead Krauts,” he smiled, “The more the merrier.”

Lou liked killing Krauts. It made his day.

Georgie piped up. “Guys, I don’t think anywhere is safe right now. I think we should keep moving. Less of a target that way, right? Besides, I hate cowering in foxholes. Feel like a damn coward. Rather just get up and out, face the enemy and take as many of them out as possible.”

“Okay, let’s grab our gear and get...” Lou said just as a German grenade fell in the middle of the foxhole.

“What the...” Charlie sputtered.

“Everybody out!” Lou yelled.

Paul saw the grenade land. He had heard the German fuse for their grenades was about four to five seconds. Two had already passed. There was no way in hell they could climb out in the remaining time. Of course it could be a dud, but you had better odds of winning the lottery. He looked around, seeing everything as if in slow motion. Georgie and Charlie were frantically trying to claw their way out of the foxhole. Lou wasn’t trying to get out. Instead he was just standing there, his eyes closed, probably praying. He turned back to look at the grenade, a million thoughts running through his mind in a millisecond. Settling on the only course of action that seemed right, and going against instinct, he threw his body on top of the grenade. Immediately there was a white hot flash while a sledgehammer the size of the moon smashed his whole universe.

\* \* \*

The whiteness hung around him like a cloud. He felt as if he was drifting in and out of consciousness, but he couldn’t tell where it ended or began. Finally some clarity began to return to his thoughts, but he still felt damn funky.



“Why did you do it?”

Who the hell was talking?

His sight was beginning to return. Looking around revealed only white. He seemed to be standing on some sort of white stage in a huge auditorium, with white seats stretching outwards. In the front row were seated three men dressed in white.

All Paul could think of saying was, “Am I dead?”

“Hardly, or you wouldn’t be asking, would you?” The man in the middle answered sarcastically.

“I guess that’s true,” Paul answered, as his head continued to clear and he wasn’t quite sure how to answer.

“Why am I still alive? That Jerry grenade should have shredded me.”

The sarcastic man in the middle, who was holding some sort of tablet and writing utensil, answered, “We pulled you out a millisecond before the blast, so we could ask some questions.”

“How could you do something like that?” Paul asked in amazement.

The man in the middle responded, seeming perturbed, “Most of the things we are capable of doing would seem like so-called magic to you. We can just do it, okay?”

“I’ll take your word for it. My name’s Paul. Who are you?”

“That seems appropriate. Your species values names for individuals. You can call me James, for familiarity’s sake. The other two men won’t need names, since they are here for observation only. We are an alien species to you humans, and represent many others in the study we are conducting.”

Paul answered, “But you look so damn human.”

“Amazing, isn’t it.” James answered, slowly shaking his head from left to right as if addressing a five year old.

Paul looked at the other two. All he got from his observation were steely, penetrating stares, as if they could see everything inside him, including his thoughts. He felt a chill run up his spine. It was as if ghostly fingers were touching his consciousness, reading his every thought.

“In a way of explanation, the other two individuals with me are familiars. In other words, they can tell exactly what your thoughts, feelings, and reactions are. There is nothing you can hide from them. They are here to make sure you answer honestly.”

“Why wouldn’t I answer honestly?” Paul said in an angry voice.

“Well, your species is known for being dishonest at times. Plus, for you it’s wartime,” he said with a disgusted look on his face, “you may feel as if you are being interrogated.”

“Sure as hell feels that way.”

“Let’s not call it an interrogation...for us it is a fact-finding mission. We’ve done it before with other species.”

“Other species? Just how many more are out there?”

“A considerable amount. Some much more advanced than your own, some less. Your species has been given special priority.”

# Explanation

Susan Oleferuk

Close to the river  
lies  
an abandoned garden  
of antiquity and shattered  
statuary  
meet me there just once before dark  
so I can explain my fall  
from grace.

“Special?” He was confused. “You say you are so far advanced compared to us; you’re able to pull me out of certain death to ask me questions, and you say we are special?”

James looked at the two other men in white and they nodded their heads. James made a notation on his futuristic-looking tablet.

“Yes, you are special. Every other sentient species we know of, including our own, value our own lives above all else. We have never fought wars or had any kind of violent disputes for the fact that we cherish our own life above having our own way. There is

always a way to work out a dispute without violence. It’s deeply ingrained into our being. But you, you humans, have violent conflicts strewn all down through your history. Some conflicts over pride or a single female! How ludicrous! Your species is reckless and violent. Also you are very intelligent.

That’s why we are here. To try and figure out how intelligence and violence can coexist in one species. There is research being conducted at this very moment during your conflict by some of your governments that will unleash an unlimited amount of power; both peaceful and destructive.”

“Do we humans scare you, James?” Paul said with a smirk. It felt good to give him a jab.

Paul imagined machine-gunning all three of them where they sat. The two silent men jerked as if startled, probably feeling Paul’s violent thoughts.

“Yes!” James yelled, “You scare, as you would say, the hell out of us!”

Paul felt more relaxed and confident now, as if he had the upper hand. James had to take a minute to settle down, though you could tell he was still shaken.

James tried to put aside the conversation up to this point, even though it was difficult.

“Back to the original question. Why did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Attempt to give your life for your comrades, by covering the explosive device with your own body.”

“I wanted to save their lives. I guess we humans cherish life to the point of giving up our own for others.” Paul could be sarcastic also.

“Madness!” James screamed. The two other men were shaking.

“No,” Paul answered calmly, “sacrifice.”

Many minutes passed while the three men in white gathered their composure.

James said in as calm a voice as possible, “We can save you.”

