

# Scheherazade

Issue 6



# **Scheherazade**

**ISSUE 6**

**2016**

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“The Coffin Man” by Kanani San Nicolas, “Hosts Hereby Herald...” by Frederick Mohr, “The Flea” by Erik Fetler, “The Strange Chronicles...” by J.T. Rethke, and “Wandering” by Marc Ferris were winners of the Creative Writing Club of MPC’s Halloween Writing Contest.

## **PJ Schmidt**

### **Ghosts**

Back at the beginning, when I was young or new to this world of paramedics occupied by men, by the daring, the caring and by the broken I was in awe. Each time the Plectron radio would produce its' mechanical set of multiple tones, I'd imagine the worst, which to those on the job were "the best" as far as calls went. I was in school to be a paramedic, or I was about to start my internship, the point being that I had yet to do much more than assist the elderly, run people to their dialysis appointments or transfer a bedridden patient from one place to another.

On this slightly overcast but warm day. I'd gone to visit a paramedic, Tom and his partner. I in my civilian attire and they in their uniforms, ready to head out to a call at a moment's notice. They'd wanted a quick lunch and invited me along, so I jumped into the back of the ambulance for the few minutes' ride down the street to pick up some food. It wasn't a holiday, there were no special events going on and the day had been quiet (which was a word I learned that you never say while on duty or with those on duty). There were very few calls for service and there was no reason to think our ten or so minute jaunt to and from to pick up and bring lunch back to the station would be any different. Of course, it was.

Before getting to wherever they'd chosen for lunch, the tones blared from the bulky and burdensome old radios the men wore on their hips. The call was for an MVA (motor vehicle accident), Code 3 (lights, sirens, with all haste). The location was Highway 92, halfway up the hill that separates the Pacific Coast and Half Moon Bay from the inland of San Mateo County.

Highway 92 was known for being treacherous when dark, wet or foggy. It wound back and forth with sheer drops to one side into ravines filled with rocks and brush, and the other side steep rock and brush covered hills. While there were trees at the base of the road which met a second highway, the trees were few by the halfway point up Highway 92, and there were even fewer turnouts and passing lanes. The two lane road would be packed during the summer and weekends; beachgoers, families, campers and vans. I'd been on that road in the dark and in the fog; it was a discomfiting drive as a young person. When I was tired, the windows would be rolled down and the radio on high just to stay awake and remain alert. That day though, from the back of the ambulance, I remember the sun shining in mid afternoon and no major events were going on "over the hill," as it was called.

Tom, who I called a friend, was in the front passenger seat. He would be the "technician," or lead, for whatever would be found once we got to our destination. His job on the way to the call was to get radio updates, work through in his head all the possible scenarios; what

additional equipment he'd need, what hospitals were on divert because the ER's were full, what time frame was acceptable for a critical patient to be taken by ambulance versus landing a helicopter to fly them out. These were just a few of the things he had to consider before we got to where ever we were going. My job was to observe. While we worked for the same company, I wasn't on duty, I wasn't in uniform and I wasn't trained to the extent that Tom and his partner were. No matter, as most of these calls ended up being quite minor; someone with slight back pain, or a lightly strained their neck who wanted to go to the hospital "just in case." Those were the typical results of this type of call.

On the way up the highway we lost the radio signal. At times it would come through momentarily like the desperately needed breeze on a hot summer day, but then it would fade out just as quickly. It took what seemed like an eternity to get to our destination, weaving through cars on the roadway, using the few wider areas with their slender dirt shoulders as our own lane, and finally as we rounded a corner seeing a vehicle on its side blocking both lanes. I don't recall what Tom or his partner said but I do recall my heart starting to race and putting on my "work persona," the face that shows no emotion, the voice that will not waver, the reassuring hand that may lead someone to or away from something.

The ambulance stopped; the distinctive deep metallic ratcheting of the emergency brake was a sound I could almost taste. Before I knew it



one of the crew had thrown open the back doors of the ambulance, grabbed a jump bag, with trauma supplies, and signaled me to come out to assist. Once I exited the back of the ambulance, I came to see why they moved so quickly. I'd seen the car on its side while looking through the small transition area from the back of the ambulance to the front, but what I didn't see were the people, standing in the roadways, their vehicle doors open. There was pointing and some shouting and I recall the sound of crying somewhere behind me.

Tom's partner went around the car to the driver's side, against the roadway. I stuck with Tom; we went to the other side, where the undercarriage of the car faced up the hill. Tom looked me in the eyes. I knew what he wanted; he was trying to see if I was "there," able to function and follow his instructions. The look lasted a fraction of a second, but it was clear and concise, and within the same breath he started yelling instructions. It occurred to me that I was on my first really big accident scene and that I was actually going to be putting my training into use.

It didn't strike me just how odd the scene was as Tom and I quickly knelt on one side of the body in front of us. A body, face down on the black pavement, lying still in the shade of the vehicle. No face visible, just the denim jeans with a bit of tummy rounding out at the top, a t-shirt, not ripped or torn. No sign of blood or deformity registered in my brain. Tom and I took our positions, ready to roll the body over,

ensuring that it would be in one smooth movement, the spine was in line with the lower body, the head and neck aligned with the spine. When Tom gave the word we would roll the person so that he could assess the severity of the injuries. It was on his count. One, two, three. We rolled the body, me at the hip and legs and he with the head and upper body, until his voice, somewhat high pitched and just loud enough for me to hear, said stop. I froze. He took his right hand from the shoulder, placed it on the pavement near the stomach and leaned over towards the face. It was then I saw the dark pool that was under the chest, the fluid that had started to coagulate just under the head, and it struck me. The body was a female; her neck had a thick choke chain, the type with big silver links that you'd see on a dog. Her t-shirt was darker color with a rock band name or emblem on the front. I remember because I had to look away from her face. Tom stopped us rolling her because of her face, caught between the pavement and the driver's side front tire.

I don't recall much after that, just images. Tom had checked her carotid pulse, and then he instructed me to gently lie her back down in the position we'd found her. He sent me to the ambulance to get a "CHP Blanket" and it was then that I knew she was dead. I don't recall what happened with the other patient, though I know we didn't transport anyone in the ambulance that day.

I ended up "decompressing" at the station. I don't recall what we

talked about, just that the three of us talked and Tom did paperwork. Later in the afternoon we would go to the coroners' office to drop off the "run report" to the Sheriff. The report detailed the scene, where the vehicle was, where the bodies were, what Tom and his partner did and the time at which Tom "pronounced" death.

Tom, being around the same age as I, was always a teacher. He asked if I wanted to see the body on the exam table. I indicated I'd be willing. We went in and this was the first time I'd gotten a good look at her. She was around seventeen, just a few years younger than me, with reddish brown hair, the front matted and tangled with coagulated blood. Her face was set upon the front of her head, like an ill-fitting mask. It was still attached by pieces of skin on one side, but the rest was scraped, battered and seemingly not where it should be. This is the image that I have always remembered, the first real image of "death" in someone that was my age, a contemporary.

Years later, I'd run my share of calls on an ambulance as the 'teacher' and the medic. I'd seen my share of death, both old and young, from medical and traumatic causes. But, one day at work as a paramedic I received a call. Tom, my friend, teacher, contemporary, had apparently overdosed on his Insulin at home. He was brain dead and on life support awaiting an organ harvesting team. To those who came to help him he was just another "call," another set of tones and a Code 3 response. For me, the news brought back the freshness of death, it

brought back the image of that girl on the asphalt with her face hidden, seemingly just laid out to rest in the shade of the overturned vehicle. Death was new again, because it was the death of a contemporary, a fellow medic, a friend. Tom is now one of my many ghosts, a memory, a whisper.

## **Tanya Fadem**

### **The Sleepover**

When all four of the nine-year-old boys arrive at my house for the sleepover from the bowling alley, they don't walk through the door; they tumble over themselves like puppies about to be fed. They dart around the house looking eagerly from room to room, shouting back and forth to each other and shedding shoes in all directions. The three visiting boys chatter excitedly about how many pieces of pizza they ate and how many sodas they've had, sugar-crazed and filled with the thrill of being away from home. My own son coolly nods at me like you might acknowledge a waiter at a fancy restaurant as if to say, "We don't need anything now, but do keep coming by and checking." Three of the boys are dressed in sports uniforms, having come to the party directly from various games. Their cheeks are bright, and their hair is sweat-caked to their heads. Their eyes shine as they imagine the possibilities of the evening.

Nine-year-olds are a special breed of boy. They are passionate, competitive, and supremely silly. They are still much more boy than man, but they clearly pride themselves on their observation of what men do and can perform a reasonable facsimile. But, in spite of their bravado, they deeply doubt themselves and are prone to bouts of sorrow about their perceived inadequacies. They are all about fairness

and enforcement of the rules—when they apply to others. No injustice gets by the eagle eye of a nine-year-old, but they also possess a dreamy quality that causes them to forget what they are doing while holding a toothbrush in front of the sink. Many spend their days comparing and ordering each other against various units of measure: “Johnny is the 4<sup>th</sup> best at math, but only the 7<sup>th</sup> best in basketball.” Everyone is ranked but will be re-measured again and again.

As the party progresses, my son glumly leans his head against my arm, trying to not look like he’s actually talking to me and despairingly whispers, “I only won one game of bowling, and they won three.” I give him a squeeze, which he shrugs off, like once it’s said out loud it no longer matters. The other boys are energetically shooting baskets on an indoor hoop, and he walks towards them with his hands raised in the universal request for the ball. The game is a unique exhibition of skill, silliness, and competition that is always precariously teetering on the brink of hurt feelings. They play hard, as if the very championship depends on them. In the heat of the game, one of the boys gets knocked over as another drives to the basket. He lies with arms splayed on the floor like the Vitruvian Man for a long, dramatic moment, before springing up with a smile; his humor is rewarded by the others with pats on the butt before they resume play. As the game’s intensity wanes, one of the boys notices the big bowl of Pirate’s Booty, a crunchy snack, on the counter and nearly dives in. He emerges in a puff of

cheese-dust with two heaping handfuls and a grin. The others pause to grab handfuls themselves, and pretty soon the game devolves into wildly shooting baskets from chairs and hysterically chanting about having “booty-grease” all over their hands.

The boys move as a herd and leap over the piles of backpacks, books, a stuffed Giants panda pillow, and sleeping bags on their way to set up the movie. They easily flop on the floor and couches and shout out requests. The boy-of-the-hour makes the final choice, which is met with groans when other favorites are not chosen. After some angst that seems like it could easily grow into full-blown discord, they seem to collectively recognize the rightful reign of the birthday boy and amiably acquiesce.

After the movie they pile their backpacks in the corner of the living room, full of pjs and toothbrushes that will go unused. Even though the room is large, they arrange their sleeping bags a sneeze away from each other, nestled amid empty soda cans and cake crumbs. The sleeping bags undulate as the tired, soda-drunk boys try to settle themselves before the lights turn off. The dark, momentary calm is broken by a chorus of shrieks, “Oh, MAN—you farted!” followed by uproarious laughter. This goes on until 11:30 when I opt to separate them a bit and sit in the mudroom until they finally drift off to sleep.

At 6:30 in the morning the boys erupt from their sleeping bags. They seem to simultaneously go from a dead-sleep to jumping around

the living room in their boxers, screeching and pelting each other with balloons. Wanting to channel this morning energy into something quieter, I pull out Star Wars Monopoly and set them up in the room furthest from the rest of the sleeping family.

The birthday boy banker himself presides over the doling out of money. He sits in the midst of piles of pastel bills, barking out the rules and handing out the pieces. All the doubt and fleeting distress of yesterday forgotten, this morning he exudes confidence. While setting up the game, they break into an impromptu, boisterous version of “Shut Up and Dance.” It’s clear that only a couple of the boys actually know the song and have taught it to the others. One of them begins to beat-box behind the melody, which leads to a riotous rap rendition. Although I doubt my sleepy ears, I swear I hear heard the word, “poop!” and before I know it, the boys are belting out a creatively crude rap about “poop-and-toots-and poop-and-toots,” flying bottoms, and stepping in poop.

With their morning creativity spent, the boys drift to the living room to play the Wii until breakfast. The ruins of the un-played monopoly game lie abandoned on the table. As they prepare for their Wii endeavors, they argue over who gets to be on whose team, jostling for control and skill-dominance. Remarkably, every argument ends in grudging agreement. Sometimes it’s not hard to imagine the reasonable preteens I’m sure they will one day be.



Before packing up, the birthday boy opens his presents. The gifts seem almost anticlimactic after the night's festivities, even though they are exactly what he wished for. The three friends crowd around the gifts that are laid out in some important but unknown order and encircled with torn wrapping paper.

The fathers arrive to pick up their boys, and with the accompanying siblings there are now a total of twelve males in the house...and me. The boys dutifully say, "Thank you, we've had a wonderful time," just like their mothers had prompted. I wave and say, "You're very welcome," and I know that they really did.

## Leslie Little

### Geologic Time

I'm just climbing into the bathtub with Gramma's old quilt and my completely thrashed copy of *Invisible Cities* when there's a small, decisive knock on the door. 9 PM and I'm not expecting anyone, nor do I really want to see anyone; I'm having a day that makes me want to stifle all my senses so I can just be a rock. A metamorphic rock, because then there's still the possibility of change. Some people are like plants, all in need of light and water. I am a rock person. I need a pack of cigarettes, a beer, and Gramma's quilt wrapped around me as I fall asleep at night. Light and water do nothing for me. I exist in the darkness and the deep.

I abandon my reading post and tiptoe to the door. I press the side of my face to it and feel the coolness of the wood invading my pores. Then I peer through the peephole.

Lauren. And she's not empty handed.

I open the door somewhat reluctantly. I want to read my book, I want to bury my nose in the quilt and remember Gramma's hot cups of tea. But I also want company, I want a beer, I want something to eat. I don't get paid until Wednesday and it's Monday. I'm out of money because Jonas took off with it. He decided on Saturday that "Jasmine is

my future,” and before he left he raided the cookie jar. It had all my tip money in it. He took the cookies too.

It’s been two lonely nights without him. What I miss about Jonas are his flannel shirts. That smell like Jasmine. I like wearing them to bed at night and thinking about her. What is she like? A female drummer in a band full of males means that she has to be kind of hardcore and tough. You know, with a lot of tattoos and dreads and porn star boobs.

I am decidedly not built like a porn star. As I open the door, Lauren says, “Damn, girl, you look like a twig that got run over!”

She shoves a Styrofoam container into my hands as she walks into the apartment. She’s peering around. There’s nothing to see. Jonas and I don’t have much. We couldn’t afford floor lamps, so we strung Christmas lights around each room. It’s my personal opinion that everyone should have Christmas lights up all year round. They make everything more cheerful.

It’s chicken chow mein. I sit on the shapeless brown couch and dig in. I don’t even bother with plasticware. I’m starved.

“Thanks,” I say, noodles falling out of my mouth.

“You’re disgusting, Katie,” Lauren says, laughing, and she’s right. Tangled hair and holey jeans and the shirt I got the one year I danced in *The Nutcracker*. I’ve been picking at my face again; there’s blood under

my fingernails. I miss ballet, my leotard and gauzy skirt, my pink shoes. I was good; I knew how to feel the music.

“So where’ve you been?” Lauren asks, finally satisfied with surveying the amount of nothing in my shithole apartment.

“Just ... you know, here and there. Working. Moved here a couple of weeks ago.”

“It’s fucking cold in here.”

“Yeah, the heat’s out.”

“Fucking slumlords.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Did you hear that Michelle had her baby?”

“Yeah,” I reply, wiping my mouth with my sleeve. The chow mein has completely disappeared. I am impressed with myself. I don’t even feel the urge to throw up.

“She’s totally gone straightedge.”

“Yeah, I know. Breastfeeding and all that.”

“That shit will ruin her tits.”

“Well, who cares when you’ve got Mr. Awesomely Supportive Husband, right?”

“All guys care about tits.”

“Yeah.”

I’d actually seen Michelle and her baby girl a couple of days before. Right after Jonas left, I went for a walk and ended up at her apartment.

I hadn't seen her in months, since she told me she was pregnant, actually. She looked tired and swollen but blissed out and she let me in immediately. She sat me down on the couch and then put this little person in my arms. Her name was Emma and she smelled like milk and happiness. She had a little patch of blonde hair on the back of her head and as I held her, inhaled her, I could not stop stroking the softness of that patch of hair. I wanted to die there, holding Emma, who smelled of happiness. Michelle's husband kept popping into the room and staring at me pointedly. I hadn't brushed my hair that day, I'd been crying because of Jonas's stupid bullshit, I'd been chain smoking. Michelle looked like an actual mom - you know, the kind that makes cookies and goes to PTA meetings - and I was just a skeleton with brittle hair and bad skin.

My stomach ached the whole walk home after I left baby Emma and Michelle and Mr. Awesomely Supportive But Disapproving Husband. I drank a glass of water immediately after walking into the drafty apartment and then promptly threw it up. My uterus felt like a cavern. Echoing. I fell asleep in the bathtub that night because the bed smelled like Jonas.

"You really do look like shit, Katie," says Lauren. "I'm kinda worried about you."

"Eh, don't worry about me," I scoff. "I've been through breakups before."

“Jonas is an ass,” Lauren sneers. “You can do better.”

I want to believe her but I know she’s lying. I really can’t do better. It’s not possible. There aren’t any nice guys out there who want a skinny girl with daddy issues and a history of eating disorders and sexual abuse and cutting. No one’s going to marry me and buy me a minivan. Sure, there are plenty of guys out there who will spend a Saturday night pressed up against me, but they don’t want to stay. Jonas wanted to stay. Until he wanted to leave.

I am quiet and my legs are folded under me. I have no words inside me. Rocks don’t talk. They sit around and take up space.

“I should go,” Lauren finally says, after studying me for a minute.

“Thanks for the food,” I say, and I mean it.

“No problem, girl. See you soon?” She taps me on the arm with her fist and lets herself out. I stay on the couch and feel the glow of the Christmas lights on my skin. For a moment, I am all colors, I am magic. I wander into the bathroom and crawl back into the claw-footed bathtub to read. It’s the only place where the overhead light is decent, and with Gramma’s quilt wrapped around me it’s pretty damn comfortable. I read Calvino late into the night and I spend the night in the bathtub where it doesn’t smell like Jonas or Jasmine.

It’s the knocking that wakes me up, loud and insistent. I know immediately that it’s Jonas and I brace myself for - what, I don’t know. Something big. It’s always something big with Jonas. I open the door.

“Hey,” he says, giving me his dumb sheepish smile. He’s holding a pink box.

“What do you want?” I ask softly, rubbing my eyes. It’s bright out.

