

The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge



Best of Poetry

Thomas Zimmerman

Best of Fiction

Eric Devine

the 1990s, the number of people in the world who are illiterate has increased from 400 million to 600 million.

It is not only the illiterate who are at risk of being left behind. The world's population is growing rapidly, and the number of people who are poor is increasing. In 1990, there were 1.2 billion people living on less than \$1 a day. By 2000, there were 1.5 billion.

The world's population is also becoming more diverse. There are now over 200 different languages spoken in the world, and the number of different ethnic groups is increasing. This diversity is a source of strength, but it also presents challenges.

One of the biggest challenges is how to ensure that everyone has access to the benefits of globalization. We need to find ways to help the poor and the illiterate to participate in the global economy.

Another challenge is how to ensure that the benefits of globalization are shared fairly. We need to find ways to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor.

Finally, we need to find ways to ensure that globalization is sustainable. We need to protect the environment and to ensure that we have enough resources to support the world's population in the future.

Globalization is a double-edged sword. It has brought us many benefits, but it has also brought us many challenges. We need to find ways to maximize the benefits and to minimize the challenges.

One of the best ways to do this is to invest in education. Education is the key to economic growth and to social progress. It is the best way to help people to improve their lives and to participate in the global economy.

We need to invest in education for all. We need to ensure that every child has access to a quality education. We need to invest in education for the poor and the illiterate, as well as for the rich and the literate.

Education is also a key to social progress. It helps to reduce poverty and to improve the quality of life. It helps to create a more just and more equitable society.

We need to invest in education for the future. We need to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn and to grow. We need to invest in education for the world's children.

Education is the key to a better future. It is the key to a world where everyone has the opportunity to succeed. It is the key to a world where everyone has a chance to improve their lives.

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The Corner

Club

Press



The Corner Club Press

March 2011

Volume I • Issue I

Managing Editor *Greg Tredore*
Fiction Editor *Amber Forbes*
Poetry Editor *Daphne Maysonet*

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Letter From the Fiction Editor

Dear shadows, who are my readers and writers,

Putting together this issue has been a surreal feeling for me. Never did I envision doing this in my sophomore year of college. And never did I envision our initial call for submissions would yield so many results to the point where we actually have to have a vetting process now.

I hope all readers and writers alike enjoy the poetry pieces and fiction pieces we've picked out for you, because we did do this with you in mind and not simply just what we wanted to see. Really, though, this issue, any magazine for that matter, would not exist without writers. I really appreciate writers, especially because all of you have made issue 1 possible. Even if I didn't accept your story, I still appreciated that you took the time to actually submit to us. Writers may not realize it, but when you submit to magazines (excluding those who, in Duotrope terms, take the Blitzkrieg approach), you are essentially saying you respect that magazine and what it has to offer you and that you'd be honored to appear in any of its issues. And when I accept writers, I am honored to have them appear in any of our issues; thus, I'm incredibly honored to have our authors in this issue. Thank you.

Take care, dear shadows, and I hope you enjoy our debut issue.

Sincerely,

Amber Forbes
Founder and Fiction Editor

Letter From the Poetry Editor

Writers and Readers,

It is with great pleasure that we at *The Corner Club Press* bring to you our first issue of the magazine. As a lover of anything written with both creativity and craft, I value our writers. The submission contributions were many, varied in style, length and content, and were delightful to read. The talent seen in these works of poetry showcase a diverse range of techniques. This appealed to me greatly, as it is all too often that works of value become marginalized due to current trends in publication.

However, it is clear that we cannot accept all works that are submitted, and I must unfortunately narrow down many poems that have great potential. This task will never be easy, and it is with great humility that I aim to serve both the writer and the reader.

For readers, I hope you enjoy the content of our first issue. I am pleased to present to you a quality representation of the literary world today — one that encompasses both the eccentricity and nostalgia in poetry. I also urge you to pay close attention to the works and their creators. The process of writing and the publishing industry can be treacherous, and the climb to recognition and success is frequently fraught with hardship for the writer. And those who choose to immerse themselves in this market take a great leap of faith. Make note of those in our first issue who intrigue and inspire you because it is likely that you may cross their paths again. As always, we encourage feedback pertaining to the content and construction of our magazine and would love to hear what input readers can give to make *The Corner Club Press* the best literary magazine that it can be.

Thank you,

Daphne D. Maysonet
Co-Founder and Poetry Editor

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Thomas Zimmerman

Cypresses

Aboard a bus between the hills of Rome
and Florence, I was dozing with my wife
but heard that cypress means *eternal life*.
Our guide talked on; at least *one* fact hit
home.

I saw the cypresses upon the hills,
like spearheads pointing heavenward, leaf-
green
up close and smoke-wreathed flames of life
when seen
through Tuscan haze. This dreaming vision fills

the wine-cup of the poet's mind, I think;
the lamp that hangs by golden chains above
the sculptor's stone. So Dante's verses sink
so deeply in the soul, and rays of love

revealed to toiling Michelangelo
a *David* in the marble's ageless glow.

Thomas Zimmerman teaches English and directs the Writing Center at Washtenaw Community College, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Poems of his have appeared recently in Milk Sugar, Red Fez, and Rhythm Poetry Magazine.

Thomas Zimmerman

To Beat Ennui

If all else fails, I list some things I love:
my life, my wife, and *Highway 61*
Revisited; Baudelaire's faux infamy
when iron-maidened into sonnet form;

the bravest Shostakovich symphony:
11? 8?; the battered heart of Donne;
to watch in safety any kind of storm;
to feel my brain-buoyed spirit rise above

my childhood's God; John Coltrane playing
live;
The Waste Land; Heaney's *Station Island*; *Lear*;
Macbeth; Walt Whitman, Paz, Neruda, Frost—

most often when I plumb their darkness, dear
as the sublimity I thought I'd lost,
as seas that beckon me to drown or dive.

Peycho Kanev

Melancholy

Somebody cut off the tongue
of my loneliness

your eyes look like scrambled
eggs

nobody
blinks

no mirrors
in between.

I use the gas to toast my love
and
the butcher's knife to spread
the butter.

Peycho Kanev has been writing poetry for the past 10 years. His poems have appeared in more than 400 literary magazines, such as: Poetry Quarterly, Welter, The Shine Journal, Ann Arbor Review, and many others. He is nominated for the Pushcart Award and lives in Chicago. Also in 2009 his short story collection "Walking Through Walls" (Ciela), and in April 2010 his poetry collection "American Notebooks" (Ciela) both were published in Bulgaria. His new poetry collection "Bone Silence" was released in September 2010 by Desperanto, NY

Kevin Heaton

Apotheosis of Evil

Headless Liberty rides the winged
death horse past snuffed out North

Church lanterns; finger painting
havoc across ominous horizons.

She calls: "To arms," in whispered
screams, no longer heard in Babel

Towers: "Beware the crack in Adams
rib," as midnight strikes the final toll.

Turkey vulture holograms reflect
on silver cirrus screens; hissing lepton

fallout spit, to circumvent the son.
Exhumed, dead bones regather flesh,

and fall to knees in homage; esteeming
the apotheosis of evil, awaiting

the Eucharist of mortal ashes,

Kevin Heaton lives and writes in Aiken, South Carolina. His chapbook, "Postcards of Faith," is at: Victorian Violet Press. His new chapbook, "Measured Days," is available from: Heavy Hands Ink Press. His work has appeared in: Foliate Oak, Elimae, Pirene's Fountain, and many others. More of his work may be viewed at his website: <http://kevinheatonpoetry.webstarts.com/index.html>.

Tom Sheehan

Twelve

Peter, Matthew, John, James and James
and all the rest.

A dozen of donuts.

L.

Too many men on the field.

Puberty or thereabouts, pancake bras
and hair in secret places.

At the face-off.

The stop just before the 14th floor.

The red numeral on my Saugus football jersey
for four years.

My platoon remnants, the ones who stayed
above Seoul, above Hamhung,
that cold winter.

Sons' jersey numbers.

Full up at dice.

WPRI, Providence.

Roosevelt, with a Lincoln Lincoln.

My brother's brogans.

Matthew's last birthday, September.

Betsy's next birthday, October.

Less than the baker's proportional.

Two six packs I buried at the Pine River camp
and haven't found yet.
The only buckshot I ever fired.
Friend's registration plate.
Old nails and hardware pieces in my artifacts
collection, this house from 1742 gave freely.
Gauge of the last sheet metal piece formed
at my hand, how it closes yet on darkness.
When I was his age, this age, I did the same things
Jamie did today, muddied out, played
football,
raced the sun to cover.
Midnight, the hour of myth and magic, peepers rising
in rebellion at the pond, their voices gathered
by moisture, like a million choir members
in the same church, my listening alone.
Two times six.
Two times infinity.

Sheehan has 13 books, 14 Pushcart nominations, Georges Simenon Fiction Award, included in Dzanc Best of the Web Anthology for 2009, nominated for 2010 and 2011. He has 180 short stories on Rope and Wire Magazine and has appeared in Rosebud Magazine (3), Ocean Magazine (7) and Troubadour 21 (+150).

William Doreski

The Last U-Boats

U-boats still prowl the Atlantic.
Their captains slump with the weight
of white hair; their crews wobble
on worm-eaten peg-legs. To fuel
their clattering diesel engines
they tube their arteries and pump
their blood to the gasping cylinders
that ignite with many snarls.

No more torpedoes; no ammo
for the deck guns. When they surface
in range of a huge container ship
the postmodern crew dismisses them
as ghosts of a war that ended
long before the oldest helmsman
was born. The last submariners
know, of course, the war is over,
but refuse the loss. They'll cruise until
their rusty seams implode and green
Atlantic fills their final dreams,
ballooning their papery lungs.

These last half-dozen U-boats
haven't sunk anything for sixty
odd years, but sometimes they incite
disaster where otherwise nothing
would occur. Depression or fog,
windstorm, arson, or divorce.
The collective ill will of a half
dead U-boat crew works evil
enough to render a higher tide
than usual, or tempt a young man
on a beach to touch, with malice,
a woman he hardly knows.

*William Doeski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. His latest collection of poetry is *Waiting for the Angel* (2009). His fiction, essays, poetry, and reviews have appeared in many journals, including *Massachusetts Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Alembic*, *New England Quarterly*, *Harvard Review*, *Modern Philology*, *Antioch Review*, *Natural Bridge*. He won the 2010 *Aesthetica Creative Works* competition in poetry.*

William Doreski

Could Be Your Father

The slim man firing a pistol
into the deep black horizon
could be your father returned
almost intact from the prison camp.
You haven't seen him in thirty years;
haven't heard how starvation-lean
his mental state has become.
When you told me how he grumbled
at bad American TV shows
dubbed in Czech I had to laugh
at Ed Sullivan or Milton Berle
spouting those determined consonants.

Yet you learned seven languages
just by watching Father lip-synch
US and European actors.
Yes, I know you're Slavic to the bone.
Yes, I know you like your vodka iced
so cruelly it makes your teeth hurt.
All those socialist fillings installed
without Novocain. No wonder
your smile looks so well-earned. The rasp
of gunfire reminds us to ask
this frustrated man for his passport
as soon as he empties that pistol.

Look at how utterly hairless,
not merely bald, he is. A lack
of protein will choke off a beard
at its roots. He lowers the gun
and looks at us with no sign
of species recognition. He's not
your father, not anyone's father.
He's a scar that's psyche-deep,
a stone tossed into a pond,
a sliver in the tip of a thumb,
The holes in the dark are bleeding.
Let's go before he reloads.

Valentina Cano

Closing

I'm going to empty myself out
like rescuing a boat a bucket-full at a time.
I'm going to plunge my hands
into stinging water and pull it up kicking
like a newborn calf.
I'm going to rip out the buttons of my coats,
let the flaps swing open in the wind
and bang against my ribs in a bone drumming
that sets my teeth singing.
I'm going to tear open the zippers that rules my
life,
the zippers that gnaw at my anxious sides
pulling out blood like darning thread.
I'm going to shake my hair so much
the strands will tangle and suffocate
in each other's dried arms.
I will empty this like a broken plastic bag,

Valentina Cano is a student of classical singing who spends whatever free time she has either reading or writing. Her work has appeared in Exercise Bowler, Blinking Cursor, Theory Train, Magnolia's Press, Cartier Street Press, Berg Gasse 19, Precious Metals and will appear in the upcoming editions of A Handful of Dust, The Scarlet Sound, The Adroit Journal, Perceptions Literary Magazine, Welcome to Wherever, and Perhaps I'm Wrong About the World. You can find her here: <http://coldbloodedlives.blogspot.com>.

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé

as with a senryu's hardening ridge

jalousie windows open
six months of chill as welcome

as five years, seven inflections
precise, scaled dots dropping off
and the rubbing out

of the fire in the hole

flailing legs like broken twigs
lost torso in grass –
his half-closed eyes are gasping

in the brush, faceless man down
canal, wash of red

three chase dreams, cartwheeling in –
hidden variable

this winter as cutting dry

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé has two chapbooks Bistre Junction and In Memoriam to a Marionette: Caudate Sonnet of the Year Ad Interim, forthcoming from Firstfruits Publications and Silkworms Ink. Trained in book publishing at Stanford, with a theology masters in world religions from Harvard and fine arts masters in creative writing from Notre Dame. Desmond has edited more than 10 books. Desmond is a recipient of the Singapore Internationale Grant and Dr Hiew Siew Nam Academic Award. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Dear Sir, Escape Into Life, Fence, InDigest, In Posse Review, and many more.

Jake Syersak



Ampersand

The night's mascara wanes
In the outlined flickering of lamp
Light,

Along this fleeting highway burrowing deep
Into the humid tongue
Of Ohio evening
In disgusting winterspring.

In disgusting winterspring,
The palpable mind opts to think of Van Gogh's
Wheat Fields. The result of the
Glow of nuclear yellow swelling
Umbr.

The muscled croplands spasm when aluminum winds
Shift, combing them to the smoothness of a stone.
Then quiet comes,
And then I transcribe these words to you,
From this to you.

You break the long, bland length of their

Wheat-soft sound
And jaundice torso.

And then the liquidity of the marrow comes; the marrow
Spills;
You unfurl
Your cerebrum over it; You

Gum it; Eat them; They
Become them becoming you—

A

Ghost of ampersand against a will—

And then you do

Jake Syersak a University of Washington graduate with a BA in English Literature currently living in Seattle, WA. I work at a bilingual (English/French) preschool and am currently applying to numerous MFA programs for fall 2011.

Kids on Mars are disappearing,
save them, join

THE PACK

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about kids

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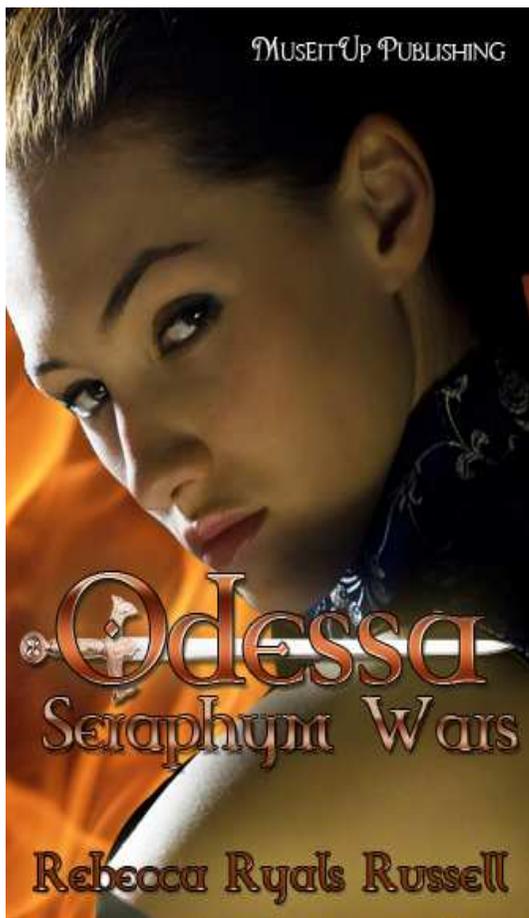
Bandits

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that overcome the impossible. . ."

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MGYA Fantasy Author

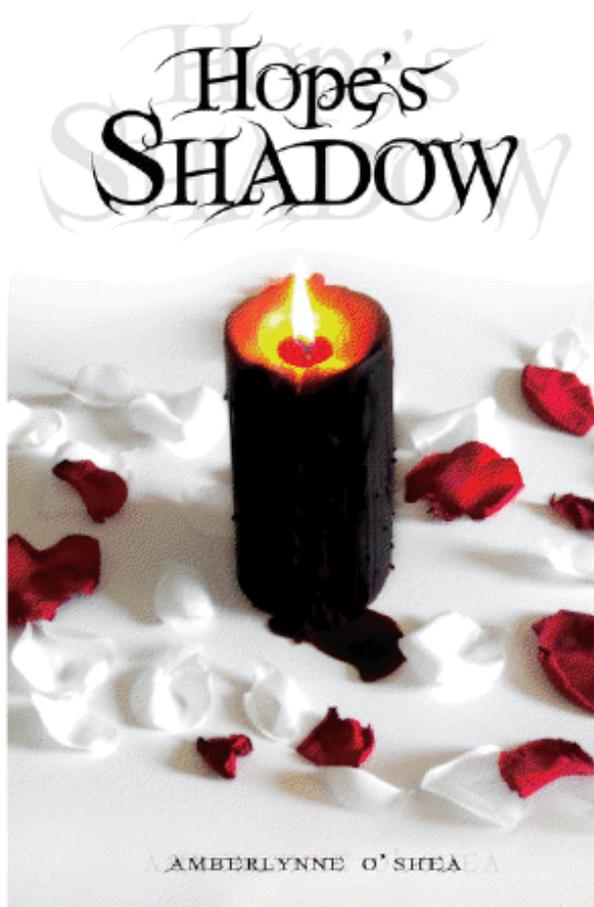


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Rooted in Lies

We moved from Illinois to New York the summer before my junior year in high school. That seemed like a shitty situation, but really, it wasn't so bad. The high school I was attending was about the same size as my new one, and I'm sure by my senior year most of my friends would have ditched me. I wasn't that interesting, until I started lying.

I'd been hanging out with this kid Huff since the first day of school, when he saw me trying to make sense of my schedule. He looked at my outstretched paper and said, "Come on, we're in the same homeroom." So there we were, on like the third day, staring at the girls in their new clothes, when Huff elbowed me. "Have you seen that?"

I looked where he directed: Jamie's ass was cresting out of her jeans without panties to obscure the view. It was a cherry of a backside, and as I took in the rest of Jamie's contours, I realized how Huff had pointed her out. It was in a proud manner, as if he were displaying a trophy, and it made me wonder. "Did you tap that?"

His entire body shook at the question, "No." He slumped in his chair. "But I would."

We sat for a while, not speaking, and I itched inside. Huff, my only friend, looked like a clam attached to his desk, and I wasn't sure if the question was too much too fast. But ever since the move--really, before--I'd been listening to my older brother Scott's advice: *New school, new girls; get laid as fast as you can.* Wasn't that why Huff was pointing her out? He sat up then, as if he'd been forming the next question the entire time, "You ever hit it?"

The truth was on my tongue, but Scott's voice filled my head,

again: *Just do it. Don't be some fucking angel your whole life. Shit, a solid ten lies can turn you into somebody else.* Therefore, the first came fast and furious, #1: "Yeah. I had a girl just before I left who wanted to give me a going away present." I laughed and then leaned over the span of the aisle. "Funny thing was, our moving date kept getting pushed back... three times."

Huff shrugged.

"Well, she felt the need to keep giving me the present."

Huff scanned my face, obviously looking for a crack in the foundation I'd just poured, and then his own cleared and he turned back to his desk. I settled into my chair, heart racing, but mentally high-fiving my brother. The words had flowed so smoothly, as if I were him, but then I caught Huff's profile, still fixed in the same position, eyes trained to the spot only he could see. Shit, had I gone too far?

"Hey, Jamie!" Huff's voice was firm and sure of itself.

She kept on applying makeup, as if no one had spoken. Huff yelled again.

"Jamie, I'm leaving!"

She put down her compact, but did not turn around. "Great Huff, thanks for the update."

I'm sure she rolled her eyes then, because she did that shiver, head/shoulder shake thing that girls love.

