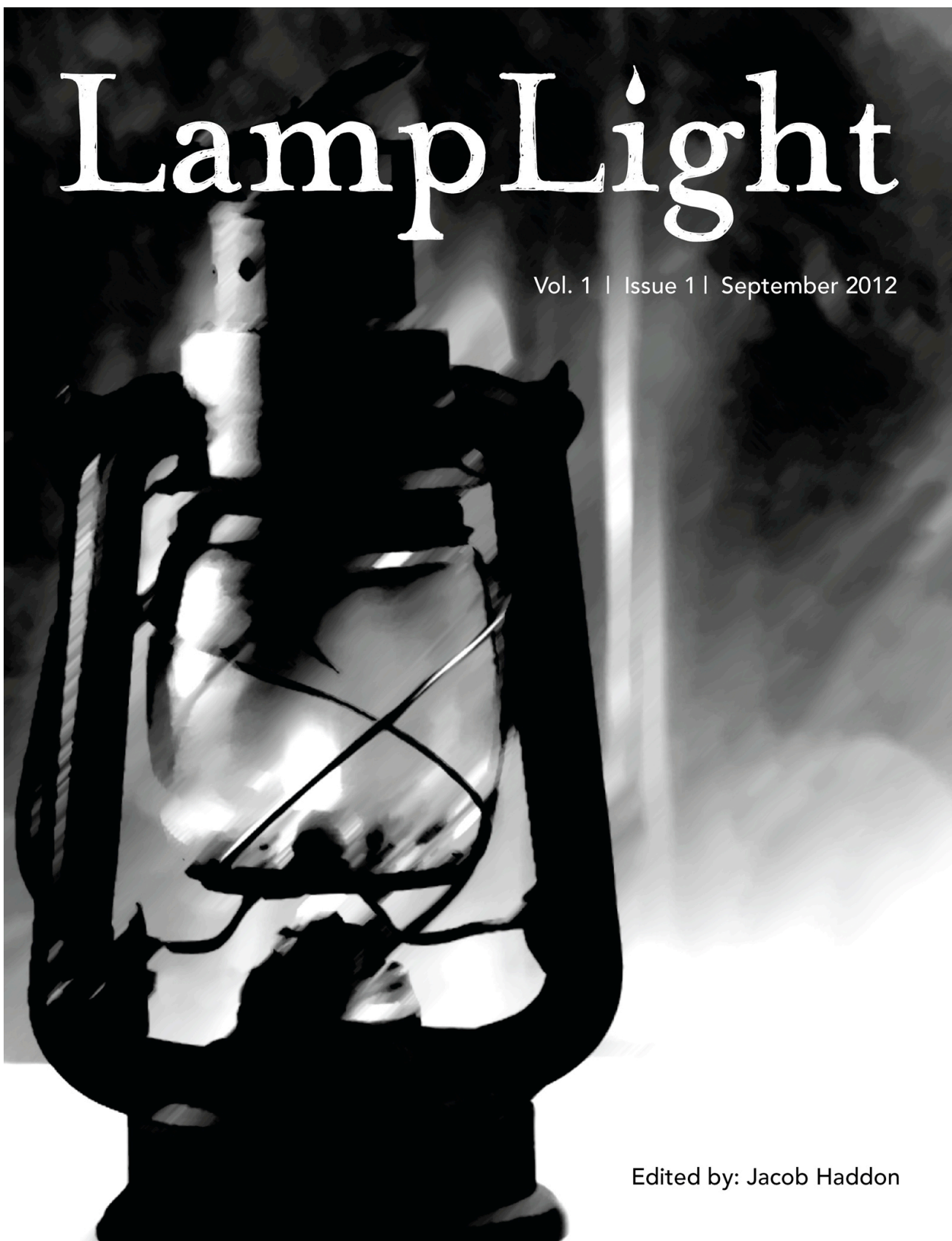


LampLight

Vol. 1 | Issue 1 | September 2012



Edited by: Jacob Haddon

Editor's Note

Hello, hello!

It occurred to me that in this new age of digital marketing and online sales that one of the most basic elements to a magazine was going to be missed: flipping through a copy on the newsstand.

So here is a taste, if you will, of what you can find in LampLight. Our first issue, which is free, presented here as it would be in print. This is the actual layout file used for our print edition (minus this note, of course), allowing you an idea of what you'll get in the paper copies.

I hope you'll enjoy this issue, and check out more of them. We've had Mercedes Yardley, Mary SanGiovanni, Kealan Patrick Burke, Normal Prentiss and more, all featured in LampLight.

Thank you for reading LampLight Magazine.

-j

Jacob Haddon

January 2015

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LampLight

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of Dark Fiction*

Volume 1

Issue 1

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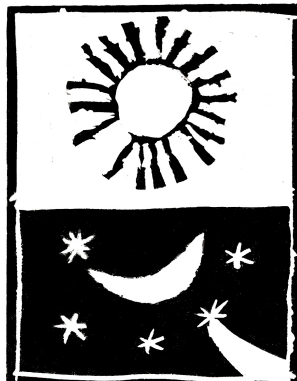


Table of Contents

Featured Artist, Robert Ford

Early Harvest	1
Interview with Jeff Heimbuch	7

Fiction

The Kelp - William Meikle	11
Elgar's Zoo - Nathan Yocum	19
No Victims - Rahul Kanakia	27
Memories of the Knacker's Yard - Ian Creasey	31
Summer Break - Mandy DeGeit	44

Serial Novella - Kevin Lucia

And I Watered It With Tears, Part I	46
-------------------------------------	----

Shadows in the Attic - J.F. Gonzalez

Reprint Anthologies	52
---------------------	----

LampLight Classics

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge - Ambrose Bierce	57
Writer's Bios	64

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LampLight

F e a t u r e d A r t i s t

Early Harvest

by Robert Ford

Dear Penny,

I hope you're doing all right, hon. It's been too long and I could tell you were worried about me in your last letter, though I know you'd never push me to talk until I was good and ready.

I've been thinking about you a lot lately. About how fast time goes by. Hard to believe we've been writing to each other going on twenty years now. Guess we're not little girls at Bible camp anymore.

Do you still go to St. Matthews every Sunday? I haven't been to church in so long I'm afraid I won't remember the hymns, but I believe again, Penny. I have faith. Sometimes God finds you when you need

Him the most.

Just the other day, I was thinking about when we hiked back in the pines at Stormy Creek and found that cold spring hidden in the ferns. We swam there all day, not a stitch of clothes on. The sun smiling down on us... splashing and laughing. Seems like so long ago.

It's been a long, long time since I felt that good, Penny. For years I've been one of those canaries my pappy used to take in the coalmines up in Yankstown. Remember how they used to carry them in the mineshafts to see if the air was ok to breathe? For such a long time, I've felt like I was surrounded by darkness, waiting to see if I was living in bad air.

You remember the summer we helped my Granny tend her garden? Eighty-two years old, widowed for ten, and still going strong. A twinkle in her eyes, and still serving the best damn cherry pie around these parts. Granny taught us a lot that summer, but it sure took me a long time to understand. Beautiful flowers all around, but the weeds sneak in if you don't pay attention.

I've been tending my gardens Penny.

I miss you, hon. I wish we could be little girls again. I wish we could start over like seedlings in fresh-tilled dirt and get another chance. Maybe grow in different ways this time around, huh?

I tried so hard to make Henry happy, but I guess I was

never enough. You remember my Aunt Ellen? She was the one that used to smoke Pall Mall 100s and hold séances in her field where the Cherokees were supposed to be buried. Ellen used to say that all men are whores and all women are bitches. I guess a little bit of me always knew the first part was true enough, though I didn't really want to believe it.

Not until I found out about Henry and Sheila.

Then...well...

When I was a little girl, I used to listen to Pastor Phil preach about how God is everywhere, in everything from the tallest mountains to the tiniest dragonflies in Gatlin. But he was wrong, Penny. God is vengeance. He's quiet redemption with cold, white eyes that waits in a place without light.

God lives beneath the rows of my garden.

But let me back up a bit, Penny. There's a lot to fill you in on, and I'm really sorry it's been so long.

It was early last year when Henry started down at Pullman's Auto. Dirty work, but hell, Henry grew up fixing every rusty junk heap his daddy brought home.

Damn near had a wrench in his hand since he was six, and working on the used cars people drive around here didn't amount to much trouble.

It's been a long time since you've been back to Gatlin, and I know it's hard to believe, but the town's grown. More people move down every year, coming from McCannville or Owen to get away from the city folk. Town's are getting grown up everywhere, I suppose.

Pullman's has gotten a lot busier since Henry started. Doing well enough that Pullman had to hire one of the Gover boys as a mechanic and a girl to help work the phones.

Sheila Koyce was the new girl's name. I saw her once when I was in Beekman's Drug. Pretty little thing. Thin waist and legs on a tiny build. Full of grace as one of those gray barn spiders we get in late September. Don't know what she did before, but she sure wasn't raised on no farm. Her hair was all done up in red highlights and her eyes... her eyes were just as green and full of life as those young fiddleback ferns up at Stormy Creek.

I can see why Henry did

what he did.

I could write lies to you Penny... same lies I told myself for about a month or so. But I know better, honey. I knew what he was up to. I can't even say she was the first. It was the little things I'd notice, you know? The tiny things in a marriage.

I've written to you long enough, you know how he was. When Henry was of a mind, he could be downright sweet, but more than not, he wasn't.

Mornings came and Henry couldn't wait to get to work... started having late evenings with all kinds of excuses on how Pullman was making him do this or that. He didn't seem to be all that mad about it though.

Do you remember the pearl handled pocketknife my pappy gave me? I never told you but a few years back, I gave it to Henry on his birthday. He thanked me and I think it was one of the few times he really understood how much I loved him, you know? He knew how much that knife meant to me and he took good care of it. But since Sheila came along, he'd leave it behind at the house when he left for work. I think maybe he was afraid he'd lose it

wherever he was spending time with her. Like I said, I kept lying to myself for too long, but you can't run from the truth forever.

Sometimes, I'd catch her scent on him. Not perfume. Her natural smell. I have to admit I was jealous—envious, even though I know it's a sin. She smelled young and vibrant, full of life and passion that hadn't been dirtied with tough times.

I'm sure she knew Henry was married. I know she did. But when he was of a mind, Henry could be a silver-tongued devil. He could always get me to do anything he wanted, and I'm sure it was the same with her.

I wanted to hate her, Penny, but I couldn't. I never wanted to hurt her.

Through the end of May I kept thinking about the two of them while I worked in my garden. I put up tomatoes and carrots and cucumbers. Even had a row of beets set in place. I was going to try some cantaloupe, but last year, Lester's goat got loose and ate every damn plant I had. I just didn't have the strength to try them again this year.

Last thing I was getting ready to plant was sweet corn. It was

going to be the same kind we used to plant with Granny—the Silver Queen corn that tastes like it was dipped in sugar.

I'd been working the better part of a morning, putting up new barbed wire and turning the soil to get it ready. I was digging up an old root when my hoe

God lives
beneath
the rows of
my garden.

thunked hard against something in the dirt.

It wasn't a solid, earthy sound. This was something big and hollow buried in the ground. I knelt down under the May sun and brushed away the dirt to see wide wooden planks set side by side. I used the hoe to keep moving the soil and found more of them. I have to tell you Penny—I got so excited. It was like I was eight years old and finding pirate treasure in the backyard. It was a treasure all right, but this

one didn't sparkle and gleam with jewels. It sat dark and full of shadows and swallowed sunlight whole.

I wedged the handle of my shovel under one of the boards and leaned my weight into it, and the end of the board popped free. A cool air washed over me, but the smell, Penny... it was like the swamp water where we used to watch the turtles come out in the evenings.

I looked down in there and it was like staring down a long tunnel. The little bit of sunlight showed rock walls and the water at the bottom swirled with rainbow oil slicks. I stretched out on my belly like a little kid and watched the colors reflecting back. I must have stared down that well for most of the afternoon. I felt at peace and for the first time since finding out about Henry, my heart didn't hurt so much.

Every once in a while I saw the surface of the water break and the length of eels thicker than my wrist twirl over on themselves. Just as I was getting ready to leave, I saw it Penny.

I saw Him.

An arm, skinny and pale as

driftwood, stretched from the shadows into the beam of light. I watched as a bony hand turned over and let the sun spill across its palm.

Penny, I know how all of this sounds, but you have to believe me. I don't know how long its been down there. It moved into the sunlight and stared at me. It had large eyes as white as hailstones, flat tapered ears close to its head, and two raw gashes where its nose should be.

It looked at me and smiled... thin slivers of teeth that shimmered in the light.

I know Pastor Phil used to say we could never look upon the face of God. His beauty was so great, we couldn't understand. He was wrong, Penny. That afternoon in my garden, I looked into the eyes of God and I saw salvation.

I sat there and listened for the longest time, hearing whispers sliding over one another inside my head. Then I pulled away and set the boards back in place, covering it all with dirt again. My head was swirling and my heart felt like it was near to beating right out of my chest.

When Henry got home, I

had a hot dinner and a cold beer waiting for him. I didn't hardly sleep that night. I stayed awake and thought about what God had told me to do. By the time morning came, it was all set in my mind.

Henry shaved before work that morning. He mumbled something over his coffee about needing to work late, said he had to fix the clutch on Pullman's Cadillac. I just smiled and sent him off to work with a fresh coffee and a bag lunch. After he drove on down the driveway, I noticed he'd left his pocketknife behind. Hell, at that point, I almost expected to see his wedding band sitting beside it.

I sat at the kitchen table and cried for a while, then went out to my garden. It took me a while but I pulled all those boards away and set down a stretch of chicken coop wire across the hole. I spread an old bed sheet across the wire and when I was done spreading dirt over it all, you'd never be able to see what was hidden beneath.

Penny, if anyone can understand, it's you. I just wanted to stop hurting so bad.

That afternoon, close to four

o'clock, I got done up in my Sunday best and drove into town and parked about a half block away from Pullman's.

I walked over to Beekman's Drug and used the payphone outside. Sheila answered in a voice as sweet as honey, and I told her I was broke down with two kids in a car up north of Gatlin on Route 40.

She covered the phone to say something and I heard Pullman yell back to Henry to get the tow truck ready. Henry must've said something back because I heard Pullman tell him he didn't give a damn if he had plans or not.

Sheila told me somebody would be on the way to help me and I could hear the disappointment when she spoke. I recognized it the way I've heard it in my own voice over the years.

I sat in the truck and watched as Henry got the diesel started and drove off. Wasn't much longer when Pullman went off in his Cadillac. No one was left except for Little Miss Hot Pants herself.

You remember when Sadie got sick a while back? She busted from the pasture and got up near Muddy Creek and ate those pin

cherries. When the vet came out, he brought horse salts and some other things I had to cut into her feed. He also brought a few syringes of Ketamine in case she wouldn't settle down at night. It quieted her down all right. I damn near thought Sadie was dead in her stall the next morning when I went to check on her.

Sheila was done up in a peach-colored blouse and was busying herself putting on lipstick. I didn't give her time to react. She lifted up her pretty head and I stuck a syringe in the side of her neck, hit the plunger and that was it.

After that ... well Penny, I just don't remember. I guess God really does work in mysterious ways, because when I came to, I was in the kitchen, finishing up a pot roast and cracking a cold beer for Henry when I saw him pulling into the driveway.

When he walked in the door, he was red faced and serious, looking all kinds of mad. I guess after driving up to Route 40 and not finding anyone that needed towing, he searched for a while and gave up. He gave me an odd look, seeing as I was dressed up

pretty, but he didn't say anything. I grabbed my walking stick—you know how my knees ache every time rain's coming along—and I went outside with my evening coffee to let Henry eat in peace.

Henry came out after he was done, carrying a fresh beer with him, and I guess after the day he had, he figured my old farm girl rump was better than nothing at all, because he was all playful when he followed me out to the garden. The sunset was far along by then, and fire shone through the line of maples at the far side of the field.

I almost regretted things then. Henry was making me laugh and we were having such a good time. It felt good, Penny. Like old times, you know? But then I caught a whiff of his cologne and I knew this was just a test from God. Of my will.

We walked on around the bend of the driveway and I saw Henry stop and squint at something moving in the field. A peach-colored stretch of cloth waving in the breeze. I watched Henry's face... the way his head turned a little, trying to figure it out.

I pulled Henry's pocketknife

from the hem of my dress and he turned to look down at the open blade in my hands. He glanced back to the field, and I watched his face change when he realized it was Sheila strung up out there in the dirt.

When I stabbed him, I was quick... once, twice, in the center of his stomach, and Henry dropped to his knees. Dark blood seeped from between his fingers and he took a step backward and fell to his knees. He looked up at me and I swung my oak walking stick as hard as I could against the side of his head.

Henry dropped like a sack of feed.

By the time he woke up, I'd bound his hands and feet in bailing wire and dragged him out to the middle of the field. When Henry saw what I'd done to Sheila, he started screaming.

You remember that poison that Granny used to put on her garden sometimes? It was bright pink, the color of fresh bubblegum. I still use it from time to time on my own garden, and I don't know what made me think of it... like I said, Penny, I didn't want to hurt Sheila, and I don't remember doing it, but I filled

her mouth with the stuff.

Pink powder was caked along the creases of her neck like make-up. The prettiest shade of color you'd ever want to see. But it did something to her insides, I think. That poison must've made Sheila foam at the mouth because there were gobs of vomit at the edges of her lips. The thing is, between that and her red hair, she was still pretty and that made me even madder.

I stopped messing with Henry and tossed Sheila down into the hole. She tumbled down, quiet as a stone. Sheila didn't grab at anything and when she landed, her head hit first and I saw the end of her dress poof up before she crumpled down into the water. Those eels started thrashing around all at once. I'd be willing to bet none of them have had a decent meal in a very long time.

Henry had been screaming the whole time, begging me to stop, asking me to forgive him. But you know what, Penny? My forgiveness isn't what he should have been asking for. It's not my judgment that matters.

I pulled Henry over to the edge of the well and let him peer

inside. I let him stare into the face of Heaven and Henry wept for my redemption, Penny. He tumbled down, bouncing against the rocks and when he landed on his side I heard his ribs break like knots of wood popping in a fire.

I watched for a little while. I saw the eels working at things beneath the water. The whispering was coming back in my head and I didn't want to hear it anymore. One by one I put those boards back in place and the last thing I saw was Henry's eyes flutter open. Then, a bony white hand stretched out from the darkness.

When the last board was set in, I listened to Henry's screams. After a while, he got quiet again and I didn't hear anything but the wet sounds of something eating.

The redemption of the God beneath my garden.

I shoveled dirt all over the boards until I couldn't hear anything, then I went on back inside. Cried myself a little more at the table again. It was too quiet and I couldn't sleep, so I made myself some coffee.

It's late as I write this letter. The wind is blowing something

awful, and I know a storm's coming in. The air's warm and the lilacs are out and it smells sweet as cotton candy at the Gatlin fair. I think I'll stand outside until the lightning gets too bad. I want to feel the raindrops on my skin. I wonder if they taste like they did when we were little girls? I wonder if they're still as pure as baby tears and sweet as salvation?

I wonder if they'll wash away my sins?

I don't know what's going to happen, Penny, but I don't feel like a canary in a coalmine anymore. I'm not scared. I have faith.

I've been wondering about how my garden will be this summer. Will the corn be as sweet as I remember? Will the tomatoes taste rich and full or will they be bitter? Will there be enough rain to keep them going?

But most of all Penny... most of all, I wonder about what the God beneath my garden will ask of me next, and what will happen if I don't listen.

I miss you hon.