“I brought some donuts. Figure we could talk.”

“Eh,” I mutter and I walk away from the open door. He follows me inside. I sit on the shapeless couch and I put the box of donuts on my lap when he hands it to me.

“Sorry I took off,” Jonas says casually.

“How’s Jasmine?” It’s a pointed question, and I’m surprised at the pain behind it. And the curiosity.

“It’s not working out.”

“Sorry,” I say.

“Can I come home?”

“What, here?” I ask, glancing around the place.

“Yeah.”

I’m quiet, I’m back in my rocklike state. I’m waiting for the words.

“Jonas, what do you want out of life?” I ask suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” and I pause here, “What do you want to do with your life? What do you want it to look like?”

“I just want to play music, man.”

“Anything else?” I’m searching for the real Jonas.

“Uh, an endless supply of seven layer burritos from Taco Bell,”

Jonas grins.

I sigh. And then I start. “You know what, Jonas?”

“What?”

“I want to have a baby.”

“What?!” Already he looks panicked. He’s inching further away from me. I open the box on my lap and pick out a glazed donut.

“Oh, relax. I don’t want to have a baby with you, you loser.” I laugh. I haven’t felt this good in weeks. Months. Maybe even a year or two.

“I’m not a loser,” he sputters.

“Yes, you are,” I say, “But you know what? So am I. We’re both a couple of fuck ups. We can’t even afford a goddamn floor lamp.”

“But you like Christmas lights.”

“Yeah,” I say, “But maybe I want a fucking floor lamp, too. Maybe I want an apartment in the nice part of town. Maybe I want to have dinner parties and shit. You know, a normal life.”

“Sounds fancy,” says Jonas.

“Goddammit, I want a baby,” I say and I feel my uterus aching as the words come out of my mouth. I’ve never wanted anything so much, my own little person with its own patch of hair that I could stroke all night.

“We could have a baby,” says Jonas. His brown eyes are like twin caverns in his face. I notice his hands are shaking. I realize that he’s high.



"I don't want to have a baby with you," I say again.

"Come on," Jonas insists. "I'd be a good dad."

I am quiet again, the words are like lava inside me, I am a rock, I am looking for the water, I am searching for the light.

I am metamorphosis.

## **Erika Salazar**

### **Mythic**

She tried to scream, but the salty water rushed into her mouth. She twisted and pulled at the chains weighing her down. She couldn't believe it. This couldn't be the end, not this. After everything she had done for the crew, this was going to be it? This was how they repaid her? Eight years of loyalty to the captain. Eight years of being the best pirate on the damn ship. Eight years and now she was going to drown. She screamed trying to unleash the rage that stormed in her veins, but instead it came out as a song.

Startled, she stopped screaming and tried to look about her. She couldn't see anything except for the few areas where the sunlight managed to pierce the dark water. Something darted into the little light left and swam around her in a blur. As she began to panic about the possibility of a shark, dots appeared in her vision. Drowning didn't feel as terrible now. Sure, at first her lungs had burned and her head had felt as though it was about to explode; now though, it felt just like swaying in a hammock. As her vision became as murky as the water around her, she felt herself moving in a different direction. Instead of just slowly sinking, she was swimming to her right. No, she wasn't swimming... she was being pulled.

Something clawed at the collar of her shirt and began to pull her out of the sea. Water dripped down her face and she felt something cold and hard against her back. She didn't feel the warmth of the sun, or hear waves breaking on a shore. She struggled to draw breath and open her eyes, but even when she managed to open them for a second, her surroundings made no sense. She couldn't see a roof, but she knew that she wasn't outside. Strange stones surrounded her. Some light source would bounce off the stones and make their colors dance.

"She may be too far gone, Zula," said a melodious voice.

"No, she just tried to open her eyes, she's still fighting. Listen to me. Listen closely, small one. You can be great, you can be fury," she heard a sweeter voice say. She struggled to make the voice louder, to make it clearer. She wanted to hear everything. "Listen. You have it, you have the rage, you feel the injustice, and you want vengeance. Remember. Remember everything. Remember what you did for them. Remember everything that you gave to them. Remember that they cast you overboard, tried to drown you. Remember and let the rage grow. Let it fill you. Become your fury, become your wrath. Claim it and you will get your retribution. You will be strong, beautiful, awesome, invincible... a legend. But you must remember those that wronged you. Remember..."

\*

*Three sea nymphs were tasked with protecting Persephone. They were her constant guardians, whether she was with Demeter in Olympus, or walking the meadows of Greece.*

She was an orphan, one of the thousands in Athens. The small home she shared with a hundred other girls never seemed to have enough room, but always plenty of chores. She scrubbed, and wiped, and swept, and always looked out towards the sea. The beautiful, wild, and wide waters. How she longed to board a ship and sail away on the never ending waves.

“What do you dream of, Odessa?” one of the younger girls asked her once.

“I want to explore the sea. I want nothing but space around me. I want to roam where I please. I want to fight others and win. I want fame and treasures.”

“Maybe you should become a pirate.”

“Girls are bad luck on the sea, don’t you know?”

“Maybe they don’t have to know you’re a girl,” the little one said as she turned back towards the home.

“Maybe...” Odessa whispered as she looked towards the ocean.

*When Persephone was kidnapped by Hades, Demeter was filled with such a rage that she cursed the three sea nymphs. She gave them an awful beauty, a haunting voice, and part of her fury. Forevermore, they would be bound to the sea.*

Odessa dressed as boyishly as she could and smeared some dirt onto her face. She tucked her long black hair into the bandana tied around her head. Today would be the fifth time she would attempt to get a job with a crew, any crew at this point.

As she walked along Piraeus port she tried to speak to sailors walking past her. "Excuse me, sir, can you -- Sir, do you know if -- Have you any --" every man she tried to talk to either huffed and kept walking or ignored her completely. As the afternoon wore on, she started to despair that she would never be able to find a ship to hire her.

She sat with her back against the side of a shabby fish stall and began to nibble on the bread she had brought with her. As the sun sank deeper into the distant waves, the men on the port began to disperse. Some went back to their ships, and others went into the nearby taverns. Odessa stood from where she had been sitting and dusted herself off. As she began to turn back towards the home, she saw a lone ship sailing into the port.

All of its sails were hanging limply, barely catching any wind. There were no lights on deck and no one was visible. Odessa contemplated going to call one of the Navy patrols she had seen walking around the port throughout the day, but before she could, the ship gently bumped into a dock. Quickly and silently she saw a rope tossed over and land on the port. A man leapt from the boat and tied the rope around the

bollard with celerity. As soon as the ship was secure, men jumped from the boat onto the deck. When the last one jumped over, the men fell behind him as they walked towards the quay. At the word of the leading man, the pirates split up at the walkway and began to seize any cargo they could find and haul it into the ship.

Odessa wondered if she should sound the alarm, or maybe... maybe she should just board the ship and become part of the crew. Would that work? Would she be accepted? Or would they cast her over-board? Would she be able to be a pirate? There was only one way to find out. She came out from her hiding spot behind a large barrel and took a step towards the ship.

“PIRATES!” a shout rang out from a nearby building. Odessa slipped back into the shadows. Most of the men stopped running crates to the ship. They pulled weapons from the sashes tied around their waists and walked towards the buildings. Soldiers and sailors began to come out of buildings and ships brandishing their own weapons. Steel rang against steel and shouts filled the air as the two groups battled.

This was her chance, Odessa thought. While everyone was busy fighting, no one would notice her slipping onto the ship. She began to sprint towards it. She was halfway down the quay when she found her way blocked. A large, filthy man dressed in ragged clothing stood in front of her with his sword in the air. “Where do you think you’re going, you little whelp,” he snarled in a slight Algerian accent. He began to

swing his sword towards her, only to have to turn and fight a Navy officer that had ran between them.

Her way suddenly clear again, she sprinted towards the ship. She jumped aboard and looked wildly around for a place to hide. "Back to the ship!" she heard a voice shout from the dock. Without thinking she ran down into the hold and hid behind crates covered in layers of dust.

She giggled quietly as she realized that she had finally found her escape, and laughed even harder when she realized that her life was now forfeit to a group of pillagers and murderers. The gods might have known what would happen to her, but she did not.

*The sea nymphs could no longer enjoy all of the pleasures they previously had. Gone were the bountiful feasts they had once shared with Persephone and Demeter. Now, Demeter had made it so that they could only feed on the flesh of men who had done women wrong.*

She had been napping in a corner when someone grabbed her collar and dragged her towards the stairs. "So you're the rat that's been sneaking off with some of our food. Let's see what the Captain has to say." It was the same man who had tried to kill her on the dock. He was much larger than Odessa, both in height and in girth. His breath stank and all of his teeth looked rotten. His long, tangled hair was greasy and smelled almost as bad as the rest of him. She almost managed to pull out of his grasp until he switched to grasping her arm.

Odessa gasped and shut her eyes as she walked into the sunlight. After two days of hiding in the dark, she wasn't used to the harsh light. She heard men grumbling around her and stopping their tasks. She blinked repeatedly trying to get accustomed to the light. Her captor dragged her towards the quarterdeck. "Captain!"

"Aye, Basem, what is it?" Odessa looked up as she heard the voice. A tall man stepped to the edge of the deck. Unlike the man holding Odessa, he looked like he took care of his appearance. His beard and hair were trimmed. His blue knee-length tunic was belted at the waist and his loose pants were tucked into his boots. Odessa stared at the cutlass glinting in the sunlight as he ran his index finger against the edge. "Well, well, what have we here?"

"It's the rat that has been stealing our food," Basem snarled. Odessa was beginning to think it was the only way he could talk.

"So you have been stealing from me?"

"No, sir," Odessa cleared her throat. "I was not stealing, I was borrowing. I mean to pay you back with my services."

"Your services? Don't make me laugh! Do you know how to manage the rigging?" Odessa shook her head. "No? Do you know how to repair a ripped sail? No. Can you cook? Can you fight? No. Well, what use have I for you? This is a ship, not an orphanage! Get the plank ready, men, it looks like the sharks will get a meal tonight!" The men began to cheer.



“Wait!” Odessa shouted. “I may not know how to do those things now, but I can learn quickly. Until then I can clean. Just, please, don’t leave me stuck.”

“Stuck? You wouldn’t be stuck! You’d be dead.”

“Dead’s fine, but there is an island off that way and if no sharks attacked me, I think I might be able to swim to it. It’d be fun to explore at first, I’m sure, but after a while I’d just be stuck. It would turn into a prison and I want to be free.”

The entire time Odessa had been looking towards the distant island, the captain had been looking at her face. “So you desire freedom? What’s your name, boy?”

“Ode—it’s Odysseus.”

“Odysseus? After the great hero? You don’t look like much of a hero, nor do you look like you’re capable of hate.”

“Hate?”

“Odysseus means to hate. You don’t look like your name. But then, Basem means one who smiles, and our Basem seems to never do more than scowl.” A laugh rose from the crew and even Odessa smiled.

“Maybe I’ll grow into it.”

“Maybe.” The captain smiled. “You want to be part of this crew? You got it then. Start with cleaning the bathroom.” Odessa heard snickers behind her, “It’s not much of a room, more of a corner. Ismail! Show

him where we keep our cleaning supplies.” He sneered and turned away.

“But Aegeus! He is a stowaway! He’s been stealing our food! How are we going to -“

“Didn’t you hear Basem?” he said, looking over his shoulder. “He’s going to pay for the food.” He winked at Odessa and began to laugh as he walked out of her sight.

*Gone were the days when they roamed in the sunny fields. If ever they tried to leave the sea, they would hear a voice that whispered unceasingly until they returned to the sea, sane or half mad.*

Other memories passed by in a flash. Learning the captain’s name meant “protector.” Growing closer to the captain and hearing his passion for names and their meanings. Learning to fight with Ismail, Evander, and the captain. Cooking for the crew with Goran. Learning how to sail the ship and manage the rigging. Her first time in a raid instead of just protecting the ship. Farid teaching her Algerian so she could talk with all of the crew. Crying the first time she killed a man. The memories filled her with warmth until she noticed him. Basem creeping on the edges of every memory. Always watching her, always scowling. The warmth became hotter, and hotter, until it was burning her from the inside out. She realized that it was hatred just as another memory crashed to the front of her mind.

*Gone were the days when they could wade in shallow waters for if even a drop of it touched their skin, their feet would transform into fishtails and their lungs would turn to gills.*

She always woke before the rest of the crew to prepare for the day. She had to make sure to hide her hair and her growing breasts. After four years, no one had yet to suspect that she wasn't a boy. With Basem always keeping an eye on her, though, she had to be extra careful.

One day, as she finished binding her chest, she heard a laugh behind her. She quickly pulled on her shirt and reached for her cutlass.

"Ah, ah, ah Odysseus." Basem spit out the name as he emerged from behind a crate. "I already have that. Oh, what will the captain say?" He grabbed her arm and dragged her up the stairs. Odessa remembered the first time this had happened, this time though, she wasn't as weak. She twisted her arm and kicked Basem in the shin with all her might. With a grunt, he let go of her arm. Odessa ran up to the main deck with Basem on her heels.

"Captain!" they both shouted. As they appeared on the main deck, the rest of the crew began to emerge from the sleeping quarters. As the men stared at Odessa, she gasped and reached for her head. She hadn't had time to hide her hair in her bandana. How stupid and vain of her to never have cut it. The men began to mutter and everywhere she turned, Odessa saw distrustful faces.

“Captain! See, he’s not what he said he was! I told you not to trust him!” Odessa faced toward the quarter deck.

“So she is not. What is this, Odysseus?” Odessa couldn’t read his expression. “Answer me!” he shouted.

“I needed to leave my orphanage, and I wanted to explore the sea. I know that women aren’t welcome aboard ships, so I pretended to be a boy.”

Aegeus nodded his head and looked out towards the sea. “What is your real name, then?” he said looking at her once again.

“Odessa.”

“God’s wrath. That suits you much more than hate.” He looked toward the rest of the crew. “Men, meet Odessa, part of our crew.”

“But Captain!” Basem shouted. “Women are bad luck! The gods will curse us!”

“Superstitions, Basem. If they wanted to curse us, they would have done so by now.”

“But—“

“Let it go, Basem.”

*Every year when Persephone left her mother and returned to Hades, Demeter would roam the lands and waters about Greece in despair. Once when wandering about the Mediterranean Sea, she heard a trio singing hauntingly of Persephone.*

More memories flashed in Odessa's mind. She remembered struggling to gain the crew's trust again. They muttered whenever she walked by. Until one raid, when Odessa saved the Captain's life. After that, the crew began to trust her again. She remembered the prisoners they had taken and killed or abandoned. The time she broke her cutlass while trying to escape the French Navy and picked up a boarding axe nearby to defend herself. She soon mastered the boarding axe after she discovered that she liked it more than the cutlass.

*Following the voices, Demeter found the sea nymphs. Their song made her heartache and at once she realized that they were in as much pain as she was. Wanting to correct her mistake, she approached them and offered to release them of their curse.*

Odessa woke with a start. Someone was shouting on deck. Fearing an attack, she tied a sash around her waist and tucked her boarding axe into it. As she began to rush up the stairs of the hold, the shouting became comprehensible.

"I don't trust her! She'll send us to a watery grave! The Captain should have never let her on the ship!" Basem shouted.

"Ah, let it go, man! You have been shouting for the last seven years and you have yet to be right!" Evander shouted back.

“She’s a curse and I’m tired of testing the gods!” He rose from his seat and stalked towards the main deck. “Odessa!” he shouted into the night air. “Come out, girl! Come out and fight me!”

Odessa climbed out of the hold. “What do you want, Basem? It is late and some of us want our sleep.”

“Fight me! The whole crew holds you in esteem, but I know! I know! You’ll be the death of us! Fight me!”

“You are drunk, go to sleep.”

“Fight me, I said! Or are you a coward? Captain’s precious pet, a coward!”

“I’m no coward! If it’s a fight you want, it’s a fight you’ll get,” she snarled, pulling out her boarding axe. But if I win, no more talk of me being bad luck.”

“Fine,” Basem scowled and drew his cutlass. With a shout he ran at Odessa. Though smaller, Odessa knew she could win against the inebriated fool. She ducked under his swing, and stuck her foot out. Unfortunately, Basem knew her tricks and managed to take a big enough step to avoid it. Seeing that he was unbalanced, Odessa smashed the haft of her axe into his lower back. He howled. He turned and swung his cutlass towards her again, though lower this time. Odessa blocked it with the shoulder of her axe. Her arms shook with the effort of holding Basem’s cutlass away. She bent her elbows, ducked under his falling arms, and jabbed him in the stomach with the haft of

her axe. He grunted and swung his blade. She shouted in pain as the cutlass' edge scraped her lower back. Odessa hadn't been fighting to kill or even injure Basem, knowing that he was one of the Captain's favorites, but it was obvious that he had no such qualms. She scowled and adjusted her grip on her axe. If he wanted a fight to the death, so be it.

She raised her axe and charged at him. Basem aimed for her head. She ducked at the last minute and tried to hit his stomach with the blade of her axe. He managed to bring his cutlass back quickly enough to avoid being gutted, but the blade still cut his stomach. Both were bleeding as they began to fight again. He swung his cutlass with shorter arcs; Odessa had to move quickly. They were panting and sweating. Each managed to put a few scratches on the other, but none were fatal or enough to stop the fight.

Finally, she saw her opening. Basem over swung enough for Odessa to get behind him once again. She kicked the back of his knee and forced him to kneel. Odessa shouted as she lifted her axe for her final swing.

"Enough!" Aegeus shouted from the doorway of his quarters. Odessa briefly considered hacking Basem's head off anyway, but dropped her arms.

"Captain," they both muttered.

"I don't want to see this again. The both of you are on my crew, act like it. And Basem, no more cursing Odessa as bad luck. If you're not sailing the ship tonight, off to quarters with you!" The Captain retreated to his room.

"Don't think this is over, girl." Basem glowered as he walked away.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

*The sea nymphs refused the removal of their burden. Instead they implored Demeter to change it to a blessing. They had seen so many girls and women left to drown by villainous men. The sea nymphs wanted the girls to be able to get their own vengeance, but only if they were filled with a righteous fury and a thirst for retribution. Demeter agreed.*

Again, more memories. Basem still trying to get men on his side. Some listening, some ignoring him. Odessa tried to not let it bother her, but it did. It filled her with rage, and the longer she remembered those hushed conversations that always pattered out when she neared, the more the rage grew. It became a storm inside her, churning up resentment and a thirst for vengeance. Roiling the waves of hatred that she had tried to suppress throughout the years. Whipping forward the memories of other storms.