"No. I mean, I'm moving away. You know, like to another school."

Jamie didn't answer, didn't even flinch.

"Don't you want to say goodbye?" Huff was working for sympathy, but sounded pathetic. Jamie turned slowly and cocked her head.

"Goodbye, Huff. Now go fuck yourself."

I winced along with him. After a moment, he mumbled, "Least it worked for you."

* * *

"So, how was it? What do you think now that your first week is over?" My dad was handing out just-delivered slices of greased up cardboard and paid more attention to the "pizza" than he did my answer. The transfer had him working extra shifts just to get up to speed with the problems at the plant, the reason they brought him on. So he was in a fog. But it wasn't that out of the ordinary, nor as deep as my mother's, who sat, dead-eyed and picked up her slice without looking at it before proceeding to chew like a cow.

I stared at the wedge and then looked at extra the place setting she had set for my brother.

My dad took one bite, slapped it back on the plate, and then spit the pizza into a napkin. "This tastes like shit."

My mom continued eating, as if my father wasn't disgusted, as if we weren't even in the room. Her usual.

"Is there anywhere worth eating around here?"

I had only heard of the café because of Huff. In homeroom, the day after he had propositioned her, Jamie looked Huff over like a dead gerbil in its cage. "I thought you were leaving."

Huff frowned. "Not yet."

"Too bad. It would have been nice not to see your family at work."

I turned to my father, feeling the lie bubbling up, less quickly than the first, but it still burst forth all the same, #2: "Yeah, the Down street café."

The restaurant was fairly packed when we arrived, and indeed, Huff's family was there: him, his little brother, and his parents. I waved while my parents found a booth. Jamie was off in the far corner, smiling at a young father. She then dropped a spoon and picked it up so that her ass was thrust in his face. She stood, keeping her knees locked and looked at him over her shoulder. The guy went red, glanced at his wife, who was wrestling their kid into a car seat, and then threw a wad of cash on the table.

We ordered burgers and then sat in silence. Scott was always the conversationalist, always had some story about shit that happened at school or something his friends had done. Growing up, he was magnetic, drawing me in and pushing my parents away. He just liked to see what he could get over on people. It was that simple and that complicated. Like the times he forged my parents' signatures on his interim reports, or straight out lied about where he'd been when he'd come home at nine to a cold six o'clock dinner: *My friend got a flat, had to get the car towed, and I just couldn't leave him with the guy. He looked like a murderer. Or, There was this recycling thing at school, so I got roped in and couldn't say no. You know, elbow-to-elbow with the teachers, every bit counts.*

Then Scott was gone and the stretches of silence grew. I wished him back, wished that my dad hadn't given him the ultimatum: change his behavior or he couldn't move with us. Scott had laughed it off, like always, but in that moment I knew what the result would be. I didn't ask him why, because I knew, and why bother, anyway? Nothing in my life was under my control.

I watched Jamie give Huff's family the check, and Huff's dad take an eternity to produce his money. All the while, Huff wilted under Jamie's presence. *Check on your wing man.* I followed Scott's advice

and stood. "I'm going to go talk to this kid from school."

My mom had the appearance of something newly purchased from a taxidermist, and my father panned the room with all the flat-eyed interest of watching a documentary on moss.

My mom sucked in a breath. A year before, I think she would have said something like, "Who, Brian? What's his name?" but, instead, she stayed with her mouth in a line and her eyes tracking nothing in particular.

I got to Huff's table in time to catch Jamie muttering, "Come on..." while Huff's dad counted out his bills. Huff saw me and looked like someone coming out of heavy sedation. One eye passed from me to Jamie and then back.

"Hey, Jamie," I said.

She didn't look up, just eyeballed the money and asked, "You need change?" She jutted her hip as if the question took her physically off balance.

Huff's dad waved a meaty paw, and when he spoke the floor vibrated. "No, sweetheart, you keep it."

I checked out her ass as she walked away and Huff finally spoke. "Hey, Brian, what's up?"

"Nothing. I'm here with my parents, thought I'd see if you were up to anything."

Huff, like me, completely ignored his family, who sat smiling, like foreigners, trying politely to follow the conversation. Then his mom coughed. "Oh, yeah. Brian, this is my mom and my dad and Josh."

I shook hands with Huff's dad.

"Brian's from...where are you from?" Huff asked.

Again, right there, Scott tickled my ear: *Make it up. Somewhere exotic, not Illinois. Seriously, what's with the silent "s" bullshit?* So far he'd been right. I was fitting in, had found a friend, so why not continue to re-invent myself? The lie didn't rush out, but was a quick reply, #3: "California. Silicon Valley."

Huff's dad peered over my shoulder, looking for the family I didn't bother to indicate. "Dad get transferred?"

I don't know how he guessed, but he was right. "Yeah. He ran a plant out there, and they wanted him here. So..."

"A lot of that happening these days. Bunch of new guys just came on board. He may be one of them." He smiled and then patted the table.

I really didn't want to get into this conversation, the questions behind the transfer, about my other life, the ones I couldn't answer, at least not truthfully. We moved for a fresh start, so my mother wouldn't be gawked at by friends and neighbors who just couldn't wrap their own minds around the fact that hers wasn't coming back. And we left my brother, too. Or he left us. Whichever, he just couldn't control himself. I think Huff sensed my discomfort because he hopped up from his chair. "So you wanted me to show you the sites, downtown, right?"

His ease with lying was impressive, so much like Scott's. "Yeah, if that's all right?" I looked back to his family.

His mother bubbled. "Of course, go on. It's no fun being the new-comer and not knowing anything." She shoed us and Huff joined me in returning to my parents.

My mother was still elsewhere, but my dad was checking out the waitresses like he was a judge at a competitive sport. "Mom, dad, this is Huff."

My mother turned and extended a hand as best she could. "Pleased to meet you. That is an interesting name."

Huff smiled. "Yeah, it's short for Huffington. My dad liked it or something." He shook my mother's hand, and by this time my father had acknowledged us.

"Huff, is it?" My father's throat bobbed.

"Yes, sir."

"Interesting." He looked over his shoulder. "Almost as much as that one over there."

My face blasted red, because I couldn't believe he was indicating Jamie, especially in front of my mom--even though she was mostly dead--but really because of how Huff seemed to feel about Jamie. He wanted a piece, but when he looked at her, he took in all of her, not just a body part or two, and he moved carefully around her, unlike all the others elbowing in to get noticed.

Huff nodded though and politely looked over and then back. "Almost, but not even close enough."

* * *

It took us fifteen minutes to navigate the "downtown" of the village, which was littered with closed stores and gas stations. Still, I wasn't stuck listening to the silence of my family, and I think Huff was equally happy being away from his own. We sat on a curb near the convenience store, and Huff spread his arms.

"So that's it, all of Greencover, right here."

I nodded at the anti-climax, and Huff rested back on his palms. "If you don't mind me asking, what's the deal with your mom?"

I tightened and looked away, because this was the one area I

had already prepared the lie, without the need of my brother's assistance, even though he had offered: *No one wants to hear that she's loony, so tell them she's an artist or was a meth head. Or maybe she's a religious freak and believes she's in constant communication with God.* No, even I knew that an explanation would be required, and that I'd have to be the one to give it.

One day when I was a freshman, I came home from school and Scott was there, pacing and jumpy and all he could say was, "Mom lost her shit." I'd never seen this energy before, and just sat down for him to elaborate, to tell the story, like always. But he didn't. He sat with me and stared at the floor and waited for my dad to come back from the hospital.

My heart hammered with the importance of the answer to Huff's question, and I cleared my throat for #4: "She had an accident, about a year ago, fucked up her head."

"No shit?" Huff's voice was sympathetic.

"Yeah, and she's been spacey like that since. Doctors say she may not get better." And this was no lie, in spite of the cause, the effect was still the same.

"Fuck, like what happened?" Huff sat up and turned toward me.

I wished then that he hadn't asked, wished he'd let it go without needing the details. I didn't want to keep lying to him, but shit, I barely knew who he was, and if I was going to make something out of this move instead of slipping back into my former self...

The lie took some maneuvering, but worked free, #5: "Horse riding. That stupid shit women do over those fences." Huff nodded like he was filling in the image. "Horse got spooked and she got tossed. Hit a rock. Without the helmet...who knows?"

Huff was silent for a moment and I was able to gather myself and scramble for any follow up questions. Just in case I needed to paint details of our posh life in California that ran so counter to the Illinois existence after my mom had had a nervous breakdown.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, man, I didn't think. I shouldn't of asked like that..." Huff tripped over his tongue for words, but I let him off the hook and tipped some of the truth.

"Don't worry about it. If it wasn't for that she was headed for a breakdown. My dad worked crazy hours and my older brother was always getting into shit." I laughed to make it seem less severe, and at the thought of Scott being the culprit. If only the explanation were so easy, because the doctors had been zero help: *This just happens sometimes.*

Huff's expression remained. "You have a brother? Where's he?"

Again, I paused, but not because this was a lie I had to sell, but just a simple fact that felt like one. "We don't know."

Huff's brow wrinkled. "Really?" I nodded. "Huh, he must be some crazy motherfucker."

"That about sums him up."

After my dad set Scott straight, he kept his shit together for a while, but once mom was back home and on meds and talking to herself, and my dad was working double shifts to cover our asses, Scott was free, and he came and went as he pleased. Until six months ago, when my dad had to pick him up from the station.

It was over a stupid misdemeanor, him lying to the cop about why he was speeding, some concocted story the cop saw through, and as he'd dealt with Scott too often, decided he'd revise and stamp on a poignant ending.

Scott came through our door laughing, but my dad was pissed.

He'd missed a shift and I know was calculating the money lost and the fine for Scott's behavior. At the same time, my mom was as skittish as a traumatized dog. She couldn't sit, watch TV, read, or do anything for more than ten minutes at a time. So she was pacing when he entered and Scott just cruised past her like she was vapor. My dad punched the wall.

Scott turned, my mother froze, and I sank into the couch. "No one's laughing, Scott. Not me, not your mother, and certainly not you."

Scott stared at my father, and his face set to anger.

"I know I've said it before, but I'm done." My father rubbed sheet-rock off his hand and a few pebbles fell to the floor.

"With what, Dad?" The tone was there, his lying voice, as if he were trying to convince himself that he didn't know the answer to the question.

And I think the pitch is what set my father off, what propelled him across the room to Scott and to cinch his hands around Scott's collar and bring their bodies crashing against the wall.

"We're moving, and if you don't change, you're not coming with us."

My mother screeched, and my father released Scott and attended to her, where she was, in the corner, hands up around her face. Scott shook himself loose and then walked down the hall to his room.

Within a month he and his clothes were gone. The hole by the door remained, though, and did so even as we moved out.

I knew I had spaced out replaying the scene, but Huff just sat quietly. I nodded to myself and then spoke to him. "So what about you? What's the deal with Jamie?" I pointed back toward the café, which was as full as when we left. Nowhere else to go in such a small town, not too

unlike from home.

Huff pursed his lips and batted them with his fist. "So you've noticed, huh?"

"Yeah. How long you been into her?"

He looked back at the restaurant as if she were at the window. "Too long. Like fifth grade, maybe. I don't know."

I remembered my own fifth grade, and how on Valentine's Day, after receiving cards with xoxoxo written in bubbled purple and green ink, Scott had said, "Look, Brian, they're plotting, now, making you think they're interested. But you gotta do just the opposite, my man. You need to turn the table, flip the deception on them. That's the only way to win."

Here was Huff, hung up on one of those girls, and my crazy brother's advice had so much resonance. "You going to do anything about it, or..?"

He tilted his head and shook it gently. "No, that game's up. She's into different guys. At least from me." He smiled into his fist. "Shit, she'd probably go for you, what with your California roots."

I recoiled at first, surprised that he'd think of opening the door like that, but his face was soft in the same way he looked at Jamie, like a kid who'd lost something and had given up searching. He simply knew that it wasn't going to happen, and who the hell was I to judge it any differently? I'd known the kid for a week. He'd been sitting on this shit for years. I thought about being kind and patting Huff's back and making him feel better and talking about the fish in the sea and bullshit. The kind of nonsense I would have said were I living back in Illinois. But I considered the new me, the "Brian" I was creating. The California kid who'd gotten laid three times, who even though he had a broken mother and a workaholic father, and a brother so crazy he'd run off, was cool with it all. This Brian wasn't going to spew empty words. Hell, no. I was going to be

the second coming of Scott, the master of deception, the king of pranks, the one person in my family who actually felt alive. I knew what he would do, so I fell in step.

"You want me to go for it?"

Huff sat up, turned slowly and his eyes flashed a momentary anger that I'd seen so often in my brother. It was at once frightening and, yet, welcomed. Then his face fell gentle again, and when he spoke his voice was a whisper. "You mean, you thought I was serious?"

I shook my head. "No, not in that way. I feel you." I reached out and clasped his arm. "I'll convince her to want me, but then I'll flip the table and get her to want you." This was how I would make my mark here in Greencover and make people know who *I* was.

Huff looked down at his lap. "How the fuck can you do that?"

I inhaled all the bravado I needed to deliver the next lie, so much so that I believed it, #6: "You have no idea what I can do to a girl. My brother taught me."

Huff looked up and his face was earnest and hopeful, and I knew as desperate as I used to appear. He looked back at the café and then nodded once. "All right. Let's do this."

* * *

The pole lamp in the front yard and the blue television offered the only light from my house. I walked into a dark foyer and the sounds of football echoed from down the hall. I kicked off my shoes and forced myself down the hall to my father. He didn't notice me until I passed in front of the TV, and then he sat up and rubbed his face as if he'd been sleeping.

"Everything all right?" I sat on the love seat, and he lowered the volume.

"Yeah, fine. Just your mother was antsy waiting for you... and asking about Scott." He turned toward the stairs. "I had to help her settle."

"She sleeping now?" I looked in his direction and even in the dim light the bags beneath his eyes were monstrous. We didn't talk about Scott, the move, my mother. He just handled the baggage and I followed along.

His attention drifted back to the game, and I pressed my hands against the cushion to rise and leave, but he spoke again. "So how is Greencover? Find anything exciting to do? Anywhere to bring a date?"

I felt more propelled to head to my room, but something about his questions reminded me of those he had asked Scott, back when he was still home and speaking to them. This was my dad's way of connecting, thinking about me in terms of what Scott had wanted.

"Not much here, a couple of other diners and a small movie theatre." I shrugged. "There might be more, but Huff and I were on foot, you know?"

He nodded. "You'll be sixteen soon enough, but I doubt having a car will help much." He looked between the game and me. "What about that one waitress, though?"

I shook my head. "Huff's got a thing for her."

His laugh rocketed off the wall, and I cringed. "Least you found a friend who's got good taste."

"I guess." I waited for more, maybe for him to say something about the difference between back home versus here, possibly offer advice on what to do next, as he always did with Scott--not that he listened. But he seemed content on his couch, relocated from Illinois to New York, as if nothing had changed, just the backdrop. In a way, he was right, but it wasn't as if we'd merely left a setting behind. Scott was

the elephant. His presence had been with us at dinner, and had been with us during the packing and the trek across country. I needed to at least ask. "You heard from him?"

My father's throat bobbed, swallowing whatever he initially intended to say, and then he muted the television. The room fell into a disquieting wash of my mind humming, waiting for his answer. "Why would you ask that?"

I looked away. "I just figured, he might have tried. I mean, he knew we were moving." I kept my head down. "So if he calls now, he'll get forwarded to our new number, right?"

My father took a moment, pinched the bridge of his nose, and kept his fingers there while he spoke. "Your brother will find us if that's what he wants. But I think you and I both know that's not going to happen."

He didn't say any more and he didn't need to. My brother's departure was as sharp in my memory as the game was against the dark room.

* * *

For the next three weeks I methodically piqued Jamie's curiosity by calling on all the lessons Scott had left. That first Monday in home-room, after sharing tight glances with Huff, I made a point of stopping before her desk and looking her over. A girl like Jamie was used to the leering, but only when she approved, and as of yet, had not. She looked up with a mouth full of insults, but my own was getting so used to letting these lies drop that I dislodged whatever she was thinking by saying, #7: "That's a nice outfit. A lot of girls out in Cali wore that. Surprised you're so ahead of the trend." I skirted past her and settled into my desk. She didn't speak, but when she glanced at me in her compact, her mouth was slightly open, as was Huff's.

Another day I came in with a lipstick that went with her skin tone. She was pale like my mother, who had a plethora of beauty items she never used, I simply found one that had never been opened. I slid it on to Jamie's desk and said, "This is more flattering than the color you're wearing." She didn't touch it, and Huff looked at me as if I'd lost my mind, but the next day her lips were tinged with the shade. Huff whispered to me, "You're my fucking hero."

This insight came from my recollections of what my brother had muttered to himself, laughed about with his friends, or like with the valentines, told me directly. His voice propelled me and gave me the confidence--as with the initial lies--that I needed. Like him, I didn't falter, and soon his words certified Jamie's ripeness: *Make her ask you. Remember, turn those tables.*

We were maybe two months into school, and one day Jamie wasn't in homeroom. Huff kept looking to the door and sighing. I wasn't concerned, because I knew that after the day before, when she didn't pull her hand away as I held it and asked some bullshit question about biology homework, that it was only a matter of time. I'd penetrated her veneer, a place that in spite of all his years of effort, Huff had not been.

"Dude, I hope she's not sick. I feel like you're so getting there." Huff clenched his fists. "It would suck if this got derailed."

I smiled. "If she's sick, I'll bring her soup or flowers or, better, some chick-flick DVD."

His face spread as if I'd clarified, for once, how God truly operated. "Fuck, you're brilliant."

And part of me felt that way, because in no time, I had shaken loose the lame-ass kid that I was and had been reborn into the "California kid who was going to get Jamie." When the bell rang and she hadn't shown up, Huff and I grabbed our shit and headed toward class,

him asking me which movie I was going to buy.

Jamie was outside the room, standing against the lockers, her face set as if she was about to deliver a speech in class. Huff and I paused in front of her and she stared at me. "Friday night, you have any plans?"

I could feel Huff's breathing cease. Here it was, the open door. "No, nothing, I think. Why?"

She tilted her head and looked at the ground. "You want to catch a movie or something? Hang out?"

My heart hammered but I maintained composure and formed the answer. It got hitched on something inside that didn't want it out. Maybe it was how easily I'd gotten her to become interested. Or maybe it was the fact that she'd pursued me, just as Scott would have planned. But whatever it was, I pushed past and said, "Yes."

Jamie smiled and walked away. I knew we'd talk later, settle the details, but Huff wanted them immediately. "So what's the plan? What are you going to do? How are you going to get her to like me?" He was manic, hopping in place, and in spite of what I'd just accomplished, I wanted to slap him. Not for being a tool; he had every right to be excited, but because I was scared. Scott's wisdom and his swagger had gotten me this far, and from him I knew how to continue, but what I couldn't figure out was how in the hell I was going to produce a result opposite of the usual outcome. Without that I had no way of answering Huff, and no way of helping him. The goal was clear, but the course was anything but.

That night the house was dark, my father working late and my mother adrift somewhere. I lay on my bed and went through all of my accumulated wisdom from Scott, but could summon nothing to help me now. A knock sounded at my door and I sat up. At first I thought I was

imagining things, but it rapped again and I said, "Come in."

My mother entered, wispy and vacant, and hovered like a specter. I went to speak but held back. At times she would sleepwalk and have no recollection of our conversations. My dad always said to just leave her be, which he applied more broadly than to just her nighttime disturbance. She moved from the door to my bed and sat with her back to me, and when she spoke her voice was muffled. "Your father tells me you have a date."

I hesitated, but then moved closer. "Yeah. Friday."

She nodded and her stooped shoulders bent with the motion. "Well, you make sure you're nice to her. You make sure you hold the door and tell her how attractive she looks." She turned partway, peering at me over her shoulder. "You treat her like you know you should." I nodded because my throat felt too dry for words. She gazed at me for a long moment and then patted my head. "See, that's all I needed. Good boy, Scotty."

* * *

Friday night came and I dressed for my date, checking my appearance in the bathroom mirror far too many times. Scott's voice entered: *Look like you don't give a shit. It makes them insecure. Makes them think that you don't care about the date as much as they do.* I untucked my ironed button-down from my jeans and ran a hand over my head, messing my hair, which only brought my mother's appearance to the surface. I stuffed the advice and the image away and went to hit up my dad for cash.

