

The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge

PARANORMAL ISSUE



The Corner Club Press

October 2013



Volume II Issue XI

Founder and Managing Editor

Amber Forbes

Co-Founder

Daphne Maysonet

Executive Editor and Poetry Editor

Mariah Wilson

Prose Editor

Kristina Serrano

Layout Artist and Cover Designer

Rachelle Shaw

Both the cover image and the image of a raven (on page 6) were taken at The Edgar Allan Poe House in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They are copyrighted to Rachelle M. N. Shaw.

<http://thecornerclubpress.weebly.com>

The Corner Club Press, Augusta 30907

Copyright © 2013 by The Corner Club Press. All rights reserved.

Any resemblance to actual events, persons living or dead, or locales in the poetry/fiction contained herein is entirely coincidental.

Dear readers,

It's been a very hectic time for me lately. My mental health has been preventing me from doing a lot of things, such as getting this issue together. I wasn't very involved in this issue due to my mental health, but I want to thank Mariah Wilson, Rachelle Shaw, and Kristina Serrano for pulling together and making this issue possible. Mariah Wilson is officially a poetry editor, Rachelle Shaw is our layout artist, and Kristina Serrano is our prose editor. Mariah and I really needed a new team in order to make The Corner Club Press the best possible issue that it can be.

Now, this is a paranormal-themed issue in order to celebrate the release of my debut novel, *When Stars Die*, which is coming out on October 22nd but can pretty much be bought already on Amazon. The first chapter is featured in this issue, so I hope you guys will read it and will be enticed into ordering the book. The e-book version won't be coming out until some time in December, so for those who want an e-book version, you'll have to wait.

Now there are a number of other wonderful paranormal stories in here that I hope you all enjoy. This was a close call issue because we didn't think we were going to be able to have it, as we weren't getting enough submissions. Certainly we were getting submissions from a lot of other people, but they were non-paranormal themed. Luckily, we were able to gather the submissions we needed to create this issue, so I hope you all enjoy.

Sincerely,

Amber Forbes

Managing Editor

MARIAH WILSON

EXECUTIVE EDITOR



Mariah E. Wilson was born and raised in Quesnel, BC, Canada. She currently still resides there and is a stay-at-home mom to three lovely children. She is also a published poet and an aspiring author who is currently working toward the final draft of her novel, *Unbroken*. She is writing a second novel and has a basket full of other writing projects on the go at all times. When she's not busy with kids or writing, she enjoys reading, crocheting, and bike riding.

CONTENTS

7

Poetry

| | |
|--|----|
| “The Night Is Still” by E. L. Knight..... | 7 |
| “Shaping the Dawn” by Bobbi Sinha-Morey..... | 8 |
| “Ash and Salt” by Bobbi Sinha-Morey..... | 8 |
| “The Question” by John Saunders..... | 9 |
| “I Dream Opera” by John Saunders..... | 10 |

11

Fiction

| | |
|--|----|
| “Silk” by Mara Buck..... | 11 |
| “Rosamonde Calley” by Walt Giersbach..... | 12 |
| “The Candle” by Heather Hofstetter..... | 18 |
| “Dimple” by M. E. McMullen..... | 24 |
| “Fade Out” by Kristina M. Serrano..... | 34 |
| “The Rabbi and the Vampire” by Darren Stein..... | 43 |
| “Prey” by Andrew Sydlik..... | 50 |

52

When Stars Die - Excerpt

by Amber Skye Forbes

| | |
|------------------|----|
| Chapter One..... | 52 |
|------------------|----|

E. L. Knight

E. L. Knight frequents many different Worlds and Universes in an attempt to learn and enjoy life from a comfortable chair.

Living in the country and shunning city life allows the reclusive hermit the peace and solitude he enjoys.

Mr. Knight enjoys a small social life, which is how he likes it, and can escape the stresses of life and the doldrums of boredom through books and other media.

He lives with a housemate and three dogs who think they own the place.

“The Night Is Still”

The night is still all is well
Darkness covers the land—
People sleep to the contentment
Of their dreams
All is lost for the nightmares comes
Then the daylight dawns
And the fears are calmed



Bobbi Sinha-Morey

Bobbi Sinha-Morey is a poet living in the peaceful countryside of Colusa, California. His poetry has been featured in Pirene's Fountain, Plainsongs, Taproot Literary Review, and Open Window Review, among other publications. His latest book of poetry, The Glass Swan, is available at www.writewordsinc.com.

“Shaping the Dawn”

I am never free of the
sparks that have dazzled
me to dust and now the
thread of my heart has
shaped the dawn. It reveals
every scar I had, and the
loping shadows whisper
past. Cloaked in the tears
of the afterlife, the chrysalis
of my fragile breastbone
broken, I choke on the dead
roses that remain when the
wind dies, the shivers in
the absence of the cold.
Words of gyre lay tattooed
across my chest, flowing
through torn veins, having
left their mark on the shadow
I have become. The light of
heaven flickers out above
me and an angel with grey
wings salvages remnants
of my rended dreams.

“Ash and Salt”

Where I live doorways
hang on the quarters of
the dying like black paper,
and I breathe in the dark
with my hands around
your unforgiving heart
outweighed only by the
soul. In my dreams I see
your eyes of ash and salt
keeping all your secrets
hidden like rare gold.
Now your lips are dead
there are no words left
to steal, no voice to lift
in dirge or throng. In
the silence that you bear
I leave my face swathed
in darkness that is not
sleep.

John Saunders

John Saunders' first collection, After the Accident, was published in 2010 by Lapwing Press, Belfast. His poems have appeared in Revival, The Moth Magazine, Crannog, Prairie Schooner Literary Journal, The Irish Times, Sharp Review, The Stony Thursday Book, Boyne Berries, The New Binary Press Anthology of Poetry, and Poetry Bus and Riposte. They have also appeared online at The Smoking Poet, Minus Nine Squared, The First Cut, The Weary Blues, Burning Bush 2, Weekenders, Spinoza Blue, The Linnet's Wings, In Other Words, and Poetry 24.

John is one of three featured poets in Measuring: Dedalus New Writers 1, published by Dedalus Press in May 2012. He is a member of the Hibernian Poetry Workshop and a graduate of the Faber Becoming a Poet 2010 course. He was shortlisted in the 2012 inaugural Desmond O'Grady Poetry Competition.

His second full collection, Chance, was published in April 2013 by New Binary Press.

“The Question”

The sky is arced like a black canvas
and shrouds us as if we are shameful secrets
of a deity no longer interested in our presence.

We stand like statues, listen, hope to witness
the evidence, the dance of winter trees,
claps of night creatures, laughter of water,

but no, quiet fills our ears, dark floods
our eyes, our taught skin made tighter
by the pins and needles of frosted air

hinting that we are alone in this night world,
leaderless, aimless, faithless, no master
to steer us towards our uncertain destiny.

It comes upon us from behind, a sheet of light
ascends over the lake, spreads over fields,
floods ditches, sanctifies every living thing

with its luminance and settles once and for all
the question. Protected by our new fidelity
we lie deep in the warm bed of certainty.

“I Dream Opera”

Unable to untangle dreams from reality,
her red lips glossed, fingertips iced,
she laid her warm body on cool marble,
slipped into the crevice of transcendence.

Her breath a tornado in her throat,
a storm of flies around her head,
she was a symphony at a black tie concert,
a philharmonic orchestra in cadence.

In this place of fugue she flourished,
a volcano in the heat of outbreak,
her voice shooting notes from the stage,
Rondos like rounds from a semi-automatic.

When her cannon was spent, she bowed,
blood flowed in every victim in the crowd.

Mara Buck

Mara Buck writes and paints within a self-constructed hideaway in the Maine woods—she hopes to leave soon. She’s been published in many of the usual and unusual places, keeping an open spot on the mantel for a forthcoming Nobel Prize. She dusts the spot often and indulges in unnecessary humor whenever possible. She intends to tweet and blog sometime in the twenty-first century.

“Silk”

I lie on my bed. My silk pajamas are *charmeuse*, unbearably soft, shockingly expensive, an extravagance in designer mauve, clinging to my body as eloquently as if created for me alone. A subtle breeze caresses from the open window and the silk moves along my leg, delicate as the touch of a courting lover.

Two ruby specks bloom on the silk. Tiny puncture wounds. Pinpricks. I feel giddy, dizzy, muzzy-headed. A brain afizz with champagne bubbles is not an unpleasant sensation.

She appears. Confident.

Arachnid eyes never blink. How does she see me? Surely not as I view her. I smile down at her, a smile unreturned, yet we are connected in the greatest intimacy.

I lie here as the room spins and she spins and I am wrapped and I find that I no longer care in the slightest, for I am swathed in silk.

Walt Giersbach

Walt Giersbach's fiction has appeared in Bewildering Stories, Big Pulp, Every Day Fiction, Gumshoe Review, Liquid Imagination, OG Short Fiction, Over My Dead Body, Pif Magazine, Pulp Modern, r.kv.r.y, The Story Shack, Short Fiction World, The World of Myth, and a dozen other publications, including The Corner Club Press. Two volumes of short stories, Cruising the Green of Second Avenue: Vol. 1 & 2, are available at Barnes & Noble and other online booksellers.

FICTION

“Rosamonde Calley”

“All the time ‘Where’s Rosamonde?’ Dammit, Mortimer, you’re making me insane.” Gretchen Schumacher toyed with the water bottle on her desk.

“But she’s a literary enigma. Rosamonde Calley was short-listed for a Man Booker prize for *Backtracking the Trail Home*.”

“Blah, blah, blah. A poignant story of hope triumphing over economic adversity.”

The angel of death across from Mortimer was about five feet tall, in her late forties, with blonde bangs arranged like a Kevlar helmet. Her smile was as tailored as her suit and complexion.

“The fascinating part is she’s failed to respond to interview requests or to do talk shows. I’ve e-mailed her numerous—”

Gretchen groaned. “Mortimer...”

He plunged ahead. “The reason this is critical is that no one reads books anymore, unless they’re page turners or bodice rippers from an airport book stall. Jonathan Franzen says he never finishes a book because they disappoint him. James Salter, the prose king bar none, said the same thing. Long works are dead. Except for Rosamonde’s books.”

“Your Rosamonde is still alive?” The assistant publisher barked a laugh.

He wanted to shriek *Yes!* but confessed, “I don’t know. It’s been two years since her last work came out and sold a quarter million copies. Television producers are searching for her. Publishers, literary agents, angry fans demanding she begin writing.”

“No one can disappear.” Gretchen delivered the fact emphatically. “This Rosamonde is a pen name, a pseudonym for some housewife in Duluth with a houseful of brats and cats.”

“I’ll find her and get her to put her next book in our house,” he declared. He didn’t tell her that Rosamonde had begun visiting him, each night in his dreams.

“*Mortimer!*” she shouted. “The reason you’re here is because I’m letting you go. *Do you understand?*”

He stiffened.

“This publishing house is on the rocks,” she continued. “Nordstrom was just fired, and Bob Parish, vice president of this group, was sent off to collect his gold watch. We’re going under—bankruptcy or merger—if we don’t get something onto the charts.

Sales! That means—nothing personal—we let people go. Young editors. You. Again, nothing personal.”

* * *

Mortimer digested the news with coffee and biscotti in the trattoria downstairs. No job, just enough cash to cover next month’s rent, and then a default on thousands in student loans. Find Rosamonde or hit the skids doing copy editing and proofreading.

Real or imaginary, she was his only hope. Mortimer had dug assiduously through Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social networks for any clues to her existence. Trying to find her was worse than J.D. Salinger holing up in New Hampshire.

That afternoon, he begged for an appointment with Rosamonde’s editor, Robert Dalrymple. The beefy, overstuffed man resembled a Victorian armchair with a chintz necktie.

“It’s a darling mystery,” Dalrymple said after hearing Mortimer’s story of search and disappointment.

“Well, Mr. Dalrymple, how do you communicate with her? Have her sign contracts? Discuss editorial matters?”

“I shouldn’t be talking to a competitor, but we rely on e-mail. She doesn’t answer my notes most of the time. Then one day—*poof!*—a manuscript will show. Isn’t that just too precious? It’s the cachet of anonymity that sells a third of the bitch’s books. I like to think the poor woman’s half paralyzed by some deformity or suffering a crapulous disease.”

* * *

Mortimer felt dizzy as he guardedly dropped money onto the bar.

“Let me pay,” Kumar said, pushing the fiver back to Mortimer. “So, about your mission to find the messiah.”

“Piss off, Kumar. I’m desperate.”

“Let me tell you, privacy isn’t allowed in this new age. Cameras are recording at every street corner. Big data collects reams of personal information. Paper trails unroll every time you make a purchase. How can a person not exist?”

“Maybe she’s like those millions of Americans with no bank account who don’t trust the government and live off the grid.”

“Rosamonde is one of them, writing best sellers? Can a writer create a world and still not be part of it?”

“Kumar, you are so scientifically wedded to mathematics that you can’t accept literary subjectivity, the ambiguity of writing, the nuance of ‘ifs’ and ‘maybes’ that are the core of literature. To you, something is either ‘on’ or ‘off.’”

“I am at least as well read as you, but I mathematically deconstruct books into syntactical quirks,” he insisted.

“I expect no less,” Mortimer said sarcastically. “You’ve reduced the world to binary

code.”

Kumar smiled. “You writers are so predictable, repeating words like ‘just’ or ‘and then,’ or opening sentences with subordinate clauses and using precious semicolons. I apply an algorithm to writing and it bares the soul. Did you know people write differently if English is their second language? White people write differently than African Americans? Women write differently than men?”

“Get out of here. You are the worst sort of pre-literate technocrat, reducing everything to formulas.”

“I am serious,” Kumar insisted. “I can show you a website that will tear sentences apart, word by word, and tell you why the piece was written by a woman. Which your Rosamonde is, of course. Beating these mathematical models is tougher than fooling a lie detector.”