“Save me?”

“Yes, we can keep you here with us or even put you back in your own existence

on your planet, safe and unharmed.”

“What about my Marine buddies?”

“Oh...they will certainly die.”

Paul jerked. No way...no way could he take the easy way out on his buddies.

He stood up at attention. “Send me back.”

“What?”

“Send me back to where I was before the grenade exploded.”

“You are truly mad! You can save yourself.”

“No! Not at the cost of their lives.”

“Very well, but I must tell you that this is sheer insanity by our standards.”

“Right,” Paul said indignantly, “I have a feeling our species will meet again.”

James answered with a sigh as he made a notation on his tablet. “And I have a feeling you are correct. Prepare yourself, we will be sending you back in a few moments.”

Paul tried to think of something poignant to leave with the aliens.

Just before he vanished to go back to his destiny with the grenade, he stood at attention and sharply saluted the three aliens and said loudly, “Semper Fidelis.”

The three aliens looked at each other with bewildered expressions.

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## Stopwatch

*Jason Sturner*

Everyone is dead.  
Slumped against steering wheels,  
on the floors of kitchens and bedrooms,  
face down in swimming pools.

Bodies litter the malls,  
the halls of prestigious universities,  
they're in hospitals and sports bars,  
at desks in corporate offices.

In the center of the oval office  
lays the body of our president,  
maggots crawl out  
from beneath her eyelids.

The rats beneath the streets  
lift their heads and twitch their noses.  
Vultures fly from trees  
into waves of decay.

Remnants of humanity crumble,  
are buried, eroded, and grown over.  
We are dust, and fossils; we are history.  
The planet is lush and productive.

Out in an unnamed ocean  
a new breed of dolphin is born,  
its flippers more like modified claws.  
One day, it will use them to grasp the shoreline.

# The Reaper is Not Mocked

John Ragusa

On a quiet, snowy night in January, William Bartley read his newspaper while his wife Kelly slept on the sofa. Outside, the night was serene; if horror took place, it took place elsewhere. Crime rarely occurred in this neighborhood. Bartley felt calm and assured. He had nothing to fear.

The front door then opened abruptly, but Kelly didn't stir. At first, Bartley thought a gust had thrown it open, but as he looked up, he saw that it was something else.

A skeletal being stood in the doorway, wearing a long, black robe with a cowl. His eyes were dark holes and his body was fleshless. He held a sharp, shiny scythe in his hand.

He pointed a gnarled, bony finger at Bartley. "Do you know why I'm here?"

Bartley faced him with neither surprise nor shock. "Yes. You're the Reaper, and you've come to claim me."

"That is correct. I've searched long and hard for you. The journey has been worth it. I've been waiting for this moment with anticipation."

"Come inside. I've been expecting you."

The Reaper entered the house. "Why is that?"

"Last month, my doctor told me that I would soon die of brain cancer. My number is up, and I'm prepared to go. I knew this would happen someday. The time is now. A person can't hope to live forever."

"So you're aware of your inevitable mortality. You don't seem frightened, though."

"I used to be scared, but I'm not anymore. I bet that disappoints you, doesn't it? You enjoy the terror you bring to people; it gives you sadistic glee. Well, you don't disturb me one bit. I will leave this Earth with no trepidation."

"You won't have a life if I reach out and touch you. You'll be history, gone and soon forgotten. You'll rot in your grave. And your family shall wallow in grief. Any way you look at it, it's tragic."

"Why should I worry about it? I've lived happily. Most of my goals have been realized, thank God. Sometimes it's not death that people fear, but an unfulfilled life."

"And what is life, when you reflect on it? It is a temporary sojourn before the onslaught of eternity. Losing life is the worst thing that can happen to someone; everything you own is cruelly taken away. You'll have no pleasures, no senses, and no emotions. Is that what you want?"

"If death means eternal peace, then I probably would want it."

"Aren't you afraid of the darkness?"

"There's nothing to fear but fear itself."

"If death is okay, why do people fight so hard to stay alive?"

"Because they fear the unknown. I don't fear it, though."

"The mystery of death doesn't frighten you?"

“What I don’t know can’t hurt me.”

“There might not be any light at the end of the tunnel.”

“I’ll never find out by staying alive.”

“You have to admit that it is sad life is so short.”

“I’ve made the most of the time I’ve had.”

“Your death will probably be painful, too.”

“It’ll only last a second or two. I’ll hardly notice it.”

“If death isn’t horrible, why is it a sin to commit murder?”

“Because death should come naturally, not intentionally.”

“Why don’t you think death is horrible?”

“Because it serves a purpose. Without it, the world would be overpopulated.”

“But you still shouldn’t take it lightly.”

“I know that it’s a serious matter. But it’s better for me to accept it.”

“Don’t you realize the power I hold over you?”

“You’d like for me to beg for my life, but I won’t do it. I still have my dignity.”

“Aren’t you conscious of the threat I pose to you? I can annihilate you anytime I choose.”

“I’m not intimidated by you.”

The Reaper walked closer to Bartley. “Wouldn’t you prefer to have my cold, damp hand grip you in the distant future? You could have so many more years of joy if your life continues!”

“I’ve had enough of that already,” Bartley said. “Some men haven’t lived as long as I have. I’ve had a pleasant childhood, a satisfying career, and a wonderful family. I don’t regret a thing. And I won’t ever look back. So you see, you can destroy me, but you cannot harm me.”

“Poor, deluded fool! That’s what *you* think,” the Reaper said, a tone of sinister triumph in his voice.