"You think fifty'll be all right?"

"I don't know. Were going to the movies, probably get something to eat after."

"You think that will be enough?"

I looked away because I had no idea. I was still coming to grips with the reality that I was actually going through with this "date".

He laughed and patted my back. "I'll give you sixty because you never know."

I waved and took off to the theatre. The walk was only a mile, but in those steps my stomach knotted and I broke out in a sweat in spite of the cool October night. Who the fuck was I to think this would work? Honestly, what was I going to say that would rearrange Jamie's perception of Huff, who had tried and had failed for years to succeed similarly? But I knew he at least deserved a chance. He'd taken one on me and all I'd done was lie, even if it was with good reason. I had to make good on this, in order to make those lies all right.

I stopped and closed my eyes and waited for a message, a bit of wisdom from the ether of wherever my crazy-ass brother resided. Nothing came. Crickets chirped and the damp night descended around me. I was on my own, and felt very much like I'd only just arrived.

Jamie stood by the marquee, her long legs exposed under a short skirt, her top squished inside a tight jacket that accentuated her fine curves. I was titillated. Fuck, I was horny, but the knot tugged again, and I reached her with a split self. "Hey," I said, and she turned. Of course she was wearing the lipstick I'd given her, and of course she looked so striking I was stunned. This is what lying had gotten me. No wonder Scott was hooked.

Jamie looked me over with less enthusiasm, taking in my rumpled appearance, but she smiled and turned to the theatre. "Want to get some popcorn?"

"Sure." I stepped closer to her, and without knowing what I was doing, crooked my arm for her to slip in her own. I don't know if this was

advice from Scott or something of a response to my mother's request, but she laughed and slid her arm in and we went to the ticket booth. I paid and then she hungrily took the popcorn off my hands. She nibbled and the crowd bustled and it was everything I'd expected. Yet there in the back of my mind was not Scott, but the image of Huff, sitting with me, watching her. Jamie smoothed her skirt and looked at me and she was beautiful. Not hot. Not sexy. She was who Huff saw, the one he couldn't disguise his feelings for, and I knew, neither could I.

"Fuck me." The words fell out and I put a hand to my mouth.

"What did you say?" Jamie jutted her hip and her face flashed crimson.

I had no choice but to lie, because if she had heard, and wasn't pretending she hadn't, my plan had no chance. Therefore, as smooth as the lies had become, this one came out ragged, #8: "I said, 'You must be hungry.'"

She looked down at the bag and released the handful she was about to devour, and when she looked back up, a pout had replaced her smile. "Sorry. Here." She thrust the bag toward me, but I held my hands up.

"No, I'm good, don't want any."

She let the bag drop to her side, a shower of popcorn cascading. "What's up? You've got some fucked up vibe coming off you." She circled her hands in front of her, indicating my aura and spilling more popcorn.

My screen was gone, my costume ripped and the charade was over, no matter how many quick lines of Scott's I might have been able to recall. "Listen, I don't really want to be here." She opened up her mouth but I extended a hand to her lips. Touching them was more than I had anticipated. The softness of her skin and the cushion of her lips, even

the light dusting of salt was enticing, but I wasn't pretending anymore and continued. "It's not that you're not hot and I'm not interested, but really, it shouldn't be *me*, here."

Jamie's eyes pinched close together and I felt bad for what I had done. This wasn't how it was supposed to work. Or was it? Fuck if I knew. Scott's voice came to my rescue: *Just let her the fuck down. Period. Say your shit and go.* But something in the tone kept me from trusting it. The words felt hollow and meaningless.

I grabbed her hand like I had in homeroom, and this time meant it. "Jamie, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have given you the wrong idea. You should give Huff a chance."

Her entire face twisted into an ugly question. "What the fuck you talking about?" Jamie took a step back and looked around her, as if trying to find an escape route or someone she knew.

"Trust me, you're gorgeous, but really this has nothing to do with me." Her face matched the red carpet lining the foyer and I knew I had to cap the explosion if Huff was ever going to have a chance, if he'd ever still want to be my friend. And in that moment before I dropped the lie, it felt like the new me had died. I had had a chance with Jamie. She was actually on a date with me. Or, at least the person she thought I was. I could have abandoned the plan and gone for it. Because no, I'd never hit it. Hadn't even come close in my old town. But now? Now I had become someone. But who? Which was why I had to let him go, #9: "I think deep down you know you have feelings for Huff."

Jamie swiveled and pulled her hand back. "Are you for real?"

I ducked and nodded.

"You've got to be kidding me? Here I thought you were some freak hanging with Huff. And then you got kinda cool, so I thought, why not?" She laughed and then snapped her lips tight. Jamie took a step

toward me. "I gave you a chance. I should have known I was right, you're a fucking douche!" She threw the popcorn at my head and because of it, and because in that instant I closed my eyes and wished I were somewhere else, possibly back home, I never saw her leave.

I walked out soon after, though, and made my way over to Huff's, another mile. He answered the door, and in the background his family sat on the couch watching a movie and laughing. They paused it for him as he slipped out on to the porch with me.

"What's going on, I thought you were on your date?" His eyes bulged and he looked behind me, as if I'd brought her along.

"I was. It's over." I wanted to say more, to unburden all my secrets, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

"What do you mean?" He paused and a burst of joy crossed his face. "You fucked up that bad?" I nodded. "Shit, you have to tell me about it. What do I do next?"

I thought for a moment about what to say. A number of Scott phrases scrolled through, but more fully than before, I understood how self-serving they had always been, and I never again wanted to believe in their power. I didn't want to lie to Huff either, not any more. Come Monday, I knew Jamie was going to be talking and that I'd have to keep lying to thwart the question: *What the fuck was he thinking?* I also knew, possibly as my brother had, that in time the lies would catch up and Huff would come to know the truth, and our friendship would be over. There was no other possible end. I'd become my brother, but in at least one regard, it wasn't too late. I clenched Huff's arm and the final lie was for him as much as it was for me, #10: "Just be yourself, it'll work out fine."

I turned away and Huff called to me a few times, asked what the fuck I meant, and other questions I can't remember, or don't want to, because I didn't have the answers then, and I don't now. I walked on,

through the dark autumn evening, cursing my brother and myself and feeling rooted with each step, so much so, that by the time I got to my door, I was barely able to recognize my home.

Eric Devine is a high school English teacher and Young Adult fiction writer from upstate New York. He has published one novel, This Side of Normal, and two short stories. His agent with the Howard Morhaim Literary Agency is currently seeking publication of his second manuscript. His submission, "Rooted in Lies", speaks to the universal element of being an adolescent and the overwhelming need to fit in, regardless of the cost.

E.A. Irwin

My Dearest Reginald

My Dearest Reginald,

It has come to my attention I will be dead within the next twenty-four hours. Obviously it is not a very positive thing to dwell on, yet there it is. You have always prided me on my ability to accept situations that are stressful and unbelievably difficult. I thank you for that since the trait may come in handy, although I think I may have found my undoing with this little tragedy.

Today, I visited a psychologist to work through all of the emotions this diagnosis has dumped on me as if I were a refuse pile waiting for another load; similar to the way you handled your life and unloaded on me. However, knowing your depth of caring, I thought you might be interested in the doctor's good thoughts regarding this trifling obstruction to happily-ever-after. His suggestion was that I write this letter, explaining my feelings for you and voicing any concerns or regrets I may have had throughout our marriage. So, once I am deceased, passed away, crossed over--any of the tactful euphemisms used to describe the dearly departed (actually I prefer the word dead)--you will finally know a few of my most deeply felt moments. Please forgive my reticence in sharing these last few oddities, but you must understand this whole dying scenario is really putting a crimp in my day. I was scheduled for a facial, but alas that foray into vanity doesn't seem important now.

First, well, I suppose I love you. If I haven't told you enough, I am sorry. Though I must admit my little tête-à-tête with the good doctor revealed this to be merely an infinitesimal regret. Honestly, I have tried to be the best wife possible considering your lackluster way of showing

emotions and blinding dedication to your ego. In addition, there is the fact you have had a mistress for most of our marriage. Long ago I gave up trying to muster any bit of anger at her interference in our lives; however, I finally came to the conclusion I was only mystified it had taken me this long to admit I didn't care.

Perhaps this working-through-the-dying routine is adding encouragement to my otherwise lifeless day. I am beginning to understand why all of those people leave letters when they end their lives, not that I'll get that chance since my demise is already pre-ordained. But the act of relating my concerns has become quite freeing. Nevertheless, silly me, I was talking about my feelings for you.

There are so many emotions I'm struggling with, many of which I'm not sure I want to leave in a letter for just anyone to find. Suffice it to say-- most are not good. Take for example the time you gambled away our life savings and Father had to rescue us from your stupidity ... and the Mafia, for pity's sake, as they laid claim to my country estate. Reginald, I never relished being a character in a Dickens novel. What made you think I would enjoy a pauper's prison? Moreover, did you really think you would get away with giving your mistress my jewelry in order to hide your pitiful assets? You've been very naughty, Reginald. Very naughty indeed.

I do remember, with a certain sort of fondness only familiarity breeds, when you thought you had discovered an enchanting new way to enhance your appearance. I never had the heart, or interest, to explain to you that your toupée and mustache reminded me of Hitler at his worst. No, I allowed you to continually sport that image, not desiring to damage your delicate psyche in your search for perfection. Frankly, I was hoping the trollop you slept with would rip it from your head during what I can only imagine would have been boisterous sex. Alas, I failed you in this, another thing for which I apologize.

My dear, there are so many of these tidbits of married life of which I have grown fond, though none can quite be compared to your incessant whining and backstabbing nature. Each day found me listening to the voices in my head rather than the tripe you felt the need to deliver in high-pitched squeals lobbed at me, sounding rather similar to your cats in heat serenading me beneath my bedroom window. At least their calls promised action on their parts — which I supposed you accomplished as well, with your dominatrix. Yes, I languished in that serene place you could never enter, a place so far removed from your insolence and childish ways. This is where I found true wedded bliss and felt I had been crowned Queen of a new Reginald-free realm.

I shall close now, my sweet Reginald, for time grows short, like your stature. Life with you has been mundane and ordinary, elements of which I cannot forget despite my imminent demise. I do not regret most of my lifetime with you, or many of the circumstances by which you constantly embarrassed yourself, since I deemed you invisible long ago. That, in itself, would be a righteous punishment for your distressingly boring existence were it not for this one last concern.

My greatest regret in all of this is that I will not be able to see your face as you are murdered. When you least expect it, someone will be there to do the deed, compliments of your now depleted trust fund. My dearest Reginald, did you think I was never going to exact my revenge on you?

I leave you with these moments of my life culled from my last dying wish.

Affectionately,

Cecily

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David Copper

Into the Unblinking Eye

Whitfield manor was empty and uncomfortably quiet. The rumble of dark brown bodies – bustling, fumbling, fussing, slipping into creaky corners to evade the glare of young Master Whitfield – had receded long enough to grant Tillie a long-desired moment of repose between laundry and the preparation of supper. But something was wrong: the door to Young Master Whitfield's bedroom was ajar and a sudden thud inside snapped Tillie into wide-eyed alertness. Seconds later, Abbey, Tillie's nine-year-old niece, scampered out, a pint-sized tornado of lead-heavy breaths and incriminating tears.

"I didn't meant to – I didn't do nothing – I..." Abbey gulped.

"Chile, you gave me a start! What was you doin' in Master Whitfield's bedroom?"

"Huh?"

"Don't play games with me, chile! What was you doin' in there?" Tillie asked.

"In there? I wasn't in there."

Tillie stooped to meet the child's darting eyes.

"Now I done told you this before, and if you ain't got the sense to heed my words, then maybe you better off dealing with Master Whitfield directly."

"No, please, Aunt Tillie! No!"

"Well, that's where you headed next time I catch you duckin' into doorways that ain't for you to duck into. You hear me?"

Abbey's reply was a blur of obliging nods.

"Now get on outta' here!" Tillie said with a slap. As the child dashed off, Tillie poked her head inside the bedroom and scanned the scene for damage. The lushly adorned four-poster bed remained intact and stately as ever; the pinstriped painted walls retained their haunted shimmer. But the painting, a framed portrait of Benjamin Whitfield the second, had slipped from the wall and found an unflattering home of the hardwood floor, rendering the proud founder of Whitfield manor humbled, disgraced, horizontal.

Tillie inched forward and inspected every edge, every ornate curl, every corner for chips, for dents, for anything likely to send Young Master Whitfield into a fury. She found nothing, which meant she could breathe again. But as she rose to restore the founder's frame to his rightful place of altitude, she saw something in the wall, something the painting had been concealing: a crack -- or really, an opening, an invitation.

With one tug, Tillie popped the doors open to reveal something that yanked from her lungs a gasp.

It was like a giant, unblinking eye, its sinister glare slightly muted by its dull gray hue. She stared back at it, trembling and poised for retreat. But soon she dared to touch this monstrous thing, sweeping her hand across its cold, hard, glassy face, poking, pressing, tracing the surface's smooth exterior with a curious finger.

Then Tillie pressed the blue button on the lower left side, and this sleeping monster roared itself awake and jolted her to the floor.

So if you like beer, make it a Heindschmidt! it screamed, dancing with a violent streak of strange bodies and bold colors, until this angry storm surrendered to silence and black. But there was more. She saw a couple – smiling white folks – strolling hand-in-hand on a beach, as a voice that must have belonged to God Himself instructed them – or maybe her, or maybe all living creatures – to ask their doctor if Rebutar is

right for them.

Then she saw colored folks, entwined in satanic tumult, shaking and bending and curling their bronze bodies, perhaps seeking escape from the oppression of the heavy chains on their necks and arms.

Then she saw beautiful ladies and handsome men with bone-white teeth and flawless posture stand and shout at a giant dollar sign.

She saw the deranged, cackling, screaming, grinning, sputtering, wailing faces of folks from some seemingly faraway land.

She saw broad-grinning people – both colored and white – floating across the highways and byways of this distant land in giant eyeless wheeled beasts.

She peered into this unblinking eye and saw both kindness and unspeakable savagery. She saw the soft promise of unfettered glee, a world well beyond the horizon of nothing surrounding Whitfield manor. And she had seen enough.

So she scrambled to her feet to bind back this nightmare, slapping the unblinking eye, clawing it, prodding it, and finally pressing the blue button that had sparked this demon to life. Then it was dead. Or maybe just resting. Either way she could leave now; she could close those devilish doors, replace the framed painting of Whitfield manor's majestic founder, and ease back into her life, never daring to share the visions she had somehow survived.

* * *

On Sundays the family would gather as one – Young master Whitfield, his daughter Emily, Topsie, Hester, Janie, James and Little Abbey – in a makeshift church service beneath the big shade tree out front. With reddened eyes and raspy voice, Tillie, unable to break the spell of that unblinking eye, feigned illness and stayed behind.

She crept inside Young Master Whitfield's bedroom as she had before, unpeeling the cover of the eye's hidden cage and unleashing the demon-fuelled onrush with a tentative touch of that infernal blue button. But this onrush was quieter, simple, serene.

Tillie crouched in suspenseful silence as a well-dressed lady spoke in staccato chirps to a handsome man with false hair:

-- could be a problem if it doesn't get any Republican support in the house. Tyka from Monroe Louisiana, you're on the air with Nebraska Senator Frank Houseman. Go ahead with your question, please.

The disembodied voice of the almighty revealed itself once more, but this time in a softer, more matronly timbre that demanded to know what Abraham Lincoln would think of the recent developments in congress if he were alive to witness them. God also wanted to give a shout-out to all the girls at Clip City hair salon.

In the midst of the Senator's modest reply to The Lord God, Tillie's eyes shifted to a tiny black rectangle next to the unblinking eye. This sharp shiny piece of satanic handiwork opened into a mélange of meaningless numbers, dashes and symbols. It whistled in disapproval when she pressed a few buttons, but by then her eyes and ears had returned to the man with false hair:

-- well, you have to consider that it has now been nearly a hundred and fifty years since Lincoln freed the slaves and --

"Freed the slaves?!" Tillie chuckled aloud. "These people is outta' they minds!" Then she watched a fat white child eat a burger given to him by a dancing clown.

* * *

Isolation was the key. This was how Whitfield manor had retained its fruitful plantation, its proud family history through the late nineteenth

and twentieth century. This is how it had survived the Northern aggression and its sad aftermath. Isolation.

The Union soldiers first strode through in December of 1865 – proudly, gallantly, with the smug scent of victory fresh on their faces – to liberate Whitfield manor. The slaves were gathered and stashed in a pantry room, told they'd face the fires of Hades should these horse-mounted marauders discover them. They huddled in frightened silence for hours, nearly days, at a time. Then the manor was packed and moved to a tiny but fertile patch of hope, a promising field of cotton in the midst of an otherwise desolate landscape in Western Texas. There were no neighbors to meddle in the idyllic affairs inside, no interruptions from its path of prideful continuity. All matters – prayer, medicine, food – were family affairs, unpolluted by outside influence.

And in this way Whitfield manor remained forever plunged in the mid-nineteenth century, always teetering on the precipice of modernity, threatening to crawl toward emancipation, toward a world just beyond its broad borders, but never quite getting there.

* * *

For seventeen Sundays in a row Tillie would claim to take ill, falsely reddening her eyes with olive oil and swallowing salt to produce a chest-rattling cough and reed-thin rasp. They all found it odd, but so long as she returned to her feet by Monday morning nobody made much fuss.

She spent hours drinking in these wild visitations; they frightened, baffled and dazzled her. And in time she concluded these images that flowed from the giant glassy monster were more than a senseless blur of stormy visions. She had, at long last, seen the land beyond Whitfield manor, and she would soon take her place in this luminous land, riding a giant wheeled beast of her own into the grass-covered fields of liberty.

* * *

It was an early autumn day like any other. Tillie stood frozen at the well, taking in the panorama she had seen a thousand times before: coffee-colored bodies, peppered with sweat, laboring under the punishing sun; Young Master Whitfield scowling, stalking the grounds for something to grumble about; Abbey and Emily ducking under the shade tree with a tiny secret in a basket.

But today she saw something different. She saw the strained faces of people and things she would miss. For on this early autumn day it suddenly seemed possible that she could run, that she could slip free from the yoke of Whitfield manor and bolt toward the life beyond its boundaries.

The voices – now haunting her waking hours as well as her dreams – had beckoned her with the polyphony of shrieks:

Drive it home today for no money down!

Dy-no-mite!

Finger licking good!

Holla back, yo!

Aw, Mom!

The gentleman from Iowa yields the remainder of his time!

Straight from the oven!

Your dog will love it!

The time is now!

Let freedom ring!

So she ran. She ran as Young Master Whitfield drifted into his afternoon nap, her limbs locked into musical motion, head tucked to chin,

wind whistling past her, steps so impossibly light she could barely hear them herself. He would wake soon – never one to let a runaway slip past his net. But she'd be miles beyond him by then. She would be free.

But where was this freedom? Ahead she saw nothing but more earth, growing a brighter gold with each breathless step. And the voices grew weaker, less encouraging, suddenly limp. She tumbled to a surrender, depleted. She rose and saw something ahead. It was a formless lump, but it would grow if she moved toward it, so she motored herself into motion. But she made the mistake of looking back as well, and the lump behind her was not without form; it was Young Master Whitfield, determined grimace in place, growing in size, in menace, with every stride.

This was a footrace she had endeavored to win. Her arms circled wildly, lacking the grace of her earlier gait, but propelling the lump into clarity and increasing the land between her and her pursuer. Upon approach the lump would become a giant wheeled beast, like the kind she had seen on the unblinking eye. It grazed on a small stretch of grass, its hand-holding owners entranced in a lover's stroll nearby, leaving the door open, and why not? A gaze behind revealed a winded and suddenly stationary figure, hands on his knees, open mouth sucking in air, eyes slammed angrily shut.

She raced to the beast, mounting it from the inside, as she had seen demonstrated so many times before. She was free at last. She could breathe again.

But the beast wouldn't wake up. She slapped at the dashboard, the ceiling, the steering wheel, but the giant steel-skinned behemoth wouldn't rise from its slumber, wouldn't gallop away into the horizon as it was supposed to. She was frozen, motionless, stunned. She didn't cry because she couldn't summon the energy. She was dead on the inside.