“What’s your point?”

Kumar leaned forward. “Your Rosamonde is a very unique woman.”

“Something is either unique or it’s not,” Mortimer snarled. “It’s never ‘very.’”

“My friend,” Kumar said, laying his hand on Mortimer’s arm, “you are betrayed by your emotion over this fictional person. I was going to say I can’t tell if she is American, Canadian, Australian or English.”

Intrigued would have been a better word. Was she lithe and lissome? Or past middle age, embittered, living alone with her cats? *Who are you?!* he wanted to scream.

His ah-ha moment came in the middle of the night. It might have been the voice he thought he heard, telling him to scrutinize listings for Rosamonde’s six books being sold online by Amazon and others. He got out of bed and opened his laptop. Each listing had received dozens of glowing reviews, but the first always came from someone named Addison Chalmers. And, curiously, the very first review of each book was posted the day it was published. And this Chalmers hadn’t reviewed anything else at these online retailers.

Addison Chalmers was a few computer clicks away from yielding an address on East 79th St. There was a magazine he published decades ago that ended in bankruptcy, then judgments against him for selling the same apartment to five buyers, and an arrest for crashing a PEN conference. Yes, Kumar! This is the age when privacy disappears! A few more clicks revealed Chalmers was an antiquarian book collector. Oh, and his claim to have seen the red-headed woodpecker, now believed to be extinct, was totally disbelieved.

* * *

Chalmers lived in a brownstone building without a doorman. “Mr. Chalmers,” he spoke into the grill of the intercom, “this is Mortimer Breyer. I’d like to talk with you about your work on magazine publishing. It’s for a thesis I’m writing. May we talk?”

He was buzzed in without an answer.

The door to apartment 2-C opened slowly and a man in a wheelchair peered at

him.

“Breyer? What college?”

“Well, it was Princeton, ’03.”

The door opened wider and Mortimer entered a dark, humid room filled with books. Books on tables and bookcases, piled on the floor, stacked on the kitchen table.

“What do you know about me? About *Progressions* magazine?” Chalmers rolled backward and pointed out a chair—the only chair—empty of books. He adjusted the translucent tubes leading from an oxygen tank to his nostrils and waited.

“Not much. But I’m vitally interested in Rosamonde Calley.” It was Mortimer’s turn to wait as Chalmers slumped in the chair and his head dropped to his chest.

“Matter of time,” Chalmers muttered. Then he laughed shortly. “It was a good game, but every game comes to an end.”

“You know Rosamonde.” His statement was a challenge to learn how this hack was a conduit to Rosamonde.

Chalmers nodded. “I know you. Your e-mails to her. Incessant bastard!”

“Sorry, but I have to know.”

“No one has to know!”

“I’m out of a job. I won’t get it back if I don’t come up with a best-selling author for our imprint. I’ll lose my apartment. I’ll default on forty thousand in student loans.”

“What’s that to me?”

Mortimer shook his head. “You could—you *can*—help me. Put your next book in our house.”

“You going to match Dalrymple’s advance? Put the marketing and spiff dollars behind it?”

“I’ll do my best to pitch your next book to my publisher. I promise.”

“Ha!” The old man sat back and closed his eyes. “Why do people write? So many reasons, noble reasons, civilized reasons. Often, though, it’s just a voice screaming to be heard.” His eyes opened wide, displaying a startling shade of blue. “And what about you? I know you wrote for Princeton’s *Literary Review*. You showed promise. A couple of your short stories were good, the others crap. Now, you slog through slush piles during the day and drink at night. Just pissing your life away. I know everything about you I want to know.”

Mortimer’s mouth opened. “How’d you...?”

“You think you’re the great genius able to build monuments of literature! Like Maxwell Perkins was to Fitzgerald? You’re a loser!” He inhaled deeply.

Anger welled in Mortimer’s eyes. “And what about *you*?”

The old man leaned forward until his face was inches away, filling Mortimer’s nostrils with the stink of death. “I’ve sold twenty-four million copies of Rosamonde’s novels, published in seven languages on four continents.”

“Under a penname!”

Chalmers appeared to deflate, withdrawing. “An alter ego, a self that’s truer than the broken down wordsmith you see here. Do you think those books would’ve sold un-

der the name Addison Chalmers? Or Mortimer Breyer? You asshole! Your name is your soul. Mark Twain was Clemens' soul. Lewis Carroll was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's essence."

"I don't believe it."

"You better believe it. That's why you're bird dogging Rosamonde. You don't love her writing. You love her!" He leaned forward again, dropping his voice. "You want to embrace her. Be her and leave your crappy life behind. Ha!"

"No! I've worked for ten years to become an editor."

"You sat in a cubicle and read crap tossed in over the transom."

"Transom?"

"Look it up, dummy. Now, get out of here and let me die in peace."

* * *

Mortimer returned to his cubicle to collect his belongings and see human resources. On his desk was his last assignment: a turgid manuscript about a religious laywoman defining her faith in the jungle of Southeast Asia. When he looked up, Addison Chalmers sat wheelchair-bound in the doorway.

"Here, dummy." He handed over an inch-thick manila folder. Chalmers smiled at Mortimer's incomprehension. "It's Rosamonde's newest book. Needs a little work—very little—but not totally beyond your abilities."

"Mr. Chalmers, I don't know what to say."

"Of course you don't. It's a present. I know that nobody gives you presents, so don't get teary eyed. One more thing." He handed Mortimer a folded paper. "The passwords to Rosamonde's e-mail and her other writings. It'll link to an outline of her next work."

"I'll see my publisher right now! Introduce us and we'll sign a contract."

"Ha! You don't understand, dummy. *You're Rosamonde now*. I'll take the advance for this book when it's published. The royalties are yours. So's the future."

"Mr. Chalmers... Addison, can we go have a drink and talk?"

"You don't need a drink at ten o'clock in the morning. And I've got a plane to catch. Ever hear the phrase, 'See Naples and die'? Give Rosamonde my best."

Chalmers rolled his chair out to the elevators with Mortimer trailing, begging for explanations.

In the lobby, Chalmers wheeled his machine around. "You still don't understand! Rosamonde has taken over my life. She wants to write about generations of people failing under our nation's false sense of exceptionalism. She's asking why her Harvard-graduate character wears a built-in time bomb for failure. She's demanding I write *her* stories—not mine!"

Mortimer stepped back. "You sound like you're channeling Rosamonde."

"I'm no more than the agent of her messages. She's insufferable. Invading my waking hours, kidnapping my dreams when I'm asleep. I've been enslaved."

"But she's a fiction," Mortimer pleaded.

"You dummy!" Chalmers' hands began waving, causing the lobby security guard to rise and look worried. "She a real person in her world. You said you couldn't find her?" He laughed. "She's out there, communicating with me through my dreams."

"Mr. Chalmers, you can get help."

He barked a high-pitched cry. "I can get out, is what I can do. Go to Italy or maybe commit suicide, kill that succubus." He moved quickly out of the lobby door.

* * *

Mortimer spent the rest of the day in Tomkins Square reading the 400-page manuscript of *Goodbye, My Loves*. He took the file home at five o'clock, mindlessly ate something for supper while continuing to read, and finished the book at midnight.

Rosamonde Calley's new book laid bare the feelings of an entire young generation that had been gulled by the promise of unachievable hopes, shattered by fabricated wars that turned soldiers into monsters of psychosis, and suffered under political cynicism unheard of since the Roman orators. And now their every moment was monitored by the same engines of progress that promised to improve their lives.

Rosamonde wrote with liquid words that slipped by like quicksilver, using turns of phrase he couldn't have imagined and metaphors that shed light on feelings he had only dimly grasped.

"My God," he said softly when he was finished. It was a masterpiece. Everything she wrote had an immediate or tangential relation to his own life.

When he finally fell asleep, Rosamonde crawled into his mind like a demented lover. He saw hollow eyes, windblown hair and a twisting visage. She whispered through blood-red lips, "Chalmers died tonight, Mortimer. He's gone. Now it's just you and me. Success is coming and the story unfolds. Our adventure is just beginning."

Heather Hofstetter

Heather Hofstetter graduated from the University of North Carolina Wilmington with a minor in creative writing and a major in film. She enjoys falling off of tall buildings and slashing people with a saber to get her creative ideas flowing.

F I C T I O N

“The Candle”

Black wax dripped onto the floor like blood from an open wound. Each drip seemed to echo off of the solid stone walls, followed by three sets of lungs letting out a harsh breath of air. They stood as far from each other as they could in the tightly confined cell, seemingly trying to become one with the green fungus which was inching its way from the cracks in the stone walls.

The fickle candle’s flame would flicker off one pair of eyes, briefly revealing the panic which had settled there, before moving on to a different set. The candle enjoyed seeing their fear. It liked to watch the pudgy man with freckles flecked across his face. Whenever the light touched him, his meaty fingers would rise up to knead his cheeks and forehead. Almost as if he could form them into different features. The candlelight receded from the man and traveled in the opposite direction until it touched brown leather. Then it flared up to glint off the simple clover-shaped buckles which kept the leather wrapped on the feet of a woman in rags. She was the candle’s second favorite. It liked the way that her unkempt clothes and choppy short hair clashed with the immaculate boots on her feet and was the way that she dared the world not to reckon with her. Within her slightly malnourished body she seemed to hold secrets. The candle watched her trying to act brave and uninvolved but it rejoiced in seeing her barely hidden fear.

The gray-haired man with robes, that until recently were pristine white, was barely glanced at by the light. In the brief moments when the others actually saw his face, all they could pay attention to was how his mouth never stopped moving with silent words.

As the candle watched them, they watched the candle. It was impaled onto a chest-level, thin metal spike in the middle of the room. The black wax cylinder was the width of a man’s fist but only as tall as a baby’s hand. The candle never tipped or toppled from its precarious position on the spike; it just continued to add to the solid black pool on the floor.

“We should do something,” the pudgy man whispered while pulling at his nose.

“Why?” The young woman answered derisively. “We’ve already tried everything.”

“But...”

“Go on,” she said. After waiting an uncomfortably long time in silence, she continued. “Can’t think of anything? Not surprising. We’ve blown on it, spit on it, tried to quench the air around it, and yet it continues to burn.”

The candle flared with joy at its remembrance of their failures and its victories.

The flame was its friend. It could not be extinguished, and thus kept the candle from fulfilling its purpose, even if its purpose was to meet its demise.

The young woman strode toward the candle. As she got closer, the candle's light revealed the three blood-blister purple birthmarks, which, if connected with lines, would form a triangle on her cheek. She licked the thumb then forefinger of her scarred left hand. Without pause she brought her two fingers together to strangle the burning wick. The flame flared and engulfed her fingernails. The woman pulled her hand back with an agility a thief would covet.

The candle allowed her to see its sly smile. Bumps like veins which have been filled with too much blood rose along the black wax of the candle. They twisted and turned like vines searching for purchase on the wax. The farther they protruded, the easier it got to see that each thread was an eerie silver that was constantly changing its luster.

As the silver receded back into the candle, the young woman wiped black soot from the two fingers she had used to touch the candle onto her pants. Her fingers came away a lighter color than the rest of her hands since some of the dirt was redistributed onto her pants.

"If we can't put out the flame, how else are we supposed to keep it from burning all of the wax?" the woman asked with a lifted eyebrow. "I still say that we should just take our own lives to spare ourselves from what is to come when it burns out. Sadly, we can't even consider that, since there is nothing here we could use except our own two hands and the oh-so-holy one over there objects each time we attempt to assist each other."

"Well maybe he's ri—" the pudgy man stuttered.

"He's not," she said bluntly. "He's just trying to make the odds work in his favor. If the two of us are dead, he knows that he would be the one who gets taken."

The light flickered over the robed man. It surprised the other two in the room when his moving mouth actually emitted sound. "Woman of Si, you are wrong. I fear for your souls and not for that of my own. If the two of you were to destroy the precious gift of life, you would not find eternal glory."

"You seriously think I'm going to find eternal glory if I don't kill this man?" the young woman said sardonically, tapping her boot on the floor. The pudgy man's eyes rose and fell as they watched the toe of the tapping boot.

"I don't know your past, but by not doing this sinful action it improves your chances for the future." As he spoke the word "future," his hands opened palms-up on his lap, revealing in the low light a deep red resonating from his skin.

The flame sputtered as the candle chuckled at the notion of paradise. Silence filled the air.

"You should really stop calling me 'Woman of Si.' I'm Leeva," the young woman said with a touch of pride when she mentioned her name. "I don't believe in your gods, but since you are so assured that they will protect you, I figure someone should know my real name if they end up carrying my stiff remains out of here."

"Leeva, if you just have faith, you need not fear the evil that will enter this room."

The gray-haired priest turned to the pudgy man. "If you embrace the gods, you will be saved."

"I'll try," the pudgy man said, stumbling over his words. "But just in case, can you tell them that I'm Char, and that my family lives at the bakery on Somner Street? My sister-in-law and I were coming back from visiting my brother's grave when I was taken, so my family will not be too shocked if I don't return. People are taken away by the guards all the time and never return."

The priest spoke in a soft voice. Almost as if he was trying to sound holier than he actually was. "Your request will be granted. Now—"

"Now, we need to figure out what to do once that candle burns out," Leeva interrupted. "They really didn't give us clear instructions before sliding that rock slab across the entrance. The guards said it was for the good of all mankind, but I think that might have been quite an exaggeration. Do we even know what exactly we will be up against?"

The candle's flame grew and shrank so that Leeva's shadow would not disappear from the wall as she paced.

"The demon Altza," the priest stated. "I was there when the prophet had his seeing." The priest's voice became monotone as he recited, "On the night of the blood-red moon, Altza will burn from his prison and enter into one who has had flames eat upon the flesh of both of their palms."