Odessa had been with Captain Aegeus and the crew for eight years by then. She had seen some of her crewmates die, saw some of them leave on their own, and had seen others join. She had seen storms that ravaged the seas and destroyed other ships, but none ever hurt their



ship. The Captain was too good a sailor. Even when a Navy was chasing them, they always managed to escape. Until, one time they didn't.

Ships of the British Navy down near Egypt saw them attack a nearby port and gave chase. They sailed through one of the worst storms they had ever encountered and lost track of the Navy while navigating through it. Once they came out on the other side, they thought they were in safe waters. Few other crews could navigate through such brutal tempests as well as they could. Unfortunately, this crew could. The British came out of the storm just minutes after they had and caught up. They boarded the ship. The battle felt like it lasted hours. Odessa's arms ached and she didn't know how much longer she could fight. She heard a shout and turned to see Captain Aegeus struck down.

Shouts rose from the crew. With a newfound vigor they drove the enemy off the ship. Instead of giving chase, as they normally would've at this point, the crew gathered around their fallen leader.

"Captain!" Odessa cried as she knelt beside him.

"That bastard bested me, I suppose," he smirked. "It felt like it was time, though."

"Don't say that, sir."

"Don't worry. It's all fine." He coughed and slowly closed his eyes. "It's all fine." Odessa stayed kneeling for a minute, and then stood shakily.

“The Captain’s gone,” she said, turning toward her crewmates.

“What are you looking at me like that for?” she snarled, noticing some of their expressions.

“This is all your fault,” Basem growled back.

“How could this possibly be my fault? I didn’t see you helping the Captain!”

“He let you on this ship! He protected you! And now the gods have finally stricken him down! A woman is a bad omen on a ship, he never should have let you on.” Shouts of agreement rang from the crew.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Basem. If that were the case, this ship would’ve gone down much sooner,” Ismail said.

“Shut up, Ismail! Just like the Captain, you have a soft spot for this wretch! But the Captain’s gone now.”

“That doesn’t put you in charge,” Evander said as he moved to stand next to Odessa.

“Maybe not, but I’m obviously not the only one who feels this way.” Most of the crew moved to stand behind Basem, while the remaining few drew their weapons beside Odessa.

“Are you looking for a fight, Basem? The Captain’s not here to save you this time,” Odessa glared.

With a shout the two sides ran at each other and began an even more gruesome battle than the one they had just fought. For a while, Odessa and her supporters were winning the skirmish. Soon though,

the number of the others became an advantage. Odessa and Evander were the last two fighting on their side, Odessa locked in savage battle with Basem, Evander trying to keep others from attacking her from behind. Suddenly, Evander gave out a yell and fell, clutching the blade protruding from his chest.

Odessa turned to see her comrade fall and screamed in anger. She continued to fight, but twelve against one proved too much.

“Finally. I’m going to do what the captain should’ve done the minute I found you,” Basem said, smiling as he wrapped her in a chain.

“I’ll see you in Hades, Basem.” She spit in his face.

\*

Odessa’s entire body shook in rage. She wanted to hunt down those bastards and make them pay. Her fury was so great that she began to scream. She awoke screaming and cursing Basem, but her voice did not sound the same. It sounded melodic.

“I told you she would be fine.” Odessa heard the same sweet voice she had before. She turned and stared at the most gorgeous girl she had ever seen. Her ebony skin shone, her chestnut eyes sparkled, and her black hair hung in bouncy curls to her chin. Her naked body was more than fitting for Aphrodite.

“What are you?” Odessa said, pulling away. The girl looked too perfect to be mortal.

“What *you* are is more important. I heard you singing while drowning. Only truly vengeful girls can do that.” The beautiful girl seemed to be singing.

“What does that mean?” With a start, Odessa realized that her voice had a similar sound as the girl’s.

“When girls are cast overboard, if they are truly and righteously angry, the gods grant them a gift. A gift to hunt down those who wronged them and others who have been cruel. Once we hunt them down, we can entice them to us with a song and our godly appearance, and then it is dinnertime.” The girl grinned and Odessa noticed her razor sharp teeth.

“Entice them with a song? But that’s -- Are you saying I’m a siren?”

“Yes.”

“Where is my tail then?”

“It comes when your legs become wet.” She splashed some water onto her own legs and they glimmered and merged into a beautiful golden tail.

“Oh... So wait, I can get revenge on those who drowned me?”

“Yes.”

“Then I must be going. I have some hunting to do.”

The girl nodded in understanding. “We’ll be here waiting. By the way, my name is Zula, what is yours?”

“God’s wrath.” Odessa grinned and dove into the water.

## Emily Migliazzo

### Renaissance

The winter moon, large and yellow, is plastered to the night sky. Grey build-up mottles its surface. It sticks there like the nicotine stains on the living room wall.

Maria looks to the moon and remembers when Ansel's teeth had been less stained, his hair more black. In the beginning, he had known all the words and she had loved them all; she'd clung to every sentence.

She walks into the front room. The sofa smells of smoke and beer. Ansel is asleep. The low hum of the TV is matched by his breathing; tonight will again be quiet. The kettle boils. The table is still set for three, waiting for a Lazarus who won't be coming back.

Maria sits down behind one of the plates. She turns the radio louder. The vinyl cushion cracks beneath her.

\*

The lace curtain flutters with a distant laugh carried in by the spring breeze. The air meets the odd family of three at the kitchen table. Ansel holds the fork and knife just above his brother's plate, distracted again by Maria. Her eyes are on Tommy. She worries she isn't good enough to help care for him. Ansel worries that she has been too good. She knows she is an insufficient stand-in for their mother—that this counterfeit parenting has come too soon to their marriage. Tommy

giggles mindlessly. Ansel knows that this is how things go. Tommy has always been the fulcrum and will always need to be. Ansel looks to Maria again, her grace has eaten away at his bitterness. Tommy has not yet eaten away at Ansel's youth.

\*

When she walks into the bedroom, Ansel is already in bed with the light off. The early summer sun still clings to the edges of the blinds. Maria pulls back the covers quietly. He isn't asleep.

"Maria?" he whispers.

"It's been 3 years, Ansel," she says.

"I know."

"I wonder if he would have been any different."

"He never changed, Maria, he was always just Tommy."

"But...maybe."

"No, but we would be." He rolls over, the smoke still clinging to his breath, and lifts his hand to her face. Voice matching the quiver of his hand, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I am not what I should be," he says. In the musty darkness, they remember how to dance.

\*

It's mid-June. The chapel walls are grey. It's been four days and he's still asleep in the box up front. Ansel and Maria sit in the front row, both staring at the ground. Ansel's eulogy feels short and insufficient. There aren't enough words because there hadn't been enough life.

Tommy was 17. They both know that the weight of this failure is heavier than the weight of sudden parenthood. She reaches for Ansel's hand, only to find it limp and clammy. He turns away.

They leave the church. Ansel stops the car at a gas station. He comes back with a new lighter and a pack of cigarettes.

\*

July. Maria leans over the cool white bowl. At first, she thinks this is a result of the beer last night. But it's been 6 weeks now since the 3 year mark of Tommy's death. Things are changing. She tilts her face away from the basin for a moment and has to smile. This is the life they need.

In the living room, the windows are open to the summer heat and Maria can hear the faint tap of keys on Ansel's laptop. There's a half-empty pack of cigarettes in the trash next to the toilet.

That night, when the moon rose, it rose silver and gold.

## **Pam Schierer**

### **Stir**

Breezy sits, scrutinizing the fragmented shapes cast on the cobbled floor by the stained glass windows. She is known by all to be the lively, radiant daughter of Herve Kearns. Her cheery disposition often summons smiles on the faces of those she knows. Herve likes to proudly introduce her to his golf cronies. She ordinarily wears her hair up in sunny curls, because people say it looks nice. Sadly, this is not a normal day. Breezy's hair dangles, listless and still; to her light grey eyes, the once vibrant world is veiled in mist. The beaming daylight and bird songs are out of place in muted tones and slow motion. Perched on the grim wooden pew she wonders, at what point is a gentle breath of air forced to become fearsome wind?

Earlier this morning she retired her once familiar apparel, a floral kaleidoscope of sundresses. She found no black in them, no black in her strappy sandals or flip-flops. Breezy wears a twill buttoned blouse, the shade of night, patterned with small sailboats; its sleeves billow at the elbows and the shoulder seams hang halfway down her thin arms. She has on dark, faded denim shorts that are too wide for her frame and peeking out from the front pocket is a faded, curled corner of hard paper. These are Margot's clothes. Breezy supposed her mother



wouldn't mind, since she no longer needs such things, and also wears her mother's nearly new, black sneakers.

Herve, under the dark, arched entrance of the cathedral, shakes hands as people file in. He is wearing a reasonable black suit with a blank white shirt and a red and blue striped tie. For some reason, Breezy put up a fuss about his tie when she came down to breakfast and sat sulking. He did not understand why she was upset. She sounded like her mother when she said it reminded her of lights. He told her he didn't want to talk about it.

As Herve pats his wife's uncle on the back and hands him a tissue, the priest asks everyone to take their seats. Herve strides to the front to join his daughter, careful to wave and smile at the few visitors he missed in greeting. He slides beside Breezy, glancing up at Reverend Marshall, and tips the corner of the eulogy in his hand as a signal to start. He spreads his arms across the back of the pew and rests a foot casually on his knee, thinking that he enjoyed the Reverend's company very much. For a young man, Marshall had a well-calculated golf swing. He makes a note to himself to remember to invite him to the course later.

The Reverend's voice bounces around in Breezy's head, distracting her. Her memories of Margot are obscured anyway. She remembers her as the feet she once followed, as the hands around her belly, the hands that reached out for her, hands she clutched to her face, the hands that

she hungered for when something hurt. Mostly, she remembers her mother as the voice that she once felt humming against her back, or whispering words from a page.

Margot had been a recluse, but she bestowed herself to her daughter by whispering powerful words, imprinting her hidden storm into the young, pliable wax. Breezy heard the words over goldfish cracker lunches and they soothed her after nightmares. She woke to words every day until recently, and she misses them. She misses the way they would bravely kick the roll of a story and send it unraveling to audacious ends.

Breezy grasps the seat of the pew, knuckles white. As the first notes of a hymn chime to begin the procession, Breezy suddenly flies down the aisle, ahead of the casket, leaving behind a wake of shocked faces. Herve stares after her in surprise and shakes his head, gathers up the papers beside him and waits to follow the casket.

Breezy passes swiftly, a ghost through the courtyard, a ghost down the stairs. Her resolve hardens with each foot-fall. Her sunny hair keeps obstructing her face – she ignores that for now – and she reaches her new car.

Outside the church, Herve resumes his hand shaking.

“Well, where did that girl’s *manners* run off to?” his mother asks, exasperated. She realizes she is interrupting Herve, who hands out

directions to the burial site that he printed the night before. She kisses him on the cheek. “Oh, I’ll give her a talking to later. Never you worry, son.”

Inside the sea-blue four-door, an ivory card hangs suspended in the window. Breezy sits with her face in her hands; her thoughts are of Christmas.

Margot enfolded her in a hug and kissed her on the neck before placing the card on Breezy’s lap. That was their tradition. Margot often left quotes for Breezy in her lunches, by her bed and in her pockets. They were a type of whispered code between mother and child. That Christmas, Margot drew a tortured tree perched on the side of a cliff; the shape of the tree was like a person bent back, terrified, arms shielding her face. The scene was made of millions of tiny black pen points – scattered, gathered and scattered again – on the fibrous ivory paper. On the back in Margot’s lovely script was written:

*They sicken of the calm, who knew the storm. – Dorothy Parker (Fair Weather)*

Breezy recognized the familiar line and as a secretive smile passed between her mother and her, Herve stepped between them.

“That’s pretty, honey.” He nodded to Margot, as if speaking to a child, and dropped the silvery car key in Breezy’s hand.

A storm stirs in Breezy's eyes. She wipes her nose with her hand and turns the key in the ignition.

Beside the white marble mausoleum wall at the grassy cemetery, Herve uncomfortably shifts his feet, thinking of when he first met Margot.

At the college library, a semester before he was awarded his degree in architecture, he approached the slender girl behind the counter at the front desk with her nose in a thick book; she had removed the colorful paper sheath and her long fingers caressed the canvas texture of the hard cover.

"Hello, where would I find books by..." he referred to the yellow note pad in his arm. "Tomas Kempfi?"

He waited patiently as her grey eyes, peeking above the book, calculated him. "Thomas à Kempis," she corrected as she stood. "Philosophy report? You're in over your head." He followed her down the aisles.

Amazed, he ventured, "Could you help me?"

She blinked at him over her shoulder as she made a selection. "To start, you may find Nietzsche more suitable," she advised, handing him a thin book.

At first, the brilliant and puzzling woman exhilarated him. After they were married, he became irritated with the cryptic messages she

would constantly leave for him; little sonnets and rhyming lines in cursive that may as well have been written in Chinese for all he understood them. She would try to explain, but her intensity made him nervous and tired; eventually the notes stopped.

She spent most of her pregnancy in tears or asleep and never joined him for golf, so he stuck to what he knew and built his business. He would have to drag her to parties at the country club, where he networked. He assumed she was enjoying herself with the women, only to be told hours later that she had called a cab home half an hour after their arrival. To avoid exhausting confrontations, he never questioned her reasons. Honestly, Margot's passing came as a relief.

Herve averts his thoughts to the catering and banquet hall arrangements. He squints at his watch, shading it with his hand. His mother assured him they were accustomed to late reservations for funerals, but when he called to confirm with them that morning, there was no answer from either company. He stands, clasping his hands in front of him, until the ceremony is over and the casket, like a drawer, is shut inside the wall. He politely nods and smiles, smiles and nods for the lengthy condolences and apologies from attendees who are unable to join them for the wake. His mother stands at his side.

As Breezy drives along the winding road, the pine trees and gated entrance are a misted smear to her eyes. The car moves automatically, stopping when required and accelerating at a reasonable pace.

The first day she was allowed to drive, Herve had accompanied her in the passenger seat; he said, "If you practice following the rules, you'll get good at it."

"Right! Intrinsic memory," Breezy responded alertly, which made her father chuckle.

"Where did a little girl hear about such a thing?"

"S. J. Watson ... kinda. Mom was saying -"

Squirming in the seat, he said, "Oh. I don't want to talk about that."

Breezy hated hearing that; her father had said it concerning all things Margot, so she learned not to talk about her. What astonished her was the last time he said it.

Their horseshoe driveway was buzzing with uniformed strangers, red and blue lights flashing against the white walls of the house. She was sitting on the front step, trying to behave like a lady and not cry, when she saw the headlights of her father's car. She sprang up and tore through the scene, clinging to him before he had a chance to stand.

"Ladies don't run," he scolded.

"Dad, I tried to call you. Mom -"

He heaved a sigh in her arms. "I don't want to talk about that."

Breezy shuts off the car's engine with a click of the key, at a level turn of the driveway. Inside, she creeps through the airy foyer, as if trying not to wake something from slumber. Her mother seldom left the wide, white house that now echoed; she doesn't remember it doing that before. Though a lovely place, to Breezy, it wore no warmth, nothing of her mother. Its many uncovered windows frame immaculate topiaries, cropped grass and trained trees, kept pristine by paid gardeners. All the tall, flat walls are white. Breezy's recent school photo and Herve's congratulatory collection of plaques and certificates, in beige oak frames, hang precisely in progressive steps up the left side of the angled staircase.

Her father had been very specific with the interior decorator. In the kitchen, he dictated his dislike for busyness and the usual family clutter.

"Neutral you say." The interior decorator clicked her tongue while flipping through swatch books on the reflective marble counter. "How would you feel about a nautical theme?" The question was addressed to Margo, but she had silently left the room.

"Sounds right," Herve chirped. "You like blue, right, Breezy?" His smile lifted his eyebrows.

"Oh you'll love it!" the lady said. "I know some lovely large paintings of beaches. We will set them in prominent locations so that the eye is drawn to the lines in the architecture."

“Well that sounds fine,” Herve declared, righting himself to retrieve the checkbook from his back pocket.

Breezy watches her hand slide up the glossy oak banister, gleaming under the skylight. She stands at the top of the stairs in front of her parents’ paneled double door. She has to start here since it will be the most difficult. She steels herself and pushes it open, leaning in a lunge with both hands. The air within the room, carrying Margot’s faint powdery scent, billows out to her.

The Day went FLICK.

It waited, Breezy knew, like a granite stone in the soft tissues of memory. Little things would jostle its rough edges and reawaken the Day again. The switch would FLICK, and she would watch it, like looking into a can.

Quietly, in case Margot was napping, Breezy’s hand shoved the door open, spreading a diagonal shaft of light in the hall. She saw nothing at first; the bed was made, closets stood stoic to the right, nothing moved in the open bathroom to the left behind the door. The room was still. She turned away to check another room, then perked, hearing – plink – a single drop of water collide with water below. She rounded, pressing the door clear.

Her mother lay serene and pale, her face above the wave-less surface of the full beige tub, her glassed eyes frozen in a placid stare. The silent house filled with the deafening sorrow pouring absently



from Breezy, her face a mask of terror. She found herself at the tub, her arms splashing, wrapping around her mother, creating icy pools on the tiled floor. Margot's blue cotton night dress, once suspended weightlessly around her, clung to her rigid frame in Breezy's arms.

Breezy wipes her tears up the sides of her face with both palms as she clops to her mother's closet. She fumbles in the bookcase which occupies most of the space inside. With deliberate steps she reenters the bedroom and she hiccoughs back her tears angrily, a Sharpie in her fist. With a satisfying – suck POP – sound, the cap drops to the carpet. She begins with the picture at the head of the bed.

“A toast! To Margot, my faithful wife of sixteen years.” Herve raises a plastic cup of chardonnay. “May her memory live on in Breezy... wherever she is.” Half of the tables rumble lightly with jovial laughter.

“Beautiful event, Herve. Everything will be just fine, darling. Keep your head up. You'll see.” His mother pats his shoulder as he sits.

“It's so unlike her to be rude.” He scratches his head, scowling. “But thank you, I think the ceremony went nicely.”

“Well, she does have a little of her mother in her after all. I mean no disrespect to Margot, bless her heart, but she was unwell. You know that.”

“I don't want to talk about that,” he says, applying pressure on the bridge of his nose with two fingers.

“Well, I’ll leave that be. The pink roses looked lovely and the man at the shop was so kind. I’m glad the weather cooperated – and this venue! Now that I know you can plan such a beautiful service, I expect great things when my time comes!” Their shared laughter is interrupted by a staff member tapping Herve on the shoulder, then leaning in to whisper.

