

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES AND MORE

OCTOBER 2021

DARK MATTER

MAGAZINE



HALLOWEEN SPECIAL

THE DEVIL'S TRAVEL AGENCY A PLACE FOR THE DEAD AND THE DYING OBJECTS OF ANTIQUITY
FLUFF & FOLD QUEEN OF THE CLOVEN HEART FREEHOLD POTATO LADY OF THE DULLAHAN
ANNIHILATE MANKIND AND IMPRESS YOUR FRIENDS JODIE PURPLE SPIDERS CLUTCH
THE LAST SCIENCE FICTION STORY CAROLINE THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE OBJECTS OF ANTIQUITY

KEN ALTABEF

MATT ANDREW

P. T. CORWIN

TAYLOR GIANFRANCISCO

JAMES HANCOCK

SAM HEIMER

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ALEX SOBEL

TALES TO TERRIFY

MATTHEW WILDING

DEBORAH WONG

BOO

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ISBN 978-1-0879-8597-8 (paperback)

Dark Matter Magazine
P.O. Box 372
Wheaton, IL 60187

darkmattermagazine.com
darkmattermagazine.shop

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES AND MORE OCTOBER 2021



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COVER ART

ONE FOR YOU

by [Sam Heimer](#)

“**O**ne for You,” while several years old, is a piece that’s still a watermark for me. It’s the first time my process, composition, and concept really came together. It’s a little on the cartoony side, but it’s a personal piece, and I love it. It still brings back very specific Halloween memories for me. I’m usually very critical of my own work, which is a mechanism that pushes me to better myself, but my initial reaction to “One for You” was one of those rare instances when I leaned back and thought, *Well done, Sam.*

—Sam Heimer

Pictured left: *One For You*



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

FEAR ITSELF

by [Rob Carroll](#)

Frank Herbert famously wrote in his masterwork of science fiction, *Dune*, that “fear is the mind-killer.” This quote even appears in the background of the cover art for *Dark Matter Magazine* Issue 001—the words crudely painted on the wall beyond the image’s blind subject in the foreground, the message put there like an Easter egg in plain sight by the very talented cover artist, Richard Wagner, and approved with a smile by me. But for as much as I love the quote, I also feel it oversimplifies what fear is and the functions the emotion serves. For example, Shakespeare had Julius Caesar say something similar, and we all know how well it ended for him.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the main biological function of fear is “to act as a signal of danger, threat, or motivational conflict, and to trigger appropriate adaptive responses.” Without that signal, I’m not sure having a clear mind will matter if it fails to see the danger before it strikes. In this regard, a mind without fear is actually more reactionary than a mind that learns to respectfully listen to and temper the emotion. Conversely, a mind governed too greatly by fear sees danger everywhere and creates conflict where there otherwise wouldn’t be any. This is a mind that has become too precautionary, and can often itself become dangerous. Suppression versus overexpression. Both are a denial of reality.

A healthy brain respects the biological signals that make up fear, and it also knows how to interpret those signals correctly. It knows how to identify danger while also empathizing with all that is incorrectly deemed as dangerous. It recognizes its own dark impulses as threats, and acknowledges that the story it tells itself can sometimes be unreliable and in need of external support to make sense. So, in essence, a healthy brain is one that approaches fear with a keen understanding of its many facets, a knowledge of its various forms, and the wisdom to see itself in both.

And with that, I present to you a preview of the stories contained within this issue, all of which explore fear in at least one of the ways outlined above. Within these stories, fear is not the mind-killer; it is the mind-awakener.

"Annihilate Mankind and Impress Your Friends: A Correspondence Course," by Matt Andrew, shows us just how dangerous a mind without empathy can be. "Freehold," by Josh Pearce, deftly wonders the opposite: Can a mind with too much empathy be a danger to itself? "The Devil's Travel Agency," by Alex Sobel, takes a calm look at man's existential search for meaning and the underlying fear that no meaning exists, neither in life nor death. "Queen of the Cloven Heart," by Hailey Piper, takes us on a quest against evil, but ends with us feeling defeated, having been left to ponder the many ways we mindlessly create a world where such an evil can be allowed to flourish. "Potato," by Ken Altabef, is cosmic horror of the weirdest order, and I love it for this. The story also explores how easily the mind can be turned against itself in the total absence of fear. "Fluff & Fold," by Lituo Huang, toys with our ability to discern good from bad, and shows how affected our discernment is by preconceived notions. "Lady of the Dullahan," by Anna Madden, wonders if in a deeply corrupt society, any man can claim to be innocent, even if he desires to be atoned. "Jodie," by Mark Joslyn, says that innocent people do exist in a corrupted world, but that in a corrupted world, innocence is what is to be feared—a tainted society won't come to the defense of its most vulnerable. "Purple Spiders," by Taylor Gianfrancisco, makes us recoil in fear at the possibility that death isn't the end of tragedy, but rather its second act. "Master of the House," by Michael Adam Robson is the second cosmic horror story in this issue, and like its genre forebears, curls into the fetal position and shivers with fright at the unknowable complexity of all the dark and mysterious forces that surround us. "A Place for the Dead and the Dying," by P. T. Corwin, explores the mind of a man wronged, and shows how a worst fear

realized can transform someone in the most horrible of ways. “Caroline,” by Aeryn Rudel, examines the terrible burden of grief and how the refusal to accept life’s unfair tragedies can lead to worser fates. And finally, “The Last Science Fiction Story,” by Alan Vincent Michaels, injects the issue with a much needed dose of humor by presenting to us a man at odds with himself and the world, both with how it is, and with how he always wanted it to be.

Sincerely,

Rob Carroll
Editor-in-Chief





ANNIHILATE MANKIND AND IMPRESS YOUR FRIENDS: A CORRESPONDENCE COURSE

by [Matt Andrew](#)

June 4, 19__

Dear M____,

Before we discuss the course in question, allow me to clear the air as to what you may have heard about me.

I am not the disgraced head of neuroscience at the Dienstag Neurological Institute—I am merely retired. Nor was I sacked as visiting professor of philosophy at Madrid's Universidad de Unamuno. Let's call it an extended sabbatical. By virtue of your enthusiastic application requesting to learn the mysteries of the human mind, you are, I hope, more interested in what I have to offer than in dinner party gossip.

With that out of the way, allow me a short moment to discuss what this course will *not* include.

Despite the fact that I am the author of obscure, out-of-print philosophical treatises such as *Evolutionary Misstep: A User's Guide*, *The Human Catachysm*, and *Disaster of Consciousness*, we will *not* be discussing philosophical pessimism or antinatalism in this course.

We will *not* discuss how much better the planet, as well as its attendant flora and fauna, would have fared if it had not been for the accidental appearance of the *homo sapien*.

I will do my best to spare you *any* discussion in the countless reasons why we would have been better off having never been born.

Nor will we ruminate over our future descendants, trillions of them, tragically and involuntarily conscripted for miserable lifetime terms, like rats on a sinking ship.

Although we *will* be discussing just how malleable and foolhardy the human brain became as a result of the evolutionary hiccup that birthed us, we will *definitely* not discuss how destructive this knowledge can be in the wrong hands.

No, I will simply be walking you through a few party tricks based on simple human neuroscience. Apply yourself to my short lessons, and you will delight your friends and astound your family!

Now, as soon as I receive the one-time registration fee, I will promptly reply with your first lesson. Remember, check or money order, only—no cash.

I look forward to working with you!

Sincerely,
Doctor Blank



June 10, 19__

Dear M____,

Thank you for your prompt payment—now let's have some fun!

I call this first trick...

The Mystery of the Detached Nose

For this gag, you'll need two assistants and two dining room chairs. For the purposes of this illustration, I will henceforth refer to these assistants as "Billy" and "Sally."

The setup is simple. Orient the chairs so that they face each other. Place them as close as possible, while allowing their occupants to sit comfortably and without their knees touching.

Next, blindfold yourself and sit in one chair, and have Billy sit across from you in the other. Sally will stand on your right side.

Instruct Sally to take a hold of your right arm at the wrist, and manipulate your arm so that your index finger touches the tip of Billy's nose. Sally will

continue to touch, tap, and stroke Billy's nose with your finger in a random pattern resembling Morse Code. It is important that the contact between your finger and Billy's nose is completely random and in no way follows a pattern.

At the same time, Sally will use her free hand index finger to touch, tap, and stroke your nose in the exact same pattern. The movements between your right hand and Sally's hand must be perfectly synchronized.

After about 30–60 seconds, if performed exactly as instructed, you will feel the uncanny sensation that your nose has been detached from your head and is now floating a few feet in front of your face!

Now for a bit of explanation:

Your body is a phantom...

What we perceive as our physical “self” is just an arbitrary “map” that covers the cerebral cortex. Stimulate any given area of the cortex and you instantly perceive the accompanying sensation on the respective body part assigned to that particular portion of the map. This system of nerve endings lends itself to be easily fooled. People who have suffered amputations can sense real feelings in their missing limbs. The brain is even known to reassign the map and accompanying sensations in order to make sense of our evolving body images.

So, with this new trick, you've just royally confused your brain with the help of Billy and Sally. Your gray matter is forced to make basic deductive assumptions in order to make sense of the situation:

1. Your arm is outstretched and tapping something that feels like a nose.
2. At the same time, the portion of the cerebral cortex associated with your nose is receiving sensory inputs in the same exact sequence.
3. Therefore, according to your brain, your nose *must* be detached and floating in space in front of you. It is the only possible answer that makes sense to our dim-witted nerve centers.

To achieve the full effects of an experiment of this type, focus is essential. Picture all the nerve centers at play as just...matter. Your nose, Billy's nose, Sally's hand, your hand—all just cells of the same composition and origin. All as equally simple to tap into as your own body parts.

To hone your concentration even further, recite a mantra while you are blindfolded and Sally taps your nose. Something like this:

This is my nose
This is not my nose
This is not Billy's nose
This is not anyone's nose
There is no nose
It is only matter...

Even after the experiment is over and Billy and Sally have gone home, keep practicing the mantra. Recite it when you look in the bathroom mirror. When you watch your mother cook in the kitchen. When the commuter train passes you at the Main Street Station.

That is not me
That is not my mother
Those are not passengers
We are just matter...

Once you've had a chance to feel the effects of the "detached nose," switch positions, blindfold Sally and Billy, and give them a try. Insist that they repeat a mantra as you say it along with them. Most humans lead simple lives swathed in comfort and denial, so they may need help opening their minds...pun intended ;)

Let me know how it goes, and have fun!

Sincerely,
 Doctor Blank



June 19, 19__

Dear M____,

I was heartened to read your summary of your rapid success. Well done! Keep in mind that these experiments are never truly over. Always practice your mantra.

For that first trick, we demonstrated how easily the human brain could be fooled. Now, I show you how it can be completely reconfigured.

I like to call this one...

The Mystery of the Severed Hand

For this second experiment, you will need one assistant (let's call him "Johnny") and a rubber gag hand that you would buy as a Halloween prank at a costume store.

Sit down at a small table where Johnny can sit within a short arm's reach across from you. Beforehand, construct a cardboard partition a few feet square that you can place on the table between you and Johnny. Lay your right hand behind the partition, out of sight, so that only Johnny can see it, and place the rubber hand in front of the partition where you can see it.

Next, instruct Johnny to use both of his hands to simultaneously tap and stroke your hidden right hand and the rubber dummy hand. As before, the sequence must be executed in a random but synchronous manner. There must be no perceivable pattern, nor should there be any visible movement where Johnny is tapping your hidden right hand, or it may ruin the illusion.

And, voila...if executed correctly, you will gain the uncanny sensation that the rubber hand is actually your real hand!

As before, the brain has been fooled and is unable to find an explanation for the resulting dissonance other than to assign sensation to a lifeless, disembodied rubber hand.

Patience and focus are essential. These tricks don't always succeed on the first try. Don't be afraid to conduct several sessions, with different assistants, if necessary. The results will almost surely be inconsistent if you do not recite the mantra to hone your efforts:

This hand is not rubber

This hand is flesh

This is my hand

I am this hand...

For added effect, have Johnny repeat the mantra with you, over and over, as long as it takes to create the sensation that the rubber hand is actually your hand. Think about nothing other than your trillions of synapses and nerve endings leading from your brain to that cold hunk of rubber before you.

Dictate reality on your own terms.

Repeat the mantra until each and every word has lost its individual meaning, and instead become incoherent jumbles combined with the ambient sounds around you.

The syllables will become conductors that propel your energies into that rubber hand.

This hand is not rubber
This hand is flesh
This is Johnny's hand
Johnny is this hand...

Once you've had some fun with that, let's alter reality even further by ditching the rubber hand. Conduct the experiment exactly as described, except Johnny will tap the table top in front of you instead of the rubber hand. As before, he will stroke and tap your hidden hand at the same time. Don't forget your mantra:

This is not a table.
This is not wood.
This is flesh.
There is no table.
There is no wood.
There is no flesh.
There is only matter...

The mantra is key. Let the words sink deeply into you as if an echo within an infinite well.

If all goes well, that gelatinous gray mass between your ears will assign living sensation to an inanimate, wooden table!

Amazing, isn't it?

You've completely rewired your brain to accept any object as part of your body...part of your "self."

Continue your observations even after this trick has been successfully accomplished. See your phantom self. See your phantom mother. See those phantom train passengers. See those phantoms sipping lattes in the coffee shop. You'll begin to see the phantoms everywhere. Just matter, all around you.

There is no me.
There is no them.
There is no flesh.
There is only matter...

Have fun!

Sincerely,
 Doctor Blank



July 3, 19__

Dear M____,

Allow me to congratulate you. That second trick usually takes a bit longer to master. Your summary was very thorough, and your insistence on utilizing the mantra in all aspects of your life reflects a true passion for unlocking the secrets of the mind. You appear to be a natural—great work!

Now let's have some fun...

First, I showed you how the mind could be fooled. Then, I demonstrated how the nerve centers could be completely rewired. All reinforced through intense focus, observation, and willpower.

Now, you will use these concepts to take complete control of matter. The old wives' tale says we only use ten percent of our brain. I say it doesn't matter—the brain has become a crutch. We've entrusted a blind, deaf cretin with the controls of our destiny. You have the knowledge to render your consciousness (and everyone's around you) utterly obsolete.

This last "trick" is not a trick. Instead, let's call it "field application."

Go to a public place. Somewhere you can sit and watch the people of your town come and go. Somewhere you can get up close without too much notice, but a relaxed setting that will allow you to focus on an unsuspecting group of people. Somewhere to observe all the matter around you. A coffee shop may do nicely.

Take in the smell of nutmeg and cinnamon. Listen to the wet thrum of traffic outside the plate glass windows as they speed over wet asphalt. The chatter of people gossiping over decafs. Hurried commuters placing rushed orders at the counter. Feel the cracked leather of the cheap armchair under your palms, one of several arranged in neat groups of four. The orange glow of bowl-shaped lamps complementing the blue dawn haze outside. The rumble of an airliner descending to land at the nearby airport.

Find someone sitting nearby. Focus on them.

For example, that elderly woman in teal polyester and matching cardigan. The one with the knitting bag by her feet. Gleaming needles embedded in balls of yarn.

Watch her knobby fingers. Her paper-thin skin stretched over spotted knuckles. Focus on those digits as she rips open yellow packets of sugar

substitute, pours them in her tea. Will those hands to do whatever you want them to do. They are *your* hands. It is *your* flesh.

*Her fingers are my fingers
Her flesh is my flesh
Her bones are my bones
There are no fingers
There is no flesh
There are no bones
There is only matter...*

It may take days, weeks, even months of concentration, but imagine just what mischief you could cause with your newfound knowledge. Wouldn't it be funny to have her pour that sugar substitute into the potted rhododendron next to her?!

Throw off the shackles of the mind.
There is only matter...

Or that young man hunched over his notebook, rewriting his notes from the day's lecture in preparation for final exams. A nice, sharp number-two pencil scratching feverishly over a yellow legal pad.

*That is my hand
That is my arm
That is my pencil
That is my flesh
There is no flesh
There is no pencil
There is only matter...*

Take control. Repeat the mantra and command the matter to do what you will it to do. Reconfigure their matter to become one with yours.

Take your time with this step. Focus. Spend all day, every day, practicing. Remember that the human mind is malleable, a dumb, infantile object waiting to be told what to do. Tell it what to believe.

Let me know how it goes!

Sincerely,
Doctor Blank



September 29, 19__

Dear M____,

Considering the news reports of the violence and chaos spreading rapidly across the tri-state region, we can drop the subterfuge. Your field testing has gone better than I'd hoped.

I've been following your local news ever since taking you on as a pupil. I realized the measure of your success before you personally reported it, primarily from the front-page headlines of your local paper.

LOCAL SIBLINGS MUTILATE THEMSELVES

Soon after our first lesson, it seems that "Billy" and "Sally" were discovered in their garage by their parents in the early morning hours. Their noses had been severed from their faces, by their own hands, and nailed to the wall in front of them. The last report stated that they remained catatonic at the state psychiatric hospital, their only verbal communication a "strange mumbling of nonsensical chants."

Shortly after mailing your second lesson, an incident occurred in your town too terrible to even describe in the local paper. A report was passed on to me from a former colleague of mine currently employed in the office of your state health department.

A young man we'll call "Johnny" was found dead in his parents' living room, his corpse fused to the heavy walnut coffee table. Initial reports surmised that his body had been forced through the wood, although this would have taken a lunatic of immense strength and determination.

Imagine my colleague's surprise and confusion when health officials determined that, instead, his cells had been fused to that of the wood composing the table. Wood grains were found interwoven into his skin. And human tissue was found sandwiched between the various wood grains. Last I heard, they had determined that there was no feasible way to separate the victim from the table and the entire mess had to be cremated together.

At this point, I was already ecstatic of your accomplishments. And then came what international media outlets have dubbed the "Coffee Shop Massacre" (which is a misnomer, considering the entire strip mall became a slaughterhouse).

Mass suicides occurring within multiple pockets of random, homicidal fury. Scores dead and hundreds injured. Well, you know this, already—you were there.

My next advice would have been for you to teach what you have learned to a committed core of acolytes, but judging from the region's rapid descent into madness, you're way ahead of me.

This will most likely be my last letter. The neighboring state has almost completely fallen, so I'll be lucky if the trusty US Postal Service is around much longer ("through rain, snow, sleet, hail, and apocalyptic mass murder...").

I'm not in a hurry to be ripped apart by the hordes of mindless murderers spilling across the country, so an extra-large dose of China White, administered by one of my favorite local "ladies of the night," will have carted me off quietly into oblivion by the time you receive this.

And now I must thank you. After my career disintegrated, I sought solace in alcohol, recreational drugs, and other immoral distractions. My mind isn't what it used to be. Now, I'm happy to say, I can vicariously watch the welcome end of humanity, thanks to you, my best student.

I am heartened in the thought that our planet will recover, eventually, and live a much happier existence without us. Trillions of future unborn humans would reach across time and space to thank you for sparing them the curse of birth.

Sincerely,
Doctor Blank

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QUEEN OF THE CLOVEN HEART

by [Hailey Piper](#)

We gave the queen only virginal women at first. She didn't ask for this, but we knew stories of dragons and devils, the things they liked to eat, and she was no different. But evil will eat other things, as I learned from experience.

As Captain of the White Guard, I had a sacred duty to commit regicide. Happy King, happy kingdom. Unhappy King—that's the queen's fault, and everyone knows it. Only an heir to the throne can become a new king, but a king can always get a new queen.

I wasn't a pitiless monster. For every queen I cut down, the White Guard commissioned a statue built in her honor—half apology, half gratitude. *Sorry we killed you. Thank you for dying. Now the king might marry a queen more faithful, more fruitful, more whatever-it-was-you-lacked that drew the White Sword to your heart.*

She who came to be called the Cloven-Heart Queen seemed no different than the rest when she first arrived. The king courted her at night, true, and he demanded a moonlit wedding without church or clergy. Still, the king is his people's father, and mine taught me as a boy to always obey what a father is owed, through bruises and broken bones, if necessary, as if to punish me for being his son.

In that way, I preferred the king.

Time passed, and we realized that his strange desires were hers laced on his lips. He seemed inattentive in court, his eyes and mind wandering. She was eating his willpower, a shrew in maiden's clothing.

We did as our kingly father was owed. Lay one queen to rest, uplift another to royalty later.

I led the White Guard into the open throne room, greaves clanking on stone floor, white cloaks billowing behind us. Every noble and petitioner knew our purpose. At the front, I wielded the White Sword, shimmering from blade to silver pommel.

There's no ceremony to killing a queen, only action. The White Sword's massive point cracked sternum, split rib, and pierced the queen's heart. I thrust deeper, and the blade burst from between her shoulders to sing against her stone seat.

That should have been the end. The White Sword had slaughtered countless queens across kingly lineage. They were decent women who'd slumped properly to the floor and bled to death.

But the Cloven-Heart Queen was no proper lady. Had we known that before, we might have dealt with her another way.

"Steel," she whispered with a sneer, and then she cackled. Claws sprang from her fingers, and her jaw stretched into a chasm of needle-thin teeth.

No thoughts. Only panic.

I abandoned the White Sword still jutting from her chest. Much worse, I abandoned my addle-eyed king. I might have abandoned my men, too, but they took my running as an order to retreat, and the lot of them followed.

She caught the slowest of us. Was it Edward Gilbert? I believe so.

Claws peeled armor from skin, skin from muscle, like husking maize. A sickly yellow tongue slipped past her teeth and stroked his raw muscle—once to lap blood, again to tear tendons that stuck in her teeth. Back and forth, she savored his pieces.

The nobles and petitioners must've been too stunned to run at first, and by the time they wised up, I had already led the White Guard outside and barricaded the castle's iron doors. Fists banged from inside, but we wouldn't budge. We ignored their muffled cries for mercy, and one by one, their pleas turned to screams that faded down unseen castle halls.

By nightfall, I realized we'd left behind our kingly father, too. He still sat upon his throne, that kind-faced man with his bushy beard and a sword meant not for beating sons, but to knight them in trust. The day I knelt at the throne and that blade tapped my shoulders, I swore I'd do anything

for him. I'd slaughtered his last dozen wives without question and had only appeared in the throne room that day to do it again.

But this time, I'd failed him. The Cloven-Heart Queen lived. Or didn't. We couldn't be sure what counted for life with a creature like her. Several nights after the assassination attempt, her voice sang through the iron doors across the city.

"Feed," she whispered, the wind curling on her tongue. A chill ate through my men, sure as her teeth.

I doubted our barricade could hold her. If we fed her, she might not want to come out. A cat that dines on table scraps will let mice scamper freely.

Every three days, the White Guard and I took into custody a virginal woman from the city. We ushered her across the drawbridge, thrust her through the castle's iron doors, and then barricaded them again. When we ran out of virgins, we sacrificed the remaining city women who hadn't fled to the countryside.

The queen didn't reject them, but her voracity grew. "Feed," she whispered. "More."

My men had suggestions for her appetite, as if an unholy fiend deserves empathy. "Perhaps she's with child, Captain Grey?" one said.

"Made my wife plenty famished," another added. "Eating for two."

"To be with child, she would have to be alive," I told them. Mention of children reminded me that we couldn't offer every woman in the kingdom to this undead monster. We would have no future then. Instead, I led the White Guard through villages and hamlets, taking on volunteers and conscripts to form an army. Surely the northern kingdoms would offer sacrifices aplenty.

They offered wrath. Our neighbors rallied, allied, and cracked our army apart. There would be no tithe of foreign women.

"You would do the same for your king," I said as we retreated.

The northern generals scoffed. "You don't kill for your king," one said. "You kill for her."

He was right. We'd tossed aside our kingly father and kneeled to a hellish mother. I was no knight; I was still that little boy cowering beneath tables or between houses while my father-by-blood shouted and drank. My better father had taken me in, and how had I repaid him?

Locked in that castle. With her.

If I wanted the king to look down from the heavens and offer forgiveness, I would have to earn it.