The candle inspected each of the three in the room and was satisfied with their burnt hands.

"Why did I ever decide to own a bakery?" Char lamented, looking down at the rippled scars across his hands.

"My guess is that you like to bake. Anyway, it is unavoidable now. We are already burned and already trapped with the demon candle. We need to figure out what to do once the demon is released and it is inside of one of us." Leeva walked as she thought. The sound of her boots against the stone helped to hide the sound of the wax drips which made it easier for her to be calm, but Char's unwavering gaze kept her from achieving complete comfort.

"Wait, why didn't they just make sure that there was no one for the demon to inhabit?" she asked.

"If there is no human which a demon can possess, they manifest their own body which cannot be killed or entrapped," the priest said calmly.

"Well, why not only keep one of us alive?" Leeva asked.

"I guess they were afraid that said person would find a way to commit suicide," the priest said pointedly.

"Really, I don't know why the guards couldn't have taken the time to explain all of this to us before throwing us into this place. Who would have thought that hand scars could lead to imprisonment and demon bait?" Leeva said, exasperated.

The priest looked at Leeva with disapproval. He had not been grabbed up and thrown in with the candle as unceremoniously as she had, but he had expected her to

see why it had been necessary.

"They were just following orders and were most likely fearful of the demon," the priest said.

"You said that the demon could be trapped once it is inside the human. Does that mean that whoever is possessed does not need to die, then?" Char asked.

The candle brightened. It lusted to see blood reflecting in its light.

"Just when I was starting to believe you didn't have a bit of sense, you actually say something intelligent," Leeva muttered.

"That normally would be the case, but we are dealing with the demon, Altza. Once established in a human, he can make people forget things. Such as—" the priest was cut off.

"Forgetting to capture him," Leeva finished. "So that means that we need to kill the person who is being possessed before Altza has a chance to get fully established."

Char slid down the wall while Leeva talked, looking like a trapped beetle trying to find a crack big enough to let him escape. "Can Altza jump to a new body during or after his human host is being killed?"

The priest stared at the inch left of candle as he considered it. He pressed his palms together as if he were praying but quickly pulled them back apart again as a grimace passed over his face. "I do not remember reading that Altza has the ability to pass from one to another."

"How will we know who has been possessed?" Leeva asked, running her fingers through her brown hair. It was hard for the others to tell if that was the actual color of her hair or if she was just so filthy that the true color was hidden beneath layers of dirt.

"Well, maybe if we try to buy ourselves more time instead of trying to put the candle out," Char whispered, his mind shying away from Leeva's query. He was ignored by Leeva, who stalked the room, her eyes lost watching the shadows. The priest did not comment; he knew Altza's coming was inevitable.

Char crawled up to the pool of wax on the floor and started scratching piles of dried wax into his hands. Then he rose up and slowly started filling in the liquid divot created by the flame with the wax from the floor. Within seconds of the dried wax touching the liquid surface, a silver outline pushed itself from the inner region of the candle outward. The melted wax at the top with the floating dry pieces suddenly flowed away from the wick, over the rim of the candle and onto the floor. It sounded like rain pouring down onto a clay floor. As quickly as the silver ivy pattern appeared, it receded back into the inky depths.

The stench of sweat and fear grew in the confined space, finally overpowering the pungent smell of the green fungus. When Leeva finally spoke, her voice was low with barely suppressed rage.

"You bloody fool! Are you trying to make my last moments come even sooner? Do you just want it to be done and over with? Because I can sure end it for you right this very instant!" Leeva took a step towards him and laughed as he scuttled back into a

corner.

"Like I would lower my odds of surviving. Now, I ask again, how do we know who is possessed?"

"The possessed will be unable to recall the simplest of knowledge," recited the priest.

"So I guess the plan then should consist of us talking to each other once the candle goes out, and whoever doesn't respond, we kill." Leeva examined the priest's blank face as she spoke. "Do you have a problem with that priest? Are you just going to sit idly by?"

The priest took a deep breath in. "I will help since it is my mission in life to help the gods get rid of the evils in the world. And a demon who takes memories from all those he is close to is definitely an evil that must be destroyed."

"Char?" Leeva asked.

"I will do whatever it takes to see my family again." A look of sorrow filled Char's eyes and the priest remembered that even if Char made it out alive, he would not be able to see all of his family. He sent a quick prayer up that the soul of Char's brother should find a peaceful place to rest.

"That's settled then. All we need to do now is wait. I suggest we gather together so that when the time comes, we do not have to search the room for each other."

They stood in a triangle, Leeva in the corner with the two men facing her, each leaning against a wall. Standing this way left Leeva the only one watching each drip of wax.

"It's almost time."

The candle flickered in anticipation.

"I have one quick question," Char said. Leeva gestured for him to continue. "Where did you get those boots?"

A startled laugh emerged from Leeva, and a slight smile flitted across the priest's lips.

"Well, since I might die, I might as well confess. I stole them from a customer of mine just before his business associates came to settle a score with him. They might never have found him if I hadn't let it slip, but you see I really wanted these boots. Never worn and wrapped up as a gift for his wife. Poor sod never had a chance to tell her that anything was ever stolen." Leeva laughed as the wax swallowed the wick.

The sound of bone hitting rock echoed across the room as Char's fist rammed into Leeva, knocking her head against the cave wall.

"Leeva?" the priest asked, hoping to find who the demon had inhabited.

"Whhaa..." Leeva murmured, still in shock from the blow.

"Altza! You do not belong in this world. Be gone!" The priest's fingers reached out and wrapped around the warm, vulnerable flesh of her throat. The blisters enveloping his hands popped and caused pain to shoot up his wrists, but he tightened his grip. He could feel warm blood seeping beneath his fingernails as they bit through vulnerable skin. Every few seconds, a weak wheeze would make its way through Leeva's crushed

windpipe. Hands scratched lightly at the rough fibers in his robe but did no damage to his body. Leeva's hands stopped reaching for him as the pulse beating beneath his grasp slowed to stillness. The priest released his hands from the cooling flesh and slowly slid the lifeless body to the ground.

"May the gods watch over your soul." The priest wiped his watering eyes with his fingertips and used them to close the open yet unseeing eyes so he would not have to see their gaze when light would come back into the room.

"Char, it is done. My mission is complete. You will be able to return to your family. The guards will let us out when the sun next sets."

"How do you know this?" Char asked hollowly.

The priest understood the man's shock. He would have nightmares of Leeva for all the years left in his life.

"I was chosen by the prophet to defeat Altza. Before the red moon, I burned my hands so I could be in this room." The priest wrapped his hands in the fabric of his robe, hoping that he could stop any blood which might be swelling from them.

"So, Altza is truly gone?" Char asked with a hint of happiness ringing in his voice.

"Yes, along with Leeva's poor soul," the priest whispered.

They sat there in the darkness. Neither of them speaking. Each secretly trying to make peace within themselves. It took them by surprise when the slab of rock was pushed away, and the glare of torchlight illuminated the bloody scene before them.

"Did everything go according to plan?" asked a guard who had been obscured by the torchlight.

"The plan? Ah, yes. It took over the woman's body. We should pray for her soul," the priest said tiredly.

"What name should we insert in her prayer?" asked the guard.

The priest paused. "I don't know."

* * *

Char's body walked through the empty streets, wandering aimlessly. The occurrences of the night were already erased from his mind. He did not remember the pain of learning how his brother died or shoving the person responsible for it into a stone wall. These memories had vanished like fog that has been hit by the sun. He would never go back to his bakery, to the family who loved him, to his always-crying sister-in-law. Instead, the shell of his body would weave across the earth, carrying the demon which would slowly empty minds of memories. The candle was gone, and now it was Altza who laughed.

M. E. McMullen

M.E. McMullen's work has appeared in numerous print and online journals and been cited for Editor's Choice, Pushcart, Hugo, and Fiction Library (EBSCO). This is his 34th published short story since 1978. In the fall/winter of 2013, his fiction will appear in Fat City Review, The Umbrella Factory, The Corner Club Press, and BlazeVOX. His reviews of classic short stories appear periodically at untowardmag.com.

FICTION

“Dimple”

Uncle Harold from the old country said Meta was “too schmart for her own goot.”

In grade school, Meta knew too much about too much. Acutely aware of her gifts, she fancied herself an alien changeling. She was nearly six when she first came to appreciate Uncle Harold from the old country, who was a real alien from Europe, if not a changeling. Naturalized former chairman of the Sciences Department at the Rotterdam Institute, he'd retired early and now shuffled through the minefields of aging possessed of one of life's greatest gifts, according to his kid sister, Aunt Marge: the ability to ignore the triumphs and travails of others when it suited him.

Originally, there were *two* Uncle Harolds.

One suffered from a gastric disorder; the other came over from the old country. People confused them. Meta, who learned at an early age to distinguish what Uncle Harold from the old country called “the weak from the shaft,” began her Great Poetic Catalogue of Experience the very day she saw the girls playing soccer at twilight. The sun was low against the hills, a fat ripe tomato. Meta thought about the elasticity of “now” and remembered something Uncle Harold from the old country once said, which was that some people played at life like it was soccer, with “no breznz inschthead auf no hans.”

“My name is a learned borrowing from the Greek,” Meta told the class once, “denoting a stage of change or transformation. I've suspected since age two that I'm an alien changeling, here to learn Earthian ways as part of a grand experiment beyond our simple understanding. I have created a Great Poetic Catalogue to that end.”

Ms. Lorenzo, Meta's English teacher, liked the idea of the Great Catalogue, but said she would reserve final judgment until she actually read it. Meta had grown frustrated trying to articulate her understanding of an external world where mini-forevers were lying around in the here and now like puddles of water after a thunderstorm. The fact that these strange phenomena went virtually unnoticed she found quite astonishing. She tried to find a way to tell Ms. Lorenzo and the class about them through the catalogue but couldn't. They grinned and said, “Sure,” and had no idea what she was talking about. It was like that for Meta.

She practically stalked Dr. Alice Montague, a local professor known for books about breakthrough theories, tugging at her sleeve outside a campus office one afternoon while Meta's sister, Glory, looked on in embarrassment. Turned out Meta had

read the paper Dr. Alice gave to the World Cosmology Conference in Vienna. "Instead of going through all the transmuted tensor rigmarole and imaginary number derivatives," Meta said, "why not just divide the whole thing by the median Chi?" This referred to a fluctuating imaginary number algorithm suggested by Dr. Alice's own work and described by Dr. Alice as "more than the square root of minus one but less than imaginary negative zero."

"Why do that?" Perplexed at this young girl's impudence, Dr. Alice could only shake her head.

Trying not to sound pedantic, Meta continued. "If you divide the whole set by the median Chi, it doesn't matter what variables exist in the Near Perfect Future because all their counterpart virtual probabilities will be confined to the same minus one to zero range you've just created, suggesting that the inability to distinguish light waves in the true immediate past from those about to be manifested as virtual waves in the near immediate future is common to all inertial observers."

Dr. Alice's first impulse was to reach out and touch Meta to see if there really was a plain young girl standing there spouting such unlikely thoughts. Having only vague appreciation for Meta's insight at the time, she later wrote a paper utilizing it to refine her own theories, neglecting to mention that it was young Meta who'd actually derived the solution.

Driving to school, Meta told her sister Glory about the "boundless moment" she'd experienced during her visit to the twilight soccer game, fleshing out one of these fanciful time and space theories that were rattling around in her head at the time, employing the metaphor that the soccer girls' game was "conducted in 'suspended' light," light not unlike the hovering halos of accretion discs at the event horizons of black holes. Meta wrote of her longing, saying that to play in their game was something she'd wanted from the time she first watched. Their grace, their purity of movement, their relentless dedication to action were awesome things indeed, but their ability to play outside the bounds of ordinary time was more than awesome, it was epic.

"They play in the last lingering rays of sunset," Meta said, "dedicated to the pursuit of an ideal. They are heroic."

"Heroic."

"Every bit," Meta said. "It's in my poetic catalogue: 'the tip of a blood-red sun hangs just above the horizon, perched within the endless twilight, a crescent of searing otherworldly fire holding it in smooth, silent equipoise above the rim of the earth.'"

"How can twilight be endless?"

"It seems to work out that way."

"Dusk ends with night, Meta."

"Ordinarily."

Meta might've explained further, as she sometimes did with her flights of fancy, if they hadn't gotten lost.

"It zounds ompassible," was the take of Uncle Harold from the old country when he heard about their getting lost on the way to school, a ten-minute drive they'd made

many times before. Straight east down West Road to where Patterson crosses. Left on Patterson, right on Lime Run Road. Problem was that West Road was torn up for repaving before Patterson and traffic was diverted onto Sycamore. While they were discussing whether or not they were still on the detour route, they missed a right lane cutoff at Biloxi, which would've led them back to Patterson on the other side of the construction.

Instead, they went on a road that looked like the way to Uncle Harold from the old country's dentist, Dr. Lash. Before they could confirm this theory, they ran into another construction zone where they were diverted onto a choking, dusty temporary road with sewer pipes stacked in the median. A wrong turn into the wrong lane and across the wrong bridge by mistake left them in a part of the city they knew more by reputation than experience, passing rows of box cars and flatbeds filled with crushed automobiles. Glory was talking on about silly stuff happening at school, very much caught up in this time-warped joyride they couldn't seem to control, running low on gas, lost on the way to school.

Eventually, they found their way back to the right side of West Road, arriving at school just as the bells are ringing and the tower clock hands came to rest on twelve and nine. A detour that seemed to go on for hours had taken hardly any time. "We are on time because of a mysterious metaphysical trick I know," Meta said. "It's called leaving early."