And to prove his words, he stepped over to the sofa, put out his hand, and touched Kelly.



During winters growing up I tobogganed with a friend on a hillside shadowed by pine trees, and he always gave excuses discouraging me to visit his house. What I remember best was how acne covered his face and his parents refused to purchase anything to treat it. He applied toothpaste to his face to dry up the pimples, and sometimes he forgot to clean it off before stepping onto the school bus.

Ten years later, I held a package to deliver to his childhood home address. I pulled the delivery van up to the end of the driveway and gazed at his last name painted in yellow on the mailbox. I hesitated. I felt embarrassed about how the last moment I saw him, the night of our college graduation, we both had promise for the future and now here I sat in an idling delivery van with a parcel. He was probably well to do and either he or his parents might answer the door and ask some embarrassing questions about how I ended up a courier.

I tried to see his house from the street but a grove of pine and birch blocked my view. I sped the van over a mile up the driveway and twenty feet to my left I noticed a bearded man in a white robe, and he carried a wooden cross as he strolled through a pasture. "Who the hell was that?" I wondered as I sped through a curve, and then I caught the first glimpse: there

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## Hope, Action

Christine Rodriguez

baby you got me so high right now  
with that noise maker in your mouth  
and the way you pause when you pull it out to speak his name  
sends a charge up and down my spine  
making me turn my head around again and again  
catching sparks in the eyes of my neighbors  
we never stopped cheering, did we?

so full of pride  
I could burst  
you vogue up and down the hall way  
as usual, but there's an extra step in your stroll

yes, I noticed

your standard shade replaced with light  
and I see you smiling to yourself when no ones looking  
for the first time you're thinking

that could be me

and for the first time I'm thinking  
hope could be an action

were at least forty junked cars surrounding the house.

I steered past a pile of car tires stacked higher than my delivery van, and as I stepped out several rats scurried out at my boots—I didn't realize what they were at first and now I wonder how I had never seen a rat before that moment. Hundreds of whisky bottles littered the sand in front of the house. A grown person's poop sat in a pile on the front deck, and underwear with brown stains the width of bicycle tires hung over the doorknob. I looked around the deck at various objects and noticed my friend's old toboggan. My stomach recoiled, and my index finger trembled as I pressed it against the doorbell and braced myself.

Martin Dobbs was losing his hair. It was like a curse. He blamed God, but he also blamed his grandfather. He didn't want to lose his hair. He didn't want to lose it anymore than he wanted to lose an arm or a leg. It was part of him; that's how he saw it. The very idea of going bald was terrifying. It was driving him crazy.

Literally.

He checked his watch, hit the *dayglow* button: 9:32 p.m. He was at work, the Golden Eagle Retirement Home where he had been a janitor for six years. He rolled his cart down the main hallway; stopping briefly to chat with Miss Evans, an elderly woman with an easy smile, bad hip and far away eyes. She suffered from Alzheimer's disease. But her sunny attitude toward life was an inspiration to Martin. Because of his baldness, he always had a black cloud over his head. Sometimes it rained. He would talk it over with Miss Evans and she would tell him not to worry so much, that it was trivial in the overall scheme of things. Within the maze of her dementia she would experience moments of prolonged clarity. "Life is short," she was fond of saying. Martin respected her but on this issue he was steadfast. *Easy for her to say*, he thought. *She's got hair*. He emptied her waste paper basket and said goodnight. From her bed, she smiled and then lowered her chain-linked glasses to her chest. Martin rolled his cart down the hallway, passing three dark rooms. It was lights out at the Golden Eagle but the chandelier in the lobby was still glowing; the dimmer set to LOW. He looked across the street. He saw his mark, plain as day, through the beauty shop window. She was at her station talking to another girl. He could vaguely see her face in the mirror, between a sink and one of those recliners with attached hair drying unit. He looked at the pink neon sign in the window: *Kelly's Cuts*. He didn't know her name. He knew some of the others, had even asked one out—Nicole. She rejected him and he felt quite certain that it was because of his male pattern baldness. She was a hairdresser, after all.

*But this one is different*, he thought. He was sure of it. She wasn't like the others. She was fresh and clean, like a nun.

He put the cart back in the utility closet, walked over to the break room and punched out on the Hamilton time clock. In preparation for tonight, he had taken the bus to work. He drove his Nissan truck to a parking lot on 1<sup>st</sup> Street, paid and then walked to the Long Beach Transit Mall, an island platform downtown. He was ready, as ready as he was ever going to be.

#

He locked the front door and crossed Figueroa Street. He worked in Carson, not far from Victoria Park. It was now 9:45 p.m. When he got to her jeep he looked around, made sure the coast was clear and then climbed into the back. He took the mask out of his coat pocket and put it on. While he waited, he tried to cover himself with a beach chair and a large mesh bag. On the bag was a picture of a bright red sun, tilting catamaran and seagulls.

He began to feel sick.

When she finally got in and started the engine—that's when he felt most scared. He had half a mind to leap out, expose himself and run away. He longed for a rain coat. He felt helpless and full of doubt. He knew his life would never be the same. He looked up at the streetlights, tall buildings and telephone wires. His eyes were getting red and watery. She was listening to Pearl Jam. Soon she was singing along.

Eventually she merged onto a freeway. Martin figured it was the 91, but he couldn't be sure. There were long spaces of darkness. He saw clouds and the flashing lights of airplanes...

#

He heard a garage door open, saw wooden beams, cardboard boxes and a plastic pool with yellow, red and green fish painted on it. It reminded him of Dr. Seuss, the way the fish looked: *red fish, blue fish*. She shut off the engine. Martin hesitated. As she stepped out of the jeep, she was still singing.