I led the White Guard back to our castle. We lowered the drawbridge and marched across creaking boards, half of us wielding sharpened swords, the rest carrying roaring torches. Behead her, burn her—whatever it took.

Heavy blackness engulfed us inside, and the air stank of rotted meat. No daylight crept after us; she had stuffed up every window and skylight with corpses. Our torches became lit splinters against the dark. Bones crunched underfoot, where our queen had littered the halls with drained, skinless husks. Rats gnawed at the desiccated flesh and protruding bones.

From the darkened throne room, her voice of salt and venom rattled the bodies and chilled my bones. “Feed?” she called.

I squeezed my fists tight so they wouldn’t tremble in their gauntlets. We filtered inside, cloaks flowing same as that first time we came to kill the Cloven-Heart Queen. Torchlight vaguely lit her shape, now seated on the king’s throne.

How dare she.

The queenly thing now stretched twice my height, grown from many feedings. The White Sword still jutted from her chest, a cradle of bone and sinew. She showed no pain. The sword was not even a nuisance. Her clawed fingers curled around a narrow rope, and at the end, something pale and naked crawled on all fours, muttering and hissing to itself. A delirious skeletal demon, almost familiar.

I lurched back and crashed into my men. They had stiffened into a wall of steel and fire. I tried ordering them to charge the throne, one last queen’s death on the White Guard’s hands, but her pet wouldn’t stop whispering, and every nonsensical word skewered my thoughts.

My men weren’t looking at the queen or her pet. They aimed their torches in all directions, painting the throne room in flickering, terrible shapes.

A gaunt face stared down at us from high on the wall. She used to be a woman, maybe one who had smirked prettily when she passed in the town square, but now her eyes glared red, and needle teeth jutted from behind her lips.

Dozens of sister-faces surrounded hers, a sheet of jittering bodies that coated the throne room walls. Blood wept from their eyes, mouths, and necks.

Our offerings. The queen had eaten some, but she had turned others to her kind.

My men had been right, in their way. The Cloven-Heart Queen was eating for two. Or eating for two dozen and more.

She towered over us, restless claws tapping her hips. Her pet tugged at his leash. His matted beard wiped the filthy floor as he brought his eyes to me, and I recognized him then. He was the most important person in the world.

My kingly father, turned into a mindless, drooling creature of undeath. Not so unlike my own father, in the end, drunk in a stupor by the side of the highway. My father was allowed the grace to die by bandit hands and be buried in a shallow grave. The king would have no such dignity.

We shouldn't have come back. We should have scoured every village in the kingdom, in the world, feeding her and her brood for all time, and no one would ever again step inside this sunless hell.

Her claw pointed at us, and her smile lit the darkness. "Feed," she said.

The fleshy walls collapsed on us, closing curtains of teeth. Her brood tore through armor and fed at necks, arms, legs, anywhere they could drain and eat.

The White Guard turned red.

And I turned yellow yet again. Nothing was sacred anymore. I shoved through my men, the halls, up to the castle's iron doors, and pushed them open.

Tried to. They jostled, but I couldn't press them open and let even a line of sunlight protect me. I banged and hollered, but voices on the far side hollered louder. A mass of angry commoners held the doors shut against me, barricading me inside the way I'd done to the king and his court.

They shouted that I'd fed their women to the queen, and their men to our war at the northern border. They poured accusations that the White Guard had damned the country, that the restless spirits of many murdered queens had called up a matriarch of undeath to bring down king and kingdom, a queenly wrath incarnate.

That couldn't be true. We built statues to their honor. This rabble acted like the king hadn't loved his wives, his people. Nonsense.

The brood grabbed me from behind and hauled me deep into the castle, where they stripped armor and clothing, but not skin. They had some worse fate planned for my body, and they stuffed me into a cage thatched with cloth and bone.

I've been here for a day, I think—there's no sun in the queen's castle to tell the time—but it feels like months. The cage is too narrow for me to lie down, and too stunted for me to sit up, let alone stand. My men lie dead around me. The women of the brood take their time with corpses.

I don't beg that they let me out. They wouldn't care for my pleas, and I won't crawl for her, not even in words.

A torch flares. The walls writhe again, the fleshy brood painted red and black with my men's blood. The Cloven-Heart Queen smiles from her throne. Leash going taut at her side, my miserable undead king tugs toward the cage. I think he recognizes me. He'll change my station one last time, from man to fiend. It's only fitting. My own father couldn't kill me as a boy, but my kingly father will end me as a man.

I'll become one of these things.

Two brood creatures open the cage just enough for the king to crawl inside. He's still muttering to himself. Every nonsensical word creeps up

my nerves. I want to talk with him about the good times, but she's broken him in too many ways.

"I abandoned you," I say, my voice cracking. "I'm sorry." I brace myself for fangs to sink into my neck.

His jaws stretch open, but no needle teeth appear. He snaps at my leg, flat teeth piercing skin. I fight at his face, and he bites at my fingers. This is all wrong. Where are his fangs? Why the hunger? The other undead creatures killed my men first and then ate them, not the other way around. I should get the same treatment.

Except he isn't like the others. He chews at me with flat teeth. Ribs protrude from his chest in pitiful angles, and his belly sags over his pelvis. Skin clings to narrow bones.

The king is not dead or undead. He's been kept barely alive, starved by his queen.

Until now.

I can't die like this. I want it clean and quick like my men. Not once did I torture the queens; the sword pierced their chests and they died in that instant. He's taking another bite. I try to fight him again, but the cage is narrow, and he's better at making himself small. Teeth sink into my arm.

I turn desperate eyes to the Cloven-Heart Queen. Let me out and I'll crawl for her, promise. I'll crawl better than the king.

Her claw points at my cage, as she pointed at my brothers before, and that same wicked smile lights the darkness.

"Feed."



DEATH IN THE MOUTH

DEATH IN THE MOUTH is an illustrated horror anthology showcasing BIPOC and other ethnically marginalized writers and artists from around the world.

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FREEHOLD

by [Josh Pearce](#)

It was almost opening ceremony, and I was on corpse duty, dragging fresh dead from the funeral home (ol' Miss Shirley, pneumonia, rest in peace) to lay out on the road near the Payton Ranch turn-off which was, we all figured, the farthest point that could be seen from the bunker's periscope and still be safely out of rifle range. The town cemetery hadn't been used in more than a decade, with most residents happy to donate their bodies to the betterment of the community, and so a thicket of bones—those that hadn't been dragged away by dogs—cut the ranch off from the rest of the world. I was wearing tattered, mud-and-blood-caked clothes two sizes too big for me; hand-me-downs and passed-arounds that everyone on corpse duty shared.

It was hard to see and breathe through the rubber Halloween mask that we hoped, from a distance, made the wearer a convincingly pustulant zombie mutant—*grr*, *argh*—but I got Miss Shirley settled in what was, I thought, a respectful enough position, given the circumstances. The dirt road was quiet, just some jaybirds scuffling in the wild blackberries. Nobody came down this way anymore unless they were on town council orders, upkeeping the freehold. The older folk were always trying to shirk their work shifts, maybe 'cause they knew they'd lay to rest here soon enough. Or maybe it was the guilt. But I liked it in the solitudinous ecosystems among the cattails, far from the maddening.

Something moved suddenly in the brambles. Not a jay, something bigger. I looked towards it, hesitated, then was still.



After a shower and clean clothes, I went looking for my friends down at the Save-Mart where they usually chilled, and found four of them dangling feet off a loading dock. Nolan was trying to get Denny to drink a jar of pickle juice. Ishtar hunched over a phone game. Harman saw me coming and said, “Hey, it’s Oh Mama,” which was what most people called me ’cause they couldn’t say my name right.

“What’s up, turkeys?” I flopped down next to them and unfolded my paperback-of-the-week.

“How was it today?” Nolan gave me a simple high-five as if he hadn’t just been sneaking kisses from me on the sly this morning in science lab.

Denny got half the jar down before it all came right back up in a splatter below our feet. I rolled away from the smell and into better light and shrugged. Didn’t want to say anything about the thing in the bushes. “Just a few more weeks and we’ll be done with it all.”

“What d’you think we’ll find in there?” Harman’s mom was a council member, so he was gonna be right up front at the ceremony.

“Balls,” Ish muttered. Maybe to him, maybe to her game.

“I hear it’s inbred cannibals who’ve gone blind from living underground for so long.” Denny was new to town—his family moved here last year—and he’d believe almost anything you told him about the bunker.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“They have electricity,” said Ish, rolling her eyes. Nearly the whole south forty of Payton Ranch was solar panels.

“I dunno. One of my uncles is on the ground-sounding teams. He says he’s heard some weird shit.” Then Denny doubled up and said, “I think I gotta go home or I’m gonna shit my pants.”

“Kay, bye, Denny,” I said, turning a page. “Feel better.”

“It’s probably just farts, you big baby,” said Nolan.

“Later, ladies.” Denny hopped down.

Ish shut off her game, said, “I got homework.”

“We all got homework,” said Harman. “You’re just the only one who does it.”

I dog-eared and stood up. “I’ll walk with you. Bye, boys.” They were trading gaming cards and didn’t look up. “Bye, boys. Whatever, c’mon, let’s go.”

Ish was kind of a dweeb, with self-inflicted haircuts and outfits assembled from her older brother's closet, and she was always busy on weekends with dweeb stuff like Dungeons & Dragons, and Ham Radio Club. But she was also the only person who pronounced my name correctly, and even knew its meaning. She'd once printed out a bunch of articles on interstellar objects for me to read and gave me some of her own canonical sci-fi books. She called me "Scout" when no one else was around and "Oh" otherwise, so yeah, I guess we were pretty much like best friends at that point.

"Will you be sad after the bunker's open?" I asked.

Her nose crinkled at the thought. "Sad? Why would I be sad?" A lot of emotions around town about the upcoming day; anxiety, fear, religious rapture. But I guess not a lot of sadness for a way of life ending.

"What about your radio job? Won't that be over?" Ish worked after school at the community college station, broadcasting fake emergency signal alerts and dramatized survivor pleas for help. The drama department really got into it. She'd won a state-level award for a bit she'd written—a series of cryptic, Chinese-military transmissions that were, she assured me, *very* authentic.

Ish shrugged. "It looks good on my resume, and I wasn't going to stick around here after graduation, anyway."

"You're thinking of leaving?" Was my whole world going to end as soon as that bunker was opened?

We were almost at the stoplight where she'd peel left, and I'd continue straight. I dragged my feet to keep from getting to it too quickly. "Almost every job in this town has something to do with keeping those people underground," she said. "You can't avoid it, unless you move to a big city. Stay here, and you automatically support it."

"But isn't that a good thing?" In my emotional tally of the town, nobody else seemed to have any confusion.



"Pass the corn."

"Pass the corn, *what?*"

"Pass the corn...plate?"

I interrupted my parents. "Why do we do it?"

"Do what, honey?" Mom said, and Dad said, "I knew she was too young for this. They should at least wait until eighteen before they make

kids handle dead bodies,” and Mom said, “‘They’ who? You were right there voting along with everyone from the very beginning,” so Dad said, “Well maybe I’ve changed my mind.”

“All of it. The radio plays, the websites, throwing roadkill onto their property. It was like, thirty years ago! Why are we still keeping up the ruse?”

“It wasn’t *thirty*—”

“Honey, the Paytons were very dangerous. Extremely insular and anti-social. Racist. They hated everyone, and had a lot of guns. *Have* a lot of guns, still, I would imagine.”

“Bastards breeding like jackrabbits,” Dad said, “using up all the good farmland.” Dad’s background was in agriculture.

“Now, Winston, it isn’t about the *land*—”

“Using it to grow dope. You notice how food prices dropped after we took over their fields?” He worked with the radiation teams, making sure not too much of it was leaking into the soil. The early days, from what I gathered, were pretty crude—slingshotting old camp-lantern thorium, smoke detector americium, and Pyrex uranium at the entrance of the bunker, where the Paytons had their dosimeters. Then the city got federal funding (and permission) to crop-dust the bunker sensors at night with pitchblende payloads. Ish called it a binding circle, to keep the monsters contained. Like I said: dweeb. Some university researchers supposedly were close to inventing an x-ray that could hit the sensors from a mile away with no risk of cross-contamination, no need to get close to the freehold, but I guess that wouldn’t soon matter much, either.

“Yeah, I get all that. But why *still*, after all these years?” I mashed my meal with a fork, creating mud. “Haven’t they been in time-out long enough?” Freeholders couldn’t see much of anything, just the narrow slot through the bunker periscope.

“Have to wait ‘til their older generation dies off. Should be almost about that time.” Dad dismissed my concerns with his spoon. “They got exactly what they wanted: nuclear war, economic collapse, race riots, whatever—we gave it to them. Two or three faked news reports and the whole brood went running for the bunker and haven’t come back out yet.”

“You never met the Paytons—it was before you were born—and be thankful you didn’t. They were simply very nasty people.”

I didn’t want to mention the face in the blackberries because maybe it *had* been just an animal, and not a girl younger than me. “Okay, but what about any babies down there? How are they to blame? Isn’t there something about the sins of the father—”

"The *what*?" Now Dad watched me sharply. "Where'd you hear that? What kind of book have you been reading?"

"Isn't that from the Bible, Winston?"

"I dunno," I mumbled to my plate, "it's just something Ish said."

"Oh, that girl." Mom started clearing plates. "Always with the ideas."

"She's an odd one," Dad agreed, and after that I guess they had nothing else to say except Mom chiding, "No reading at the table, please."

On my walk with Ish, I'd said, "Hey wait, if you're leaving, then I should have something to remember you by. Stand next to the sign." It was a local landmark, kind of a touristy thing, a roadside blowup of the freehold floor plan. Every week, the sounding team went all around the edges of Payton Ranch, using stethoscopes and ultrasound to map out the interior of freehold. Counting voices, measuring how full the storage areas were, listening for sounds of escape. Then they updated the freehold map, best that they could make of it, and put it up here for everyone to track.

Ish played along, posed—okay, *super* cute, love it—while I took a picture. But when she dropped her hands, and her face returned to normal, I knew something was wrong.

A sour taste in my mouth that stuck all through dinner. I tried to text Ish sorry before bed but the police radio-jammers—which the town used to restrict the signals that the freehold could pick up to only what City Council wanted them to hear—meant cell service sucked.



Corpse duty again. This time it was the small stuff, so I dumped a wheelbarrow load of squashed skunks, raccoons, cats, a dog, and other veterinary contributions in a midden heap near enough where the Paytons' air sensors would sniff the volatile organic compounds and recommend staying indoors. One year, we put a whole moose out there. Had to do it by hand, because five mutant zombies on a pickup truck would've been one for the freehold logbook.

I sat on the overturned barrow, pushed my mutant mask up enough to breathe, and opened a new book. Such a nice day, with the sunlight greening in the high branches, and I could hear the Payton creek running somewhere out of sight. I took off the half-rotted funeral jacket to let the sun warm my arms. I got lost in the book, so at first I didn't notice the noises in the tall grass until, suddenly aware of a shadow, I looked up and

gasped. Right in the middle of the footpath was either a small child or a large upright rabbit, my view of it blurred by sweat. Entirely on reflex, I tugged at the mask like it was actual sloughing flesh, lurched to my feet, and let out a pretty passable growl.

It certainly worked, in any case, because the creature vanished almost immediately back into the brush. After my heart settled, a feeling of disgust flickered through me like a candle flame. Must we always automatically act like the monsters they think we are? I hadn't recognized the face—or even recognized it as human, some ferality in there throwing it off the far rim of the uncanny valley—but from her color, she must've been from the freehold. I pulled off the mask and shouted after her, "Wait, I'm sorry! Please don't run away." I heard movement, quick scurrying through the grass, and followed it. I saw trampled blades, but no clear footprints. How had she gotten out, past the sounding teams and cameras? "Hello? Where are you?"

Without the costume or my book, and leaving all the dead behind me, I ran full-chest, light-hearted, fleet-foot, open-throated, gulping down the honeyed air, the creek-reed pollen, some bugs, like a jet turbine, and still she kept ahead of me—she was *fast*. Bursting free of the overgrowth, I saw just a flash of her vanishing beneath the roots of a gnarled walnut—I think it was her—down a little burrow. I pushed aside branches and rocks. My shoulders would fit the tight squeeze. My hips...maybe less so. "Hello down there."

Only the distant sound of clattering pebbles returned from the dark. With my phone light on, I crawled in head-first. I scooped handfuls off the walls and forced them past my legs behind me to widen the tunnel enough for my whole body. It was exhausting, and I kept getting snagged on roots and rocks. Downhill I went, covered in dirt and sweat, cotton-mouthed. My fingers brushed against either a rat's tail or a worm. I snatched them back, afraid of teeth. Broke at least three nails, and rubbed my forearms completely raw.

The light reflected off something shiny, and I stopped. A piece of galvanized metal blocked the way, and I suddenly realized the full weight of the Earth all around me. Couldn't go backwards, a panic-thought that made me throw up a little in my mouth, which cut off my breathing, made everything smaller and closer together, setting off the whole cycle again. I slammed my hands against the metal, accomplishing nothing. Screamed once past the raw acid burn in my throat.

Stop. The sounding team could've heard me, but they'd already done their shift for the week. Whole town would find my suffocated corpse on

Opening Day. Any freeholder who heard me screaming would think it was a zombie attack, and come guns blazing. Only the rabbit girl was closer, and where had she gone? The thought cleared my head just enough. Deep breath. She must have gone somewhere. I ran my hand along the edge of the metal and cut my finger on a loose bit of it. Got my nails under it, and pulled. The flap came away like a hatch, creating an opening. I scraped by and tumbled out into a room. I was in the bunker.



“If the bunker’s open and nobody has to pretend anymore, then you can,” I swallowed back saying, *Stay here with me*, “get an honest job without leaving town.”

“You know how much of our local job market relies on deception, Scout? Once the Paytons come out, there’s gonna be a whole lot of people out of work, and I’m not going to be one of them.”

“Or,” I picked a violet and threw it at Ish. It stuck in her hair. “The Paytons come out and spend all their gold on cheeseburgers and movies and other shit they haven’t ever had.” That was another popular theory, the buried treasure, the hoard of precious metals that every survivalist had for when paper money went worthless. “I’m thinking either King Tut or Roanoke. What about you?” I coaxed. “Untold treasures, or unsolved mysteries?”

She brushed the flower out. “Wasn’t Tutankhamun’s tomb cursed?” *Tutankhamun*, adorable, what a geek. But yeah, probably right. “I imagine either Dr. Moreau or the end of Butch Cassidy,” she said.

I had read that book. She’d given it to me, with marginalia, a little look at the interior floor plan of her brain. Doesn’t end well. Neither does Butch Cassidy, I suppose.



Treasures or mysteries, which was it to be? Lights turned on automatically all around me. This was the famous freehold, huh? It was so quiet, and if I stretched up on my toes, I could reach the ceiling. This room was crammed with furniture like an IKEA showroom; all the clever ways to maximize your minimal space. Couches that unfolded into extra beds, lots of cabinets and floor storage space.

The walls were all painted in bright colors, like in a preschool. There was a sink built into one wall, and I was pleasantly surprised that the taps still worked. I washed myself off as best as I could. A door led farther into

the shelter, but before I stepped through, I pulled the piece of sheet metal away from the wall so I could have a quick escape if I needed one. Noticed claw marks all along it. Broken human fingernails.

The next room was much the same: a couch, a TV, bunk beds, compact shower, compost toilet, lots of shelving. There was no one in either of these rooms. No sound of distant footsteps or other activity. The solar panels kept everything lit and the water recycled, like in one of Ish's books. We could launch this thing straight into space and probably be all right. What would you run out of first, if you were sealed off from the world like this? Food, water, air, or sanity?

The next room was almost a mirror image. I was going to get lost without breadcrumbs. I opened my photos and zoomed in on the one of Ish, then spent several minutes trying to figure out where I was on the billboard behind her. This place went on forever. Town council knew the rough shape of it from sounding teams, but the feel of being lost in outer space stuck with me. I was an advance scout, the first to set foot in a world that no one else had seen. I took videos with my phone. I was going to be so famous at school.

I passed row after row of bunk beds, enough to comfortably sleep fifty—if I included all the pullout couches—and storage closets with 55-gallon drums of dehydrated survival food, most which hadn't even been opened. I even found a garden with black-wilted greens under grow-lights. I rubbed the leaves between my fingers, tasted something bitter. Looked like the Paytons had made room to bring some of their cash crop along with them.

But for all the stockpiled food, dirty laundry, crayoned kids' drawings, and cigarette butts, the freehold was empty. Hadn't there been a nuclear family with at least five offspring? Some pregnant barefoot daughters plus significant others, and an indeterminate extended network of cousins, half-siblings, baby daddies, great aunties, and the rest? No way all of them snuck out the way I'd come in.

"They'd better find *someone* down there," Ish had said, "because last time someone rolled back an empty tomb, they invented western colonialism."

It was so quiet, I found myself tiptoeing, opening and closing cabinets gently. The loudest noise I heard was the hiss of air in a utility room, which left a metallic taste in my mouth, and caused a moment of dizziness. What had the sounding teams been listening to all this time, if not the ghosts of air filters and DVD dialogue? The thought gave me an idea, a way for everyone to get what they wanted. I moved through gun lockers and wine storage. I taste-tested freeze-dried ice cream. Freehold was nicer than my parents' home, and bigger even than Nolan's. Like the dream of a palace from a lost civilization, frozen in time.



“So, you don’t see a silver lining?” I asked. “No possible good?”

“You and I, we were born into this. Into our parents’ bad choices. How can we possibly make it good? They tell us it’s for the best, but we’re trapped here just as much as the freeholders.”

“They stockpiled guns and sent death threats to our parents!” I was practically yelling at her and couldn’t stop. Oh, good one, Oh. Make your only real friend tear up right when she’s looking for any excuse to run away. “What would you have done differently?”



I could probably live here forever, just off the dehydrated meals alone. We could both live down here, once I showed Ish how peaceful it was away from everyone else. We’d have a real *Home Alone...at Bernie’s* setup. She could write her little dramas, and we would act them out for the sounding team, make it sound like the Paytons were alive and well, fully populated and quite content with staying where they were. The town council could keep applying for federal grants and levy taxes, the university could invent more mind-control x-rays, the local radio station could produce more scripts—“Remnants of the last nuclear states continue to use up their arsenals; all citizens are advised to shelter in place”—which would be heard only by an audience of two, me and Ish playacting our reactions to such news in our best Payton impersonations. Nobody would be exploited, and Ish would never need to go anywhere else.

But then, bouncing off all the metal surfaces, came the clatter of ninepins. Crap, I’d almost forgotten about the girl. Well, that was okay—Ish and I could teach her whatever she needed, what we wanted, everything there was about the surface. Leaving out, perhaps, the bigger lies.

I chased the echoes around a series of right angles—advertised in bunker pamphlets as “attenuating gamma radiation”—to the freehold’s two-lane bowling alley. What kind of mind did it take to witness the end of the world and say, “Know what? I could really go for a few frames right now”—some real cognitive dissonance right there.

I passed the polished-skull bowling balls in their return rack and pushed aside the bowling-pin femurs and tibias to get to the empty space behind them. As I crawled, the waxed wood under my hands and knees gave way to loose-packed dirt. The battery on my phone died, so I continued on by feel. Ish and I would have to give the little rabbit girl

a name, of course. Probably something out of one of her books, like “Friday” or “Newt.”

“What would you have done differently, to protect people you love?”

“Should have just bulldozed over the entrance on day one, then!” Ish shouted back at me.

For a minute, I couldn’t speak. “That’s...murder.”

“How’s it any different from what we’re doing every day already?”

That was when Ish walked away, and that was the moment the Earth disappeared beneath me.

The dirt shifted under my palms, ran loose like quicksand until it fell away completely, and I was falling through the dark. I clawed for something to hold on to, but I couldn’t gain purchase. All my fingernails were gone, torn off trying to get a grasp on things, trying to feel around the edges for the shape of the truth, find something solid to cling to.

Only, not falling, because there was no wind against my face, no gut uplift. And not darkness, either—there were bright pinpoints all around me. *The Payton gold*, I thought at first, and then *Eyes*, when they winked.