On the way to the bluffs, Glory mentioned to Aunt Marge about how time sometimes behaved strangely when Meta was around. When they asked Meta about it, she smiled. "I've noticed the same thing," she said, suggesting they drive back over the route and confirm that the time lapse of the trip to school was, as Meta put it, "irrationally non-linear to all 'at rest' observers." This solution proved to be impossible because the West Road detour was gone, the repairs having been made and the crews having moved on.

Aunt Marge, her face red from the wind, prattled on about Jake, a friend of hers from the old days who was coming for a visit. They'd be drinking wine and laying down mountains of gab about people they'd lost touch with years ago, which set Aunt Marge to thinking that there were things that Glory and Meta should know about the family. Sensing her discomfort, Meta paused to scan the sky. She was standing just outside the door. The sun was close to setting.

"It's about your parents," Aunt Marge said. "There's no easy way."

Marge was winded and stopped talking. They found a bench where she could catch her breath. Sometimes Uncle Harold from the old country said things that were strange and out of kilter. It reminded Marge of the way Kate and Alan, their parents, talked.

"Your mother, Kate..."

"Yes?"

Aunt Marge raised an eyebrow in what Meta once called "classic high theatricality."

"Bit daft, to put it indelicately," Marge said, resting her gaze on Meta as if to fortify the notion that Meta should be concerned.

"And father was loony, too, I suppose," Meta said.

"Certainly eccentric."

As if to hurry along this process of family revelation, the sun, which had been sitting well above them moments before, was now poised on the horizon as they gazed down from the bluffs.

"We'll finish this some other time," Aunt Marge said.

Meta smiled sympathetically. "No hurry."

Far below, the game was on between the reds and the blues. From their vantage, they could see that the teams seemed identical but for their colors.

Meta's intensity grew as the intensity of the game grew. Aunt Marge, back to smoking again after eight months off, opened her second pack of the day. If the ominous crinkling of the cellophane distracted Meta's spectator trance, it wasn't apparent. Glory, for something to do, pinched her nose and began to mutter a nasal play by play. "The blues press the attack into the setting sun," she says, "moving the ball to their right perimeter while menacing the goal with charming little dashes and feints."

Aunt Marge has settled in, by Meta so that her line of sight falls in visual harmony with the shimmering edges of the setting sun. Keeping her head still, she observes a silhouetted tree branch for a ten count as she'd seen Meta do, trying to detect the motion of the setting sun. Meanwhile, the blues has scored. That quick little blond girl Meta told them to watch, Lisa, who kicks very well with either foot, got by her defender with a neat little sideways hop and zipped the ball past Pepperjo Johnson, the red goalie, in a flash.

"Get it out of there, goalie," Meta called. "Never let the ball rest in your goal. Not even for a second. Get it out."

"Alan was an alien," Marge said. "There was talk about a forged identity and smugglers. Various ideas floating around about why he disappeared."

Meta glanced up. "My father came from a place a cupful of dorz up the rud from Uncle Harold from the old country's boyhood home near Dansk, Minsk, Pinsk or Flint. It depends on which of those places you like, since he's claimed each one as home at one time or another, making my father, his contemporary, the immigrant they called Alan, of equally hazy origin."

Meta didn't think of Alan as being different until Aunt Marge brought it up. "Time behaves strangely around you, Meta," Aunt Marge said, "though I scarcely know what it means or how it could be. If your dad were here, he'd have an answer. He was a whiz on stuff like that."

"On that subject," Glory said, "you'd think the sun would have set by now. We've been here for a while. If it's your doing, Meta, please stop."

"Kate always claimed Alan had special gifts," Aunt Marge said. "He was quite shy, you'll recall, rarely appeared in public."

"Yes!" Meta yelled, pumping her fist into the air. The blues had tied the game, and the players were breaking, dancing around in place to stay warm like nervous young fillies. The red goalie, Pepperjo, flipped the ball out of the net very quickly, clipping the leg of a blue. Suddenly, scowls were flying back and forth.

"We were very little," Glory said.

The game was back on. The blues were on the attack. The reds were running around willy-nilly as if they'd forgotten how to play defense. Rather than taking advantage, the blues got cautious, started backing off.

"It takes the sunlight eight minutes to reach us," Meta said. "I wrote a poem for the catalogue to explain my muddle: 'It's an idea neglected/but I have long suspected/that this eight minute gap/is connected to the rap/about the expansion of `now'/I just don't know how.'"

"Kate lived in the sunroom after Alan left," Aunt Marge said. "One day in April, when the birds were singing and the trees were beginning to bud, she was gone, and our world was drowned in grief. Everybody loved your mother. The doctor came and stood over her with a sad nod. He closed her eyelids gently with his thumb."

A red defender fell down. The blues scored and took a one-goal lead. "The sun's yet to move," Aunt Marge said, watching the blues celebrate, "and my watch has stopped."

Meta gave her opera glasses to Aunt Marge. "I snuck into school," Meta said, "dropped some micro systems around using spiderweb circuits disguised as lint, strictly in the interest of science."

Aunt Marge lowered the binoculars. "Just like your mother with her schemes, hitchhiking to Alaska to work the oil fields." The action was on again, and Marge raised the binoculars. "That girl. Who is she?"

"Which?"

"Running up the right side just behind the tall girl with the ball. Cutting left and crossing to the middle. Now, she has the ball. Ah, she's lost it. She very much favors you."

How Meta could be at once on the field in the thick of the action and sitting up on a bluff watching had given Aunt Marge pause, but she'd learned not to dwell on such strangeness where Meta was concerned.

"Her name is Dimple," Meta said finally, giving the name against her better judgment.

"She certainly favors you, Meta."

"These events happen in the mind," Meta said, "and OMG, yes, she favors me, but there is a difference. I'm not her. Dimple's very different."

"Different?"

"For one thing, she has a marvelous dimple to die for on her chin, which I don't have. For another, she is down there."

"And?"

"I am up here."

"How does that work?"

Meta paused before answering. "I don't know," she said. Uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had taken, Meta frowned mightily, remembering that Aunt Marge once said she wouldn't have been surprised if a third eye had popped up on Kate's forehead some midnight on the full moon.

"Imagine that," Glory said. "Something Meta doesn't know."

Deemed to exist by a few willingly impartial observers on the bluff but problematically existent otherwise, Dimple was one to hide in anonymity when possible; still, in certain situations, Meta felt her there like an invisible wall, a more confident, more self-possessed version of herself, except, of course, for the dimple.

If Dimple and these twilight girls did indeed dwell otherwise than in the minds of their beholders, and if they were indeed capable of being in the static light of two places at once, couldn't Meta run with them somehow in her mind? There were some quite formidable bluffs there, yes, looming doubly large from below, no doubt, scrubby plants clinging to the sheer face of a sixty-foot drop. Warning signs were posted. The steep sandy terrain was strewn with little intertwining paths that seemed at first to offer a safe path down. No place for Aunt Marge, but there she was anyway, climbing down, scraping her hands, muttering.

This whole getting-lost-on-the-way-to-school business illustrated Meta's plight. "Part of a shared trance maybe," she told Glory. "Ten-minute side trips to the Near Perfect Future dismissed as hallucinations, demonstrating the involuntary bifurcation of conscious awareness. Thinking we're in one place when we're really in another."

"It took longer than ten minutes," Glory said.

Meta nodded pensively.

"You said it yourself," Glory said. "We left earlier than we realized."

"That's certainly one possibility," Meta said.

Far below their perch on the bluff, the dew had settled easily onto the field, a soft, cool blanket in the glow of a blood-red sun. Slim figures moved fluidly through the air, vague shapes of swirling vapor. Meta closed her eyes and pictured them in her mind. Heat had begun to build in her own muscles during her ritual warm-ups, testing the paths of muscle memory with each new move. A blast of cool air rushed into her lungs as the soccer ball sailed off like a breakaway moon.

The players are blurry shapes in the foggy twilight. Vapor trails curl in their wake as they glide by, made of mist and shifting light. Dimple comes gradually into definition. First a shadow, then a vague shape. Finally, details emerge: a face and a body, young and lean as Meta's own. In these mental warm-ups, they run the fields of her image-infested catalogue poem, mingling with the blues and reds, never one with either. Meta thought about the great quantum mystery, that a thing of substance could cross from position A to position B without traversing the space between.

Dimple's face from out of the mist is an eerie mirror image of Meta's own, reminding her that they can exist together as one in this place and time, same and different at once and without contradiction. Dimple's truth is the truth of the moment, lending

credence to the notion that there are more facets to conscious presence in this world than we dare imagine.

Meta's own truth begins with the twilight air coursing into her lungs, which she knows cannot strictly be, that one could be lost within the simultaneity, feeling, seeing, and touching what the other feels, sees, and touches. Nothing in the twilight, strictly speaking, can be, yet, it is. The trimmed turf beneath her feet cannot strictly be either, still, there it is. Dimple runs without getting winded. She jumps effortlessly, executing her soccer dashes and feints with remarkable precision. She is all the more real for being so elusive and ethereal. Meta knows she's met her match.

These images of the girls playing soccer in the mist were never really clear to Aunt Marge, who didn't like going out on the cliffs anyway because the light was never right out there and the footing was shaky. Those old orbs saw the world in a general blur anyway, so who knew *what* you were seeing out there? Knowing that one misstep put you in a serious drop, Marge went anyway. She was not one to be intimidated. Life was full of risks. Like her own mother, Marge was bound to see things through, especially things involving her niece living in a netherland Marge didn't pretend to understand. Family was family.

The mists twist the forms like vapors seeping from the earth, Meta wrote in her poem catalogue, implying substance where there is none. Not so, says a voice from just outside my head. It's a frieze unfolding, carved in water vapor instead of stone, animated by the engine of imagination as tribute to the power of suggestion. Wonder about Dimple. I will tell you who she is, but I doubt you'll believe me.

Poor Aunt Marge, having this strange business thrust upon her, trudging through dust and mud just to experience what she doesn't understand. Marge and Glory find Meta on the bluff leaning against a white rock outcrop watching the game below. They sense energy in her voice. "The blues are one up and driving," she says. "Nobody's ever gone two up."

"We've seen that one girl before," Marge says. "She bears an eerie resemblance to your mother, Kate, at that same age."

"Get left," Meta hisses, but the red goalie is late, and the ball flies into the net just below her outstretched hands. Pandemonium is loosed. The triumphant blues spill across the field delirious with joy while the reds skulk off slowly in small, silent groups. Aunt Marge strains to see what's happened. Her eyes are wide and unblinking.

"The blues have gone up two," Meta says, "venturing into territory where no one's gone before. No more to learn up here." Putting her own little dance to this momentous event, she leads them down the gradually sloping path, looking back over her shoulder occasionally to be sure they're okay.

"This business of planting spy equipment in the school," Aunt Marge whispered to Glory, "shows you just how far she's over the line. Now, this Dimple business, like

Dimple was a separate—”

“She is,” Glory said loudly and abruptly, as if to close the debate. Meta turned to look but didn’t seem to catch the drift.

“I don’t get any of it,” Marge whispered.

“Neither do I,” Glory said, but not so loudly as before.

Meta can get into your head, this much they know.

In her poem catalogue, she talked about hearing Dimple’s voice on the wind when she first came down from the bluffs. Following behind, Glory was unnerved by her sister’s audacity in the face of grave danger. Aunt Marge, meanwhile, remained clueless. She’d had a vision of a poor wretch who looked a lot like her, tumbling off the cliff, a thought Meta put in her head to protect her, no doubt, and make her aware. Meta loved Aunt Marge, which Dimple only vaguely understood and did not necessarily relate to. Meta says Dimple can’t love anybody but herself. Dimple knows nobody could ever love her back as much as she loves herself. These petty vanities and selfish ways, she says, fester in all of us.

“But especially in her,” Meta adds, angry as she tells about it, suspicious that Dimple might think she’s fronting for the Angel of Death on this. Dimple convinced Meta to bug the school with micro surveillance, to what purpose Meta was never quite sure. Meta did it just to prove she could, but wouldn’t let Dimple anywhere near it.

Always near the edge, they continued their descent into the cooling air.

Uncle Harold from the old country had a saying, that something was *ded ass za mouz in za trep*, which Aunt Marge borrowed to express just how they’d finish if they went over the bluff.

Dimple basks in the brief light that lingers at the setting sun, Meta had written about this experience of going down into the twilight arena. *You can see her down there if you peek between the leaves and limbs. One of those crazy situations nobody can quite explain, where separate worlds of light and dark overlap.*

Aunt Marge makes her way down the path, wondering if now is her time, wondering if Meta senses that maybe the end really is near for dear old Auntie M., who isn’t getting any younger. Catching the sweet scent of pine, she asks Meta to slow down so they can savor the day. Glory stays close to steady her aunt, who’s worn those damn clumsy shoes of hers with the spongy soles, leaving each of them to wonder if this plan to navigate down to see Dimple up close is such a good idea. The narrow path is strewn with rocks. Death is always right there, a drop into the dark just beyond the bushes.

Dimple dared Meta to give in to the dark, which Marge didn’t like hearing one bit. “The stars will be out soon enough,” Marge said. “No matter what anyone says.”

Not having much hope for a future romp in Eternity, Aunt Marge tries to concentrate instead on a simple thought in the *now* as she descends from the bluff. Giving in to the dark, she decides, would be the same as going off the cliff, which sometimes

happens to those who believe they've gone off a cliff even when they haven't. These challenges are diversions from any true vision of mortality, she tells herself, offered purely for vexation by this vexatious upstart of a half girl. Still, one truth remained to keep Meta on solid ground. Sooner or later, if they played long enough, one of the teams was bound to go two up. It was as inevitable as rain.