-R

I n t e r v i e w

Robert Ford

by Jeff Heimbuch

Bob Ford is one of those guys who make a lasting impression on you. Case in point, the first time I ever met him, about five years ago, was at 1:30 in the morning, smoking a cigarette against a pillar at Horrorfind Weekend. While the group he was with (intermingled with a bunch of my friends) were loud and laughing hysterically, Bob stayed along the fringes, smoking away, and looking like one cool guy. Every so often, he'd chime in to the conversation with a one liner that would have everyone in stitches before going back to take another drag.

He was one cool motherfucker.

We quickly became friends, and hit it off with all matter of conversation. When the weekend was over, we bid farewell, but kept in touch since his friends were also my friends.

It was another year before I actually had a chance to read something he wrote, and when I did, I was absolutely blown away by it.

Bob has an ability to almost write you into a

situation, so you're not just reading about a character experiencing it, but actually experiencing it yourself. His situations are true to life, and take you to a place you've been before, even if you've never actually been there.

I was lucky enough to ask him a few questions about his work, and he was only too happy to oblige.

JEFF: Tell me a little bit about why you wanted to become a writer to begin with? What drove you into the arms of your muse, and get your stories down on to paper?

ROBERT: Why did I want to become a writer? Well...I'm an only child and I grew up poor to middle class on a farm in the middle of nowhere. I never wanted for anything because I suppose I never knew any better until I got older, but as an only child I was left to my own devices quite often. My parents never refused any books that I wanted as a kid and in fact, my mother is responsible for buying me my first issue of *Famous Monsters* and *Fangoria*.

I started writing stories as a kid out of default and continued to get encouragement from some great English teachers I was very lucky to have. Except for one in seventh grade who refused to turn in an essay I'd written because he accused me of plagiarism.

Dickhead.

An uncle of mine lived with us for a while when I was young and he left behind a paperback copy of

Carrie. I stole it away and read it secretly, knowing, as I made my way through it, there were parts I definitely shouldn't be reading as a 12 year old. It stunned me. I had never read or seen anything written that way. The structure...the segues between chapters. It was unlike anything I had ever been exposed to before and I wanted to do that. I wanted to create that sort of art.

I always loved the reactions I got from my writing. I wanted to make people laugh, cry, be frightened, whatever. Anything. Any sort of emotional reaction from words I'd put on paper, I absolutely loved. I still feel that way. Unless I provoke an emotional reaction from my readers, I feel I've failed as a writer. It falls flat to me.

JEFF: Each writer has their own little process of how they write...can you tell me a bit about yours? Music down low, candles lit, with Venus and Mercury aligned in just the right spot?

ROBERT: I take my time developing the voice of my characters. I do my homework. When I see

everyday life and know how they would react in any given situation, I know I'm ready to write their story. For me, I tend to get titles first and I don't know why. An odd turn of phrase will pop up in my head and I'll have absolutely no idea what it's attached to. I've got a running list going on my laptop. The title "Free Ride Angie" rattled around in my head for a good six years until the story finally came together—in a literal brain dump —and I didn't write the story as

much as I typed it down while my muse dictated it to me. My subconscious at work.

When I'm actually doing the writing itself, I hate distractions. I don't like to be around people. I plug my headphones in and listen to music that relates to the particular chapter I'm working on or the character I'm working on, ranging from Frank Sinatra to The Cure to

Nine Inch Nails. I've got a standard "writing playlist" that is sort of a catchall sort of thing, but I really tend to alter the music I'm listening to for the vibe of what I'm working on at the time.

JEFF: Of course, writer's write what they know, and base a lot of their work on things that happened in their own lives. Samson and Denial (a damn fine novella, if I do say so myself), is written in such a vivid way that I can't help but ask if you found yourself in a similar situation before? How did that story even come about to begin with?

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ROBERT: Well first, thanks for the kind words on *Samson and Denial*. That's another story where I got the title in my head first and a few years later I had the opening. Everything else came together afterward. I lived in Philadelphia for a couple of years while I went to college and as any writer will tell you, we're all an observer of life around us. Walking around the city, I saw people in all ranges of life, from the homeless to stockbrokers, to drug addicts and prostitutes. Samson's character came together as a conglomeration of the people I saw and met in Philadelphia and as metaphors for things going on in my life much later as I wrote the novella. And as usual, they're cloaked in metaphor. Most often, only people closest to me will be able to decipher what the real meaning behind the story is. The thing is, the underlying emotional hit tends to resonate with readers even though the "true" story is masked. The bloodiest thing I've ever written is a short story called "Racing the Milk" and every time I choose that story at live readings, there are people in the audience that are a complete mess of tears. It's cathartic for me because I've already written down the demons that were bothering me in the first place, but it's always interesting to watch people's reactions.

JEFF: Your characters are also so alive that they feel incredibly real. Does the same go for them as well? Have you populated your stories with people you have known?

ROBERT: Not directly, no. I...may have "borrowed" parts of people I know in some of my work, but never an entire character. I think it does a disservice to the character I'm working on to completely hand them over to a living person. They

should be complex and unique and take on a life of their own. The closest I've come to dedicating an entire living person to a character is in my latest novel *The Compound* and...ehhh...the living person deserved what they got in the book.

JEFF: You've also been known to write movie scripts as well. Do you find that process different than writing prose? What makes you decide whether an idea you get is going to be a screenplay or a story?

ROBERT: Writing a script is an extremely different process. In many ways it's a lot easier, in a lot of other ways, it's much more difficult. For a screenplay, I do a tremendous amount of note-taking up front. Because of the format, I don't like to play things very loose on a script ahead of time. I need to know where things are going and then I'll let dialogue and actions find their place as I'm writing, but I need to know the overall structure of a script before I get to writing it. My favorite movies are the ones with an extremely unique structure to the script. *Pulp Fiction*, *Memento*, *The Green Mile*, *Shawshank Redemption*. To me, there's nothing more important than structure in a script.

What makes me decide on whether an idea works better for a screenplay or prose is really the concept itself. Since writing my first script, I've tended to write in a much more visual way in my prose, but not everything lends itself to a visual format for screen. I've got a few things in my back pocket that are going to go directly to a script format. The first thing off the top of my head is a collection of notes for a script called "Escaping Angel" and that one's going to be a very deadly story. You guys will like it. Trust me.

JEFF: What is your favorite book of all time and why?

ROBERT: My favorite book of all time is *Sleepers* by Lorenzo Carcaterra. I came across the book by complete accident and devoured it the same night. It captures the raw, broken childhood of kids growing up in Hell's Kitchen and for me, showcases like nothing else the bond between friends that continues on to adulthood. Sometimes bad things just happen and people react in different ways though it changes them at their core forever.

The book also shows one of the things I love about the most frightening types of horror and the truth behind it all; the scariest monsters out there are things that are never born of a writer's imagination, no matter how creative we may be. The most frightening monsters are people themselves. We read about horrific news reports every day and nothing writers can create will ever come close to the horrors of the real world.

JEFF: If you could go back and time 20 years, and give advice to your younger self about writing, what would it be?

ROBERT: Oh. So many things. Oh. About my writing? Oh. Well, **THAT** narrows it down a bit.

I would tell myself to start a hell of a lot earlier and buckle down and keep at it consistently and it will pay off—maybe not necessarily financially, but definitely emotionally. For my day job I do advertising and graphic design. I got into this career when I was young because I didn't know any writers who made money, but I did know designers who made a living. What good is making a living if you

don't enjoy it or if it's not your true passion?

I'm not positive but I think Anne Lamott said “writing is the only thing I've ever done that it didn't feel as if I should be doing something else.” I couldn't possibly agree more.

JEFF: How do you keep your hair so luscious? What hair products do you use?

ROBERT: I probably shouldn't say this, but at the moment I've had a long week and am drinking a glass of tequila. I wash my hair in a 40/60 mixture of midget blood and children's tears. It really provides the overall body and shine I like.

You can keep up with Bob's work at his website, Coroner's Report, at coronersreport.blogspot.com
Bob's latest, *The Compound* will be out in 2013.

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F i c t i o n

The Kelp

By William Meikle

I didn't know what to expect. All they'd said was that it was a matter of national security. Just what the RNAD wanted with a fifty-year-old doctor of Botany with a gammy leg and a drink problem I wasn't told. I was given a train ticket and a contact name and sent off to Helensburgh.

Once there I was met by a sergeant and a truck—both of them well past their best. We rattled along an unlit road for what seemed like hours, coming to a sudden halt at a manned checkpoint alongside a long moonlit loch. An attendant waved a torch and a gun in my face, I showed him my paperwork and we were allowed through. I was driven to a Nissen Hut,

shown inside to a bed, and given an order to see the Colonel in the morning.

I sat on the edge of the bed for several minutes, unsure of my next move. It felt cold and quiet, and I was already missing the comfortable clutter and noise of my University apartments back in Glasgow. I went outside and studied the lie of the land. There was a loch and a lot of huts. Beyond that there was little to see but the moon on the water. It was very pretty, if a bit chilly. I watched it for a while as I tried to get used to my new situation. It took three slow cigarettes before I even felt like settling. When I finally lay down I soon found that my allocated bed was little more

than a few sheets thrown over a stiff board.

I slept badly. Things didn't get much better when the morning started on a wrong note.

I'm afraid the Colonel, a stiff little man with a stiffer little moustache, didn't take to me. From what I understood of my short briefing, I was to be seconded to this unit for the duration to "do my bit against the Jerries". But by the time he led me via a warren of corridors through and between a maze of Nissen huts and showed me into the lab I was still none the wiser.

It was only when I was introduced to the head of the team that I began to have some inkling as to why I had been

summonsed.

I knew Professor Rankin by his reputation of being an iconoclast, a visionary and as mad as a bag of badgers. Last I'd heard he had gone over to the Yanks for a huge stipend at one of the West Coast think tanks. I never expected to meet him in a Nissen Hut on a Scottish loch-side.

His unruly mop of white hair shook as he grasped my hand. He was as thin as a rake, but his grip was as hard as cold steel.

"Ballantine. And not a minute too soon. Come over here man. You need to see this."

It all came out of him in a rush, as if it had been bottled, shaken and released. "It's a complex structure all right. But it's much more than that. It's alive... or at least it was before it was frozen. There's Golgi apparatus and mitochondrial DNA but no real cell wall structure to speak of. It's like nothing I've ever seen before... like nothing anyone's ever seen before."

I wasn't given any chance to answer. He dragged me over to a microscope.

"Look at it," he said. "Just

look."

I looked. I had no idea what it was. It looked almost like the internal structure of an amoeba.

"It's going to change everything," Rankin said. "Do you remember the Pabodie Expedition in the early thirties?"

"The great Antarctic failure? Wasn't there some kind of mass delusion on that one?"

"So everyone thought at the time. But the story goes that they discovered an ancient city under the ice. A city built by beings genetically engineered for the purpose. Beings that could take any shape required to get the job done... and at least one of the beings was still alive. They called it a Shoggoth."

I barked out a laugh.

"Cabin fever and too much booze more like."

Rankin looked down at the desk. He'd obviously prepared the microscope slide from something in a Petri dish at the side. It looked like nothing more than a pool of thick oil.

"They were asked for proof, but could provide none. Save this. They brought back a sample," he said. "It cost an arm and a leg to get it, but we finally managed to

persuade the Yanks to give us some of the material for experimentation."

He lifted the Petri dish, studying the contents.

"OK," I said softly. "You've got something. But what has it to do with me?"

He smiled.

"This material was manufactured. It bonds with other living tissue and builds."

"Builds what?"

He laughed loudly.

"Anything we want it to. Don't you see Ballantine? You and I are going to change war forever. We're going to make the ultimate defensive weapon."

The protoplasm in the Petri dish suddenly surged against the glass with such force that the dish jumped out of Rankin's hand and shattered as it hit the ground. The tarry substance started to make its way across the floor, scuttling like a manic spider.

Rankin nonchalantly stepped forward and poured some of the contents of a glass jar on it. Steam rose. A vinegar-like tang caught at the back of my throat and forced me to close my eyes. When I looked again there was nothing left but a smoking pool of

oily goop on the floor.

“Hydrochloric acid,” Rankin said, holding up a half-empty jar and almost smiling. “It seems to do the trick.”

* * *

Over the next few weeks I began to understand the detail and scope of what Rankin hoped to achieve... and my part in it. The tarry material did indeed prove adept at recombining existing biological materials into things rich and strange. And it did it at a prodigious rate. He had me trying combinations of various plant-life. We had a spectacular disaster when we introduced the tarry material to pond algae, which left a green scum covering the whole interior of the lab that had to be removed with bleach and blowtorches. Still Rankin refused to be depressed.

“We’re getting there,” he said, even though I had no real idea of the required destination.

Not yet.

I began to get an idea of what he was looking for when we set the substance to work on some seaweed. It took a particular liking to *Utricularia*

vulgaris, one of the bladder-worts common along this coastline. It seemed like a marriage made in heaven. Although contained in a tall sealed jar the weed-tar combination filled all the available space within minutes and was soon a seething mass of crawling vegetation frantically trying to escape.

Rankin clapped me heartily on the back, phoned the MOD and returned to break open the whisky. We sat on the harbour wall smoking and drinking, and after a few drams his tongue finally loosened.

“They approached me last year,” he said. “They’re frightened of the power of the German fleet, and wanted some way of locking them in port and making them vulnerable to attack.”

He took a long drag of smoke before continuing.

“By coincidence I had been talking that very day about the Shoggoth material. I put two and two together, the brass came up with the cash, and here we are. We’ve done it Ballantine. All we have to do is introduce a scrap of the new stuff to the waters around the Hun’s anchorages,

and they’ll be clogged up in no time. The perfect defensive weapon.”

I could see several flaws in this plan but kept my mouth shut... I didn’t want to cut off the only supply of whisky I had in weeks. So far he hadn’t noticed that I was managing to get twice as much of it inside me as he was... I wanted to keep it that way.

I regretted it the next morning of course... I always do. And I regretted it twice as much when I walked into the lab to be confronted by two admirals of the fleet and a Secretary of State. Luckily Rankin wanted to showboat, so I hung at the back and let him get on with it.

He gave them the spiel about the Antarctic expedition and the Shoggoth material, but even in my hung-over state I could see that they were seriously underwhelmed. They perked up slightly when he started the experiment proper. He used an even larger jar this time, one near six feet tall. The tar combined with the weed and surged, filling the space in seconds, fronds flapping and slapping against the glass in a frenzy.

The brass sat in stony silence.

“That’s it?” the Secretary finally said. “All this time and effort, and you give us some bloody energetic seaweed?”

Rankin gave them the same line he’d given me the night before, about clogging up harbours and stifling the Jerry fleet.

The Secretary sighed theatrically.

“Look Rankin, the reason we got you for this job was because we expected something flamboyant, something that would show our people that we are ahead of the game compared to Hitler’s scientists. But this just won’t do. They throw the Doodlebug at us, and what do we do in reply? Send them some fucking lively seaweed? No. This just won’t do at all.”

* * *

“Flamboyant?
I’ll show them
flamboyant.”

Rankin was a driven man after that. He would be found in the lab, alternatively shouting at the Shoggoth material and muttering under his breath.

“Flamboyant? I’ll show them flamboyant.”

I first guessed his intent when he had me procure some material from the Botanic Gardens in Glasgow. Venus fly traps mostly, but also three different types of pitcher plant and a particularly sticky sundew that was both rare and expensive. I also heard from a colleague that he had requested several jellyfish be tracked down... the more poisonous the better. I tried to get a look at what he was working on, but by that time he had locked the lab down to all but himself. The rest of us were reduced to bit-players and spent most of our time in the mess hall drinking beer and playing cribbage... although in my case I didn’t join in the card games.

It was nearly two weeks before we were summonsed for a demonstration. There were no brass present this time... Rankin wanted to be sure of his flamboyance first.

He had made some drastic changes in the lab. A full fifty per cent of the area was taken up by a large glass tank. In the center of the tank sat a metal box. A chain was attached to its lid and led, via a winch, to a pulley next to Rankin. On the far side of the glass tank a small pony munched contentedly on a pile of hay. Suddenly I wanted to be back in the mess cradling a pint of lukewarm beer or back in the postgraduate club at the university getting beat at chess.

Anywhere but here.

Several others shuffled nervously. Indeed, there might even have been a revolt... if Rankin had given us time to think about it. But before we could stop him, he yanked on his end of the chain.

The metal box opened.

The pony pricked its ears. That was all it had time for. Thrashing tentacles came out of the box. They waved in the air as if tasting it and sought out the pony like snakes zeroing in on prey. They struck as one, wrapping themselves in long strands around the pony’s flanks. The beast started to whinny and tried to pull away. One of the

tentacles tore off from the animal, taking a long strip of flesh with it. The other tentacles merely tightened and pulled harder.

Something climbed out of the metal box; an amorphous mass of thrashing fronds that might once have been seaweed. It opened in two halves, spreading itself wide like bat-wings. The tentacles pulled the pony across the tank. Foam bubbled at the pony's mouth, its tongue lolling, red and steaming. But it was still alive as the thing took it into its folds, still alive as the carpet of vegetation wrapped itself around the body and squeezed. We all heard the bones crack. As if from a far distance there was a piteous whinny.

Someone behind me threw up, and I smelled beer and cigarettes.

"For pity's sake Rankin. Do something," I shouted.

He turned and smiled.

He yanked on another chain, and a rain of what looked like water came from a series of pipes above the tank. The vegetation started to smoke and curl, and once more I smelled the tang of vinegar as the hydrochloric acid

turned everything to oily sludge.

"How was that?" Rankin asked. "Flamboyant enough do you think?"

I spent that night getting roaring drunk in the mess. I wasn't the only one.

In the morning we started preparing for the field test.

* * *

On the night before the big demonstration Rankin sought me out in the mess.

"Come with me Ballantine," he said. "You're the only one who will understand the import."

I put my beer down reluctantly. I was on my fifth and already looking forward to the sixth. But I couldn't refuse him. Technically he was my commanding officer, and I wasn't exempt from military justice. With a heavy heart I followed him down to the lab.

The place had changed. The heavy glass tank had been removed. But the network of piping was still in place overhead, and the metal box still sat in the middle of the floor, its walls etched and pitted by the acid.

"If you're going to be

slaughtering some poor animal, I want nothing to do with it," I said.

He smiled grimly.

"Not this time. Come. You need to see this."

He led me to the long trestle. A thick forest of thrashing kelp and tentacles completely filled a tall glass jar.

"For pity's sake Rankin... how much of this thing did you make?"

"Enough," he whispered. "But that's not why I brought you here. Watch."

He walked away to our left. The kelp followed him, the thrashing fronds and tentacles now concentrated on that side of the glass. Rankin turned and came back towards me. The kelp tracked his movement, the thrashing becoming ever more insistent.

"It knows me," Rankin whispered. "I think I've made it angry."

"That's not possible," I started.

"Neither is this," he said and walked forward. He stared at the kelp and spoke in a loud voice, as if ordering a disobedient dog.

"Quiet!"

The kelp stilled.

Rankin motioned me forward.

“Look,” he said. There was wonder and awe in his voice. I saw why seconds later.

I looked at the kelp.

And the kelp looked back.

A single, lidless eye, pale green and milky, stared out from the fronds. Even as I watched it changed, being sucked back into a new fold. A wet gash opened, like a thin-lipped mouth. It stretched wide and a high ululation filled the Nissen Hut, like a seagull on a storm wind.

Tekeli-Li! Tekeli-Li!

“What the hell is this shite?”

I said softly.

Rankin dragged me away.

Three new-formed eyes watched us intently.

“I’ve been reading the journals from the Antarctic expedition,” he said. He led me to the far end of the trestle and picked up a leather-bound book. He opened it and started to read.

“It was a terrible, indescribable thing vaster than any subway train—a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous,

and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and un-forming as pustules of greenish light all over the tunnel-filling front that bore down upon us... slithering over the glistening floor that it and its kind had swept so evilly free of all litter. Still came that eldritch, mocking cry...

Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!”

I leaned over and read the words for myself.

“That’s just a story to frighten the gullible,” I said.

“Maybe,” he said. “But I’ve sent a sample back to the Yanks. They’ve got more sophisticated equipment than we have. Maybe they can make something of it.”

From inside the glass the noise grew louder.

From inside the
glass the noise
grew louder.

Tekeli-Li.

Tekeli-Li.

“Tekeli-Li. Tekeli-Li.”

* * *

The field test was scheduled for noon the next day. I spent most of the morning trying to convince the Colonel to postpone it, but a combination of the smell of beer on my breath and a fear of disappointing the top brass, led him to dismiss me out of hand. I watched the preparations in the harbour with a terrible sinking feeling in my gut that had nothing to do with the booze from the night before.

Rankin was back into his full-blown show-off strut. He marched around the harbour barking orders, a conductor marshalling his orchestra. By the time the brass arrived at quarter to the hour everything was in place.

We stood in a rough semi-circle just above the shoreline. Several yards beneath us sat the now familiar metal tank. From where I stood I could hear the thing thrash against the inside walls. A chain led from the top of the cage along the shingle to lie at Rankin’s feet.

The harbour wall stretched

away to our left, and ahead of us in the water a small flotilla of boats made a rough semi-circle encasing a drift-net full of locally caught mackerel. Rankin had wanted to use a couple of convicted murderers from Barlinnie, but even the Colonel had drawn the line at that. The men on the boats were equipped with flame units, and each boat contained several bottles filled with acid.

I hoped it would be enough.

Rankin stood, center-stage, and waited for the brass to move into their place along the harbor wall. When he spoke, it was in a voice honed by many years of addressing large lecture theatres. His voice carried, loud and strong in the still air.

“You wanted flamboyance? Here it is.”

He dragged on the chain. The lid started to open, slowly at first. Tentacles found the edges and tore. A chunk of metal flew like a discus, passing less than three feet over the head of the Secretary of State. The kelp came out of the box like a greyhound from a trap, expanding as it came into a roiling mass eight feet wide and

near again as thick.

It completely ignored the net full of fish. Instead it threw out a writhing forest of tentacles... straight towards Rankin.

* * *

He had to step back sharply, and even then the leading tentacle caught him around the left foot and tugged, hard. He fell, slightly off balance, and a second tendril reached for him. He just had time to kick off his shoe and scuttle, crab-like back up the shingle beach. The tentacle dragged the shoe back to a maw in the kelp. The moving carpet of fronds came up out of the water, still focused on Rankin.

The air was full of the high ululation.

Tekeli-Li!

A gull flew down, attracted by the noise. Two tentacles plucked it out of the air. A new maw opened and took it as fast as a blink. The body of kelp did not slow. It came up the beach, shingle rattling like gunfire beneath it.

It was then that I saw the fatal flaw in the planning. All of the men with the flame units and

acid had been placed out on the boats in expectation that the fish would be the target. They were now frantically trying to reach shore, to get at the creeping creature, but they were still too far out to be of any help.

Up on the harbour wall security guards ushered the brass to safety, but down on the shore we were in disarray. A fresh-faced young squaddie stepped between Rankin and the creature. He raised a rifle and took aim, pumping three quick shots into the main body. The bullets had no effect. The tendrils wrapped themselves around the lad and dragged him off his feet. He scrambled amid the shingle as he was dragged backwards. At the same time the carpet of kelp surged and fell on him like a wet blanket. His screams cut off mercifully, quickly.

All along the back of the kelp more moist mouths opened and squealed.

Tekeli-Li! Tekeli-Li!

The rest of us turned and ran.

The kelp followed us up into the warren of huts. A group of men tried to set up a rear-guard action, blocking one of the alleys

with volleys of gunfire. The kelp swarmed over them without a pause. Man-shaped forms squirmed and writhed within the kelp then went still.

I ran faster.

When I turned to look again the kelp had more than doubled in size.

I saw Rankin's white mop of hair among the people just ahead of me.

The kelp saw him too. Tentacles raised in the air, thrashing wildly.

"Rankin," I called. "It's only angry at you. Nobody else has to get hurt here."

I wasn't sure that he'd heard me until I saw him duck inside the lab. Soldiers ran past the open door, heading for the road out of the base, and I was sorely tempted to go with them. But despite his faults Rankin had believed in me, and I owed him for that. I threw myself into the lab, just ahead of a nest of tentacles.

"Get into the corner," Rankin shouted at me. "Pull the left hand chain."

That was all he had time for. The kelp flowed through the door, blocking all escape. I

pushed myself as far into the corner as I could and grabbed at the chain.

"Not yet!" Rankin shouted. He danced aside, avoiding thrashing tentacles, until he stood on the spot where the metal cage had sat. "Wait until it's all inside."

The first tentacle took him around the waist. He screamed as it started to tug at him, but he held his ground, forcing the main body of the kelp to come to him. More tentacles struck at his chest and his ankles. He struggled to stay upright. By now most of the kelp was inside the room.

Once more I reached for the chain.

"Not yet!" Rankin screamed. "None of it can escape."

The kelp rolled over the lab floor. It opened out like a huge umbrella towering over Rankin, then fell on him, his white hair the last thing to disappear from view.

"None of it can escape," he called at the end.

I agreed.

I pulled the chain.

The acid rain did its job. In five minutes all that was left of Rankin and his creation was a

pool of oily goop on the lab floor.

It was only later, as I downed the first of many drinks, that I remembered his words.

I've sent a sample back to the Yanks.

I spent weeks after that checking. I found the shipping order and the name of the boat, the Haven Home. Records show it was sunk by a U-Boat, somewhere off Rockall. In my dreams I see a glass container, lying in a flooded cargo hold. Inside the kelp sits, dormant, waiting.

And I worry.

I worry about breakages.

I worry
about
breakages.

F i c t i o n

Elgar's Zoo

By Nathan L. Yocum

Elgar Sampson Vallente regarded the white tiger through cataract clouds and weighed the merits of shooting it in the face. The tiger lifted its head, gave a disinterested growl, and promptly fell back to sleep. Elgar clenched the fence between he and the beast. Faded signs warned of electrocution, death, pain and discomfort. Elgar ignored them. The power was off. The power would never return. The power came from an oil-burning station in Hilo. Hilo was on fire. Thus it stood to reason that no power was being produced in Hilo aside from the primitive combustion energy of burning homes, burning strip malls and ships at ocean lit like accidental Viking

funerals.

If Elgar's wife were still alive, he'd have fled and sought shelter. If his kids had stayed home, if they'd not joined the larger, wider world, the bustling mainland with all its cars and cities, he'd have a reason to go to Hilo. But they hadn't. They left, they lived, they forgot to call and write their father, though he was getting up to the better part of seventy-five years. And now, who knew? Hilo was on fire. Maybe the mainland was on fire, maybe the world was on fire.

Elgar wrapped his fingers around the chain links of the fence. Namaste, the white tiger, was a special problem.

* * *

Events prior to the fire had taken their strict and usual order. Elgar fell asleep in his chair to the slow drone of twenty-four hour news coverage. When he woke the tv was off and the lights were out. A black out, not uncommon but inconvenient for making eggs and bacon. Elgar opted for a diner alternative. He hated to spend the money, but Ken's Pancake House was a lively enough place. Maybe he'd see an old friend.

The Cadillac turned over after three attempts. Elgar contemplated taking it to the mechanic but dismissed the thought. Upkeep made no sense.

In all honesty, he did not expect to outlive the engine of this car. Everything in his mind had a resigned finality. This might be my last meal. This might be my last shit. This might be the last time I eat eggs and bacon. So went the pattern of his life. As it was, Elgar would never get another plate of eggs and bacon. Five miles from town the road became a solid roadblock of abandoned cars. The sky was lit orange and raining ash. Gun shots popped in the distance, echoing and stirring pigeons and mynah birds. Nothing human moved.

Elgar pulled the emergency brake and silenced the chuffing of his engine. He walked to the nearest car, a Civic already coated in gray flakes. Its headlights were on, giving the slow ash fall and distorted sunlight an ethereal, dreamlike quality. Elgar marched slowly forward with his deliberate old-man gait. His right knee throbbed with arthritis and forewarned the coming rains. Fear clutched his chest. Fear of the unusual. Nothing stirred except for birds and ash tossed

She was young,
beautiful and blue.
Elgar tapped on
the window. The
blue woman stared
at Elgar, motionless.

into twisting eddies by warm tropical winds. Elgar placed his palm against the Civic's windshield and spread his fingers into the ashes. Flakes fell away, forming a porthole on the windshield. Through the porthole, the driver stared back at Elgar. She was young, beautiful and blue.

Elgar tapped on the window. The blue woman stared at Elgar, motionless.

* * *

The Cadillac survived the voyage home. Elgar decided not to journey to Hilo. He was not a hero, he would not be of any help. Furthermore, he was afraid.

The lady in the Civic was dead. The people in the van next to her, dead. A young man sprawled out on the road wrapped in a cycle-suit, dead. They were blue, and lifeless, and whatever was happening it was beyond Elgar's control or comprehension. He went home. He tried to turn on his tv. Tried to turn on the radio. Cursed himself for not getting replacement batteries for the hand set, for not accepting his son's offer to get him a cell phone, for not knowing what to do and not being young or strong or vital. Eventually, Elgar lit a camp hotplate and made some soup. Corn chowder from the can. It was bland without salt, but he'd stopped salting things on doctor's orders. When a young man, he'd never have guessed that old age was dominated by slow walks, sore knees and bland food. He'd romanticized the wisdom of the old. He'd imagined that he would still have his wife. That they would bicker over television shows and spend holidays with their sons. Nothing like the actuality of life.

The sun went down and Elgar lit a candle. He thought about reading , but instead looked at a picture of himself and Sarah, his wife. They were standing in front of Akaka Falls, and thirty years hadn't passed. She hadn't been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He hadn't scattered her ashes. It was just him and her in matching floral prints, smiling on a sunny day before time got a hold of them and tossed them to the wind.

* * *

He woke with the sun. The TV was still dead. The air was still thick with smoke. Things hadn't improved, and as such, Elgar felt he should stay home. He cleaned the living room of his cabin , first making the bed, then picking up dirty clothes for the laundry hamper, then sweeping the floor that was now bare of clothes. He cooked a ramen packet over the camp hotplate and kept ears out to the world. Miles away gunshots still resounded and echoed over an otherwise silent landscape. Elgar drank cold coffee out of a pot he'd brewed the day before last

and waited. For what he wasn't sure.

* * *

The next day the gunfire ceased, but Hilo was still on fire. Ash still rained. The tv still sat with its black screen and no power. No Price is Right. No Fox News. No commercials. Elgar was lulled to sleep by the chirps of cochi frogs.

Another day came, and Elgar rose with the sun. He stretched his leg. The rain hadn't fallen, but his knee still spoke of its coming. Elgar ate a cold can of Vienna sausage for breakfast and decided to try his luck with town again. He packed a tuna sandwich and his .22 caliber chipmunk rifle. The Cadillac tried to start. It sputtered loudly with the effort of a creature who is all intent and no payoff. Elgar was not upset by this. He'd expected the Cadillac to stop someday. Each time it had turned over, each time it had made it to town over the past two years had been a blessing, an act of God. Elgar squeezed the wheel, said a brief thanks, and left his old friend in the car port. He realized it was Saturday. In regular times Saturday meant a

trip to the zoo. Walks along asphalt paths, lunch on the designated benches. Watching families go through the motions. For the first time since the fire, Elgar really thought of the zoo. Was anyone there? Were the animals blue and cold like the people of the road?

He left on foot. The ash fall had stopped, but cinders were ankle deep for most of the walk over. The entrance of the zoo stood open as it always had. It was a small free zoo, reliant on donations, without a front turn-style or attendants to enforce donation.

Elgar walked through the entrance and was immediately greeted by the squawk of a large African Macaw. The bird regarded the old man with one eye, claws clinging to the cage it claimed as its home.

Elgar took a deep breath and swallowed against tears. The bird was alive. In fact, by the sounds of the zoo, the chirps and barks, and hungry squeals; everyone was alive at the zoo. Elgar bent over and pulled a shoot of grass out of the dirt. He pushed the blade into the cage. The Macaw bit the grass and chewed it

thoughtfully. Its leather tongue rolled the vegetation back and forth across its inner beak.

“Shhhhhhhh,” Elgar told the massive bird. He pressed the barrel of his chipmunk rifle against the lock of the Macaw’s cage and burst it open with a point blank shot. At first the bird stood stunned. The grass in its mouth jutted out, unmoved. The door of its cage swung lazily open. Elgar bowed and swung his arm like a fancy usher. “Go on den. You like be free?”

The Macaw squawked and awkwardly flung itself in a half jump, half glide, out of the cage. It landed on a wood bench, squawked again and took off for the forest edge of the park. Elgar smiled.

* * *

The rifle was an expensive and wholly unreasonable solution to the animal freedom issue. He just didn’t have enough bullets to do the work. Elgar decided instead to find the zookeeper’s office, which was simple given the minuscule size of the zoo. The boss was bound to have keys stashed away.

The zookeeper’s work room was one of the few enclosed structures on the twenty acre lot. Elgar rifled the door and found a room empty of life but not man. The zookeeper sat in his cushioned office chair. His yellow work shirt was offset by his blue skin. The zookeeper’s eyes bulged out of their sockets. The tip of his tongue protruded from his lips and had turned a dark black. Elgar wondered why there were no flies. Why didn’t this man stink like the dead?

Five decades prior, Elgar had worked as a sugar cane harvester, like his father and his grandfather. He’d once come across a corpse in the fields, decomposing and smelling both sweet and retched - some victim of unknown and unsolved violence. That body’s odor had thickened and even after he’d called over the Luna boss and gone home his clothes reeked of corpse..

The zookeeper didn’t stink. He didn’t appear to be rotting. Flies weren’t crawling over his face and eyes and tongue.

Elgar held his breath and entered the office. He thought of the international pandemics that

had plagued the news of late. SARS and Bird Flu and Swine Flu and New Typhus and if he could just hold his breath for the next minute or so he wouldn’t breath in whatever germs the dead zookeeper was emanating.

Elgar crossed the office in two giant steps. He found the zookeeper’s keys clipped to his belt. He pulled the ring, but the keys wouldn’t unlatch. Elgar fumbled the latch with his thumbs, but the ring held solid to the dead man’s pants. His face turned red and stiff, he panicked like a diver too far from the surface. Elgar gave up on the latch and pulled the entire key ring. The zookeeper slid out of his chair and slumped to the ground. Elgar put a foot on the zookeeper’s leg and yanked with panicked might. The belt loop on the corpse’s jeans ripped, and Elgar suddenly found himself rushing to the door and breathing long gasps of what he hoped was clean, fresh air. His head buzzed and his vision sparkled, but he kept his feet and soon enough was fit to stand straight.

Elgar jingled the keys in concert with the zoo animal

noises. Where to go first? Elgar decided to play no favorites, he'd free them all in the order of the zoo's tour path.

First the butterfly house, which required no key aside from Elgar's pocket knife and three smooth cuts to remove the front flaps and give the attending monarchs access to the outside world.

The ant eaters proved more of a challenge in that they seemed wholly ambivalent regarding their freedom. Elgar stood at the open entrance to their habitat and watched them root around, licking up insects with long alien tongues.

The primates proved more game to Elgar's plan. Lemurs, rhesus macaques, howling monkeys, they all paced in filthy enclosures in tune to whatever catastrophe was befalling the world. Or maybe they were just hungry. Whatever the case, as soon as Elgar unlocked a cage, its monkey inhabitant would spring free and run its bow legged gait to a nearby forest trees. The freed primates hooted to each other

and flung themselves from tree to tree, scaring the wholly living bejesus out of the birds and mice whose authority in said trees had gone unquestioned until this moment.

Elgar freed feral pigs and goats. He swatted the donkeys out of their enclosure, but they would only go so far as he urged them. Frustrated, Elgar left them

There was still Namaste, the zoo's main attraction a Siberian white tiger

to stand in the parking lot. He freed golden pheasants and green parrots. He opened the enclosures of the bearcats, his favorite animals of the park because their musk smelled exactly like Fritos corn chips, and thus his childhood.

Elgar emancipated the legion of zoo creatures, and for a few

glorious moments the park was filled with movement and life. Colored feathers whirled in cyclone dervishes, furred creatures frolicked with unlike and unkind animals. Snakes pursued mice, rabbits and pigs ran free, goats stood on boulders and walls and beheld all with their square-eyed stare. He was Noah after the flood, and all the beautiful chaos of the animal park was his to behold.

Elgar feared his last task. There was still Namaste, the zoo's main attraction. Namaste was a Siberian white tiger, gifted to the park by a Las Vegas magician upon his retirement. It was the star of an otherwise diminutive and underfunded sanctuary. Its habitat was a giant electrified fence isolating an acre of grassy hill, trees with hung tires, and a pond the tiger tirelessly paced around.

Elgar stood by the fence and watched Namaste watching him. The tiger crouched low in long grass, its tail up and twitching as part of its overall predator coil. The old tiger understood that today was different than the droll days of zoo past. The animal

smells had grown closer, as had their chirps and scurries. Namaste was frisky with the new smells and movements. He wanted live food, not the unfrozen chicken carcasses the keepers fed him. He wanted to capture prey and fill his mouth with its hot blood. Namaste looked at Elgar and licked his chops.

Elgar looked at the zookeeper's key chain, then back to the tiger, then back to the key chain. He unwound the problem in his mind. The tiger could not stay; it would starve eventually without minders to feed it. He could not become the tiger's new keeper in that he did not have the food or the strength to hunt whatever food it required. He couldn't just open the cage and hope for the best. A vivid image flashed in Elgar's mind of the tiger running him down and chewing a leg off. An uncle of his had survived a bear attack in Alaska eighty years ago. He'd get drunk and tell the kids at family luaus.

* * *

"He wen push me down and

bite my knee," Uncle Vincent slurred to the rapt attention of children who'd heard the story a dozen times before.

"He wen push me down and bite my knee and den he lift me up, up, up into da air. He jus' shake me tree times." Uncle Vincent gnashed his teeth and shook his head left to right, like he was the bear.

"Ho den. I hear this one pop and den one snap and den I was jus' flung away. And den I wen land on dis cliff, with nutting to grab, and nobody for help me. And der I was, tumbling down one side of da cliff all buss from da rocks and da bushes. Down, down, down." Uncle Vincent rolled his hands, one over the other, giving the universal sign for tumbling.

"Ho den, I went flying tru da air and I tot I was going die. Here I stay tinkin I was going hit da ground and..." Uncle Vincent clapped his hands together, causing all the children to jump in unison. "Pack! Buss my head open and ah pau!" Uncle Vincent picked up his beer poured out a short stream.

"But it was not to be. I tink maybe God was wit me, or luck,

or someting like dat. I neva hit da ground. I wen hit da water. Water so cold it was like da kind liquid ice. I wen try swim em, but my leg hurt so bad. I wen come up to da surface and blew out spit dat turned to ice crystals in da air. I try swim em to da shore, but no matter how much I kick, I only went in circles. Who knows why?"

The children stared wide-eyed, as they always did by this part of the story. They all knew the answer, but none dared interrupt the master teller.

"I swam in circles because dat bear wen bite off my leg!" Uncle Vincent rolled up his pant leg to show the spellbound children his richly oiled koa peg. A roaring grizzly was carved into the side. The braver children reached out and touched it. Uncle Vincent finished his beer.

* * *

Elgar let out a long breath. Uncle Vincent had instilled in him a lifelong fear of being mauled, specifically of getting his knee chewed off by a wild animal. Adults have a way of recklessly proving the world a

dangerous place and the things that crawl far enough and deep enough into a child's psyche tend to stay there. Uncle Vincent was fifty years in the grave, but his words were still very much alive in Elgar's skull.