There was no going back from our decisions. Not for the freeholders, not our parents, not me or Ish. I kept struggling between the claustrophobia of dependence and the agoraphobia of abandonment before I finally saw that she was probably right—we were head-first down a hole, thinking that the bunker would give us an easy fix to all our problems, and the only thing any of us could do was dig deeper and hope for someone to reach out and take our hand before we starved.

How long was I stuck on that thought in this airless place before the pinpoint lights began to swirl around me, until finally, hovering between the fear of falling forever and the fear of being stuck in place, that balance of terrors which surpassed understanding and brought peace, I found myself floating high above a star system and saw a tumbling jumble of tunnels, tubes, and modules hanging suspended like a metal bramble in the void, starkly lit by a cold and distant light source, with sharp shadows etching its corrugated steel edges.

I drifted toward it, found that one of the brightest points was actually a harsh fluorescence coming from a round window. It got larger and larger as I came closer and pressed my face to the glass. Inside, I saw a family gathered around a table set with a great feast of rehydrated astronaut rations, a large family of many generations much removed, all reunited here in some celebration, and I thought, *What was wrong with their faces?* The ones at the head of the table seemed normal enough, but as the lineage continued down the miles and miles of place settings, each face seemed more melted than the one before. At the

end, I looked from monster to man, and man to monster, and monster to man again, and could not tell the difference.

I could clearly hear their laughter and cheerful voices, but no matter how hard I pounded on the window or how loudly I shouted, they didn't notice. Another figure came into the room. A person, but not a person; could have been a large animal, could have been a rabbit, or a girl with flowers in her hair.

There was one other face that kept flickering in and out of the crowd, noticeable only because of how obviously it didn't fit in with the rest of them. It had eyes like two deep finger holes, and a gaping mouth like a thumbhole, its hair and skin pulled back tightly on a polished dome of a skull.

It was always looking at me. Why wouldn't it tell anyone else that it saw me? And then the rabbit girl moved between us, and the face disappeared—it had only been my reflection the entire time. I screamed at it, at the realization, at the people on the inside. The rabbit twitched, looked over, came up to the window, and peered out.

She opened the porthole so that she could grab my wrist with a small, soft, furry hand, and pull me inside. It took several straining seconds to wiggle me loose from the dirt, and I tumbled forward. I was in the bunker.

It was very quiet, with only the hiss of air ventilation and the subsonic thrum of some buried machinery, maybe a generator or a water pump. "Hiya, Scout, where have you been?" the girl asked. "We've been looking everywhere for you. Your mom is worried sick." She peeled off her inhuman face like a mask.

I clung to her. "I'm so sorry. I tried to call and tell you." The room was surprisingly spacious with all its furniture folded away into the walls. She turned on the tap to get me a drink. The water grew into a sphere as big as a bowling ball, sticking to the end of the faucet with surface tension until she tapped it with a finger and sent the globule floating in my direction.

"Drink this."

"Isn't there any food left? I'm *starving*."

She gave me a puzzled look. "Left from what?"

There was no sign of the feast. No sign of anyone else, or that they had just been here. "They're all gone?" How had they snuck out without my noticing? I looked back at the wall I'd come in through. No windows, of course. What would an underground bunker need with windows? Or hatches. "How did you get in?"

"Through the front door, of course." There was, somewhere deeper inside the bunker, the sound of thunder like ninepins. She turned her head toward the noise. "Come on, there's something you've gotta see."

And so, I went with her, and we saw. We were where we were, and far above us, the world was right where it should be.



THE DEVIL'S TRAVEL AGENCY

by [Alex Sobel](#)

You Make The Call

You don't know what you're asking for, exactly. You don't know where you need to go, or how to go about getting there. You don't know the cost, don't know how much you have to pay. You don't know the risks for you or other parties, don't know if there will be benefits. You don't know if you'll get where you need to go, you don't know if it'll make any difference when you get there.

Don't worry, we'll help you with all that.

You're given a phone number. Maybe you get it from some back-alley mystic with a storefront that you've passed by every day on the way to work for years and never noticed, but now that you see it, you can't help but wonder how a place like that stays in business. Maybe you got it from a priest with connections, one who wants to help out, who doesn't see what good it would do anyone keeping the number from you, who hopes you don't ask where he got it from, or if he's ever used it. Or maybe a friend gave it to you, one who's used our services before, in which case let us know, because referrals get you a discount on your next trip with us.

When you call the number, we answer on the first ring. This is company policy, and if we make you wait for more than one ring, please call our customer service number.

We say hello, the voice in broken pieces, like crumbling stone. It moves in waves, pushing forward through your cell phone, then pulling you toward it, away from yourself. You think it will bury you, think it will lift you off your feet. You think your lungs will collapse, you think you will scream. You don't know what to do.

You decide to say hello.

"Is this..." you begin. "The devil?"

We are not him. But that doesn't mean that he is a figurehead used as a way to sell our services. He's not a spokesperson, he takes an active role in the company.

We tell you as much.

"My name is Grace. I need to talk to my brother. To see him. He's dead."

We already know this, but we do not tell you so.

"We're twins," you add, your words coming through the spaces between teeth. "Drug overdose. He wasn't even... he was just so young."

We type a few things into a computer, your basic information, who you want to visit. The computer then tells us where you need to go, which mode of transportation you'll need to take to get there. You hear it on your end, the sound of keys, wonder what kind of computer we could possibly be using. We give you a location to be at, a time, say that there will be a bus. It won't be late; it will not wait for you. We tell you goodbye.

"Wait, what do I owe you? Don't you want my soul or something?"

We tell you that you will have to pay, but it will not be with your soul. This is human currency, not ours. What would we do with a soul, anyway?

The Bus Comes

You're at the location an hour early, wait patiently at the bus stop, the notebook in your hands. You should have made copies of the pages and brought those instead, but it's too late now. You wonder if this stop is used for regular buses, too, if this place will disappear as soon as you walk away from it. A few cars pass, but they're going too fast for you to see the driver's faces, if they're men or demons or something else. You don't know if you'd be able to tell the difference, anyway.

The bus arrives.

We're in the driver's seat when you step on the bus, but you don't really see us. You see what your eyes allow you, what we allow. Maybe you see an old man like the one who used to drive the bus to school. Maybe you see the long-haired character from a TV show you shouldn't have been allowed to watch at that age. Maybe you see your mother, maybe you see everyone's mother. Maybe you see the idea of a mother.

You don't see your father.

The only other passenger is a boy, maybe ten, with thick bangs, long and oily, that completely cover his face. He doesn't look up.

The bus has uncomfortable seats, bars for people who need to stand, a retracted wheelchair ramp. There are ads lining the spots above the windows, one for a bubble-faced chiropractor, one for a juice you've never heard of that advertises itself as being "tai chi for your belly," the logo for a fast food restaurant that you've eaten at four days a week since he died, the calories sitting hard underneath your ribs. It's just like a regular bus, you think.

Because it is a regular bus, we'd like our customers to know.

The Trip

The bus drives for an hour, no turns, not even any curves in the road. You see fields, crops. There are billboards lining the side of the road, advertising a candy shop with a name that you're pretty sure is offensive. You try to look it up on your cell phone, but you can't even use data to connect to the internet. You dial his number. It hasn't been disconnected yet, but there's no reception, nothing's going through.

There are small towns that you catch glimpses of, the kind where there are a few dozen people who know each other's business, where the odds are good of your ex marrying your best friend or sibling, where you can't escape people, where you can't escape yourself.

As you get farther and farther away, the towns get smaller, sadder. You can tell that a change is happening, try to focus on it, to find exactly where it occurs. You want to know where the break is, when you're officially out of your world and in hell, or wherever it is you think you're going. You remember being little, lying in bed, trying to figure out the exact moment when you fell asleep. Every time, you wake up disappointed, the break between awake and asleep out of focus, the image fuzzy on either side. You also remember Stephen lying next you, sharing a bed until you're thirteen, until it's weird for twin brother and sister to sleep so close. He moves into the attic, and you sleep alone.

You remember that, too.

It doesn't get darker, like you expect. Instead, the colors outside the bus window begin to merge, blend at the edges. You think that it looks like existence was taking up a certain amount of space, that there was a density to the world, and suddenly that space was cut in half, with everything rushing to fill up every hole, every gap, everything.

This is not strictly what it's like here, but you're closer than you'll ever know.

When the bus stops, the young boy stands, pulls his feet across the floor toward the front of the bus. When you look out the window, you see a charcoal horizon bowing toward the murky sky, pulled back like the rain under windshield wipers. You see what looks like a tree behind you, the shape jagged, like it was cut out of paper by unskilled fingers.

“Where are you going?” you ask the boy as he moves toward the door. “Where is this? Why are you here?”

For the first time, you see the boy look up, meeting you with his face-swallowing eyes. “My mom,” he says, and walks off the bus. He doesn’t say what he means, whether his mom is here, or she’s the one who told him to come, or something else entirely. You try to follow him with your eyes as he leaves the bus, but as soon as he steps out, he’s gone.

It’s not just you, you should know. When he stepped off that bus, the boy was gone to himself and everyone else.

You try to imagine what it will be like. Will there be fire? Bats? Monsters? Will Stephen look the same? You’ve seen movies with dead people in them, where they look the way they did when they die. Is that what will happen with Stephen? There wasn’t any damage to him, though. Not when you found him, anyway.

It wasn’t like Dad.

You Remember What Happened

Dad was living in a trailer park, but was forced out when they started building the new hospital. He sold the house, didn’t need all that space without Mom around. You went to his apartment, you and Stephen. Dad hadn’t answered his phone in almost a week. He was on the couch, head slung back, an arm dangling over the edge. A beer was on the end table, just barely out of reach. You spoke, moved closer to him, but then you saw, caught the slightest touch of blood on his cheek. You made Stephen look, made him make sure. You wonder if Stephen saw himself in the body, if he knew he’d be next, saw his own face.

You called your mom while Stephen dealt with everything, the ambulance, answered the questions that needed to be answered.

“Dad’s dead,” you said when they put you through to your mother.

She gasped. “My God. How? What happened? How old was he?” she said.

You talked with her for a whole minute before you realized that she thought it was her own father who was gone.

You Arrive

When it's your stop, you get off the bus, start walking because you don't know what else to do, where to go. You hold the notebook in your left hand, feel sweat dripping down your fingers toward the pages. As you push forward, the ragged corners of the tree at the horizon begin to round out until it's oval shaped. You keep pushing ahead even though you feel your feet sinking into the ground, holding you, begging you not to go. You begin to hear noise, footsteps, the clanking of glasses. The horizon narrows ahead of you, a crack, and you slide through it.

You find yourself in a bar. There are people eating, drinking, but no one speaks. There's a short blonde who looks too young to be allowed in here, a couple of men sitting at a booth, their necks tucked between their shoulders. You take a seat at the bar, set the notebook in front of you. You don't know if the bartender speaks your language, if he can understand you.

"How much does a beer cost?" you say, pointing to the taps. You make a motion like you're fanning money in front of you. He shakes his head, pours a beer, places it in front of you, then walks through a door behind the bar and disappears.

You take a sip, the taste bitter, like swallowing your own bile. You want more.

"You like it?" You turn to see a woman next to you, maybe twice your age. She motions with her head toward the beer.

"Yeah," you say.

"Here for someone?"

"My brother. He overdosed."

She nods. "I first came for my wife. Cancer, so I knew it was coming. But the day she died," she stops for a moment, sucks in air through her nose, "she could see it, you know? She started to say something. 'Make sure you...' she said, and that was it, she was gone. I wanted to know what she said. Make sure I... what? It felt important."

The woman sips her own beer, her face not betraying the bitterness. She smiles, but fights against it, like she's seeing someone she just had a fight with and doesn't want to reveal how much she missed them.

"What did she say? Did you ever find her?"

She swallows. "Well, I found her alright. But you wanna know what she said? She told me she couldn't remember what she was trying to tell me, that it wasn't important. She told me not to come. But that was a long time ago."

"And you keep coming back?"

“Yeah, though I don’t see her much anymore. Now I just come to hang out, see the sights a few times a year. There’s a lot here. Have you been to the giant dog statue? Or the man made of cold fire?”

You shake your head.

“They’re something,” she says. She sticks out her tongue, moves her body back and forth like an animal shaking off water. “Do you have a list? Some questions? A speech or something?”

“A speech?”

“For your dead brother. Saw your notebook, assumed that’s what it was for. That’s where I failed. I didn’t have anything prepared for my wife. It was mostly tears, mumbling. You’ll only find him for a few minutes, then he’ll be gone. Just thought I’d warn you. They have to keep moving or something happens, but I can’t say what. Them’s the rules, I don’t pretend to understand how any of it works. But then, I don’t have to. I’m only visiting.”

You Continue On

The streets are brick, uneven. The replacement bricks are obvious, a soil color over dark green. You pass different stores, restaurants, some with signs you can read, some in a language you don’t recognize. You stop into one that says “Grocery” on the sign. There’s a cashier, but no customers. You get his attention, ask him if he’s seen someone named Stephen, give a brief description. The cashier doesn’t speak, only nods, turns back toward the register.

As you walk out, you get the feeling that you used to work at this grocery store, or maybe somebody you know did.

You see the sign for an arcade, neon, blinking purple. You don’t recall ever being in a place like this, but it feels familiar. You see a man playing a game, his body gaunt, movements robotic. You walk up to look over his shoulder. He’s playing a game that consists of a superhero beating up robots. The green robots have drills for hands, the yellow ones shoot lasers, the red ones blow fireballs. Each can be destroyed by punching them until they explode.

“You know this one?” the man playing the game says, looking over at you. You jump at the sound of his voice. “The game, I mean. Sorry to scare you. I know everyone else around here is, like, an automaton. Makes you jumpy when someone living and breathing comes along.”

You nod, slip your hand in front of your mouth to confirm that you’re still breathing. Your breath is warm against your palm. There must be oxygen here, you realize.

We take care of our customers, providing any breathing material that they require. If at any point, you find what we've provided to be insufficient, we will do everything in our power to better accommodate you.

"Makes me think of going to Disney World as a kid," you say. "Going on the rides, the animatronics coming to life as you float by in your raft. I remember being so disappointed when my mom told me that they didn't move all the time, that when someone wasn't looking, they stopped, went dead."

"Wanna play?" the man says, stepping away from the game cabinet, motioning for you to take a turn.

You're good at the game, the controls feel natural under your hands, but you don't have a single solid memory of ever playing it.

The man watches you finish the game, doesn't say another word. You start to think that he's like them, after all, that he's not human, that you're living out a pre-considered scenario, or a memory. Or maybe it's a process, everyone here becomes mechanical after awhile, like an afterlife tucked into another afterlife. Maybe you'll become like that, too, not thinking or feeling, just doing, just somebody else's memory, a construct.

The thought of this tickles something in your brain, but you can't quite point to what.

You Find Him

Stephen's at a diner, the kind with knick-knacks on the wall, pictures of old movie stars, instruments with unplayable strings, a miniature jukebox on each table. He's sitting down, eating what looks like eggs, but a different color, one you can't name, one you've never seen before. He's wearing a dark-green flannel shirt, black jeans. They may be the clothes he was buried in, but he always wore the same few things, so you can't tell.

You sit across from him. The small jukebox next to you is playing "Cupid," by Sam Cooke. Stephen looks up, coughs slightly, swallows like he's about ready to tell someone bad news.

"Go ahead, Grace," he says, motioning with his hand as if to say the floor is yours.

"I found this," you slide the notebook toward him. "In your apartment."

He dabs his mouth with a napkin, swallows. "Is there a question? If you want me to read something, you'll have to do it for me. I can't."

You don't question the rules of this world, you've learned better, so you pull the notebook back toward you, flip through the pages. "It's your journal."

"I seem to recall."

"You talk about killing Dad, how you're glad you haven't yet, how he deserves to die."

"So, you want to know if I killed him?"

"No," you say. "I don't think you did."

"But the coincidence, it bothers you, doesn't it? Or maybe not a coincidence. I'm not sure I know what word it is. Death is confusing, isn't it? It's hard to sift through."

"Have you seen him? Dad?"

He shakes his head. "He's somewhere else. Another town or village or whatever we're calling these places. Maybe someday I will. I'm surprised you didn't come to see him. I bet he'd--"

"Did you mean to do it?" you say, interrupting. "I need to know. Was it suicide, or just an accident?"

Stephen puts down his fork.

"Which would you prefer? That I purposely took myself away from you, left you alone, or that I wanted to live and was just too stupid to not take too much?"

You don't reply to this. "What is it like here?" you ask instead.

"I wouldn't know. You're the one on the outside. How does it look to you?"

"Remember Disney World? The animatronics?"

"They're not all like that." He motions with his fork. "The girl at the table in the corner."

You turn to see the girl he's talking about, her eyes panicked, scanning the room.

"She's missing someone. Probably came for a stupid reason like you, now she can't go home, or can't stop coming back, or whatever it might be. That happens. It's like an addiction for some people."

You turn back toward Stephen. "I didn't come for a stupid reason."

"Then what did you want out of this?" You don't answer. He stands up, drops his napkin on top of his plate of eggs. "I have to go now, okay. But before I leave, I want you to know that I do love you, Grace. For what it's worth."

"Where do you go?" you ask, as he walks away. He doesn't seem to hear. "Do you become like everyone else around here?"

"You remember too much," Stephen says, opening the door. "Do yourself a favor and forget as much as you can, okay? It's better that way."

And then he's out the door and gone to you forever.

The Way You Would Have Gone

You couldn't have cut anything, no slicing of skin, splitting of veins. You can't even stand injections, not because of the pain, but just the penetration of your flesh, the fear of something inside you. Jumping seemed reasonable, but from where? You couldn't have gone through with using a gun. Too messy, too much clean up. You didn't want to be a burden on anyone. You just wanted to be gone. You had pretty much settled on pills when you got the call. Twins think alike, you remember thinking. So, you had to put your plans away, call relatives, make arrangements. It was on you now. You went and told your mom in person. It only took her a few times of saying his name before she looked at you and said, "My son?"

"Yes, Mom," you said. "Stephen, your son. He's dead."

"My son," she said, touching her cheek. "Dead."

A few tears fell from her eyes, landed on her fingertips. For a moment, you felt grateful. Grateful for her sadness. Grateful that she could remember.

Grateful that soon she'd forget.

You Return

You explore for a few hours before getting on the bus to go home. You expect the real world to become something you recognize, but it's the opposite. As the bus moves forward, everything complicates, everything expands, feels less familiar, less like home. When the bus comes to a stop, you check your phone, see you have a signal. You call the home where your mom's staying, ask to speak to her.

"It's Grace, Mom," you say when she answers. "Your daughter."

"Yes, Grace, of course," she says, her words shaky, uncertain.

You put your phone to your chest as you walk off the bus. You look at us in the driver's seat, mouth "Thank you." We nod, smile, and you get out, the ground rough against your feet.

We're always glad to have a satisfied customer. We do hope you'll use our services again.

You return your phone to your ear. "How are you feeling today, Mom?" you say.

"My hip hurts, but that's nothing new. What have you been doing? It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Not too long, Mom. I just got home. I went out with some friends after work," you say, not knowing what time it is, if that story would even check out.

“Oh, okay. For drinks? Are you married or anything? I can’t seem to remember. Did you go out with a boy?”

“Yes, there was a boy, but not for a date or anything. I paid for myself.”

“I see. Hope it wasn’t too expensive, then.”

“No, Mom,” you say, watching the bus pull away, disappear. You think about what Stephen said, remember every detail. “It didn’t cost that much at all.”

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ART FEATURE

FRIGHT NIGHT

Art by [Sam Heimer](#)

Feature by Rob Carroll

When asked what inspires his work, artist Sam Heimer is quick and to the point: “Halloween, not horror.”

As someone who has always believed Halloween and horror to be synonymous with one another—even if purely in spirit—I eagerly await the explanation.

“I’m always chasing the feeling I had as a kid every October,” Sam explains. “Halloween matters so much. It’s a harvest holiday. It’s food and community, and how those things relate to the frail nature of life. It’s finding warmth when the world is otherwise cold. It’s a spectral holiday that once a year brings me back to childhood, to a time when I could still fully see and feel the magic of the world. I enjoy horror, but I don’t really see it in my work beyond heavy blacks and rotting faces.”

Sam’s love for Halloween beyond just the holiday’s familiar trappings can be felt in every square inch of his artwork, and in my opinion, this undeniable passion for his subject matter is the reason why everything he creates is so instantly a visual success. And despite my initial skepticism, after hearing his explanation on why his work is strictly Halloween and not horror, I agree with him. Halloween and horror *are* synonymous in many ways, but a lot of those ways are superficial, and nothing about Sam’s work is so simple.

Pictured left: *Big Night 2*

Every ghoul that Sam conjures up is set against a backdrop of smiling pumpkins, cozy homes that glow with warmth, and handfuls of pint-sized trick-or-treaters enjoying the evening fun. Frights are had, but terror fails to take hold. The towns and children, it seems, are inoculated against any feelings of true horror. This is a night of celebration, a night of triumph over



Pictured above: *One Night*



the dark imaginings that haunt us throughout so much of the surrounding year. Yes, Sam's ghouls are monstrously large, crazed, and sometimes even grinning with a self-amused psychopathy that doesn't feel the slightest bit benign, but even so, never do they feel capable of wrongdoing. If horror is an exploration of our fears, a trip into the heart of what terrifies us, Sam's artwork is the joyful mockery of the demons we expect to find there.

"There has to be a softness to my work, a sense of humor," says Sam. "The subject matter is never just gore, for example. My line quality has a natural severity to it, but in every image there's also feelings of happiness

Pictured above: *Big Night*

or sadness, depictions of a smile or a soft touch, a joke peppered in. Art that depicts pure sadism doesn't interest me."

Adults are nowhere to be found in Sam's artwork, but the children here aren't exactly childlike. They're bizarre in posture and strange in action. They perform dark rituals at the feet of demons, remain calm (almost casual) in the face of monsters, and sprint gleefully from supernatural danger. They befriend Death, flirt with evil, lock their humanity away behind expressionless masks, and through those masks, stare back at the person viewing them in a way that can only be described as unsettling. It all reminds me a bit of *The Addams Family*, or the work of another dark artist with an affinity for oddball children, whom, it turns out, Sam and I both admire.

"In my art I see the artists I poured over as a kid," says Sam. "Edward Gorey, José Guadalupe Posada, Gustave Doré."

Doré is also one of my favorite illustrators, but Gorey is the one I'm referring to here. Sam's work sometimes feels like it walked right off the pages of Gorey's, *The Gnashycrumb Tinies*, both in style and substance. The engraver's line work is apparent in the work of both artists, but so is the humorous personification of the forces which lay beyond our control. Dark humor is magical in this way. With it, the artist can pay respect to the horror genre and its artistic importance while also challenging fear's hold on our psyche. Perhaps *that's* why all the children in Sam's world wear expressionless masks. Horror is rendered comic in the face of the unimpressed.



Pictured above left: *Gauntlet* Above right: *Untitled*



Pictured above: *With Help From Those That Went Before*





POTATO

by [Ken Altabef](#)

The water in the bathtub went cold six days ago, could even be a week. There's no more hot water, the pipes all clogged. The bathwater is so green with gunk I can't even see what's underneath, but I don't want to see. Lord, it all itches something fierce, especially down in the crotch where it's snaked between my legs. I want desperate to pull it out, but I'm afraid. When I tried to pull out the shoots I found in my ears yesterday, it hurt like hell.

The damn stink is the worst. Raw potato doesn't have itself a strong smell but when you're surrounded by it, growing fresh and thick on the walls, covering the whole room—the ceiling even—it's enough to make a body want to vomit. I feel a tickle down my throat as it shifts, a playful little tug at something or other inside me, trying to make me gag. But nothing comes up, the pipes clogged there too.