Three minutes later the garage light went off. It was pitch black except for the outline of the door leading to the house. He crawled out of the jeep and tried it—locked. He heard a television, balled up his fist and smashed it into his overhanging gut.

There was a refrigerator next to the door. He opened it and light filled the garage. He saw a worktable cluttered with tools, coffee cans and a vice grip. Nailed to the skeletal frame, above the table was a map of Earth; lines of demarcation covered it, crisscrossed like a spider-web. He looked around for a place to hide.

10:47 p.m.

The light had gone out under the door and he no longer heard the TV. He took off the mask and rubbed his thinning scalp. The moment had come and gone. He had lost his nerve. He felt relieved, actually. He took a deep breath, let it out and then shook his head. He was glad he hadn't gone through with it. He wanted a girlfriend, that's all. He hated himself. There was a stack of board games next to an exercise bike. He wished he could play one with her. He imagined the two of them rolling dice, palming cards and smiling.

#

The refrigerator light illuminated the equatorial lines of the map. He stared at the Earth, studied lines of longitude, latitude, saw a tiny island in the Pacific and wanted to be there. He made a mental note of the coordinates and yawned. He couldn't keep his eyes open. He wanted to go home. He crawled back into the jeep, closed his eyes and slept.

#

He woke up at 5:07 a.m., got out of the jeep and looked for a place to piss. He saw a five-gallon water bottle next to a record player. The bottle was empty except for some change, mostly pennies. He slid it over with his foot, unzipped his pants and relieved himself. He briefly recalled a dream, something about female vampires. They were slowly taking over the world. Martin was the only one who could stop them. He had to drive a wooden stake through their vaginas. He thought it was pretty sick, the whole idea of it, so he tried to forget. As he looked around the



garage, wondering if he should stay in the jeep or go back to his hiding place, light seeped through the space around the garage door.

An hour later he heard the TV.

Footsteps.

The door swung open. He was waiting for it. The mask was already on his head. He squeezed a little bit tighter between the water heater and the wall. He wanted to close his eyes, but didn't. He heard two voices, a man and a young boy's. The man asked the boy if he had kissed his mother goodbye. The boy answered yes. Martin heard the engine start and then the creak and groan of the garage door as it slowly opened. He peeked around the water heater and saw the jeep curving backwards. He was exposed! He ran over to the washing machine, ducked behind it and banged his knee on a pipe. He peeked around the smooth white surface and saw sunlight flashing against the jeep's bumper. The sudden flow of light was straining his eyes. It was difficult to see. He couldn't tell if the man in the jeep saw him or not. He struggled to make the adjustment, blinking his eyes. The garage door began closing. He ran as fast as he could, slammed down hard on the concrete and rolled sideways. When he looked up the jeep was turning left. Then it disappeared.

*Safe.*

He glanced at the house, and what he assumed was the bedroom window. A white drape covered the view. He took off the mask, purple with yellow lightning bolts. In the early morning sun he saw that he was in a suburban neighborhood. There was a newspaper on the grass, the Wall Street Journal. He heard a dog barking in the distance. The sidewalks were clean and the lawns well nourished with Miracle Grow. He looked down at the mask balled up in his fist. He thought of the Blue Demon, his favorite Mexican wrestler. Martin was a big fan of the *Lucha libre*. He liked the masks, and the fact that some of the wrestlers took on the identity of their disguises, be it folk heroes, animals or gods.

He got up, brushed himself off and started walking. He felt sore all over, especially his side. At the end of the cul-de-sac he pushed south. He turned left at the bottom of a hill, walked a quarter mile, turned right and headed west on Imperial Highway.

He found a bus stop.

When the bus arrived he dropped a dollar-fifty in the till, asked for a transfer and grabbed a schedule. As the bus jerked forward, he sat in the first empty seat. He studied the schedule: map-lines, numbers and zones.

#

He stepped off the bus in Long Beach, a stone's throw from his studio apartment on Broadway and Esperanza. He unlocked the dead bolt, set the alarm on his clock radio and turned on the fan. It cooled the room and also cut out the noise of the city. He pulled the bed down from the wall, took off his clothes and lay down. Listening to the fan, he pictured the map of Earth. He saw longitude and latitude, calculated lines to a fixed point, and remembered that island in the Pacific. He felt antsy, unable to relax. He got up and poured a glass of milk, adding some Hershey's chocolate syrup. Then he opened the blinds and turned on the TV. He picked up

the remote and began flipping channels. He stopped at an exercise program. Soon he was on the floor peddling his legs like a bicycle. It felt good. He kept peddling until the instructor changed the exercise. Presently he was doing sit-ups. His fat, hairy body was sweating profusely. *Luck*. That's how he thought of it. He kept going, counting along. He thrust his body upward again and again. "You're a lucky man, Dobbs," he said, out of breath. He was breathing deeply, forcing his torso up to his knees. A feeling of exhilaration came over him. He pushed his body harder. The space between his elbows and knees felt like the Grand Canyon. The instructor changed the exercise to jumping jacks. Martin kept doing sit-ups. The fan rotated across his body, back and forth, back and forth...He felt the cold air sweeping across him. "I'm lucky," he repeated, sucking in air. "I'm the luckiest man on earth."

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## One of life's simple pleasures

John Mariani

I cover my hands with sand;  
clean sand, dirt-brown sand,  
cigarette and bottle-strewn sand,  
different textures, colors and compositions of sand.