* * *

Elgar sat in his chair and dozed in and out of sleep. The day's activity had exhausted him. He spent the late afternoon and early evening staring at Namaste, pondering their situation. He contemplated shooting the tiger. He contemplated opening the door and trying to scramble up the fence. Nothing made sense. Nothing was safe. Nothing was right.

Eventually Elgar drifted into sleep. His dreams took no solid hold. He floated through imaginings of his life that if not completely true, were at least true in his rememberings.

* * *

The morning sun rose and Elgar made his way back to the zoo. Yesterday's chaos and animal cacophony gave way to

lonely silence. The freed residents had left, had found some new home, some new place. All of them except the goats, who stood their silent vigil on the rocks, and Namaste.

"Good morning," Elgar called to the goats.

"Good morning," He called out to Namaste. The tiger's friskiness had subsided. The big cat stretched itself out next to its pond and licked the pads of its front paw. Elgar sat outside Namaste's home and watched the tiger clean itself. Minutes passed, ash started to rain again from Hilo.

The tiger was old, that much was certain. Its fur was mottled and without luster. The cat's back hips were too skinny for its body; it paced awkwardly around the concrete rim of its pond.

"We're old men," Elgar told Namaste. "What can we do? We're old men."

Namaste did not acknowledge Elgar. The old cat slumped onto its side and yawned.

"I'm going to let you out, old man. You gotta be good to me, okay?"

Elgar turned back to the

rocks and shouldered his chipmunk rifle. He brought down one of the smaller goats with a single shot to the eye. The rifle discharge echoed across silent expanses and frightened the other goats off. Elgar felt bad about slaying the beast he'd freed the day before, but he knew that some animals eat and some animals are eaten, and goats always fell to the latter.

Elgar dragged the goat carcass to the tiger's fence, leaving a trail of blood across thirty yards of grass and concrete. He retrieved a utility ladder that was propped up outside of the zookeeper's office.

His plan was simple. Dump the goat on one side of the habitat, wait for Namaste to start eating it, unlock the cage, leave while the tiger was distracted, go home, make soup. He understood it wasn't a great plan, or even all that good, but he had the means to do it and no alternatives aside from abandoning the tiger.

Elgar set the ladder against the fence and froze. His breath caught in his throat. The hands that held the ladder were bright blue and for the first time he realized that the tips were numb

and tingling, as though they were asleep. The tips of his toes were numb as well.

“No, no, no.” Elgar whispered when he regained his breath. The little old man shouldered the goat and forced himself up the ladder. His hands lost all feeling but he pushed on, one step after the other. Elgar wrapped his arm around the top wrung and pushed the goat to the outer edge of the fence. For a long moment he felt as though he were falling, as though the ladder would tip and he and the goat would come crashing to earth. The image was clear in his mind when the goat tipped over the edge of the fence and tumbled into Namaste’s sanctuary.

Elgar closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He took hold of the lower wrung with hands that existed somewhere else. His feet found the ground without feeling. Elgar wobbled and tried to stand straight but couldn’t find the strength. He looked up. Namaste was regarding him from the pond. Looking at the man and the goat with curious eyes.

“Come on!” Elgar yelled and punched the fence. “Come get em!”

Namaste was hungry, but his cat dignity wouldn’t let him hurry. The tiger casually strode over to the dead goat and gave it an investigative nudge.

“Go on!” Elgar shouted. His arms were completely numb. His breathing turned shallow and labored. Elgar couldn’t wait for Namaste to dig in. He lurched forward on unsteady legs, hand gripping the fence for balance. The edge of Elgar’s vision turned black. Numb hands fumbled the keys, which he dropped, retrieved and promptly dropped again. Elgar slid to the ground, his legs no longer good for anything. Elgar picked up the keys one last time. The vision of his left eye faded to black. Elgar gripped the gate key, stabbed it into the lock and twisted it to a satisfying click. The gate swung open.

Elgar smiled. His arms dropped to his side and twitched involuntarily. Namaste nudged the gate fully open and stared into Elgar’s good eye. The old creatures silently regarded each other. Namaste walked through the gate, free, a creature of his own regarding and destiny. Elgar was out of fear. Fear had lost reason. He was going to die. He

was going to join his wife, and his father, and mother, and Uncle Vincent, and all the friends he’d promised to meet again.

Namaste crept closer. Elgar felt the beast’s powerful hot breaths on his face, the last part of his body to feel anything at all. Namaste licked his chops. One corner of Elgar’s mouth held its smile as the other side went numb and slack. Namaste licked the old man’s face with his asperous tongue. One long lick that started from the chin and ended at the old man’s white hairline. A small noise emitted from Elgar’s mouth, maybe a chuckle or a laugh, or squeal of delight. It was the remnant of a good sound, a sound of joy like a baby’s coo.

Namaste settled himself across the old man’s legs and watched him pass.

F i c t i o n

No Victims

By Rahul Kanakia

When I enter the autopsy room, Dr. Hsu's hands are already inside the body of Dr. Borstein's latest kill. Borstein stands over him, explaining the subject's numerous genetic deficiencies.

Borstein sneers at me. Borstein and Hsu think that they are eugenicists, purifying the human race. I think they are lying to themselves. They do not act with precision. Their ideology is a gloss that they paint over their crimes of passion.

"Hold back those fat flaps," Borstein says. "Watch closely, Mohit. You might learn something." I am overweight myself. Borstein has never shied away from implying that he

would be willing to excise me from the gene pool.

I stand opposite them and wait for the rest of the Conclave to arrive. The autopsy room is brightly lit, but cold. The air is host to strange whispers and rumblings from the pipes. After a particularly obvious kill, bodies often disappear from the autopsy room before they can be examined. During a recent renovation, over a hundred hastily-embalmed bodies were found hidden inside the walls.

"I'm talking to you, Mohit," Borstein says. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Sloppy work in the operating room today," I say, "You nicked his heart. It was

clear as day. Your insurance rates will go up for sure."

"I couldn't bear to operate on that queer for another second," Borstein says.

"That was my patient," I say.

"There's no need to thank me."

"Your action was against the rules."

Dr. Pabst, the woman-murderer, walks in. "What rules?" he says. "Isn't killing against the rules?" He is an oedipal murderer. During treatment, he likes to subject the ladies to repeated rectal probing. Before they die, he whispers "I'm sorry, Mom" into their ear.

"I am requesting a judgment against Dr. Borstein," I say. "He

killed one of my patients on the table today.”

“Hmm,” Dr. Pabst says.

“Were you saving him, then?”

“He was my patient,” I say.

“If you weren’t saving him, then what does it matter?” Dr. Pabst says. “Someone would have gotten him eventually.”

We have not allowed a patient to leave this hospital in fifteen years. But still, the proprieties must be observed.

By now, more doctors have filed in. There are sexual murderers, thrill-killers, Übermenschen, racists, madmen, religious cranks, animal-rights activists, and a whole host of others. A short round of discussion is sufficient to dispose of my claim. My request is denied, and I am censured for wasting the time of the Conclave.

Incensed, I leave the Conclave. I go home and stare at the television. Then I open my computer and make a call to my patient’s next of kin.

“Mr. Kariha,” I say.

“...might I speak to your wife?”

“Janine died ten years

ago,” he says. “My boy was just a child when he murdered his mother.”

“An oedipal case, then?”

“In a way,” he said. “My son and I were very happy together.”

“In any case,” I say. “I’m very sorry about your loss. That isn’t how it was supposed to happen.”

“Don’t worry,” Mr. Hariha says. “I started mourning him the moment we brought him to that hospital. I’m glad it was so quick. I thought that such a beautiful boy might be tormented for months before he was finally released. Thank you, though, for all your concern.”

We have not
allowed a patient
to leave this
hospital in fifteen
years. But still, the
proprieties must
be observed.

While he thanks me, I gain an erection. After I hang up, I masturbate. The result is spectacular. I see stars.

During the night, I wake up. There is someone in my room. I throw off the covers and scream, “Today! Right now!”

My murderer slinks away. He is a *idée fixe* killer. During the night, he talks into my ear trying to mold me into his perfect victim. I resist as best I can, but every day I feel the influence of his whispered words.

When I wake up, I am more angry about the Conclave’s decision than I was when I went to sleep. I decide to kill the most

physically perfect patient of Dr. Borstein that I am able to find.

There is a girl of seventeen on the third floor. She has long blond hair and eyes that are blue and empty like the sky. She came in for appendicitis. She survived the operation and is due to be released any moment.

When I walk up, Borstein is outside her door.

A tear drops from one of his eyes. I am holding a steaming vial of acid.

"I am going to dissolve her face," I say.

"Not that," he says. "Have a heart. She's nothing like that boy."

"Are you saving her?"

"She's destined to carry forth the master race!"

But he does not bar my way as I walk into the room. She looks up as I enter.

"More treatments?" she says.

"I'm ending you," I say.

"Really?" Her pupils dilate. She sits up straighter. "Why? Can't you please tell me?"

"That's none of your concern."

"My first was my own baby," she says. "I smothered it with a pillow. My second was a classmate. He was sixteen..."

She goes on, describing her kills. How crass. As I approach, the teen licks her lips.

"Please tell me why?" she says.

"Your doctor crossed me."

Her smile fades. Her brow furrows. When she speaks again, the dreamy tone is gone. "For revenge?" she says. "That is stone bullshit. I want to see the chief of medicine."

I smile and hold the beaker

of acid over her face.

She reaches out and slaps it aside. It flies against the wall and sizzles through the white paint. She swaddles her acid-burned hand in her blanket.

"What the fuck did you just try to do?" she says. "You send in a goddamn nurse, and then you get the chief here."

Hours later, I am standing in the parking lot of the hospital as we release our first patient in years. News cameras track the young girl. Dr. Borstein is holding her arm. She is sneering at me. Our chief of medicine makes a speech about the hospital's ongoing commitment to humanist values.

As the cameras turn off and the news crews drift away, a maniac with wide open eyes steps out of the dwindling crowd and stabs the girl as she reaches for him with outstretched hands.

Dr. Borstein is present to witness my humiliation when the Chief of Medicine's suspends me without pay for letting a personal feud cause harm to a patient. Over and above the damage to the reputation of this institution, the Chief seems personally disgusted with my lapse of

judgment.

"In all my years as a doctor, I've never seen anything as perverse as what I just witnessed," he says. "I recommend that you go home and start considering other lines of work."

My murderer is waiting for me at the gate to my apartment complex. He is carrying six bags of groceries.

"Hello," I say to him. I search in my wallet for my key card and swipe us both in.

"I saw you on the TV today," he says.

"Oh?" We are standing in the lobby of my building.

"You were magnificent," he says. "Saving that girl was so brave."

"No, no, I was trying to burn away her face."

"You knew what you were doing," says my murderer. He calls the elevator and goes in. I wait for him to go up, but he stands there with his foot in the door. Eventually, I enter.

"There aren't many people with the courage to save someone nowadays," he says.

"I've killed eighty-one patients," I say. I press the button

for my floor. "My specialty is an overdose of painkillers that sends them away in a bliss that nothing in their life could ever have matched. They're a miserable lot: clinically depressed, bipolar, schizophrenic. Nothing can save them. Nothing except me. Aristotle said no one can be judged happy until he is dead. Well despite themselves, they ended up happy, very happy."

The door opens. I step out. "Eighty-one," my murderer calls out behind me. "Has it been so many? Really? And when was the last?"

"It was..."

He has stepped forward into the hall. "Two years ago, perhaps? And wasn't he that one with cancer? The one in so much pain? Wasn't he really begging you to do what you did?"

"No," I say. "He wanted to live. They all did. I had to intervene to correct their sickness. That's always been the job of happy, well-adjusted people. People like me."

"I used to be like you," he says. "I set one hundred and thirteen fires. A crowd would gather around the fires, and we would worship the screams. But

then I realized that the people inside did not run out. They did not want to live. They disgusted me."

"Everyone wants to live."

"Not anymore. Look inside yourself. You know the truth. Every day, you wish for death."

"But I'm the only one."

"No, you're not." A tear falls from my murderer's eye. We embrace, and I feel the bulge of a knife in his pocket.

"So then you've not come for me?" I whisper into his ear.

"I come at night, trying to cure you with my hypnotic suggestions," he says. "Someday I will. Someday you'll want to live."

I snake one hand down to touch his knife. "So...only then?"

He pulls my hand away. "You're not worthy yet," he says. "But someday soon, these clouds will open. Someday the light will shine down on you again, and that's when I'll strike."

"Wait here." I go into my apartment. I search for my spare key and press it into my murderer's hand. "Please come whenever you can."

As he leaves, he says, "Someday you'll regret having

given this to me."

But I am not worried about that. Right now, all I want is one second of peace and understanding before the knife comes down.

F i c t i o n

Memories of the Knacker's Yard

by Ian Creasey

Another day, another corpse. This guy had been good-looking before someone worked him over. Now he had big, livid bruises on his head and upper body, cigarette burns on the cheeks and eyelids, and the usual wide slash across the throat.

"How long have we had this one?" I asked, shivering in the morgue's chill.

"Two days," the white-coat guy said. I didn't know his name. I try to remember the lab people and support staff but turnover's too high. This line of work burns people out faster than a crematorium on overtime.

"What did you leave it that long for?" I said, annoyed. "Waiting for the killer to turn

himself in?"

"We were waiting for the ghost to show up," he said.

I shook my head in disgust. "Look, when someone's been murdered, they want us on the case. If their ghost doesn't turn up in twenty-four hours, that's because it can't."

That was the problem. If a ghost complains that it's just been murdered, it can help us by describing the killer or at least tell us about its enemies.

Investigating a murder without a ghost is much harder. The slashing was the third this month, all without ghosts, and the eighth this year. Or was it the ninth?

Hell, when you lose count of the corpses, you know you're

losing.

Back upstairs, I took a swig of stale coffee to warm myself up. Then I grabbed an ancient black raincoat that looked as if a tramp had slept in it for a month, and I rifled through my pockets to remove any police identification. Malcolm Chenier, Detective-Inspector. The old ID photo mocked me with his full head of hair and blue, optimistic eyes. When I posed for that picture, I'd never fired a weapon except on the shooting range. I hefted my gun now, wondering whether I'd need it, and decided to play safe and bring it along. I didn't debate for more than a second, remembering the corpse in the morgue. Two days was too long

—I had to rush.

It was a windy afternoon; the plastic bags snagged in the courtyard's dead trees rustled and billowed like fledgling kites. The overcast sky promised rain. I put my shades on and started walking.

I could have taken a car but not all the way. Past the wasteland of 'For Sale' and 'To Let' signs, the road became cratered with potholes and choked with rubble. The spooks keep Ghost Town unfit for the living. The buildings are all wrecked, burnt-out shells; the streets are full of festering garbage. Ahead I saw dense black smoke, and I coughed as fumes caught in my throat. The ghosts were burning toxic waste again.

Not themselves, of course. They hire people to do that. Ghosts don't have much, but they do have money. Nowadays you can take it with you.

If you ever had it in the first place.

Through my shades I saw spooks hanging around like bored teenagers. Some of them had

brought their grave markers here, now that cemeteries were obsolete, and they sat on their gravestones, sizing me up with hungry, jaded eyes. As I walked down the road nicknamed Death Row, a haunt of young ghosts heard the click, click of living footsteps and swarmed me. My breath frosted, white vapour in the air, and my skin chilled in the ectoplasmic embrace. I stopped,

Ghosts don't have
much, but they do
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Nowadays you can
take it with you.

trying not to flinch as the haunt writhed around me. Two of them wore sharp suits and expensive shoes; another was naked. The others were translucent wisps, fading ghosts who would soon be eaten by the stronger.

“Wooh!” The naked spook thrust his arm into my skull, as if scooping out my brain. The

crawling sensation made me shudder, but the ghost couldn't hurt me.

Probably.

The other spooks danced and gibbered, trying to get a rise out of me. They knew I could see them, because I wore ghost-glasses. Shades to see shades. Ain't technology grand?

“Very scary, boys,” I said.

“You should be in showbiz.”

“I was in showbiz,” said one of the sharp-dressed ghosts.

A lot of them say things like that. Death's a great opportunity to reinvent yourself. Before the others could spin me their obits, I cut in.

“Anyone new around? Just been murdered, last couple of days?”

The victim's ghost might have been too traumatized to report its murder at the station. If instead it had gravitated to Ghost Town, these boys would know about it. Word gets around, especially about slashings—fresh pickings.

The showbiz guy shrugged: a boneless ripple in pale wisps of aura. “Friend of yours?”

I nodded. It's best not to admit being a cop in Ghost Town. Even dead people are criminals nowadays.

The haunt all giggled, an unearthly cackling that raised goose-pimples along my arms. "You won't see him again," said Mr Showbiz. "Not whole, anyway."

"You might find some pieces," said the naked ghost.

They thought this would horrify me. It did, the first time, but I've seen a lot since then. More than these fresh young ghosts, anyway. I could scare them, if I wanted.

"In the Yard, is he?" I asked in a bored voice.

"Yeah," said the showbiz ghost, sullenly.

I'd expected that, but the confirmation helped. I started walking again, heading for the Knacker's Yard. The haunt, desperate for distraction, drifted along with me.

"Got any thrills?"

"Talents?"

"Love?"

I ignored the spooks and kept going. I felt sorry for them, but I didn't want to get drawn in. I was in a hurry, and they had all the

time in the world. Sometimes to end a conversation you just have to walk away.

And even that doesn't always work. I had to step carefully in the ruined road, and the writhing ghosts kept blocking my view. They whirled around me, faster and faster, a carousel of restless death.

"Give us your mind—"

"Your memories—"

"Your soul—"

Annoyed, I took the shades off. The spooks disappeared. I still felt the chill of their presence, and I heard a faint whisper, "You'll be back...."

No, I won't, I thought as I walked on. When I die, I won't end up in Ghost Town. I hate coming here for an afternoon, never mind eternity.

Trouble is, the alternatives are all worse.

I picked my way along the streets, avoiding broken glass, oil slicks and rusty barbed wire. After a while I reached a ruined hotel. Skeletal walls embraced the sky, their once-white paint flaking in the wind, stained with the soot of trash fires. In the old lobby, two bouncers—living, looming, muscle-bound

specimens—stood by the stairway to the basement. I was surprised to see only breathers, until I remembered I'd taken off my shades. I put them back on and saw another figure, the senior doorman. His face was the dusty grey of cold ashes.

Ghosts run the Knacker's Yard.

"Toll," said the doorman.

You have to pay with a piece of yourself—or someone else—just to get in.

When I was a kid, my parents made me take piano lessons. I stuck at it for five years, until I discovered girls and under-age drinking. Even then, not knowing what I was going to be when I grew up, I knew that pianist was about as likely as astronaut. I figured the lessons were pointless.

I was wrong. Though I've never touched a piano since, the lessons come in useful occasionally.

The doorman held out a smoke-grey, almost transparent hand. I tapped the left earpiece of my shades, concentrated on those long-ago piano lessons and wrenched them out of my head. The doorman's withered fingers snatched at the morsel. He

popped it in his mouth and swallowed.

“Tinkle fucking tinkle,” he sneered. “I hate musicians.”

Piano lessons aren't much good to a ghost who can't touch the keys. But plenty of breathers prefer to buy someone else's lessons rather than put in the hard work themselves. That way you can practice for five years in an afternoon.

The bouncers stood aside for me. “Is Charley around?” I asked.

The doorman shrugged. “I haven't seen him lately. Maybe he's faded.” He grinned like a skull. “Why don't you look for him on the racks?”

I turned away, trying to look unfazed by the blow. I was sad to hear that Charley had disappeared, yet I could do nothing for him. There's little anyone can do for the dead.