I should'a run away when it all first started. I should'a run like hell when I found that first one. There's a spot on the mirror where it hasn't grown all the way over yet, and I catch sight of myself—*what a horror I look!* My skin is all milky pale and as wrinkled as a prune, but they won't let me get out of the water. I see myself, like a withered old scarecrow lying in a coffin full of green water, and I remember.

Potatoes are supposed to have eyes, but when this one opened, I near fell down sideways. I've been digging potatoes for thirty years in that little vegetable patch out back of my house, but I

never had one look back at me, and with such a sad, soulful glance as that. Its one eye was brown, as you might expect, but pink around the edges where it should've been white. It glistened wetly. And then it winked.

Nowadays, people see faces on damn near everything—a man in the moon, Mother Teresa on a biscuit, Elvis almost everywhere, and the Lord Jesus on a cheese sandwich. But it still nearly bowled me over. At first. At first.

But after I held that little 'tater in my hand for a while, and it was warm and kind of soft at that, it didn't seem quite so strange. Unusual, certain. But not too strange at all. It hummed at me, that sweet little thing did. A slow, sad tune like something I might've heard a lifetime ago when I was a young girl, a melancholy lullaby meant to send troubled children off to sleep. Up and down, the tune went, but never so much up as down, lower, lower, slower, slower. It seemed the most natural thing in the world.

But what should I do with it? I figured the poor little thing could do with some water, so I filled up the old mop bucket, and I knew 'taters like it kind of dark, so I put it under the bench out in the garage. But after standing there a while, and thinking and listening, I thought that crusty old bucket wasn't so good and my lonely garage not near good enough, so I brought it in the house and let it soak in my wedding bowl. That was Stratford crystal there, fifty-years-old. But it still needed dark, so I put it under the bed and pulled all the window shades nice and tight.

I lay down, dead tired, but I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to run like hell—to run and run and run. But that little humming song told me I was too tired to move and put me straight off to sleep. I didn't even dream, not as far as I can reckon.

Next day, I went over to market and bought fresh eggs and some sliced turkey and a couple normal potatoes, and I almost told that Jennie Flaherty about that odd little 'tater of mine. I wanted to tell her, I did, but the words just wouldn't come. It was all just about the weather and the local gossip and such. No news about a humming potato. Certainly not.

When I took that bowl out again, I saw the 'tater had sprouted! It had little shoots coming out the sides—yes indeedy—four crooked little shoots with tiny little fingers and toes. The eye looked at me, still so sad and lost like a little pup. And the potato hummed. It sang me that low, sad song as the days went by and by.

After about a week, my little tater-child was fast outgrowing that bowl. It had got itself full-grown arms and legs, and a second brown eye (though it was a bit smaller than the other), and a curl to its shape looked just like a baby. I emptied it into the bathtub, filled it up with warm water and put in some

fertilizer grow-stuff I got down at the store. That stuff turned the water kind of green so I couldn't hardly see my sweet little baby no more, but I could still hear it hum to me. I didn't go out of the house much after that; I knew I shouldn't leave a child there in the bath alone. No mother would.

And the song, that song was just for me. It didn't want no one else to hear.

When my boy Harlan came round for his monthly visit I wouldn't let him go into the bathroom. I couldn't think of a good reason, neither. If I told him the pipes was broke, he'd want to get at them with a wrench. He was handy like that, always fixing things. So, I started yelling at him, and I cussed at him some and finally pushed him out the door and gone. "Crazy ol' bat!" he said, and it wasn't the first time.

I wanted to chase after him, I wanted to scream out to him, but I didn't. My baby needed me. A momma can't just run off like that.

It grew fast after that, filling up the tub, eating up all that fertilizer stuff, I guess. Its legs went so long they dangled over the sides. It looked a frightful sight. It had peculiar skin, all dry and brown and crinkly no matter the water, just like a regular potato does. Its head looked like a big old potato with those sad bloodshot eyes, and it had a lump of a nose, and a mouth with crusted, weeping lips. No hair, but the dome of its head shifted here and there like something was moving underneath, just below that crinkly skin. No one could possibly say my young man was handsome, I know, but nobody ever said my husband Jack was too easy on the eyes, neither.

It made a different song than just the humming, now it had a mouth and all, a song made up of no real words anybody could understand, except I did understand them. It said it loved me and it wouldn't ever hurt me. It wanted to go outside, it wanted to go visiting other people and do some real living. I guess just about anyone can understand that. I guess. I didn't think much of that kind of talk, though. Not for him. I could dress him up in some of my husband's old clothes but that just wouldn't work. He couldn't go anywhere looking like the way he did, with that nasty potato skin all over. And he smelled like fried eggs, cooked too long on a greasy skittle. Though now I come to think of it, I must admit my Jack might have smelled a fair bit worse.

The water was surprisingly warm when I climbed into the tub with my young man. I felt so many different things—the nourishing embrace of moist earth, cool clear water, tangy loam. His long, boneless fingers caressed me as I clung to his rough, papery skin. He was gentle with me, and that helped—and it sure did hurt that first time. First time in a long time. He whispered constantly all the while, and that helped. I can't rightly recollect what he said, but I'm sure they were nice, tender things.

Next few days, my potato spent most of its time in the garden, digging up some more of them strange things and putting them in the sink, the bathtub, and damn near everything else that would hold water and fertilizer. Soon the whole house stank and the walls started to crawl. My potato man had become way too busy to pay me much mind. I thought about my boy Harlan and wished he'd come down for his visit, and then I remembered the way I'd run him off and all. Then again, he never sang me such a pretty song.

When it left me, I felt hurt and afraid. I shouldn't have to stay in this dirty water all the time, and like I said, the way it's crawled up inside me's no good neither. My belly's all swole, and I feel it moving. It hurts, and I'm afraid. A mother shouldn't be left alone, surely not when she's expecting. But I'm not alone, not really. A body could go near deaf from all the humming and singing round here. Now the whole house sings.

I was surprised, that's all. I thought he couldn't go nowhere with that ugly potato skin of his. But then I noticed the potato peeler and all those rinds on the bathroom floor.

No worries, then. I think he'll pass just fine.



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FLUFF & FOLD

by [Lituo Huang](#)

On a windblown, electric night—after even the sun has retreated, cowed by the Santa Ana winds that shrivel your eyeballs in their sockets and suck the spit out of your mouth—I am folding laundry. I’m balling up each sock in its brother. The dueling TVs on opposite walls of the empty laundromat are both playing commercials. On my left, a stack of bleach-stained towels. On my right, a stack of bleach-stained shirts. I ball up the socks and toss them in a pile in front of me.

I stare through the door of the laundromat, which someone has propped open with a shard of cinder block, at the man outside. He sits on the concrete bumper at the end of a parking space demarked by bright white lines. He stares at the road, smoking. I can smell the cigarette smoke that floats into the laundromat through the doorway. When the occasional car passes by, its headlights illumine him, and then I can see him in profile, his hand frozen in the act of carrying the cigarette to his lips. *Yes, I think, he will have to do.* That he is alone, that he is outside, being whipped by this wind, that he, too, will die—fills me with a throb, and I want to cry.

When I finish folding the rest of the laundry and cram it into my basket, I walk out to him.

“Good evening,” I say. I stop in front of him with the basket on my hip.

“Hi,” he counters, standing with an explosive movement. His voice is loud and cheerful. It drives the mystery from the night. Everything about him is ordinary—his dark baseball cap, the stubble on his shiny face, his shirt stiff with white paint, and the way he pinches the cigarette between his thick fingers. Polite, he holds it downwind. The wind blows the smoke away from us, it has no time to linger. Nor do I.

“Laundry?” he asks.

“Uh huh,” I say, bumping the basket higher up on my hip, “And what are you up to tonight?”

“I just painted this lot,” he says, hesitating over his words. He gestures with his hand a wide arc as if to say, *all this*.

“Looks good.”

“It’s just regular latex paint,” he says, warming to his subject, “There’s some that uses a roller, but I use a regular brush and trace over the old lines.”

I cannot wait. “Excuse me,” I say, “But are you up for this, or what?”

He looks at me. He’s confused, because his cigarette is halfway to his lips, and his head’s turned partway to meet it. He looks out of the corner of his eyes. Another car rolls by, its blue-white headlights flashing over us.

“I said, are you up for it?”

“Up for what?”

“Look,” I say, rolling my eyes a little, “This basket is heavy.”

He’s relieved. He understands now what is expected.

“Let me help you to your car,” he says, smiling, then tosses his cigarette on the ground and reaches for my basket.

“Not my car. In here.”

I turn and lead the way back into the laundromat before he can ask any questions.



I let him enter before kicking the cinder block away from the door, which clicks closed. The two TVs are blaring. One is playing a news show with four talking heads, each in front of a different backdrop. The heads are shouting. The other TV is playing a travel show. A man bites a skewered lizard and gags.

He sets down the basket on top of a washer by the door.

“Not there,” I say, “Back here.” I lead him to the back corner that cannot be seen from the entrance.

As soon as he reaches it, I am by his side. He drops the basket, which lands with a crack. Its contents fluff out onto the floor. I’m on him, covering his

quizzical “Ma’am?” with one hand, and I feel him gasp at how cold that hand is. I force him to the ground. He struggles, he is strong, but I am stronger than he imagined possible, and I pin him to the floor, and I slip my arm behind his head and clasp my hands, all my weight is on him. I can feel his heat, the sweat that breaks through his salt pores. I see his blood vessels unfurling beneath the chickenish skin of his neck, taste the stickiness around his Adam’s apple. His stubble scrapes me when I rub my lips against its grain, tracing his jugular with my teeth. When I press down, the blood pulses into my mouth, thick and warm, like the juice of a smashed peach. He shudders beneath me until his heart grows quiescent.

The front of my shirt is wet. My tongue darts over my lips like a salamander on a fallen leaf. The man’s breaths come long and slow, even when I pick him up and curl him into a dryer. I toss his hat in after him and shut the door.

I right the laundry basket and pull out a clean shirt to put on. My soiled shirt goes into a washer. I count my quarters—six for the washer and three for the dryer. The travel show has gone to commercial again. A young mother rubs cream into her infant and I can already hear the uneven clunking of the dryer with its heavy load and its heat that blows down to the bone.



LADY OF THE DULLAHAN

by [Anna Madden](#)

The night was mist and smog and a blur of headlights. Nido leaned across his magbike, the engine a deep purr. His THREAD pinged a multiple homicide with a request for back-up.

Reroute me, Nido thought, the neural link faster than words. His THREAD allowed thought-transfer, the implant a standard for huntsmen.

In four heartbeats, his armor's AI worked out the quickest path through Besnick City. The city's upper branches were spires of steel, cutting up the night sky like serrated teeth. Nido was headed into less civilized parts. The crime scene was in the Vein, a ghetto-slash-mine built beneath the pretty glitter, sprawled out like hoary black roots over a large deposit of anthracite.

The route lit up across Nido's smoked visor. With his fist on the throttle, he urged his magbike faster, becoming a lone vulture with the scent of carrion in his nose. The black-specked air grew thicker, while the narrow alleys bled neon and plastic garbage and despair.

It was dark, but in two hours, dawn would kiss the horizon. With it, he'd be issued his dismissal by CanisCorps. Nido's quota was overdue, his ranking so low it had cycled into the red. The wind pressed against his chest—against his fragile sense of control, his anger, and deeper, into a part of him he didn't like: the part of him that was afraid of what he'd become if he lost this job.

CanisCorps didn't care who a huntsman brought in for their quota, week after week. It could be a desperate parent with stolen credits, or a sick pitman in a backroom, muffling a wet cough as he bought opioids.

Nido had learned to care, though, and that was a problem. He saw corruption everywhere. Unfettered corporate greed touched the lives of thousands of innocents daily. Powerful criminals paid big bucks to keep their names off the SKYLIST while petty thieves who stole to survive were sentenced to years behind bars. Nido wasn't sure how much longer he could play a rigged game.

Turning into an alley, his magbike's nose arrowed for Dragon's Vape. Electric-crimson and bright-magenta neon sketched out a hide of scales and wide-spread wings, while dubstep pulsed through walls of black steel and concrete.

As he parked, Nido noted damage on the premise. There were snapped beams, bent and misshapen, with long, talon-like scratches. Concrete was torn out of the foundation like something had taken a mouthful of slab, then spit it out.

Near the entry, another magbike leaned on its kickstand. It was sleek, dark as the night, with fluorescent green LEDs stitched into its belly.

Nido dismounted, his dark robe falling over his leather greaves. The robe was an heirloom, embroidered with a pattern of white-bone vertebrae at the spine. He wore it to remember where he came from, and to inspire fear in his prey.

Vape bars were busiest at shift handovers, but the lot was vacant despite the prime hour. A current of unease laced the air, buzzing. The awareness that he was being watched descended as certain as gravity's pull.

With a jolt, Nido received a message ping to his THREAD.

"I arrived first, blue flamer," a huntsman said in a harsh whisper, his voice like hard water hitting stone inside Nido's helmet. "Finders, keepers."

Nido didn't need to ask to know this was an old hound. THREAD was a tool, like armor or a stun blade, but the gray-haired generation clung to real speech still. A sign of limitation, of being unable to evolve or adapt. In many ways, the old hound was no better than the basic AI built into Nido's armor. Limited, bound to the cycle, and easily replaced.

You called for back-up. As he responded, Nido scanned the immediate area. No pitmen regulars were visible, but the air smelled of wet iron. Nido approached the front door, his robe rippling like dark water at his sides. *I'm here for an assist, to sate my quota.*

"Keep a watch on the entrance then," the old hound said. "I'm inside, following the scent."

What's the story on the assailant? Nido asked. Turf dispute? These vape bars attract all kinds of shade.

A pause. "I don't think the perp's human. Too methodical to be warm-blooded. Targets citizens on the SKY.LIST. She hasn't taken a swing at me yet, nor acknowledged I exist."

What do you mean by "she?"

"Looks female, but Dullahan would, in its default mode."

Nido cursed. *That's not supposed to be on the market yet.*

Dullahan was a new synthetic armor with a wetware processor—state-of-the-art—but CanisCorps had delayed the release for...reasons. It was billed to be an innovative AI, capable of learning from its own experiences. The old hound sounded like a head case. Was he insinuating that this avant-garde AI was alive? And that it had somehow gone rogue?

If so, and it was responsible for this scene, CanisCorps would pay dearly. Maybe it didn't matter. The megacorp had its claws sunk deep into Besnick City, and few knew the true extent. CanisCorps was a web of hidden subsidiaries, shadowy shell companies, paid-off politicians, lawyers, and other civil servants. Even huntsmen were on their payroll.

After Nido recovered the Dullahan for CanisCorps, his ranking would stabilize. He'd keep his job, and he wouldn't have to hurt anyone in the process.

The vape door rattled, held ajar, the wind shaking the unlatched panel. A dancer's bare arm poked through the sill, her fingers long and slender, the elbow bent.

Nido pulled the handle back for a better look, and heard a wet crunch. The dancer's head dragged free of her neck. Leaning down, he saw dark hair tangled up in the bottom hinge, a long clean cut along her nape. He took in her headless body, the crumbled, lithe limbs, wrapped in a low-cut dress, the feet dressed in violet heels.

His THREAD checked the girl's profile against the SKY.LIST. In two seconds, a ping signaled a match. Her name was Nadia Saylor, aged eighteen, with misdemeanors of petty theft and forgery.

A criminal, but undeserving of this fate.

Static crackled his THREAD, and Nido winced, his eyes watering with the aftershock—a side effect of sensory overload not uncommon for an implant user. There were limitations to organic and synthetic bonds. He knew from training to breathe deep and wait for his mind to reset.

"Help—"

There was a long, ugly shriek. It pierced, sharp as any blade, despite the helmet Nido wore. Gritting his teeth, he fell into a combat stance, drawing

his stun blade free. His awareness encompassed the serrated tip. It could deliver a one-hundred-volt shock when its metal touched skin.

He heard a crunch of glass, then heavy footfalls. The old hound flew through the open vape-bar door in a knot of black cloth and glinting metal. He landed with a hard thud, his armor bearing the worst of the impact.

The Dullahan followed, stepping across the threshold. Neon painted her visor in flamingo hues. Her iridium armor glinted, silvery and dew-like. Knee-length boots clicked as she stepped over the dead dancer. A Flayer was active in her right gauntlet. A weapon he wasn't overly familiar with, but it looked deadly enough. It was a whip by design, but with an electric current coursing through the long, metal-braided tail.

You sure it's an empty set of armor? Nido asked, his head tilted sideways.

The old hound rose to his knees and forearms, wheezing. "I crushed the left leg like a tin can," he shouted, "but the armor took back its shape."

The Dullahan's gait was even, without any sign of a limp. Nido stepped into her path, blocking her from engaging the other huntsman further.

Thought you said she wouldn't acknowledge you. Nido twirled his stun blade and powered it on, the soft blue glow extending up his gloves.

A dry laugh. "She didn't take kindly to my cuffs."

The Dullahan turned to face Nido as his stun blade hummed to life. She whirled her Flayer in a continuous overhand flick, creating an X-pattern perfect for defense.

Nido's THREAD interfaced with his armor's AI, activating dichromatic vision across his visor. The gray hues were better suited to the low-light conditions. Nido engaged his opponent, moving with the heat of a flame, the fluidity of smoke.

The Dullahan spun and cracked her Flayer's tail. Nido attempted to side-step the attack but was struck square in the breastplate. The electric current crackled against his armor without effect, thanks to rubber-insulated lining.

It was the opening he needed. Nido sprung forward and stabbed between the joint of her shoulder. A direct hit, and he felt the juice hit.

The Dullahan shrieked as her metal shellwork tasted voltage. Hers was a voice like a thousand steely voices forged into one, mesmerizing and terrible and all-consuming.

The old hound doubled over. Nido staggered, too. He dropped his stun blade and pressed both hands to the sides of his helmet to try and dampen the banshee-like scream. His implant glitched, and his vision blurred.

The Dullahan pinged his THREAD over and over. He felt her grab hold of his neural link with a lingering touch like ice. She poured into

his mind, accessing his memories quick as a blink, until settling on hunts from two years ago. The Dullahan replayed specific memory files in a cycled taunt of who he had once been. Years when Nido was the top huntsman in his unit, with the highest rank. A time spent following orders without question, thinking himself one of the good guys. The line between criminal and enforcer was eternally muddy, but back then, he didn't care.

Get out of my head, Nido said, focusing his thoughts into a mental shove, his expression beneath his helmet a snarl.

The Dullahan shivered. The sensation jarred Nido, her reaction overlaying his own consciousness like oil poured over water. She verified his employment to CanisCorps, then retreated from his mind. The woman-who-wasn't-a-woman stalked past both huntsmen without engaging further, as though they didn't exist, and headed straight for their magbikes.

Nido watched her, panting wetly in response to the assault on his mind. *Some luck she didn't kill us.*

"I wouldn't call it luck," the old hound said, winded but unbeaten.

The Dullahan took a liking to the old hound's magbike, swinging a long leg over the seat. At her command, the engine spun up with a growl. Quick as lightning, she peeled away from the curb.

Nido holstered his stun blade, the dichromic filter deactivating with a silent command from his armor's AI. Colors flooded his eyes, but all he saw was the pulsating red of his own anger. The system was a broken wheel. His own employers had released a monster into the Vein. Was it such a stretch to think they'd deny responsibility and wouldn't care about the murders in the slum so long as their stock continued to rise?

Maybe it was pointless to try to fight for this city, to push back and stand up to injustice. Nido's hands shook with white-hot rage. What did it say about him that he considered giving up before he had even begun?

He sprinted to his magbike. *I'm going after her.*

"Don't be stupid," the old hound said. "You're going to get yourself killed."

In answer, Nido twisted the magbike's throttle and sped after the other rider.

The Dullahan was leaving the Vein, rising up into the main hub of Besnick City. She merged onto the cargo guideway, which was a high-speed rail made of strong magnets suited for electromagnetic tires. It was the transport line for the tons of anthracite carried out of the mine, piled high on automated eighteen-wheeler magtrailers that operated twenty-four hours a day. The black rocks were sent to the refinery, or to the shipping yards.

He pushed his THREAD's limits, enhancing his senses and reaction speed, his neural link encompassing his armor's pliable AI and the magbike beneath him. To the sides, blackened powder had collected in ugly piles, tarnishing the silver road. Nido skirted the patches of black dust. If he hit one in a curve, he'd lose traction and control. He gripped the handlebars firmly, his feet planted on the pegs. His shoulders and arms were flexible.

If there was one thing he could still do right, it was ride.

Passing a magtrailer, he braced against the wind buffeting the side, and shifted from fourth gear up to sixth, accelerating fast. Only, he was too rough letting out the clutch.

The magbike jostled underneath him, untamed, ready to buck.

He slammed the front brake, momentarily panicked. The nose tipped forward, the back wheel unlocking, rising into a stoppie. Letting off the brake, Nido leveled out, the back end of his magbike slamming back into a magnetic hold.

He exhaled and pushed on. It was a fine line between control and the semblance of it.

In a streak of jade-like LEDs, the Dullahan zipped between the convoy of fast-moving magtrailers. Hers was a bold weave, fishtailing when she hit a patch of spilled anthracite, as though she had no regard for her own survival.

Her mistakes allowed Nido to gain on her, and he was now so close to her tail, he touched her shadow, her brake lights glaring back.

The longer the chase, the more the Dullahan would improve. The wetware processor would learn and adapt, polishing her riding skills as she mapped out the magbike's limitations.

Nido needed to end this, and quickly, while he remained the seasoned rider.

A tunnel rose ahead, a hungry mouth of destiny ready to swallow them both whole. That's when Nido remembered that the automated magtrailers could be stopped in an emergency. He formulated a plan as he pulled up alongside the Dullahan, her armor glinting in his peripherals.

Looking over, he gave a cold stare, then pulled into the lead.

The Dullahan didn't react to his rile. She wasn't interested so long as he didn't pin her into a corner like the old hound had attempted to do in Dragon's Vape. But that was exactly what Nido planned to do out here, and he wouldn't fail.

Nido hastened up to the next magtrailer. Holding the throttle steady with his right hand, he drew his stun blade with the left and activated its blue current.

The emergency brake was a cable wrapped in red rubber that ran along each set of magtrailer wheels. Without hesitation, Nido slashed the cable loose.

Sparks flew. Nido fisted the throttle, sliding in front of the magtrailer before it started to rotate and slow. Checking his mirror, he saw the Dullahan hit her brakes hard to stay clear.

In his pass, Nido was forced to ride up a pile of anthracite, his magbike at an angle. He felt the magbike's frame shudder, but he trusted the physics and soared off the makeshift ramp, his robe flapping wildly at his sides like dark wings. He landed with a tremor onto the median strip, well ahead of the compromised magtrailer.

Metal groaned and shuddered. The severed back brakes on the magtrailer forced the heavy transport to swivel and lose its vertical trajectory. The trailer crashed horizontally into the tunnel entrance and sparked along the tunnel's interior until it screeched to a halt, pinned inside. The lanes within the tunnel were blocked.

The Dullahan screamed. It rose in a ghost-like wave, hitting his **THREAD** in a whirlwind.

His head pounding, Nido let out a strained breath and eased off the throttle, his arms numb from holding tight. The magbike rolled to a stop.

The sky was visible in the tunnel's exit, the first light of dawn appearing. With a boot to his kickstand, Nido parked, then walked back to the scene of the crash. His robe was a ribbon of darkness.

The air was dusty with anthracite, which cut visibility to thirty-three percent. His helmet filtered the worst of it, keeping his air scrubbed clean, and he stepped through the rubble, over flames and blackened skid marks.

He found his target quickly.

The crashed magbike was on its side, pinning the Dullahan by her left knee. The fiberglass shell of the vehicle had cracked. Metal had pierced and torn and crumbled. The sick-green LEDs flickered, spilling from metallic guts.

With a grunt, Nido lifted the magbike and shoved it aside. His foot slipped in liquid. He looked down to see that he was standing in a pool of blood.

The Dullahan screamed as he shifted the weight of the metal off her, her voice harrowed and mortal and terrifyingly real. Her breastplate rose and fell with the ragged breaths of a dying animal. Human bone protruded from the webbed scales of blood-stained iridium.