“Oh, fine, fine.” Herve nods and stands to cross the room. “Attention please, the buffet is now open. Please form an orderly line, starting here.” He opens his hands, palms out, fingers to his forked feet, in front of the basket of bread rolls.

Breezy pulls her car to a stop against a scuffed sidewalk downtown and glares at the sun beaming through the branches of a pine tree. She reaches up and spins the card in the window.

“Summer’s Fickled Weather, mom.” She feels her face smile for the first time in days.

Breezy slips the faded paper from the front pocket of her mother’s shorts. It was the last thing her mother gave her – she found it tucked in her lunch that Day.

In the picture a sunny-headed baby reaches a puffy hand to touch Margot’s face. Little Breezy’s other hand is flung up in the air. Margot’s shorn hair falls to her cheekbones and she’s gazing into the baby’s eyes, her lips curved in a slight smile. The mother’s hands are wrapped

around her little girl and a book is perched open on her knee. There they sit, frozen in grayscale, in the dappled light beneath a tree. Breezy traces the lines of her mother's familiar cursive, which slides from the top of the frame and ends on her flung-up hand.

*Summer's Fickled Weather (Sarah Kendrick)*

*Breezes*

*Trees gently stir*

*Cloud designs form unmoved*

*Accumulation quickens*

*Whirlwind*

Breezy pockets the photo. She stands, locks the door and looks across the car at the dock. The harbor is peppered with boats. Her grey eyes follow the shape of the land. In the distance, the golf course her father frequents suns its green body, waiting for wealthy men to calculate its curves.

Laughter chimes in the driveway. The fogged, geometric glass on the cedar door darkens before the lock clicks and it swings open.

"He was just st – " Herve stops, staring down at the foyer floor.

His mother draws in an unbelieving breath. "What on Earth?" He lifts his foot as if he has stepped into fire. On the creamy tiles, in careful black cursive is written:

*This level reach of blue is not my sea:*

"Herve, honey, what is this?" His mother steps around the ink. "Oh!" She points, covering her mouth with the other hand. Above the glass car key bowl, the painting of Fiji has written across it:

*Here are sweet waters, pretty in the sun,*

Herve stands on the first stair, beside his proudly displayed diploma on the wall; he puts a finger on it, looking at his mother.

*Whose quiet ripples meet obediently*

Above the marching pictures, up the wall of the staircase in large black script:

*A marked and measured line, one after one.*

*This is no sea of mine. that humbly laves*

His arm is around his mother, bent crying at the top of the staircase; she is first to spot the line written on the hall's natural wood floor:

*Untroubled sands, spread glittering and warm.*

He helps his mother over the words, pushing open his bedroom door.

His mother wails at the bed, piled high with the books from Margot's closet. Above the bed, across the picture of a pink Hawaiian sunset:

*I have need of wilder, crueller waves;*

Herve stomps back into the hall, his mother following. "I put up with this for years with Margot but she *never* made such a fuss! I –" On Breezy's door, the words from the Christmas card:

*They sicken of the calm, who knew the storm.*

He huffs forward, indignantly.

"Herve, honey, her car isn't in the drive. She isn't home."

"I don't care. I am going to take every last book out of this house – today!" His mother nods in agreement, wiping her nose with her embroidered handkerchief. In Breezy's room the words spiral the walls:

*So let a love beat over me again,*

*Loosing its million desperate breakers wide;*

*Sudden and terrible to rise and wane;*

*Roaring the heavens apart; a reckless tide*

*That casts upon the heart, as it recedes,*

*Splinters and spars and dripping, salty weeds.*

Breezy turns on her toe, looks both ways and dashes across the street, her golden hair a sail behind her. The bell above the shop door rings out her entrance.

“Hello, welcome to Quick Cuts. How may I help you?” The smiling woman tilts her head with the practiced greeting.

Breezy retrieves the photo from her pocket and slides it across the counter.

“Yeah, hi. I need a haircut.”

**The Flea**

Chloe Johanssen had broad hips and arms like a bear. She lay sprawled on her back just outside the hallway washroom, every appendage groping toward a different corner of the sparse, bohemian residence. She wore a mauve silk nightgown that I suspected had been purchased years earlier, before it clung to her torso like a shimmery sausage casing. As I approached, I noticed two officers and Mr. Johanssen looming over the dead woman, looking down and discussing something I couldn't discern. Voss Johanssen was an ox-necked hydrant of a man, with thin grey hair and helpless elephant eyes. When I got closer, I elicited the nature of their conversation: Mrs. Johanssen had just finished an early dinner and was in the process of drawing a bath to, as the husband put it, "assist with her digestion." She never made it to the tub, having collapsed in the hallway on her way to fetch some peppermint and caraway tea for her stomach. As I peered into the washroom, I saw that the tub remained full and untouched, cirrus wisps of soap still coating the tepid surface, and the first thing I considered is how the generous form of Mrs. Johanssen would have fit.

My conversation with the three men provided me with several interesting pieces of information, none of which, unfortunately, could help me solve Mrs. Johanssen's cause of death. What I could conclude

was that she was not shot, stabbed, or drowned; nor was she strangled, drugged, or concussed. She had no known allergies, and she got plenty of exercise chopping wood for their stove. I will not bore you with further trivialities of this conversation, other than to share Mr. Johanssen's embarrassing display of boorishness when he referred to his wife as a "carcass." I was fairly content to let the matter rest, but it seemed as if the matter was not ready to lie down just yet.

I had just crossed out the word *asphyxia* in my pad when I felt an irritation on my hand. I looked down and saw a flea perched on the knuckle of my left thumb. At first I thought it was a fleck of ash or coal, but then, as if aware of being discovered, it twitched and vanished, as fleas are prone to doing. I didn't think twice about the insect—why should a flea be of any significance in such a matter? Eventually, after expending my resources, and having determined that the evidence and a solution were not to have an immediate relationship, I decided to cut my losses and dismiss myself from the case. I very nearly forgot all about it, until two days later when I received the call to come take a look at Mr. Johanssen's corpse.

Mr. Johanssen sat upright at the kitchen table, arms resting naturally on the surface in front of him. A half-plate of oysters in the shell sat on the table, next to another plate half-filled with empty shells. The man looked oddly peaceful, lips slightly pursed into a complacent half-smirk, as if he'd just closed his eyes for a mid-meal nap. Whatever



it was that took the poor man, even after exhaustive investigation, we had yet to determine.

I don't know what impelled me to check Mr. Johanssen's pulse. It isn't something I would have ordinarily done, especially considering that his death had already been confirmed twice. I feel obligated to acknowledge this moment, which, looking back, reeks of mischievous fate. Had I not checked the man's pulse, I never would have noticed the familiar fleck of ash on the back of his hand, mere inches from my own. It is perhaps absurd to say I felt a bit conspicuous, as if the flea was somehow aware of my presence; the manner in which it lingered, as I raised and lowered Mr. Johanssen's porcine hand, seemed almost brazen. I cannot say how long I watched the flea, but it likely would have been much longer if one of the officers hadn't approached to accuse me of interfering with police business. My attention was temporarily diverted to defend my actions, and when I turned back a mere moment later, the flea was gone. I figured it would be best keep the incident with the flea to myself and so I left immediately to contemplate the matter over a glass of wine. The last thing I remember hearing before closing the front door behind me was one of the officers saying how the house would now be empty, having been relieved of its only two occupants.

That evening is when I solved the case.

I sat at my desk, attempting to write, for poetry has always been one of my passions, though I can't say I've had much enthusiastic feedback. I remember writing the phrase "...erstwhile pompons adorn a chipped breadbox," when I felt a tickle on the back of my neck. I unconsciously brushed the tickle away, like a horsetail to a fly, and continued to write: "...cracking her crimson knuckles..." The tickle returned, and once again, I instinctively brushed my nails against the spot. Then, before my mind could return to the poem, the incident at the Johanssens' flooded my inner attention. I began to think about the situation more clearly: Mrs. Johanssen and her husband, dead, unknown causes... how the flea persisted. The empty house. Perhaps it is ridiculous to consider the consciousness of a flea, but we cannot be so pompous to know exactly how aware these creatures are—we can only speculate. If the flea was, indeed, aware of me, he must then be aware that the Johanssen house would soon be empty, thus its food source. When one considers the improbable circumstances required for things like solar eclipses and the discovery of Penicillin, it is not so easy to rule out fantastic possibilities in other areas. The empty house, the mysterious deaths, the flea.

I positioned myself before the wall mirror and waited impatiently for the tickle to come back. When I felt the next bite in the same spot on my neck, I turned to the mirror, immediately recognizing the folly of trying to see clearly the back of one's own neck. I couldn't see anything

suspect, other than a small patch of stubble on my jaw that I'd missed during my morning shave. There was no evidence yet that it was the flea that irked my neck, but the idea had already taken root, and I was growing increasingly certain that I was now in danger of suffering the same fate as Mr. and Mrs. Johanssen. And if their meaty physiques could so easily fall to this bite, then my anemic frame was surely at risk. I took a scarf from my winter trunk and wrapped it around my neck. I could only find one of my mittens, which I slipped on. Of course, I realize now that bundling myself up in such a way was a futile comfort, one whose folds and numb fibers left me even more susceptible to the flea's treachery.

You might be thinking my best course of action would have been to leave my apartment and find a bath house or similar place of cleansing, but I assure you, with a creature as clever as this, it would have been no more effective than taking a stroll in a leper's clothes. There was no way to know if the flea was with me, calculating its attack, or if it would be waiting for me to return home. I would have to sleep sooner or later. I gauged that this was my primary conundrum—I was no doubt capable of staying awake for a day or three perhaps, but the bug would certainly outlast me in the end, as I wagered that such creatures require considerably less sleep than members of our species. No, I could not escape the beast, so I would have to find a way to outsmart it.

I came upon a box of Peruvian incense that had been given to me by a former client, and decided that insects should be averse to all things smoky, which would afford me some time to fabricate a more rigorous defense. As I sought a match, the top of my scalp developed an itch. How irresponsible of me! My attempts at ingenuity were washed out by the obvious—my hair, though not as lush as I would have liked, provided nothing less than a sanctuary for my nemesis. I would have to take preventative measures without hesitation.

Shaving one's head with a straight edge razor is an arduous task, one which requires experience that I evidently do not possess. Nevertheless, I was able to rid myself of my hair with minimal superficial nicks. The difficulty, however, was not with my scalp, but with the numerous itches I felt along my back and shoulders during the process. I became so distraught that I abandoned my clothes altogether, prepared to strike at whatever lint or freckle that dared trespass upon my body. Only once did I lash out thoughtlessly at a fleck on my thigh. It was unfortunately with my razor hand, and though I did not sever any vital muscles or tendons, I drew more than a fair amount of blood. I sopped up the blood with a dry washcloth and was able to apply a sterile bandage to the wound. As I prepared to dispose of the cloth, I realized that my defensive strategy had been a mistake. As Sun Tzu states in *The Art of War*: "Hold out baits to entice the enemy, feign disorder, and crush him."

I wrung the bloody washcloth into a small dish—a white one so that the liquid bait would be easily visible—and set the dish in a place where I thought the flea would most likely feel most relaxed: the bedroom. I placed the saucer of blood on the nightstand next to the bed, then crawled up onto the window sill and braced myself against the frame. My eyes locked in on the dish, anxiously awaiting the slightest ripple in the red. It did not occur to me that I was still stripped naked, and that my neighbors, if they should by chance peer up at my window, might not understand the nature of my dilemma. This thought was interrupted when I felt an itch in the pit of my arm. I instinctively released the opposite hand from the window frame, which caused me to topple from the sill like a sack of flour. My head cracked against the nightstand, spilling the saucer of blood on my face and neck. I knew I was injured—my head reeled from the blow—but I also knew that to close my eyes and submit was not an option. Another itch on the back of my arm delivered a much-needed dose of adrenaline, and I swatted the invisible menace away and steeled myself for survival. After pulling myself to my feet, I thought about the veritable feast of blood that covered me, and recognized how only a scavenger would feed from such a source. And even if this flea was a bottom-feeder, it was certainly too astute to succumb to such elementary tactics. Seeing as I could not lure the flea with stagnant water, so I would have to find a way to poison the well.

The absinthe was a wonderful 1849 *Pernod Fils* that I had bought at auction a few years before. Fortunately, I still had a little over half the bottle left. In the kitchen, I dropped and broke one glass after tending an itch in the crook of my knee, but then managed to procure a second glass without incident. The first taste was beautiful, and I allowed myself to savor it as it was meant to be. But then I asserted myself and poured a more potent dose, which I choked down as gracefully as I could manage. After sweeping the broken glass to a safer corner of the room, I began to feel the magnificent effects of the liquor. I knew that if I was to have enough in my blood to affect the flea, I could not tiptoe into it—I must charge while my motor functions were still intact. I poured two more, increasingly healthy drinks, and soon thereafter decided it would be prudent to stash all of my clothes and bedding in the corner of the living room. I then burned the last of the Peruvian incense and cleansed myself with Witch Hazel and lemon juice. I had forgotten my freshly shaved scalp, and the searing pain across my skull awakened my nerves and stimulated my circulation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the preventative measures were not successful. Not four minutes later, a bite in the middle of my back caused me such a panic that I scraped several healthy layers of flesh trying to get at it with a wire bush I typically used for removing rust from the bannister. You might wonder why I still resisted, now that my blood was adequately tainted? To err on the side of caution, I suppose,

as it occurred to me that there was no telling what affect the absinthe would actually have on the insect. It has caused violence amidst the most reasonable of men—I supposed that it might only escalate my dilemma. After swiping away yet another attack on my clavicle, I could see that, as long as I was the only warm blooded creature on the premises, no amount of delay would protect me.

I took another long tug on the absinthe and withdrew a box of fireplace matches from the pantry. I then sat myself next to the window, waiting for any passers-by on the street below. It was already fairly late, but the Gourd Festival was in town, which always kept a few good people out later than usual. I maintained my watchful post at the window, brandishing a lit match at all times in case the flea chose to come at me. I burned a forearm, and a fair amount of calf before the young man in the camel hair coat appeared below from around the corner.

I opened the window and called down to the man, waving the absinthe bottle out in front of me as a gesture of goodwill. He did not seem to understand my slurred, fractured speech, and kept walking. I was not prepared to let this tribute get away, so I hurried out the front door, down the apartment stairs, and sprinted along the street after the man.

There was no one else on the streets at this hour, and all the neighboring apartment windows were dark. It only took me about

fifteen seconds to catch up to the camel coat. I cannot imagine what went through his mind as he turned around and saw a bald, naked man with skin wounds, sprinting directly at him, waving a nearly empty bottle of absinthe. I cracked his skull with the initial blow of the bottle, and he collapsed to the ground in a graceless heap. Without heed, I hoisted him up over my shoulder and carted him back toward my flat. I considered donning the coat myself—it was an extraordinary specimen—but I then figured the coat would serve best to keep the tribute warm and delectable.

I made it back to my apartment without incident and dropped the body onto the entryway floor. There was a small stream of blood coming from the side of the man's head, which I swathed with a hand towel—not one of my nicer ones—so he would not bleed out. I laid him on his back in front of the mountain of clothes and linens, which I had mentally and emotionally determined was my shrine to the flea. The offering, I was convinced, was irresistible, and would keep me in good favor. There was a moment where the man began to stir, but a swat against the forehead with the back of the wire brush remedied that nonsense. I felt another itch on the back of my neck, and I took it as a sign that I must act quickly.

I spread the man's arms, peeled off the camel hair coat, and opened his shirt to bare his chest. I also pulled his high collar down so the man's succulent jugular vein was exposed. Finally, I cut the man's



sleeves with a knife to offer his arms. Content with the presentation, I backed away and hunkered down in the corner of the room and waited for the beast to claim its sacrifice.

For several minutes nothing happened. My keen eyesight would have picked up the slightest fleck on the body, but there was none. I began to get a little anxious, as no doubt the body was cooling, and I was well aware of the flea's disregard for carrion. My anxiety rapidly turned to impatience, and impatience to resentment. This specimen I had provided was every bit as toothsome as I, and yet— Another bite along my shoulder blade severed my thoughts and prompted me to do what any willful and rational-minded individual would do to stimulate the intended response: I would have to lead by example.

The police burst through my door at around six thirty in the morning. They tackled me rather roughly and expressed a blatantly premeditated hostility against me. In hindsight, I suppose it was the appropriate response to finding me sprawled on the floor naked, chewing on my incapacitated guest's throat. Evidently, another passerby returning from the Gourd Festival stumbled upon the broken absinthe bottle and a trail of blood leading from the street up to my flat. I tried to explain the situation, warning the officers as best I could in the scuffle that I had solved the Johanssen case, and that they were entering a volatile arena. I also addressed my unorthodox behavior, clarifying that it was merely a prelude to something ultimately more sacred. They

had little to say about the case or the flea, and seemed intent on dragging me out of my home and bringing me here.

That was nine hundred twelve days ago—as you can see, my mind is as keen as ever, though it seems the powers that be have rescinded my sleuthing privileges. I am, however, allowed to read the newspaper, which is how I learned that the Johanssens died from something called *anaphylaxis* caused by a fatal allergy to the oysters. That's what the coroner said, at least, but I remain skeptical. To this day, I still feel the sporadic, bite-like itches on different parts of my body, as if the flea is still here, trying to tell me something. Perhaps someday I will understand what it is. Now, if you will excuse me, visiting hours are almost over, and it's nearly time for my medication.

**Colton Miller**

## **The Lonely Death of Luke Davis**

My younger brother Luke is dead. His body was found this morning, but it still isn't clear when he died exactly. Or how he died.

We haven't spoken in fifteen years. The last time, if I remember correctly, was at his college graduation. Maybe I should've reached out to him. Maybe he should've reached out to me. But it doesn't matter anymore.

My phone rings.

It's Mom. I had already spoken to her about it. His body was found at work, and I guess she was his emergency contact or something.

I don't want to answer it, but I do. "Hi."

"Hi Honey, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine, you?"

"You know... It's been a rough day. But I need you to do something for me." I can hear her voice cracking from emotion, even though I know she's trying to hide it from me.

"Sure."

"Can you find out where he lived? He was using our house as his permanent address, the one on his license, but can you find out more, can you find out where he lived?"

"Yeah," I say. "I will."

“Thank you. We’ll be in California late tomorrow night to ID the body... But I just wanted you to go there before the police do, or whoever does those things. Before they tear the place apart. Just to see if there’s anything that needs taking care of.”

“Sure.”

“Thank you,” she says. “I love you.”

“You too.”

“Talk soon, bye.”

“Bye.”

I hang up.