In Meta's poem catalogue, Aunt Marge loses her balance, goes hurtling through the bushes and off the bluff without so much as a "whoops." *Auntie M's a stuffy old flightless bird, a busted kite, a damn fool. OMG, experiencing the very thing we fear most: those first few seconds in space when hope is gone and nothing waits below in the dark but rocks, hard dirt, and death.*

Somehow unscathed after the fall, Auntie M. lounges on the sidelines, adrift in the midst of one of those contradictory experiences one has sometimes in dreams, reminded of the impossibility of a situation as one experiences it. All very mellow. Dearest Marge hadn't much hope for Eternity anyway and would've been content to inhabit the sideline perpetually in a kind of impromptu afterlife, feeling the dewy grass wet against her ankles, seeing the fire in the eyes of the girls as they chased the runaway moon up and down the field.

Dimple, it seems, arouses irrational fears of the dark.

Aunt Marge sees her out there in the middle of the reds and blues, dead ringer for Meta, but very different. Dashing and fainting in close view, playing her little black heart out for the glory of the dark, she is a part of Meta better left alone. You can suspect she hangs out with the Angel of Death, if you believe in such things. When you see her out there in the dusk running in red with the reds, blue with the blues, you know it cannot be, of course, which makes you consider that nothing about Dimple can be. As if to prove this detachment from reality, she doesn't bother glancing toward the sidelines where three shadows watch the game in the fading light.

"I'll tell you about Dimple," Meta says, "but I doubt you'll believe me."

"We'll try," Glory says, smiling.

"She's like Uncle Harold from the old country. She's a native of some far away alien place. 'Dimple is proof we're more than one person,' I wrote in my book, 'living in the here and now and the there and then, coming and going from there to here and back again.' Up close, the chin dimple is darling. Call it otherworldly, if you like, call it disarming, but OMG you have to admit it is absolutely positively darling."

"The stars are coming out," Glory says. "We should go back."

Deeply into the rhythm of the reds and blues as they stay locked in their tense back and forth struggle, Aunt Marge doesn't answer when they call to her, and she doesn't look when Meta and Glory turn and head slowly back toward the bluffs.

"Praise God for the stars," Meta says.

Looming ahead in the gathering purple twilight, the bluffs sit like great stone battlements holding back the darkening sky. The calls of night birds pierce the air as if to punctuate the muffled cries and shouts of the players as the reds and blues play on

into the night. At home, back in the real light, they would find her cold and gone later that very same day. Part of her, they knew, would remain on the sidelines as before, watching the game, left behind forever.

Kristina M. Serrano

After starting college at sixteen, Kristina M. Serrano earned an Associates Degree in Arts, a BFA in Fiction, and a Certificate in Publishing, landing on the Dean's and Chancellor's lists. When not playing "aliens and ninjas" with her hyper Bichon Frisé puppy, she can be found reading, compulsively editing, and seeking representation for her third completed novel, working on its sequel, and dreaming of its publication. She also has dozens of unfinished novels and plots stored away for a rainy day.

FICTION

"Fade Out"

The crazy house was a mile from my apartment. So I had no choice but to visit Aunt Noreen when classes ended for the summer. I knew Mom and Dad just used their faraway-ness as an excuse. They didn't want to make the trip for the same reason *I* didn't want to make the trip. I had way better things to do than feeding my aunt's appetite for pity.

Sure, it was terrible a sweet sixteen had died in the accident, but it wasn't like it was Aunt Noreen's fault. Texting and driving. The poor girl had learned the hard way. Aunt Noreen had been overdue for her midlife crisis long before the wreck. I thought the fancy mental hospital was just an alternative for pity seekers who sought vacations.

I don't think that way anymore. I found a story inside that place, one that changed my life. But here's the crazy part: I wasn't its protagonist.

Halcyon Haven looked more like a bed-and-breakfast than a storage unit for loonies. A mahogany Victorian mansion complete with a doorbell that rang Beethoven's Fifth, and a creepy receptionist that left her perch only to answer it.

I pulled onto the grassy drive, and after I parked my cadet blue clunker, I rang the bell. Phyllis (as displayed by a shiny metal nametag clipped to an iron gray skirt suit) opened the ornate door, not bothering to lift her thin chapped lips into a smile. She blinked her tiny eyes once behind her black wiry glasses and motioned for me to follow her to the lobby.

Like the floors—like the whole building—the reception desk was dark, archaic, and polished. Phyllis sat down behind a very modern-in-contrast flat-screen monitor and smoothed her gray-blond ponytail before pecking a few keys with her bamboo-like fingers. "Name."

Dang, not even a question. "Anneka Abrams."

"Spelled...?"

"A-N-N-E-K-A. Then...uh...just Abrams. Spelled like it sounds..."

She arched a lazy brow that had lost a battle with some angry tweezers without lifting her gaze from the screen. "Weird spelling."

"Thanks."

She ignored my cynicism to rattle a few more keys, then spoke with half a yawn.

“Your Aunt is on the third and top floor, room 308. There are cameras in the elevator, so no smuggling medications intended for the patients.”

“This place has an elevator?” She gave me a disapproving look in reply before returning her attention to the dull tidy desk.

I smoothed my pale, torn jeans as I found the elevator around the corner, which was half hidden by a velvety scarlet daybed. Anyone else would have been automatic Phyllis haters, but she made me laugh. She was the type to assume that every college kid was only an older version of a high schooler who moved away from parents’ nagging to get high in peace.

I was, for the most part, a book-by-its-cover case. My stringy shoulder length hair had been boring until I dyed it apple’s blush red with a blue streak brighter than the other half of a police siren. Skin paler than illness. Not violets, but violet skulls decorated my black tank, and the chains on my combat boots jingled like keys of death when I walked, but that was pretty much it. I’d never tasted alcohol, never was interested in drugs. No tattoos. Not even pierced ears. Twenty-one and still clean.

Maybe I just wanted to look and act half the part. Maybe I just picked creative writing as my major to tick off my parents and rebel against a society of Phyllises. So while no one would dare call sour me “sweet,” I wasn’t exactly a bad seed. I didn’t know *who* I was.

The wooden elevator dinged, and I rode it, adjusting the strap of my graffiti-hued duffel bag. The hall of the top floor was red and wallpapered and carpeted like the modern average hotel, less like a Victorian retreat. It wasn’t hard to find Aunt Noreen’s room. My knock was answered by her smile and wild blonde perm. Her azure golf ball eyes were as bright and witless as ever, framed with just as much mascara and runny liner. Either this place worked miracles, or my and my family’s unspoken theory was correct: that she’d really just needed a vacation.

She squished me against her daisy sundress. “How’s my favorite niece? How’s school?”

I wriggled free and offered an awkward smile, hoping she hadn’t gotten any face powder or clown lipstick on my clothes. “Great and great.”

I talked to her for an agonizing hour before I caved. Call me a callous punk if you want, because this is just plain insensitive, but if I heard, “If I hadn’t gotten a manicure that day, she would still be here,” one more time, I would have slapped the self-pity out of her system and told her to get over it already. Lives are too short to waste on the self—some are shorter than others.

So when I finally escaped, I wanted nothing more than a Tylenol and a good nap. A few doors down, the elevator opened.

I’d never heard screams like that in my life. The sheer torment in the sound spun me around and sent my duffel bag to the floor. The elevator closed, and the squeak of rolling metal filled the hall, along with more of the incessant cries. I had one of those slow-mo moments when the scene is actually happening really fast, but you see every detail as if time itself restrained the charging flicker of an instant just so you could see

all that you needed to see.

I saw a guy around my age, shoeless, medium-length dull caramel hair a sticky knotted flop, his grimace of a face swathed in stubble and grime, his jeans and brown tee too tight, faded and torn to scraps. I saw the heavy leather straps straining against his writhing wrists, ankles, his broad but hunger-thin chest. I saw the cold metallic cart they wheeled him on, nothing but their silvery nametags revealing any sign of employment. And when he passed me, somehow, among the chaos and tormented shrieks, I glimpsed his wintry blue eyes, but he didn't glimpse mine.

They took him through swinging double doors. I followed quietly and caught one just before it closed, glancing at the sign above. "Contained Wing," it read. They stopped the cart by the last room at the hallway's end, as far from the elevator as possible. I watched them wheel him past the threshold as another door opened across from it. A short, stout woman with a mean masculine complexion and a tire-belt waist crossed the hall and disappeared into the room with the guy and hospital staff. Leaving my duffel bag behind, I followed as silently as my jangling boots would allow. Voices leapt back and forth over the screams as I drew near.

"What's the story?" asked Manly Woman.

"Street bum," a middle-aged male replied. "People have been calling us about him for weeks, saying he used to seem harmless enough but lately has been a crazy train run off the tracks, especially at night. Whatever brief medical history he has is supposed to be faxed later."

Manly Woman raised her voice, irritated by the boy's bellows. "Has he had a physical yet?"

I heard the nod in a different woman's remark. "Dehydration, malnutrition, but mainly damaged optic nerves, glaucoma. Poor kid. It probably could have been prevented if he'd had access to an optometrist."

The screams stopped, and a new voice spoke. The deep but youthful tone wrung my heart like the hands of a murderer. "Dark... Only dark... Darker, darker!"

"Tonya, get the syringe," Manly Woman ordered with a sigh. The boy cried the same word as bits of metal and glass rustled, and soon, the screeches faded into nothingness.

* * *

This was supposed to be a place for bored and selfish people to blow their money on. I'd never realized there were actual *patients*.

I'd fled the scene before anyone could notice me, but the action didn't feel right, like whenever you know you've forgotten something but can't place what until the time comes when you need the item.

So, begrudgingly, I went back into Aunt Noreen's room to buy time, enduring her babbling and regret until Phyllis herself peeped into the room to say that visiting hours were over.

Before I left, Aunt Noreen took my hand and smiled. "Please visit again soon, Anneka. You've been a breath of fresh air."

I nodded and awkwardly patted her wrist before turning toward the door.

"Oh, and Anneka," she said just as I was about to step out, "please drive carefully."

The new stillness in her expression startled me. I smiled, feeling a twinge of unexpected sympathy for my complicated aunt. "I will."

I'd honestly planned on going straight home and diving into a hot bubble bath, but my finger hesitated by the elevator button. Why had I stayed so long with Aunt Noreen?

The memory of the guy's screams echoed in my ears. He was just down the hall. And he was probably in a strait jacket. Why would there be a need to lock his door?

The handle was silver and slender like all the others. My hand lingered there for a moment. *People don't just enter a stranger's room, especially in a psych hospital.* Maybe some people are fascinated by real, raw pain. Especially people who have never experienced it.

It was really dark in there. I could barely see the metallic cart in the middle of the room, in front of the bed. The boy's head was to me. He didn't stir, save for the quiet rhythm of his sedated breaths. I crept around the side of him so I could see his face. It was both empty and filled: empty of hope, filled with despondency.

I leaned closer to see him clearer in the scanty light. That's why we both were startled when his eyes opened.

I gasped. He gasped. Neither made a further sound. A long moment passed before I gathered the courage to bolt. But I didn't make it out the door.

"Wait!"

I paused mid-sprint, my knee bent.

His voice trembled in incredulity. "You're like...crystal." *Crystal?* That settled things. I shouldn't have gone in there. The guy really was mentally disturbed.

"No! Wait, wait! Please come back."

Maybe it was the desperation in his voice. Maybe it was stupid of me. But whatever the reason, I turned around. I chipped some neon polish off of my nails in a nervous gesture as I returned to his cart. "Why?"

"Like crystal," he mused. "I can see you crystal clear." I shook my head, remembering what the staff had said about him. What he had said. *Dark...Only dark...* The guy was blind.

I felt bad then, because I knew for certain I'd caused him to have another nervous breakdown, just quieter. I softened my voice, made it as kind as I could manage. "I'm really sorry for bothering you. I...mistook this for my Aunt's room." I turned away again.

"You have really cool hair. And I think you have tiny purple skulls on your shirt. I can't be sure, because you're kind of in shadow. The room must be dark."

I blinked once, shaking my head. That wasn't possible. He'd been diagnosed. How could he see me?

"What's your name?" His voice changed. Still desperate, like he wanted to keep me with him, but not as severe.

"Anneka. Anneka Abrams."

"Edgar Coel." He paused a moment, as if afraid I would run out the door again. "Look, Anneka, I may be strapped to a loony cart, but I'm not crazy. I've been on the streets since I was eleven. They put me in a home a couple of times, but I always broke out. It was nice when I got older. They couldn't drag me away anymore. And by then, I was used to fending for myself. So I freaked out when I lost my sight."

For a moment, I just stood there like *I* was the one in need of therapy. "So you're blind, yet, you can see *me* clearly? Why..."

"Don't ask why," he interrupted. "Don't know, don't care. You're the first sliver of control I've ever had in my life, and I don't want to question something good. Can you just promise you'll come back? I've never begged, but I'm begging you now. Let me see."

I just nodded, still dumbfounded. Sleep. That was it. I needed sleep.

When I turned away, he spoke again. "I wouldn't care if you were a shriveled up toothless man with age spots and a dirty gray mustache, as long as I could see *something*. But I guess I should be twice as grateful. Not only can I see something, but that something is pretty to see."

I furrowed my brows. Just when things couldn't get any weirder.

Shutting the door behind me, I replaced Edgar Coel's sight with callous darkness.

* * *

I'd deeply considered not coming back. But I had to make sure I wasn't crazy. After a good night's sleep and a light breakfast, I drove back to Halcyon, but not to see Aunt Noreen.

I took a deep breath when I opened Edgar's door. The cart was gone. Now, he was strapped to the bed. When he looked at me, right at me, I knew I was sane.

Before I'd shut the door behind me, his blue eyes had been unseeing, settled on nothing in particular in the windowless room. Now, they came to life above a smile so vast I could do nothing but return it. His face had been cleaned, his stubble cleared, and he wore new jeans and a plain gray t-shirt.

"I knew you'd come back."

"Yeah? How so?"

"Because things like this don't happen every day."