The sensation never ceases to excite me.  
No matter how often I burrow my body  
into the sand, allowing the ocean  
with its undulating motion  
to wash it off my limbs,  
I still get excited.

It's curious and very sensual;  
in fact, it's one of a number of unique  
activities in life,  
which always provides pleasure.

It's so simple and accessible  
yet, so subtle and discreet;  
it provides satisfying, interesting  
and entertaining moments -  
for myself and fellow sand-worshipping  
enthusiasts.

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## To get to my heart

Christopher Gaskins

you must split my ribs and  
rub them brittle,  
snap my spine in several places, grab  
and grind  
then shove aside the  
sweeter excess,  
dig for love with a higher fervor like digging  
a hole  
to China and back;  
the dirt never seems to fit in exactly  
the way it came out.

# Untitled

Jason Alan Wilkinson

This is not about the rambunctious pit-bull next door  
that got loose and bit every child it could lay hold of.

Or the firearm that came to cease it's untimely assault.

It's not about the final days of a political regime  
that did absolutely nothing for the masses  
whose votes guided it to power.

It's not about state-sponsored Fear,  
Richard Gere, or what the hell Kevin was thinking  
when he married Britney Spears.

This is not about a poet who, owing to his greater sense of aesthetic justice,  
ought verily to abstain from rhyming.

This is not designated to elicit euphoria.

Nor will it leave you strung out.

It's not about Identity Theft, the far Left,  
or who *left* the garbage bag on the porch  
in absence of depositing it for collection.

This is not about a governor who spent his days routing out crime  
and his nights in some pricey brothel.

Nor the individuals of a similar description, who would see him burn for it.

This is not about the new pit-fighting league  
that has garnered international eminence.

Or those unfortunate competitors  
who now ruefully contemplate their inclusion in such  
from a wheelchair.

By no means is this about a legislative body more concerned with performance-enhancing drugs, computer games, and otherwise pretending to look busy, than it is with exercising the will of the people.

This is not about the photo-sharing community website that your preteen child, in spite of all remonstrance, has defiantly pledged her last thirty-seven afternoons to.

Nor is it a reference to all of the psychos one is likely to encounter in such a place.

This is not about a haunted piece of real estate, whose multitudinous proprietors were, over a score of decades, individually frightened beyond all imagination.

It's not about the whiffle ball game that 'got out of hand' when you hit a line drive into the neighbours prize-winning flower bed.

No, it's not about the ensuing police reports that were slated in consequence thereof.

This is not about the person who ripped out your heart for the singular purpose of unceremoniously depositing it in the nearest gutter.

This will in no way compromise one's ability to maintain a pot belly and eat chips until the surgeon is called in.

Nor is it an indictment of those whose corpulence were far beyond their voluntary manipulation.

This is not about the entertainment console whose production cost thousands of lives in an underdeveloped nation.

It's not about the stores of tax money blown to revive mortgage firms that evict families by the truckload (whose revenue once aided their piracy).

Or what percentage of that trust went into the coffers of the personal 'massage' industry.

It's not about crappy drinking water.

Not a long finger-pointing session about who made it so crappy.

This is not about the bachelor party footage that quite inexplicably wound up on a photo-sharing database largely frequented by psychotics and children.

It's not about the annulment that was carefully averted upon its discovery.

This is not about a sponge that is purportedly capable of absorbing an entire lake.

Nor how many were spontaneously drowned by the aforementioned domestic article.

This is not about an education system that focuses more of its resources upon  
what variation of t-shirt your child wears to class, than it does in fortifying  
his or her intellect.

It's not about the addle-brained court that would fail to succour its dying machinery.

This is not about to fix itself.

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## Poem from the Netherworld Notebooks (Radio)

Kenneth DiMaggio

My stolen car  
can only tune in  
to a hysterical preacher  
screaming how only Jesus  
can save you

And whether  
the one  
at the all night gas station  
was number seven

there was no defiance  
in any of the clerks  
or attendants  
who showed  
that they were worth  
no more  
than the minimum wage  
they were going  
to die for

Ah shut up Preacher

because  
you me Jesus  
—we're all too  
undignified  
to have something  
worth saving

And continuing to prey  
upon a dead civilization  
will never separate me  
from the banality  
of my victims

# A Random Act of Violence

Marvin McAtee JJ

“You’ve got some ketchup right there,” Karen said leaning towards her daughter’s mouth with a napkin.

“I can do it momma,” proclaimed Serenity, Karen’s vivacious six year old, as she snatched the napkin from her mother’s hand. She rubbed it across her mouth, further smearing the condiment. “Told ya,” she added bobbing her head for dramatic effect.

“Yeah,” Karen laughed as she helped her little girl out by cleaning off the smudge, “you sure did.” The two of them were out enjoying a mother-daughter day, since dad was stuck at the office, on this beautiful August morning.

They had already been shopping and were planning on going to the movies, but they decided to first stop off for a bite to eat.

The two of them were laughing and enjoying “big girl” conversation when a man in a trench coat walked in. His face was uncovered except for the shadow his ball cap cast across it. He took only a few steps in before revealing the semi-automatic rifle he was wielding.

He fired off a few rounds into the ceiling, smiling as the restaurants customers screamed and tried to take cover. He made his way through the diner firing off more shots with each step. Karen’s maternal instincts kicked in as she dove over the table to comfort her screaming child, unknowingly attracting the eye of the armed assailant. Karen covered Serenity, tightly wrapping her arms around her. She was trying to use her own body as a protective cocoon as she cleaved the child to her bosom.