Then she felt a yank from beyond. A cement-hard hand had

punched inside and pulled her out by the hair.

"Where the hell you think you're headed to, Goddamnit!" Young Master Witfield snorted.

"I'm sorry, I just –" she shrieked

"You get your tail back home! Come on!"

She punched, clawed, kicked, scratched and poked as he scraped her flailing body along the sun-parched earth. He was angry but calm. He was back in control. And she was property once more. But she fought him, leaving a trail of bitterly kicked up dust all the way back to Whitfield manor. She knew it would not be a happy homecoming.

She would have to be whipped. No one said this upon her return, no one had to. Her naked body would have to be stretched across the back of the shed and lashed into quiet compliance. She stood up on wobbly knees, hobbled to the shed, defeated. Heads shook in disbelief, discomforted eyes fell to the ground. Abbey dashed inside with a fury that seemed almost urgent. Young Master Whitfield boasted the only smiling face, his brick-like jaw twitching in anticipation.

"You have betrayed me, Tillie. You have betrayed the Whitfield family," he said. "And for that you must atone."

"I'm sorry Master Whitfield," she offered. "I don't know what come over me, sir."

"Sorry," he repeated. "Sorry!"

He paced, poised with the whip. Such occasions evoked the performer in him.

"You, my dear, have only just begun to feel sorrow. And it shall be doled out with a generous helping of shame!"

He held the whip steady, angled at his side, but he drew in a

sharp inhale that puzzled Tillie. No movement-- only a cat-like squeal from the distance, creeping closer. Soon it was too loud, this spine-seeking caterwaul, this siren. The whip fell from Whitfield's hand and his arms arched skyward as two black and white cars, driven by uniformed men approached. They stepped out and drew guns.

"Jesus eff-in Christ," one of them said.

Then every eye followed a bang at the back door and Abbey bounded through, limbs and shoulders shuddering. In her shaky hand was the tiny magic rectangle, flopping like a fish plucked from a watery home and soon slipping free to a grassy patch below. Collapsing into her aunt's arms, Abbey's face stiffened into a mask – mouth rigidly agape, eyebrows seemingly frozen into a permanent lift. It was the mask of someone who had just achieved the impossible, someone who had done something braver and harder than dialing three numbers and crying for help.

"Did I do right, Aunt Tillie?" she sobbed.

"You did just fine, chile. You did just fine."

"So what happens now?" The child retorted.

"Guess we'll just have to hold tight and find out, won't we?"

The siren's screech was gone now, but somehow its lingering echoes still urged aunt and niece alike into a mess of trembles and tears. The piercing cat-like wail had startled them, but there was more. The siren was also the loud angry clank of an iron gate unlocking, releasing them into a freedom of foggy and shadow-cloaked roads that could possibly lead to the bright beaming vistas they'd spied from afar, or could possibly just leave them lost.

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Note for the Bright Star

Fred Chandler, editor of the weekly and only newspaper in Quipilanta, *The Bright Star*, enjoyed looking out one side of his shop window the day the issue was printed. He'd already placed the front page in the window and watched early risers stop to look at the page, read some of the items on the page, and pass on. A few other shop owners, real early risers like he was on most days, with a lantern to guide them to their work place, read the page under the light of the lantern, swinging their lanterns to assist in their reading. The lanterns threw soft shadows into his editorial office. The lighting activity was, he had decided early in the career of the paper, a significant part of issue day.

Also in the window this day, in the other corner from the front page, was a personal note, the first one Chandler as an editor had ever posted. The note said, in an elegant hand, "Will, if you're alive, I'll be in Boston. You know where. I'll love you forever. Shirley Grace."

The editor went back in his mind into the quick history of the note.

A beautiful young woman, Shirley Grace Hazelton, married not yet a whole year and newly located here with her husband, an adventurous sort, had handed the note to the sheriff, Tim Caswell, and explained its creation.

"They were renegade whites and Indians," she said, "that hit our place. Will was hunting, gone most of the morning. They invaded the house, grabbed me and tied me on a horse. We were riding on the Quipilanta Trail and suddenly there was shooting. It might have been my husband Will. My horse was hit and went down the ravine. The rope broke free and I fell behind a rock. A prospector found me wandering a whole day later and ministered to me for over two months, in the back part of his mine, and protecting me, before he brought me here to town.

My husband, I firmly believe, is out there looking for me. Maybe they caught him too. I don't know, but it's been five months and no word. I'm going back home to Massachusetts. Please keep this note posted on your office door and in the window of the newspaper. Have the editor print it too every once in a while. I'll send money for it. Will may be dead, or he may still be alive. I'll be praying for him. Tell him, if he comes in, I'll be in Boston."

She had taken the afternoon stage to connect with the railroad in Carver City, heading back to her family in Boston. Both Chandler and Caswell had seen her off, saying they'd do their best to keep the word alive and available for Will if he ever showed up in town. Silently she had hugged both men, hope and thanks intended in her gesture.

Caswell said to the editor, after the stage had departed, "Those were the saddest eyes I've ever seen on a woman, Fred. I swear, the saddest. But I don't hold much stock in her husband getting back here again. If he was okay and fixed on getting back here, he'd have done it by now. The odds are too much against him and her, but if I was a betting man, I'd hold out for her doing well in life despite how this may turn out for her husband."

They stood in the dusty street of town as the stage disappeared in a swirling cloud out on the trail, two men looking at the same incident from two angles. The sheriff had seen many harsh revelations on his job, the worst thing possible happening in too many cases. The editor, on the other hand, was thinking that somewhere down the line he could write a happy ending to the note on the window of *The Bright Star*. It would be true justice, true melodrama, and yet a kind of fairy tale. He realized that last point as the stage was seen no more.

In the following weeks, Sheriff Tim Caswell was searching for the small band of renegades that had hit the Hazelton place and had continued their raids, with robbery and kidnapping of women as their chief aims. Two more small ranches on the far side of the river, one upriver and

the other downriver, had been hit by the renegades. One of the women was missing, the other had hidden in a drop-down her husband had dug under the barn floor and escaped her possible kidnapers.

Caswell's posse had scoured the two areas and found all kinds of tracks leading every which way, telling him the renegades knew they'd be tracked at first by the sheriff and his deputies and had purposely put off their trackers. Caswell also realized that at least some of the band were men that came into Quipilanta on occasion, men he invariably had seen in town. It severely bothered him he might have put out his hands a few times and grabbed some of the band.

The thought made him formulate a plan, realizing the "cowards and skunks that they are," who hide themselves, become someone else when they visit the town, come into the saloon or the general store, possibly even walk into his office once in a while. It also bothered him that a few of the drunks he'd locked up after an occasional Saturday night free-for-all might have been renegade members.

He approached The Bright Star editor to enlist his help in the plan. "Fred," he said one night at the end of the bar in the saloon, "I'd like to shake some things loose in this gang of cutthroats we got in the area. I can't get the idea of Ella May Swenson out of my mind since she went missing. I just feel she's been taken off by them and is suffering who knows what up there in the rocks and the high canyons of the mountains. We probably haven't scoured a tenth of the possible areas where they've got a hiding roost."

"What do you want me to do, Tim? You name it. I keep thinking about that look on Shirley Hazelton's face when she left town. It haunts me yet, and now I see Alan Swenson every time he comes to town with that haunted look on his face. I know he's been weeks up there in the mountains looking for his wife and hasn't seen hide nor hair of her or any of those cowards. I heard he sat at one place on a mountain trail for a whole week swearing they'd have to come by him and he'd trail them

to find his wife. Man looks half dead when he comes in for a rest and to stock up again."

"They're outright cowards and skunks, Fred, but they got to have feelings somehow, at least one of them. We've got to get that one break and shake one of them loose. Let's make it a high public thing, the rats and cowards that they really are, and shake it right out in the open, maybe break down the one weak link we're looking for. You write it up in the paper every issue and I'll shout it out every chance I get." He paused in his delivery, as he thought of the hours that faced him out on the trails searching for clues, whereabouts. "I'll start tonight in the saloon. I just hope I can get my feelings into it as clear as I'm feeling right now."

In the saloon that night, Saturday to make it special, the sheriff shared a place at the end of the bar with a few cowhands. Before he could break into some sort of arranged tirade against "cowards and skunks that might live among us," Chandler walked in and was asked in a loud voice from a corner table, "Hey, Fred, some of us was wondering why you named your newspaper The Bright Star. Seems like an odd name for a cow town newspaper. We was talking about just this minute, and here you are."

Chandler stepped right into the breach of the sheriff's plot to shake things loose. "I'll be glad to fill you in on that. On my way here, to do what I was not sure of, becoming a cowboy, do some mining, maybe start a newspaper in some nice little town. One of the last nights on the trail, out in the open, near midnight, I saw the brightest star I had seen in years. It sat out over this area where I knew the next town was, Quipilanta. That star just grabbed me with its splendor, its majesty, its lone beauty. It brought the idea of a newspaper into my mind to extol the beauty of a place like Quipilanta, to let everybody who'd read my newspaper know what a lovely little cow town I had found for my future, and a place to start a newspaper."

He shook his head at that last part even as many in the audience

were nodding in confirmation of his speech.

There was a silence at his pause, the roomful of men waiting for him to continue.

Sheriff Tim Caswell, still at the end of the bar, stepped into the silence. "Well, Fred, I guess you didn't know how damned wrong you were with those thoughts of yours about this nice little town as you called it. What do you really say about this place now, about what might be living here among us citizens of Quipilanta, who might be sharing space with us some days and some nights, just like tonight for that matter."

He swung his gaze around the room, let it rest now and then, not on individuals, but on clustered men at tables. "What comes to mind now, Fred? You got some more explaining you'd like to drop on these folk right now? You have some real stuff to chew on, but only for the able men among us, not for those hiding behind a mask of sorts."

Chandler, feeling the sudden change in the air, the abrupt tenseness that the sheriff had caused, said, "How right you are, Sheriff, now that among us live or spend time with us, a scurvy bunch of cowards and outright skunks, those bandits that are hitting lone houses where only the women are at home, only them able to fight back. It's amazing how most times these scurvy cowards know when the men folk are out and about their work, herding or driving or hunting or catching up strays. That says they have spies among us who hear of plans or see opportunities they're looking for and advise their cowardly and scurvy comrades that a raid is in order. Isn't that the height of cowardice so gross that when a man dies with that on his soul, the evil Satan sits waiting for him to come down among his kind?"

The charge was like lightning loose on the grass.

The Bright Star editor ran right into his next thought and said, "The day that Shirley Hazelton left town to go back to her folks in Boston, and her husband maybe looking for her for months out there, or being plain all-out dead, was one of the saddest things I've ever seen. We've never

had a single word about Hazelton, not a good word or a bad word to send back to his wife in Boston about him. That's horror enough for a lady, except when I see Al Swenson come in from another leg of his search and think of his wife out there with those skunks and cowards and wonder what she's going through. Tell me what a good old town Quipilanta is, go ahead, I dare you. None of you have the guts. And I'm convinced there are a few scurvy cowards wearing a different face sitting right here now, trying to pry information loose about when the next gent might leave his wife alone so the house can be robbed and she can be grabbed. Look at your neighbors, look at those at the table where you're sitting now. Is there anyone there you wouldn't trust your life with out on the trail, wouldn't trust your wife with, or your daughter?"

That was like Thor's hammer had slammed into the middle of the room. Righteousness had certain ways of being recognized

He paused once more, the silence sitting in the room like a tornado waiting to bust loose.

Not a soul in the room said a word, though chairs shifted and creaked under moving weights and the shuffle of boots swept across the floor like a single broom was working the sawdust into place. The sheriff and the newspaper editor left the saloon together, stares following them, measurements being made, assessments working in the spirits of good men, and guilt starting to work, perhaps, in the innards of a few bad apples poisoning the room.

Oh, there was talk after the pair left, noise, braggadocio, exclamations, denials, and a rustle of discomfort sitting like a pall over the whole saloon. Certain fears were loosed that day in the saloon by the sheriff and the newspaper editor.

And word spread around town in a hurry.

For all that matter, Quipilanta was quiet for more than a week. It was not another raid that broke the silence, but another note, not to the editor of The Bright Star, but to the sheriff. It came under his door in the

dark of night. The hand was crude but legible and simply said, "Swenson's wife and that lady's husband are working as captives up in Davidio Canyon. They ain't the only ones. Look for a tight passage way past the end of the canyon to the other side of the mountain. Two lookouts always watch from the high trail. They sleep a lot."

A righteous posse of townsmen, all volunteers for the "crusade" as the sheriff called it, was led by Caswell into the sly exit from Davidio Canyon to the site of the bandits' lair. It was a cakewalk unnoticed by posted lookouts, and both Al Swenson's wife and Shirley Hazelton's husband were freed from the captive torments, both hurting but alive. Two other kidnapped "slaves", both women, were freed at the same time. Six captured men were hanged after a quick trial where the "captives" were the chief witnesses for the prosecution. It was a thirty minute trial.

And it was Fred Chandler, editor of The Bright Star, Quipilanta's lone newspaper, who sent off a telegram to Shirley Grace Hazelton in Boston, saying, "Do you come here to greet your husband or do we send him off to you."

All of Quipilanta, seeing the telegram now sitting in the window of The Bright Star as a second note, waited for the reply.

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Scattershot

David pushed the side door open with his heel, leaving his arms free to cradle the vegetables for tonight's dinner—freshly unearthed Yukon Gold potatoes, beets just for Sally (no one else liked them), tomatoes, cucumbers, and a solitary green pepper.

Saturday was David's day to prepare dinner, and it gave him a caveman-like sense of satisfaction to have grown most of the meal's ingredients himself. True, the lamb came from Whole Foods, but he'd cook it on an open fire—well, actually on a Weber stainless steel gas grill, which was almost as good. It still made him feel self-sufficient.

He was washing the vegetables, somewhat more cursorily than if Sally had been there to supervise, when he heard the noise—a kind of metallic ping. He couldn't quite place it, neither its nature nor its location, and went back to washing. He was wiping his hands on his already soiled khakis when he heard the second ping. The living room. Definitely the living room. He went to investigate but found nothing amiss. Then, just as he was leaving the room, he heard the sound again, and his eye caught some motion, a tiny piece of glass flying into the wall and falling to the floor. He picked it up and turned it around. He saw holes in three of the foot-square panes that made up the living room windows.

David went outside and looked around. Nothing. The suburban street, a little too old and a little too expensive to qualify as a development, was quieter than usual, probably because the temperature was well into the nineties.

Back inside he examined the living room again, and that's when he found the tiny pellet. A BB. At least, he assumed that's what it was. He'd never owned a BB gun himself. He continued searching and soon

found a second, but not the third.

Who would shoot out my windows with a BB gun, he wondered. Maybe *shoot out* was too strong a phrase. The windows were still there, although they'd have to be replaced.

Should he call the police? Not exactly a serious crime, but this was Maplewood, not Newark, and these things weren't supposed to happen here. He had time to call. Sally and Laura were at the mall, probably wouldn't be back for an hour or more, and Sean was off playing video games with his friends. So he made the call, apologizing to the dispatcher for bothering her about something so minor.

The officer who rang the bell thirty minutes later, Liz Cortez, was surprisingly young and pretty, so much so that David had to force himself to take her seriously. He walked her into the living room, showed her the windows and the two BBs he'd recovered. "Too big for BBs," she said. "They're metal pellets from one of your more powerful air guns." David shrugged. What difference did it make?

She began writing up a report, which should have been pretty simple, but it took forever to get the details on paper.

"Sir, may I ask who lives here with you?" When David told her, she asked the kids' ages. "Laura is sixteen, Sean is fourteen."

"They have any fights or arguments with their friends? Maybe your daughter broke up with her boyfriend?"

David thought about it. He had taken the kids out to dinner Thursday as he did every week while Sally went to her class, some adult-ed thing on art appreciation. He tried asking about their lives, but as usual, Sean answered in monosyllables, and Laura acted as though he were prying. He'd been closer to them when they were younger, and he wasn't really sure when or why the relationship had become more distant. They're teenagers, Sally would say. Don't take it personally.

He told Cortez that he wasn't aware of anything in the kids' lives that would explain the windows.

"Are they around, sir? Can I have a word with them?"

David told her everyone was out but that he would ask if they had any ideas. He bristled a little when she suggested it was sometimes better if an outsider did the questioning. David didn't like the word *questioning*, and he was getting annoyed with all the "sirs."

"I'll talk to them," he said. "If there's anything, I'll give you a call. I probably shouldn't have bothered you with this."

"No, sir, you did the right thing. Let us know if they have any ideas, and be sure and ask your wife, too."

As soon as he closed the door, giving it a harder push than necessary, David began berating himself. It'd been a waste of time to call the police.

* * *

David rushed about the kitchen, looking for the right casserole dish or the right utensil as he assembled the lamb chops, baked potatoes, salad, and of course the beets. Sally stood to the side watching, her offer of help having been rebuffed. He liked to do it himself, even if after eight years in the rambling colonial, he still hadn't caught on to how she organized the kitchen.

"Don't we have any red wine vinegar?"

"Top shelf, on the left."

"I thought there was still some fresh marjoram."

"No, but you can use oregano. It's almost the same."

Damn. He hated using substitutes.

"David, is something wrong?"

"No, just trying to get it all done at the same time." He had decided to wait and tell the whole family about the trouble over dinner, as casually as he could, though he felt guilty about evading Sally's question and a little afraid it would provoke still another discussion about communication and what she saw as his tendency to leave her out of decisions. They were going through one of those periods when it seemed important for Sally to reexamine every aspect of their relationship. He thought they were doing just fine, at least as well as any couple nearing their twentieth anniversary.

As a peace offering, he stopped chopping and gave her a hug and a kiss on her forehead. "How was your afternoon?" he asked. "Buy anything?"

Sally sighed and turned to start setting the table. "I'll show you later—if you remember to act interested."

Once everyone was seated and the food had been passed around, David spoke up.

"Had some excitement while you guys were out," he said. Sally and Laura looked up expectantly. Sean kept eating. "Someone shot a few air gun pellets into the living room windows."

"What do you mean?" asked Sally.

"Probably just some kid having a good time."

They got up and rushed to the living room.

"The food will get cold," he called after them, but they seemed in no hurry and eventually he had to go and retrieve them.

"Did you call the police?" Sally asked.

He told them about it. Sean, now fully engaged, asked a lot of questions in rapid succession, clearly disappointed he'd missed the excitement.

"Are the police going to set up a patrol?"

"Sean, it's not that serious."

"Can I help you catch 'em, Dad? I could put up my tent on the side of the house and sleep outside tonight."

"Thanks, Sean, but I don't think we need to do anything rash."

"What if they try again and use real bullets."

"I don't think that's going to happen, and if it does, we'll let the police handle it."

"You always say they're useless."

Laura gave her big-sister sigh. "Sean, stop being such a *kid*."

"Who asked you?"

"That's enough, guys," David said, a little more firmly than he intended. "Laura, he's just trying to help."

Laura sighed again and after a pause, David asked her the question Cortez had posed about a jilted suitor.

"No, Dad. I've been going with Steven so long no one else even asks me out anymore."

With that, David resumed eating, but no one else had much of an appetite. Sally didn't even finish her beets, and Sean couldn't stop planning long enough to eat anything.

"Dad, we could go to the surplus store and see if they have any of those night goggles they use in Iraq."

Sally laughed and David gave her a stern look, which seemed to end the conversation, as well as dinner. He remembered when Sean was much younger and had become enthralled with toy soldiers, spending hours planning and executing mock attacks. Sally hadn't understood

Sean's interest in that, either.

That night, after Steven picked up Laura, and Sean went out with some friends, Sally asked David if he was more worried than he let on. "I really don't think it's anything, and the police certainly weren't concerned." But as they watched TV, Sally noticed at each commercial David went to the living room and looked at the windows.

* * *

Over the next few days, David spent more time outdoors than usual, even taking nightly walks. Sean kept asking him if he was standing guard, and it annoyed him that his excuses about getting a little air and exercise were so transparent. He let the week pass without repairing the windows, telling himself he was busy when he was actually waiting to see if there would be another attack. No, *attack* was the wrong word. *Incident*.