I couldn't believe how easy the straps were to ignore. Aside from them, as we talked, nothing felt out of place. I made myself comfortable atop his bedside, and I soon found myself telling him everything about Aunt Noreen. I whined. I complained. He was the one with real problems, but he never told me to "shut it" or "take a walk in my shoes." He just plain listened. And watched. Watched and listened.

And he was darn funny. He had me in stitches imitating the snobs he used to see

buzzing from shop to shop complaining about clothing brands and only being able to afford three hundred dollars' worth of clothes at a time.

It was only when the conversation quieted did I dare to approach the real subject. "So how much of me, Edgar, can you see exactly?"

"All of you. Your clothes, your face, your arms. But everything around you is black."

"I still don't understand it, but I believe it."

Manly Woman walked in then, a tray of lunch in her furry freckled hands. I stood. My heart throbbed. I knew I wasn't supposed to be in there.

She just scowled and shoved past me to set the tray on the bed. She took one look at Edgar's smile, his calm disposition, then glanced at me. "He sure isn't putting up a fight anymore. Whatever you're doing, keep it up. As long as I don't know the details, anyone who helps cure the residents of Halcyon is a friend of mine."

Blushing, I promised Edgar I would return later, startled by how thankful I was to have unrestricted access to his room.

As the days and nights passed, I further surprised myself by how much I enjoyed talking with Edgar. I listened to him, the mischievous stories of how he'd played pranks on passersby when they tossed empty ice cream bowls and latte cups into the public trashcans. He listened to me, about my clueless future and my writing. I even read a few stories from my notebooks to him.

His smile grew each day, so much that, eventually, he was freed from his restraints. I questioned more and more why he was in a mental institution in the first place. That is, until I stopped by his room a week later to bid him goodnight.

There was labored breathing in the dark space. I could barely see the silhouette of Edgar's bedframe, so I shut the door behind me and switched on the floor lamp in the corner. I saw him then. He writhed and jerked atop the covers. His lifeless hair clung to his forehead by sweat's sticky grip.

When I sat atop the bed, the muttering began. "Dark..." he whispered. "So dark..."

I laid a hand on his arm. "Edgar, wake up. It's just a bad dream." He wrenched it from my touch, screaming. He was back to the Edgar I'd first seen strapped to the cart, the unseeing soul blinded by despair.

I couldn't take it. So I shook him until he opened his eyes. Only when they found my face did he relax. For a moment, we just sat there. I counted the rate of his breaths, listened as they slowed. He stared at the only thing he could see. "Wanna talk about it?" I asked.

He closed his eyes. "No."

"It might make you feel better."

"I feel like a pansy just *thinking* about talking about it."

I laughed softly, hoping that would open a door for him. "You're *not* a pansy. You're actually the toughest guy I know."

He smiled a little at that. But it soon vanished. I waited. And then he finally opened his eyes. He looked right at me, but he didn't see me. This time, he was elsewhere, a faraway elsewhere. "Maybe it's the irony."

“Huh?”

“The dream. Why I had it. Terrified of the dark my whole life, and now I’m blind.”

He laughed a dry laugh. “Bet you’re proud now, Mommy and Daddy! Above, below, wherever you are. Although it’s most likely below. I thought I was *finally* free of you and that closet, your fists. A very unique timeout, I’ll give you that. But you’ve been dead years now. And yet, you’re still torturing me. I’m still locked in the dark. But not only for two to four days, your favorite time period. For always. Always dark...Dark. Dark. Dark. Dark. Dark.”

His voice faded with each repetition of the word. I don’t even remember if I fully comprehended his monologue as I took his shaking shoulders in my arms.

Edgar needed out. I was going to get him out. But to do that, I’d need to give him all of my time.

* * *

When I stepped into Edgar’s room the next morning, after saying a brief hello to Aunt Noreen, my heart warmed as he returned my smile. But his smile lowered as I grew closer to his chair.

“What is it?”

“You’re fuzzy.”

“I’m...what?”

“Come closer.”

I did. He squinted. His eyes clung to my image like a last lifeline.

“No change. You’re still...” He swallowed a labored breath.

An impulse hit me then, but I’d never been surer of anything in my life. “How old are you?”

He furrowed his brows. “Twenty-one, they tell me. But what does that have to do with anything?”

I smiled, just a little, the perfect pinch of spice to season the moment. “Because if you were jailbait, I wouldn’t do this.”

Afterward, he told me that kiss was the only time he’d never regretted closing his eyes. “Anneka,” he said as I was leaving.

“Yeah?” I said with a smile.

He squinted at me, his lips an emotionless flat line of concentration. “Just wanted to see one more time before you leave.” After a moment, he nodded, and I walked back to squeeze his hand before leaving for real.

* * *

I never noticed that Edgar didn’t seem interested in walking around, getting used to feeling his way. I was the blind one then, blinded by a new mission. I’d planned to surprise him as soon as I returned from straightening up my apartment. Even some-

one with 20/20 vision would trip in there. I knew he'd be thrilled to get out of Halcyon, off of the streets, forever. And if it meant putting college on hold to make that happen, so be it.

Love, especially abrupt nonsensical love, makes crazy people do even crazier things.

It was late at night when I returned. So late, I debated a long while over waiting until morning to tell Edgar my plan.

In my excitement, I nearly tipped over the lamp when I turned it on. "Edgar, I..." But his bed was empty. Empty of all but a piece of paper. I took the piece of paper. On it were words that I could barely read. Some letters overlapped; some were too far apart. All were tilted and wiggly.

It took a few minutes to decipher the note. Water rolled under the room's adjoining bathroom door. I jetted inside.

* * *

I never knew where he got the pen, and that shoestring tied to safety rails in a bathtub could be so perilous. Never realized how fast water could rise.

I found him facedown, wearing another plain tee and more plain jeans.

That day, I screamed. But that year, I cried.

I cried when I ripped my apartment to shreds in hopes the messiness would remind me of how blissfully dull life used to be. I cried when I was the only one to place a bouquet on his grave. I cried when Mom and Dad brought Aunt Noreen to my graduation, when Aunt Noreen didn't say a word about her own guilt for once. Everything had changed.

Years later, when I finally thought I'd done my share of crying, I cried when my book became a bestseller.

The world fell in love with my protagonist. His name is Edgar Coel. It was strange how I got the idea to write *Fade Out*. You see, I'd visited my Aunt Noreen at a mental hospital one summer even though I thought that she milked her "illness." I'd never believed in mental cases, maybe not even miracles. I thought it was people's own fault if they believed they were crazy. But I learned my lesson.

He left like stage lights. No one notices the actual bulbs, only when someone flips the switch, when the brightness dies. Edgar shined on this earth, and now, because he's gone, everyone knows about his light. He was blind of the world, but the world was blind of him. Whether or not people believe his story, I don't care. I'll always be proud that, for a moment in time, though I'll never know why, I was his gift.

I take my book from my shelf and take his note out of its resting place, the gift he gave me in return.

I can't live in a world where the only good thing that's ever happened to me fades. I was drowning in darkness before I saw you. Now, I might as well drown once and for all.

If I weren't a selfish coward, I would have lived to tell you I love you. But you have your own life, your own apartment. You don't need some lost, caged cause.

Darren Stein

Darren Stein is an Australian artist, teacher, and writer. Born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1973, he worked in the townships and squatter camps around Johannesburg and Soweto during the transition to democracy in the early 1990s. His community work included adult education, Post-Apartheid reconciliation, and police reform. After suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder caused by his exposure to the violence of the period, he immigrated to Sydney, Australia. He now teaches History and Comparative Religion at a college on Sydney's North Shore.

FICTION

“The Rabbi and the Vampire”

I was not there when the girl came sprinting past the darkened workshops and tanneries towards the *Jüdenstraße*, her feet mercifully numb as they slid and slit against the icy cobblestones beneath them. I would see her injuries later, would mop up the blood that she trailed across the floor from her ravaged soles, would tend to the scratches that had torn across her hands and arms from where *he* had tried to snatch her.

I could imagine her desperately weaving between the putrid reek of steaming vats, broken crates, and rusting mechanical devices like a mouse trying to escape a toying tomcat. The terror which drove her through our little gate, left half ajar and unguarded due to years of mutual conditioning from those both within and without, must have been incentive indeed. And so, her pretty blonde hair trailing in the wind, she had run to the only light she could see and crashed through the door into my grandfather's synagogue to the mirrored horror of those inside.

“Please!” she cried, coming to rest on her knees before the crowd of bearded men, who, like some pastiche from the fairytale of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, stared down at this alien creature, young and beautiful and in obvious distress. They with their *yarmulkes* and *tzitzit*, all dressed in modest black suits with only their age, height, and girth appearing to differentiate them. She, conversely, wore a white dress, its hems and arms stained with blood, wet from the freezing snow.

“Please!” she begged. “I seek sanctuary.”

All eyes turned, as they naturally would on any complex question, to the Rabbi—my grandfather, who had risen from his chair at the end of a long table covered in holy books. His dark brown eyes stared at the young woman from his own worn and startled face. He stroked his long silver beard anxiously and then appeared to make a decision.

“Bring bandages, boiling water, and honey to help disinfect her wounds,” he said to the men standing beside him.

“Abraham,” he turned to me, “go and get your mother and sister. It is not right for us to be alone with this woman.” So begrudgingly, then only ten years old, I had run back to my home to do as my grandfather had asked. My mother, already dozing

after the day's exertion, stirred uncomfortably but followed me with my sixteen-year-old sister to the synagogue.

When we returned, someone had placed the girl in a chair and fetched a glass of water from which she was drinking eagerly. Levi Cohen, one of my grandfather's students, had lifted her legs upon a saddlebag and was examining the wounds beneath her feet.

"There are pieces of glass wedged between the webbing of her toes." He grimaced. "She will need to have them removed to prevent serious infection."

A pained expression crept across the girl's face. "Please," she said, addressing my grandfather, who she now recognised as a leader. "Please grant me sanctuary."

My grandfather looked at her thoughtfully, and then sat down on a chair beside her so that he could speak to her face to face. He seemed more comfortable now that my mother and sister were there.

"We cannot give you sanctuary, my dear," he said, "because we have no such thing as *sanctuary*. Your people, I regret to say, have never recognised the sanctity of our places of worship and study. They have attacked our synagogues and yeshivas with complete disregard for their holiness, and so, I cannot offer you the protection of a place that will be recognised as off limits to those who might wish to harm you."

The girl's eyes dropped in despair.

"What we *can* do," my grandfather continued, "is hide you."

The girl looked up hopefully. "Can you? I mean, I am not sure if you can."

"Then you will need to tell us who exactly you are fleeing from."

She gave him a fearful look and glanced around the room at the bearded faces of the congregation.

"Perhaps, gentlemen," said my grandfather to his congregants, "it would be best if you all went home. My family and I are more than able to care for this young girl."

"We thank you for thinking of our safety, Rabbi," motioned one of the elderly men, "but whatever danger she has brought into the ghetto will affect us all. There is no point trying to martyr yourself."

"Indeed." My grandfather nodded. "You are right. But perhaps we can diminish the impact of it."

The men looked at him uncertainly.

"Please," he said reassuringly, "if there are to be consequences, it would naturally be better if you were all with your families. Go home through the rear exit and say psalms for us. We will meet again for prayers in the morning."

So once again, they bowed to his wishes and shuffled off in silent conversation, looking back with concern at the young woman and our little family gathered around her.

My mother took over the binding of her feet while my sister washed the blood from her arms, and I tried as gently as possible to bandage them with linen strips.

"I think," she said, "it was an aristocrat."

My grandfather raised his eyebrows while my mother began to shake nervously.

"He came into the city from the castle in the mountains. He told my parents he was a relative of the Count."

My grandfather watched her apprehensively.

"I see," he said after a few moments of hesitation. "I understand you must be very frightened."

She was breathing quickly again. "I think he means to kill me. I think he wanted to...eat me."

My sister squealed and then brought her fist to her mouth out of embarrassment. My mother turned to my grandfather.

"Papa," she cried, "she cannot stay here! She is a danger to us all."

My grandfather placed his hand reassuringly on my mother's shoulder.

"I understand the nature of the situation," he said, smiling, "and I appreciate your advice. It is not without its virtue." He then turned to my sister. "Chana. Get this young lady one of your Sabbath dresses." My sister's eyes widened in horror. "I will buy you a new one."

And though my sister seemed uncomfortable with this prospect, the payoff seemed to appease her and she hurried home to pick out one of her least favourite outfits.

I took over my sister's role as nurse and tried my best to wash and clean her wounds with a moist cloth before daubing honey over the cuts and scratches. As the girl winced at my touch, I bandaged her arms with twists of fabric, but she did not resist. Far worse was my mother's attempts to draw the splinters and glass from her savaged feet, and I could see her biting her lip in order to resist the temptation to withdraw her limbs.

When my sister returned with some clothing, my grandfather stood and ushered me towards the corner of the room. There we stood staring at the blank wall, neither speaking nor moving as the women helped her into the clean garments.

"Thank you," she said notably to my sister, who she recognised for having given up one of her dresses.

My sister smiled and nodded politely but did not speak, looking at her beautiful visage with caution.

"You have cared for the stranger," my grandfather purred. "A great mitzvah, a good deed. And now you must return home," he said earnestly.

"But Papa..." my mother tried to argue, but my grandfather raised a finger, and as always, my mother showed complete obedience.

"Try to mop up the blood with some lemon juice to hide the smell, and then hurry home. Lock the doors and do not open them until I return. You too can say psalms for me," he said, assuring her that this would be the most constructive act she could perform.

"Abraham," he then turned to me, "before you join your mother and sister, you will show this young lady the recess where you and your friends hide behind the

aron kodesh. Help her lie comfortably and then wall the space around her with holy books before pulling back the bookshelf to conceal the opening.”