Charley and I used to go running together; I gave it up when he died from a heart attack after a personal best in the half-marathon. He was my contact at the Yard. Without him, I'd have to make like a customer. Hell, I'd have to buy my piano lessons back, if I wanted to keep them.

Charley normally slipped me the toll when it turned up downstairs. He let me riffle through the racks, too. Without his help, this was going to be a whole lot trickier.

I walked down toward the basement, careful not to slip on the frayed, slimy carpet. Before I reached the bottom I stopped, then glanced around to make sure no-one saw me hold a small glass bottle to my left ear. I touched my shades.

I took a deep breath of frigid air and thought about my job. The endless procession of corpses. The dumb burglars, the drunks and nutters, the smug fraudsters you can't touch. The sour, overstewed coffee in the station canteen. Ten years of paperwork, so mind-numbing that if you catch a dealer you're tempted to bypass procedure and force-feed him his own wares until he chokes. Coping with all the crimes and killings, trying to keep head above water and being pulled off the case whenever there's a bomb scare, a dole riot, or a politician going walkabout. They say a woman's work is never done, but try being a policeman. As fast as you clean the scum off the streets, the

gutter fills up faster.

Popping all that into the bottle took a real weight off my mind. Instantly I felt younger, stronger, and as if I'd had a decent night's sleep this month. I smiled—how long since I'd done that?—and put the bottle away. A tiny evaporating thought said, Remember.... Usually Charley reminded me to reintegrate afterward, but without him—

I'd just have to manage. I couldn't avoid this; transfers always create leakage and residues. While I looked for evidence, a trace of me would backwash. And if the Yard's customers got the taste of cop, I'd never make it upstairs alive.

Or dead.

I went on, shivering. It was cold as a penguin's supper down here. The inhabitants of Ghost Town don't need central heating, and their crowding auras froze my flesh like a blizzard. Many spooks had crisply defined shapes, as if newly dead or well fed; others were blurred and translucent. The ghosts flitted back and forth, roaming the basement's grubby corridors. This was their shopping mall, restaurant and drugs den, all in

one. Breathing customers were tolerated but not welcomed.

The spooks didn't bother to move out of my way. As I barged through them, my skin crawling, they stared at me with unfriendly eyes. Was that the natural resentment of the dead for the living, or something more? It occurred to me that if Charley had been eaten, any of these ghosts might have swallowed his mind, his memories. Anyone here could recognize me.

I walked faster, until I reached a door stippled with mould. The ghosts just floated through this door, but I had to knock.

Another of the Yard's underling breathers opened the door. He wore a white shirt and black tie, like a waiter at an uptown restaurant, and I half-expected him to offer me a wine list. The recollections of many vintage wines and drunken evenings would be here somewhere. Everything was here somewhere.

The room stretched back and back, the walls glittering like Santa's grotto. The sparkle came from reflections of the harsh strip-lights upon thousands and

thousands of tiny bottles, racked from floor to ceiling. Ghosts crowded round the racks, sampling the contents, giggling, cursing and sighing. At the far wall, a crush of spooks gorged on the memories of love affairs and sexual encounters. Other shelves contained anything from sporting triumphs to childhood fun with sand-castles.

On previous visits I'd joined the browsing throng, and Charley had steered me to likely bottles. But now I'd have to ask. I turned to the waiter flunky.

"What would Sir like today?" he inquired.

"Murder," I said.

"The murders are on shelves fifteen to seventeen—or eighteen if you want to be the victim."

"I'm looking for something special."

He smiled. "Gunshot, poison, strangling?"

"Slasher."

"Ah, a connoisseur. There's nothing like the spurt of blood, the choking cough, the victim's frantic gasps for breath.... I believe we have several fine specimens." He paused.

I paid him the browsing fee. "I want the fresh stuff," I said.

The waiter sorted through the merchandise and passed me two bottles. "These are the latest in."

I sat on a grimy couch, then poured the first bottle into my head.

My husband shouted, "Get me a fucking drink." I crept downstairs, my face throbbing with fresh bruises. In the kitchen I found a can of beer but didn't open it. Instead I opened the cutlery drawer and grabbed a carving knife. It felt heavy in my hand, and the buzz of the fridge roared in my ears. I climbed the stairs—

I refocused my vision onto the endless shelves around me. "I'm bored of domestics," I said to the waiter. I put that memory back, and swigged the other.

Thwack. I saw blood trickle from the new gash, just below the cigarette burns on the pretty-boy cheekbone. I dropped the putter.

"Maybe I should try the nine-iron," I said. "Or the driver. What do you think?"

The guy's eyes were closed. He was unconscious—or faking it. I reached into my golf bag and took out a random club. It was the sand-wedge.

What the hell. I walked round and addressed the guy's left side. Thwock.

Prince Charming didn't scream or even twitch. This was getting boring. The cigarettes had been fun—it was a shame I'd run out—but now it was time to finish the guy. I exchanged the golf club for my knife.

I made a couple of practice cuts on his face, enjoying the smooth incisions as I tested the knife's sharpness. Then, digging deep into the flesh, I slashed right across his throat. The wound gaped like a moist red orifice. Blood puddled at either side.

Damn. It was running off the edge of the newspaper I'd put down, and soaking into the carpet—

I struggled to surface from the memory, blinking away afterimages of blood. “I'll keep this one,” I said.

Then I saw that the waiter had gone. A ghost stood in front of me. She had filmy scraps of clothes on a blurred body, as if she were fading. Yet as I looked, her hair grew long, then short again. Her breasts flattened and vanished. A beard sprouted on the ghost's chin, then diminished

into stubble and unfashionably long sideburns. The new face smiled.

“Charley?” I said.

“Hi there,” said the ghost.

“How's things?”

I shrugged. “Same as ever.” No nearer to catching the killer, but I didn't want to say that out loud. Not here.

And not to Charley. Not now.

“What's happened to you?” I asked.

“I was thinning,” he said.

“And I didn't want to end up in bottles or any of the quack sanctuaries. So a few of us with the same problem—”

“A composite,” I said.

“Yeah. Meet Rob, Duncan, Stephanie, and Grace.” As he named the others, the ghost flickered into different shapes. Then Charley returned, with a fuzzy outline.

I tried not to wince at the sight. If the spook hadn't finalized its new form—if the fading fragments hadn't coalesced—then the composite was unhealthy to say the least. It hadn't even settled on a joint name.

“Hello everyone,” I said, doing my best not to make it

sound like Goodbye.

“Can I get you anything?” asked Charley. As he gestured to the shelves, he saw his blurred arm. He tried to focus and acquired small hands with silver nail varnish. His hair shimmered, as if uncertain of its colour.

“I've got what I came for,” I said. “I'll leave the money here.” I stood up and placed the purchase fee on the couch.

“Is that everything you need?”

It wasn't. I'd intended to get the victim's memories, in case they contained a clue. But now I had to leave, straight away. My friend Charley was only one fifth of the ghost standing before me. The other four weren't my friends at all, yet they shared the composite memory. They knew who I was. Right now I couldn't remember why that was a problem, but I knew it was bad—very bad.

“Yes, it's fine,” I said. “Good to see you again. Hope the integration works out for you.”

I moved to the door. As I brushed past the phantom, its form shifted again. Breasts this time, and short dark hair.

“So long, Charley,” I said,

stressing the name. I was probably safe while his personality had the helm. But the composite looked so unstable that Charley might submerge at any moment.

I left the Memory Hall and hurried to the stairway. As I climbed I expected a hullabaloo behind me, but I heard only the eerie silence of a crowd of ghosts.

The bouncers loomed at the top of the stairs. "Come back soon," said one.

"Dead or alive," said the other, grinning.

Taking this as a threat, I reached into my coat and grasped my gun. But the pair moved aside and let me walk through the abandoned lobby. I barely restrained myself from running.

Back outside, rain pounded onto the rubbish-strewn road. I savoured the stinging drops on my face and hair, proof that I still had a body, that I wasn't a ghost just yet. The blustery wind felt fresh and clean after the unnatural cold of the spook-filled basement.

Foul weather soon loses its charm when you're the wrong side of double glazing. I walked

away from the ruined hotel until I found a sheltered corner by a tangle of concrete slabs. I made sure I could see the lobby entrance, in case anyone followed me. Although I had made it out, I didn't feel safe. The encounter had unnerved me.

Poor Charley. Soon his composite would fall apart, triggering a feeding frenzy on the Knacker's Yard floor. Eaten, Charley would evaporate, all his traits and memories scattered among the inhabitants of Ghost Town.

I could only mourn him. "Rest in peace," I whispered, my eyes welling up. I remembered the days we used to go jogging, then drinking—all the weight we lost in exercise, we put back on in bar snacks. He liked his ale; now he'd no longer miss it.

The sharpening wind whirled scraps of paper like a presentiment of snow. The day had faded into gloomy twilight. No street lights shone—the ghosts prefer darkness. I couldn't stay here much longer, peering into the dusk while gusts of rain soaked into my hair and dripped down my neck.

I wished I'd got the murder

victim's memories, if only to save his relatives from having to trawl the Yard for any relic of him. I wondered which bottles he'd ended up in. The Yard has many shops. Budding musicians and novelists visit the Skills hall. When exams approach, students flock to Knowledge. As for Feelings, let's just say there's always a market for true love. And all the fake kinds, too.

This was the killer's motive—murdering people so their ghosts could be captured, broken up and sold in the Knacker's Yard.

And the slashings themselves were valuable. I reckoned the killer tortured the victims to spice up the memories and get a higher price. Selling the killings also removed the evidence from his head. If he was picked up for a traffic offense, he didn't want murder on his conscience.

For months I'd rushed to the Yard after every killing, buying up the memories to search for clues. Now I sifted through the latest again, reliving the cigarette burns, the golf clubs, the throat slash. The memory was brief and focused, with no hint of identity or location. I felt someone's presence, a shadowy figure

waiting for the kill. There were other associations too—cross-references to the rest of the killer's mind—but I couldn't pin anything down. You know when you try to remember something and it's on the tip of your tongue? It was frustrating as all hell.

I hated having the murder in my mind. It turned my stomach, as if I had personally tortured and killed the victim. And I worried that if I kept the killing in my memory too long, it might infect me. I might start thinking I'd really done it and feel the urge to confess.

Or I might get a taste for it.

Best to take the memory out and put it away with the rest. I searched my pocket for the other murders and found two bottles. What was in the extra one?

After some thought, I dimly recalled using it. I realized that the bottle contained my own memories, my police memories. Normally Charley reminded me to put them back in.

I lifted the bottle to the earpiece of my shades, then hesitated. I'd done all this before, with no success. Maybe those memories, that mindset, had

been the problem.

I had to stop thinking like a cop, and start thinking like the killer.

To do that I'd have to ingest all the other murders. I loathed the prospect. The slashings had been bad enough individually, but experiencing them all at once would be nightmarish.

And yet if I didn't try it, this would just go on and on. More corpses. More profits for the Knacker's Yard. More futile hunts for the killer.

I put myself back in my pocket and absorbed all the murders.

The deaths flooded my brain in a montage of beatings, slashings, and blood. Guys who screamed, guys who struggled, guys who tried to bribe me. Old women, fat women, and pretty girls who lost their looks real quick. My knife grew jaded, but to me it was fresh every time.

I almost retched. I felt dazed under the onslaught. The screams, the smell of burnt flesh, the carpet cleaning bills—

That was a clue. I could ring round carpet-cleaning companies, download their databases and look for repeat

custom.

But I had no enthusiasm for that now. Routine police work was too slow, too uncertain, too fucking boring. No, I wanted leakage. I had so many of the killer's memories that I hoped their associations might coalesce into...something. Anything.

I walked back to the ruined hotel and stood near the exit from the Knacker's Yard. I imagined that I'd just come out, having sold someone's ghost for scrap, together with my own memory of the killing. I'd done this almost a dozen times. And from here—

I started walking, not thinking about my direction, letting my feet carry me. They knew the way. Whistling, I strode past the familiar looted shops and derelict houses. Rain thudded on the rusty shells of burnt-out cars.

As the evening darkened, more ghosts appeared on the street. A young woman approached me, carrying a wizened baby.

“Hey, mister—spare us a thought?”

“Fuck off and die,” I said. “Oh, you're already dead. Then just fuck off.”

But the spooks wouldn't leave me alone. A gang of them mobbed me. "Bleeding breathers —"

"—This is Ghost Town—"

"—You shouldn't be here unless you're dead—"

"— We can arrange that—"

I stopped and addressed the haunt. "You want me to call the Knackerman?"

The ghosts drew back, huddling together, the rain falling through their hazy figures.

"Because I can arrange that. I can arrange for you all to end up in bottles." I fished in my inside pocket and drew one out. "You want to try this on for size? Come on, who wants to be first?"

They fled. I kept walking, leaving the spooks behind. As I reached the edge of Ghost Town I heard traffic and footsteps and beggars shouting for spare change. Breathers filled the streets with their umbrellas, their jostling elbows. I looked at them and laughed. These people were walking ghosts: they just didn't know it yet.

My feet took me into a burger bar on Kellett Road. It's hungry work, killing people. I grabbed a Monster Burger and

fries, and ate them as I started through the back streets. I was tired now and just wanted to relax in front of the TV. I hoped The World's Dumbest Hackers was on.

As I approached my house I smiled to see Oscar keeping watch from the chimney pot. But he didn't bound down to greet me. Instead he howled, then sank through the roof into the house.

That was odd. I looked around but saw no-one else nearby. Maybe being dead was getting to him again. Some dogs find it hard to adjust.

I put my key in the keyhole, but it wouldn't turn. I took it out and looked at it. That wasn't my front door key—

Yes it was. But this wasn't my front door.

I snapped out of the trance. It had worked! I'd followed the killer's footsteps right to his door —

The door opened. Behind it stood a tall, thickset man with black hair and a scraggly beard. He had a metallic third eye implanted in his forehead. And he was pointing a gun at me.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"A customer," I said,

improvising desperately.

The ghost dog walked through him and sniffed my leg. The man—the killer—looked at me suspiciously and past me into the street.

"You'd better come in," he said.

Inside, the house smelled of pizza and cigarette smoke. At least it was warm. The killer kept me covered as he ushered me into the front room. I tried not to flinch as I recognised the scene of the murder memories. The carpet looked clean except for pizza crusts, but the white wallpaper had a dark stain near the floor.

He turned the television off. "A customer, huh? What are you looking to buy?"

"Ghosts, of course. Why sell to the Knacker's Yard when you could sell straight to their clients? Don't you know how much mark-up they add?"

"Shit!" he said. "How did you find me?"

I shrugged. "Word gets around."

"It better fucking not!"

"You can't keep a talent secret for ever, you know. You're too good at what you do. Now,

aren't you going to offer me a drink?"

I hoped he'd relax a little, but he was too canny for that. He already had a bottle of Scotch open, and he poured me a shot using his left hand while he covered me with his right.

As I sipped the Scotch, he patted my coat and discovered the gun in my outer pocket.

"Isn't this what the police use?" he said.

But he had the gun, and mine as well. I looked around for a weapon. Nothing. You'd think a killer would at least keep an axe on the wall.

"If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for me," I said.

"It's a piece of shit. Don't you know they only use it because it's cheap?" He laughed. "Are you a customer, or just a very stupid cop?"

He tried to give me an intimidating stare. It worked, with his firepower backing it up. He said, "I could ask you. Or I could ask your ghost. Which do you think would give me an honest answer?"

"Me!" I said.

"No, I think the ghost will. You see, I'll suck out your memories. And then I'll know who you are, how you found me, and whether anyone else knows I'm here."

He whistled, and the dog came trotting through the door. "Oscar! Go fetch the Knackerman. Good boy! Fetch the Knackerman!"

Oscar barked once, then scampered away. I realized he was augmented, fed on human ghost scraps. He could probably beat me at Scrabble.

The killer stepped back. "Sit down and don't move. Any trouble—well, if you know so

much about me, you know what I usually do to the meat. But if you sit still, I'll spare you that." He pointed his gun at my heart.

I knew he only waited because the Knackerman could more easily capture my ghost when it was new-born—new-dead—and confused by the trauma.

I also knew that if he wasn't going to bother tying me up or incapacitating me—hell, a blow from one of the golf clubs under the table would quieten me down—then that must mean the Knackerman was close, and would arrive very soon.

I had just minutes to live. And then my ghost had just seconds to live. Well, afterlive.

My mind whirled in panic as I struggled to concentrate. What was procedure? Talk to the gunman. Communicate. Negotiate. While he's talking, he ain't shooting. Yet those barely-remembered slogans felt stale and weak. Blood-soaked images filled my head, urging me to kill the bastard. I wanted to hit him, burn him, slash him—

But he had the gun, and mine as well. I looked around for a weapon. Nothing. You'd think a

killer would at least keep an axe on the wall. He only had an Escher print, the one with the white swans turning into black and the black swans into white.

I'd have to charge with my bare hands. That would be futile without a distraction. I looked at the phone and willed it to ring. I longed for someone to knock on the door. Why's there never a Jehovah's Witness when you need one?

Tension crackled. The pause was so pregnant it had quintuplets. I glared at him. He glared at me. He had a better glare because he had three eyes. That unblinking third eye was a port in his head. Only people who deal with ghosts all the time have that op. I prefer my shades—at least I can take them off and not see spooks, pretend that life's as simple as it used to be when it stopped at the end.

The killer nudged the gun from side to side, an inch either way, just to draw attention to it and remind me who had the upper hand. I thought about trying the old “Behind you!” trick. But he'd hardly fall for that in his own house.

I could only wait for the

Knackerman and hope his arrival would be the distraction I needed. I wondered what he looked like. They say no-one knows, because when he breaks up a ghost, he sells every scrap and memory except the victim's sight of him.

There's a Ghost Town myth that says he's the Devil, that once the Knackerman takes you, you can't ever get to Heaven. It's amazing how many ghosts still try to believe in Heaven.

Another story says the Knackerman delves into the victim's mind and appears as their worst nightmare. Maybe he'd already arrived, because this was my nightmare. Cop caught by the criminal. Becoming the slasher's latest victim. Going to the bottles in the Knacker's Yard.

I wondered who'd buy me and how much they'd pay. I thought, “Whoever buys this memory—I hope you fucking choke on it, you pathetic voyeur.”

Then I remembered that not all my mind was in my head. Maybe—

I heard excited barking, growing louder. The Knackerman was coming. I shifted in my seat, turning slightly

to one side. The dog burst through the wall, followed by a short guy with greying hair. He didn't look like a bogeyman; he looked like a civil servant on dress-down Friday. Well, it's always the quiet ones.

He said, “What the hell is this? You think because I'm dead, I don't have a social life? You can't just send your superdog to fetch me whenever you get the urge to do some slashing. I've told you to keep it down to one a week.” While the Knackerman spoke, my hand drifted toward my pocket.

The killer looked at him and said, “But this guy knows—”

That was as far as he got. As soon as his gaze shifted, I grabbed a bottle from my pocket and threw it at his middle eye. It smashed on the metal socket.

I wasn't sure which bottle I'd thrown. But I charged anyway. Before I reached him, his face went slack. I seized the gun from his limp hand, then backed away.

The Knackerman shook his head and said, “Stupid fucker.” I didn't know which of us he meant.

Oscar went into a frenzy and tried to bite chunks out of my

body. My scrotum iced over as the dog's phantom teeth closed on my testicles. Reflexively I kicked back, but we couldn't touch each other.

The killer looked worn out. "So this is what it's like being a cop.... It's even worse than I thought."

"Yeah," I said. "It's a lot more fun this way round."

I ached to blow him away. All the murders in my mind, all my anger and disgust, said Kill! Kill! My grip tightened on the gun, my fingers grasping the trigger.

The killer said, "You can't shoot me in cold blood. That's murder."