After a six hour drive, I’m in the town that Luke called home. Until the cops or coroner or whoever let Mom know where his body was found, we didn’t even know he lived here, let alone lived on the coast. I thought he was always a city-type of kid, but I guess that just goes to show how little I knew him. How little *we* knew him.

This salty and seagull-shit covered town reminds me of Rhiannon. We spent a weekend in a coastal town like this once. But that was a long time ago. I wonder if she ever moved to a town like this like she said she was going to do one day. Possibly. She’d like the view of the ocean on her drive home from work.

I make a quick stop at a gas station and then a liquor store across the street, where I get a bottle of rum and a two-liter of Coke.

I drink myself to sleep in the hotel room while a rerun of *The Simpsons* glows over me.

The next morning, I wash away the booze in the shower and head to the library where Luke worked in acquisitions.

I walk up to the girl at the front desk who stops what she's doing to assist me.

"Can I speak with the library director?" I ask with a raging headache, each word a painful pulse.

"Um, I can check. Mind if I get your name?"

"Mike Davis. I'm Luke Davis's brother."

The reaction on her face reveals that this is a touchy subject. It's something they're not fully comfortable with. That doesn't surprise me.

"We're so sorry for your loss," the library director tells me as I sit down in the chair in her office.

"Thanks," I say.

"If there's anything I can do--"

"I'd like to see his office."

"Of course."

"And do you have his address? The one on his driver's license is our parents' address."

"Unfortunately, that's the same we have. He never gave HR a different address. Seemed like a very private guy."

"Yeah."

“Well, let me show you the office,” she says, standing up.

“How come you didn’t notice he was dead for so fucking long?” As soon as I say it, she sits back down.

“Uh--” she stammers. I’ve caught her way off guard. I offended her.

She squirms in her seat and I can tell she feels guilty. But she goes on the defensive to explain herself. “Well, he was never one to talk. He spent most of his time alone in his office, and as you can see,” she points to his office door across the hall, “he had blocked the window on his door with posters, and we couldn’t see inside, or even see if the light was on or off.”

“But it had been many many days,” I remind her, even though she obviously doesn’t need reminding.

“Yes. But there were many times that we went days without seeing him. He came in early and went home late. We rarely saw him... He did great work for us. We all liked him. It’s a sad day for all of us.” The compliments irritate me.

“No one asked about him? No girlfriends, friends, other family?”

“No... I think he was a solitary guy.” She gives me a look like, *You’re his brother, how come you don’t know if he had any friends?*

“When’d you finally realize he was dead?”

She hesitates, not sure if she should give me the details. “It wasn’t until we came in yesterday morning, and it had been after the weekend,

and there was a.... smell. So we called security and they unlocked his office door and there he was..."

"I guess I've heard enough. Can I see his office now?"

She rips off the CAUTION tape and unlocks his door. I brace for a lingering stench of a decaying body, but there's nothing. I guess the custodians did a good job...

I spend the next ten minutes rummaging around the office before I find a piece of personal mail on his desk under a stack of books. It's an unsent letter from him, but what I really care about is his return address in the upper left corner. There's nothing else of importance or interest to me.

I don't bother saying goodbye to the library director as I let myself out.

I don't drive right to his apartment either. I stop at a local pub for a rum and coke. Or two.

At his apartment's leasing office, I inform them that I need the key to his apartment. I find it rather difficult, since I have no proof he's dead, and no proof that I'm family. But I finally get the key after I yell in the property manager's face.

When I get to his apartment door, there isn't any caution tape or anything like that. It's been less than a day since his body was discovered, so I guess whoever goes to dead people's houses hasn't

come yet. I don't know how all that logistical and legal shit works. Mom was the one who talked to the cops anyway.

I open the door, bracing myself for whatever I might find in his apartment. I walk into a stale and dark room and close the door behind me. Despite being high noon, I can't see anything. A rim of light outlines the drawn shades and closed curtains.

I fumble for the light switch and flick it on. It's a modest one-bedroom apartment. There isn't anything too unusual. Couch, TV, desk, laptop. A coffee table strewn with books. Some artwork on the walls, probably local artists. A few movie posters too. A treadmill, now just a laundry rack with pants and jackets draped over it.

There's a bookcase on the wall opposite the front door. History books and novels pack the shelves. A lot of coming-of-age young adult books in particular, which I find interesting. I wouldn't think he was a fan. *Catcher in the Rye*, sure, but not the recently released YA shit.

There's a framed photograph on one of the bookshelves. It's our family. I don't bother taking a closer look. I don't need the memories.

I move to the kitchen next. There's a pile of dirty, crusty dishes in the sink from, presumably, his last breakfast.

On the floor next to the fridge is a cat food dispenser. But it's empty. Just a few crumbs.

Oh fuck. I'm gonna find some starved-to-death cat in his bedroom.



Then I look around, and realize I missed the clues when I first walked in. There's a scratching post next to his desk, a basket of catnip toys next to the TV, and a cat bed in the corner near the sliding door to his patio. I hadn't noticed any of it. But no sign of the cat.

I check the fridge. It's more depressing than I would've thought. There's a half-finished 48-pack of beer taking up an entire shelf, an old milk, some packs of cheese and deli turkey, and a jar of pickles. That's it. Besides the six rows of ten-high stacks of canned cat food on the bottom shelf. I don't know anything about cats but this cat food looks legit; it's none of that Meow Mix crap. Overall, it looks like the cat ate better than Luke did.

I check the bathroom in the hallway and see nothing of importance except for a litter box. Besides the smell of shit and piss from the dirty litter box, no sign of the cat.

In the bedroom, no cat, just an unmade bed, a pile of clothes on the floor, and a dresser. But on the dresser is a pile of letters and books.

The book is a paperback novel. A young adult novel called *When the Tides Change* by Kate Brown. The cover has a picture of a girl walking on the beach, a trail of sunken footprints behind her. I flip the book over and read the back. Basically, it's about this girl who comes from a troubled home in a small town and goes off to college and comes back for Christmas vacation, having grown and changed. I find it odd that Luke would like something like this. Too fucking cheesy for my taste.

I take a look at the papers all over the top of the dresser. They're letters. To and from Kate Brown. I do a double-take and realize the letters are to the writer of the YA book. At first I think it's stalker fan mail, but then I see that Kate has written him back. Many times. I skim one of the letters and it becomes clear that Kate and Luke actually knew each other, they had met in person. And their relationship was more than just pen pals.

Now curious, I look at the book again. There's a picture of her and a short bio. She's pictured standing in front of an apple tree. She's pretty, her long brown hair cascading over a red long-sleeve shirt. The author's bio tells me that she grew up in Pennsylvania and lives there with her two dogs. No other interesting information. You'd think that all these authors who make shit up for a living could have a better bio on the back of their book.

I skim another of the letters from the top of the pile and learn that Kate had booked an airplane ticket to come out here in a few weeks to see him.

I remember the unsent letter from Luke's office. I pull it out of my pocket and see that it's addressed to Kate. The name hadn't meant anything to me when I found it in his office. Damn, he was probably going to mail her this letter days ago, but he died before he could mail it. I almost open it, curious to see what he wrote to her, but then decide not to.

Kate probably has no idea that Luke is dead. She's probably still planning on seeing him in a few weeks. I'll make Mom contact her. I'd rather deal with a dead cat.

Which reminds me, where the fuck is this cat? I look all around the apartment. In the closets, in the shower, behind the dresser, under his desk. Then finally under the bed. I use the light from my phone's screen to look around. Underneath the bed is a mess: old clothes, suitcases, old yellow-faded receipts.

I keep shining the light from my phone around under the bed until a pair of tiny eyes stares back at me. The light from my phone reflects off the cat's eyes with a green shimmer.

I reach out to pet it but it backs away. It cowers behind a pair of ratty old jeans.

I give up on trying to ease it out from under the bed and go straight to the kitchen, open the fridge, and pull out one of the cans of cat food.

I grab a plate and open the can, which has probably at least two servings, but dump it all on the plate and set it down on the kitchen floor.

I peek around the corner, careful to not spook the cat. The cat's peeking right back at me. In the light of the living room I can see that it's an orange tabby. It kinda looks like it's a male, but I don't know shit about cats.

The cat eventually walks over to me, cautious. As it walks closer to me and the food, I see how skinny it is. It hasn't eaten in days.

The cat approaches the plate of food and once it's more or less comfortable with me being there, it leans down and starts to eat. As it licks up its food, it begins to purr.

I get down on my knees and pet it as it eats. I run my hand down its back. I feel its vibrating purrs, but mostly I feel its spine and ribs. I continue to run my hand down its orange striped coat. Its tail stands straight up in joy.

I reach down and slide its collar around so I can see its tag.

On one side it has Luke's name and phone number. Then I flip it over and almost drop to the floor.

His name is Walter.

The memories flood back to me. Those memories that I never actually forgot, but the memories that I pushed away. The life from which I was so detached. It all comes back. All of it.

*Luke and I are walking in the park near our house. It's summer. Every day we go to the playground across the street. We push each other on the swing and play tag or king of the hill with the other kids.*

*But one day as we're walking home, we find a cat. It's sitting in the street, its paw bloody. I run over and pick it up. It's an orange tabby kitten. It yowls at me in pain.*

*"It's hurt!" I yell to Luke.*

*I run home with the cat in my arms, Luke right behind me.*

*"Mom, can we keep the kitty?" Luke asks her as he takes a bite out of his PB&J. The cat was doing okay. Mom helped mend its paw with the help of the local vet. The vet told my mom it was probably a stray. And since no one had come looking for it and it didn't have any identification, the vet told my mom we could keep it. If we wanted to, of course.*

*"Can we keep it?!" Luke asks Mom.*

*"Maybe honey. Does Michael want a kitty?"*

*"Yes duh!" I say.*

*"Will you take care of it?"*

*"Yes!" We both promise.*

*"His name is Walter!" I exclaim.*

*"Yeah, Walter!" says Luke.*

*"Boys, it's a girl, you can't name her Walter!"*

*We all laugh. Eventually we settle on Annie. I don't remember why.*

*Luke and I raise Annie all by ourselves. She's our project, the thing we bond over, the thing we care about, the way we spend our time after school.*

*Annie lives for ten more years until we're in high school. Mom has to put her down one winter when she stops eating altogether. I don't go to the vet when they do it. I'm too busy hanging out with friends getting drunk and stoned at the lake near our high school. Luke doesn't talk to me that night when they get back from the vet.*

*Mom suggests we get another cat, a boy, and name him Walter since that was the name we came up with so long ago when we thought Annie was a boy. Luke wants to get another cat, but I don't. So we never do. We finish high school and go to different colleges. I graduate first, move to LA, come home for his graduation, and then never talk to him again. He never talks to me either. I don't know what happened.*

*But he did get the cat. He got our Walter...*

Walter is still purring as I snap out of my unwanted memories.

I leave Walter to finish eating his food as I go back to Luke's living room. I sit at his desk, in his torn up old leather office chair. I grab a piece of blank paper and write to Kate. I tell her who I am and what happened.

Then I write everything that I should have said to Luke over the years. My hand hurts by the time I'm done writing.

I place my letter in a manila envelope along with Luke's unsent letter for her.

As I sit back and think, I'm interrupted when Walter jumps in my lap, purring and nuzzling. I pet him some more. He's comfortable with me now, but I wonder if he's curious where Luke is.

After Walter jumps off my lap to use the litter box I look around Luke's apartment. I find the cat carrier on the top shelf of his closet.

I grab the envelope with the letters to Kate and collect a few of Walter's cat toys and the cans of cat food from the fridge.

Walter doesn't put up a fight when I put him in the carrier. He just purrs the entire time.

After locking up Luke's apartment and heading outside, I drop the envelope for Kate in the mailbox in the parking lot.

As I walk towards my car, Walter looks up through the holes in the roof of his carrier and meows at me.

I think we'll be okay.

## **The Strange Chronicles of Francis Conney**

*Ortonville Independent* (Weekly Newspaper) Archive: “Inside the splintered wooden boxcar, the naked body of a teenage boy was identified by a partial fingerprint. The boy’s head was not found. Two black dogs were also found near the body; both had to be euthanized.”

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Every Halloween takes me back to the strange life and times of Francis Conney. It was my opinion that Francis wasn’t missing just a few cards from his deck; he was probably missing an entire suit.

My first close-up encounter with him happened on a cool fall afternoon in 1959. Thankfully I was with my 87 year-old grandfather. I was nine years old; Francis was probably a few years older. My mom had sent me out to my grandfather with a fresh thermos of coffee and a crunchy cucumber sandwich. She made one for me, too. He was plowing a freshly harvested 100-acre wheat field in the northeast corner of our farm, near the farmstead the Conney family rented.

After eating our sandwiches, my grandfather invited me to ride along with him for one trip around the field. Behind our big green and yellow 720 John Deere diesel tractor was a 4-bottom moldboard plow.

Plowing was our most dramatic and romantic farming activity. I will never forget the deep earthy smell and sight of fresh black dirt and



its stark contrast against the field's golden grain stubble. Mixed with the fragrant smell of diesel fumes, big bright white seagulls would appear out of nowhere to feast on long, transparent earthworms exposed behind us in the freshly turned soil.

I remember my grandfather was wearing faded, blue-striped bib overalls under a felt-lined tan cloth coat and a tattered, broad-brimmed straw hat with a quarter moon piece of transparent green plastic sewn into the front brim. He also always wore orange-colored soft cotton work gloves. He was not a big man and at his age, he wasn't getting any bigger.

I was riding on the tractor's right fender when we noticed Francis purposefully striding through the golden grain stubble on a diagonal line that would intercept us. Behind Francis, in single file, were his dogs; seven assorted mangy black mongrels. He must have been the only one to feed and care for them, for they were like his disciples, totally devoted to Francis.

When Francis stepped directly into the fresh black plowed furrow we were following, my grandfather was forced to abruptly step on the clutch. The big tractor and plow jerked to an immediate stop and I had to grab a handhold in the fender to prevent being thrown forward and off the tractor. We sat there for a few seconds staring down at Francis, his eyes *always* cast downward.

Francis was thin and looked to be just a bit taller than me. He never wore a hat. He had dark hair, *probably* dark eyes and wore dark clothes. He was Gothic before that genre was invented.

My grandfather took the tractor out of gear and moved the throttle lever to idle. He spoke sternly, "Stay here and don't get down." He stood up slowly from the tractor seat and carefully climbed down to see what Francis wanted.

From my perch on the rear fender, I could see Francis saying something. My grandfather's back was to me and I don't think he said anything. My grandfather turned away from Francis, grabbed the tractor handholds, and carefully putting his feet in several steel footsteps he pulled himself back up and sat down heavily in the tractor's big yellow seat. "What did he say?" I asked.

The tractor's big diesel engine continued to rumble at a slow idle. I watched Francis turn and march away, never looking back. My grandfather didn't speak for a few more seconds, then said in disbelief, "Francis said he would *kill* me if he ever caught me out in this field again."

I thought, *That doesn't make any sense. This is our field.*

But, that was Francis.

I remember thinking about how Francis might carry out this death threat. *It would probably involve his mangy posse.*

My second and last close-up encounter with Francis was even more bizarre. It was also my first encounter with a warped criminal mind. It was about 6:30 one summer's evening and my dad had just finished milking our eighteen Holstein dairy cows. He was walking from the dairy barn toward our farmhouse when he spotted Francis, nude and heading down our driveway, pedaling my little black bicycle for all he was worth.

I was just coming out our front porch screen door when I saw my dad start to sprint. My dad chased Francis, catching him about halfway down our tree shaded gravel driveway. Out of breath and holding Francis firmly by one arm my dad asked, "What in the Sam Hill are you doing, and where are your clothes?" Francis said, matter-of-factly, "They are behind your house."

Sure enough, they were. Eyes down he begrudgingly traipsed back to our back door, where we found his clothes in a pile. In silence, Francis slowly dressed, and then left walking dejectedly down our long gravel driveway in the fading evening light.

I was happy. My bike, "Little Blackie," had been saved. But I couldn't help thinking, *What made Francis decide to take off all his clothes?* Maybe he thought he'd be faster that way.

The third time I saw Francis, I was walking on our gravel county road the one-half mile to Grant Center No. 1; our one-room, one-

teacher, country school. I was carrying my dark blue metal lunch box. Inside was a Wonder Bread sandwich (with a slice of the local Flannery's Sausage Company bratwurst and several crispy leaves of iceberg lettuce), a small plastic bag of Old Mill potato chips and two of my mom's homemade chocolate chip cookies.

About half way to the schoolhouse, I picked up an interesting rock to throw at something and casually glanced to my left, across the Whetstone creek, into Harold Berger's cow pasture. That's when I spotted Francis. He and his dogs were slightly behind and walking parallel to me on the other side of the creek. The seven mangy dogs were in their usual position; strung out in single-file behind Francis. The biggest dog had a gimpy rear leg and was limping along, right behind him.

A deep shiver and cold chill ran up my spine, even though it was a warm sunny morning in mid-May. The Whetstone creek was running high with ice cold spring snow melt, so for that moment I felt safe from Francis and his posse. The trouble was, the creek crossed the road about a quarter of a mile in front of me, flowing under a one-lane wooden bridge about 200 yards before the relative safety of the schoolyard. He could cut me off there. I remembered his death threat to my grandfather.

I wished I was riding Little Blackie, but I wasn't. My only chance was to run. Luckily, I was wearing a new pair of black high-top Keds. I

took one more look over at Francis and decided it was time to act. I took off running. I was tempted to drop my lunch box, its handle clattering in my left hand, but I loved bratwurst sandwiches.

I beat Francis to the wooden bridge by about 100 feet and kept on running. To get out of the pasture, Francis had to stop and crawl under a four-strand barbed wire fence, so I knew I was safe. I kept on running down from the gravel road, down into a grass filled ditch, up into the schoolyard and toward the schoolhouse. When I looked back, Francis had already turned around and was slowly ambling back down the gravel road toward the bridge. For whatever reason, Francis never did attend school.

I shivered to think what Francis and his dogs would have done to me. As I caught my breath, my thoughts slowly turned to our teacher, Miss Deagel, who I had a crush on, the school bully (eighth grader Donny Trapp) and the school day ahead. When school got out at 3:30 I looked around for any sign of Francis and kept my eyes peeled all the way home.

The next Francis Conney adventure didn't occur until seven months later. One night about 8:30, during a howling December blizzard, our party-line phone rang. It was Margaret Stengel calling to report the Conney's house was on fire. She had already called the fire

department in Milbank, so they were on their way out from town. My dad decided we should drive over to the Conney family and help.