I frowned as I slowly processed all he had asked me and then directed the young girl towards the raised platform at the end of the room. The aron kodesh housed the holy Torah in what amounted to a curtained cupboard. Behind it was a small recess just large enough for two adults to sit side by side. Limping and clearly in a lot of pain, the girl struggled to crawl behind the wooden fixture, her new dress snagging on a wooden splinter and ripping her replacement clothes. Then suddenly from outside came a loud piercing screech as if from some type of animal. The girl froze in terror and looked back at my grandfather.

“You will have to hide with her, Abraham,” said my grandfather earnestly. “Quickly now, and do not make a sound, no matter what you see or hear.”

I pulled the bookshelves closed behind us and stacked some prayer books in front of the cracks to try and make our presence less apparent. While the girl hyperventilated in fear, I knelt down and pressed my eye against a tiny hole in the aron kodesh, just making out my grandfather in the hazy view it afforded.

Somehow, he did not seem frightened, but rather determined. He looked towards the entrance to the synagogue and then spoke out in a loud and clear voice.

“You need not continue to wait for me to exit the building,” he said. “You may enter if you so wish!”

And in an instant, another presence was in the room.

“How very gracious,” said a tightly clipped, sardonic voice. A tall man dressed in elegant dark green garments stood before my grandfather. He had sharp, pale features and a black moustache and sideburns that grew thinly across his face.

“*Shalom Aleichem*,” said my grandfather.

The man’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “I believe you might have something that belongs to me, Jew,” said the man offhandedly as his eyes studied the room. He gazed down at the book-strewn table, but appeared to be careful not to touch anything.

“Everything ultimately belongs to God.” My grandfather bowed.

“Indeed.” The man smiled. “Alas, it seems there is little difference between our preachers and yours.”

He proceeded to pace up and down, investigating his environment while my grandfather remained impassive. “Reality,” he said, “is somewhat different. Everything ultimately belongs to those with power here on Earth.”

“You seem agitated, Sir,” said my grandfather.

“We both know a girl came into the ghetto,” the man snapped. “I can smell her. Now hand her over, Jew!” he shouted, approaching my grandfather but did not touch him.

The girl grabbed my arm as I watched, and I unconsciously took her hand. My grandfather, however, looked into the man’s eyes.

“You have clearly not been doing this for very long,” he mused, regarding the man carefully.

"Excuse me?" he growled.

"This," he motioned back and forth, referring to the two of them. "The count it seems has not instructed you about your history."

"What?"

"Forgive me," my grandfather demured, "*our* history."

The man appeared to be confused. "If you do not give me what I have come for, Jew, I will rip your throat open and feast on your blood!"

"You cannot touch me," said Grandfather cautiously. "No vampire can."

Up until that time, I had never heard the word "vampire." The girl next to me cringed at the sound of the word, and the man himself seemed shocked that he had been identified.

"So you know what I am?" he said.

"Oh, yes." My grandfather nodded. "But it seems you do not know what I am."

The vampire stared at him.

"If you were to ask the count, he will tell you that you cannot suck the blood of a Jew."

"And why not?" asked the vampire with curious irritation.

"Because we are a holy people, a nation of priests. As God's chosen people, we do not need symbols of faith to ward you off. We have our blood covenant. Our holiness runs through our veins, the very life force that you so desire."

"Nonsense!" The vampire laughed, but he seemed uncertain.

"Do not take my word for it," beckoned my grandfather. "I will happily give you my arm or my neck so that you may taste for yourself. But I warn you, it will be the last thing that you ever drink."

"I don't have to kill you to drink your blood, old Jew. I can simply kill you for the pleasure." He grinned widely.

"True," my grandfather agreed. "It is unfortunate that your kind have long caused difficulties for my people. The count would drain the blood from a young Christian child and place the body at the ghetto gates. The Christians would then accuse the Jews of murdering the child and using their blood to bake our Passover Matzah. Vicious pogroms would be perpetrated against my community as a result."

"Ingenious." The vampire grinned.

"Perhaps," my grandfather said sadly.

"We have known of your kind for thousands of years. The first vampires were called *Am Lak*, the lickers of blood, from the tribe called the Amalekites."

A sense of recognition crossed the vampire's face. "From the Bible," he said. "They attacked the Israelites from behind. Moses raised his hands while they fought off the attack, and whenever he lowered them, the Amalekites would win. Whenever he raised them, the Hebrews would win."

"Well done." My grandfather smiled. "You know your scripture."

"I have not always been this way." The vampire stared down at my grandfather, who had sat upon a chair. "There was something else," he said, approaching the old

man. "God instructed the Israelites to kill the Amalekites. To wipe them off the face of the earth."

"That is also true," said my grandfather. "It is a very powerful commandment, and one which, till now, I have never had the honor of fulfilling."

"What!" cried the vampire, but it was too late. My grandfather seized the vampire by the arms and from his seated position pulled him towards him. He recited in Hebrew as the vampire struggled.

"I shall surely erase the memory of Amalek from under the heavens." The vampire began to shake and scream in agony. "God is my miracle. For the Hand is on the throne of God. God maintains a war against Amalek, from generation to generation."

As my grandfather continued, reciting the verses a total of three times, the vampire appeared to waver and collapse, his body thinning and desiccating before my very eyes. When my grandfather finally stopped, there was nothing but the lavish garments that the beast had worn.

Beads of sweat peppered my grandfather's brow, and he sat, breathless. I did not dare speak or call out to him. I was frozen in awe at what I had witnessed.

As if knowing that I could see him, he raised his hand and beckoned in my direction. I pushed the shelves aside and slid out. Leaving the nervous girl behind me, I ran and fetched my grandfather a glass of water and helped him drink, his hands still shaking from the ordeal.

"Thank you, Abraham." He smiled.

I looked down at the man's clothes. "Is he really gone, Grandfather?" I asked.

My grandfather nodded. "We can only hope that the series of events that brought him here do not bring others of his kind," he said.

Others, I thought.

"It is perhaps time we helped return that young girl to her family," he said. "Go and get your mother and sister and together we will take her back to the Christian side."

And so our little family escorted the young woman out of the ghetto to her home. My grandfather had reasoned that the city's authorities would be less likely to suspect a whole family of foul play than two males accompanying an injured woman in the early hours of the morning, irrespective of their age. Her family was indeed relieved, elated and very grateful that their daughter had been saved from both a humiliating and deadly fate by no less than a group of Jews.

Emily Stoker, as her name turned out to be, spoke very highly of my grandfather and his role in protecting her, as well as how I had sat with her in the darkness and helped stop her from screaming or going insane when her pursuer had appeared. And so it was that some days later, her father, a wealthy industrialist, entered the ghetto and approached our little synagogue. He had a proposition for our family, a way he proposed to thank us and grant us an opportunity that we would never otherwise receive. He wished to adopt me, to take me out of the ghetto and give me a secular education—access to opportunities that I would never receive either in the ghetto or as a Jew.

My grandfather was vehemently against it. He argued that my identity was not a matter for compromise. Yet it was my mother who stood against him. After all the years of acquiescence to his will, she stood firm on the man's offer.

"Abraham knows who he is, Papa," she cried. "He will return to us one day. And although I understand your fears for him, I can see the hope he would never otherwise have."

A few weeks later, I left the ghetto to attend schools in Berlin, then Paris, and finally Dublin, where my adoptive family established themselves after the Revolutionary outbreaks of the 1840s. Although I visited my family in the early years, I did not maintain my religious identity. As my grandfather had feared, it was all too easy to assimilate, to lose the rigidity of Jewish observance when not amongst a broader community of one's own. That was the existential danger of pulling down the ghetto walls. How would we maintain our identity when we were no longer forced to be Jews?

Although there is much that I had forgotten, I would always remember the night where I watched an old Rabbi kill a vampire with words from the holy Torah. I would never forget the one commandment that God had given to my ancestors, to kill the Amalekites, those lickens of blood. So later, when I began to write, I decided to expose these creatures for what they were, to identify their characteristics and extol their weaknesses, so that others would know them when they encountered them, and understand how to eradicate them when necessary. Although some friends have given me hope that I have been successful, results, I believe, will be known only long after I am gone.

Bram.

Andrew Sydlík

Andrew Sydlík aspires to write better fiction, poetry, and criticism. His work has appeared in The Holiday Café, Taproot Literary Review, The Shine Journal, Bewildering Stories, and the anthology Come Together: Imagine Peace, published by Bottom Dog Press. He lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he studies American literature and Disability Studies in the Ohio State University's English PhD program.

F I C T I O N

“Prey”

My body is a weapon. My mind is a weapon. My spirit is a weapon.

She does not approve of my hunting. Something unsettling about it, she says.

Yet she grows closer to another kind of hunter. His kind of hunting is unlike mine, full of blood and strips of flesh. Snarled and dirty and intimate. My hunting is precise, clean, transcendent. I hunt the souls of men. With my bullet I pierce the flesh, with my teeth I rend the hardened heart, and I send souls to Heaven.

My wife, the beautiful professor, guides him from classroom to her office, her hand leading his. Full of earthly wisdom, she says she is trying to help him. I know their bookish conversations are a filthy lie, that underneath is the sinful truth of lust. She knows he is a beast—that he bathes in moonlight and becomes the wolf. A thing of evil, stalking us lambs to devour. He dares to enter the House of God, pretends to listen to my sermons, to be a part of my service. But a house divided cannot stand. The power of God lives in me, and I'll tear down a thousand churches before I let him swallow her spirit.

Evil is my prey. I pray for the victory of the righteous. Where is thy justice, O God? Where is the vengeance for my blood?

Tonight he has abandoned her. Tonight the moon bares her secret places, a voluptuous celestial Jezebel. He walks into the woods, oblivious. I follow. I have cross, holy water, and silver bullet, ready for the beast. He comes to a creek, strips, puts his clothes behind a rock, and splashes to the other shore. Man becomes wolf. Finally, he sees me. He snarls.

I raise the pistol, silver bullet in the chamber. My body is a weapon. My mind is a weapon. My spirit is a weapon.

I pray.

* * *

Sometimes, as I wake, I see images of trees and rivers and mountains. Other times, I wake with the images of streets and power lines and buildings. I am never sure whether these are memories, dreams, or what I'm seeing at that moment.

I hunt the hare, the squirrel, the deer. I hunt books, clothing, car keys.

I ask her: Am I a man who dreamed that he was a wolf, or a wolf who dreamed that he was a man?

She says: I don't know. Could be either, could be both. In the legends, souls could get mixed up, go to the wrong bodies. Or people could have both a human soul and a beast soul.

She knows the legends—her studious eyes have gone over all the books in the library on this stuff. She gives lectures on these myths and folklores. She found me out, hunted me down, uncovered my secret. I don't know these stories; I'm afraid to read them, afraid they will confirm that I'm a monster.

I pray. I used to grip my rosary on moonlit nights, but the whispers always turned into growls, and the only god who answered was the luminous yellow eye of the night. I looked into that eye and saw myself: a wolf, a hunter. The memory of the things I killed and ate as a wolf made me, during my hours as a man, into a vegetarian. The metallic taste and pungent stench of raw flesh and innards. The look of terror in my prey's eyes just before I leapt, before its expression gave way to acceptance and peace. A split second of heaven, perhaps the longest time any creature will have on this earth.

I'm glad she found me. She made me hate what I am less. Made me think not just of the predator, but of the joyous animal playing with crows, who loves the music of frogs and owls, and the feel of dirt and grass beneath my paws as I run. How I would rest in a thicket, calmed by the smell of pines, blackberry bushes, the distant screech of a hawk and nearby twitter of chipmunks. Knowing the peace of wild things.

I listen to the harsh honks of geese, and I know I don't have to be good. But I want to be good. My heart swells with love for her, for the creatures around me, for God. I ask if her husband can help; even if he isn't Catholic, we love the same Christ. But she says that he's watched too many horror movies and read too many hellfire sermons. Maybe I have, too.

I've decided. I'll go into the woods, leave my humanity behind a rock, and let God take care of the rest. As the wolf, I don't worry about good and evil. And if I'm killed by another wolf, or a human hunter, or fall from a cliff, it won't matter whether I am predator or prey.

Amber Skye Forbes

Amber Skye Forbes is a dancing writer who prefers pointe shoes over street shoes, leotards over skirts, and ballet buns over hairstyles. She loves striped tights and bows and will edit your face with a Sharpie if she doesn't like your attitude. She lives in Augusta, Georgia where she writes dark fiction that will one day put her in a psychiatric ward...again. But she doesn't care because her cat is a super hero who will break her out.

Chapter One

The sound is a dagger scraping crosshatches on a frosted windowpane, its echoes loud in this insensible room I've been locked in for the past few days. I want to remedy my fears over the sound, but I'm more terrified of the impending trials that will determine my readiness to be professed in the Order of Cathedral Reims. The trials are the reason I have been locked in here.

Colette sits beside me, lost in knitting a scarf she has been working on for a week—the amount of time we've been trapped in here with minimal food, water, and sanity. Her ability to shut out the world with a click of the needles is something I have always envied. For her, the world is nonexistent.

But not for me.

The sound strips my nerves raw, so I tighten my shawl and rise from the creaking mattress. My boot-clad feet meet the floor, and in spite of my stockings, cold still shoots through the soles, hibernating in my bones. Pulling in a deep breath of biting air, I tiptoe over to the door and press my eye to the keyhole that overlooks a bright hallway. The air freezes in my chest. I knew I heard those blasted shadows, the eerie, almost impossible sounds they make whenever their black cloaks trail along the cobbled floors of Cathedral Reims. Sometimes I wonder if they're witches, people born of the Seven Deadly Sins and considered worse than murderers in the eyes of the law. Then I remember my little brother is nothing like them. They are mere shadows. Mere shadows.

Two of them stand outside the room. I recognize them. The tall one is Asch, and the little one is Sash. I don't know where I heard their names. Here, in my dreams, in nightmares, or somewhere else.