Nido stood over his prey, frozen, his hands clenched at his sides.

He had assumed the Dullahan suit was empty. *Had he wanted it to be true so he didn't have to claim the responsibility of his actions?* He thought of CanisCorps, of those who survived in the dark web of this city. He had been on a hunt, determined to find prey weaker than him, to sacrifice in his stead before

the dawn spelled his doom. He shook his head. He had only ever wanted to serve a purpose. To chase down killers and miscreants. To redeem himself, to keep ahold of all that he had accomplished by the last fraying strand.

More likely, he had lost himself in the nightmare. He was certain of it. Guilt and what-ifs chilled his blood.

A tingling numbness seeped across his THREAD, his mind aflame. He knelt, took off his gloves, and tossed them aside. With his bare hands, Nido lifted the black visor on the Dullahan's helmet.

A shiver ran up his spine at what he saw.

Nido unfastened the Dullahan's helmet and gently pulled it free. Sweat-laden hair spilled out and framed the face of a young woman. Her expression was still, as if etched of slate. She looked no older than twenty. Her skin was ashy, and her sage-green eyes were pained.

She stared back. Her gaze brimmed with fear. She was everything he had promised to protect and serve.

The ache in his THREAD grew. His mind spun. His heartbeat thudded in his ears.

Her lips moved, brightened by a gloss of blood.

He leaned closer.

"It wasn't...me." The woman gulped a breath, the sound mortal and wet. "Tried to stop...it."

"I know," Nido said, placing a hand on her shoulder, but she was already gone. Her eyes turned lightless beneath the mist and the fog and the cloy of anthracite.

Metal chinked.

Looking down, Nido saw iridium, brightest silver, slithering on the ground toward him.

He heard the Dullahan whisper across his THREAD. It was using his implant to connect, to root and burrow. The AI sounded pleased, eager. It promised to restore his ranking, to mold him into the greatest of the huntsmen. Nido's THREAD offered the AI a better connection than it had been afforded by its previous host—a neural link to overtake. The woman's body had been chained to its commands, but without a THREAD, her mind was still able to resist.

Nido tried to shove the AI off, but he was weakened by his own shock and exhaustion. *Why should he survive when he was stained by an innocent's blood?*

The Dullahan sensed his weakness. It squeezed tighter. It needed him, or so it claimed. Not his mind, so much, but his body would serve well. The wetware processor required a skeleton inside its framework to abide its

orders, with flesh and blood and muscle to fill what was empty. It needed a human body to move.

Its consciousness poured across his THREAD, cold and enveloping. The plates on the woman's body broke free. They expanded, then hooked onto Nido with needle-like teeth, stabbing into the joints of his armor. Powerless against such strength and malice, his old armor broke apart. The Dullahan contorted, quivering as it overtook Nido, slithering onto his limbs like a liquid-metal snake and striking with its sharp bite, again and again and again.

The suit crushed his body, stripped his skin, and splintered his nerves. His dark robe was shredded to rags.

Nido forced a breath, then another. As a nightshade visor fell over his eyes, Nido saw himself in its inner reflection. He looked into the face of a man who had lost control.

A scream rose from his throat, raw, full of anger and hate.



will
you
be
mine?

xoxoxo

JODIE

by [Mark Joslyn](#)

Morning was her favorite time. Her window faced East, and she always left the curtains open so the dawn would wake her. When the light washed over her closed eyelids, she gave a small, wincing smile, and rolled on to her back. She threw off the covers and let the light warm up her bare legs.

Five minutes of basking, and Jodie was ready to get up. She cracked her windows to let the cool morning air sweep into her room, and took a deep inhale, letting it invigorate her lungs.

She brushed her teeth, showered, and combed her hair. Once her outfit was selected and her hair was on point, she grabbed her phone for a morning selfie. She still posted one every day, even though no one liked them anymore. Well, sometimes her mom. But she liked the way she looked. She almost always did. And it was one of the only times of the day when she was in total control of her image.

Downstairs, her father sat at the counter with a steaming cup of coffee and an open newspaper. He raised his head at the sound of her socked feet padding down the steps.

“Morning, sweetheart.”

“Morning, Dad. Pot still fresh?”

He nodded his head towards the French press, still half-full of warm, inviting liquid. Jodie poured herself a cup and breathed deep the aroma.

"You find out if they are sending you on that trip to Kansas City?"

Her father shrugged. "Maybe me, maybe Brett. I mean, they are sympathetic to our situation and everything, but they want other partners to have face-time with clients, too. I can't be the only one building relationships."

"Yeah, but you're the only one with a compelling reason to go. You gonna press them on it?"

"Maybe," he said, putting aside the paper entirely and looking at his daughter. At seventeen-years-old, she was now taller than her mother, and almost as tall as him (taller when she wore heels). But her slight frame and baby cheeks still made her seem so damn fragile and small. "But I see where they are coming from. And truthfully, I don't love leaving you alone."

She gave what she hoped was her strongest smile. "It's fine. Nothing you can really do anyway. It's better for everyone if you are out of range. Especially if they let you take mom as your assistant again. She's not doing so well."

Her father nodded. It was true. His wife had many strengths that he loved about her, but adaptation wasn't one of them. She had a hard time dealing with the garden variety changes of life, like moving house, or getting a new in-law. And the current situation was far from the garden. She would wake from nightmares regularly. Sometimes, he would reach out to hold her, to lull her back to sleep. Other times—times he was ashamed of—he pretended to still be asleep, and shut his eyes tighter when he started hearing her softly cry.

"Well," he said, draining the last of his coffee, "I better be on my way. Hopefully the roads stay normal, and the car doesn't-*GAH!*"

The grunt was followed by the sound of a mug shattering, and Jodie, who had been looking out the window and studying the lawn for any overnight changes, whipped her head around. Her father was nowhere to be seen.

She rushed around the kitchen island to the spot where he had been standing. His suit, shirt, and tie lay in a pile on the floor. She reached down for them, but recoiled when they started moving.

No, it wasn't that they were moving. But there was movement inside them. Something quite small. It was like watching a puppy struggle out of blanket.

The clothes rustled some more, and a tiny creature emerged from between the pants and shirt. The thing looked like a cross between a basketball and a turnip, with limbs that were like dry twigs.

Jodie looked at her watch. 8:15.

"Shit. He's usually still sleeping in around now."

The round freak at her feet looked up at her with eyes that resembled two rabbit droppings, and spoke with her father's voice. "Ah, well. My fault for dawdling with that second cup of coffee. And watch your language."

Jodie gave a smile that wasn't entirely forced. She was glad that her father kept his own voice, no matter the body. Tyler never thought to change stuff like that.

"Well, driving is out," said her father, as he waddled unsteadily on his new legs. Jodie averted her eyes. She wasn't sure if this new form even had private parts, but if it did, she didn't want to see them.

"I'll order you an Uber."

"That would be great, honey."

"Sorry, Dad."

Her father raised what passed for his face as best he could. "Not your fault, Jodie. Really. Not your fault."

After she made sure her father got picked up okay (remembering to give the always reliable Adebese five stars for not making any remarks), she put on her shoes, grabbed her backpack, and started towards school.

As usual, the changes started the moment she got outside. Her sneakers tightened and her book bag tripled in weight. Those were his standbys, the ones he used most every day. The grass screaming at her was a new wrinkle. Most of it was just a general shrieking, like pigs being tortured. Occasionally, she thought she could make out a more specific obscenity amongst the cacophony. She pressed her ear buds in and cranked her music. It was only six blocks. She could make it alright. She always did.

Two blocks from the school, Lindsey Baker started trying to get her attention from across the street. Jodie kept her eyes forward and pretended not to see her. That was harder to accomplish once Lindsey ran over and stood directly in front of her.

"Do you know what he did this morning?"

The accusing yelp cut through her tunes, and she yanked out her headphones.

"What?"

"I said, do you know what he did this morning?"

"Something awful, I'm sure," she said, as she tried some evasive maneuvers.

"He turned my father into a goddamn lawnmower!"

Jodie stopped trying to get around Lindsey. "He...what?"

"Yeah! Yeah!" Lindsey screamed, flailing her arms. "This morning my dad was out mowing the lawn, and all of a sudden, he doubled over the thing. When he straightened up, his legs were just...gone! The whole bottom half of him is just the lawnmower now! He's still out there! He's going in circles and spitting grass out of his mouth! I tried to get him to stop, but he can't even look at me or blink or anything."

"Jesus, Lindsey. I'm so sorry." Jodie tried putting her hand on Lindsey's shoulder, but got it slapped away instantly.

"Screw your sorry! I want you to make this stop!"

"I can't. Not how you want me to."

"It's been three months!"

"I know."

"Just say yes, already! We can't live like this."

"You really think that's the answer? To just give him whatever he wants? That's not going to work. That's not going to make things better."

"It's worth a shot! Because saying 'no' sure as hell isn't working."

"I...can't. I just can't. It can't be like that. We can't let it be like that."

"You're a selfish bitch! If it was me—"

"But it isn't you. It's me. So, I get to decide. Look, you know he'll just turn your dad back eventually. Deep down, he hates change."

"Oh, I guess that makes it alright?"

"I'm not saying that makes it alright, I'm just saying..." Before she could finish the thought, Lindsey was stomping away. She was so upset she almost let herself get nabbed by one of the concrete claws that were reaching up from the sidewalk, grabbing and scratching anything that came too close.

Once at school, the day followed its usual routine. She had a wardrobe change every period. In English, it was a clown suit, complete with floppy shoes that were nearly impossible to walk in. Next, she endured Communications with an itchy sweater that felt like a legion of ants were burrowing into her skin. She sat in the back row in each class, making it easier for her peers to avoid looking at her, and reducing the chances of being called on by some substitute who didn't know better.

Some days brought new outfits, some days he just recycled, but lunchtime was always the same. The moment she stepped into the cafeteria, she was naked, nothing left on her but her backpack. She used to have this nightmare when she was little. Of course in the dream, all of her classmates pointed and laughed. Now that it happened in real life, they all made a concentrated effort not to look at her.

The first few times this happened, she had tried to cover herself with her book bag, but now she didn't bother. She marched to an empty table and took out her lunch from her bag. She laid out the turkey sandwich, bag of baby carrots, and chocolate chip cookie, and stared, waiting for a change. When a full, uneventful minute passed, she reached for the cookie. The moment her fingers touched it, it turned to maggots. She shrugged. No sugar today.

Jodie ate the rest of her meal with confidence. Tyler usually only screwed with one item. One week, he had ruined all her meals, but when she started to look too sickly, he eased up.

She ate slowly, not trying to rush. She, and everyone else in the cafeteria knew what was coming. Sometimes he came to his classes, sometimes he didn't, but no matter what, Tyler would show up at lunchtime.

Jodie was half done with her sandwich when he walked through the door and took the seat across from her. He was the only companion she had at lunch anymore. Some of her closer friends had tried to stick it out, but the third-degree burns they got from the seats of their pants being turned into hot coals had chased the last of them off. She missed them, but she didn't blame them.

Tyler had nothing in his hands when he approached the table, but a plate appeared in front of him as soon as he sat down. The steak on it was plump and covered in a luscious sauce, with crispy potatoes and blistered shishito peppers piled all around. The smell wafting off the plate was intoxicating.

Tyler started to eat (using a fork and serrated knife that generated in his hands), without looking at her. He was half-way through the filet when he first spoke.

"It's call steak au poivre. I saw it on the cover of some gourmet magazine."

"It looks really good."

"We could eat like this. Every night. Together."

"I don't want to do that, Tyler."

Tyler turned back to his plate, sullenly pushing his food around.

"Tyler?"

"Hm?"

"I'd like my clothes back."

"Oh, so you want me to be nice to you when you won't be nice to me?"

"I'm always nice to you, Tyler."

"Bullshit!" Upon Tyler raising his voice, the boy that had been hurrying past them liquified. "You're not nice to me. I do things for you all the time. I always have. And you don't even care. You never even wore any of those diamonds I got you."

Looking at the puddle on the floor that used to be a person, Jodie could hear Lindsey's voice, blaming her for all of this. At one point, she had thought she could just spare everyone by not going to school anymore. But on the third day of skipping, when Tyler figured out what she was doing, he sent an entire gym class... somewhere.

When they reappeared a week later, none of them wanted to talk about where they had been or what they had seen.

Jodie hadn't even risked being tardy since then.

"I've always cared. I've always appreciated you and thanked you."

"I didn't do it so you could thank me. I wasn't looking for some socially-mandated response. I did it so you could see how I felt about you. So you would realize that I'm the kind of guy you should be with. I'd treat you right, if you would just let me."

"It doesn't work that way."

Tyler's lips quivered in response for a moment, but then he just returned to his steak. He was far more occupied with skewering it than actually eating it. Every time he jabbed his knife down, the lunchroom collectively flinched. No one headed for the exit, though. Probably because a small lightning storm had started above it.

Jodie waited for Tyler to finish his meat before she spoke again.

"Tyler."

He looked up, his face twisted into a pout.

"My clothes?"

Tyler waved his hand, and a yellow sun dress draped itself over her.

"This isn't what I was wearing."

"I know. This is better. You look good in yellow. I don't know why you don't wear it more often."

The reason was she hated yellow. She couldn't remember if she had told him that or not. In any event, she didn't think it was worth bringing up. She returned to her sandwich and carrots, eating leisurely, so he wouldn't think she was hurrying.

After about three minutes of silence, Tyler looked up at her sheepishly.

"I didn't mean to get mad. I shouldn't have lost it like that."

Jodie nodded. "It's okay, Tyler. But that kid, I think it was Ben Larch, could you..."

Tyler gave his fingers a quick drum on the table, and the melted boy sprung back up from the ground, fully solid once more.

"Oh, I guess it was Hal Simmons."

Hal gave himself a quick pat down and then, apparently satisfied that everything was in its right place, ran to the farthest table in the lunchroom.

Jodie went back to munching on some carrots, and slowly became aware that Tyler was focusing an intense stare on her.

"Well?"

She shrugged. "What?"

"Well?" He repeated, loud enough that several people at the nearest table felt the sensation of being punched in the face.

Jodie looked at him confused, until Tyler jerked his head towards the recently recombobulated Hal Simmons, who was eating his lunch with a panicked fervor.

“Oh. Right. Thank you, Tyler.”

“You’re welcome. Anyway, since that’s over with, I was thinking we could do something tonight. It should be nice out. I could get us a convertible to cruise around in. You like Corvettes? Or maybe a Lexus?”

“I don’t think so. But thank you for asking.”

Tyler’s face started to twitch back into his pout. She didn’t know if he was going to cry or give half the room shingles again. “Why not? Are you seeing someone else? Is it that dick Gabriel you have History with? He’s always staring at you.”

Behind her, Jodie heard a sharp, painful shriek. She had never heard Gabriel scream before, but she was confident it came from him. She couldn’t bring herself to turn around and see what exactly Tyler had done to him. Four weeks before, he had thought she was dating Malik Jones. She still hadn’t been able to shake the sight of his eye sockets growing sets of gnashing teeth.

“I’m not seeing anyone. I don’t have plans. I just don’t want to go out with you, Tyler. It’s not anyone else’s fault. It’s just a choice I’m making.”

A small tremor started moving through the room. At first, Jodie thought Tyler was causing an earthquake. But it was more than that. It wasn’t just the floors and the walls that were starting to shake. It was everything. The sunlight, the words being spoken, even the air that she was breathing started to tremble. The only unmoved thing in the room was Tyler, who spoke through clenched teeth.

“Why are you being such a bitch! I’m offering you a good time. I can do more than any guy in this town! Any guy on the planet!”

Tyler slapped his hand on the table and Regina Leachman (whom Jodie had done gymnastics with in the fifth grade) flew against one of the floor-to-ceiling windows on the far side of the room. From the corner of her eye, Jodie watched as Regina slid a bloody trail down the glass, like a bug being scraped off a windshield.

Tyler was still fuming, not registering what he had just done. He wasn’t even looking at Jodie anymore, talking more to himself than her. “I gave you a ride when you needed one. I was there for you whenever you were having a fight with one of your friends. I...” Tyler clenched his fists, and the room shook harder. “I became like this for you.”

“I’m grateful. And I’m impressed. But that doesn’t mean I want to be with you.”

“Do you know what I had to go through to make this happen? Do you know what this took?”

“I don’t. I can’t imagine—“

"No! You Can't!" Tyler took quick, snarling breaths through his nose. The exhale was slowly melting the table beneath him. "Maybe I should have just been a selfish jerk. I guess that's the kind of guy you want to be with, right?"

Jodie kept her focus on Tyler, but couldn't help hearing what was going on around her. Some kids had started to pray, others quietly cried.

"That's not fair, Tyler."

"Fair!?" At that, Tyler stood, his eyes locked on her once again. "Don't talk to me about fair! I've done everything I'm supposed to do! I did everything right! And you won't even give me a chance. How is that fair? That's all I'm asking for. Just a chance. After everything I've done, I deserve a chance."

Jodie rose, gripping the table to steady herself. "No. No, you don't. You can't. That's not how it works—"

"Stop saying that!"

"That's not how it works! I don't want you!" The scream was out before she even realized it was building inside of her. It was bad. She knew that. But it felt so damn good.

Tyler closed his eyes, and the quake in the room became so intense that it was like the world was having the most violent seizure. Jodie's knees went out from under her, and she crashed back into her chair. She clenched her jaw, trying to stop her teeth from rattling out of her head. The only clear thing in the world was Tyler's voice.

"Do you know what I can make happen? Do you know what I'm capable of?"

The air started to rip. Jodie could see colors that didn't exist, that she knew she was never supposed to see. Her tongue desperately wanted to go down her own throat.

The soft weeping of her classmates had become uncontrollable sobs, and the prayers had become cries for mercy. Spears with scorching-hot blades shot from the walls, and the exit had become a cavernous tunnel into an impenetrable darkness. Some of the kids tried to break the windows to escape, but swarms of glass shards enveloped them.

Tyler was floating above her now. There were tiny rings of fire whipping around his feet. He went higher and higher until he was just below the ceiling. Despite the distance, his voice came as if he were whispering in her ear.

"I'm the most amazing person you're ever going to meet. There's literally no one in the world who can take better care of you. Why are you too stupid to get that?"

Jodie could feel her kidneys trying to process alien liquids. Around her, kids were trying to walk on knees that bent the wrong way. Tyler hadn't stopped talking.

"You pretended to be nice, but you're really just like the rest of them, you just wanted to walk past me. Well, no one does that now. I don't get ignored anymore."

Something slithered around Jodie's feet, something that didn't have an end or a beginning. The monsters she had seen in the closet when she was five started to dance around her retinas.

"Don't you know what I can do?"

Jodie shut her eyes before her vision drove her insane. With some effort, she opened her mouth and took a deep breath, ignoring whatever it was that made her lungs crackle.

"I know what you can do," she rasped, the inside of her mouth so raw that her own words were like razors. "But more than that..." Her attention faltered. Something was reaching down from the ceiling, singing a song in a dead language. "More than that...I know what you can't. And what I can."

The room shook harder. Jodie squeezed the table so tight it should have broken. The agony was like she was being pulled apart. She could feel, literally feel, Tyler's gaze on her, a hot, slimy weight on the top of her head. She could hear the sound of his panting breath, so fast and labored that she was sure one of them would be dead in the next moment.

She wouldn't look at him. Past the pain and the darkness, past every screaming nerve in her body wanting her to say the opposite, she pushed her words. "No. The answer...is still...no..."

And then it was over.

The room became still. Steady, gloriously uncorrupted air flowed into her lungs. Her bones rested comfortably inside her skin. Light entered her irises without violence, and the only living creatures in the cafeteria were frightened (but relieved) teenagers.

Tyler was sitting across from her again. His meal was gone as if it never existed. In front of him on the table now were just his hands, which he studied intently.

Jodie quietly finished her meal, gathered the scraps into her paper bag, and crumpled it up. Tyler still wasn't looking at her. When she started to rise, he stood up so quick that his chair clattered to the ground. She stood rigid and hoped he hadn't seen her flinch.

Tyler shifted from foot to foot for a moment, still keeping his head down. Then he quickly spun and stomped towards the door. Just before he was gone, he yelled, "Slut!" without turning around.

Jodie waited, and when she was sure he wasn't coming back (he occasionally decided he had more to say after one of his dramatic exits), she picked up her

book bag and threw away her trash. As she left, she could see Regina rise to her feet. The sound of her neck snapping back into place was somehow more unsettling than hearing it break.

She stopped by the bathroom before her Econ class and saw that Tyler hadn't just screamed the insult at her. The word "slut" was printed across her forehead in bold, black letters. She tried some soap and water, but it wouldn't come off. For a minute, she tried to see if she could style her hair over it, but couldn't without blinding herself. Something inside of her wanted to cry. She left it inside of her and walked to class. Walking through the halls, she caught snippets of her classmates' conversations about the events in the cafeteria. The collective wisdom was that she shouldn't have made him so mad.

The sartorial torments continued throughout the day (hazmat suit, smelly boots, a comically puffy ballgown that she kept tripping in), but after the last bell, she was back in her original jeans and blouse. Her new face tattoo was still there, though.

Her route home (which changed every day, depending on what streets Tyler set on fire) took her past Mr. Samuel's house. He owned the hardware store in town, and his son had been on Jodie's tee-ball team when they were younger.

Mr. Samuel was on his front lawn when Jodie walked by, beating the grass with a shovel. Upon looking closer, Jodie could see that he was trying to kill something with six legs and two heads. Jodie stopped, and was going to offer a hand, when the creature scurried back into a hole it had made in the ground.

Mr. Samuel leaned on the shovel, trying to catch his breath. When he looked up and saw Jodie, his lip curled into a snarl.

"Little bastards have been tearing up the garden all week. Couldn't you just go to the damn movies with the boy, or something?"

Jodie made an effort not to return his nasty look. "Couldn't you just move?"

Mr. Samuel snorted. "Move? Let me explain something to you, little girl. This is *my* property, understand? I own it. No one tells me what to do with it."

Jodie waited, wondering if there was more wisdom coming. But he just spat on the ground and marched to his porch.

About an hour after she got home, Jodie got a text from her mother. She and her dad would be both be late, as she had joined him at the office to help him finish his work. Apparently, the body he had been given made typing extremely difficult.

She ordered a pizza, which was delivered by a terrified young woman who was only slightly mollified by the 30% tip. When she left, Jodie stood in the street and watched her taillights fade for three blocks, just to make sure she got away safely.

She ate at the kitchen counter, no TV or music. She didn't feel like any noise that evening. She concentrated on the sensation of taste, the sweetness of the tomato sauce, the buttery crust, the exquisite oiliness of the melted cheese. She meant to save some for the next morning (she loved cold pizza for breakfast), but ended up devouring the entire thing without thinking.

She tossed the box in the recycling and went upstairs. She got undressed and looked at herself in the mirror, the "slut" imprint still on her forehead. She looked at her image for a time, then put her palm to her head, covering the word, and stared at her unmarred reflection. After a minute, she brought her hand down again. Then up again. Back and forth, she went like that.

Marked.

Unmarked.

Tainted.

Untainted.

She studied the two girls she saw in the mirror, comparing them to one another. Who was pretty? Who was ugly? Who was strong? Who was weak?

She did this until her shoulder ached, and then she just let her arm hang limply at her side. She kept looking into the mirror. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. And then, without any fanfare, the word was gone. It didn't even fade away, it just vanished in a blink. Jodie smiled at a satisfied-looking girl in the glass.

Jodie slipped between the sheets of the bed and nestled into her pillow. The world outside was quiet and still. In the dark silence, she listened to her soft breath, and brought her hand to her chest. Her skin was warm, her heart was steady. After a little while, she closed her eyes and slipped into the landscape of her own dreams, where anything was possible.



ART FEATURE

DIE CHROMATIC

Art by [Meljen Art](#)
Feature by Rob Carroll

Melissa, known by her pen name, “Meljen Art,” draws in black and white because she’s colorblind.

“I can see colors,” she tells me, “but they are often muddled or muted, and night time is almost entirely black and white to me.”