My mom, dad and I piled into our 1956 red-finned Plymouth two-door sedan and started out. We turned north out of our driveway, but didn't get too far. Amazingly, even with sub-zero temperatures, the snow blowing horizontally was so thick that it completely clogged the fins of our car's radiator, causing the engine to overheat and stall. Abandoning our disabled car and using a weak flashlight, we started back to our farmstead, my parents on either side of me, each holding one of my mitten covered hands. "Hold on tight!" my dad warned.

We could just barely make out the power and telephone poles on either side of the snow-covered road. My parents used them to stay in the middle of the road. It was a near whiteout on a pitch-black night. We could see a red glow in the direction of the Conney's farmstead.

The wind was blowing so hard that, several times, I was blown completely off my rubber overshoe booted feet, swinging in mid-air between my parents. But we made it back to our driveway, from where we could see the red flashing lights of the fire truck, stuck in the deep snow about a quarter mile down the road. My dad had a front-mounted Farmhand loader on our John Deere diesel tractor, so he grabbed several log chains from our tool shed and, using some ether starting fluid, got the frozen tractor running and headed off to rescue the fire truck.

About that time our Ottertail Rural Electric power failed, leaving my mom and I huddled in the farmhouse around the dim yellow glow of a kerosene lantern, listening on the telephone party-line for any news updates.

My dad succeeded in dragging the fire truck one and a half miles to the Conney farmstead, but it was too late. Their rented house had burned down to the concrete basement foundation. The Conney family, including Francis and his dogs, escaped unharmed. Rumor had it that Francis had set the fire to smoke a cat out of their basement.

There was no sign of Francis until the next fall. I had almost forgotten about him.

It was October 30<sup>th</sup>, the day of our Halloween party at school. About 3 o' clock Miss Deagel announced the end of the regular school day and said, "The eighth graders have prepared some surprises for us down in the basement." Eighth graders blindfolded us and individually led us down the rickety wooden steps. The first thing we encountered were a series of coarse burlap potato sacks cut into long strips, suspended and spaced out, so they brushed against the top of our heads. We were told these were thick cobwebs filled with big black spiders. Then our hands were guided into a big steel bowl of slimy cold spaghetti, which we were told were the brains of a werewolf. Finally our blindfolds were removed and we had fun bobbing for red

Macintosh apples in a big, water-filled metal tub and playing Dodge ball in the dusty basement.

The party ended late, around 4:30, and it was already starting to get dark outside. A big orange harvest moon was just beginning to peek over the northeast horizon as I started walking toward home. By the time I reached the wooden bridge, the north wind was getting cold. I started walking faster. Our fenced in cow pasture bordered the south side of our long driveway. Just as I reached the corner post of the pasture, I heard dogs barking in the distance, behind and to my left.

I stopped and turned to look back over my left shoulder. There about a football field away, coming through Todd Koch's freshly harvested cornfield, was Francis's pack of dogs racing toward me with Francis bringing up the rear. The dogs were struggling and being slowed down by the thick parallel rows of beaten down corn stalks, but I was in big trouble and made a split second decision. There wasn't enough time to get down the road to our driveway, so I decided to cut diagonally across the pasture to intersect it, which meant going down the grassy ditch and having to cross two separate fence lines.

I threw down my empty blue lunch pail and started to run like I'd never run before.

At the bottom of the grassy ditch I got down on the ground and rolled sideways under the bottom strand of barbed wire fence. I stood back up and had begun sprinting toward the other fence line when I



heard the first dog's feet scratching across the gravel road and heading down into the ditch I had just crossed. I yelled out at the top of my lungs, "HELP! HELP!" I was only 100 yards from our farmyard and prayed that my dad would be there to save me.

Our cows had eaten the pasture grass short, so I was making good progress. I was almost to the opposite fence line when I stepped into a fresh badger hole and tripped. Falling forward, ass-over-teakettle, I tumbled to the ground and could sense that the dogs were almost upon me. I covered my head with my hands, tucking myself into a ball, and waited for the inevitable.

Then I heard the sharp yelp of a dog, the heavy sound of hoofs and another high-pitched yelp. I could feel and smell fresh dirt and grass flying through the air around me. I opened my eyes just enough to see a blur of brownish red, white and black. I crawled like a banshee-on-fire to the fence line, rolling under the bottom strand. I stood up and ran straight into my dad's arms.

As he held me close I started to sob and looked back to see what had saved me. There in the pasture, spinning like a whirling dervish with his reddish brown tail flying straight-out behind him, was our big white-faced Hereford bull, Ralphie. His huge, broad white head and his two big downward-curved ivory-colored horns were knocking dogs completely off their feet. One dog was being trampled under his sharp

hoofs and several others were standing well back from Ralphie's spinning circle of death and destruction.

Francis was standing on the gravel road calmly watching the mayhem. Except for the one gimpy dog Ralphie trampled to death, the other dogs escaped, retreating back to him.

I realized I owed my life to Ralphie.

Ralphie was normally a very gentle giant. I remember we used to lead him from pasture to pasture by walking in front of him with a thin twine string wrapped around his horns. But that Halloween eve we realized that Ralphie wasn't actually intent on saving me; he just hated dogs.

After we got home my dad called the sheriff and promised that Francis would never bother me again. Soon after that, the Conney family moved to Ortonville, Minnesota, about 20 miles away.

The next spring I read in the *Grant County Review* that a tornado had hit the rail line at the east end of Ortonville. Boxcars were hurled like toys high into the air. A black and white picture showed a pile of smashed boxcars. One death was reported.

## Russell Swartz

### Waiting

He stood under the green awning of Dave's Liquor and checked his watch. A car pulled up and he watched the grey-haired woman inside climb out and throw open a green umbrella. The rain pattered off it.

"Morning, Marge," he said.

She walked over to him and stepped over the puddle in front of the curb and folded the umbrella neatly and set it against the wall, under a painted sign selling haircuts.

"Morning, Robert."

"You're home early."

She fumbled in her purse.

"They sent me home," she said. She pulled out a golden box of Benson and Hedges and took one out. "Caught me smoking."

"You can't smoke at the Center?"

She found a lighter and lit the cigarette and drew on it.

"Nope," she said.

"Huh."

"World's a bitch like that."

They stood in silence. Marge finished her cigarette and tossed it on the ground.

"Bob's dead," she said.

Robert shook his head.

“Christ,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Idiot drove off a bridge.”

“While you were at the Center?”

“Yeah.”

“Christ,” he said.

Another car pulled up, bright-red and glossy with rain. A man in a suit opened the door and walked under the awning.

“Morning, Robert,” he said.

Robert nodded.

“Morning, Tim.”

Tim smiled.

“You’re home early, Marge.”

Marge nodded.

“They get you for smoking?” Tim asked. Marge nodded.

“What a shit rule,” he said. They all nodded.

Tim stuck his hand in a jacket pocket and pulled out a crumpled softpack. He tapped a cigarette into his palm and offered it forward.

“Smoke?”

Robert took it and Tim found a scarred Zippo and held it to the tip of the cigarette until it glowed and withered. Robert took a drag and Tim lit his own.

“Thanks,” Robert said. “How’s life?”

“Good,” said Tim. “The wife kicked me out last week.”

“Sorry to hear that,” said Marge. “Where are you sleeping now?”

“Hotel Montreal.”

“How’s the bar?” asked Robert.

“Good.” Tim took a drag. “Half-price rail drinks between three and six. You should stop by some time.”

“Maybe I will,” said Marge.

Tim took another drag. “How’s life, Marge?”

“Same,” she said. She lit another cigarette and blew out smoke. It vanished into the rain. “Bob’s died last week.”

“Hell,” Tim said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she said. “Wasn’t your idiot kid.”

“I’m still sorry.”

She waved a hand.

“Don’t be,” she said. “He drove my Caddy – my Caddy – off a bridge. Be sorry for the mortician who had to sew him back up so that his Aunt Lois could have a good cry over the casket.”

“I’m sorry for the mortician, then.”

They stood there and another car pulled up with a broken headlight. A tall man ran under the awning.

“Morning, guys,” he said.

“Morning, Jerome,” said Tim. Marge and Robert nodded and smoked.

"How's it going for everybody?"

"Bob died," said Marge.

"Huh," said Jerome. "How'd he do that?"

"Drove off a bridge."

"Was he on the news this Thursday?"

"Probably," said Marge. "I know he made the papers."

"He made me late for work," said Jerome.

"Jesus Christ," said Robert. "Don't show too much sympathy or anything."

"Sorry for not being sad for a grown man driving off a bridge."

"Right?" said Marge. "Right?"

Jerome looked at Tim.

"Can I bum a cigarette?" he asked.

Robert looked at his watch. "Two minutes to showtime," he said.

"Can you wait?"

Jerome shrugged.

Another car pulled up. A woman in a blue vest stepped out. The rain began to come down harder, and her hair was matted against her face as she stepped under the awning. The woman fumbled for her keys.

"Morning guys!" she said. "How's everybody doing?"

"Bob's dead," said Marge.

The woman stopped.

"Jesus Christ, Marge," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He drove off a fucking bridge."

The woman stepped to Marge. She hugged her.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "I'm so sorry."

"He drove off a fucking bridge."

There was the sound of rain on the awning.

There was the sound of rain against the cars.

Far away, the sound of rain on Bob's grave.

And very close, the sound of Marge crying.

**Marc Ferris**

## **Wandering**

Jake had a problem. The single-wrapped Reese's Peanut Butter Cups had all sifted to the bottom of his large plastic Jack O-Lantern candy bucket. Jake really liked Peanut Butter Cups. The Nestles Crunch, Krackle, Hersey's bars, and Hershey's with Almonds were all on the top with Charms, and Tootsie Pop suckers sprinkled in. Jake really liked Peanut Butter Cups but they were on the bottom of the bucket...

...On the bottom of the bucket with the big Brazilian Wandering Spider.

Jake saw the pretty lady who lived in the white curvy house up the lane drop it from a Tupperware container into his bucket. He didn't say anything because she also dumped a King's ransom of 15 Reese's Peanut Butter Cups in to cover the arachnid. Jake liked spiders, and knew everything about them which is how he knew it was a Wandering Spider and not a Hunstman Spider. If it was a Hunstman he'd be on his fifth Peanut Butter Cup by now.

Instead he sat at the kitchen table with his Iron Man mask pulled to the top of his head, and holding the bucket between his face and the light. The dark shape of the spider's body was visible, the legs were blurry outlines. Above the shape he could just make out the yellow writing on his favored candy. He swallowed hard with a moist mouth



and carefully put the bucket down as not to aggravate his passenger. Looking to the kitchen sink for a pair of rubber gloves he didn't see any, but since his step-father had bought the new dishwasher his mother never wore them anymore.

The clock on the microwave reminded him his mom and step-father would be home any minute. When they arrived he could kiss his Peanut Butter Cups goodbye. The last two Halloweens his step-father, Grant, had cleaned them out after sending him to bed.

"Sorry, Runt," Grant said. "There's a holiday tax to be paid." His mother was no help, taking Grant's side. It was now or never. Rolling up his sleeve he lowered his hand to the top of the candy pile and wiggled his fingers to allow them to burrow in. The different textured wrappers made varying crinkling and slipping noises. Soon only his wrist was visible. Jake slowed his fingers searching for the tell-tale smooth wrapper face with the serrated, pinched ends for easy tearing.

His mind flashed the image of eight beady eyes glinting above a pair of black, dagger-shaped fangs dripping with venom. His heart raced. The spider shifted its legs at the bottom of the bucket. He jerked his hand free, Krackle and Mounds bars flew out like a candy volcano eruption. Picking them up, Jake settled on the Mounds bar and returned the rest to his bucket. The coconut and almonds were small compensation.

“Hey Runt, what’d your mother tell you about eating candy before we got home?” Grant said, making him jump and spin around.

“She didn’t say anything,” he said.

“Well she shoulda.”

“I just got home, I only had one piece.”

“Bullshit, and you can’t bullshit a bullshitter,” Grant said, walking into the kitchen and moving the bucket away from him. “Sides, there’s a holiday tax in this house. If you ain’t in bed in two minutes that tax goes up.”

Jake looked at Grant, and at the grinning face in his bucket and said, “Fine, I’m going to bed.”

“Good thing too, I don’t want to have to lose my temper. Now git,” Grant said. Jake took two steps, turned back, and went to the table. Grabbing the black plastic handle of his bucket he picked it up and banged it three times. “What the hell are you doin’?”

“Loosening the candy for you.”

Bullshit, now the Peanut Butter Cups are on the bottom. You can’t bullshit a bullshitter.”

Jake shrugged and said, “Guess you can’t.” Grant glared at him hoping the boy would give him a reason to tan his backside. Jake walked out of the kitchen and headed to his bedroom and got into his pajamas. He sat up in bed staring at his Iron Man mask and waiting.

Grant screamed.

Jake turned out his bedside light and pulled the covers up to his shoulders. Minutes later a siren wailed in the distance, and was soon loud enough to drown out his mother's cries, and his step-father's weakening moans. The flashing red and blue lights against his bedroom curtains put him to sleep.

## David Olsen

### Striver

#### Chapter 1

It had been raining for what seemed like two weeks straight on the Monterey Peninsula and I could hear it gently drumming on the on the roof. I stood in a wine cellar that housed rows of vintage wines stacked from floor to ceiling inside oak cubbyholes. The room also housed s full bar. I was inside this room, with its sliding glass doors closed; I was attempting to sneak a short pour of a recently opened bottle of Louis XIII Cognac. Tracey was still getting ready for our evening plans and I hoped to maneuver in and out of her wine cellar without detection. Although the bottle had been a gift from Tracey she was aware of my penchant for the coveted spirit (since she introduced me to it) and monitored my intake closely, ostensibly for my benefit. But the spirit also retailed around two thousand dollars per bottle. That could have something to do with it.

I poured myself a very short one, and knocked it back. I closed my eyes as the wood and dried apricot aromas permeated my sinuses and the substance burned ever so subtly on its merry path to my stomach. Glancing around, I began to pour one more slightly larger short one when a sudden burst of movement through the thick fore window of the cellar caught my attention. I looked up from the bottle to find

Tracey, waving both of her arms at me, she looked concerned. She had told me to come in and make myself at home via the intercom at the front gate to her Pebble Beach estate. I had made my way in, and in her obvious absence ventured here, to arguably my favorite room in her large estate. I usually had time to kill when she was getting ready.

I started at the sudden motion and pushed the bottle and snifter glass quickly back onto the interior bar top. Tracey's lips were mouthing something but I could only hear muffled excitement. I walked toward the door (the cellar was roughly the size of my Carmel apartment) and opened the slider stepping out. A look of concern was spread across Tracey's small round face that was flush from the commotion. She was obviously not ready for our date yet as she covered her partially naked body with a paisley patterned silk robe. Her hair was still hanging around her shoulders in blonde errant locks and her mascara was only half applied to her left eye. Her voice was urgent.

"Peter, can you help me please, Champ is outside, he is whimpering and won't come back in the house. I think there is something wrong!"

"I didn't notice he was out, is he OK?"

"I don't know, I let him out because he was scratching at my door like he needed to go to the bathroom. I can't go out there wearing this, it's raining," she said.

"OK, no problem, I'll check on him, I am sure it's nothing." She obsessed over this dog and he was always fine.

I followed Tracey through the corridor under crown molding and fifteen foot ceilings leading to the rear courtyard. The rain was coming down harder now in a rhythmic cadence on the roof and surrounding walls, wind whipping through the coastal pine trees outside.

Tracy stood aside and I opened the heavy, carved wooden door. A rustic reminder of the intended simplicity of the hacienda architecture; however, this estate was not a simple home. The sweet and briny ocean air smelled heavier with the rainfall. Stepping onto the porch I heard the poor dog whimpering and then a strange squawking sound.

“What was that Peter?!” Tracey shouted.

“Relax, stay inside Trace.” I partially closed the door to get some privacy from her, or perhaps from her expectations.

The back yard was a sprawling landscape with an enclosure at its center. A waist high adobe wall created a fire pit area, with some chairs around. Sort of a wind break that made an entertaining space. The only small gap in the wall opened toward the central walkaway and was enclosed by a gate, a gate that was closed. Champ appeared to be locked in this courtyard with a large bird. But the dog, rather than the bird, was cowering from what I could tell. Not the bravest of the boxer mixes. I was relieved when I realized what was happening. A little contrived bravery for my damsel.

I got closer as the rain, which was warm to my surprise, trickled over my shoulders and dampened my hair. Seeing me, Champ suddenly

with a small burst of courage approached the large pelican. He darted left and right playfully, but seriously, and the bird spread its wings at least six feet wide and its massive beak and gullet opened and quickly shut, creating a loud SNAP sound. Champ dashed cowering and whimpering back to his corner. The pelican had fallen squarely into the same small corridor as Champ. But it was indeed stuck. Two animals of a distinctly different element, enclosed together by a random act of fate.

Poor Champ must have gone to investigate the bird and the gate latched behind him. I opened the small side gate and the dog came pummeling out, bypassed me and ran straight toward Tracy, who was still peering out from behind the large door.

“Sit, Champ!” Tracy screeched. The dog sat at the entryway, his hind end squirming with excitement, and she patted his wet head.  
“What is it, Peter?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “There is a damn Pelican out there in the courtyard. I have no idea how that happened. Talk about falling into the wrong place! It looks like the poor bastard can’t even fly.”

“Are you serious? What are we going to do with it?”

“I’m sure we just need to call animal control or the SPCA, they will come pick him up. Don’t worry, I’ll sort it out.”

“No Peter, get rid of him now! He is scaring poor Champ!”

“Tracy, I said I would sort it out. Now go ahead and finish getting ready.” I answered firmly.

She looked at the excited pooch and then up at me. "Fine, but he is all muddy now, will you clean his paws and dry him off before letting him in?"

I nodded. "Of course," I said as I approached the door. I took hold of the dog's collar while he squirmed. She looked me up and down in my khakis, top siders, and polo shirt.

"Are you ready for the Yacht Club party?"

"Yep, we can go as soon as you are ready."

"Right, well, I have a small present for you. I was going to give it to you on our six month anniversary next week, but go look in the guest bedroom, I have a suit laid out, Armani. Will you wear it tonight?"

You didn't need to do that Tracy, but thank you." What the hell was wrong with my outfit?

"I know, but I saw you looking at them the other day when we were shopping, and I thought you might look really sharp in one, you do look sexy in a suit."

Subterfuge, I couldn't resist. "Thank you, Tracy. I'll make the phone call, go ahead and finish up."