The fiendish character stood over the top of their booth, looking down at them. He squeezed the trigger filling both of their bodies with the hot lead spewing out its barrel. After emptying out the clip into his innocent prey he darted out of the establishment.

The mother lay on top of her daughter with blood pouring out of her fresh wounds. She was slipping away, but was only praying for her daughter’s safety. As her eyes started to close one final time she saw blood run from her baby’s lips. A single tear fell rolled down her cheek as she took her last breath.

The two were awoke by a brilliant white light. Karen grabbed her daughter in a heart felt loving embrace as they stared off into the great unknown. They had no idea where they were or what had happened, but neither of them was afraid.

“Welcome home,” a voice said.

“Home?” Karen said trying to figure out what was going on, “where have we been?”

“It is of no importance anymore. All that matters is you are home.”

“Where’s my daddy?” Serenity interrupted.

“He did not come with you but will be here soon, if he passes my final test,” the voice explained. “You may watch him through there.” When its words were finished a section of clouds moved and the man they wanted to see came into focus.

“Daddy!” Serenity exclaimed as if she hadn’t seen him in years. Her tone quickly changed as she saw how he was acting.

Tad, her father, was sitting on his couch sobbing. He had been flipping through old photos and driving himself insane. There was a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a gun in the other.

The depression had been growing since he had received the awful news. Weeks had passed, but with all the sleepless nights he was unsure exactly how much time had gone by. “A random act of violence!” he cried out.

That was what the police had ruled the crime just before telling him that the perp would probably never be caught. There had been no leads or no arrests made since that horrendous day. Tad found himself slowly losing his grasp on reality. He missed his wife and daughter very much, in fact too much. He did not want to live with the pain anymore. Tad turned up the bottle one last time before putting the gun to his head. He cocked it back debating on whether or not to pull the trigger when his phone rang.

The answering machine picked up and a voice spoke, “Mr. Higgenbottom this is Sheriff Dunbarr down at the precinct. We have arrested a suspect we believe to be the guilty party of your case. He is being taken in for immediate arraignment and will be going to trial right away.”

Tad put the gun down. He did not want to live, but he wanted to see the monster responsible for his misery pay for his crime.

Within a few months the trial was underway. Tad was doing a little better he had gone back to work trying to occupy his mind. His employer repeatedly told him to not rush it and take all the time he needed. But in his mind the only time he needed was one day. The one day he would never get back.

He was still having trouble sleeping at night. His psychiatrist had written him numerous prescriptions, but their help was only minimal at best. He would not be able to rest until he saw that madman behind bars. He was present on the day of the trial. He sat upfront behind the D.A.

“Ville Padrone,” was the name they called as the bailiff led the man in. His feet and hands had been shackled. He was dressed in a solid orange jumper and black slippers. His hair was cut short, a buzz cut. His eyes appeared to be as black as his heart. He wore a pencil thin mustache on his lip, as he walked into the courtroom with a smile.

Tad could feel his body temperature rise as his blood began to boil. He felt like jumping across the rail and pounding Ville’s face in with his bare hands. It took every ounce of self control that he had to finally subdue his wrathful revenge.

The judge entered the room and the trial began. It was a complete and utter mockery of the justice system as the overpaid defense attorney put on his show. The investigating officer was discredited because he had a history of excessive force complaints. The weapon that had cut down Tad’s family was deemed inadmissible because of a type-o on the search warrant. Even the D.A.’s eyewitness was brought to tears as Padrone’s attorney brought up her drug filled promiscuous past. As strong of a case as the prosecutor had built, the defense had ripped it apart within hours.

With no admissible evidence, no credible witnesses, and the arresting officer's testimony being tossed out, the jury did not need much time to deliberate. It seemed like only minutes to Tad before they had reached their verdict of "not guilty."

Tad never took his eyes off of his family's killer the entire trial. He studied the man who did not deserve to live remembering every detail about him. He would not forget Ville, and soon Ville would not forget him.

As the jury read off the not guilty verdict Ville turned to Tad. His eyes widened with joy as he saw Tad staring back at him. Ville gave a devilish smile while shrugging his shoulders as if to say, "No big deal."

"YOU MURDERER!" Tad screamed leaping from his seat across the room. His hands landed around Ville's neck.

The judge called for order slamming her gavel on her desk. "Bailiff break them up!" she ordered.

Ville laughed as the bailiffs wrestled Tad to the ground. Tad was infuriated and unable to control his body. The officers viewed it as resisting as he kicked and lunged at Ville. They had no choice but to zap him.

Once the electric shock put him into submission they cuffed him and stood him before the judge. She charged him with contempt of court and sentenced him to one night in jail.

"I'm the victim!" he shouted as she handed down her verdict. "That bastard shot and killed my girls in cold blood and I'm the one going to jail while he is set free to roam the streets! GOD BLESS AMERICA!!!"

The officer shoved Tad into the holding cell and slammed the door shut. He climbed up on the dirty cot. He started to cry as his hatred for Ville turned into regret for Serenity. "I'm sorry," he cried as he thought about her. He couldn't help but think about all the times when he was too busy with work to play with her, or how when she would do something so insignificant but the added stress from the bills piling up would cause him to explode at her. He filled his mind with everything he had done wrong stirring up those familiar thoughts of suicide as he drifted off to sleep.

The next morning he was released a new man. At some point in the night he came to the realization that it was not him that had done wrong. He loved his wife and daughter and it was not his fault they were no longer here. There was only one man to blame for that, Ville.

He had thought up a hundred and one ways to murder the son of a bitch. Some were real drug out twisted ways to torment him. He wanted Ville to die a slow and agonizing death like his own soul was dying. More importantly Tad wanted to watch him die that painful death.