"That never stopped you," I said.

"Look, you're making a big mistake. Don't be hasty about this. We can work out a deal—"

I laughed. "I never realized just how weaselly all that crap sounds."

The Knackerman said, "You want me to bag him up? He'll fetch a decent amount at the Yard. I'll cut you in for half."

He floated across the room, toward the killer.

Then his hands started growing. They sprouted more and more fingers, which swelled and lengthened and curled. The Knackerman cupped his huge, hideous claws around the killer's skull, ready to trap the emerging ghost.

The killer said, "Oscar—get him!"

Oscar leapt into the air, pounced on the Knackerman and bit his leg. The Knackerman grunted. But the dog didn't get a second bite. He couldn't loosen his grip. The dog's teeth locked onto the Knackerman's leg as if it were made of ultra-sticky toffee.

The Knackerman twisted like a champion contortionist, bending his leg upward. I heard a muffled whine as Oscar scrabbled frantically, clawing the

...blood dripping
onto the carpet.
Another cleaning
bill, I thought

Knackerman's torso. But the Knackerman's whole form was sticky as flypaper, and soon the dog was just a twitching blob of fur, even his tail immobile.

As the Knackerman's leg reached his face, he opened his mouth wide, dislocating his jaw like a snake. Then he bit the dog's head off.

Oscar's ghostly body shriveled and evaporated. The Knackerman barked twice. "Nice appetizer," he said.

I had kept watch on the killer throughout, careful not to get distracted, and all the while the Knackerman's hands had stayed wrapped round the guy's head. Now, between the pale fingers, eyes widened in panic. I knew the killer was about to make a last desperate move.

All the rage in my head boiled over. Vengeance for the victims, my own festering hatred, the blood and death in the murder memories—all the violence erupted like lightning. And I held the lightning conductor. My hand clenched on the gun. There was no way in the world I couldn't shoot. I pulled the trigger.

The silencer went phut, like a champagne cork popping. My arm sprang back, my wrist aching from the recoil. The gun was a real elephant stopper, compared to my own street-rat shooter.

The killer slumped to the floor, blood dripping onto the carpet. Another cleaning bill, I thought.

The Knackerman looked at me and said, "You got his leg, you idiot."

"I know," I said. At the last moment I'd jerked my aim downward.

"So finish him off!"

I shook my head. "I don't want to send him to the Knacker's Yard. I don't even want to kill him. Well, I do. But I don't want to want to kill him."

"Hell, he'll get the death penalty anyway."

I smiled. "And afterlife imprisonment for the ghost."

"What a waste," he said.

I pointed the gun at the Knackerman and said, "You're even worse than him. Right now I can't touch you, but if this racket starts up again, I won't only get the breather. I'll recruit some ghosts and go after you. Just

because you're dead, that doesn't mean you're beyond the law."

The Knackerman gave me the finger with his hideous claw. Then he vanished through the ceiling.

I sighed. I grabbed the whisky bottle and swigged three shots in three gulps. Then I poured the rest of the bottle over the killer's ragged wound. That was all the first aid I could be bothered with. He screamed most satisfyingly.

"Can I use your phone?" I said.

"Fuck you!" he whispered.

"Thanks."

I called the station and asked them to send a holding van. "I have a murderer for you," I said. "Bring the scoop as well: he's got some memories I want back."

With considerable relief, I decanted the killer's murder reminiscences into the remaining bottle. Yet I knew their residue of gleeful violence would taint my dreams for months to come.

Did I really want my police memories back? They were hardly any more pleasant. Perhaps I should return to the Knacker's Yard and buy myself a new personality, build up a

history from the endless shelves....

My fingers twitched. I decided that I would go back, if only to recover my piano lessons. After a day surrounded by death and ghosts, I had a sudden longing to play piano while I still had flesh and bone to touch the keys.

While I waited for the van to arrive, I sat and listened to my slowly calming heartbeat. Grateful for every blood-pounding thump, I vowed to make the most of those I had left.

F l a s h

Summer Break

by Mandy DeGeit

Turning the key in the deadbolt to her new place, she glances over her shoulder out of habit, and like always, there is nothing there. As she steps over the threshold into her new apartment, she hopes everything will be okay.

Moments turn into days, while days flow into weeks, and weeks become months. Day after day, her apartment is perfect. It's everything she needs and more. Open and spacious, bright and airy, the apartment is all she's ever wanted in a place to live.

The summer goes by quickly and quietly. She loses herself in hobbies—simple things—as she

figures out what makes her happy. Everything is different from the past now that she's no longer afraid. Everything's different, but she feels safe now, much safer than she did before. She knows she'll be just fine. She doesn't need help living anymore. She has served her time in the darkness. Gone are her days of constant sadness as she now spends most days in the sun with

a smile on her face. This is her new life; it's her time to shine.

September is just another month and begins without her noticing.

It's an early morning like all the others, but somehow different entirely. Her eyes spring open as shrill screeching penetrates the double-paned windows of her “perfect” apartment. She bolts upright in bed, the tears already

forming in the corners of her eyes. Her knuckles whiten as she grips the blanket tight to her trembling body. Her blood pressure rises, coloring her cheeks in a rosy blush. She is oblivious to how tightly

September is just
another month and
begins
without her noticing.

she clenches her jaw. A molar cracks, and she swallows the tiny chips of enamel, but they go down unnoticed. Her teeth grind back and forth, catching the inside of her cheeks and a coppery taste floods her tongue as she begins to bleed.

She remembers the screams and blood flowing from their little bodies. She thinks of the ones who ran, and the ones who didn't move at all. She remembers the gun—not pointed at her—but in her hands, the metal hot with use. Everything she had forgotten, she now remembers.

Their high-pitched squeals gouge at her sanity, both then and now.

NO! It can't be, she thinks as she stifles a wail, throwing herself out of bed. She stumbles to the window, jerking open the blinds. The sunshine hurts her eyes, as her retinas adjust to the sudden outpouring of light into the room. She looks down to the street. The tiny, evil creatures—the ones from her worst nightmares—gather in front of the house across the street. The tiny forms scurry and skitter around the enclosure, swarming over a plastic swing set and

congregating in a sandbox. SO MANY! Her eyes narrow to slits as she stares down at the sea of colour and movement.

"They are everywhere, Monsters everywhere!" She mutters as she pulls the window coverings closed and heads over to the bedroom closet.

"So many monsters in this world. So many tiny monsters." Her voice is muffled as she rummages through to the back of the storage closet.

She steps out onto the balcony, eyes wild, as she takes in the full sight seven floors below her.

"So many tiny monsters, they are everywhere." She murmurs quietly as she loads the rifle shells into the magazine. "I have to do something."

The tiny, evil
creatures—
the ones from
her worst
nightmares

S e r i a l N o v e l l a

And I Watered It, In Tears

by Kevin Lucia

Part 1

He sits in his idling truck, staring into the rain-streaked night, feeling the engine's throb in the seats. Rain hisses against the cab's roof, while wipers smear across window-glass with sliding *thunks*.

He presses his iPhone against his ear.

Listens.

Finally sighs "Goodbye."
Hangs up, drops the iPhone onto the passenger seat, sits back and closes his eyes.

Feeling the engine's throb.

* * *

"Andrew. I signed the papers this morning."

"Rachael...please. Let's keep

trying. Just a little longer..."

"It's been a year, Andrew. We tried. And I'm tired. I can't do this anymore."

"Rachel..."

"The papers. Sign them. Don't drag this out. Please."

* * *

Thursday, 5:55 PM

Standing at the end of a line that hadn't moved for thirty minutes, annoyed at wasting time sitting in his truck, Andrew McCormick pulled his iPhone from his pocket, slid his thumb across its touch-sensitive screen and groaned softly at the time.

5:55 PM.

The New York State Electric & Gas payment center here in Clifton Heights closed at 6:00. His apartment's electric bill was scheduled for termination at 8:00 AM tomorrow morning. But work started at 7:30, and he wouldn't get a break until eleven. By then, his electric would be three hours terminated.

And he was so overdue they'd demanded cash. No payment-by-phone or electronic checks. Worst of all, he didn't have near the amount past due. Only fifty bucks to spare until next Friday. Hopefully, that'd buy him some time.

Of course, if he'd kept current, he could've paid the damn thing over the phone, or online. From home, work ...even

his iPhone. They had an APP for that. Had an APP for everything, these days.

Of course, if he'd managed to keep his teaching job, hadn't had to quit after...

No.

Don't.

He glanced around, trying to numb his mind with a cataloging of his surroundings. Saw nothing but dull gray cement walls. Tile floors. A small waiting area offering a few chairs, a bench, and a coffee table scattered with magazines. Fluorescent lights hummed above, while bland pop muzak played over tinny speakers, just barely covering the sound of trickling, gurgling water...

The rain outside, of course.

Not water rushing around him, sweeping him down into darkness.

Just the rain.

He shivered slightly. Squeezed his free hand into a tight fist, fingernails marking painful crescents into his palm. It's just the rain.

That's all.

On the wall next to the receptionist's window—which seemed intolerably far away just

now—hung a bulletin board. Its offerings ranged from a community calendar, a bake sale announcement, a few handbills for local musicians...

And a row of "Missing Persons" flyers.

His belly grew tight. Because of course, there wouldn't be one for Patrick, would there? Because nobody had listened, nobody believed.

Not even Rachael.

He closed his eyes. Instantly felt lost and disoriented as water rushed and gurgled around him, dragging him down into the darkness so he reached up and massaged the middle of his forehead, where a dull pulse had begun to throb.

Well.

That certainly didn't help.

But slowly, as he rubbed, the throb eased. The gurgling water—surely just the sound of rain hitting the building's roof—faded. So maybe he'd avoided a migraine, this time.

Thank God for small favors.

You know what'd be another small favor? This line moving sometime before closing.

Andrew opened his eyes and glanced again at his iPhone. 5:58.

And the line hadn't budged an inch.

"Jesus," he muttered.

"I know, right?" This from the black man standing in line before him. "Like we ain't got somewhere to fuckin be." He scowled at Andrew over his shoulder. "This is some lame-ass bullshit, right here."

Andrew sighed, stuck his hands and iPhone back into his pockets. Rolled shoulders sore from sorting through soda and beer cans all day, cracked a stiff neck and said, "I hear that."

"It's jus like...damn," the black man gestured at the young woman in front, "folks got places to be, right? I mean, I get it. Been there, done that, pleadin my case, jus like she is. We all been there, right?"

Andrew nodded. Who hadn't? Paying bills on time seemed a dim fantasy, these days.

"But when a line to China starts formin behind you... show some courtesy. Tha's all I'm sayin."

Andrew grunted. Wondering how often a line had formed behind himself this past year, since...

No.

To distract himself, he said, "I always mean to pay my bill online, but I've never quite got my checking account balanced enough for that. Don't ever really know what's cleared and what hasn't. I...lost my old job, the new one doesn't pay as well. And I never did have a head for finances, anyway. My wife did all that."

The black man's face sobered. "Shit, man. I'm sorry. She pass on?"

"No. We separated about a year ago."

"Damn. Still sorry."

He waved and lied. "No worries."

"Anyways, I ain't never messed round with that online shit. Identity theft an all." The black man grinned. "Was always afraid I'd pay a bill online, then get charged somethin from BigBoobs.com, shit like that. So not only would I be out cash, but in trouble with the old lady over porn charges ain't even mine. Course, I ain't got that issue no more. Me an her ain't speakin now. So, guess I could scope all the porn I want, right?" He shook his head. "But that shit sure ain't better'n my lady,

y'know? D'rather have her."

"Oh. I'm sorry. You aren't..."

The black man waved, playing it up as no big deal ...though Andrew somehow sensed it was. "Naw. Not married. Don't know if we'll even get back together, man. Some shit jus ain't worth it, y'know? Get tired of tryin, after awhile."

we tried

I'm tired

can't do this anymore

"Yeah," Andrew agreed, forcing a light tone. Pushing back the darkness inside, ignoring the way the rain pattered against the building's front doors, trickling down the glass. "I suppose we all hit that point, eventually." He paused. "You always pay in person?"

The black man nodded. "Yeah, in cash, too. There's somethin reassurin bout it, y'know? Solid. Handin the 'lectric company cold cash, payin that bill for sure steada worryin I messed up, an a check might bounce. Bill's due Saturday, an I was thinkin I could pay this quick'n easy on the way home. Course, this joint usually empty after work, but no. Figures. Not today. Helluva day at work, an

instead a goin home an kickin my feet up, I drive through this goddamn fuckin monsoon outside to stand in line forever, maybe for nothin cause they close on my ass. Cause missy up there won' stop her yappin."

As if to underscore his complaint, thunder growled, and the rain seemed to fall even harder. Gurgling and rushing against the windows and the front doors. The black man nodded at the ceiling. "See? Gonna be like Noah'n damn Ark drivin home in this shit."

Andrew ignored the rain rushing against the building and examined the black man's attire more closely. Plain, gray button down shirt—"Deyquan" embroidered over the left breast - and uniform gray pants. Feet shod in black work boots, similar to his own. "Work for the County?"

"Yeah. Whatever they want me doin, right? Garbage detail, litter in the parks an playgrounds, trimmin bushes'n hedges along sidewalks, patchin asphalt an clearin deadfall off roads in summer, shovelin an plowin come winter." Another big grin. "Tha's me, brother. Jack of all trades. An

this Jack is tired as shit, man.

How bout you?”

He shrugged. Tired of telling the same story, but with no energy to lie. “Used to teach high school English. Clifton Heights High. Lost my job, now I’m working at The Can Man.”

“That can’n bottle place up on Route 434?”

He nodded. “The same. Not a bad place. And we’re running a special.” He managed a limp grin. “Six and half cents a can.”

Deyquan smiled. “Hell. I oughta pay ya’ll a visit. You get commission for referrals, shit like that?”

He actually smiled.

“Unfortunately not.”

“Why’d you lose your teachin gig? District budget cuts? Seem to be all you read bout in the papers, these days.”

“Something like that,” he managed. Nodding at the front of the line, “What’s the hold-up?”

Deyquan shrugged. “Dunno. Ain’t really been listenin, y’know? Same ole thing. ‘Can’t pay my bill, single Mom, need electric on or social services’ll take my kid.’ Shit like that.”

Deyquan sighed.

Shook his head.

“*Shit*. I get it. Life fuckin sucks. I know. Grew up in Philly. Momma raised me an my brothers an sisters—all five of us —by herself.” He gave Andrew a pointed look. “Sad. Some people jus can’t do it on their own, y’know? I mean, don’t wanna judge, got no idea what shit she’s goin through, but *damn*. Jus wanna get home, lay down an...”

“*Please!*”

Glass rattled against its metal frame, punctuating the sobbed exclamation. Startled, Andrew looked up and saw the young woman who’d been holding up the line, pressing her hand against the receptionist’s window, where she must’ve slapped it.

The receptionist—a stout, middle-aged woman with gray cropped hair, square jaw and flinty eyes—glared through the glass. “*Ma’am*. Last time. Please leave. *Now*. Or I’m calling the police.”

The woman wore faded but clean jeans and a limp, tired spring jacket that hung off her thin frame. Her stringy mouse-brown hair dangled in a limp ponytail, bony, trembling hand pressed against the glass. “*Please*,” she whispered, tears shimmering

in her voice.

Perhaps the receptionist’s features softened around the eyes and mouth. Perhaps not. Regardless, she spoke in gentler tones, now. “I’m sorry, Miss Tillman. There’s nothing I can do. You need to call Collections.”

The woman’s shoulders quivered.

Hand sliding down, off the glass.

She turned away. Rushed down the line, past them, one hand clutching a worn brown purse. The other wiping tears from her long, angular face. Several jerking strides lurched her away from them and through the ladies room door.

“Damn,” Deyquan muttered, shaking his head. “Now I kinda feel like shit, y’know?”

Andrew nodded, but said nothing.

A dim unease gnawing his insides.

As water continued to sluice down the front doors.

6:05

Deyquan was just getting the receipt for his payment—
thanking God, the Man Jesus and

the Holy Fucking Ghost the receptionist had stayed open a few minutes after closing and had also turned off that damn annoying elevator music—when a woman screamed.

From not far away.

A deep, throaty scream of terror.

But muffled, coming from another room.

“What the *fuck*?” He looked over his shoulder at the White Guy he’d been talking to a few minutes ago. Motherfucker’s face paled so much, looked like goddamn snow. “Who the fuck is...”

A door slammed open.

From the Ladies Room.

And out stumbled the woman who’d paid her bill before him. Middle-aged, medium height, average build, average everything. Soccer Mom Queen. Only now she sounded more like a Scream Queen in a B-movie fright-flick, leaning against the open Ladies Room door, whimpering, wheezing.

He stepped towards her.

“Hey! You okay?”

Soccer Mom swallowed.

“Uh. She’s....” She coughed. Ran a trembling hand through plain,

average brown hair. “I n-needed to use the...”

Her eyes widened.

She coughed again. Dug into her pocketbook, pulled out a

“My God.

She’s dead!

I think. God,

I think she killed

herself, or

something!”

green inhaler, stuck it into her mouth and triggered off a blast, sucking on it like a wino sucks on a forty ounce of Big Bear.

She swallowed, removed the inhaler and gasped, “My God. She’s dead! I think. God, I think she killed herself, or something!”

An image.

Of that girl who’d slapped the receptionist’s window.

Please!

Aw, shit.

He approached her. “What’d she do? Chug some pills, shit like

that?”

Soccer Mom shook her head violently. Panting, trying to catch her breath. Confusion and fear competing for control of her face.

“No. I...think she...God.

Drowned herself?”

Wait.

What?

Drowned herself?

What. The. Fuck?

“Yo, Miss Receptionist,” he tossed over his shoulder. “Call 911!” He slapped White Guy’s shoulder. “C’m on, chief. Let’s check this.”

He trotted towards the Ladies Room without waiting for an answer. Nodded at Soccer Mom. “We got this. Maybe go over to Miss Receptionist, there. 911 folks’ll probably want details.”

Soccer Mom nodded, rushing off. The lingering terror in her eyes twisted Deyquan’s guts. What the hell could’ve scared her so bad? Yeah, dead body, bad mojo. Maybe the girl cut her wrists and bled all over the place and...

But Soccer Mom said *drowned*.

I think she drowned herself
An icy sensation prickled

along his spine. Making him wish that he'd just gone straight home today.

6:10

Deyquan passed through the small foyer and stepped into the restroom. Looked ordinary as shit. White tile floor. Pale green concrete walls. Row of white stalls along one wall, white porcelain sinks and mirrors on the other, only strange thing was, sounded like someone had left a faucet running..

drowned herself

He rounded the corner fully.
Stopped and stared.

A cold tension blossoming in his guts. A swelling of irrational fear. White Guy—who'd apparently decided to Man Up—rasped at Deyquan's shoulder, "My God."

drowned herself

The young woman - who only fifteen minutes before had been pleading her case with Miss Receptionist—hung by her head and neck from a sink midway down the restroom.

Face jammed into the sink.

Arms dangling limply at her sides.

Knees bent but hovering a few inches above the floor, not quite touching. Toes dragging on tile.

And water. Running.

Trickling. The faucet was on, and the sink—clogged with the girl's face—overflowing onto the floor.

Deyquan peered closer. At the neck's odd angle. Her head seemed *forced* into the sink, the neck bent oddly. Maybe broken.

Deyquan stepped closer, but White Guy grabbed his arm. "Crime scene," he muttered thickly, almost in a trance, "shouldn't touch anything."

Deyquan nodded. "Makes sense. Shit. This brother ain't messin with no crime scene, that's for damn sure."

He turned and followed White Guy out of the bathroom. "Hell, yeah. One thing a brother knows is stay the fuck 'way from crime scenes. This one time, my cousin Marcus saw a drive-by back in Philly, an he was stupid enough to..."