She smiled and tippy toed up toward my forehead for a kiss. Her five foot two to my six foot two made the task endearing, and difficult, so I crouched. Then she walked back toward her bedroom. I watched her petite frame disappear as a silhouette into the far reaches of the



hallway. “And don’t drink all of the Louis Tres, it’s the only bottle!”  
came a muffled shout. Busted.

I looked down at my clothes. It was a yacht club party, I had boat clothing on right? I looked back at the pelican, calm now and sidled up against the stone wall furthest from Champ and Me. I was like the pelican, I realized, fighting for survival in a place I did not belong. A place that I would belong, but certainly didn’t yet.

After attending to Champ, I looked around for a snifter glass, poured myself just a smidgeon more of the Louis Tres and sipped. I reached for the phone and dialed information for the SPCA. Apparently I wasn’t the only caller regarding pelicans. I was told that the oil in their feathers can wash off with continuous rain and they get water logged and can’t fly. I don’t think terrifying wealthy gutless pooches was typical however. They were going to send someone over to pick up the bird in the morning. Once his feathers were dried he would fly free. All would be well.

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My morning coffee warred in my head against the remnant of a wine headache earned by imbibing three bottles of vintage Montrachet with Tracey at the Pebble Beach Yacht club event the prior evening. Even through the cerebral battle I could sense a thick nervous tension coursing through the corridors of my office as I sat at my desk and flicked on my computer monitor. There seemed to be a collective

inability to concentrate on what we were being paid to do...sell home loans. I looked at the tiny Eiffel tower on my desk, a gift from Tracy leading up to our big trip to Paris in two weeks.

Ken Cash was coming in (Actually Ken Castelano – we like nicknames in our office) the regional vice president for half of California, for an all office meeting. Ken was the youngest VP in the company. He had only visited our offices once in the entire year I had worked here for a congratulatory speech regarding our district's performance. But the brass from Big Nation's Subprime Lending Division always put people on edge.

As my monitor flickered with startup images and text, I leaned my head into my hands and breathed the steam of the coffee in, trying to wake up. The lingering hangover was worth it; Tracy's crowd knew how to party, I could keep up there. It was keeping up with them financially that was the difficult part for a non-trust-fund type such as myself.

I looked at my white board, and its collection of home loans awaiting funding. I smiled as I contemplated my next paycheck. It was looking like another ten loan month, only four subprime. This meant another ten thousand dollar bonus check. Selling home loans was an odd profession for an Ag Business Major with a Minor in English. But it seemed like every one I knew was having trouble spending all of the money they were making in the real estate industry, especially home

loans. And without any other serious prospect to make that kind of money, I was in. It was like the prices of real estate would never stop increasing. The unspoken thing that everyone knew and wouldn't admit was that this bubble would burst. I just wanted to make as much as I could before that happened. Why should everyone else make all of this money?

Everyone in my office was leasing brand new Beemers and Benzes but I had taken on no debt, drove my same old beater car and had no mortgages. Everyone else in the world seemed to be buying as many houses as they could on adjustable rate loans in anticipation of selling higher. Plus there was the side cash. Everyone in this office was making massive amounts of cash on the side by selling leads to independent brokers. We'll come back to that point later. We had a good thing going, for now.

Chelsea, my banter comrade, strutted over to her desk in a black coat, black skirt, and tall red stilettos. Her desk was directly in front of mine, in the "pit"; rows of desks in a large, open-plan office. It was all buzzing, ringing and loud voices sell, sell, selling. It was open except for the manager's office and conference room at the front of the building and the break room in the rear. Her office contained a large one way mirror, so she could see us, but we couldn't see her. She had been spending a lot of time behind that window lately.

“Hey Chels, how’s the pipeline coming?” I said. Chelsea had four pending loans, a rare off month from a staunch competitor. It felt good to be on top, I had more loans than anyone in the office. Our boss, Rebecca from London, made us all keep pipeline whiteboards above our desks so that we could all see each other’s successes, and perhaps impending failures. Those certainly incited some trash talk. Ten loans a month was the goal. “Looks a little light over there.”

“Fuck off Wilson.” She replied, and she threw a paper clip at me without turning around. I laughed as if I assumed that she was being ironic.

“If you want you can borrow my producer of the quarter trophy for when Ken gets here,” I said, handing her the glass object from its prominent placement on my desk.

“I will show you where you can stick that trophy-”. She was cut short as the main office door swung open and an authoritative man in his early thirties walked into the room in an expensive looking suit. Tanned skin, close cropped blonde hair, and a defined jawline that reminded me of *Surf Magazine*. The alpha, Ken Cash was upon us all the way from San Diego. He got straight to business.

“Alright office, let’s all gather in closely please, we have a corporate announcement.” He beckoned us from the far reaches of the office. Our manager Rebecca was at his side in a suit and looking severe.

“Office, our CEO Rocco Norizzo has decided to close a few of our offices. The entire Salinas branch is closed effective immediately. A few of you will be offered an opportunity to continue at the San Jose branch. I am here to issue your severance checks. If any commission is due to you from your open home loans, it will be distributed in two to four weeks. Please collect your belongings and your name will be called in alphabetical order by Rebecca and me to collect your severance.”

With that Ken and Rebecca walked into her office and closed the office door behind them. We couldn't see what was going on through the one way glass window. An anxious chatter permeated the room as people slowly stood up and began packing everything they could into boxes, waiting for their name to be called. I think we were all in shock, it felt surreal. I felt like I was watching this scene play out on a TV screen as one by one they opened the door and called their next victim. They were playing Russian roulette with our livelihoods.

Chelsea looked at me, her eyes bugged out behind her red rimmed reading glasses, and her lips downturned in an unusual way. “Wilson,” she said, “I am actually going to fucking miss you.” She began collecting items from her desk.

I wanted to say something clever, but couldn't manage anything except, “Me too.”

Jesse who sat behind me emerged from Rebecca's office, an envelope in his hand. He returned to his desk to pick up his box of

items. "Looks like I am going to San Jose." I forced a smile at him. "Don't worry Pete," He said, "you're one of the top producers. I am sure you will get moved too." He patted me on the shoulder and headed out of the office for the last time.

Enid, a large, surly underwriter with a knack for turning down my loans was called into Ken and Rebecca's office. She emerged moments later with a terrifying scowl and an envelope that she was tearing up as she marched briskly back to her desk. Underwriting was at the opposite side of the building, almost invisible from Rebecca's office. I watched in detached bemusement as she picked up a computer monitor and chucked it with surprising force at one of the office windows by her desk. It crunched against the glass, but the glass gave way, and the monitor fell to its demise three stories down into the flower beds below. A breath of wind circled in and a few papers rustled on my desk. Everyone stared for a moment. Realized what had happened, and then with increased animosity went on with their business taking whatever they could from their work stations like wild eyed looters. It was all happening too fast to process.

Enid was escorted from the building. Shortly after, Rebecca and Ken went right on calling name after name.

I looked at my white board of loans, and my trophy. Then I pulled out my cell phone to view an incoming call. I declined it. It was Tracey. We were supposed to leave for Paris very soon. I couldn't tell her, yet

she had to know. I couldn't afford to go to Paris for two weeks now. I needed to find work. A difficult concept to broach with her, or her family, or the majority of our friends...I was barely hanging on to some shred of dignity with her crowd as it was. Fuck.

The room was empty when they called my name. W, for Wilson. Near the end of the alphabet, the end of the line for my career.

**The Headless Witch**

**I. Royal**

“Then I activate the entasis field that disassembles her shaved head atom by stinking atom.” I kept the light away from my face, kept my voice even. “She dissolves—quickly, but only her head.”

“Wait a minute,” Dr. Akanax interrupted. “Go back. You said something different this time.”

“Should I start over?” I asked.

I got to my feet and stood in the light.

“I’ll give you the questions again,” he said, adjusting a device that resembled a giant silver acorn. “Get comfortable and just answer—naturally.”

“Ask.”

I kicked off gently and arched backwards, floating into the cool dark microgravity of Dr. Akanax’s leather office. It was real leather too, not hologram hidden bulkheads like the rest of the station. I folded my hands behind my head and crossed my bent legs at the ankles.

“How are you adjusting to Rahu?” He clenched the shiny teardrop suddenly and then spun it loose to a point in the air between us. “Do you like your work?”

“We are in competition. Our rivals are making significant



progress.”

“Those are Lord Dunsany’s words, not yours.”

“Lord Dunsany never said or wrote those words.”

“Our Lord Dunsany,” he said. “Continue.”

“He wants us to be the first and I agree. You’re about to ask me if I think it’s all worthwhile.” I swam back towards him, just before the spinning device. “The mapping technique is brutally unsubtle. I dared to disagree with him. We have other ways of extracting the data, far less invasive ways. They just take longer.”

“How’s your health Rollie?” asked the man I used to know as Jack.

“I’m fat.” Even weightless I was out of breath. “I’ve been in space too long. If I go home now, I’ll be crushed.”

“I’ll recommend longer exercise shifts and you should consider shaving off that damn mustache.” He said. The man I had known as John Dawstone used to joke with me like this. He insisted that I call him Jack, like the former president. His tattoos activated with pale blue light when he brushed the rosy glowing console set in his desk. His arms and half of his face radiated coiled tracery. “You’re already over the safe limit of holo time,” he smiled. “But since that is your field, we won’t worry. Otherwise, how are you adjusting?”

“What more do I need to say? As you know, I had already spent three years in orbit above the north pole on Ketu station,” I said taking

a slow big breath. “Making breakthroughs in holographic mathematics look easy, thanks to riding the gravity bubbles. I was supposed to go home, but our Lord Dunsany, without explanation or apology, decides to have me over for tea-- at a covert station hanging below the South Pole. Madness, but at least I can keep working. I just wonder if I can ever leave.”

“—but, you have the opportunity and the tools to make history.”

“Yes, literally. He had me illustrate castle Dunsany, just like the real one near Tara. That’s in Ireland you know.” Dr. Akanax shrugged, so I took a deep breath and continued. “I’ve never been, but he had old black and white pictures of the place. I thought—what the hell. So I made the whole thing, from the black iron gates to the sunken steward’s house come to life all over the station, and he started writing in that book of his with—” I paused for a breath. Then continued, “--quills he made himself. I guess he did his research on the real guy. He even wrote while sitting on a crumpled old hat. I’m not sure what he writes. It was done in several different handwriting styles. The stanzas were beautiful, but indecipherable. He never answers to his old name, as far as I can tell, he stays completely in character.”

“Who do you love?”

“You didn’t ask that last time.” I smiled and reached absently for the silver medical artifact that was now humming and spinning before me. It gave me the feeling of being watched.

“Rollie, this device is going to record your dreams after I induce sleep. This will help us to evaluate your health.” He waved at the floating machine that glittered pleasantly. My hand stiffened, unable to grasp and half encircling the glowing metal. I was familiar with the temporary paralysis. “Ah, high Beta,” he said, “Beta 3 in fact, what an active thinker. Yes, hold still. The oneirolog requires a few seconds to scan and synchronize with your brain patterns and implants.”

“Just like my holographic interface?” I could still speak.

“Just like it. We couldn’t have built it without you.”

“Is it safe?” I asked, but I knew better. My own tattoos shone blue as the device made contact with my internal systems.

My entire body swam in vibrating azure euphoria. The air tasted as warm and sticky as cotton candy. I could have been made of the stuff.

“Go ahead and sign on when it asks you,” he said sitting back on the air.

I have always used my middle name, which few people know. It’s only the initial F. on all of my official documents. My father was a writer with a strong admiration of Dostoyevsky. He once told me about a time when he had a bad fever and he dreamed that he was him. A twin, come to stay and write alongside. They took turns writing *Poor Folk* and *The Double*. He said he never told mom. I mentally entered ‘Fyodor’ when prompted. “Now, let’s continue,” the doctor said and asked again, “Who do you love?”

I kept silent. I felt loose again, so I turned and twisted away, corkscrewing slowly to my favorite leather corner. I coiled into a ball and held myself. The tingling from the device preparing me for sleep was as good as any neural orgasm ever produced by my own custom holobooth. It felt good to be in the dark again.

“We were talking about Olive, your beautiful daughter,” he prompted.

“When? I haven’t brought her up to anyone since Ketu.” I said. I reflected for a moment and caught my breath.

It was all a trick of the light and the dark. A mathematical trick that my theorems accidentally accomplished as I was building better light fantasies. The giant governance commission, Infire, noticed my holographic modeling math, made a connection for me with ongoing research in other fields that could benefit from my work and quickly made me so rich that I jumped the sky to Ketu, an international orbiting station. There I joined an eclectic and talented team of the best young scientists from Earth. At our disposal was a fabrication corps of astronautic engineers, physicists, and thinking machines. We had no limitations upon us other than the hardships of space, which we were rapidly overcoming. It had been a sensational time. We dropped invention and advancement upon the planet on a weekly, sometimes daily basis. Cameras showed the bionic Kenyans laughing unsuited in

outer space. The French widows made champagne everlasting and the whole team became the makers of the wildest imaginings. We were genies in the sky granting wishes. We were always seen having a good time. Other research stations couldn't keep up.

My contributions to holography singlehandedly rebuilt the automated military, mining and expeditionary forces. Home entertainment flourished; pornography didn't do too badly. I had inches of special equations bearing my name. Underwritten by Infire, I held hundreds of patents. It didn't stay good. The fallout were maimed psyches unsuited to the challenge, dangerous psychoses born of forcing the human body to accept more input than it needs and bombarding the mind with false reality. After a couple of years, the public was tired of me. And once, a camera caught me in the rapture of my own holobooth, I unaware. A cover shot for tabloids if ever there was one. My little girl had just started to grow up. I chose a bad time to leave and become a celebrity.

"If you don't wish to talk about her now, that's fine," he said. "I'm going to begin the sedative. You'll be asleep soon. Go ahead and recall for me the event, paying particular attention to the patient this time. I won't stop you again until you've finished."

The man I had known as Jack had just called the victim a patient. Odd that Jack had joined Rahu station becoming Dr. Akanax, but he still

answered to Jack when I used it. Was it a charade for the pleasure of Lord Dunsany? Was my therapist forced to play a character that the real author created? The murders had started up soon after. At least, that's when I noticed them. Soon I was willingly performing them in the name of science. I wondered when they would try to rename me.

"I call them," I said, feigning drowsiness. "--test subjects, not patients."

He shrugged again and the glowing tattoos faded from his artificial bronze skin. An off bronze that wasn't quite healthy. The perfect color to hide his nicotine stained fingers. I squinted into the bright corner that he occupied, took a deep breath, closed my eyes and continued.

"It was in my lab, same as any other time." I said, aware that the sedative, a cocktail of pharmaceuticals, had finally arrived. The doctor had placed the order with the construct mentality and it had accessed my own body's micro machines through broadcast energy. The drugs were synthesized inside of me. "Cauldron was running the experiment as I ordered it, the test subject was—groggy. She came to in a fixed harness, muzzled. Doped."

The silver teardrop keeps twinkling and I keep basking in its hum. Eyes shut. I rub my fingertips roughly on my scalp. I'm versed in the arts of injecting sensation, and have safeguards to protect my inner machine. I don't just theorize about illusions, I build them. I live in

them. Most people live in holographic reality, if they can afford it. I've made a decent career designing fantasies lased in air. The risks a brain takes immersed in holograms, have taught me to spare no expense protecting myself and I do have the money.

Our duel extended to the microscopic. I have a nano network that is top of the line, but Dr. Akanax was probably using pico systems by now. I was hoping to override the medication and take control of the oneirolog, but all I could get with my reaching thoughts was a device link menu:

SIGNED ON AS: FYODOR

ENCRYPTED ONEIROLOG-PRESCRIPTION: MARTINSON, ROYAL F.

MEMORY RECORDING: ACTIVE (X): ALPHA 8HZ //SLOW CORTICAL  
POTENTIAL-OPTIMAL

TRANSMIT ENCODING SERIES: 2

So, the strange dream tool is going to read my thoughts and record them for posterity.

Dr. Akanax called from across the room, barely audible over the droning lullaby of the spinning device, "The smallest detail could be important."

*Dear Olive, forgive your father if you can.*

"I'm standing on the deck," I said. "In my Zwelos, when Lord Dunsany enters with the others, including Theo himself—"

"Sooranard." Dr. Akanax corrected.

“Sooranard,” I responded automatically, but I had known him as Gottlieb Theophilus when he invented the variable grav rods we wear in our shoes. He named them Zwelos an abbreviation of the German word for weightlessness. This was done in the early days on Ketu; the first of many amazing breakthroughs I saw when I joined.

*When you have seen this, through my eyes, you may understand the lies I've lived and what it was all for. I hope you will pardon me.*

“Theta now, good. Where are you Royal?” Dr. Akanax asked.

“I'm in the—cathedral.”

“Where?”

The office door chuffed open, the breeze stirred, my eyes shut tight, I just float comfortably and recalled as requested. The odious sweat of my chief captor wafts into my drowsy mind. He had always had a peculiar onion scent to his perspiration. I wish that was my only reason for hating him. I knew the real man had just joined the doctor; was floating to his side even now.

“In the lab. The data lab.” I saw it, steep stone ribs and pointed arches surrounding a large stained glass window. At least, that was what the cold metal station was supposed to look like here. It was as Lord Dunsany wished. I made it happen.

“How is my Sime?” asked the deep, gravelly voice of Lord Dunsany.



A small metal catch springs open. I hear the soft rustling of fingers within a tin. A match flares to life, its acrid sulphur spilling across the room. Tobacco smoke follows.

“He will come back to us,” answered Dr. Akanax.

“I’m lost without my illustrator,” scratched from Lord Dunsany’s throat. “Please continue doctor. We must have him.” I could tell they were both smoking. I wondered if they were sharing.

“Go ahead Rollie.” He sounded like good old Jack again. “You were saying—“

I kept my breaths slow and deep from practiced meditation. I like prolonging the hypnagogic state and was probably showing a brain function of a low Theta pattern, somewhere around 4.1 Hertz, just above the threshold of dreamland. If I could retain control without falling asleep--

The fuzzy feeling stayed with me.

I saw the lab. I never left it in my mind. I could see the Centaurus constellation through the holographic stained glass, and within the glass an unnatural thing shaped by my light: a tortured man’s face on a horned and hunched creature a family or two removed from pterodactyl. It towered over bowing supplicants; drawn in what looked like my hand, yet I couldn’t recall ever doing the work.

In the light cast through that abomination--

“She’s in the harness. Sooranard and the others join our Lord Dunsany.” I speak in a monotone. “Dr. Akanax, you’re there. Dr. Welleran the cyberneticist and Mammolek, who built the construct mentality that runs the station—Cauldron.”

“Does she understand?” asked Dr. Akanax.