He began to stalk his prey.

The officer who Ville's lawyer discredited was more than happy to let Tad help himself to the case files. He browsed them soaking up any bit of information that could potentially lead him to Ville's whereabouts. He went over the reports for hours before setting out on his mission.

He found Ville's address and decided to start there. It was hours before the



apartment showed any signs of life. Tad waited for Ville to make a move he was very eager to pounce on him, but he wanted to make sure he would hold the upper hand. He watched as Ville got into his car. He followed him carefully to a bar on the outskirts of town. Ville went in, but Tad stayed in his car waiting like the ever vigilante hunter ready to ambush its prey when it is at its weakest.

A couple of hours later Ville came out with a woman on his arm. They climbed into his two tone Cutlass and drove off. Tad followed them as they pulled into a nearby alley. The longer he had to wait to punish Ville the more the anger built up inside of Tad.

He was staring at the car watching its windows fog up when his mind started to carry him off to when he first met his wife. As he thought about her beautiful sweet perfect face his eyes swelled up with tears. His heart started to break the more her face reminded him of Serenity.

Then, in a quick instant his mind was pulled back to reality by a screaming woman. Tad paused for a minute to distinguish what kind of scream it was. She screamed again signaling to him it was not a lover's moan. He hopped out of his car and ran up to Ville's. He threw open the driver's side door and grabbed him.

Tad threw Ville to the gravel causing him to bang his head on a dumpster. The woman in the car appeared to have a broken nose as she tried to cover herself with he tattered clothing. "Get out of here," Tad told her as she made a mad dash out of the alleyway.

Ville lay on the small rocks; his head bleeding. Tad could literally smell the booze on his breath as he sat him up. He propped him up against the brown dumpster, and delivered a powerful right hook, "That was for my baby!" The drunkard spat out a bloody tooth as he tried to get to his feet.

Ville had managed to get up on all fours, but was experiencing some technical difficulty with his equilibrium. Seizing what he saw as a golden opportunity Tad ran up and kicked him in the ribs. Ville was knocked back against the dumpster. The severe blow made breathing a difficult task to him, but between breaths he managed to get out, "I'll... kill... you!"

"You already have," Tad said letting his anger guide him. He pulled a picture of Serenity and Karen out of his pocket. He knelt down beside Ville and held the tearstained photo up for him to see, "Why?" he asked no longer able to fight back the sorrow. "Why them? They were sweethearts that never done nothing to nobody," he wiped his sleeve across his face to dry his tears.

Ville was purposely letting his inebriated eyes wander elsewhere. Tad grabbed him by his shirt and shoved the picture in his face, "You look at it!" he demanded. "You took everything away from me! EVERYTHING!"

Tad punched Ville one more time laying him out. He scanned around the dark alley for something to finish the job when his eye caught a concrete brick. He walked over to Ville with the heavy block in his hands and revenge in his heart.

Tad raised the brick high above his head.

"Daddy!" Serenity screamed out as her mother clung to her tightly.

As the little girl's voice filled her daddy's ears peace entered into his body. He felt the presence of her and forgiveness instantly filled his heart. Tears of joy filled his eyes as happy thoughts of his little girl overtook him.

While Tad was having his spiritual moment Ville took the opportunity to pull the Glock 9 from his waistband. He aimed the gun at Tad who was seemingly unaware. The thought crossed his mind as to where the dumbfounded happy look on Tad's face came from, before he pulled the trigger.

Three shots he fired. The first hit Tad's chest instantly stopping his heart. The second clipped his throat; causing blood to spray out profusely. The third and final bullet caught him in the face. It hit his cheek tearing away the right side of his face as it passed through. As Tad's body fell to the ground the cylinder block fell on what was left of his skull. The force caused it to flatten before breaking in half. It forced out a bloody mixture of brain matter and tissue through the new openings of his cranium.

When Tad awoke he saw a brilliant light in a cloudy surrounding, "Welcome home," the voice said. With one arm around Karen and Serenity hoisted up in the other they walked through the pearly gates.



The Plain Truth, art by  
Peter Schwartz

# Bombshell

Gregory Liffick

Andre had stayed at this particular Paris hotel many times in his diplomatic career. He was drawn to its mannered atmosphere. Its art deco architecture. Especially its bar. Reminiscent of something from an old black and white movie. Bogie or Hemingway would feel comfortable there. After a long day of service he liked to stop there late in the evening and have a relaxing drink before going to bed.

To be honest, he liked to pick up women there as well. Given his fairly handsome and distinguished appearance, his sophistication, and his bearing of obvious importance, he was usually successful. The presence of his two bodyguards often helped, also, betraying the fact that he was a VIP of some sort, a person women might like to know.

He tried to be discreet about it. After all, he'd been married for thirty-five years and still loved and respected his wife as a friend and companion. But, their sex life was over. It had died in the fire of his career and his constant traveling. He probably hadn't been at home for more than a few years, in total, in all the time they'd been together. He knew she likely had a lover of her own, and he didn't deny her the same right as himself. They tacitly agreed to forgo jealousy and keep up appearances for both their sakes. They both had public images to maintain.

Andre scanned the crowd in the subdued light of the bar as he walked in. He decided to dismiss his bodyguards at the curb tonight, despite their protests. He didn't think he needed them for 'show' tonight, and he wanted to be left alone to drink his drink and to 'hunt,' as he liked to call it. He felt safe enough at the hotel and at the bar. The hotel was more like his home than the large mansion he shared with his wife and two nearly grown sons.