On Saturday morning, he decided he'd waited long enough, and he reluctantly confronted the windows. It was the kind of job he hated because he never got it quite right. Never knew just how to measure the glass to order a replacement, and his caulking was always sloppy. He liked to fend for himself, but home repairs were his weak spot.

With resignation, he took out a yardstick and did his best to figure out the right size, then went to the local hardware store to get replacements. Adopting a casual tone, he asked the clerk if anyone had been in recently on a similar mission, but the young kid just shrugged. "I only work here Saturdays," he said.

David had trouble removing the old glass and getting the new panes to fit, and he splintered the wood in a couple of places when he forced it. He used glue and plastic wood as well as caulk, but his work still had a homemade look. He ripped the pane out and started from scratch, although it didn't come out any better the second time.

David and Sally went out for dinner that night, to a Moroccan restaurant that had just moved into the neighborhood. Sally had a new outfit on, a long brown and green flowery skirt and a low-cut white blouse, with her hair freshly cut and colored a lighter shade of blonde. She'd even had her nails done and wore her contact lenses instead of her less attractive but more comfortable glasses.

Once they were seated, Sally surprised David by ordering a cocktail—they usually just had wine with dinner—and then told the waiter they were in no hurry to order. David wondered if there was something specific she wanted to talk about, but then she asked him if he knew what tonight was. He panicked and then realized it was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the night they'd met. There had been a time when he was the more sentimental one, always surprising her with flowers and little treats. When had that stopped?

He tried to get in the mood but couldn't. Too much going on in his life right now. And the more she flirted, the harder he found it to go along. He complained about the food, the service, and the belly dancer he thought strangely inappropriate.

"She's a little heavy to be doing that, isn't she?" he said.

"Only in America do women have to be toothpick thin," Sally said, a slight note of defensiveness creeping into her voice. David didn't see why. Sally still had a girlish figure.

The belly dancer was working her way to their table, and much to David's chagrin, she moved up close, her hips just inches from his face. Sally laughed at David's embarrassment, and then the dancer took off her scarf and playfully wrapped it around David's head. He sat stiffly, absolutely mortified, until she moved on to the next table, leaving the scarf wrapped around his head. He took it off and placed it on the back of his chair.

"Didn't turn you on?" Sally teased.

"Absolutely not," David said, dipping a piece of bread into oil and trying to act nonplussed.

"I thought it was rather fun."

David took another bite of bread. "You need to fix your blouse," he said. "Your bra strap is showing."

They drove home quietly and David eased the car into the garage, but something at the side of the house caught his attention, and instead of going in, he walked out to investigate.

When Sally caught up, she saw the vegetable garden had been trashed. Almost all of the plants were broken in half or pulled out completely, and the fence used to keep out the rabbits was ripped loose. David was already on his knees, working on a few plants he thought he could save, struggling to control his anger. The windows were one thing; this was personal now. The garden was his private domain. He couldn't let this go unanswered. When Sally suggested calling the police, David refused. "What are they going to do?"

Later, in bed, Sally pulled the book out of his hands, and made him look at her.

"Talk to me. How upset should I be?"

He frowned. "It's probably just a kid," he said. "No big deal."

"You really believe that? It's not how you've been acting."

David took his glasses off and turned out his light. "It's hard to explain. It's just the idea that there's somebody out there who may have it in for us. But he's obviously too big a coward to do anything beyond petty vandalism. He's not a real threat."

She kissed him and put her hand on the back of his head, seem-

ingly reluctant to let him get away with a routine peck. But after a few seconds, he pulled away, said good night, and turned over on his side, facing the wall.

The kids hadn't noticed the garden when they came home, so the next morning David called them together to tell them. Laura got upset; Sean just got more excited. David tried to calm them both down but didn't succeed.

"Look, obviously, we have a problem, but let's not overreact," he said." Whoever is doing this wants to get our goat. He's not really trying to hurt anybody."

"How do you know that, Dad?" Laura said. "This is crazy. We don't know what he's going to do next."

"Laura, we can handle it."

"How?"

"I'm not really sure yet, but I promise you I'll handle it. Are you guys all sure there's no one mad at you?"

Laura shook her head, while Sean just ignored the question. "Dad, we need to set up round-the-clock patrols. We can each take twelve hours. Or I could get a couple of the other guys to help. Eric has a webcam we can set up outside. It can even take pictures at night. And Logan—"

"Slow down, Sean. We don't need to get your friends involved. You haven't told the whole neighborhood, have you?"

"Well, just Eric and Logan and Mark and Jon. Just my close friends. And we all want to help."

"No, Sean, we have to do this ourselves. Don't talk to any more outsiders."

"We can trust them. They're my friends."

"I didn't mean it that way, but think really hard whether there's anyone who might be mad enough at one of you to do this. No reason to feel guilty if there is. This guy is crazy. It's not your fault."

But they all professed ignorance.

* * *

David stepped up his nightly patrols but with a difference. He began carrying a baseball bat. He hadn't been in a fight since he was a kid, and while he was in decent shape for a forty-seven-year-old guy with a desk job, he wasn't about to confront his adversary with his bare hands. Sean asked if he could come along on what had changed from occasional walks around the perimeter into longer patrols up and down the street. At first David said no, but Sean looked so crestfallen that David relented. He couldn't help being glad Sean wanted to stand up for himself, and if there was trouble, Sean could call for help on the cell phone that seemed glued to his fingertips. Sally wasn't very happy, but she couldn't talk David out of it.

"Should we walk together, or should I cover you from a distance?" Sean asked. "I could program your phone so you just have to push one button and I'll know if you need help."

"Let's stay together, Sean. We just want to keep our eyes open. This isn't one of those killer video games."

"It's kind of like a war, though, isn't it, Dad?"

"I wouldn't go that far." But it was beginning to feel that way.

Sean proceeded to give him a rundown on the different kinds of air rifles. He'd learned about the ammunition, accuracy and range of each, as well as the comparative costs, by doing some research on the Web. The bottom line was that the likely range of the air rifle used against

their windows was only about five hundred feet. David was impressed. If only Sean put so much effort into his algebra homework.

On Saturday, David awoke early, tense with anticipation. Their enemy seemed to prefer attacking on Saturday, and if he were going to return today, David would be in position. He planned to spend as much time outside as he could, puttering around the yard and doing chores that would keep him at the side or in back. Close enough to respond, though not so close that he'd scare off the attacker.

But when he crossed the driveway, he was too late. The windshield of Sally's Volvo was a maze of cracks. It looked like someone had hit it with a hammer.

Sally must have noticed David standing there because within a minute she was by his side, her face ashen. David started to examine the car more closely, but Sally was frightened. "Let's just go inside and call the police."

David insisted on waiting outside, and within a few minutes a police car drove up and a cop got out, straightening his overloaded Sam Brown belt. He was about forty, carelessly chubby with a stomach at war with his shirt buttons.

Before David could greet him, a second car pulled up and Officer Cortez got out. At least she wasn't alone this time. When she asked what happened, David just pointed to the Volvo's windshield.

"It's not just the windshield," the male cop said. He had been examining the car and noticed several marks in the side and back windows, the ones most exposed to the street. He knelt down and before long found a telltale pellet. Cortez told the second officer about the earlier attack, and they agreed on what seemed obvious. The shooter had taken multiple shots at the car's windows, probably got frustrated when they just bounced off the safety glass and then moved in to take out the

window at close range.

"Must have made quite a racket," the male officer said. "You never heard anything?"

"Nothing," David said. "Our bedroom's on the other side of the house. In the back."

"You said this was your wife's car?" Cortez asked. "Any reason why he would have picked her car over yours?"

"Maybe because mine is in the garage."

The second cop glared as Cortez pulled out her report forms and asked if they could come in to ask their questions. David hesitated. The whole family was home. He didn't want them involved, but he didn't have much choice.

The kids and Sally met them as soon as David led them through the front door, and he realized they'd been watching from inside. They sat in the living room.

"Do any of you have any idea who might be responsible for these attacks?" Cortez began.

"Not a clue," said Sally.

"Me neither," added Laura. Sean just shook his head, swinging a wider arc than normal out of excitement. He seemed in awe of the uniforms, and his eye kept sneaking down to their weapons.

"Laura, you didn't break up with a boyfriend or have any trouble at school with someone?" Cortez asked.

David stifled a groan. He knew she'd bring that up. He wondered why the older officer wasn't taking charge.

"No. I've been going out with the same guy for a year," Laura said.

"What about you, Mrs. Harriman? Anybody have any reason to be mad at you."

"No, nothing I can think of." They all looked at her for a second to see if she would go on, but she didn't.

"And apart from the windows and the car, there's been no other sign of harassment?"

"And the garden," Sally said. Both officers turned to David, and Sally realized he hadn't told them. She proceeded to describe the obliteration of the garden while David glowered. What was the point?

The whole thing took about twenty minutes, and when they got up to leave, both officers shook the kids' hands and made the obligatory concluding comment. "If you think of anything else, give us a call."

As soon as they were gone, the kids' moods changed. Sean became as agitated as his father and started devising ever more bizarre defense plans. "We could set up tripwires around the perimeter. I learned in science class how we can attach them to a buzzer that'll go off in the house if someone touches one."

Laura, meanwhile, turned almost hysterical.

"Why can't the police protect us?" she asked. "Can't we insist they do more?"

David shook his head. "There's nothing they can do. I think we have to handle this ourselves."

"Dad! This is getting scary."

"Laura, I'll handle this."

"That's what you said last week." The comment stung, even more than Laura intended. David had been thinking the same thing. He had let the family down. He'd have to do better.

On Monday, David bought a gun, taking a day off from work to drive into Pennsylvania to avoid New Jersey's seven-day waiting period. Once in the store, he felt overwhelmed by the full display cases, and his lack of knowledge put him at the mercy of the salesman.

"I'm just looking for something to have in the house in case something happens."

"I know just what you need," the salesman said, pulling out a blue metal automatic handgun. "Enough kill power to stop a whole gang of intruders."

Within minutes, David had forked down \$625 for a Glock 9mm, undoubtedly more gun than he needed, but he was too embarrassed to object. He stopped at a shooting range, got a little instruction, and spent a couple of hours practicing. He would never be a marksman, but he could manage. He didn't tell Sally.

He kept the gun locked in a fireproof strongbox in his file cabinet, except on his nightly patrols, when he carried it. He knew it was against the law to conceal a weapon, but he didn't care.

Much as he liked the company, David decided it was too dangerous to let Sean come along on any more patrols, a decision Sean found hard to accept.

"But Dad, you can't go alone."

David smiled at his son and ruffled his hair, even though he knew the boy had long outgrown the gesture. He was almost as tall as David and would soon tower over him, but he was thin and gangly, with a mop of reddish brown hair and just a hint of facial fuzz. David tried to picture him as a grownup but couldn't get his mind around it, even as Sean begged to be treated as one.

"Wasn't I a big help in learning about air rifles?"

"You bet. I appreciated that."

"And don't I help when you have to fix something around the house so I'll learn how to do it myself?"

"Sometimes."

"Well, this is the same thing."

"Except it's dangerous."

"That's why you need backup." David smiled at the TV jargon. "And if it's so dangerous, why aren't the police doing something about it?" Sean asked.

"They are. They're keeping an eye on the house." It was true. David had noticed the occasional police car driving slowly down the street, about as useful as stopping people from taking a bottle of water through an airport security line. There wasn't much the authorities could do, whether it was an al-Qaeda terrorist or a bored teenager with an air gun. That was why it was up to him to protect his family.

David heard Sean out for a few more minutes before issuing his decree. Though he was pleased at his eagerness, he felt this was his responsibility, and it really was getting dangerous. "I'm sorry, Sean. You can still help by keeping an eye out from inside."

Sean marched off to his room to sulk.

What David didn't tell Sean was he had decided to change tactics. Instead of walking the street this Friday night, he would lie in wait in case this week's attack came in the pre-dawn hours. He picked a corner of his yard that was mostly hidden on three sides by shrubbery, and when darkness came, he nestled in to watch. He covered the ground with an old poncho and spread himself on it, lying prone on his stomach, propped up on his elbows, and holding a pair of night-vision binoculars

to his eyes. He had a flashlight, a cell phone, and a whistle close by. And in his pocket, the new Glock, with the magazine in a separate pocket. He knew he'd have a hard time explaining himself if a neighbor happened to spot him—or worse yet, called the police. But he didn't dwell on it. He had to do something.

The street was a quiet one, and by midnight almost all of the houses were dark. David found himself looking at each in turn, especially the homes closest to his, those within range for an air rifle.

He focused first on his next-door neighbor, Andy and Marjorie Saropian. That was a possibility. They had a teenage son, Will, who once asked Laura out and had been turned down, but that was over a year ago, probably too long for a kid that age to hold a grudge.

The house on the other side didn't seem to hold any promise, although he had to admit he didn't really have much intelligence on the owners. They'd moved in about five years ago and were much older than Sally and David and not particularly friendly. They would exchange waves and occasional comments in the yard, but neither had been inside the other's homes. He had a sense the woman wasn't in good health, though he wasn't sure about that. Their kids were grown and on their own.

He trained the binoculars briefly on a house across the street but was inclined to rule it out. Sarah Bristow was a single mom whose husband, a reservist, had been killed in Afghanistan two years ago. Her kids, especially the eldest, twelve-year Henry, had taken it hard. David had wanted to help but could never figure out how. The best he could do was urge Sean to befriend the boy, but Sean insisted he was strange and wouldn't go near him. The house was up for sale, had been for several months.

Someone new had moved in next to her. Two someones actually.

A gay couple who kept to themselves. He hated the house—too big for the land, painted an odd blue, really weak landscaping.

The house on the other side of the widow was more of a possibility. He didn't like the man who owned it, and he knew he had a teenage son, a high school senior who always struck him as strange, coming and going at all hours with never a nod or a hello. And he had the odd habit of standing out front all the time talking on his cell phone, as though he didn't trust his parents not to eavesdrop.

The boy's father, a short, bald man who wore his pants too high, was named Walter Farrell, but David had nicknamed him "the Fascist" because he was a retired military veteran, worked for Raytheon, and periodically stuck dumb bumper stickers on his car like "We wouldn't be torturing them if they weren't terrorists." He'd be the kind to let his kid have an air rifle. Sally had come to know him because they served together on some kind of neighborhood committee.

As the night wore on, David periodically felt for the Glock in his pocket, at one point taking it out and slipping the magazine in, just to make sure he could do it in a hurry. The gun felt a little heavy, but the magazine slid in easily, with a loud snap. It gave him an unexpectedly good feeling to hold it. Then again, the whole experience of standing guard over his home and his family made him feel something close to pride.

Nothing came of it, however, and at dawn, David gave up and went inside for a few hours of sleep. The rest of the day proved equally uneventful, as did the next several. David continued to keep watch each night, staying up as long as he could manage. He couldn't help feeling a little disappointed that nothing ever happened.

* * *

Sally was getting increasingly upset with David's behavior. His

nightly vigils were making the whole household tense.

"How long are you going to keep this up?"

"As long as it takes. Maybe you should take the kids to your mother's for a few days."

"School just started. We can't just leave." Then, after a pause. "This isn't helping us, you know."

That surprised David, though it shouldn't have. For months, Sally had been pressuring him for more attention and what she called "quality time," complaining that she felt their relationship was too often on auto-pilot. It was true, but that wasn't his fault. They'd been married a long time. It was no surprise—and no big deal, really—that much of their life had settled into a routine, with less to talk about. And the tension over sex. He wasn't sure why he was interested less. It didn't mean he didn't love Sally or didn't find her attractive anymore. It just seemed part of getting older. It happened to everyone. But he didn't say any of this. He kept his focus on the most immediate problem.

"Sally, what do you want me to do? I can't pretend it's not happening."

"Maybe he's made his point and it'll end now."

"Made his point? What does that mean? What point?"

"Maybe he's had his fun and gotten bored. There was nothing last weekend, and if it's a kid who's gone back to school, he'll be distracted by other things."

"Maybe," David said, mostly to keep the peace. "Let's just see what happens this weekend."

But David couldn't wait for the weekend. He began to think that whoever was harassing them had changed patterns and the next attack would come during the week. His evidence consisted of a series of hang-

up calls, with Caller ID numbers that proved phony when he called back. Apparently, the Internet made it easy to fake them. A hang-up call late Thursday convinced him his enemy was mapping strategy for a whole new assault, so without telling Sally, he took Friday off. He dressed and left the house as usual, but once he was sure Sally had left for her job, he doubled back, hid his car a few blocks away, and snuck back to the house. He settled into the garage, which had big windows in the door, to wait and watch. He had his binoculars, the baseball bat, and the Glock. This time he loaded it and placed it carefully on the workbench that lined one side of the garage wall.

There was a lot more activity during the day than there had been on his nightly vigils, and he took an odd pleasure in watching various people who didn't know they were being observed: A plumber with shoulder-length hair who sat in his truck and waved his hands in the air as he talked on his cell phone for ten minutes before going to the gay couple's house. A woman walking a dog who pretended to scoop up the poop but really didn't. Four runners of different sizes and shapes. A woman sitting out in her yard lazily watching two children play.

He was enjoying himself, lost in thought, when a car pulled into his driveway. Instinctively, he ducked out of sight. It was Sally. He checked his watch. What was she doing home in the middle of the afternoon? He decided to stay hidden, hoping she had an appointment she hadn't mentioned and would leave again. He sat perfectly still, completely silent.

Within a few minutes, he heard her bound out the front door, but when he didn't hear the car start, he stole a peek. Sally was across the street, walking up the front steps of the Fascist's house. David put the binoculars to his eyes.

Farrell opened the door instantly, as if he'd been waiting for her. What was he doing home in the middle of the day? Sally went inside.

David sat staring at the house, at the closed front door, not moving. He tried to think of why she had gone over there, went back over their conversations for any mention of Farrell, tried to recover any clues he might have missed, but he came up blank.

Could it be that she knew something about the attacks she wasn't telling him and was trying to deal with it without him? No, she knew it was his responsibility. He considered marching over there but didn't want to admit he was spying on her. Well, not spying on *her*. It wasn't his fault she got caught in his dragnet.

He was interrupted by the sight of a car, an old Ford Mustang, pulling up in front of Farrell's house.

Derrick, Farrell's teenage son, got out, went to the trunk, and rummaged around, and when he emerged, he held a long case. David stared through his binoculars, sure he was looking at the air rifle responsible for his broken windows. He watched the boy go around to the back of the house.

Sally was still inside. David knew he had to confront them, find out just what was going on. He reached for the garage door. No, that would be too noisy and too visible. He'd go out the back and circle around, come on them by surprise. But just then the school bus drove up and Sean got off. He stopped at the sight of his mother's car in the driveway, surprised as David had been.

David slipped the Glock into his pocket and dashed from the garage into the house and out the back door, running on the balls of his feet to avoid making noise and staying low to avoid being seen. He was hoping to get out the back door before Sean came in the front and found him. He gently shut the door behind him and leaned against the wall, catching his breath. When he was convinced Sean hadn't heard anything, he crept around the side, using the shrubbery for cover. He

hugged the house as he came around to the front, and then when there was no way to avoid exposed ground, he ran for it, zigzagging a little, jumping over a recycling bin, and hiding behind a car when he could. As he got closer to the Farrell house, he realized he didn't have the slightest idea what he'd do or say when he got there. Ring the bell? Kick open the door? All he knew was he had to confront Farrell.

He rang the bell and focused on getting calm while he waited for Farrell to answer the door. When he did, David just said, "I need to talk to you."

"About what?"

"It's about your son. Let me come in."

"This is a terrible misunderstanding," Farrell said, stepping out on to the porch rather than letting him in. "I already told your wife that he has nothing to do with what's been going on. I don't know how she got that idea."

Sally appeared in the doorway. "David, what are you doing here?" She opened the door and walked out on to the porch, taking up a position next to Farrell.

David stared hard at Sally but spoke only to Farrell. "Let me in," he repeated. "I want to talk to your son."

Then suddenly Derrick was standing in the doorway, carrying the air gun, pointed at Sally. "Get out of here," he said to her. "Leave my father alone. I'm not letting you break up our family."

"Is that what you think?" Farrell said. "We're just friends."

"Right. Friends. Is that why she's here now? Sneaking in when Mom's not around?"