"Something's happening."

Deyquan and White Guy stopped. In the restroom's doorway stood Miss Receptionist, face blank and unreadable.

But her eyes danced.

Wide and bright, pupils jittering.

And Deyquan's irrational fear grew inside.

"No fuckin shit. Lady jus killed herself in y'all's bathroom. I'd say somethin's happenin, all right."

A tight head shake. "No. I don't mean that. Our *phones*. They don't work. Cells either. Goddamn Internet won't connect, even. And the doors..."

"What about the doors?" White Guy, sounding more afraid than Miss Receptionist, even.

Miss Receptionist grimaced. Working up the courage, maybe. And then she rasped, "Locked, or something. Can't open them. Keys don't work. Windows won't open, either. And I tried to break the glass in both a door and window with a hammer from the utility closet...but the glass *wouldn't break*. Hammer kept bouncing right off. Not even a scratch."

"Wait," Deyquan said, "are you sayin that we're..."

Miss Receptionist nodded so hard; Deyquan thought her head might pop off. "Yes, I am. We're stuck in here.

"We're trapped."!

Reprint Anthologies

by J. F. Gonzalez

The first installment of this column is coming under an extreme deadline. Originally intended to shine a light on lesser-known authors (and books) newer writers should seek out and read, I still plan to do that. However, because of the tight deadline, we're going to start off with something a little different.

But first, a brief introduction of sorts. One of the things that sparked the idea for this series of articles was noticing the looks of befuddlement new writers and fans of the genre give me whenever I casually mention a writer like Karl Edward Wagner or Charles L. Grant. A quick probing of their reading interests usually elicits the following: they came to the field by way of Stephen King and Dean Koontz, of course, and also Clive Barker and perhaps Peter Straub. Some of them might pick up one of the latest Year's Best compendiums like Paula Guran's The Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror or Ellen Datlow's Year's Best Horror. Some might even pick up Lovecraft because they've heard good things about him. What they all have in common: they keep up with the current state of the field

This is all fine and good. Quite a lot of them, however, never bother to dip back in the not-too-distant history of this genre. Part of the problem might be that NY Publishers simply aren't issuing reprint anthologies like they used to and these newer writers miss them.

When I was a young fan of the genre, much of my education of the deep history of fantasy, horror, and science fiction came from reprint anthologies.

The first was *Ten Tales Calculated To Give You Shudders*, a 1972 anthology my mother bought me when I was around ten years old. This volume (edited by Ross R. Olney from Golden Press and clearly geared toward the youth market of the mid-seventies) was my first introduction to “adult” horror fiction - Robert Bloch, William Hope Hodgson, Frank Belknap Long, H. Russell Wakefield, and other writers of the pulp era (the lone exception being a Robert G. Anderson tale culled from the pages of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* from 1966). Prior to that, I'd been reading books geared towards kids my age, usually purchased from the Scholastic Book club. And comic books. I was heavily into DC and

Marvel's horror titles, especially *Man-Thing*, *Werewolf by Night*, *Weird War Stories*, *House of Secrets*, and *House of Dracula*.

That anthology was my first taste of serious horror fiction. When I began to take a more serious interest in this type of fiction, the so-called "horror boom" in publishing was in full swing. It was a terrific time to be a fan of this genre: there were so many quality anthologies being published at that time, all of them featuring the works of the then contemporary writers of the day (Charles

L. Grant, Stephen King, Harlan Ellison, etc), and reprinting the classic tales from decades past (Bloch, Bradbury, Wellman, Matheson, etc). Anthologists like Charles Grant and Stuart David Schiff combined original fiction with reprints in many of their anthologies. You could find dozens of reprint

volumes in the large chain bookstores of the day (B. Dalton's Books or Waldenbooks) and second-hand bookstores by the likes of August Derleth, Mary Danby, Robert Aickman, Richard Dalby, and Peter Haining. Marty Greenburg and Robert Weinberg (often in collaboration with other editors) were beginning to issue volumes reprinting tales from the pulps and the Edwardian/Victorian era. And for the yearly roundup of what was happening currently, there was Karl Edward Wagner's *The Year's Best Horror Stories*.

In short, reprint anthologies were the textbooks

for my education in the field.

The good news is reprint anthologies are still being published. Nightshades Books and Prime Books are doing an excellent job in issuing reprint anthologies on a wide range of themes and styles. Penguin Classics issued S. T. Joshi's *American Supernatural Tales* a few years ago. In 2009 Library of America published *Peter Straub's American Fantastic Tales: From Poe to the Pulps and American Fantastic Tales: Terror and the Uncanny from the 1940's to Now* (both are also available as a boxed set).

Running Press and Carroll & Graf publish the reprint anthologies Stephen Jones puts together. You should try as many of these anthologies as you can. You might not like every story, but you will probably find quite a bit of material you will like by acknowledged masters of the genre.

You'll also learn a bit of the

genre's history, too.

And that's a good thing.

Reprint anthologies, more than any other, I believe, do more to preserve the history of the genre than original anthologies or magazines. While many reprint anthologies are built around a theme (genre tropes like Vampires, Ghosts, Zombies) or adhere to a specific time period (Victorian era, the pulp era, etc), there are some that I feel can be considered text books for those who wish to immerse themselves in a complete education of the history of supernatural/weird fiction. What follows are my recommendations

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on five reprint anthologies I feel fit these criteria. All five feature some story overlap, but all are worth seeking out for the material the editors of these volumes ferreted out and for the rich, informative introductory essays that preface each volume.

And for the pure geek factor: there was so much cool stuff published before a lot of you were born.

Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural, edited by Herbert A. Wise and Phyllis Fraser first appeared in 1944 from Random House. It's been reprinted numerous times since its first appearance, and the edition I have is the 1994 Modern Library edition, that I believe is still in print and still available. Going as far back as 1832 to reprint "La Grande Breteche" by the great French writer Honore de Balzac, this volume served as the benchmark for other anthologists. Reprinting classic, often-reprinted tales by the likes of Poe, H. G. Wells, William Faulkner, Ambrose Bierce, and M. R. James, this volume also reprinted then-contemporary tales like "The Sailor-Boy's Tale" by Isak Dinesen and Carl Stephenson's "Leningrad Versus the Ants." The list of authors and stories is simply nothing short of incredible: Algernon Blackwood, E. F. Benson, A. E. Coppard, Ambrose Bierce, Saki, Edith Wharton, Rudyard Kipling, Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, H. P. Lovecraft, even Ernest Hemingway! The tales run the spectrum from the classic English ghost story, to the early weird fiction of Edward Lucas White, to the gothic, cosmic horror of Lovecraft (then a new thing for the mass audience who might have happened upon this volume in their local Pickwick or Barnes and Noble). In short, a volume every serious devotee of horror fiction should not only own, but read.

Equally important is David G. Hartwell's

wonderful *The Dark Descent*. Containing fifty-six stories and novellas, most of the material contained in this volume should be familiar with long-time readers of the field. Editor David G. Hartwell prefaces each piece with a short critical essay. His introduction traces the history of horror and supernatural fiction and its place in literature and is required reading for any serious student of the field. Sharing space with the familiar tales (Fritz Leiber's "Smoke Ghost" and Robert Bloch's "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper") are obscure gems like the creepy 1882 tale by Lucy Clifford "The New Mother" to works of classic literature ("The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson; "Good Country People" by Flannery O'Connor). Every sub-genre is included: the gothic (Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"; Science-Fiction ("The Autopsy" by Michael Shea); Lovecraftian ("The Call of Cthulhu" by Lovecraft, "Crouch End" by Stephen King, and "Sticks" by Karl Edward Wagner), and the quiet ("If Damon Comes" by Charles L. Grant).

Hartwell followed up *The Dark Descent* with a companion volume in 1992 - *The Foundations of Fear*. This volume focuses more on the novella or short novel length rather than the short story. As a result, you have familiar tales like Richard Matheson's classic "Duel" and "At the Mountains of Madness" by H. P. Lovecraft, but you also have tales like "The Entrance" by Gerald Durrell, one of the strongest tales of gothic horror involving mirrors I've ever encountered. Hartwell goes even further back in time than Wise & Frazer with "The Sandman", an 1819 novella by E. T. A. Hoffman (which still holds up today nearly two hundred years later). Like *The Dark Descent*, the tales run the gamut from the

psychological to the Science-Fictional, to offerings from writers of classic English Literature ("Barbara, of the House of Grebe" by Thomas Hardy) to pure modern horror fiction ("In the Hills, the Cities" by Clive Barker). *The Foundations of Fear* was my first introduction to the work of Belgian weird-fiction writer Jean Ray, represented here with "The Shadowy Street".

Alas, both the Hartwell volumes are out of print, but are well worth tracking down through used book dealers, or on Amazon or Ebay.

Two recent anthologies to this list are currently in print and easily available. *The Century's Best Horror Fiction* edited by John Pelan (CD Publications) and *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* edited by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (Tor Books). The editors of both anthologies present their selections in chronological order, which is something geeks like me love. The Pelan volume presents one story from each year of the twentieth century he found as "the best". There are some excellent choices here, some obvious standards that were no-brainers, and a few minor quibbles (as much as I love "The Tower of Moab" by L. A. Lewis, I would have gone with "The Three Marked Pennies" by Mary Elizabeth Counselman for the 1934 entry, but that's just me). Starting with the 1901 entry ("The Undying Thing" by Barry Pain...a wise choice), Pelan includes familiar often-reprinted classics and rare outstanding tales even I'd never encountered before ("The Lover's Ordeal" by R. Murray Gilchrist). It was nice to see Ulric Daubeny's "The Sumach" represented in this volume (one of the most under appreciated tales of vampirism I've ever encountered). This two-volume set represents all forms and styles - ghost stories,

science-fictional horrors, psychological horror, the conte cruel, contemporary supernatural horror, surreal. All in all, this is a very worthy entry, but it comes with a hefty price tag. A two volume hardcover set, this will set you back \$150. If you can afford it, this will be money well spent.

A more affordable solution (with more stories!) is the VanderMeer volume. Published as an attractive trade paperback from Tor Books, at over 1,000 pages it is a doorstopper of a book (this title is also available as an eBook, and I believe there is a trade hardcover as well)! As of this writing I have barely waded in to it. Despite that, I heartily recommend it. What sets this volume apart from the others is this is an anthology focusing on weird fiction; therefore, all forms of weird fiction are included - the surreal, the decadent, the Gothic, Lovecraftian, etc. Weird fiction can be beautiful, it can be strange, it can be unsettling. As a result, the stories included here are all over the map. Not only does this anthology contain many classics (and a lot of my personal favorites!), the editors also found wonderful material from the early pulp years (like the excellent "The People of the Pit" by A. Merritt and "Unseen - Unfeared" by Francis Stevens) and they include an array of tales by writers around the world with new English translations (as a long-time fan of Jean Ray, I am especially pleased to see two of his tales reprinted herein). The rare pulp entries (the aforementioned Merritt and Stevens pieces, as well as rare gems like "The Night Wire" by H. L. Arnold and "Mimic" by Donald A. Wollheim) and the translated entries are proving to be the real winning points for me. I've never encountered Luigi Ugolini's "The Vegetable Man", nor Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "The Hell

Screen” before; both are utterly absorbing. As of this writing, I have only gotten as far as Robert Barbor Johnson's “Far Below” (an excellent choice)...which means I am barely a quarter of the way through. Despite that, I can't recommend this anthology enough. The Table of Contents features some very familiar tales and names (Jerome Bixby's classic “It's a Good Life!”, “Sandkings” by George R. R. Martin, Stephen King's “The Man in the Black Suit”) to tales that are completely unfamiliar to me (“The Other Side of the Mountain” by Michel Bernanos). This anthology is really that good and deserves a place on your bookshelf.

(Peter Straub's two-volume *American Fantastic Tales* should probably be mentioned here too as being volumes you should look into acquiring. A quick perusal of the Table of Contents indicates some excellent choices: stories by Charles Brockden Brown, who authored *Wieland, or The Transformation* in 1798—probably the first Gothic novel published in the U.S.—as well as tales by W. C. Morrow, Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, F. Scott Fitzgerald, August Derleth, Jack Snow, T. E. D. Klein, Thomas Tessier and dozens of others).

I would consider these anthologies to be the ultimate textbooks for having a solid grounding in the field of imaginative, dark, weird fiction.

The beauty of reprint anthologies, especially those that dig deep within the genre's history, is they will often feature works by writers one may have missed entirely. This was the certainly the case for me in first coming across the work of Jean Ray, Eddy C. Bertin, David Case, or Charles Birkin (who I encountered in an anthology edited by Marty Greenberg). These days I own collections of short

fiction by most of these guys (and I wish some enterprising U.S. publisher will issue a collection of Eddy C. Bertin's horror fiction in English translation). I would never have come across any of their work if it hadn't been their appearance in various reprint anthologies.

So. There is your list to start you off. Go forth and purchase these volumes. Read them. If you like the work of a particular author, research them to find out what else they may have written. Repeat and rinse as necessary. I'll be back next time to ruminate on the works of a few neglected authors from decades past. Until then, happy reading!

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L a m p L i g h t C l a s s i c s

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

By Ambrose Bierce

I

A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the ties supporting the rails of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners—two private soldiers of the Federal army, directed by a sergeant who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff. At a short remove upon the same temporary platform was an officer in the uniform of his rank, armed. He

was a captain. A sentinel at each end of the bridge stood with his rifle in the position known as “support,” that is to say, vertical in front of the left shoulder, the hammer resting on the forearm thrown straight across the chest—a formal and unnatural position, enforcing an erect carriage of the body. It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the center of the bridge; they merely blockaded the two ends of the foot planking that traversed it.

Beyond one of the sentinels nobody was in sight; the railroad ran straight away into a forest for a hundred yards, then, curving, was lost to view. Doubtless there was an outpost farther along. The other bank of the stream was open ground—a gentle slope

topped with a stockade of vertical tree trunks, loopholed for rifles, with a single embrasure through which protruded the muzzle of a brass cannon commanding the bridge. Midway up the slope between the bridge and fort were the spectators—a single company of infantry in line, at “parade rest,” the butts of their rifles on the ground, the barrels inclining slightly backward against the right shoulder, the hands crossed upon the stock. A lieutenant stood at the right of the line, the point of his sword upon the ground, his left hand resting upon his right. Excepting the group of four at the center of the bridge, not a man moved. The company faced the bridge, staring stonily, motionless. The sentinels, facing the banks of the

stream, might have been statues to adorn the bridge. The captain stood with folded arms, silent, observing the work of his subordinates, but making no sign. Death is a dignitary who when he comes announced is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him. In the code of military etiquette silence and fixity are forms of deference.

The man who was engaged in being hanged was apparently about thirty-five years of age. He was a civilian, if one might judge from his habit, which was that of a planter. His features were good—a straight nose, firm mouth, broad forehead, from which his long, dark hair was combed straight back, falling behind his ears to the collar of his well fitting frock coat. He wore a moustache and pointed beard, but no whiskers; his eyes were large and dark gray, and had a kindly expression which one would hardly have expected in one whose neck was in the hemp. Evidently this was no vulgar assassin. The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and

gentlemen are not excluded.

The preparations being complete, the two private soldiers stepped aside and each drew away the plank upon which he had been standing. The sergeant turned to the captain, saluted and placed himself immediately behind that officer, who in turn moved apart one pace. These movements left the condemned man and the sergeant standing on the two ends of the same plank, which spanned three of the cross-ties of the bridge. The end upon which the civilian stood almost, but not quite, reached a fourth. This plank had been held in place by the weight of the captain; it was now held by that of the sergeant. At a signal from the former the latter would step aside, the plank would tilt and the condemned man go down between two ties. The arrangement commended itself to his judgement as simple and effective. His face had not been covered nor his eyes bandaged. He looked a moment at his “unsteadfast footing,” then let his gaze wander to the swirling water of the stream racing madly beneath his feet. A piece of dancing driftwood caught his

attention and his eyes followed it down the current. How slowly it appeared to move! What a sluggish stream!

He closed his eyes in order to fix his last thoughts upon his wife and children. The water, touched to gold by the early sun, the brooding mists under the banks at some distance down the stream, the fort, the soldiers, the piece of drift—all had distracted him. And now he became conscious of a new disturbance. Striking through the thought of his dear ones was sound which he could neither ignore nor understand, a sharp, distinct, metallic percussion like the stroke of a blacksmith's hammer upon the anvil; it had the same ringing quality. He wondered what it was, and whether immeasurably distant or near by—it seemed both. Its recurrence was regular, but as slow as the tolling of a death knell. He awaited each new stroke with impatience and—he knew not why—apprehension. The intervals of silence grew progressively longer; the delays became maddening. With their greater infrequency the sounds increased in strength and sharpness. They hurt his ear like

the trust of a knife; he feared he would shriek. What he heard was the ticking of his watch.

He unclosed his eyes and saw again the water below him. "If I could free my hands," he thought, "I might throw off the noose and spring into the stream. By diving I could evade the bullets and, swimming vigorously, reach the bank, take to the woods and get away home. My home, thank God, is as yet outside their lines; my wife and little ones are still beyond the invader's farthest advance."

As these thoughts, which have here to be set down in words, were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it the captain nodded to the sergeant. The sergeant stepped aside.

II

Peyton Farquhar was a well to do planter, of an old and highly respected Alabama family. Being a slave owner and like other slave owners a politician, he was naturally an original secessionist and ardently devoted to the Southern cause. Circumstances of an imperious

nature, which it is unnecessary to relate here, had prevented him from taking service with that gallant army which had fought the disastrous campaigns ending with the fall of Corinth, and he chafed under the inglorious restraint, longing for the release of his energies, the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction. That opportunity, he felt, would come, as it comes to all in wartime. Meanwhile he did what he could. No service was too humble for him to perform in the aid of the South, no adventure too perilous for him to undertake if consistent with the character of a civilian who was at heart a soldier, and who in good faith and without too much qualification assented to at least a part of the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war.

One evening while Farquhar and his wife were sitting on a rustic bench near the entrance to his grounds, a gray-clad soldier rode up to the gate and asked for a drink of water. Mrs. Farquhar was only too happy to serve him with her own white hands. While she was fetching the water her husband approached the dusty

horseman and inquired eagerly for news from the front.

"The Yanks are repairing the railroads," said the man, "and are getting ready for another advance. They have reached the Owl Creek bridge, put it in order and built a stockade on the north bank. The commandant has issued an order, which is posted everywhere, declaring that any civilian caught interfering with the railroad, its bridges, tunnels, or trains will be summarily hanged. I saw the order."

"How far is it to the Owl Creek bridge?" Farquhar asked.

"About thirty miles."

"Is there no force on this side of the creek?"

"Only a picket post half a mile out, on the railroad, and a single sentinel at this end of the bridge."

"Suppose a man—a civilian and student of hanging—should elude the picket post and perhaps get the better of the sentinel," said Farquhar, smiling, "what could he accomplish?"

The soldier reflected. "I was there a month ago," he replied. "I observed that the flood of last winter had lodged a great quantity of driftwood against the

wooden pier at this end of the bridge. It is now dry and would burn like tinder.”

The lady had now brought the water, which the soldier drank. He thanked her ceremoniously, bowed to her husband and rode away. An hour later, after nightfall, he repassed the plantation, going northward in the direction from which he had come. He was a Federal scout.

III

As Peyton Farquhar fell straight downward through the bridge he lost consciousness and was as one already dead. From this state he was awakened—ages later, it seemed to him—by the pain of a sharp pressure upon his throat, followed by a sense of suffocation. Keen, poignant agonies seemed to shoot from his neck downward through every fiber of his body and limbs. These pains appeared to flash along well defined lines of ramification and to beat with an inconceivably rapid periodicity. They seemed like streams of pulsating fire heating him to an intolerable temperature. As to his

head, he was conscious of nothing but a feeling of fullness—of congestion. These sensations were unaccompanied by thought. The intellectual part of his nature was already effaced; he had power only to feel, and feeling was torment. He was conscious of motion.