I wish they would go away. I wish, I wish, I wish. I close my eyes. Open them. They are still there. Why must they be here? Theosodore, our Mother Superior's lackey, could gather us any moment for the first trial, a trial that will test everything we are made of, and here are Asch and Sash teasing my nerves with their cold, white fingers. But I don't know what it is about them. They haven't done anything in the two months since I've started seeing them, but their presence makes sharp fear burrow into my muscles and knot them. I believe I'm the only one who can see them. This frightens me. Perhaps waiting for these trials has made me mad.

Colette's voice rises behind me, a quiet thing in the tremors of my mind. "Are you searching for those shadows again?"

I look over my shoulder and into eyes that reflect a blue sky. I have no reason to tell her that I am. She puts down her knitting and tightens the standard gray shawl given to all girls being tested for the Professed Order. Winters are bitter in the city of Malva, especially in this winter of 1880, though the unpleasant chill is a mere prologue to the upcoming trials.

"Amelia, it's stress. We've all been stressed about these trials." She shows me her bloodied fingers. "See? I've bitten them to the nub! Now why don't you come over and let me braid your hair?"

I shake my head. I will admit nothing. And yet, I don't know why I can see them and Colette can't, or why they're even here. I keep opening my eyes and closing them, hoping they will disappear. But they don't. For whatever cryptic reasons they have, they are here and have been watching us all for the past two months.

Colette puts a hand on my shoulder that I shrug off. "Stop this nonsense, Amelia. You know how fretful you make me when you act like this. It's stress. I promise you. Just stress."

Stress. Yes, just stress. But does stress truly conjure shadows of the darkest thoughts in one's mind? I thought of tearing my hair out in clumps to reduce the stress of these trials. While I have awaited this period in my time as a sister, knowing that my performance hinges on whether or not I stay and continue on as a nun is trying. I don't want to go home. I can't go home. Home is where I'd spend days in my room, sometimes comforted by prolonged sleep, other times tortured by an unquiet mind. Cathedral Reims was the only thing able to give me some purpose, and here I am, and here is where I need to stay.

I turn back toward the door and curl my fingers against it, tapping my nails on the wood. I will not argue with Colette. Even trying to convince myself they are not real is like trying to convince one of our priests to remain celibate.

"Don't bother with me, Colette. I'll be—" Wailing erupts far down the corridor. The sound is loud enough to break the icicles clinging to our window. I'd join, but I already ache from stress. That crying has been intermittent since we were shoved and locked in these rooms. The trials are that dreadful, though we have no idea what they consist of. The screams of those being tested assure us they are far from pleasant. I look at Colette and gesture in the direction of the crying. "At least I'm not at that point."

She sighs again. "All right, then. Once this is all over, I'm certain you'll stop seeing things."

I hear the skirts of her gray dress rustle across the floor and the creaking of the mattress as she settles back on it.

I first saw the shadows on the roof of the south transept while Colette and I were in the orchard, picking plums for jam. My little brother Nathaniel was

with us, but he was too busy climbing trees to take notice of anything. There were five of them, I remember. I turned away from them and whispered to Colette, "Do you see those things on the roof?"

"What things?"

"There are five of them, all in black cloaks."

She dragged me deeper into the orchard so that foliage and plums obscured my view. "You're starting to lose your mind, just like Sister Marie did. Remember what happened to her? She was so stressed about the trials last year she slit her wrists, miraculously survived, but had to be put in an asylum. Don't end up like her! Don't bring them up again. Ever. If you do see them again, just keep telling yourself they're not real."

But it's hard to believe they're not real when I see them every day, amassed in different numbers, engaged in indiscernible chatter. If they were just illusions, wouldn't I have gone truly mad by now? Wouldn't I have started seeing other things too? Wouldn't I—wouldn't I have ended up like Marie by now? Because I haven't frightens me even more, for what could this mean? Marie's sanity fell apart in just a month, and even then we sisters could see it unwinding when she started hallucinating. She saw things, like the suffering witches on the stained-glass windows, or the statues of witches nailed to stakes talking to her. We have such harrowing propaganda around Cathedral Reims.

Colette's knitting needles start clicking away. I press my eye back to the keyhole. Asch and Sash now speak in hushed tones.

Asch balls his white fists. These shadows have skin the color of clear-day clouds and eyes an endless black. The eyes alone tell me they are far from human. I hold my breath in anticipation of what he'll say. Sash, however, throws a hand over Asch's bluish, scarred lips. Thick, disfiguring scars cover Asch's entire face as though someone took a serrated knife to him. Sash narrows his eyes and opens his mouth. What comes out is loud enough for me to hear.

"You do realize there might be some people here who can see us?"

A painful cramp overtakes my stomach. He has a boyish voice. A boyish voice. He is a child. They cannot be real. They are illogical. They are demons spawned from a stressed mind whose darkest thoughts contemplate all the ways I can hurt myself to feel something other than this impending feeling that I may be inadequate for the Professed Order. But there they are, those shadows, acting, living, breathing, speaking, doing human things.

Asch grips Sash's thin wrist. Sash is such a tiny thing. He has the face of a fourteen-year-old—soft, sloped jaw, a cocky smile that emphasizes the deep cut on his upper lip. Asch brings himself down to Sash's stature, mocking the boy for what he lacks.

"You keep your tone down then. I have no doubt there are ones here who can hear and see us, but they're a minority. No one would believe them, even if they ran all over the cathedral heralding our presence."

Sash raises himself to Asch's chin. "Then you—" He looks in my direction and narrows his eyes.

I pull away from the door, realizing I've started tapping my nails against the wood again. I dig them into the grain to stop them, then pin myself against the doorframe while straining my hearing. Curse my nervous habits!

Sash speaks up. "I think someone is watching us."

I pull away from the door, final in my decision to cut them from my mind so I can cling on to the last strands of my sanity. I will need to cling to those bits if I am to survive these trials. The swishing of their cloaks meets my ears as I stride over to Colette, keeping my face passive so she suspects nothing is amiss. My sanity cannot spiral in the direction dearly departed Sister Marie's did. I sit down and start braiding Colette's tangled, blonde locks. My fingers fumble as they try to remember how to braid.

"Are your imaginary friends gone?" Colette asks, needles clicking away.

I ignore her, sweat beading down my temple. The swishing of their cloaks grows louder. They are not real. Nothing will come in here. The sound will disappear, and I can safely blame stress for their existence. I open my mouth to speak. My voice comes out dry. "I'm just—"

The door creaks open. Colette snaps her head in the direction of the door, while I keep my eyes on the frayed braid in my hand. She pulls away from me like someone screamed her name and sweeps over to the door. Out of my peripheral, the shadows casually glide into our room. They look around like they don't see us.

She reaches for the knob. "T-there must be some awful draft or something blowing down the hall to push open a locked door."

This is too much of a coincidence that their presence would push the door open and leave poor Colette believing it to be a draft. There is nothing illusory about their presence.

Colette pulls her shawl around her. "I-it's quite chilly." I don't feel a draft at all, but I'm not willowy like her. She puts her hand on the knob, then stops. "That's peculiar. The lock has come undone. Faulty lock, I suppose. Well, we're good little sisters. We won't go running from our trials." She slides the bolt back in place.

I'm antsy for the feel of her braid in my hands so the shadows don't know I can see them. She sits back down. I grab the undone braid, forcing my eyes to be lost in the tangled hair as my fingers get snarled in the straw texture. The shadows walk around our room. Their eyes burn holes in our backs.

"I know one of them can see us," Sash says, stopping in front of us. "One of them knows something. Isn't that right? One of you can see us."

My breath hitches. Now I can't be insane. The faulty lock, the blown open door—I can't continue believing they're not real, especially when Sash implied not everyone can see them. Do illusions often justify their existences to the

mentally insane? I wouldn't think so.

Just don't look up, don't look up, don't look up.

Conversation. That's what I need, a conversation with Colette. Swallowing the lump in my throat and wetting my lips with my tongue, I say, "What do you think the first trial will be?" The ease with which the question tumbles off my tongue surprises me. My calm tone does not match the way my nerves feel, like they're being drawn taut through a loom.

Asch's voice comes out in a lilt. "You're imagining things, Sash. I don't think we're any closer to finding one than we were two months ago."

They are looking for people like me then, ones who can see them.

Colette looks over her shoulder, forcing me to adjust my arms so I can keep braiding her hair. "I've tried not to think about the trials. I can't even speculate. I had nightmares when I first heard the screams from the last group Mother Aurelia put through. I dreamt these trials manifested our greatest fears," she says.

I have to tense my hands to keep them from shaking. Fear cannot be present on my face, not with these shadows around. "What is your greatest fear?"

I look up briefly to find Asch nudging Sash closer to us. "Just touch one of them, Sash, if you're so certain one of these girls is what we're looking for. After all, we can touch them. We just can't touch those who can't see us."

Colette lets out a small laugh, drawing my eyes to the blueness of her eyes as she turns around and looks at me, her braid falling softly against her back. "If I talk about my greatest fear, I think I might go insane. Let's try not to think about the present. Let's think about the future, about what great nuns we'll make."

Sash reaches out a pale hand. Part of me wants to run, scream, cry, while another part of me desperately prays Sash changes his mind and realizes he isn't looking for me. I know nothing of what these shadows intend to do with the people they're looking for, but instinct says what they want to do can't be good. I have to bite my tongue to keep my voice from wavering. "I suppose you're right. Talking about fears won't do us any good. Let's just remind ourselves why we're here in the first place."

Colette nods, breaking into a smile. "I'm here because the physical world isn't enough for me."

I grab for Colette's braid as Sash draws near. "I'm here because—" I can't say why I'm really here. I promised Nathaniel I'd tell no one. He would never forgive me if I did. "I'm here because I was dissatisfied with my home life and I wanted something more."

Sash's fingers are a centimeter from my cheek. He's going to—

They whip their heads away from us.

"Shit," Sash says. "He's coming. I can hear him. We have to leave, Asch. He can't catch us in here. He can't catch us at all."

Asch bolts for the door. "We'll keep a closer eye on these girls, if that'll sati-

ate your curiosity.”

They throw open the door and vanish into the brightness of the hallway. Whoever this ‘he’ is has frightened them away. At the same time, I do not want to meet this ‘he,’ not in the least. This person might be more frightening than the shadows.

Colette approaches the open door. For a brief moment I swear I see panic in her eyes. Shivering overtakes that panic, however. Her voice wavers as she says, “B-blasted lock. It’s cold, so cold. I feel like the temperature has dropped tenfold.” An undertone of fear edges her voice—or that could be from the cold. “Let’s be good sisters and let Mother Aurelia know our lock is broken, all right, Amelia?”

I nod, sighing as my nerves release my muscles. I thank our god, Deus. Thank Deus they’re gone. Thank Deus they are gone.

Colette lets out a gasp.

Theosodore, the Mother Superior’s assistant, has a firm grasp of Colette’s wrist. Her wrist looks like a willow branch in his meaty hand the size of my skull. He looks at her with his infamous jagged smile and strokes the thorny whiskers jutting from his chin. “Are we trying to escape, Sister Colette?”

Did the shadows run from this man, this man who must stand seven feet tall, who looks imposing in stark gray robes lined with black threads? He could kill us in silence, and no one would ever know. This is the man who beats us when we step out of line, though he has neither touched Colette nor I. He must be the one the shadows ran from, but why?

Theosodore’s smile turns vicious, shoving all thoughts of the shadows from my mind. His presence means the first trial is here. His presence means our fate has begun. His presence means our futures will be determined over the next month, if we can survive.

Colette looks Theosodore full in the face, fear nonexistent in her eyes. “I wasn’t trying to escape. The lock is broken. The door has been blowing open all day.”

Theosodore narrows his dark brown eyes, forming menacing creases on his forehead. He grabs Colette’s other wrist and pins her against the doorframe, drawing his face to hers so that there is barely a space between them. I’ll bet he smells like wine that has fermented for only a week. “Don’t lie to me. You’re not the first to attempt escape.”

She draws her eyebrows together. “Call me a liar if you please, but you will have to let Mother Aurelia judge that.”

Theosodore lets go of Colette’s wrists. He keeps his face close to hers. “I’m not here to start a fight or punish you. I’m here to gather you girls for the first trial. That will take care of whatever misgivings you may harbor about being professed.” His jagged smile returns wider than before. “That will be a punishment in itself.”

He gestures us out into the hall, where we find other sisters in gray dresses and tattered shawls huddling for each other's scarce warmth. The stained-glass windows make outside bleary, but they don't disguise the snowfall that curtains the world in white. Theosodore starts to lead us down the hall. Colette latches her icy hand on my own. Despite being couched in a group of bodies, the cold slices through me even more than it did in that room, shivers disguising any nervousness I feel for the impending test. As we make our way to the first trial, I spy Sash peering out from behind a statue of a witch tangled in a noose. He's looking at no one in particular, until I pass.

Then he locks his eyes on mine, and I find myself pulling on Colette to press us farther in the crowd of bodies. Though I no longer look at him, in that one gaze alone I could see the words on his mind: I know you can see us, and I'm going to prove that you can.

He will be at the trial. He will watch me at the trial. I already know. Deus, if you can hear my prayer, you will steer him away from me. If he is there, if he is present at every trial, then I just know I will never be professed. I will have to go home to parents who haven't seen my brother and I in three years. I will have to go home to a future far more uncertain than this one.

I can't bear that. I'd rather die.

AUTHORS AND ARTISTS IN THIS ISSUE

Mara Buck
Amber Skye Forbes
Walt Giersbach
Heather Hofstetter
E.L. Knight
M. E. McMullen
John Saunders
Kristina M. Serrano
Rachelle M. N. Shaw
Bobbi Sinha-Morey
Darren Stein
Andrew Sydlik