"She came to talk to me about you. To prevent this." Farrell shook his head, then tried to catch his son's eyes. "She thinks you've been

shooting up their house with your air rifle."

"Don't lie to me, Dad. I've seen you together. You're not *just* friends."

Sally gasped and David followed her eyes to a spot behind him. Sean stood a few feet away, the baseball bat in his hand. David started to speak but his chest tightened and he stopped. The situation was sliding out of control. It wasn't supposed to be this way. He wanted to tell Sean to go home but he knew it wouldn't do any good.

Then Derrick turned his air rifle toward Sean.

"Don't move. Don't anybody move," he said. More TV dialogue, David thought, though this time there was nothing amusing about it. Then he realized the Glock was in his pocket and he started to ease it out, the way he'd seen it done on the screen so many times.

Derrick caught the movement and turned the gun on David.

"David!" Sally screamed.

"Dad," said Sean, almost in admiration.

Then everyone seemed to talk at once, Farrell and Sally telling David and Derrick to put their guns down, Sally yelling at David and talking more calmly to Derrick, Farrell yelling at his son and talking more calmly to David. David could sense Sean's excitement rising behind him.

Despite the shouts, no one moved. Derrick and David stared at each other, both of their guns wavering slightly. David tried to remember if Sean had told him anything about how much damage an air pellet could cause if fired at close range. The Glock obviously represented far more kill power. It could take them all out in seconds. He looked at Sally, a question still in his eyes, and he wondered what Sean was doing behind him. He prayed the answer was nothing, but there was no way he could turn around to see. He lowered the Glock, holding it against his

leg.

Farrell stepped in front of his son. "Give me the rifle," he said. "Is everybody here crazy?"

The boy hesitated and Farrell reached for it, pushing it downward, but it went off. A pellet caught his shoe and ricocheted into his ankle. He fell, but he held on to the rifle, wrenching it away from his son.

Sally screamed. "Stop it! Just stop it."

"Shut up, bitch." It was Derrick. His face was white as he leaned down to help his father. David put the Glock back in his pocket and took the baseball bat from Sean. He put his arms around him and tried to move him off to the side. He tried to turn Sean away from the scene, but the boy resisted. He wanted to see what was happening. David held on to him, not sure what he might try to do.

Sally went to help Farrell, but the boy pushed her roughly aside and she fell. "We don't need your help," he said.

David and Sean started for them, but Sally stopped them. "Stay back," she said. David seemed surprised, not sure at all how to interpret her ministrations to Farrell. He seemed to have recovered, though he didn't try to stand. "I'm all right. Just leave us alone." He exchanged a look with Sally.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know how it got so out of hand."

"Just get them out of here," he said.

Sally stepped off the porch and looked up at David. They stood that way for a second, each trying to read the other's mind.

Where would they go from here? Where could they go? David knew it would take time to try to work that out, maybe a lot of time.

Sally reached out a trembling hand to David, and he took it,

steadying it. Sally put the other arm around Sean, and they hugged for a moment.

Together they crossed the street.

Mark Willen received a Master of Arts in Writing from Johns Hopkins University in 2010. "Scattershot" is his first published work of fiction, though his nonfiction stories have been published by Congressional Quarterly, Bloomberg News and Kiplinger. He is currently at work on a novel.

Gehenna

I

This is what they do to him, to the old man, after a lifetime spent in quiet contemplation among books of eschatology.

They parade him before the students on high holy days, not unlike the mummified thumb or shriveled toe of a medieval saint or mystic, an artifact to be revered as a symbol of piety, celibacy, wisdom and dread. Recently forced into retirement, the old man is given the title "Instructor Emeritus," an honorific bestowed upon those priests too ancient and addle-minded to continue teaching without embarrassment or scandal in the classroom. Though rare and often ritualized, these appearances are meant to satisfy his need to be among the students, his proverbial "lost flock" whose intellectual curiosity seems to dwindle with each passing year.

The problem is just this: the old man, when given an opportunity to address the students, tends to say things that fly in the face of orthodoxy. The Jesuits believe (and have practically made it a matter of doctrine) that God in his munificence has traced an invisible circle around the campus, and all who enter this sacred sphere are, through divine grace, absolved of sin and are henceforth immunized from the wickedness of the world. Here God walks in the cool of the evening, and here the serpent is rebuked and banished to the alleys and tenement buildings at the circle's grim periphery. At the center of the circle stands the Tree of Life, and the Jesuits urge the students to gather each morning under its sheltering limbs. But if some of the boys find these clichés convincing, it is only because they are unaware of what life holds in store for them--they will finish high school, go to college, get married, beget chil-

dren, grow old; in short, they will be miserable in a million predictable ways, and it saddens the old man to think of the myriad banalities and disappointments that await. Such a life doesn't have a happy ending because it was never a happy proposition from the very start.

Sensing their impassivity to their own fate, the old man dares the boys to sample the repellent fruit from that other tree, the one forbidden to them. With an admonitory wave of his hand and a loud rap of his cane, he shouts, "Wake up! Open your eyes! The overripe fruit has fallen from the branches and is rotting on the ground all around you. Go on, pick it up, taste it. For eons it has been fermenting, and its effects are quite sublime."

He paces the room, from front to back, leaning heavily on the desks for support.

"Blessed is he who can understand a metaphor. This image of a mystical circle, and the invisible wall of protection it reputedly offers, is a fantasy, an obvious fabrication for the weak of mind and spirit. In reality the circle does not exist, has never existed. This must be so because God is all encompassing and without boundaries. He dwells inside and outside any circle that ever was or even can be. And the same is true of Good and Evil, which, like God, are in a continuous state of flux and thus are indistinguishable from one another. God does not walk in the Garden but swims in this protean sea of Creation. And all men, whether they are aware of it or not, flail about and gasp for air in its cold and tempestuous waters. You do, and I do. We are drenched in it. Soaked to the bone in Good and Evil."

Against their better judgment, the Jesuits allow him to finish his lecture, but later that same day, when they overhear several boys contemplating these dangerous ideas in the cafeteria, the priests, fearing a schism, an insurrection, a possible drop in enrollment, call an emergency meeting. In the gloom of the principal's office, a secret vote is taken,

and the priests unanimously decide that the old man, because he may have already defiled the minds of these impressionable boys, must never again speak in the classroom.

Keeping him away from the students, this is one of the many things they do to him, but it is not the worst thing.

II

Feeding, bathing, and dressing him pose significant challenges, but bringing him to mass each morning is particularly trying. During the Lord's Prayer, he recites soliloquies from *Hamlet* and recounts the strange, eventful histories of Saxo Grammaticus; during the Te Deum, he whistles an Irish hornpipe and dances a slap jig; during the celebration of the Eucharist, he shakes his head slowly back and forth as though in bitter disagreement, or is it in stark disbelief? The Jesuits are never quite sure and are reluctant to ponder the possibility that the old man has fallen prey to the allure of that wine-drenched harlot, Heresy.

Despite suffering from rheumatoid arthritis and having lost a great deal of weight since the onset of his illness, the old man is still agile, more so than some of his septuagenarian colleagues burdened with the responsibility of keeping watch over him, and he develops a remarkable talent for sneaking out of the chapel while the other priests are deep in meditation.

For hours the old man haunts the city streets, a forlorn figure in black that can easily pass for a ghost, a derelict, a holy fool clothed in sackcloth and ashes. At nightfall, when packs of stray dogs emerge from their fetid dens to forage for putrid meat in dark alleys, the old man, as if by instinct, finds his way inside a corner café where he chats with the lovely barista. After ordering his usual mug of Irish coffee, he makes his way to the back tables to commiserate with the luckless poets who scribble blank verse in their prodigious notebooks, play chess, and obsess

over their personal failings. Though most claim to be free thinkers and practitioners of the more esoteric philosophies of the Far East, these men, burdened with years of guilt, feel an inexplicable urge to confess their countless sins, sometimes doing so in spectacular detail. They revel in self-debasement, which they mistake for virtue, and sometimes shed a few cathartic tears for good measure.

As he tries to judge whether they are deserving of redemption, the old man relishes the pleasant heat from his whiskey and the exquisite numbness that creeps through his limbs. A few sips is all it takes to liberate him from the imprisonment of flesh and bone, and for a few wonderful moments, he slips out of his body and floats freely through the café, a diluted presence, insubstantial as the wisps of steam that rise from the golden domed espresso machine and coil around the blinking neon sign in the front window.

"I dare say, booze is more magical than the Blood," he proffers. Then he encourages the men to set aside their coffee and join him in a proper drink. He snaps his fingers and calls to the barista, "Whiskeys all around!"

The old man is incoherent by the time the Jesuits find him, his arms dangling at his sides, his jaw hanging open. The priests hoist him from the chair and struggle to carry him through the streets slick with rain. At the rectory, they put him to bed and lock his door.

Keeping the old man away from the café, this is another thing they do to him, but still it is not the worst thing.

III

In the morning before classes begin, some of the boys, the more incorrigible among them, loiter in the alley behind the gymnasium where they smoke cigarettes and sip from flasks and try to make sense of their teen angst. They joke about their sexual conquests and cast doubt on

the wisdom of their elders, but when they hear the arduous scrape of heavy shoes along the broken bricks, they hastily stomp out their cigarettes and rehearse their expressions of innocence.

The old man hobbles around the corner, his eyes lost in some twilight reverie, but upon spotting the boys, he suddenly straightens up, tucks the cane under his arm, and with a kind of regal bearing marches toward them. The boys are well aware of his apostasy, but they are unsure if he intends to impart some heretical platitude or reprimand them for their bad behavior. With the ashes and glowing embers of their cigarettes still swirling around their ankles, they address the old man with feigned respect.

“Why, good morning, Father Loomis!”

The old man grunts, turns a quizzical eye to the lavender alliums that have survived the first unforgiving blasts of freezing autumn air. He reaches down, gently removes the partially withered head from its stem and twirls it in front of their eyes.

“You continually ask yourself, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ And this is what I say to you: What is the meaning of this flower I’m holding? What is the meaning of this fly crawling on my sleeve? What is the meaning of this conversation we’re having? All the answers to all the mysteries of this universe and the next can be found in the delicate petals of a flower. But few people comprehend the simplicity of the message. Most people look for answers elsewhere.”

He points to the pained expressions of martyrs on the chapel’s stained-glass windows.

“A catalogue of torments,” he says. “Just look at them, the poor misguided souls. The disciples once asked Jesus, ‘Master, when will the Kingdom come?’ And do you know how he replied? Hmmm?”

The boys shake their heads, try to suppress their smiles.

“He said, ‘It will not come by watching for it. The Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth...*but people do not see it.*’”

The old man surrenders the flower to the wind and watches it fly apart and vanish.

“Eternal life,” he murmurs, “the resurrection of the flesh.” He looks up as though startled out of a dream. With spittle flying from his lips, he lets out a cry: “To die and not be forgotten! That is the best any of us can hope for, gentlemen, the only immortality we shall ever know.”

Ignoring their smirks and snide laughter, the old man lifts his cane and waves it over their heads like a magic wand. Mantled in the soft autumn light, he continues on his sad, directionless promenade, muttering blasphemies and puzzling oaths. He can no longer control himself. By now this is quite plain to everyone.

That evening, before saying grace and breaking bread, the priests crush an assortment of black and white pills into a fine powder and stir it into his mashed potatoes and gravy. As missionaries sent by the Church to proselytize in remote mountain villages, the Jesuits have borne witness to a thousand unspeakable nightmares, but despite battling rare diseases and risking life and limb, not for medals or glory or honor but to tell the uncomprehending bumpkins and their brood of squalling children that contraceptives are morally suspect and that God wants them to be fruitful and multiply--despite all of this, the priests find that they have no appetite for the old man's profane banter, and they pray that the medication will temporarily solve the problem until Nature decides upon a permanent solution.

Keeping him in a perpetual drug-induced stupor, this is another thing they do to him, but still it is not the worst thing.

IV

With its anarchy of adjoining corridors and antechambers and quiet galleries, the school is a labyrinth of forked paths that follows a mysterious logic that no one, save perhaps for God, can fathom. Even after teaching at the school for nearly fifty years, the old man will sometimes lose his bearings in its funhouse geometries. Tottering along on his wooden cane, he passes through an arched threshold and into a hallway that seems to stretch on and on until it tapers away to a cruciform of ghostly white light. Under the high vaulted ceilings, he wanders like some hapless denizen in a rococo palace swarming with sculptures and mirrors and tapestries. There is a kind of sordidness about the place; it exudes decadence and frivolity.

At last he comes to a spiral staircase and stops to peer over the railing. Somewhere in that gaping darkness, he hears conspiring voices. They speak of a party and make lewd predictions about its outcome. Carefully clinging to a wrought-iron balustrade, the old man descends the twisted helix and makes his way to the basement where the limestone walls are lined not with the skulls of long deceased Jesuits or with wormbored coffins smelling of must and decay, but with dozens of shiny new kegs of handcrafted ale recently delivered from the local brewery. There he finds two boys rolling one of the kegs toward a ramp at the back of the building.

"You! I say, you there! What do you think you're doing?"

The old man sucks in his breath and begins to shake with rage. The epic hellfire and brimstone sermon, that has been bottled up in his heart for so long, now threatens to erupt from his sputtering lips.

"You reprehensible...you impertinent...Do you have any idea who..." His words become small and faint like those of a frightened child who has been abandoned in a wilderness. "That's strange...I was on my

way back to the rectory and..." Massaging his forehead, he offers the boys an apologetic smile. "Where is the rectory, gentlemen? I've lived here for so long, but I can't seem to remember..."

Using tones of quiet cajolery, the boys pretend to comfort the old man. "Follow us, Father Loomis. We're happy to show you the way."

Tears well up in his eyes. "Bless you. You're very kind."

"It's our pleasure."

"I'm sorry to be such a nuisance."

"No trouble at all, Father. Really"

"It's no picnic getting old, boys, let me tell you."

"Oh, we can imagine."

"I keep having these senior moments...And...Wait a minute now...Are you certain this is the right way?"

"Of course."

"But this is a most unusual route."

"Circuitous. Isn't that the right word, Father?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"A very Latinate word, circuitous. Watch your step now."

"Please, let go of me."

The old man tries to break free, but it's no use. With their powerful hands, the boys take his cane and prod him toward an open door. The closet has the awful dimensions of a sarcophagus; it reeks of tobacco and formaldehyde and the rich, alluvial muck of the nearby river that rises from the sewers and floods the basement after a heavy rain. In the corner there is a mouse nest, a mop, a bucket filled with gray water, an ashtray crammed with cigarette butts.

"Here you are, Father."

"But you can't, you shouldn't..."

"In you go!"

They shove him inside and swing the door shut. He sobs, begs for mercy, hammers on the door until his knuckles are raw and begin to bleed. The boys turn the lock and then return to their thievery.

For the next thirty minutes, the old man listens to them roll kegs toward the ramp, and then all at once there is silence. The hours pass slowly, and he has the sensation, an uncanny one, that the entire universe is made of the thinnest fabric. The things that seem concrete and imperishable are nothing more than a projection on a screen, flickering images that will soon go dark forever. Trapped within that hideous blackness, the old man grows more and more terrified until in his panic and delirium he recognizes the death pangs of consciousness, the final stratum of reality slipping away into oblivion. From his larynx, a scream rises with terrible urgency, but his voice is so ragged and shrill that only a fugitive cry of humiliation escapes his lips and dies long before it ever reaches the staircase.

Early the next morning, compelled to visit the basement to retrieve an untapped keg for the priests' luncheon, the housekeeper, Ms. Higginson, hears a faint but persistent scratching and opens the closet door to discover a nearly unrecognizable creature curled up in the corner, a cadaverous thing of plutonic origins that, in its madness, drools and quivers and, with trembling fingers, smears its own excrement over the cold, wet stones.

"Why do we cling to our fear? Beyond our fear there is nothing. Nothing at all. We must learn to surrender to the darkness."

It's only after the pale specter opens its toothless mouth and speaks in a sibilant whisper that the housekeeper unleashes a terrible

howl that rouses the Jesuits from the sweet serenity of sleep.

His own students have done this deplorable thing to him, boys he has mentored for years, but even this isn't the worst of it.

V

The priests carry him to the rectory where they force him to stand under a spray of scalding water. Next, they set up a hospital bed in the library because, they feel, it will be easier to keep an eye on him there and because they believe the mere sight of these books will provide him with some comfort in his final days. He was once a great scholar, a polymath with wide-ranging interests--history, science, obscure religious movements. Some of the priests can still remember how, long ago, shortly after his ordination, he dreamed of writing fulltime, but the act of writing takes a great deal of self-discipline, and the old man has always preferred to read about things rather than write about them. He once tried his hand at fiction, but the experience left him shaken and consumed with self-doubt. He decided there were too many books in the world and it wasn't for him to add one more to the already insurmountable pile.

Lying quietly in bed, it now occurs to him that writers, like the leaves lighting on the windowpane, are practically infinite in number; they accumulate outside the library, desperate to get in, and threaten to crush humanity under their collective weight. He dreads joining their ranks, an author indistinguishable from a million others, and it is for this reason that he became not only a teacher but the official keeper of these rare volumes--to bar the door and allow in only the finest works of the human imagination. But if the years have taught him anything, it is that he is a humble servant to these books, not their keeper.

He has no other intimacies, took a vow of celibacy when he was barely more than a boy, but he has been perfectly content with a life of

the mind, which is rich and varied and full of small wonders. This attitude contrasts markedly from that of his colleagues, many of whom often wonder if they made the correct decision in life. As young seminarians they were taught that the Word of God could be heard most clearly in our love for one another, in a mother's love for her child, a father's pride in his son, but the priests had no chance for love of that kind. They were trained to profess their love for their Church, but that wasn't love, that was neurosis, because no one can love a bureaucracy. Books, the old man soon discovered, were a far superior substitute for coping with loneliness. The trick was to transform his interior monologue into a dialogue in which he conversed at length with the authors of these volumes. But now, because of his failing eyesight, he can no longer peruse the dusty spines that line the walls from floor to ceiling. Losing hope that he will live long enough to read from his favorite books a final time, the old man falls into a deep depression.

The Jesuits send a boy to sit beside his bed, but the boy has no intention of reading to him. He has not come here for that purpose. With eyes that are black and small and stupid, he smirks and asks, "Would you like to see something, Father?" From his book bag he removes a deck of pornographic playing cards and fans them out beside the pillow. "Sinful, isn't it, Father?"

The old man lifts his head and whispers, "Oh god please help please god help god please..."

"Relax, you rattlebag of bones. It will all be over soon, yes, very soon now."

Intentionally depriving him of his books, this is another thing they do to him, but still it is not the worst thing.

VI

The afternoon of the Great Blizzard.

His heart beats slowly now, faintly. His breathing is shallow but not labored. From his bed he can gaze out the window and observe the students leaving school for the day. After the long hours spent conjugating Greek and Latin verbs in crowded classrooms, the boys look thin, ashen-faced, glassy-eyed, old men in the making, but now that the day is over and the weekend has finally arrived they start to bounce back to life, loosen their ties, smile up at the receding sun.

All ignore the vast wall of clouds that gather on the far horizon, tremendous lead-colored things that from a distance look like the craggy granite peaks of a vast mountain range. As the cold front gains momentum, the clouds start to wheel wildly across the sky and metamorphose into a hundred phantasmagoric shapes--anvils and chariots and monster movie insects that leap across the lake and decimate the city with their snapping pincers. A rumbling blast of icy air barrels through the bleak canyons of abandoned factories and empty warehouses. Discarded newspapers take flight like mutant bats that flap their gigantic wings before swirling away in a cyclone of sordid celebrity gossip and astrological twaddle. Rows of telephone lines snap one by one, silencing a thousand yammering voices, all of them buying and selling and dissembling with unparalleled expertise. The marble putti, prancing impertinently in the nearby fountain, douse the boys with angelic effervescence, but the boys refuse to abandon their benches until the snow explodes from the clouds. Before dashing back into the main building, some of them stop to face the brutal winds, brave soldiers readying themselves for a catastrophe of grand proportions, a nuclear winter maybe. They open their mouths and claim to feel the anger of vibrating molecules on the tips of their tongues and taste the final, unadorned truth of the cosmos in the heavy white flakes.