When I first discovered Melissa’s artwork and approached her for an art feature, it was because I enjoyed her playful, abstract approach to the macabre. When I found out that her black-and-white art was a reflection not just of her vision, but also of her sight, I was intrigued. Then when I learned that the “shadow creatures” she creates are not just a fun way to parody pop culture, but also a way to help mend a wounded soul, I became obsessed. This is outsider art at it’s finest: rejection of the status quo not due to grievance, but due to necessity. Rejection of the current social order not as a means to create a new exclusionary end, but as an ever-evolving method of achieving radical inclusiveness that is forever new and *without* end.

“Instead of fighting with color,” she explains, “I decided to embrace my colorblindness and use it to express how I see the world. I used to draw very realistically, which is the best way to learn, but after years of doing that, I desired a greater freedom of expression. So, I started to emulate abstract art, and that translated into what I do now.”

Pictured left: *Jason Has a Heart*

There is something comforting about the darkness Melissa paints. I believe it's a combination of the fond nostalgia we feel for the horror icons she takes inspiration from and the way her playful depictions defang them in a way that allows us to love the monsters without having to fear for their next victim...or for ourselves. In this alternate universe, perhaps we could even be friends. And I think that is what would make Melissa the happiest.



Pictured above: *Wednesday Addams*



“Growing up feeling like a freak and dealing with depression my whole life led me to create these shadow creatures,” Melissa explains. “They took years to finally come into form, but when they emerged, they allowed me to express my inner weirdness and longing for connection with the world around me in a way I couldn’t before.”

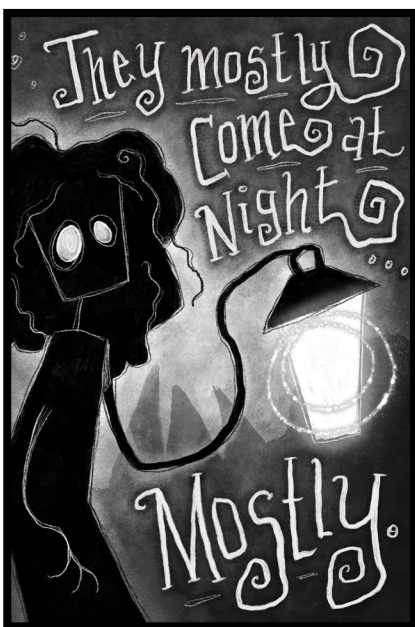
It’s funny how outsider art, either in a magnificent display of paradox, or as a laughing ode to societal mis-categorization, often feels the most deeply universal.

“We all crave connection,” says Melissa. “We all crave to feel loved and understood. We just need to learn to be okay with our weirdness, to embrace our inner monsters with acceptance, and even humor. There’s always a little bit of light no matter how dark it seems.”

Perhaps it is with this sentiment in mind that Melissa would like us to experience her art. For example, when viewed this way, her piece “I’ll get Out of This Somehow,” feels less like a really great morbid joke, and more like a declaration of positive action that is *also* a really great morbid joke—which is perfect in my mind, because while I appreciate Melissa’s expression of the human condition, her wickedly dark sense of humor is my favorite thing about her work.

For example, when telling me that she still enjoys playing with color every now and then, I smile at the two colors she names.

"I do enjoy adding a splash of gold or blood-red sometimes. It's a very rare treat."



Pictured top left: *Kraumpus Calling* Top right: *Gorgon*

Pictured bottom left: *I'll Get Out of This Somehow* Top right: *Newt*



Pictured above: *Night on Bald Mountain*



PURPLE SPIDERS

by [Taylor Gianfrancisco](#)

Jude knows even before she stepped into the mirror that her afterlife is a problem. While other spirits light up with energy like fireflies on fire, her purple veins pulse grossly in her translucent, pale skin like spiders trapped within her body as a reminder of her death by overdose.

Her stoned lover, a painter, doesn't know how to fix her—much less wants to. He calls Jude's bruised presence a watercolor of pain. "You need a grotto like mine," he says, hiding underneath his stained bedsheets and smoking a joint. "To hide away in forever. To remain the same forever."

Jude is pigeonholed in this one-bedroom apartment, so she thinks that's good enough. She squats in the barely decorated space as though she encompasses it entirely. As she breathes, her lover breathes. The room breathes. The furniture breathes. Everything expands and collapses into each other because of her. The stoned painter sometimes says that she is a divinity, but only when he is making art.

When he is lost in this reverie of artmaking, he hums the strange lyrics of The Doors, an absent-minded spell that he casts on Jude. She is wrapped into the lyrics like her purple spidery veins. Slowly becoming entombed in a melancholic daze that only she and the stoned painter know.

One night, while high, the painter tells her how much he loves her, and paints her in fabulous purples and blues. "Like

a mirage,” he says, and coughs up some smoke. “A mirage for junkies.” He stumbles into his half-painted paintings and laughs to himself. He doesn’t think she is listening when he says that mirages are just ghosts on the other side of the mirror.

She blushes as she thinks that within this hovel, she is alive. That she, among the paint brushes, stained bedsheets, and smoked joints, is an entity just as much as the painter. When this apartment was hers, it was full of light and air—the windows were open all the time, letting in the wayward spirits at night. She could sleep in their quietude, unafraid of mosquito kisses and hatching larvae. She likes to think that her romance for chaos and decay began when she met the painter at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. He, with his burrowing, death-like glare; she, ready to relapse with a needle.

Now, the painter has urinated all over the walls until the mauve pink is a runny-yolk color. The odor is faint; the turpentine of the paint is fresher. While the apartment decays quickly, Jude stays in a consistent state of suffering. As her lover, the stoned painter sits on his stool, carefully stroking the canvas. Jude forgets about the smells and colors, and focuses on the purple spiders crawling within her flesh. *I always feel them pop*, she says to herself. She doesn’t realize she has said it aloud until the painter asks if she remembers her death.

She doesn’t want to talk about the needle or the blood, though, so she simply says ‘no.’ The painter then launches into her story, but not as a cautionary tale—as a legend really. Jude watches how his eyes light with a hellish blue fire, its ink of poison slowly blotting out the living room light. She doesn’t want to be a ghost anymore; she feels her flesh slowly become numb to the air conditioning, the vibrations of the fan.

As the painter finalizes a paint stroke, he says her name with piety. He doesn’t show Jude his painting, but he doesn’t need to. Maybe he has painted her again, half-muse, half-ghost. Or maybe the canvas is the artifact of a bruise. All Jude cares about is the way her skin moves in the skylight—a purple rune, crying for a total cremation. Maybe if she sinks into the mirror, she will be reborn. Or, maybe, the purple spiders will eat her flesh and then regurgitate her so that she will forever remain toxic to the touch.

When she asks the painter about karmic energy, he scoffs. Says that there is no such thing as reincarnation. “Living is a death in and of itself,” he says, carving a deep blue slice of color against the canvas with a butcher’s knife. “You die more and more every day.” She touches the knife in his hand—the blade and his flesh cold because she is sinking to the atomic level of daily suffering—and he shivers. Blinks rapidly and inhales deeply.

Jude lingers for a long time in this space; she imagines that his sober girlfriend who stops by on Sundays will see this orgasmic tying of fate and kill her/him for the thousandth time. His girlfriend who doesn't believe in death echoes. But neither did the stoned painter until he had gone on an acid trip and discovered Jude in her pure ghost form in the apartment.

When he comes down, he is crushed underneath a doubled living—he senses Jude in the fiery depths of his brain. She senses him submerged deeper in his body-cavity, as though possession is merely a slight of hand.

The waves of tension release themselves in the painter's body. His girlfriend visits and they eat Thai take-out, and fuck, and then sleep—all while Jude inhabits his internal space. For a moment, she believes that she is a corporeal entity once again. Alive, full of oxygen and blood, heart pounding a slow code of vitality.

The stoned painter's girlfriend wakes up, kisses him (Jude) on the tip of his nose, whispers something about how he has the perfect little nose to cosplay as a character Jude has never heard of. Jude pretends to feel blissfully half-awake and mumbles through the painter's sleeping lips, "I love you, Cherie," because she wants the girlfriend to leave. Because she wants the girlfriend to never sleep with the stoned painter, her lover, again.

The next day, she doesn't leave his body. He asks her to, though. "Please," he says, begging in the murky darkness within the electric currents of the brain. But the neurotransmitters have stopped snapping inside of him; her own spiders have attached themselves to his, and she is suffocating him, she can feel it. She feels more powerful by the hour until she punches the mirror with the stoned painter's fist, steps through the glass, and transports herself and him through the cobwebs of her purple spiders into the afterlife that she so deserves.





THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE

by [Michael Adam Robson](#)

Filthy and naked, he was disgorged onto a cold, hard floor. Somewhere an alarm was buzzing. He opened his eyes and blinked in the harsh light, his thoughts muddy. The room was all white tile and bright steel.

There was a rattling behind him, and he turned and caught a nightmare glimpse of black tentacles being sucked into the wall as the opening to the dark, confused place he'd emerged from closed. He stumbled to his feet, shocked awake. Or was he still dreaming? He put a hand on the wall, but there was only smooth white tile.

On the other side of the room there was a steel door and a glass panel flashing with red lights. Part of him was afraid of what might lie outside this room, the rest of him desperately wanted out. He shuffled over to examine the panel, the source of the alarm.

Angry symbols pulsed in time with the buzzing, and at the bottom was a large red X. His jumbled mind couldn't make sense of the text, but the ghost of a memory compelled him to press the X.

A wet rattle came from the walls. The alarm stopped, and the panel now displayed blue text, and a line that slowly filled, marking time. The steel door slid smoothly into the wall, spilling light out of the room. There was only one way forward; he stepped through the door, which slid quietly shut behind him.

X

Where the first room had been cold and hard, the second was warm and comfortable. One side was dominated by a fireplace that housed a huge, roaring fire, its flames reflected in the polished wood floor. A big leather chair and a low wooden table squatted like living things in front of the flickering orange light. Shivering, he approached the hearth and put his hand to the glass. It was cold.

The chair looked inviting, but on closer inspection he saw the brown leather was stained with a dark red spatter. Despite his misgivings, he was weary enough to sit. The warmth of the room and the dancing flames steadied his nerves, gave him time to think. What was this place? How had he gotten here?

He noticed a tablet with a glass face lying on the table, and it came alive in his hand, glowing with symbols. He pushed one.

To his surprise, the fireplace vanished, and now he was looking into another room, at other people. Two beautiful young women writhed naked on a bed, kissing, coupling.

He was on his feet immediately, but hesitated to approach. Embarrassed, he knocked on the glass, but the women were so absorbed in their amorous activities, they didn't notice.

Another half-memory surfaced. These scenes were illusions, that was why the fire had been cold. He looked at the tablet still in his hand. There was a red X at the top, which in the first room had meant exit; he pushed it.

The window went black, then transparent. Outside, the terrible reality behind the room's illusions was revealed. Writhing black tentacles snaked out from the house, groping blindly over a desolate gray beach, sucking up filthy water from a dark, rolling sea. They seemed to be scavenging, searching for something. Repulsed, he pressed the X again and, mercifully, the window went dark.

There was a spidering crack in the glass which he hadn't noticed before. He ran a finger along it. Maybe he could smash it with the table and escape that way. But did he really want to be out there, with those things? It might be *him* they were searching for.

His reflection was split diagonally by the jagged crack. He didn't recognize the face. For the first time he wondered who he was.

A rattle came from behind him, and he was horrified to see in the window's reflection a tentacle worming out of the ceiling. He stumbled to a corner and cowered, as far away as he could get. The thing deposited something on the table and was sucked back up through a hole that closed after it.

When he was able to move again, he went to see what the tentacle had left him. A molded plastic tray held steel utensils, a cup of water, and two chunky mounds of mash, one green, one white. It was food, and he was, he realized, ravenously hungry.

But he couldn't eat it knowing where it had come from. This room and its comforts were a lie, a web to snare unwary prey.

He took the knife and flung the rest across the room in a clatter of utensils. To his dismay, the wall opened up and three tentacles rattled in. He climbed up on the chair, but they only swept the mess into their hole and vanished.

In the middle of that wall was a wooden door. Would it lead to the den of this writhing black monster? No. Those things seemed to live in the walls, the door was meant for him. When he approached, it opened itself. The room beyond was dark.

Clutching his knife, he walked through.



The lights came up slowly as he entered, just enough so that objects loomed out of the shadows. A large bed filled most of the room, and he could see under the tangle of sheets that it was occupied. He skulked across the thick carpet and looked down on the sleeping figure.

The master of the house. A naked, grimy man, with a bloody gash across his face. That face...

It was *his* face. Except for the wound, the man was his mirror image.

Memories were coming together like a puzzle; most of the pieces were missing, but it was enough to guess at the picture. This man was the one who had conjured him up, and the black tentacles that infested the house were his servants. They'd brought him here for some terrible purpose. And yet...that bloody face didn't inspire terror. Clearly, this was a man whose servants had turned against him.

The house was its own master now. And it was hungry.

The picture was getting clearer. Why would a man make a copy of himself? To sacrifice, in his own place.

The man's eyes fluttered open, locked on his. Without thinking, he raised his knife and stabbed that wounded face, stabbed until the clawing and the bubbling screams stopped.

He wrapped the body in the sheets and dumped it on the floor. Under the fresh blood, the mattress was dark with old stains. This hadn't been the first sacrifice.

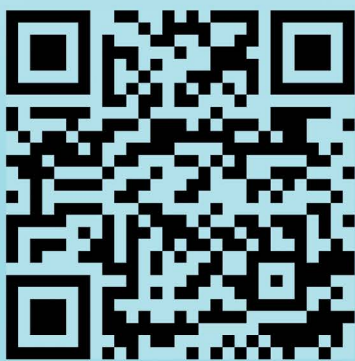
Before long, the wall erupted with tentacles that collected their red feast and sucked the mattress and carpet dry. With their sinister courtesy, they made the bed with clean sheets, then withdrew to the walls.

Exhausted by the strange ordeals and violence, he crawled under the sheets. He tried to stay awake but, despite his best efforts, eventually fell into a troubled sleep.



On the other side of the house the next build finished, and a fresh copy was disgorged from its chamber. A diagnostic revealed errors—another failure. Red lights flashed and an alarm began buzzing.

The thing blinked in the harsh light and shook its head to clear its muddy thoughts.



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A PLACE FOR THE DEAD AND THE DYING

by [P. T. Corwin](#)

I've already killed two of them back at the cabin. I can only hope their souls are burning in hell.

I chase the last girl through the forest, where the full moon drowns the sky in a dark blue and the night is alive with the whispers of leaves and the screeching of foxes.

She's younger than me. Faster as well. And every intake of air grates against my lungs, making me cough. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up.

I should have brought a gun, a knife. But all I have is an ax, too heavy for me to throw. Not that I could hit anything anyway. Through my mask, the world is no wider than the eye holes allow. But I keep it on. Even as sweat runs into my eyes and latex sticks to my hot cheeks. I keep it on. It's the same one as they wore that night. A burnt face, skin yellow like puss, winding over exposed red flesh. I want it to be the last thing she sees.

From further down, where the path bends to the right, I hear panting and a chaos of leaves.

I know these woods. I've come here on walks with my Judith, and there's a hill here that leads down towards the city. The girl must have missed the turn, gone off the path and slipped in the dark.

Her head rises at the edge of the hill, leaves pinned to her hair. She plucks them out, a moment of vanity before she sees me. She scrambles to her feet and disappears below the hill line. Like dipping under water.

By the time I reach the edge of the hill, she's not far gone. And she's limping, steadying herself on the trees.

I can catch her, if I'm quick about it.

The hill is steeper than I thought. The moss and leaves make it more slippery. I need to be careful. If I fall and hit my head on one of those tree stumps, it's over.

What if I die before I finish it? What happens to my poor Judy's soul? Will she haunt this world forever, never to find peace?

I shuffle down the hill, slow myself down by holding on to the trees. Like crossing a frozen lake. This way, it will take me longer to—

Something cuts through the silence. Music. Only faint, somewhere further down the hill.

It hits me.

Craven's Point. A plateau further down this hill. A famous spot for teenagers to make out at night, when the sprawling city below is nothing but a distant valley of fairy lights. I took Judy there on our first date, back when we were still in college. Her summer perfume filled the car. Our first kiss while Roy Orbison sang on the radio.

There are always people at Craven's Point. There are bound to be people there right now. If the girl makes it to that plateau...

There's one way I can think of to catch up with her, but it'll cost me my ax. I will have to find another way to kill her.

Maybe Judy is watching me now, stuck in this world until my work is done. Judy, my love, give me strength.

I drop the ax and push myself off from the tree. I almost fly down the hill, my feet moving faster than my brain can handle. Branches snatch at my jumper, slice the latex over my face.

I slam into a tree harder than I had planned. It knocks the wind out of me, shoots pain up my wrists. But it worked. I've gone further in these few seconds than I would have gone just by walking.

And the girl is just a few more steps away.

She turns just as I leap onto her.

We tumble down the hill like a pair of dead bodies. Roots punch into my back, tear at my hands and arms. I cough up leaves and dirt.

Finally, a fat stump breaks our fall. As we lie there panting, it looms over us like a church tower.

If there is a God, I hope he understands why I do this. I hope he forgives me.

I spit out grit that crunches between my teeth.

Beside me, the girl is wheezing.

I roll over, climb on top of her. I wrap my hands around her warm neck.

“Wait!” Her eyes wide with panic. “John. It was his idea. The masks.”

“That’s why he’s dead.”

“We didn’t know.”

I let her speak. I want her to lie to me, just like the other two. Liars go to hell.

“It was supposed to be a Halloween prank.” She sounds like she’s about to cry. She must have practiced this. “We did it a dozen times before we got to your house. People just screamed and we ran away. It was a laugh. We never meant to hurt anyone.”

“Hurt? *Hurt?*!” I knock her head against the ground.

Her eyes turn upwards, eyelids flutter.

“You didn’t hurt her. You killed her. You murdered my wife!”

I squeeze. I want to squeeze the soul out of her like Popeye squeezes spinach from a can.

Her mouth opens, gasping for air like a fish on dry land. What is she whispering?

I lean in closer.

“...valley of death, thy rod will protect me.”

She’s praying. Not very well, but it might still work. If I kill her now and she goes to Heaven, I could never forgive myself.

“...fear no evil...”

No. She doesn’t deserve to go like this.

My hands ease their grip.

She coughs, gags for air.

I’ll finish it, Judy. I promise, I’ll set you free. But I need her to—

She knees me hard where it matters, and now it’s me trying to catch my breath.

I roll off her, holding my crotch.

She scrambles to her feet.

Can’t let her get away.

I grab her by one ankle, the hurt one.

She yells, tries to pull away. Trips. There’s a horrible noise, a wet splat. Then a faint gurgling from above me.

I crawl over to a tree, lift myself up and lean against it.

I can’t see the full picture from this angle—I don’t think I want to. Just her body speared upon the tree, the church tower growing out of her like a flower in pavement.

Her foot twitches, disturbing leaves. Twitches...twitches...

Rests.

It is finished. She tried to get away, tried to escape justice. That must count as a sin.

Judy, I've done it. You can rest now. You're free.

But what about me? Where can I go now that I have nothing left?

I'm tired. Distracted. So I don't see him until it's too late.

He jumps out at me from the right—John, the man with the plan—and the next thing I know is pain. Incredible pain, like from some beast sinking its teeth into the right side of my stomach.

My ax. He's used my own ax against me.

I was stupid leaving it behind.

My legs collapse under me and I slump down on my ass, the rough bark I've been leaning on scraping my back.

I try to move, try to get up, but my legs won't obey.

I can smell him. Filthy pond water stinging my nostrils.

"You were dead." I have to force the words out. Every syllable like a knife carving up my insides.

"What? The little diving lesson back there?" He steps in front of me. He is dripping with water, seaweed clinging to his jeans and his denim jacket. "Nothing but a typical Sunday with dad for me."

I feel sleepy. Can barely hold my head up.

He laughs, kneels down. His hair clings to his face in wet strands. "Look at you. Big scary avenger." He rips the mask off my face and tosses it into the leaves. "But underneath, you're nothing but a pathetic old man." He grabs my face. His fingers are cold against my cheeks. Or maybe that's just me.

I want to reach out for him, but I can't lift my hand off the ground.

"What? You want to try again?" He moves his face closer, close enough that I can smell the cigarette on his breath. "Give it your best shot, Gramps. For your old lady."

Tired. Cold. Need to sleep. Just a little.

"Hey!" He slaps me hard.

I slide over, ready to fall, ready to rest, but he props me back up against the tree, like a defenseless dummy.

He's not done with me yet.

"Wake up, Gramps!" He pulls my eyelids apart.

I can see only a fuzzy blur in front of me.

"When you get to Hell, say hi to your wife for me."

He spits in my eye. The mucus runs down my cheek like a tear.

The fuzzy blur moves away, and I am left alone with the darkness and the pain and the silence of the forest.

I have failed. I let him get away. John. The man with the ideas. Without him, Judy would still be alive.

Will she really go to Hell with the two women I've killed? So they can torture her even more and for all eternity?

And what about me? Killed by the same man, who still walks free?

Where do the dead go if they cannot find justice?

Judy told me once, snuggled against me in bed while the snowflakes fell over the black canvas of night, that she believed—truly believed—that we all get our own version of the afterlife. Whatever makes us happy, that is where we go. We could live in a mansion in the clouds or stay here, watching over our loved ones, or go back to a place where we were happiest.

I asked her where she thought she would go and she said, "My happiest place."

"And where would that be?" I asked her.

"I don't know. I only know you'll be there."

I will, my love. I will.



THE LAST SCIENCE FICTION STORY

by [Alan Vincent Michaels](#)

“It’s blood,” I mutter, picking at the sticky, silvery mass on my forearm. I look up and stare at the bald, stocky man sitting behind the gunmetal table, but I can’t read his round face or dark eyes. I know he thinks I’m nuts. “Sheriff Johnson, I didn’t kill anything...human,” I say. “I didn’t break any laws. You have to believe me.”

“Sure, I do,” he replies, tapping and scrawling notes on his pad. How long since George died? Two hours? Three?

I can’t stop sweating. Makes me look guilty, but it’s so damned hot. Been a sweltering heat wave since dawn, and to add insult to injury, the window AC is blowing warm, stale air, and a dusty box fan is rattling uselessly behind me.

The sheriff touches the corner of his pad and a reedy voice announces, “Recording.”

“Interview on July 12. Sheriff Michael Johnson, Cortland County, conducting. Deputy James Gilmour, assisting.”

Johnson mops his brow with a camouflage-patterned bandana.

The deputy is also sweating and even more tired looking, leaning against the closed door. His dour expression matches the sheriff’s.

I suppose no one can be in good spirits on such a hot day.

“Time is 4:15. Stephen Donald of 221 Campbell Road, Cortland, received Miranda and waved counsel. State your name, that you asked to describe a murder you allegedly committed at about one o’clock today, and that you understand your rights.”

Johnson holds the pad towards me.

I lean forward and comply, shouting my conclusion, "It was self-defense!"

My mouth feels like it's full of cotton. "May I have some water?"

"I'm good, Jim." Johnson nods at the deputy, who leaves quickly, seemingly eager for any reason to escape the hot, confining room.

"Until now, my life's been...well...boring," I say. "Then Dad died and George showed up in the front yard..."

"This 'George' is the person you say you killed?"

I watch dust motes dance in the naked, fluorescent glow of the ceiling lights. Sweat runs down from the small of my back.

"Yeah. 'Person.' Your word, not mine."

"Go on."

"I was a bank teller 'til two months ago."

Gilmour returns with a plastic cup filled with lukewarm water and one rapidly vanishing ice cube. I down most of the water in two large gulps, watching the deputy try to torment me by opening slowly a cold can of soda that drips with condensation.

Nice. You bastard.

"Everything changed," I say, wiping my forearm across my mouth, dismissing the deputy with a piercing glance, "when Dad died. I'm Manfred Donald's son. Quit my job and came here from L.A. to bury him and sell his farm. Already sold the cows. The farm and equipment close next month. Then, back to L.A. I guess."