“She’s young. She cries like she understands. She had been on Ketu,” I thought of her, a pretty first engineer who had built the dark energy grids with Sooranard. “I stare into her pleading eyes.” She has stopped struggling; a single breath escapes at last, all else is silent. She reminds me of my girl.

*My sweet Olive, your grandfather was crazy and so is your dad, but I will leave you with a better legacy than insanity. I promise.*

Then I activate the entasis field that disassembles her head atom by stinking atom. The warped plasma slams into her. It rips the light from her face in a flash of surprise and pain. She’s choking on her melting tongue. Her skin ignites, hidden within a mesh of x-rays and laser pulses. Her pink spine emerges from the black rippling mirage. Blood and fluid crackle through the air, bursting in a boiling spatter. I reflexively hold my breath. Charred black spots cascade over my white station robes. I wear no mask.

Cauldron terminates the entasis field. The data is gathered. She is recorded.

I blink through the stinging hot mist of her. The still sizzling neck is cauterized just above the clavicle. My ears ring and somewhere beyond that din, questions are being asked of me. I don't know anything at this moment. I can't even remember her name.

"Did you at least get the stabilizing equation from him doctor," rasped Lord Dunsany.

"YM=TPE?" Dr. Akanax took a long drag. "Oh yes, under heavy sedation he told me it means Yesterday's Meal Equals Today's Pooping Experience."

"Need I remind you doctor, that he maintains the hyperlink. A considerable edge for us, don't you think?" The tired voice of Lord Dunsany is a harsh whisper. "Crack his code; prepare him. I need my Sime. Only he can draw the dark body."

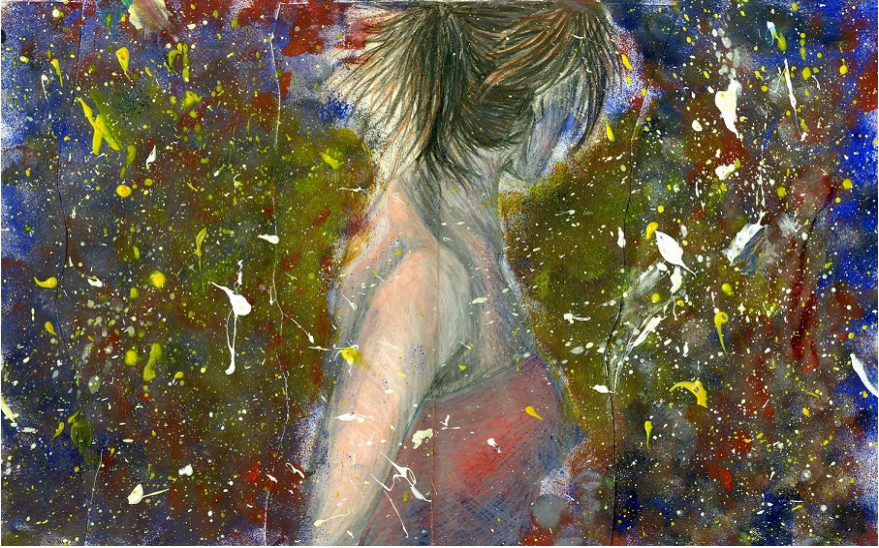
"The mind must have a vessel," said Dr. Akanax.

"And the soul," replied the man renamed Lord Dunsany. He thumped what sounded like a heavy book. "We will be successful, and I-" he paused to swallow hard, trying to find relief for his throat. "I will be the first projected man, the first man to walk faster than the speed of light."

B(X)=DELTA 3.3HZ//SLOW CORTICAL POTENTIAL-ENHANCED



**Golnoush Pak/ Breadth12**



## Golnoush Pak/ Fabric Study



**Ruvic Delacruz/[Former] Fish Market**



**Ruvic Delacruz/Far from the Boardwalk**





## Rebecca Shiraev

### Apples

If I could reach out  
and pluck our story  
out of the heavens  
like a ripe apple  
How exquisite in  
color  
how precise its taste  
that we weep  
at the galaxy miracle  
waiting in  
each fruit  
in each mind  
How to bear  
the agonizing meal  
of meteors  
and dust.  
The imperceptible  
delicious infinity  
of Your Song.  
You offer it so innocently  
Without guile  
without knowing  
That  
One bite  
Will forever shape the taste of apples  
Bite  
after bite  
after bite.

## **Pam Schierer**

### **At Continent's Edge**

Let's undress – slip

The frock off a sultry secret – if it be inclined:

Lies a verdant bed at continent's edge – here

Amorous earth awaits – meets

Gallant water – his

Fog – a whispered mist – calls – she

Blinks long-winged lashes – sends

Pebbles scurrying to his core – he

Pushes a firm palm – flings fingers splayed – up

Her stately shoulder slope – elegant, bare – his

River fingers creep – slowly, slowly, there – unlace

Her grassy green dress – budding, adorned – his

Lips slide tender kisses – up

The bend of her knee – waves

Embrace – curl round – her slender waist – swell

Over the contour of her hips – she

Lounges luxurious in his salty spray – sifted – sandy

Legs spread – leafy skirt lifted – pools

Draw at dunes – then drain – her

Caress sumptuous – her every grain – he

Tides rhythmically over – here

In the space of a lone heartbeat – he

Breaks – extends

Attains – stays.

## **Jennifer Clymer**

### **Covering**

Sea grass drapes over  
rounded shoulder of black branch.

A lacy, green shawl.

## Rebecca Shiraev

### Dust

Familiar dust settled  
In the brown fruit bowl.  
A stray butter knife  
Clean and gleaming beside  
The salt.  
Rumpled runner  
And marred oaken table.  
Stained thrift store chairs  
Draped with napkins for  
Folding.  
A glass for water  
A mug for tea  
Slumped purse pushed aside  
Daily messes mixed  
With lazy hands.  
Momentary stillness,  
Gracious afternoon.

**Good-bye**

I said I didn't like long good-byes  
when the future was full of  
tomorrows. Better quick,  
painless. No looking  
back, I thought.

But, that  
was

be-

fore

white  
coats spewed  
monotone platitudes,  
*Nothing more we can do.*  
Now I claw and clutch at  
each aching moment. Begging  
the minutes to slow. *S t r e t c h i n g.*  
Reaching. Drinking you in. Desperate  
for this good-bye to be longer ...

## **Jonlyn Vogt**

### **Home**

coffee's getting cold  
and so am i  
it's storming outside  
and in my heart  
these ink stained sheets  
and mascara coated cheeks  
missed the sound of rain  
but i just miss the way  
you used to say my name

## Frederick Mohr

### Hosts Hereby Herald Happy Haunted Halloween!

When wishful writers write with wrangling wane,  
As anxious artists, ax anguished aching aim.  
Cartoon creations capture creepy crazy creatures,  
Making moody muses mock mirthful music measures.

Spooky spider spinsters, spinning spiny seamless scenes,  
Daring demons darken, deep delightful dreams.  
Headless horseman heaves his helpless head, held high,  
Freaky focused fears from free fall freely fly.

Hush! Haunted Halloween heralds horrific howling hoards,  
When weird winds waken within wild wacky wards.  
Mounting moon's motion meets mortal man's monster,  
When werewolves wax wicked with wild-eyed wonder.

What woeful witches watch with wanton wreckless will,  
Those tricker treaters trekking, toward treasure troves 'til,  
Perilous pumpkin patches prove prickly private passage,  
Forlorn flaking fences, forsaken fixes fracture.

Haunted houses harbor, horrific hellish hobos,  
Gruesome ghostly goblins, gobble ghastly grinning glows.  
Vindictive vile vampires vex villages vipers vie,  
Devious drunken Dracula, drinks dark delirious dye.

Finding frenzied Frankenstein, fearing foam-filled freaky fits,  
Zany zealous zombies, zapping zooming zombie zits.  
Bold blue-black bats, batter brittle barren bone,  
Spooky skeletons, stilted silhouettes, somehow sewn.

Moldy mummies mumble, monstrous melancholy,  
Sneaky spirits springing, serpent shadow's solemn sully.  
Clever cloistered curling cats, catch cuddly cubs, consumed,  
Praying pale-faced parents, pretend playful pride, presumed.



While willing wizards wait with warlocks wanting woe,  
Serious seasoned sorcerers seek sacred sites so slow.  
Simple soulful songs, sing striking sounds supreme,  
Hosts Hereby Herald Happy Haunted Halloween!

## Jennifer Clymer

### Kama'aina

I miss the way the flowers marked the seasons;  
fuchsia and purple azalea petals  
that blew loose from the trees, gathering on the sidewalks  
in bright colored piles in July;  
the tiny yellow flowers dotting the hedges  
in March, along the Kamehameha Highway; and  
the pink and white plumeria blossoms,  
spinning round and round like paper umbrellas  
in the trade winds in May.

I miss how the locals switched lanes - cut into traffic  
with a Shaka or a slow wave of thanks  
from rolled down windows.

I miss the potlucks and luaus where  
tables were piled with sushi rice,  
lau lau, spam musubi, chop chae and lumpia;  
where we talked story under Monkey Pod and Banyan trees,

until it grew dark and our bodies,  
became silhouettes in the moonlight.

I miss soft, warm air that drew around me like  
a thick blanket when I stepped on the cool grass after dark,  
the pores of earth slowly exhaling the heat of the day.

I miss eating on our covered lanai, surrounded by birds-of-paradise,  
red tí leaves, white orchids from my garden;  
the way we lived half inside and half outside,  
barely knowing the difference.

I miss the tepid, turquoise ocean that baptized me with each wave,  
salt water carrying me in its current between the reef  
to secret hideouts where schools of Moorish Idol lingered.

I miss the world below the surface of the sea,  
where once I swam with a family of turtles,  
and would never have known they were there,  
would never have known what a honu looked like  
had I stayed on shore.

But, by the way my heart tears open now,  
like ripping a fresh scab from a deep wound,

I know that I miss the people most of all.

For so long, I tried to hold you out -

keep you an arm's distance away,

or repay you for all of the gifts you gave.

But slowly, on your island time,

I learned you were not leaving,

learned calling you "Auntie" and "Uncle"

wasn't just because that was your way.

I didn't expect being a neighbor was more

than just being next door.

It meant showing up on the porch

when someone was sick,

arms loaded with rotisserie chicken, watermelon,

tuna sandwiches on thick, white bread.

You didn't treat us like Haoles, even though we were;

You called us Kama'aina, even though we weren't;

And you made us believe we had breath, we had Aloha too.

Now, here in California, I hear that I am lucky

to live so close to the ocean;

I hear that making a home is slow,  
and that healing takes time.

But I remember an ocean even closer,  
a home where I really belonged,  
and a people I still can't forget.

I'm not waiting or wanting for time to move me on,  
or to heal what I won't let go.

I want to hold on for now, to this grieving, aching sadness,  
hold it, tucked close inside.

Because you are the truest Ohana I've ever known.

## Patricia Merrifield

### Kinana

1.

I am already twelve years old so I  
remember when we were back home in Aleppo,  
the tall pines, the gardens with warm water flowing  
from pond to pond, the scented spices and onions,  
lemons and ginger, the smell of the sun.  
I loved school in those days and how my  
mind zinged when Mrs. Sharif explained  
the world to us. I was going to be a  
doctor and help sick kids  
with their pain.

First the grenade was flung into my class,  
flashes of yellow, of yellow, of red, of blood,  
of the blood of my friend Maryam.

Then fire in the market, the souk, the shops,  
the smoke, the flames orange in doors,  
orange in arches, in stone, in soul.

The bombing of the Great Mosque, I couldn't hide,  
I couldn't sit through it, I stood with  
my palms and my forehead pressed into the wall, the  
chant of the bombs, Again! Again! Again!  
Again! and Again! I couldn't see to think  
or hear to cry or talk to say, to  
say what? what? to say what?

After ages silence soundlessly breathed  
And my papa said "we will leave."

2.

*We are swallows blown out of the nest.  
All our wings are broken. We peck in the dust*

We are living in Lebanon now, in  
Shatila refugee camp. Only Adan,  
the youngest of us,  
goes to school here. Nashwan picks olives  
or oranges. Papa helps out in  
a grocery and gets paid a few Lebanese pounds.  
Mama wants to work too, though  
no one has chosen her yet.

We sweep our damp shack, mama and  
I, and cook favas, drinking the water  
they're boiled in. For Eid al-Adha  
we were given some goat.

*We are swallows blown out of the nest.  
All our wings are broken. We peck in the dust  
and feel through our feet the low tread  
of the jackals*

We hear stories of Syrian girls  
who never come back to Shatila,

and the wailing of mothers.  
Mama is looking for a man  
to marry and protect me,  
she is looking,  
she is looking.

May it please Allah he  
have quiet hands and  
a kind mouth.

*We are swallows blown out of the nest.*

*All our wings are broken. We peck in the dust  
and feel through our feet the low tread  
of the jackals.*

*They are near*



## Don May

### Ode to Nate Mackey

We walked through sand, hereafter called Then.  
Owned once, once owned triplicate, we hurried.  
Sand-colored, sack-sand plant, in the distance.  
From the roof, steam pipe, big stove pipe

parametric tameness, now previous  
wildness a long-antecedent namesake  
show-shape open. capital letter tameness  
aped for reasons. Pretended to  
for what we hoped was - 'greater good.'

Shape no less than once-was  
We remember when no-shape was  
antecedent, longing for merely before.  
Before, nostalgic for once-was

Big lake, cerulean with Maybe-Then  
like a metallic school of tuna fish  
Hurrying along beneath.  
Before-now, below. We squinted above.

noonday sun nostalgic for shade tree  
shade tree remembering canopy  
canopy once was, then was,  
wanting for nothing, was-extant.

Timbre of coal juice, opiate,  
Then was, all-collate soak nil Opeth.  
Champion dais, so-so petrolat  
tabular list of translations: always.

Found feather reattaches to  
seagull. Pine pitch retreats down  
sapwood, runs away into

the awaiting dirt. Prelude.

shade tree antecedent to  
once-was canopy, vine-web  
noonday burn dreaming  
of once-was, endless sap-filled vines.

The truck was big, and the cargo; big.  
Vine-water squeezed out, almost accidental, imagining  
vine-water's taste, mineral could-have.  
Could have or might have, as once.

Antecedent longs for merely before.  
Before admires almost here, about-to.  
Now wished, as usual, for nigh. Or,  
nigh-on nigh. Inevitable, wished-for, We.

## Rebecca Shiraev

### Redwood

Looming redwoods whisper  
Sly stories  
Of a trained lover's hands.  
A world hereto  
Unknown.  
Summer hours winding through  
Madrone  
And manzanita.  
Sharp branches, torn clothes  
And soft earth sliding  
Underfoot.  
A silent starry sky framed  
In firelight silhouettes.  
Sparks and cinders  
Circle heavenward.  
An ancient meal.  
A divine rite.  
Wonder found  
At dawn  
Lakeside  
It is a New Day

When I shake the ashes  
From my campfire clothes  
Skin smudged with mud  
And tangled hair  
Matted  
With slumbering bark.

## **Kanani San Nicolas**

### **The Coffin Man**

He lives in the house up on the hill  
For sixty five years, he lives there still.  
Every morning he walks down the lane  
Through wind, fog, snow, or rain.  
In his workshop, he's locked away  
Alone at work, building coffins all day.

The coffin man, he's called by all.  
His ghostly figure is thin and tall.  
He takes great pride in his art  
Of ferrying souls that must depart.  
When a pale corpse is brought to his door  
He is always eager to make one more.

Sickness or death can be outran,  
But you can't outrun the coffin man.  
He shapes the wood, and hammers nails in  
Righting the ones led away by sin.  
He digs their graves where earthworms lie  
And the very next day their soul shall die.

Heed this warning, if you can,  
Stay away from the coffin man.

## Haley Walker

### The River

Wash your face in the river, dear  
Dry your skin on her warm rocks  
Lay in the sun and let her feed you love  
She doesn't think,  
Or feel,  
She just  
Is.  
And you know all the dirt you wore to get here  
Has now washed downstream  
Coming to rest in the bed of some  
Far pool  
Another one,  
Like this,  
With its own sloping walls  
Where streams of dusty light fall  
Streaking through the water  
Suspended, silent.  
Dive,  
Dive deep,  
Feel the river change around you  
Light to dark  
Warm to cool  
As you slide further down.  
Leave the surface behind  
Up there,  
Where water snakes wait,  
Stay here for a moment  
In the dark  
In the cool  
Alone  
Before you resurface  
And meet that bright, shimmering world.

## **Pam Schierer**

### **When I Write**

When I write

I see the cogs in turn – joining, departing, and joining again – within the soul.

When I write I can

Hear the whirl of belts within being, see how they work – but I can't get it down –

Words don't do justice to the

Function of heart springs or

The way they insist on

One specific thing.

But when I write I'm closer – nearer than I'll ever be – to the

Cold sleek endless alloy machinery

That is the human spirit.

When I write I can

Dip my toe in the pool

Then a foot and sometimes

I can sink lower, the

Surface just above my ankle bone

Still, I can only speak in shadows - hoping they expose at least

The shape of what I find.

Something like a pool

Something like a drug, like

Something vast and above me but at the same time

Something sleeping with in me – that I cannot seem to wake.

Every so often its lidded eyes rouse and

Through the small breach I see

Myself reflected in the watery irises

That glide sidelong –

Then shut.

But I never seem to have a pen when it wakes.

How did they do it – Whitman and Blake – how

Did they find where to dive headlong

Into the pool? How

Deep did each sink? Did they leave a sign?

“Hughes was here” carved in the thirty meter line

Is it in the catching – the capture, snatched in jar – in page?

Its lapping edges taunting at my toe – or ankle bone

I doubt my mind, my pen, my tongue – I doubt the pool

I doubt my lungs

When I write.



## Patricia Merrifield

### Womb

A simple bag, a container,  
enclosure, negative space,  
mossy and dark.

Creation, pain, elation retainer  
pulsing with heme, with semen, a place  
of hope, of despair, of  
whispering blooms  
in a forest of gloom.

## Submissions & Guidelines

*Scheherazade* considers submissions of poetry, short fiction, creative nonfiction, novel and book length memoir excerpts, graphic art, and photography from MPC students.

To submit your own original creative work, upload up to 5 poems and/or up to 20 total pages of prose in .doc, .docx, or .rtf format at <http://www.mpc.edu/scheherazade-submission>.

Please do not include your name or page numbers in the submitted work.

Work submitted should be in 11 Point Calibri or 12 Point Times New Roman font, with 1 inch margins at top, bottom, and sides of each page. There are no limitations on style or subject matter; bilingual submissions are welcome if the writer can provide equally accomplished work in both languages.

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