With preternatural speed, the snow accumulates into dirty, yellow dunes, turning the neighborhood into a vast urban tundra, a blinding,

windswept wasteland that stretches from the lake to the doors of the rectory. Soon the humps of cars parked along the curb are barely visible. There is no sign of the police or paramedics or city snowplows. Inside the library, the lights flicker and then go out altogether, and the room quickly turns cold. The Jesuits build a fire, but within an hour they use up the last of the logs, and once more the rectory becomes as bitter as the tomb.

"He won't last the night," they concur.

They kneel beside his bed and speak to their creator, the greatest librarian of them all, but God, while capable of retaining and synthesizing vast amounts of information, has perhaps learned that in the end it is best to ignore the pleas of mere mortals who too often request that he radically re-write the final pages of this absurd melodrama for their personal benefit.

Sensing God's indifference, the old man raises his head and speaks to his colleagues as though they are acolytes at the feet of a master: "Each of us is a character in some facile and purposeless tale. And just as we are fictions, so too is God a fiction. This is the essence of the one true gospel."

The priests drown him out with their humble petition to heaven: "O Lord, grant Thy healing, that the soul of Thy servant, at the hour of its departure from the body, may by the hands of Thy holy angels be presented without spot unto Thee!"

When darkness falls, the Jesuits, in their desperation, decide to use some of the books as fuel and select those titles that have contributed to the old man's apostasy, first editions of scholarly tomes that have long been out of print, books about the Black Death, the Gnostic gospels, medieval heresies. Without compunction they cast these contentious books into the flames, and the old man, gasping for breath, en-

dures this final vision: the secret songs and sermons of Cathars and Manichaeans and Borgesians smoldering on the popping and hissing embers, vanishing from this world forevermore in a conflagration of human folly.

Destroying his books, some will argue, is the worst thing they do to him. But even this is not the very worst thing.

VII

A government desk clerk, with small nervous hands and thinning gray hair, completes the necessary paperwork and has it signed in triplicate by the principal. An ambulance comes for the body and transports it to the county morgue where the coroner performs a routine and rather perfunctory autopsy. From there the body is taken to a public cemetery where a mortician prepares it for burial. His assistants place the corpse in a cheap balsawood box, hammer down the lid, and then leave it beside several other unremarkable caskets that await burial.

Through the tree-lined lanes of the sprawling necropolis, past the improbable skyline of rain-worn obelisks and the aberrant architecture of marble monuments, two gravediggers convey the body to a hilltop that overlooks the expressway. The men remove their hats, trade a few dirty jokes and, having muttered obsequies of damning indifference, hastily lower the casket into the hole. They take up their shovels, fill the pit with clumps of frozen soil, then make their lazy way back to the basement of the small stone building near the cemetery gates to collect the next box.

The old man's family and dearest friends have preceded him into death, and no one comes to his final resting place to say farewell or to scatter flowers over his lonely grave: no colleagues, no intercessors, no former pupils, no one at all. No vigil is held for him in the school chapel, no mass said in his name, no mournful requiem played on the organ, and in the ensuing years no priest appears from out of the rain or snow or

dazzling summer sunshine to say a simple prayer for the forgotten dead.

And this, let it be known, is the worst thing they do to him, the very worst thing.

Kevin Keating's essays and fiction have appeared in a number of literary journals, including Slow Trains, Green Hills Literary Lantern, Subtle Tea, Cerebration, Fiction Warehouse, The Plum Ruby Review, Ascent Aspirations, Double Dare Press, Tattoo Highway and many others. His stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize (by Thomas E. Kennedy) and the StorySouth Million Writers Award. His novel, The Natural Order of Things, is scheduled for publication in mid-2011 by Northern Frights Publishing. He currently teaches English at Baldwin-Wallace College near Cleveland, Ohio.

Ron Koppelberger

Witness

Begat by the pursuit of distant vistas, the distressed ruffle of the witness flittered in disturbing breaths of abandon. Balanced in revelation the aged monk watched as the figure of a man in worship endeavored to resurrect the lifeless native. An animal of some indistinct origin grumbled and fussed in the ragweed bloom next to the monk. Paying attention, caution, reasonable suspicions of amazement resolved to enthrall the aged priest with the prospect of destiny, a coveted payment for the promise of new life.

Divisions of light and sound surrounded the native in a brilliant corona as his lifeless body levitated away from the dense underbrush and thorny briar scrub. He watched from secret hidden sylvan vantage, his jungle perch, his eyes glued to the taboo of ethereal mists and jungle dreams. Was this the eleventh hour, he wondered as a rolling cascade of scarlet drizzled from the underside of the floating man.

Eclipsed in perfect symphony, by the sunbeams and lattice of lush vegetation, by the realms of revival unto the sustenance of existence, in denial of death and the darkness contained therein, the native yawned and levitated to a standing position next to the praying man. The monk struggled with an understanding, the substance of life, chaste witness in moments of clumsy, fumbling birth. He had witnessed a miracle and the rest of the world had gone on to another Sunday and another twilight before the darkness.

Ron Koppelberger has published 420 poems, 239 short stories, and 64 pieces of art in over 111 periodicals, books and anthologies, including The Storyteller, Ceremony, and Necrology Shorts among others. He also won the People's Choice Award for poetry In The Storyteller for a poem titled Secret Sash.

Planting Roses in Iraq

Traffic was a killer on Interstate 78 East. Bumper to bumper today. Josh Weiler guessed that driving into sun glare caused the backup for the past two miles. The real reason for today's arteriosclerosis, he learned ten minutes later, was an SUV and a compact car parked in the right lane. The drivers--men in suits and ties--were shouting so loudly he could hear them through his closed windows and car radio. Just as he began to inch around the cars, he saw the older of the two men take a silver pistol out of his jacket and fire. The targeted man shouted and ducked down as the shooter fired again. They began to circle the SUV in a bizarre dance. Step step. Bang bang.

Traffic accelerated into three lanes again. The event was sure to be on the six o'clock news. Or not.

Josh was late getting to Belleville--not dreadfully so, but late enough that the teachers' parking lot was full. He had to drive through twice and finally park awkwardly on the grass. Locking the car after yanking out his briefcase and coffee mug, he headed toward the brick complex that housed 1,300 high school students. Halfway across the lot, he clicked the locking button on his key ring again. The horn's toot and blinking lights gave him a sense of security, even though he was sure he had locked the car.

Sheila Mullally was standing in his path, feet planted firmly on the curb, smoking a cigarette on school property. One arm cradled her breasts and the other held the cigarette like a semaphore. Sheila was in her thirties, like him, and taught algebra and some other mathematical truths he had difficulty grasping. Unlike him, she treated everything as

dispassionately as a professional assassin. She ordered her students to behave, and they did. She ordered her blonde hair to stay in place and her clothes to be quiet and mind their own business. Her large eyes rotated up and down his wool jacket and slacks with a certain hauteur.

"All dressed up and nowhere to go," she said, snorting like a bull.

Her words disconcerted him momentarily. "I dress up because of pockets. Pockets for everything I need. Cell phone, car keys, Lifesavers. ..."

She made the sign of the cross. "Wallet, watch, spectacles, testicles." She laughed silently as he walked by. "Why don't we have a beer after school?"

Sheila's Jersey accent still took getting used to after his emigration from Massachusetts at the beginning of the school year. She dropped the g's in her gerunds so they came out "Comin' and goin'" and used careless locutions, saying, "The phone had rang," or "I seen that on Bloomfield Avenue." As a displaced New Englander, he wondered if this was local patois or the evolution of a new dialect. He called back over his shoulder, "Maybe."

* * *

First period English was an inviting beginning to the day. The tenth-grade Igs--intellectually gifted students--either exhibited superior genetics or their parents were assiduously guiding them through life's challenges and opportunities. Today, they discussed ways that letter writing held the key to Thomas Jefferson's legacy, and he felt a wave of pleasure. He fondly remembered his student in Pittsfield who had come back after graduating and then serving in Kuwait. He said Josh had made a difference in his life. "The dead made me more aware of the living, so I took your advice and started college."

Second period was a different class and the chore of diagram-

ming sentences. "Why do we need this crap, Mr. Weiler?" Jamie immediately called from the back of the room.

"Jamie," he importuned sincerely, "I wish you'd raise your hand before you explode. We need this crap because..."

Several girls squealed, and he heard the word crap repeated behind hands cupped over little pink mouths.

"...Because you can't communicate with other people if you and they don't agree on the rules. What if I said something like *I will to you the cell phone give?* That's German sentence structure. Or, Juan's grandparents would say *I don't have no bananas*. A double negative."

Juan waved his hand and shouted, "My grandpa don't have no bananas!"

"Shut up, Juan. I'm giving an example."

Somewhere in the thicket of children in the succeeding school periods were a few absorbent minds hanging on his every word. He believed this for a fact. He had to or else why was he teaching? Hidden among them were unique specimens who might grow up to be a Supreme Court judge, or physicist uncovering parallel universes. A percentage of small people in front of him, however, would be severely constrained by circumstances, culture, or their hormones.

Where was the justice that dealt breaks to the few in this working-class town while others equally deserving got a bad deal off the bottom of the deck? He blurted out as much during a late-morning break.

"You're too goddamn noble to be a teacher," Sheila said when he sat down to join her with his cardboard container of coffee. "You're a missionary." Her laughter came out like the bark of a seal-- a seal who smoked too much.

The other teachers conversed in snippets of adjectives. Their stu-

dents were brain dead. Psychopathic. Bathroom-dwelling dope-smokers. It was all he heard in the Teachers' Room. "You wouldn't believe what she said in class," or "His mother still defended the little creep after I showed her the contraband." Early in the school year the teachers had divided along social and political lines, the progressives by the window and the conservatives near the door. He tried to straddle the invisible barrier diplomatically, but found himself drawn to the liberals, who were still rankled and defensive about losing national issues.

Changing the subject, he told Sheila about his commute. "I saw the guy take out a pistol and try to blow the other driver away. Right there on I-78." The balding fellow who coached sports listened intently while picking apart his coffee container.

"Did he get him?" the coach, whose name Josh could never remember, asked. "Did he kill the other guy?" The coach had, for some reason, left his usual place among the more conservative teachers to sit two seats away from Sheila.

"He missed. Maybe he was too conscientious to do any damage."

"Most people are bad shots," coach said. "Maybe they once learned in the Army or from watching TV, but you put a gun in their hand and they get all emotional and then they miss. It's very hard, you know. It's really hard to shoot a person."

"How many have you plugged?" Sheila asked, staring with her big eyes.

"I'm prepared," he said, and his eyes narrowed.

She barked. "You'd murder the murderer to discourage murder, eh? What a brilliant social philosophy."

Josh got up to get milk for his coffee and decided to keep on

walking.

Too goddamn noble stuck in his mind as he slammed back the front door and left the argument behind him. Alicia, his one-time fiancée in Pittsfield, was the last person to condemn him as a *schlemiel* who led with his jaw. She, too, was a teacher -- a criminal justice professor at a community college. Matters became worse because Alicia was with him when a woman dialing a cell phone ran into his car. Surveying the minor major damage to his fender, he became inarticulate. He tried to tell them both the incident wasn't significant. There were bigger issues in life; the insurance companies would iron it out.

"For Christ's sake, Josh!" Alicia said in disgust. The programmed response, she explained, was to scream at careless drivers. "She hit you! Most people would have grabbed their neck and threatened to sue for grave bodily injury. You stood there like a dope. There are adversarial situations in life when you can't be noble."

The pain of a woman's criticism, a lover's loss of respect. And there were other instances of their fundamental differences. He had drifted to New Jersey and Alicia was now teaching somewhere in the Chicago suburbs.

He made two rounds of the school and headed back to the classroom. Three periods to go. He wondered if he could reinsert himself into his students' world and serendipitously pry open those burgeoning hearts and minds.

"Mr. Weiler?" Jennifer popped out from behind a corner to intersect his progress. They nearly bumped, and he stepped back. She was a pale girl, with a bob of hair and three silver rings in each ear. Like many of the high schoolers, she was wearing a T-shirt and a too-small sweater buttoned once to emphasize her small breasts. Her skirt was impossibly short for her long legs.

"Yes, Jennifer." He sought a neutral tone in the face of this provocation. No, ambush.

"I don't wanta get Eddie Costas in trouble, but I gotta say he touched me. Inappropriately." She paused to see if she got a reaction. "On my body."

He asked why she was telling him. Why she didn't go to the Principal.

"I guess I just needed to talk to someone. Someone who would understand."

He exhaled patiently. What the hell did he do to deserve this situation? Didn't she have parents -- a dad who would come storming into school looking to rip Eddie's heart out? Didn't she have a priest or pastor? And, didn't she know a 15-year-old girl who dressed like a strip-mall Lolita was inviting inappropriate behavior?

"I think you should see the Principal and he'll get to the bottom of this. Do you want me to go with you to see Mr. Brogan?"

He knew Eddie, the proudly notorious school joker. Earlier in the school year Eddie had allegedly called in a bomb threat. The school had been evacuated and the kids sent home. Eddie proclaimed his innocence. Then the police examined a tape of the call and discovered he had said *bong* -- not bomb. Someone had apparently left a pot pipe in a gym locker.

"Don't you want to know where he touched me?" She looked hurt, a damsel defiled. Her hands fluttered to her chest and he stared at her chipped nail polish.

"Go...speak to...Mr...Brogan...now!"

The afternoon classes were a welcome respite and reinforced his optimism that children's minds were malleable. Was that hubris? Did he

believe he was God, blowing the breath of life into clay models? If so, then call this Genesis High School and label it one of His lesser creations.

Fourth period was a mixed group assembled to learn composition. He had assigned the kids to write a paper describing their grandparents and the major value that stood out in their lives. When Josh was hired, the principal had warned him to steer clear of specific subjects like fathers and mothers who might be missing for whatever reason. Avoid religious holidays, politics, and traumatic situations like the Columbine shootings. Above all, no sex. "Kids this age can come unglued for no reason at all," he said. Grandparents and cultural values seemed innocuous enough.

Tatiana had put together a stunning paragraph, he thought -- just forty or fifty words --about an elderly couple who had retired -- well, had been laid off just a year before they could collect a pension. They persevered.

Geraldo did the expected and filled a page, in double-spaced scrawl, on living in Ecuador, all of which had been copied from the Internet and had nothing to do with character traits. Still, the students were charming in their naïveté and amusing in the assumptions they made.

He pointed to Maysoon and asked her to read. Maysoon Damalouji gave the appearance of being very small for a 16-year-old, but Josh recognized it came from her cowering posture and defensiveness as she tried to catch up as a new American. He rarely heard her talk. Maysoon, the school's only Iraqi, displayed startling green eyes that complemented her blue *hijab* head covering.

She stood and waited until he nodded, wanting to make sure he had really chosen her.

"My grandfather was a lawyer," she began softly. She read methodically in remarkably good English, her words marching evenly over

her lips like orderly soldiers. "He worked for the Ministry of Justice and wore a white shirt and smelled like roses when he went to work every day. He worked for justice. Then the war came and I saw them take my grandfather away. They shot him and two other men and put their bodies in a hole outside our town and the machines covered up the bodies. I saw this happen at night. My father and mother and brothers cried but they could do nothing. I said we should dig him up and my father slapped me. In the spring I planted a rose in the ground where he lay sleeping and watered it and white roses grew. Then my father took our family to Basra and we were helped to go to Syria and then to America. I hope someone is watering my white roses. The end."

Maysoon's eyes dropped like shutters and she sat down. End of composition. The room was silent.

He cleared his throat. "Maysoon, was your grandfather taken away by Saddam Hussein's soldiers?"

She shook her head once. "I think they were the English or American."

The bell rang at that moment, and twenty-five students raced out of the room.

* * *

Sheila lurched into her Ford Explorer at three o'clock and he clambered into his ten-year-old Saab, telling her to follow him. At the bar on Bloomfield Avenue, she ordered a vodka martini. He reflected for a moment and called for a Sam Adams, then became aware of Sheila staring at him, big barnyard eyes in an expressionless face. "What?"

The waitress left and Sheila lit a cigarette. She blew out the match with a practiced mannerism.

"You can't smoke indoors, Sheila. It's the new law."

"What you said this morning. Don't tell me you didn't have some bleeding heart reason for becoming a school teacher," she accused, inhaling deeply.

"Of course I did. I do."

"You're going to become cynical, just like everyone else. The way my brother -- he's a cop -- started out wanting to help save juvenile delinquents. Now, he just beats the shit out of them."

"You equate cops and teachers? Teachers create learning, while cops arrest development --literally." He was startled that this interesting, complex --yes, attractive -- woman could be so absolute in her attitudes.

She laughed and stubbed out her cigarette in a saucer on the next table. "I can't beat up kids. I'd lose my job."

It did no good to suggest she was missing his point.

The conversation bobbed over the surface of their drinks as they each jostled for position. Josh was getting restless from the parrying and thrusting when Sheila abruptly pushed her glass away. "Let's get out of here. Save your money and we'll have something at my place."

Josh didn't explore his motive for following Sheila home and up the stairs of the duplex she rented. It might have been the beer or the opportunity that presented itself. Anyway, how could he analyze an event that hadn't taken place yet?

"Excuse the mess," she said, tossing her car keys on a table in the hallway.

"You're allowed. It's the chaos theory. Things move out of their places the minute your back is turned."

Time slowed deliciously as they drank beer and continued dropping conversational breadcrumbs to discover the other's tastes. Then,

without discussion, they moved to her bedroom and he was looking down on her naked body. She lay on her side unselfconsciously, relinquishing her autocratic control and allowing him to offer whatever he wanted.

Her hands moved over him, touching him in places he hadn't known since he and Alicia had separated. He worked to empty his mind of conscious ideas, but he was shocked when the image of Maysoon's roses fertilized by her grandfather intruded as he reached a climax. He measured the alien brutality of the child's past against Sheila's softly heaving stomach and breasts. The errant thought had subtracted from the passion he'd just enjoyed. Why? Didn't the dead make you more aware of the living?

Lying against her pillows, spent and comfortable in the smell of fabric softener, Maysoon's world retreated. He told Sheila about Jennifer waiting in the hallway to confess her fevered dreams to him. "Kids wear their confusion like a new outfit they're trying on," he said. "Their problems --real or imagined -- are like scarves and sneakers and sweaters. Tomorrow they'll trade them in for something different."

Sheila reached over to grab her cigarettes from the nightstand, but didn't open the pack. "It's their age -- and also this age. I had a run-in today with Eddie Costas and I had to give him a week's detention. You know what I believe? Anti-social behavior is the biggest, most major problem now. Before 9/11, but more now. Anyone who doesn't think so just ain't serious."

"What's the solution?" he asked, admiring this reflective side of her. "Do what your brother does?"

"No, of course not." She propped herself on an elbow and tapped his chest with the pack. "Love 'em. I love people, but just the ones who deserve it. I can love them even though I don't like them.

Certain people, well, I also make love so they know that I care." Her tongue rotated lasciviously around her lips.

He felt a laugh gurgle up. "You can't make love to the whole world! It'd take forever."

"Well, for evil people, there's another answer." Her large eyes twinkled. "Throw all the guns in the ocean. Barring that, castrate all the sociopaths. Gotta be an answer there somewhere."

He didn't ask if Sheila was going to interpret having sex differently than he was. It wasn't necessary. It sufficed that they'd had two hours getting to know each other, and that was always a rare opportunity for people. No need to rationalize why people get laid. Then he left Sheila's apartment and drove through falling leaves that fluttered down like rose petals. He was on time to see *Larry King Live* on CNN.

* * *

His drive east on I-78 the next morning was uneventful and smooth. As much as drive-time talk show hosts applied theories to traffic, Josh believed there were fewer cars because it was Friday, and a beautiful autumn day meant many workers were taking the day off. In fact, if anyone were to deconstruct traffic patterns they'd probably find a profound mathematical cycle of good days alternating with bad days. The cosmic benefits extended to his finding choice parking at the school. He got out and looked up to see Sheila locking her door three cars away. She waved and mouthed the words *Love ya*.

"We should do that again," she said, lighting a cigarette as he came over. "Let me make dinner."

"Taking pity on a single guy in a new city?"

"Bullshit." She laughed. "We both get hungry. How about Saturday afternoon? A cookout, with steak and Sam Adams while the good

weather lasts?"