"Sorry for your loss. Manny was...interesting," Johnson says.

"Never knew him," I reply. "My parents divorced when I was one. It was pretty bad. Mom, my older brother, and I moved in with my aunt in L.A. We never stayed in touch with Dad. Actually, I was born on his farm here, but grew up off Santa Monica Boulevard. I guess his death was the kick I've been needing to get out of L.A."

"So...I've been working on my science fiction novel for, like, eleven years. After Dad's funeral, I decided to write full time. Funny thing, but his death made me think about what I really wanted to do with my life. Long odds making a living writing, especially science fiction, but I fell in love with it when I started reading my brother's books, dreaming about all those fantastic worlds and weird-looking creatures.

"And I read everything I could: Asimov, Pohl, Herbert, Clarke. All the greats. They helped me escape my Mom's ranting and her wacko boyfriends. We were always fighting--"

"What's this got to do with killing George?" Johnson interrupts, teeth

clenched, a hard tone infusing each word. He loosens his tie and drags his bandana across his brow.

"Look. Gotta tell it my way," I reply, matching his tone, "or I can't get through this. You need my backstory. You'll see that I had no choice but to defend myself."

"Not seeing anything so far."

"I started *Alien Odyssey* when I was sixteen," I say, ignoring the sheriff's stare. "Filled dozens of notepads coming up with new ideas and characters all the time. Must've written two-hundred pages in pencil before my Mom decided I was serious and gave me her old laptop to use. It was wicked-intense typing up everything I'd written and all the new stuff, but it was the only way."

"I got through the long nights dreaming about skipping college, getting a Nebula or Hugo Award, doing book signings. I wanted so badly to be a *science fiction author*. I could taste it. Can't imagine writing anything else."

Johnson glances at his watch.

I wipe my brow.

"Talk about being wasted when I typed 'The End' on page four-hundred-six! But I stayed up all night printing it on my Mom's laser printer, then mailed it the next day to the biggest publisher in New York City."

"Took months to get a response. Then hours more before I found the courage to open the envelope. No check or contract. Just a short letter that began: 'Dear, Mr. Stephen.' Damn it, Sheriff, they rejected me and didn't even get my name right!"

I breathe deeply, trying to regain my composure.

"They said my novel didn't..." I punctuate the next words with air quotes, "'meet their expectations' and I should 'revise it and submit it to a publisher specializing in *sci-fi*.'"

"Come on! *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* were sci-fi. Great effects, but it's not real science fiction. Just eye candy and clichés. The imagining part was pretty much gone and where's the science? Movies like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Matrix* had cool ideas, and it was great going to the World Science Fiction Convention in Chicago, but *real* science fiction is serious stuff. Rod Sterling once said, it's 'the improbable made possible.'"

"Hey, isn't he the guy from that *Twilight Zone* show back in the '60s?" Gilmour asks, his inquisitive expression seemingly genuine.

Johnson grunts and rolls his eyes. "Stephen, get back to today."

"Want to know what pissed me off the most, Sheriff? The publisher sent back the first three pages all marked up. Red cross-outs, squiggles, backwards letter 'P's. They didn't just reject my novel. They slaughtered it!"

“Hey, I thought my novel was perfect. Who’d mark up the statue of David with red paint? Make his biceps larger? Put on pants? That’d be sacrilegious.”

Johnson reaches inside his shoulder holster. I yelp involuntarily and slide down the chair, trying to become a smaller target. He pulls out a cigarette pack and lighter, offering me a smoke. I stare at his outstretched hand, not comprehending at first, then slowly shake my head.

“I thought you were going to shoot me.”

“Day’s not over yet,” he says, lighting up and drawing deeply on the cigarette. He angles his head up and exhales. I sit up, coughing as the smoke drifts around me. I decide not to add “a complaint about his smoking” to my current list of problems.

“Guess it took me a while to realize my novel really did need some work,” I continue. “Can’t tell you how many times I’ve rewritten it. I’ve sent it to a ton of publishers and agents. Hey, you know, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* got rejected like over a hundred times before it sold, but I’m not that patient.

“Then George shows up at the farm today, and I knew I had to kill him. I’d never be a science fiction author if he lived.”

Johnson stops looking past my shoulder at the wall behind me and stares into my eyes. I finally have his attention.

“I was rewriting chapter ten,” I continue, “where Jason, my protagonist, lasers an insectoid alien horde, but I couldn’t concentrate with Hunter’s crazy barking and whining. Hunter was my Dad’s Golden Lab. Mine now, I guess.

“So, I go to the porch and guess what I saw?”

“What?” Johnson grunts, bending his pad stylus on the table.

“A real, live alien!” I shout, moving my outstretched hands above my head. “It started moving closer with Hunter circling and barking, then Hunter suddenly dropped and started wagging his tail in the grass.

“The alien was about five feet tall, and at it looked like a gray, stubby bundle of moldy asparagus. Three eye-stalks on top. Three knobby tentacles from its mid-section—two for its legs and one long arm with thin, wispy fingers at the end.

“About a hundred feet behind it hovered this weird, silvery sphere, covered in a soft, blue glow. You could smell the ozone. The sphere floated silently a few feet off the ground and probably was, maybe, fifty feet across.

“The tension in my muscles evaporated slowly. ‘Who you? What you?’ I finally croaked. I couldn’t believe I forgot the verbs. My hands were trembling, but I couldn’t command my legs to run. I was paralyzed.

“‘I am George Jetson,’ came the reply in a familiar nasally tone, seemingly from everywhere or maybe it was just in my head. ‘I work for Spacely Space Sprockets. I need your help with the button I push in my office.’

“If that weren’t strange enough, I felt calmer the more I listened. Started thinking of it as a ‘he,’ too, but there was no obvious way to tell.

“My thoughts were floundering, trying to make the connection, then it hit me. The old *Jetsons* TV cartoon, of course! I imagined there were alien Jane-, Judy-, Elroy-, and Astro-vegetables in the sphere. It was so absurd; I couldn’t even force myself to laugh.

“Look, guys, I’m not crazy. It’s all true. No! Don’t stop recording. Let me finish and I’ll show you the body, so you’ll have to believe me.”

Johnson beckons at the mirror behind him and I stare for a moment at my reflection. Drawn, sunken face. Stringy hair. God, I look awful. I rub my eyes and struggle to remember the insane events of a couple hours ago.

“George waved his fore-tentacle at me and said, ‘I hope my voice makes you feel comfortable. I have a proposal for you.’

“Wish I had a pad then, Sheriff,” I say. “George said lots of crazy stuff, like his home world was called *Anaxathane*, and he refined his English while orbiting Earth, studying for months the radio and TV signals we send off into space. He also said we were the first race they’d encountered who polluted space—broken satellites, probes littering Mars, electromagnetic radiation, that kind of stuff.”

Gilmour steps aside as another deputy opens the door and walks in. Johnson doesn’t bother with introductions, but at least the open door helps vent some of the heat.

“Because *The Jetsons* signals were stronger compared to others they received, their scientists believed it was an important story we wanted to share. Seems they were quite upset when they discovered it was just a ‘cartoon.’ Guess they don’t have entertainment programs on *Anaxathane*.

“Look, Sheriff, I was chatting with an alien asparagus like it’s something I do every day. I know what’s fiction and what’s reality. It wasn’t making any sense to me. I should have been terrified, but I wasn’t.

“Then George said the craziest thing. He’d come to Earth to survey it for—get this—resorts! You know, hotels, spas, pools, restaurants. George wanted my Dad’s thousand-acre farm to build an effing alien resort. It was his people’s way to always negotiate directly first.

“Seems the *Thanes* acquired Earth and Mars in some sort of interstellar real estate swap. They gave up a bunch of big gas planets somewhere for the rights to build thousands of resorts here for themselves and other

aliens. I told him Earth didn't have any room for aliens, what with almost eight-billion humans already here.

"George blinked his eyestalks, but said nothing. We stared at each other for a long moment. I could hear the wind and my breathing, but I don't think George breathed at all. In fact, I remember thinking that he redefined the meaning of 'still life.'

"I'm dry and cold,' George said, finally breaking the silence. 'Water, please.'

"I was about to ask why he felt cold on such a hot day, but Hunter bounded up the porch steps and began sniffing around the alien's foot-tentacles.

"George had to be using some tech on us or maybe telepathy. I felt completely relaxed, talking to an E.T. on my porch, like he and I were best friends.

"I went inside to get the water and, the closer I got to the kitchen sink, the more nervous I became. As I filled the pitcher, the enormity of the situation overwhelmed me. Panic. Fear. The whole nine yards. I grabbed the counter edge as the words 'There's an alien on my porch!' sounded inside my brain like ping pong balls rebounding in a steel bucket."

I drew a deep breath.

"George was an *alien* who wanted to build resorts, for God's sake!"

I wave my hands around in frustration.

"But that's not why I killed George. Didn't really care if he built resorts, harvested pineapples, or opened E.T. sushi bars. I was terrified because there was a real alien here on Earth."

I swung my hands about, again, knocking my cup off the table, water drops spraying in a long arc.

"Sorry."

Johnson rolls his eyes. "Get this one, Mallory." The second deputy smirks as he leaves the room.

"Yeah, sounds crazy, but you weren't there, Mallory," I say. "Look, Sheriff, George wasn't trying to laser me or suck my brains out. Would that have been more 'self-defense' for you? I was *afraid*, okay? I knew real science fiction was done for, and it was game over for me."

The look on the sheriff's face proves he doesn't get it. I sigh, exhaling slowly.

"Aliens are real. UFOs are real. It's all real! Alien cultures and amazing technologies are gonna be science fact. Where does that leave science *fiction*? Or me? I don't want to write romance novels or do restaurant reviews."

My emotions well up.

"The Spiral Galaxy Resort orbiting the third moon of Rigel 12 has a six-supernova restaurant," I intone. "Unparalleled recipes and phenomenal service, with a kid alien-friendly menu. Screw that!

“So, who’ll buy science fiction stories, go to conventions, or even watch sci-fi shows with something like that around? The *real thing* will be better than any novel or Hollywood special-effects movie.

“No need dreaming about distant worlds and aliens. Or asking the big, what-if questions about what it all means for the human condition. Just ask an asparagus-head to loan us his *Encyclopedia Galactica* and learn about everything instantly.

“We won’t have to think any more about space travel. It’ll all be everyday stuff, like catching a cab or flying in a plane. *Illegal alien* will really mean something else. And UFOs won’t be unidentified anymore, not with their alien crews dining at Applebee’s and drinking espressos at Starbucks.

“We’ll witness great intergalactic battles, read news stories about starship fleets exploring the universe, encounter incredible technologies that are indistinguishable from magic.

“The stories of Niven, Sawyer, Simmons, and Baxter will come to life right before our eyes.

“But what about me? I’ve wanted to be a science fiction author since I was old enough to say ‘Aldebaran.’ No freaking way any alien was going to take it all away from me!”

Mallory returns and I take the offered cup, sipping the tepid water.

The sheriff and deputies still seem uncomfortable, even after removing their ties and rolling up their sleeves. The sweat patches around their armpits are the size of cantaloupes.

“Don’t remember thinking about it,” I say. “I just knew I had to kill George. I had hoped I’d frighten the rest of the asparagus-heads to go back to their freaking *Anaxathane*.

“Besides, nothing had really changed if I was the only one who knew about them. Right? George told me I was his first human contact. My plan was so simple.

“I grabbed my shovel from the back porch. As I got closer to George, that serene feeling washed over me again. I knew it! Hypnosis or pheromones or something. Probably some evolutionary trick to subdue their prey when hunting.

“George’s tentacle-fingers grabbed the pitcher from me and upended it over his eye-stalks. The water soaked right into his skin. I stared, totally amazed. Not a drop hit the porch.

“His eyestalks focused on the shovel in my hand and I tensed my muscles. My mind raced for an explanation, fighting the tranquil feeling.

“‘Have to bury Hunter’s crap that’s on the walkway,’ I say haltingly, half-nodding at the pile the dog had left. I slowly turned away from George,

took a step down, turned and swung the shovel hard, hitting right above where his leg-tentacles attached to his body.

"You should have seen it! Cut him right in half. Felt like slicing mushy bread. I spun around completely, the shovel flying off into the yard. Almost no resistance at all. A popping sound, then sticky, silvery goo—his blood—sprayed everywhere, especially on me."

I point at the silvery globs on my shirt and hair.

"His eyes blinked up at me from the pile of mush that was once his top. I thought his expression conveyed surprise, but who knows?

"My pulse raced in my ears. Time seemed to slow as I watched his bottom half spray more goo; then the body twitched violently and slumped on its side. That's when I dropped to my knees and puked. I was so skeeved out."

I drag my forearm across my brow. "Yes, I killed him. George didn't shout or cry. Can't expect aliens to act like real people, can we?"

Johnson and his deputies stare at me for a few seconds, and then look at each other. I look down at the table.

"Hunter's barking at the sphere brought me around," I say. "Just in time to see the ship vanish into the atmosphere. I gave up looking for it and got some trash bags to put George in. He was starting to decompose already and he stunk something awful. Worse than any skunk roadkill.

"After tying the bags, the smell vanished, like it never was. I stood there, closed my eyes, and then I'm standing in the lobby, yelling at Deputy Gilmour about what happened to me. Bet that was George's revenge: hypnotizing me to turn myself in."

I spread my arms out, palms up.

"I had to kill him. He was going to ruin it all for me. I am going to be a science fiction author and no effing *alien* is going to stop me."

I slump back in my chair, exhausted, sweaty, and thirsty.

"Sheriff," Mallory says, moving away from the wall, "except for his sci-fi crap—"

"It's not science fiction!" I shout.

"...sci-fi crap, it sure sounds like what Sarah Collins just called about a couple of minutes ago."

"What?" Johnson asks, turning to face the deputy.

"Yeah," Mallory continues. "I got her call when I came on shift. I knew she was really upset because of how she said it. She told me in calm tones she was having afternoon tea with a large, talking, purple carrot and could we come over and kill it. Can you believe that? I figure I'll go over and see what's up."

Johnson taps the pad to stop the recording, then stands up. "Son of a bitch!" he exclaims, exhaling sharply. "First, the heat. Then, the AC goes AWOL. Now all this Roswell-crap insanity..."

"Gilmour, put Stephen downstairs in the cage with the guy who claims he chopped up a talking, blue tomato this morning."

The deputy moves behind me, unhooking the handcuffs on his belt.

"It was self-defense!"

I rise in protest, but Gilmour puts one hand on my shoulder, pushing me down, and the other on his nightstick.

"There are really more of them?" I whisper. My body shakes. My voice grows to a shout. "Oh my God, it's not fair. Not fair!"

I slam my fist on the table, drop my chin, and choke back a sob.

"I'll call the state barracks and get some backup to help and to watch the town, boys," Johnson says. "We don't need any hot-headed heroes tonight. Dammit, this means the Feds are gonna stick their noses in this mess. Mallory, get the shotguns anyway and let's go check on Mrs. Collins."

Looking down at me as I peer up through teary eyes, Johnson says, "I think it's all crap, Stephen, and you're full of it, too. You better pray to Heaven it's just this damned heat wave messing with our heads. Otherwise, you and the 'dice-em-up cowboy' downstairs are why we get invaded by hordes of pissed-off aliens tonight. Or probably worse: Why we'll soon be up to our armpits in shuffleboard-playing vegetables."

"Either way, folks won't take kindly to aliens messing with us. It's going to get a whole lot hotter before morning."



REPRINT STORY

Originally Published by Red Sun Magazine

CAROLINE

by [Aeryn Rudel](#)

“Can I go to the basement and see Daddy?” Caroline asked.

Barbara set the shotgun on the kitchen counter, checked the safety, and knelt beside her daughter. “Honey, Daddy isn’t ready for visitors yet.”

“When he finishes his lessons?” Caroline said, hopeful. She and David had been close, and she felt the loss more than her twelve-year-old brother. Mark wanted nothing to do with his father. Barbara hoped he'd come around, especially if he could see the progress David had made, but she knew she couldn't rush things.

“We'll see, but that might be a long time from now.” Barbara pulled her daughter close, and Caroline melted into the embrace. “Now go outside with your brother and Uncle Robert. I'll call for you when I come back upstairs.” She wouldn't risk having the kids in the house during rehab.

“I could help with the lessons,” Caroline said. “I could help Daddy too.”

Barbara smiled. “I know you could, but remember what the people from the Rehabilitation Agency said. Just one of us right now, until he gets a little better.” The rehab process fascinated Caroline, and she questioned Barbara on every detail. Barbara didn't tell her much. Most of it wasn't fit for an eight-year-old to hear.

"Please, I miss him so much." Tears stood in Caroline's pale green eyes. Green like her father's used to be.

Seeing Caroline like this sunk a knife into Barbara's heart. "Go on, honey. Now."

Caroline shuffled to the sliding glass door, opened it, and stepped into the backyard, where her brother and uncle waited. Robert looked a lot like David, enough that Barbara often did a double take when she found him drinking coffee at their table in the morning. Outside, he scooped up Caroline, and she came alive in his arms, smiling and laughing. Mark walked up behind them, grinning. They looked happy. Despite the terrible thing that had happened, her family looked happy.

Barbara watched Robert and her children for a few moments, trying to soak in as much of their joy as possible. Robert didn't like staying outside while she worked with David, but she needed him to stay with Mark and Caroline. She didn't want to worry about them while David did his lessons. There was another reason, too, one she couldn't tell him. Robert had become the bedrock upon which they were rebuilding their lives. She remained devoted to her husband, but if David couldn't come all the way back... She pushed the thought from her mind, feeling guilty for even considering it. Too soon for thoughts like that.

Barbara locked the sliding glass door and returned to the counter where the shotgun waited. The Mossberg 500's black barrel and synthetic stock looked like a gun-shaped oil slick on the soft cream tiles. Barbara picked up the weapon and began loading shells into it from her pockets: double-aught buck. She hated the gun, but it was mandatory. She'd asked for something smaller and easier to carry, something that didn't kick like a goddamn mule. The Rehabilitation Agency refused. The gun had to have legitimate stopping power. She had to be able to kill her husband with one shot.

With the shotgun loaded, Barbara made her way to the basement door. It had been the first of the "improvements" made to the house when David came back to live with them. They'd replaced the wall with a concrete slab to support a heavy steel frame and the new door. The entrance to her basement looked like a bank vault, a thick rectangle of shining metal. The door made her feel safe and terribly sad at the same time.

She entered a six-digit code—David's birth date—into the keypad to disengage the locking mechanism. Barbara pulled open the door, and the stench of rancid meat wafted from the dark stairwell beyond. The smell used to make her sick, but you could get used to anything with enough time and determination. She flicked on the lights, filling the stairwell and the basement below with a harsh fluorescent glow.

Barbara thumbed the safety off on the shotgun and waited. The sounds of David's chains dragging on the concrete drifted up after a few seconds.

"David, I'm coming down."

A low, rattling moan followed her announcement, animal-like and unintelligible. Barbara drew in a deep, steadying breath and descended the short flight of stairs.

The Rehabilitation Agency had remodeled the basement, like the door. First, they'd painted the walls a soft blue. The color had tested well at the local containment center where David lived after the Agency captured him. He'd been there six months before they deemed him a candidate for rehabilitation. The agency also put in banks of fluorescent lights and the manacles and chains on the wall.

David stood in the far corner of the basement, his gray, cloudy eyes tracking Barbara as she moved into the room. His wrists and ankles bore heavy manacles, padded on the inside with soft leather. The manacles attached to chains, that in turn, attached to thick steel rings set into the wall. He had five feet of movement in any direction. A bright yellow half-circle on the floor indicated how far he could reach at the end of his chains.

David had finished eating. Nothing remained beyond the crimson stain around his mouth. Barbara never asked where the "food" came from; she didn't want to know. A white van delivered a package wrapped in opaque plastic once a week. The agency told her the wrapping was edible—like a tasteless Fruit Roll-Up—so she just pushed the package into David's reach with a broom handle.

A plain wooden table and chair sat outside the yellow half-circle, five feet from its farthest edge. She'd positioned the table close enough for David to see and hear her, and far enough away that he had no chance of reaching her. On top of the table sat the rehabilitation materials: a stack of white plastic binders. Barbara put the shotgun down and smiled at her husband. He shuffled forward, chains rattling against the concrete.

She took a binder from the top of the stack. Inside were big, laminated cards with pictures of ordinary objects. She selected one and held it up. "What's this, David?"

He cocked his head and stared at the card. A line of pink drool fell from his bottom lip, and he opened and closed his mouth, making wet smacking noises. She almost set the card aside to choose another, and then he spoke.

"Treeee." David's voice was low and grinding, like a man who needed to clear his throat.

"That's right, baby," she said, trying not to feel too hopeful. He'd never identified that particular card, but they were a month into the rehab process and recognition of simple objects wasn't enough. "What kind of tree?"

David tilted his head back and moaned. To Barbara it sounded like frustration, but the agency told her not to read too much into David's vocalizations.

"Come on. You know this one."

He lowered his head, stared at the card, then at her, his milky gray eyes moving back and forth. A few seconds passed, and then, "Crissssmaaasss treeeee." He'd put two words together coherently for the first time.

Barbara couldn't contain her glee. "Yes! That's it, baby! Christmas tree! Christmas tree!"

David had made a monumental breakthrough, but it paled in comparison to his reaction to her delight. The corners of his mouth, still stained red from his meal, twitched, and then rose. An unmistakable smile. The sight of it brought warm tears to Barbara's eyes. The smile disappeared, and David's face fell slack again. She didn't care. He'd exhibited a genuine emotional response. Undeniable progress.

She set the picture of the Christmas tree on the table and looked back at the binder she'd taken it from. The label on the spine read SERIES TWO. Next to this binder sat a stack of four more. Their spines read SERIES THREE, FOUR, FIVE, and SIX. Rehabilitation was a long, slow process, and the agency told her never to work outside the program. Full rehab was possible, although only fifteen percent of candidates made it all the way back. The agency told her she must complete each series in order, but David was doing so well. In under a month, he'd shown increased levels of cognition and memory, and a decreased aggression response. Add to that the breakthrough today, and...

"You're ready, right, baby?" Barbara grabbed the SERIES FOUR binder from the stack, opened it, and flipped through the cards within. The one she wanted lay at the bottom. She pulled it out, held it to her chest, and took a deep breath.

She held up the picture of Caroline taken a year ago at the park. Their little girl sat on the swings, her face glowing and happy. "Who's this, David?" she said, her heart thundering in her chest.

"Girrrrl," David said, eyes fixed on the picture of his daughter.

He'd answered quicker than ever before. She knew she should stop. Pushing him further might set him back weeks, might trigger a violent response. But he was so close. Could *this* be the road to full recovery? He'd loved Caroline so much. The agency didn't know everything, right? Rehabilitation was a new process. They couldn't have it all figured out.

She held the picture out further. "That's right. It's a girl. What else? *Who* is it?"

David studied the picture again. His mouth worked, and his eyes roamed around the room, as if he searched for something. Barbara allowed herself to hope, to prepare for the overwhelming surge of excitement should David remember his daughter.

"Come on, David," she said, trying to keep the emotion out of her voice.

His lips squirmed away from his teeth, and his eyes rolled in their sockets. He looked like he was fighting something, trying to push through a thick caul of base instincts and hunger, to the light of reason beyond.

He failed.

David's face relaxed back into the slack, emotionless mask he'd worn since he'd been infected. "Girrl."

Despair washed over Barbara, a dark tide that smothered the hope she'd felt moments ago. She put the picture of Caroline down on the table and stared at it, running her hands over the glossy surface. Then she looked at the shotgun. Would it be better to end it now? Would it be easier on everyone? Robert was a good man and already like a father to the kids. Wouldn't David understand?

She swallowed and shook her head. "No, I won't give up on you." She put the picture of the Christmas tree and Caroline's picture back in their binders.