Immediately, as he sat down in his favorite booth, he saw her. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties and was beautiful in a very striking manner. Long dark hair, very good figure, and a finely featured face, accented by deep blue eyes. He could not decide her nationality, though he was usually good at figuring out where people came from. He believed he could tell a Russian woman from a German one, from a French one, and so on. But, he could not pin her down. Despite this slightly troubling mystery, he felt driven to introduce himself to her.

He picked up his drink and stepped directly up to her, fueled by the confidence of his long romantic and cosmopolitan experience. "Excuse me, miss," he said as he sat down next to her at her table. "Can I join you?"

She looked up, at first appearing a bit startled, but then quickly relaxing. Andre smiled to himself. He knew he had a way of instantly making people feel at ease. It was the reason he had entered the diplomatic service to begin with. "Why not," she answered, invitingly, looking him over with interest. He couldn't make out her accent either.

"I always have a drink in this bar after I finish my day's work," he confided. "I always stay at this hotel when I'm in Paris, and this is my favorite bar." He introduced himself, shaking her smooth, delicate hand. He explained who he was, knowing it would impress her.

“Oh, really,” she replied, her growing smile suggesting that the information had had the desired effect. “Power and position always gets them,” Andre winked to himself.

“I’m a personal assistant,” she said, not adding for whom. Still, her expression hinted that it was someone famous, probably a celebrity, likely a guest of the hotel. “I’m here for the week with my boss.” Suddenly, she laughed at herself. “I forgot to tell you my name, didn’t I? And you forgot to ask,” she playfully pouted, wagging her finger at him. “It’s Marie,” she said, shaking his hand again, this time more tightly.

Andre couldn’t tell her that he didn’t really care what her name was. He just wanted to make love to her. Although she was surely the most beautiful of the many women he had encountered, and also the most mysterious, she was still merely one in a long string of conquests over the years.

They continued to make small talk for an hour or so, ordering a couple of more drinks in the process. Their conversation and body language became increasingly familiar and intimate, and developed into verbal foreplay. As she began to touch him and place her hand on his leg and face, Andre realized that they were destined for bed. The mystery of her nationality and accent still troubled him slightly, but he was still intent on sleeping with her and finally asked her up to his hotel room. She followed him eagerly, grasping him around the neck, and breathing hotly into his ear.

As soon as they arrived inside his suite and closed the door behind them, they began to kiss and caress each other passionately and remove each other’s clothes. Her body was even more striking naked. Her breasts were natural and unbelievably full and firm. His manhood betrayed his excitement, standing more erect than it had in recent memory particularly for a man of his age, as his underwear dropped to the floor.

She moved to the bed and lay on top of the covers. She rolled on her back, propping her head on the pillows and spreading her legs. “Come here,” she purred, “I want you inside of me.”

He climbed onto the bed, shaking like a first-time schoolboy, and worked his way on top of her. “I’m going to enjoy this very much,” he almost said out loud. “This might be the best I’ve ever had,” he wanted to shout. “And I deserve it,” he continued to think. “After all of the long hours I’ve put into the peace agreement I’m brokering.”

“Come on, Andre,” she almost begged. “I can’t wait.”

Andre pressed his penis past her moist opening and then thrust it deeply into her sweet tightness. As it reached fully inside of her, its tip pushed against a triggering device near the mouth of her womb. An electrical signal moved up a short wire and set off the surgically implanted block of plastic explosive inside of her abdomen. In an instant, the bed, along with much of the room, was obliterated and Andre and Marie were vaporized, minute drops of blood and tiny pieces of flesh and bone spread like a fine spray across what remained of the walls.

Upon hearing the explosion and witnessing it from a hotel room across the street, an operative for a radical group in Andre’s home country opposed to the peace agreement sent an email to Andre’s superior. A message was quickly posted on the group’s international website claiming credit.

# Leafers

Chris Butler

Life encircles each passing season.  
The climate falls into predictable patterns.  
Nature's death provides beautiful scenery  
In the region of New England.

The climate falls into predictable patterns.  
We still admire the fall foliage  
In the region of New England,  
As we pile up the dead.

We still admire the fall foliage;  
The seas of orange, yellow and red.  
As we pile up the dead,  
We swim through rotting mounds.

The seas of orange, yellow and red,  
Absent of anything resembling green.  
We swim through rotting mounds,  
Decomposing corpses nourishing the earth.

Absent of anything resembling green,  
Skeletons of towering trees,  
Decomposing corpses nourishing the earth,  
Bare branches now lacking leaves.

Despite her natural splendor,  
Nature's death provides beautiful scenery,  
Although we know the redundancy;  
Life encircles each passing season.

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## The Dark

Mike Berger, Ph.D.

No, no, no! Light bulbs don't glow;  
in reality, they suck up dark.  
Spinning electrical generators  
don't produce a watt of electricity.  
They vacuum up dark.  
Dark is made of particles.  
Of course, they are called Darkons.  
They have no charge or mass  
but process gravity and spin.  
They are big; really really big.  
They are bigger than the Higgs,  
the illusive God particle.  
No man constructed collider  
can capture the total dark.  
It has strange and bizarre properties.  
The human eye can't see a thing  
peering into a room full of dark.  
Utilities companies deceive us  
stealing away the dark.  
They store it in the old coal mines.  
When they've gathered it all up  
you and I will plead for dark, and then  
we can buy it for an exorbitant price.

Down in the Dirt  
Alexandria Rand, editor  
AlexRand@scars.tv  
<http://scars.tv>

Scars Publications and Design  
829 Brian Court  
Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA

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