He smiled. "I'll give you my answer later." Josh rested his hand on her arm, briefly, and walked toward the building. He stopped on the walk leading to the front door. Gaggles of early arrivals passed, and he lost himself in their chatter and the crisp sunlight. Maysoon approached, with a black scarf framing her olive face. She smiled.

"Thank you, Mr. Weiler," she said.

"For what, Maysoon?" For recognizing she existed?

She shrugged, and at that moment a sharp noise shattered the soft autumn air. He searched the parking lot with his eyes and heard a second pistol shot. At the same moment Sheila grabbed her stomach and slowly fell forward. Her cigarette arced gracefully to the driveway. Eddie Costas stepped away from her, and the sunlight glinted on the pistol in his hand, then the boy turned and ran toward the trees on the other side of the lot.

Maysoon shrieked again and again and dropped her book bag to cover her face with her hands. He didn't understand her Arabic, but recognized the shock coursing through her body. Sheila had fallen to her knees, as if she were praying to the sidewalk or looking for a contact lens.

"It's okay, Maysoon," he said folding her into his arms. "It's not happening. It's not really happening." Her shoulders were thin chicken bones under her sweater. He wanted to contain the girl and tell her there still were sanctuaries in the world, perhaps sheltered by his arms, but she screamed again and wrenched free. Autumn leaves fluttered down on Sheila's back in a golden shroud as he stumbled toward her kneeling form.

Walt Giersbach's fiction has appeared Bewildering Stories, Big Pulp, Every Day Fiction, and many others. Two volumes of short stories, Cruising the Green of Second Avenue, have been published by Wild Child.

We Are the Dead

The First was all that we knew in our city of dead. His thoughts were our thoughts. We were the enactors of His will. We had no purpose but His purpose. And in our ignorance, we believed that this was good.

Within our conscious there are but scattered echoes of what was before the First. They are the remnants of His memories, fleeting visions that we embrace when they come and abandon when they are gone. Up until now, they have been useless to me. Up until now, I have not needed to know.

Now, I think they are more important than anything. They are certainly more important than this existence we lead, this *unlife*.

The flashes. They are brief. There are colors I have not seen before. Something bright and beautiful springs up from the ground, and the sky is not covered in black and grey clouds. Blue, I think is the word. I've heard it fall from the First's lips. It is a word that means water, on earth and in the skies. And green. It is a word that means life, life abundant.

At one time, the world was not this cracked and barren desert of machine and sand. We strange creatures built from remnants of the rotting dead had life once. We embraced the blue, and we loved the green.

In the visions of the First there is something else, something we are all too familiar with. Fire. Endless torrents of it, falling and crashing and waving, destroying the blue, consuming the green. It is all around us and it is caused by us. All around there is death. All around there is sickness. The First's most vivid memory of what we've come to call the Dark Time is of a woman with pale skin covered in black spots along her arms and face. The black spots are a parasite. It is eating her alive.

The First was not a God then as he is now, but he was a man. He discovered a way to bring men back after they'd crossed over into darkness. A way to reanimate the dead. A chemical in his bloodstream made it all possible. From his blood secretes the life which we all need. That is why we are all connected to the First.

He said something strange about it once and smiled as if it were a joke, "*The blood is the life.*"

He made machines. The machines became a part of us, the remnants of the scattered and diseased bodies. We made the city. The city was made to keep the First alive. Every tube, every building is pumping and creating to keep the vessels of the First breathing. He sleeps and dreams now; through his dreams, we are given order.

Order is created through a system of government he has set up for us in the form of three classes of people: the diggers, who excavate the caverns below to create more room for our expanding city; the builders, who carve the tubes, the pipes, and the steel to create our monolithic towers that pump life into the heart of the First and through Him into us; and the keepers, it is they who tend the Wall.

The Wall is where we rest. The tubes that connect our limbs cannot hope to sustain us. So as we grow older, more are necessary for us to function. The First created the chemical to harden our parts like marble so as to stave off decay, yet this leads to the gradual slowing of our movements, until one day, we become like living statues, now secreting a chemical of our own to flow through the city, returning to the First the life that he has given us. The Wall is where we sleep, named for the series of tubes lined in scarlet and the bodies that hang from those tubes, grey like rock, but breathing. Alive eternally, but resting. The Keepers tend to the wall, keeping it safe, ensuring the continuation of its function.

There are three who the First has willed shall never sleep at the Wall. These three are those who rule over the classes. Myself, and two others, who he has called my brothers. I am called sister. The First willed

that we have names, to separate us from the horde of the dead that work in the bowels of the city. I was called Lillith, my brothers, Apophis and Set.

So the First willed it, and so it was done.

Those were the last thoughts of the First any felt for nigh a millennia. His slumber became quiet, like death. Only our continued existence and the soft flickering of His eyelids gave proof that our God yet lived. We placed him in the tallest oblique tower, surrounded by the life-giving mechanics he'd created, attached to them and apart of them. He remains there, the ultimate of our kind, the mighty sleeper.

A thousand years passed. I ruled over the Keepers. Apophis over the diggers. Set over the builders. We thought it was good, because we were ignorant.

Gradually though, the people we guarded forgot about the First, and instead turned to worship my brothers and I as gods. Instead of tending to their duties, the stupid ones began to erect edifices in our honor, in our likeness; great statues from the black stone harvested from the barren earth. I could not bear to look upon mine. It was the first I'd ever seen of my face, and I found a shard of glass to look at my face to see if the abomination really was mine.

It was. Milky-white eyes without pupils, skin not like that of our people, but washed in a frosted white. My nails are red. The tubes that protrude from the top of my head run red. My lips are red. Visible things like veins can be seen along the sides of my face, and they too are red. I feel as if the First made me in blood. I am incredibly unlike the others. Like my brothers, I am much taller than the workers. They are like children to me.

I had my statue destroyed. I tore my claws into it myself. My brothers though, they provoked the worship of the people they commanded. The First would not have had it this way, I think. I think that if he saw how quickly the stupid ones forgot him, he would have wept. Are we still ca-

pable of weeping?

I do not know.

I have never cried.

I know something like sadness took me the day I saw that statue. I saw how strange I was. It wasn't self-loathing I felt, it was loneliness. A god is lonely. A goddess suffers from the praises of her people. If I were to touch them, they would shrink back in reverence and fear. They would not speak to me, but they would hurl their prayers and blessings at my face--such prayers became like stones, stones which stung my cheeks and tore my flesh.

Apophis and Set did not understand my troubles. They laughed at me when I spoke of my loneliness. They'd gone on to new ventures with the rise of their cults, were creating entire mini-worlds of their own. New forms of expression, all for the sake of their vanity.

I went to the only place I knew, the room of the First. Even he, my creator, my father, my king would not hear me. He slept. He slept dreamlessly. Those thoughts that once educated and comforted me had become an aching silence; the mind that had once painted for us such beautiful pictures of the world before had become a barren and empty abyss...just like the rest of our world.

In this room of wires and his cold, pale form, I had the epiphany of sorrow. I saw the room we'd constructed for him, and how beautiful we'd once thought it was. Everything had been so carefully chosen, out of reverence and love for our creator. Innate designs had been carved into the walls where they held the thick, thick tubes of chemicals that ran through several smaller channels and into his back where he hung, crucified and dreaming and giving us life amidst his bed, his wall of machinery. A spherical stone slab rested in the middle of the room before him, his white table, where he thought that he would awaken give us his beautiful thoughts once more. We hadn't imagined his slumber would last this long.

Dust from the dry wind and the grey sands covered this room. It made a mockery of all our sparse decorative work. We hadn't thought to build closed windows, instead wanting to leave the domed room open so he could look out upon all that we did for him. One of our many mistakes. The weather from our harsh environment affected our bodies not, but they were a terror upon the work of our hands. Cracks formed like veins along the ceiling and in the floor. They rubbed the stone raw and faded it, made it ugly like everything else.

This room. This room is like all that we put our hands to. Our desire was to create something beautiful, but in the end it only becomes ugliness. The tragic memory of its former glory makes you wish you'd never created it at all.

We are like our father in that sense, we are like the First.

Was not his vision to preserve life in the wake of humanity's destruction? What is this life? We do not speak to each other. The workers have forgotten how-- their mouths are only good for praise, blindly serving the masters the First put over them. Our existence is meant to prolong our existence, and that existence has no meaning. Everything we make is eventually destroyed. All life is lost. We are the reanimated dead. Joy is but a distant memory.

These thoughts tortured me further. I stayed within that tower for nearly a century, looking down upon our world, abandoning my charges, and watching the decay and the horror that is the world I live in. The sadness created more sadness, and yet I couldn't look away. So I sat motionless, eventually only half-watching the people like ants below me and the new buildings rise higher and higher as Apophis and Set's greed reached unimaginable levels. My eyes became like stone, caked open by the dust and sand, and my limbs grew weary, even without the heavy chemicals or the machinery that enabled their movements. They would not move because I'd lost the will to. I became like the statue I'd destroyed.

I was still worshipped. The stone goddess, Lillith, silent and observing.

It was no surprise when Set came to find me. Such greed eventually leads to competition, the desire to best one another. I knew Set's nature, as I knew the nature of Apophis. They'd eventually lunge to destroy one another, and all that the First had sought to escape would be repeated once more: war. Set was clever though, much more clever than our brother, I fear. I am certain he reasoned to bring me to his side, to bring my dust-covered form from my silent vigil, to bid me to war against my brother. Blood against blood. Flesh against flesh.

All this ran through my head as I heard his footsteps, great and heavy into that room, and my red, red lips curved into a smile. I smiled, because the muscles in my face were sore and could not manage the effort that it takes to laugh. I wanted to laugh because I knew what my brother planned, and the thought occurred to me that we strange creatures of machine and flesh are already dead. How could any of us ever hope to die?

"Sister," Set's voice came in a whirl, a slight mechanical whisper from the gears locked within his jaw that made his voice sultry and smooth. "It has been too long since you've left this tower."

"I've seen what is below," I said.

"Why do you not join us? Grand things are underway."

A harsh rasp came from me, the beginning of a chuckle as my lungs began to work once more. "There is nothing down there that holds any interest to me. Even our changeless skies are more captivating."

"Things are happening, Lillith," Set said, and I heard his voice change. The First had given him lungs that could change voices at will, the closest thing to music that we will ever know belongs to a creature calculating enough to use it.

I turned my head and felt aware of literal flakes falling from the nape of my neck and clattering to the floor. It was a slow motion and

probably appeared incredibly unnatural, even to one such as Set. I could see his eyes widen as he beheld me, seeing my face for the first time in over a hundred years.

And I looked upon him too. Set was every bit as strange and abhorrent as I, I realized. He was not a pale, white thing like myself, but grey like the skies above us. He'd been decorated by our father in black and gold, though by this point the black of his robes were faded and dull, the gold a tarnished brass. He had scrapes of hair that fell about his sharp features in wild, white strands, and the tubes at the top of his head had been fashioned around it like a sort of crown. He had once been beautiful, a work of our father's genius, now a memory of former splendor.

"Look at us, Set," I whispered, my voice like iron after years of silence. "Dead things held together by machinery and magic, what things can possibly happen. We shouldn't even exist."

Set stepped closer to me, his eyebrows furrowing. "For one so lovely, and so powerful, you astound me with your weakness. Our world is what we make it, the First is ancient history, and we are the new Gods. Our people have become nations; the world is ours to control. We could bring...we could bring life again."

"Life?" I snarled. "Is that what you mean by going to war with our brother, Apophis? The thunder of your quarrels is even felt from these great heights. You will not destroy each other, but all that you have sought to create. It's foolishness to even begin."

"There are ways." Set stepped even closer to me. I kept a careful eye on the whirring of gears in his mouth, the strange ways he mimicked breathing, growing more fervent and excited the closer he got to me.

I do not have a heart, but had the First given me one, it would have been beating. The things which are like blood in my veins caused my white face to flush and I felt something entirely new begin to take over me. It was an excited sensation that ran from the center of my waist and spread like fire throughout my body. Yes, I felt hot. After these years

of coldness and silence, I felt warmth in my body and it frightened me.

"These things you speak of..." My voice shook with nervousness, and I didn't know why. "The First would not have had this; his dream was to escape this."

I saw a wide-eyed look come into Set's eyes and he grabbed my arm. The touch of his hand against my skin felt strange. It felt strange because I wanted his hand there. He'd been prepared to meet me with more of his dialogue, but instead I saw a look of fright meet his face. He couldn't let go. He didn't want to. I didn't want him to. We could only stand there closer to each other than we'd dared, staring into each other's soulless eyes, perplexed at the new sensations running through us.

There were memories. Visions the First had given us long before his slumber turned to silence. Yes, we saw the people. We saw them desire one another, the things they did to create new life into the world. We'd never mimicked these visions and these actions for there'd been no need to. We were the dead, such matters were beyond us.

But now, now as Set took my other arm, his actions uncharacteristically nervous, I could only wonder at how long we'd survived without feeling something so powerful. It propelled me to act on instinct, and in his nervousness, I became bold. I had to be with him, I wrapped my arms around him and pressed him close to me, laying my mouth against his shoulder and my teeth into his skin. It was strange and he cried out, but it was not a cry of pain. It was a cry of satisfaction.

We could feel more than just hate and greed, I discovered. We could feel pleasure, pleasure and desire. It was the most vibrant thing I'd experienced since the day my eyes first opened to see the smiling face of the First looking down upon me. We wrestled each other to the ground and out of our black clothes. Our bodies melted together so easily, everything becoming an instinct, it was like we were acting out a memory.

But it wasn't the First's memory. It was another. Visions ran through

my head, visions of something long forgotten. Another life. Another time. In those moments of ecstasy I travelled to a place, the place the First had shown us before. I was alive then, and I was beautiful.

I had children.

I had *children!*

The realization brought me out of that memory and into that terrible, glorious moment. Set was beneath me crying out in agony and bliss. I'd left bite marks all over his naked, sculpted body and his long fingernails left claw marks all over my breasts and back.

"Sister," he whispered, closing his eyes.

We looked at each other. I wanted to continue living out that delightful memory and leaned in to touch his lips. That's what we did when we were alive, we kissed.

Not so in death. Set used all of his strength and pushed me from him. His eyes were wide, in anger and in terror. He gazed at me with a strange look of betrayal, as if I'd tricked him. He covered himself with the fragments of his clothing.

"Witch!" he screamed, his voice coming out like more of a roar as he continued to back away. "Witch! Witch! What have you done?"

"Set, I don't understand," I said. I didn't understand. I didn't understand desire, and I certainly didn't understand his terror of our passion. Pain, more pain than the deep, dark oppression that had plagued me over the century shot through me, and for the first time in my existence, a red-colored tear formed in my eye. "Set, come away from the edge!"

He kept backing toward the opening of the tower. "What have you done? What have you done?"

I reached out a hand to him, begging him to stop. He wouldn't listen. He was mad with fear. He just kept backing, backing toward that opening, toward the harsh wind and the limitless city below. He stepped over the edge and sailed into the blackness below. I heard him calling out my name as he plummeted to the earth. He called out my name!

I fell to my knees as a deep-throated cry escaped me. Somehow I felt that even our bodies were not designed to take such great falls. He could not have survived that drop to the chasms below. I imagined his people, our people, swarming around his broken body and mourning his loss, but not so greatly as I. In those final moments, I knew Set more than I'd known anyone else, more perhaps even than the First. Set and I had shared the most ancient and sacred of things.

Love.

Dear Father, forgive me. I know what I must do.

As the wind howled around me, and I felt a greater loneliness than ever before, I clutched my remaining garments around my naked body in a futile attempt to feel less vulnerable. A thought possessed me. The culmination of all thoughts that I'd had in that room. *The world is wrong.* The pain. The sadness. The loneliness and the despair. We were not meant to be here. The time of man had ended. Our time here was unnatural.

I shall destroy the First, and in doing so, I shall destroy all that he has created: us, and our failures, our decay, and our sorrow. I think maybe that in the end, as we are all closing our eyes for the last time, that he will smile. For only in true death can our isolation end.

We will go into the dark together, hand in hand.

Dorian Dawes grew up chasing shadows and starlight. Strange things fascinated him, things such as alleys between old buildings, and the mysteries that lurked within them; things such as moonlight drifting through the trees in a cemetery; abandoned buildings, and unused railroad ties. He is most inspired by these things and the fantastic works of the macabre by Clive Barker and H.P Lovecraft. When not writing, he is reading Gothic Literature by candlelight and dabbling in witchcraft from the safety of his bedroom.

Screams of Death

Screams of agony fill the air. Confusion and an immature mind grasp only pieces of the reality as the wails of an ambulance signal the second onslaught of help. Standing across the two lane black top on the safety of an embankment the scene becomes surreal. A rusted and beaten yellow and brown Toyota is lying on its side from a failed attempt to conquer the steep curved bank. Flames of yellow, red and the blistering blue flicker deadly from the ground to the now highest point of the vehicle, the passenger door. The heat is searing and sends waves of rippled air towards the sky.

Another scream.

Paramedics arrive in their busy blue outfits of outward calm. They speak softly to the vehicle, and direct each other with precision known only to their field. A police officer directs traffic while kicking empty brown beer bottles towards the ditch. Towards the truck. Red and blue bleed across the sky in warning.

A crowd has gathered although there are only four close houses. Whispers spread as the onlookers wait and continue to listen to the tortured wails losing their ferocity. He is losing his fight.

Hungry metal jaws snap at steel, grating the ends together, creating their own howls. The top of the cab, now perpendicular to the road, rolls back as several men reach inside. He is still screaming. Did he ever stop? Flesh is burnt, sending a ripe odor into the air.

A man is pulled from the truck, bringing pieces of the interior along with him as they melt into his skin. His screams muffled from exhaustion, he cries instead. The ambulance is waiting. A long white sheet drapes over his raw, naked body as he is wheeled to the other vehicle

and strapped inside.

The crowd begins to disperse, the action gone. A tow truck appears and is directed by the police officer. The ambulance pulls away from the curve.

The lights of urgency never turn on.

Melissa Stevens lives in rural East Tennessee with her husband of ten years, her two year old daughter and her three cats. Her short stories, Subliminal Zombification, Wrong Kind of Hero, Janie Moss and the Other Point-oh-Two, The Desk and A Shadow in Time are published in the three Vicious Anthology books, available for purchase through Amazon. She is also an illustrator, having created the cover art of The Evolution of a Conceptual God, by Jim Vires, and interior illustrations in The Wind is My Wine, by Phibby Venable. A writer and artist at heart, she is lucky enough to enjoy both loves daily in the wee hours of the morning, when the rest of her world is asleep and thinking flows more naturally.

Submission Guidelines

The Corner Club Press is an on-line non-profit magazine distributed as a free PDF download. We publish every two months.

Content

We will consider unsolicited material submitted by any writer. Submissions must be original and not previously published elsewhere. We appreciate well-written, creative, and thought-provoking work that has both literary merit but can cater to a wide audience. Simultaneous submissions are encouraged.

We will not accept any form of erotica, fanfiction, high fantasy, or any children's fiction, EXCLUDING young adult. We do accept creative non-fiction. Short stories should not be more than 7,000 words, and poetry must not go beyond 5 pages. We accept multiple submissions, but this must be noted. Maximum of 3 for short stories, and maximum of 5 for poetry. If you're submitting both poetry and short stories, please submit them in different documents. If accepted elsewhere, notify us immediately.

We have nonexclusive rights to your work. If published, all rights will revert back to you in three months. The three month period begins the day of publication. For more information about nonexclusive rights, please visit this [website](#). Upon publication, we will send you more information regarding negotiable rights.

As of now, we offer cash for the best poem/short story in each issue. Keep in mind pay rate is subject to change. **Pay rate is \$50 as of now.** ONLY one best poem and one best short story in each issue--Editor's 'Best Of.'

Please e-mail all submissions to **submissions@thecornerclubpress.com** as an attachment. In your header, let us know if you are submitting a poem or short story, put the word count (short story) or page count (poem), then put the title of the work. In the body of your e-mail, please put a short bio you'd like to appear in the magazine should your piece be

chosen. Also, PLEASE let us know how and where you found us.

Editing

We reserve the right to edit your work, but will e-mail you with any suggested changes.

Response Time

Expect to hear within two weeks. If you have not received a response from us in that time, send us an e-mail asking if we got it, and we will reply ASAP.

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