Encompassed in a luminous cloud, of which he was now merely the fiery heart, without material substance, he swung through unthinkable arcs of oscillation, like a vast pendulum. Then all at once, with terrible suddenness, the light about him shot upward with the noise of a loud splash; a frightful roaring was in his ears, and all was cold and dark. The power of thought was restored; he knew that the rope had broken and he had fallen into the stream. There was no additional strangulation; the noose about his neck was already suffocating him and kept the water from his lungs. To die of hanging at the bottom of a river!—the idea seemed to him ludicrous. He opened his eyes in the darkness and saw above him a gleam of light, but how distant, how inaccessible! He was still sinking, for the light became

fainter and fainter until it was a mere glimmer. Then it began to grow and brighten, and he knew that he was rising toward the surface—knew it with reluctance, for he was now very comfortable. “To be hanged and drowned,” he thought, “that is not so bad; but I do not wish to be shot. No; I will not be shot; that is not fair.”

He was not conscious of an effort, but a sharp pain in his wrist apprised him that he was trying to free his hands. He gave the struggle his attention, as an idler might observe the feat of a juggler, without interest in the outcome. What splendid effort!—what magnificent, what superhuman strength! Ah, that was a fine endeavor! Bravo! The cord fell away; his arms parted and floated upward, the hands dimly seen on each side in the growing light. He watched them with a new interest as first one and then the other pounced upon the noose at his neck. They tore it away and thrust it fiercely aside, its undulations resembling those of a water snake. “Put it back, put it back!” He thought he shouted these words to his hands, for the undoing of the noose had been succeeded by the direst

pang that he had yet experienced. His neck ached horribly; his brain was on fire, his heart, which had been fluttering faintly, gave a great leap, trying to force itself out at his mouth. His whole body was racked and wrenched with an insupportable anguish! But his disobedient hands gave no heed to the command. They beat the water vigorously with quick, downward strokes, forcing him to the surface. He felt his head emerge; his eyes were blinded by the sunlight; his chest expanded convulsively, and with a supreme and crowning agony his lungs engulfed a great draught of air, which instantly he expelled in a shriek!

He was now in full possession of his physical senses. They were, indeed, preternaturally keen and alert. Something in the awful disturbance of his organic system had so exalted and refined them that they made record of things never before perceived. He felt the ripples upon his face and heard their separate sounds as they struck. He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf—he saw the very insects

upon them: the locusts, the brilliant bodied flies, the gray spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass. The humming of the gnats that danced above the eddies of the stream, the beating of the dragon flies' wings, the strokes of the water spiders' legs, like oars which had lifted their boat—all these made audible music. A fish slid along beneath his eyes and he heard the rush of its body parting the water.

He had come to the surface facing down the stream; in a moment the visible world seemed to wheel slowly round, himself the pivotal point, and he saw the bridge, the fort, the soldiers upon the bridge, the captain, the sergeant, the two privates, his executioners. They were in silhouette against the blue sky. They shouted and gesticulated, pointing at him. The captain had drawn his pistol, but did not fire; the others were unarmed. Their movements were grotesque and horrible, their forms gigantic.

Suddenly he heard a sharp report and something struck the water smartly within a few inches

of his head, spattering his face with spray. He heard a second report, and saw one of the sentinels with his rifle at his shoulder, a light cloud of blue smoke rising from the muzzle. The man in the water saw the eye of the man on the bridge gazing into his own through the sights of the rifle. He observed that it was a gray eye and remembered having read that gray eyes were keenest, and that all famous marksmen had them. Nevertheless, this one had missed.

A counter-swirl had caught Farquhar and turned him half round; he was again looking at the forest on the bank opposite the fort. The sound of a clear, high voice in a monotonous singsong now rang out behind him and came across the water with a distinctness that pierced and subdued all other sounds, even the beating of the ripples in his ears. Although no soldier, he had frequented camps enough to know the dread significance of that deliberate, drawling, aspirated chant; the lieutenant on shore was taking a part in the morning's work. How coldly and pitilessly—with what an even,

calm intonation, presaging, and enforcing tranquility in the men—with what accurately measured interval fell those cruel words:

“Company!...Attention!...
Shoulder arms!...Ready!...Aim!...
Fire!”

Farquhar dived—dived as deeply as he could. The water roared in his ears like the voice of Niagara, yet he heard the dull thunder of the volley and, rising again toward the surface, met shining bits of metal, singularly flattened, oscillating slowly downward. Some of them touched him on the face and hands, then fell away, continuing their descent. One lodged between his collar and neck; it was uncomfortably warm and he snatched it out.

As he rose to the surface, gasping for breath, he saw that he had been a long time under water; he was perceptibly farther downstream—nearer to safety. The soldiers had almost finished reloading; the metal ramrods flashed all at once in the sunshine as they were drawn from the barrels, turned in the air, and thrust into their sockets. The two sentinels fired again, independently and ineffectually.

The hunted man saw all this over his shoulder; he was now swimming vigorously with the current. His brain was as energetic as his arms and legs; he thought with the rapidity of lightning:

“The officer,” he reasoned, “will not make that martinet's error a second time. It is as easy to dodge a volley as a single shot. He has probably already given the command to fire at will. God help me, I cannot dodge them all!”

An appalling splash within two yards of him was followed by a loud, rushing sound, *DIMINUENDO*, which seemed to travel back through the air to the fort and died in an explosion which stirred the very river to its depths! A rising sheet of water curved over him, fell down upon him, blinded him, strangled him! The cannon had taken an hand in the game. As he shook his head free from the commotion of the smitten water he heard the deflected shot humming through the air ahead, and in an instant it was cracking and smashing the branches in the forest beyond.

“They will not do that again,” he thought; “the next

time they will use a charge of grape. I must keep my eye upon the gun; the smoke will apprise me—the report arrives too late; it lags behind the missile. That is a good gun.”

Suddenly he felt himself whirled round and round—spinning like a top. The water, the banks, the forests, the now distant bridge, fort and men, all were commingled and blurred. Objects were represented by their colors only; circular horizontal streaks of color—that was all he saw. He had been caught in a vortex and was being whirled on with a velocity of advance and gyration that made him giddy and sick. In few moments he was flung upon the gravel at the foot of the left bank of the stream—the southern bank—and behind a projecting point which concealed him from his enemies. The sudden arrest of his motion, the abrasion of one of his hands on the gravel, restored him, and he wept with delight. He dug his fingers into the sand, threw it over himself in handfuls and audibly blessed it. It looked like diamonds, rubies, emeralds; he could think of nothing beautiful which it did not resemble. The

trees upon the bank were giant garden plants; he noted a definite order in their arrangement, inhaled the fragrance of their blooms. A strange roseate light shone through the spaces among their trunks and the wind made in their branches the music of AEolian harps. He had not wish to perfect his escape—he was content to remain in that enchanting spot until retaken.

A whiz and a rattle of grapeshot among the branches high above his head roused him from his dream. The baffled cannoneer had fired him a random farewell. He sprang to his feet, rushed up the sloping bank, and plunged into the forest.

All that day he traveled, laying his course by the rounding sun. The forest seemed interminable; nowhere did he discover a break in it, not even a woodman's road. He had not known that he lived in so wild a region. There was something uncanny in the revelation.

By nightfall he was fatigued, footsore, famished. The thought of his wife and children urged him on. At last he found a road which led him in what he knew to be the right direction. It was as

wide and straight as a city street, yet it seemed untraveled. No fields bordered it, no dwelling anywhere. Not so much as the barking of a dog suggested human habitation. The black bodies of the trees formed a straight wall on both sides, terminating on the horizon in a point, like a diagram in a lesson in perspective. Overhead, as he looked up through this rift in the wood, shone great golden stars looking unfamiliar and grouped in strange constellations. He was sure they were arranged in some order which had a secret and malign significance. The wood on either side was full of singular noises, among which—once, twice, and again—he distinctly heard whispers in an unknown tongue.

His neck was in pain and lifting his hand to it found it horribly swollen. He knew that it had a circle of black where the rope had bruised it. His eyes felt congested; he could no longer close them. His tongue was swollen with thirst; he relieved its fever by thrusting it forward from between his teeth into the cold air. How softly the turf had carpeted the untraveled avenue—

he could no longer feel the roadway beneath his feet!

Doubtless, despite his suffering, he had fallen asleep while walking, for now he sees another scene—perhaps he has merely recovered from a delirium. He stands at the gate of his own home. All is as he left it, and all bright and beautiful in the morning sunshine. He must have traveled the entire night. As he pushes open the gate and passes up the wide white walk, he sees a flutter of female garments; his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the veranda to meet him. At the bottom of the steps she stands waiting, with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity. Ah, how beautiful she is! He springs forwards with extended arms. As he is about to clasp her he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon—then all is darkness and silence!

Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge.

Writer Bios

Robert Ford - Robert Ford fills his days running an ad agency and considering ripping the phone lines from the wall. He has published the novella, *Samson and Denial*, various short fiction, and has several screenplays floating around in the ether of Hollywood. He can confirm the grass actually is greener on the other side, but it's only because of the bodies buried there.

Visit coronersreport.blogspot.com to find out what he's currently working on, or if his committal papers to the asylum have been processed

Kevin Lucia - Kevin Lucia is a Contributing Editor for *Shroud Magazine* and a podcaster for *Tales to Terrify*. His short fiction and poetry has appeared in several venues. He teaches high school English and lives in New York with his family. He is the author of *Hiram Grange & The Chosen One*. Visit kevinlucia.com.

J.F. Gonzalez - J. F. Gonzalez works as a full-time writer. He is the author of over a dozen novels of dark suspense and horror, including *They, Back From the Dead*, and *The Beloved*. His home on the web is jfgonzalez.com.

Ian Creasey - Ian Creasey lives in Yorkshire, England. He has sold forty-odd short stories to various magazines and anthologies; his debut collection, *Maps of the Edge*, was published in 2011. His spare time interests include hiking, gardening, and environmental conservation work—anything to get him outdoors and away from the computer screen. Visit him online at iancreasey.com

Mandy Degeit - Mandy DeGeit is awesome, loud and spends most of her money on tattoos and traveling. She lives in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada and is normally be found writing, running IdleHands.ca, or hanging out with her friends. You can find out what she's up to next at: mandydegeit.com

Jeff Heimbuch - Jeff is a recent transplant to California, where he currently lives 20 minutes from Disneyland. He spends most of his time writing (about horror or Disney, but not necessarily together). He has written two books on Disney: *Main Street Windows* and *It's Kind of a Cute Story*, with Rolly Crump. You can find him at jeffheimbuch.com

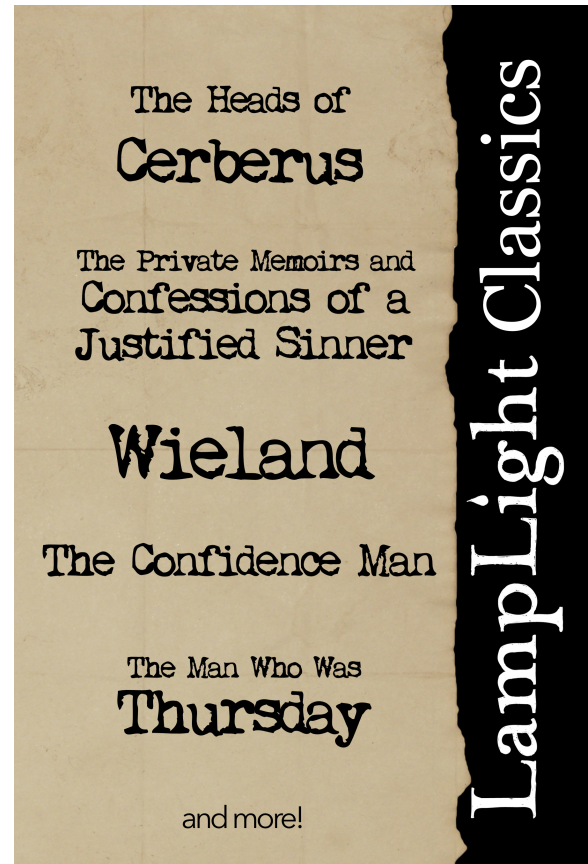
Rahul Kanakia - Rahul Kanakia is a science fiction writer who has sold stories to Clarkesworld, the Intergalactic Medicine Show, Daily Science Fiction, Redstone, Nature, and Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet. He currently lives in Baltimore, where he is enrolled in the Master of the Fine Arts program in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University. He also serves as a First Reader for Strange Horizons. He graduated from Stanford in 2008 with a B.A. in Economics and he used to work as an international development consultant. Please visit his blog at blotter-paper.com or follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/rahkan

William Meikle - William Meikle is a Scottish writer, now living in Canada, with fifteen novels published in the genre press and over 250 short story credits in thirteen countries. His work has appeared in a number of professional anthologies and he has recent short story sales to NATURE Futures, Penumbra and Daily Science Fiction among others. Visit him online at williammeikle.com

Nathan L. Yocum - Nathan L. Yocum is a writer, teacher, and entrepreneur living on the Big Island of Hawai'i. His short stories have been featured in SpecLit Masters eZine and the Writers on the Wrong Side of Road Anthology. Nathan's novels, The Zona and Automatic Woman are available on Amazon through Curiosity Quills Press. Visit him online at curiosityquills.com/published-authors/nathan-yocum

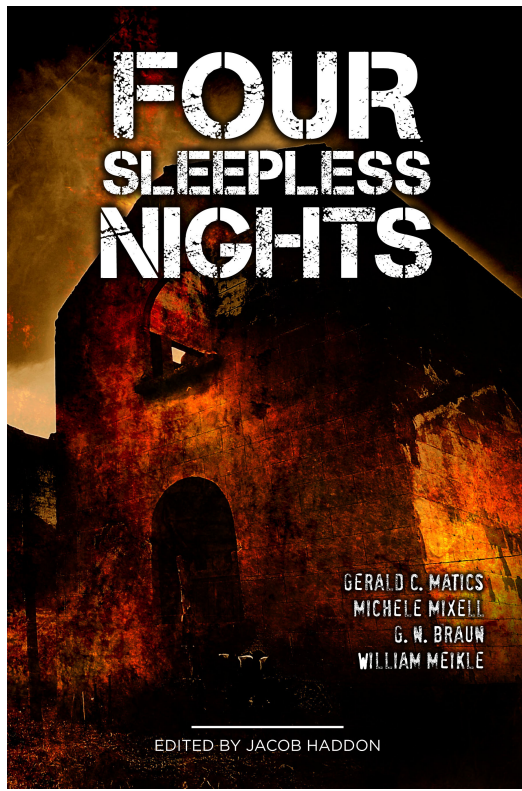
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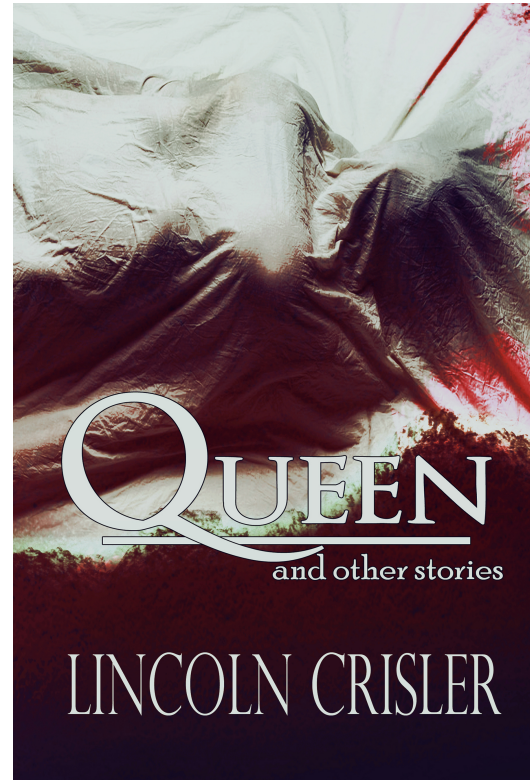
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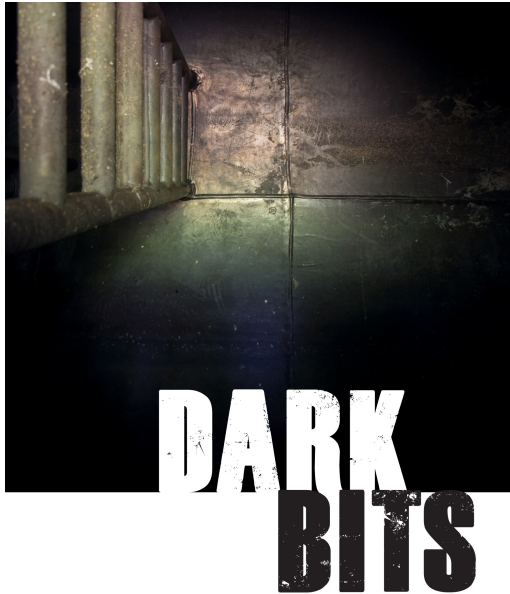
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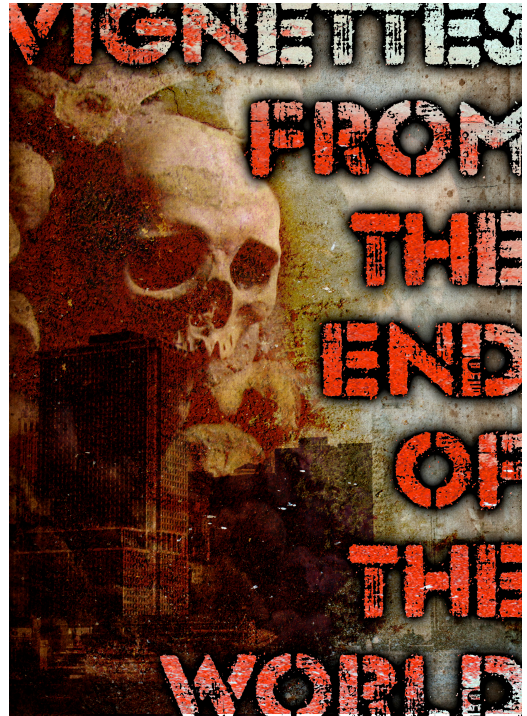
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this is how the world ends
this is how the world ends
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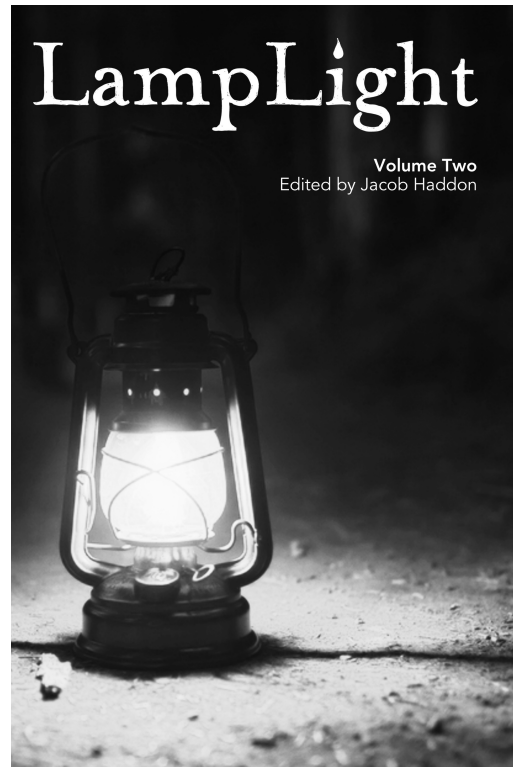
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