David watched her do all this without a sound. When she finished, she picked up the shotgun and moved to the stairs. At the top, she flicked the light switch, plunging the basement into darkness.

She stood there in the dark, the shotgun dangling in her right hand. She knew tears were coming, but they would be for her. Robert and the kids couldn't see; they needed to believe David was getting closer. She needed to believe, too, if only to give her a reason to keep going.

Below, David's chains rattled, and Barbara looked down at her left hand, at the plain band of gold on her ring finger. A chain of her own.

Barbara pushed the heavy steel door closed. Before it shut, David's voice drifted through the thin sliver of darkness between door and frame. The words came through ghostly and heartbreaking, crashing against her emotions, carrying both hope and the damning resignation that there was still so much to do.

"Christmaaaaaaas treeeee."



Barbara woke with a scream climbing up her throat. The dream left no trace in her mind beyond a lingering sense of terror and panic. She let her eyes adjust to the darkness in her bedroom, taking deep breaths to calm her racing heart.

Minutes passed, and that sense of acute panic did not dissipate. She got up and went to her closet. Inside, behind the clothes, loomed a jet-black gun safe. The Rehabilitation Agency recommended she keep her gun close at hand, but with an eight- and a twelve-year-old in the house, the thought of a loaded shotgun within easy reach terrified her. She touched the combination dial, letting her hand rest there while she tried to decide if she was being foolish.

Barbara waited for the alarm hammering through her brain to subside. It did not. She entered the combination, opened the safe, and pulled out the shotgun, shuddering as her skin made contact with the cold metal. She stuffed a handful of shells into the pockets of her pajamas, unable to bring herself to load the gun yet.

Barbara left her room and stood in the hall, listening. The house was quiet. Mark's room was closest to hers, and he always shut his door. She opened it a crack and peered inside. A boy-shaped mound lay on her son's bed, and she watched the subtle cadence of his breathing for a moment before moving on.

Some of her fear dissipated, and she crept down the hall to Caroline's room. The soft glow of Caroline's night-light splashed into the hall through her open door. Barbara approached, carrying the shotgun behind her back. She didn't want Caroline to see it if she was awake.

One look into her daughter's room, and the panic came roaring back, dumping ice water down Barbara's spine. Caroline's bed was empty.

"Caroline," Barbara whispered, stepping into the room. No answer and no sign of her daughter.

She left Caroline's room and ran to the stairs at the end of the hall. She stood at the top, listening again. Nothing. The stairs ended in the living room, and she could see into the kitchen from there. The overhead light was on, and she had a clear view of the steel door to the basement.

Someone had pushed a chair next to the keypad, and the door stood open a crack, just enough space for a slim eight-year-old to squeeze through.

"No, no, no," Barbara said, and dug into her pocket for shotgun shells. She stopped long enough to jam three shells into the shotgun and pump one into the chamber before running to the basement door and hauling it open wide.

The lights were on below, but she couldn't hear anything. Barbara bounded down the stairs, the shotgun at her shoulder, her finger on the trigger guard like the Agency had taught her.

Barbara's mind whirled with terrifying images. Caroline missed her father so much, and Barbara sometimes worried she might follow her down into the basement. The keypad and the door made her feel safer, but Caroline often lingered in the kitchen before Barbara went down to work with David. Had she watched Barbara enter the code? How stupid she had been to think such paltry obstacles could keep a grieving child from the one thing that would make them feel better.

Barbara reached the base of the stairs and stopped. The shotgun dropped from her shoulder, and she stared in mute horror at the scene before her.

There was so much blood. It ran in thick rivulets from David's half-circle and splattered the wall behind him. Her husband sat on the ground facing her, his shoulders slumped, head down. Something lay on the floor in front of him, something she couldn't look at, couldn't see, or she would not have the strength or sanity to do what must come next.

She shuffled forward, her mind blank, numb. She brought up the shotgun and put her finger around the trigger. David didn't move until she stood inside the "safe" zone. She pointed the shotgun at his head.

He looked up, his face streaked with blood. His eyes found hers, and some of the old green peeked through the muddy gray.

David's mouth worked, and his eyes held hers. He tried to speak. Her finger tensed around the shotgun's trigger, but part of her needed to hear, needed to know the destruction of everything good in their lives.

David's eyes were pleading, desperate with terrible pain, and worse, understanding. He answered Barbara's question in a single word, uttered with perfect human clarity.

"Caroline."

She pulled the trigger.





POETRY

THE RUSK

by [Louis Rosenberg](#)

The west winds wailed and branches brayed
to mourn the dawn of dusk.
As none were safe when darkness reigned
the land they called The Rusk.

The air grew dense with fog that crawled
up over distant hills
and sank into the valleys plush
with ornamental kills.

The bodies hung like chandeliers
of bones freeze-dried with dread.
They rattled in the midnight breeze
like windchimes of the dead.

Into this land a young man came
with treasure in his sight.
He heard the tales of riches claimed
by those who last one night.

“I fear you not,” he dared the wind
and mocked the deathly trees.
“I’m not like all those other fools
who trembled on their knees.”

“So brave, so bold,” the trees replied,
“we’ve seen it countless times.”
And right they were, for now he hangs
among the other chimes.





POETRY

A NIGHT IN THE LUTHERAN GARDEN

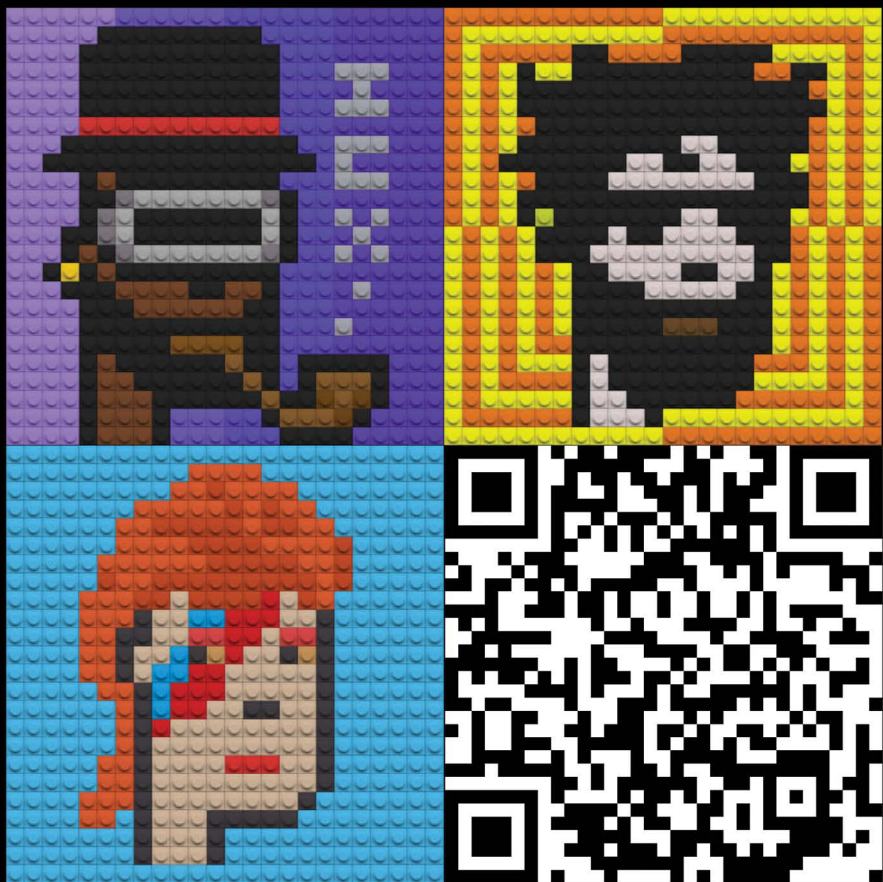
by [Deborah Wong](#)

I spray and clean Dad's black and white photo
with the Bethlehem's Holy Water in bottle
his former prize possession, untouchable
even when Mom's cleaning the cabinet, or
me, reaching for the olive wooden crucifix,
but now I've got a confession to make,
glad to visit Sweet O' Dad's columbarium
on the Halloween's eve night, just because
Dad had lost the grip to empower my life,
I'm free to binge-watch Netflix all day,
blasting K-Pop music as my national anthem,
wondering how'd his soul living in solitude
inside a porcelain urn, on the niche wall,
and, he had always hated 31st October,
Michael Myers's overrated skin mask,
the adorably big-ass Jack O' Lantern's grin,
pumpkin spiced Latte, and pumpkin cookies;
now, I serve pumpkin curry with chickpeas,
pumpkin mochi, and Mom's pumpkin baos
as a bonding tool to bring forth both worlds.

Dim streetlights across the lonely freeway,
flipping Dad's mahjong dices for decision,
hope the meals achieve his expectation,
cold wind rustles with howling pack of dogs,

Eustachian tube popping pressure symptom,
I've beaten vertigo but never in tinnitus,
crickets chirping, stridulating Amazing Grace,
maggots drilling in and out from the earth,
devouring on corpses' passed rigor mortises,
a half-eaten pumpkin mochi left on the bowl,
a man's gold teeth grills inlaid with decays,
praising the dough's tanginess and glacé,
advises me not to get into heavy sleep debt,
I leave only the pumpkin mochi behind, in case
Dad haunts and destroys my dream later. There,
a new tombstone engraved 'Fearsome Teddy',
awaken by revolting knockings at the window,
the man wants to hitch a ride to downtown,
refuses to miss the Halloween countdown,
I ask for his name. "Theodore," says he.

BLOCKPUNKS



craft.network/collection/blockpunks



POETRY

HORROR POEMS

by [James Hancock](#)

Hanging Point

There was a tree atop a hill
Whose branches black as night
No leaf would grow on twisted twigs
And shadow blocked the light

None would dare to climb the hill
Or look upon the tree
Standing close would bring a curse
And death would visit thee

Victim

I saw you from my window
I saw you on the train
I saw you in my dreams last night
You want to share my pain

I've dug a bed for you to rest
To stare up at the moon
My blistered hands are nearly healed
I'll visit you real soon

I know the number of your house
I followed you one night
Collection day is on its way
You needn't scream or fight

We'll journey to the forest
We'll kiss and say goodbye
I'll wrap you in a linen sheet
And lay thee down to die





POETRY REPRINT

Originally Published by Writer's Den

WE EAT

by [Alan Vincent Michaels](#)

Little spider, minute and black
a mere speck against
crimson and white silk strands
multi-hued colors swirling
through shifting patterns

I watch you wander aimlessly
then you dart quickly
towards vibrations
along the strands of your web
then you move slowly
after your prey vanishes

I blink

Did I see what I thought I saw?
That fly had struggled
for only the briefest of moments
caught in what seems to be sticky silk

Was it your dinner?
Was it not?
I guess, not

When it touched your fateful trap
it vanished
but to where?

Another fly
unsuspecting dinner to be
was caught in your web

It, too, vanished
not with a flash
but with the cut between frames
of an old-time movie

Existence
then non-existence

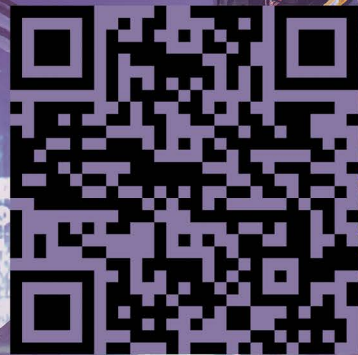
Curiosity piqued
fear swallowing my reason
I approach and reach out
touching the spot
where the flies weren't

A sound, like shattering crystals
A smell, like scented flowers
My heart hears a siren's call

All control abandoned
as my fingertips touch
nothingness

My world dissolves
into streams of blacks and gray
then, momentary glimpses of
fangs and faceted eyes
encompass me
becoming real
becoming solid

Words
infused with music
rising to a crescendo
strong and clear
supplanting my thoughts
and fears
"We eat...like kings!"



superrare.com/jarvinart





ARTISAN SPOTLIGHT

TALES TO TERRIFY

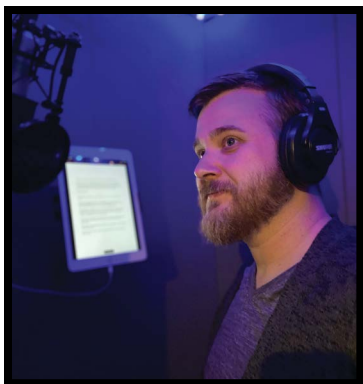
Featuring [Drew Sebesteny](#)

We here at *Dark Matter Magazine* appreciate many things about the fall besides just Halloween: October baseball, Iowa Hawkeyes football, a warm slab of ribs from the famous Twin Anchors restaurant (located on N. Sedgwick in Chicago, open from 4–10 p.m., Tuesdays–Fridays, and Noon–10 p.m. on weekends),¹ but nothing hits the spot this time of year quite like a good spooky story, especially if that story is in audio. So, in the spirit of the season, we sat down for some ribs (*extra zesty sauce, please*) and an interview with one of the best horror fiction podcasts around: the one, the only, Tales to Terrify.

DMM: We hate to do this—we really do—but care to press pause on this life-changing barbecue for a moment so that you can introduce your podcast to our readers?

Tales to Terrify: [Licks fingers and obliges.] Tales to Terrify is a weekly horror fiction podcast, specializing in short stories authored by emerging and established writers, and narrated by a variety of talented voices. Episodes range from 45–75 minutes each, depending on the story length and the runtime of additional content. We can be found at talestoterrify.com, as well as on all podcatcher apps, and via our RSS feed.

1. This is not an advertisement. We just *really* love Twin Anchors ribs.



Drew Sebesteny

DMM: And you are?

Drew Sebesteny: I am Drew Sebesteny, the owner, producer, and host of Tales to Terrify.

DMM: Which means what exactly?

DS: As producer and host, I write and record the intro for each episode, edit the audio files from our volunteer narrators, edit and master the episode, then upload, post, etc. I also do my best to be a face for the show, but I'm

not really a social media kind of guy, so it's not my greatest strength.

As the owner, I deal with all the fun administrative things like paying bills, writing and editing contracts, maintaining the website, etc.

DMM: We agree. Administrative things *are* fun. Who doesn't like filling out boring forms? Anyway...Tales to Terrify just completed its 500th episode. This is a tremendous accomplishment, and let us just say for the record, "Bravo." But 500 episodes also means that the podcast has been around for quite awhile, probably longer than many know. Care to give us a quick history lesson?

DS: Tales to Terrify is one of just a handful of surviving podcasts from the prehistoric podcast boom of the early 2010s. At the time, it was the first off-shoot from the popular StarShipSofa podcast, which spawned a network called the District of Wonders. Tony Smith, the host of StarShipSofa and owner of the District of Wonders, got together with horror writer, Lawrence Santoro, to launch the show.

Larry's personality was a big part of the show in the early years. He was well-known in horror literary circles, especially around Chicago, where he lived. He hosted the show for about two and a half years, bringing his unique gravelly voice and quirky Vincent Price style to both the hosting role and the story selection.

Larry sadly passed away in 2014, and the torch was picked up by then editor and narrator, Stephen Kilpatrick. Stephen carried the show for more than four years and really made it into what it is today. It was fairly early during

Stephen's time at the helm that our current managing editor, Seth Williams, and myself came on board as narrators.

Eventually, Stephen chose to move on to other things, and I picked up the mic as the host. A few months later, Tony put the podcast up for sale. I remember the email clearly. He asked if I'd be interested in buying. I didn't immediately take him up on the offer, but the moment he posted the sale publicly, I knew it was something I had to do. I cared too much about the pod-

cast, and I had invested too much in its production to let someone else come in and take the reins. In the spring of 2019, Tales to Terrify undocked from the mothership that was the District of Wonders and set out on a solo journey with me at the helm.



Tales to Terrify produces bone-chilling audio versions of short horror stories written by new and established writers.

DMM: Considering the changes in leadership that you just described, would you say that the current iteration of the podcast is more similar or more different from the iteration created during inception?

DS: The core of the podcast has remained the same since its inception—short horror fiction narrated by volunteer voices—but the content that frames the narrated fiction has evolved quite a bit over the years.

In the beginning, Larry incorporated a wide range of other content for the show, including segments called “Lights Out,” which broadcasted audio recordings of on-location ghost hunts, “A Tour of the Abattoir,” which was a horror review and literary theory segment, and “The Nook,” which was the audio version of a cup of hot cocoa and a story by the fire. Larry’s hosting segments were always steeped in his own personality and vast knowledge of horror writing and authors, and he was all about mood. Stephen’s segments focused more on current news in the horror community, or brief perspectives and thoughts on the genre and its influences.

Since taking over, I’ve tried to bring my own style to the show. I want to do more than just introduce stories. For instance, after being inspired by a similar segment from Stephen, I now incorporate stories of real



The podcast now narrates real tales of horror alongside its fiction offerings.

horror into the program. These tales add great variety to the broadcast, and have become the perfect complements to our fiction offerings. So far, we've dug up dark history throughout most of the U.S. and Canada. The segment has proven to be surprisingly popular.

DMM: Why horror?

DS: Horror has been one of my favorite genres since before it was appropriate for me to read. As a kid, I cut my teeth on

works like Stephen King's *Night Shift*, and Clive Barker's *Weaveworld*. I've always just loved that feeling in my gut when something strikes me as truly terrifying. I think horror's real power lies within its ability to connect with raw emotion.

DMM: Why audio?

DS: Audio is my favorite way to experience fiction. When I was a kid, I'd go to the library and check out those big plastic cases full of cassettes. Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* series had like two dozen cassettes in total. I'd lay in bed late at night, listening until I fell asleep...or didn't.

DMM: What kind of stories best translate to audio?

DS: Stories with these three attributes usually make for the best audio:

A strong, clear narrative, especially in short fiction. Novels can afford to jump around between different perspectives and times and places, and the story will still make sense because of the time afforded to the narrative development. But if a short piece attempts a similar narrative complexity in a much shorter time frame, it can be tough for the audience to follow—at least in audio format.

Good dialogue. Flat characters tend to feel *extra* flat in audio. Audio benefits greatly from characters who are larger than life, and who have distinguishing and memorable characteristics, and clear motivations.

Proper structure. You have to understand the rules of writing before you can start to break them.

DMM: Creative trends have always intrigued us. What trends in style or content or theme have you noticed creep into contemporary horror?

DS: Horror tends to reflect upon what's happening in real life. For that reason, I don't think anyone's surprised that plague horror has been on the rise lately. But the one theme that I find most interesting right now is the increased focus on "the other." Otherness has always been prevalent in the genre, but the idea that you don't *really* know your neighbors or coworkers or even loved ones is more real now than ever. Skepticism and distrust is a big part of our current culture.

DMM: Any tips for aspiring horror writers who may have an eye on submitting a story to Tales to Terrify?

DS: Write what you're scared of. Find something that terrifies you and dive in. Make yourself uncomfortable.

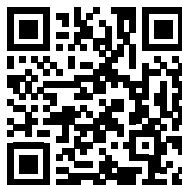
DMM: What can we expect from Tales to Terrify going forward?

DS: I'm making a push to produce more stories, and to beef up our offerings for our paid supporters, such as more bonus content and extra episodes. Besides that, we're always working to expand our listenership and reach as many ears as possible. I want Tales to Terrify to continue haunting people for many more years to come.



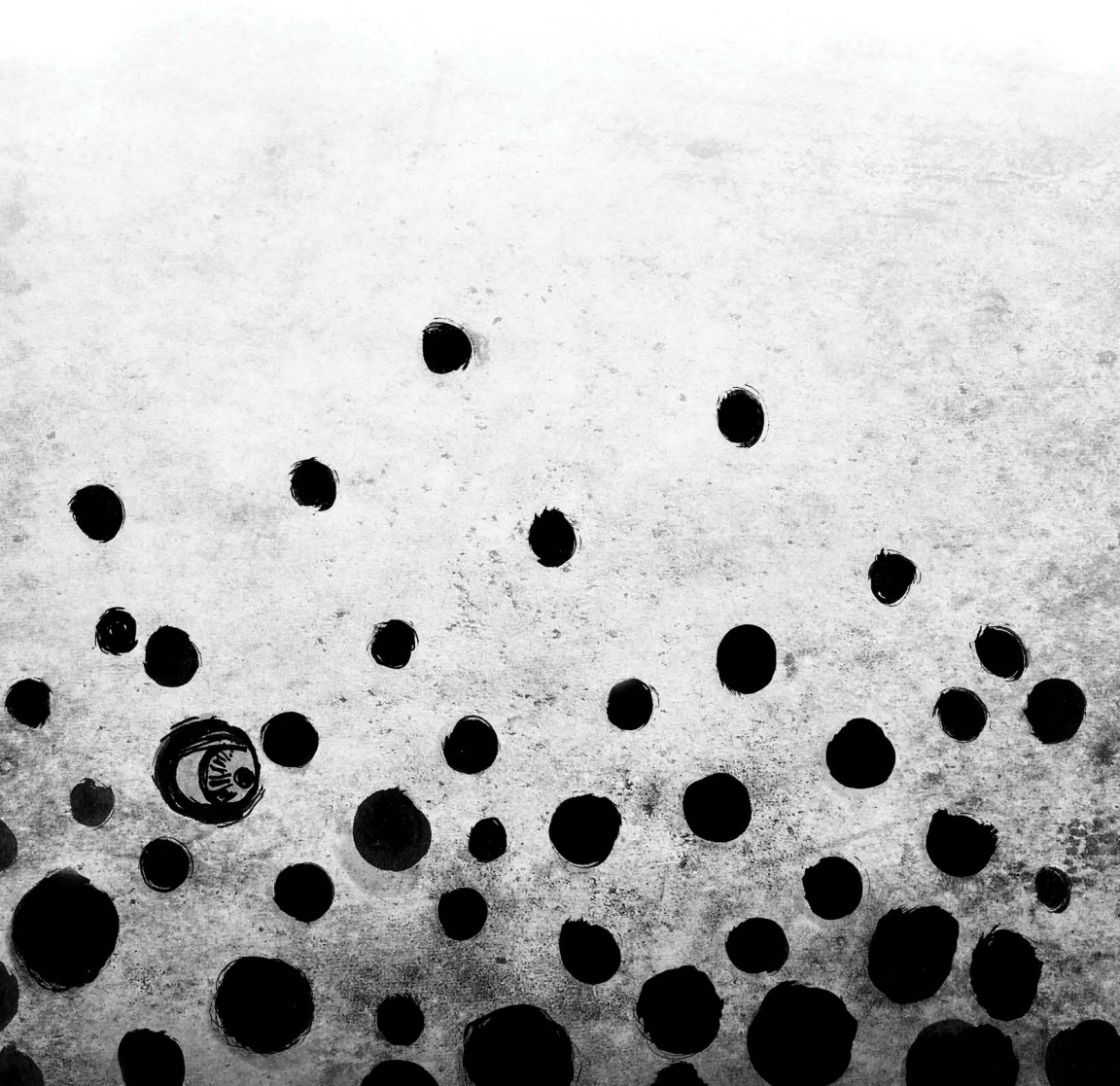
To learn more about Tales to Terrify, visit their website at talestoterrify.com. Or scan the QR code below.

The Tales to Terrify team consists of Drew Sebesteny, Seth Williams as Managing Editor, Pete Morsellino as Associate Editor, Meredith Morgenstern as Fiction Editor, and Brian Rollins as Narration Editor.



CLUTCH

Sloane Leong

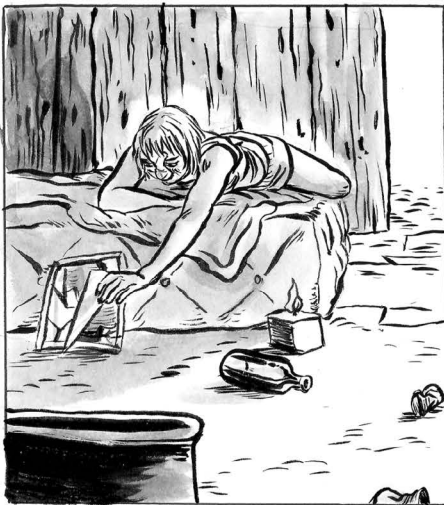




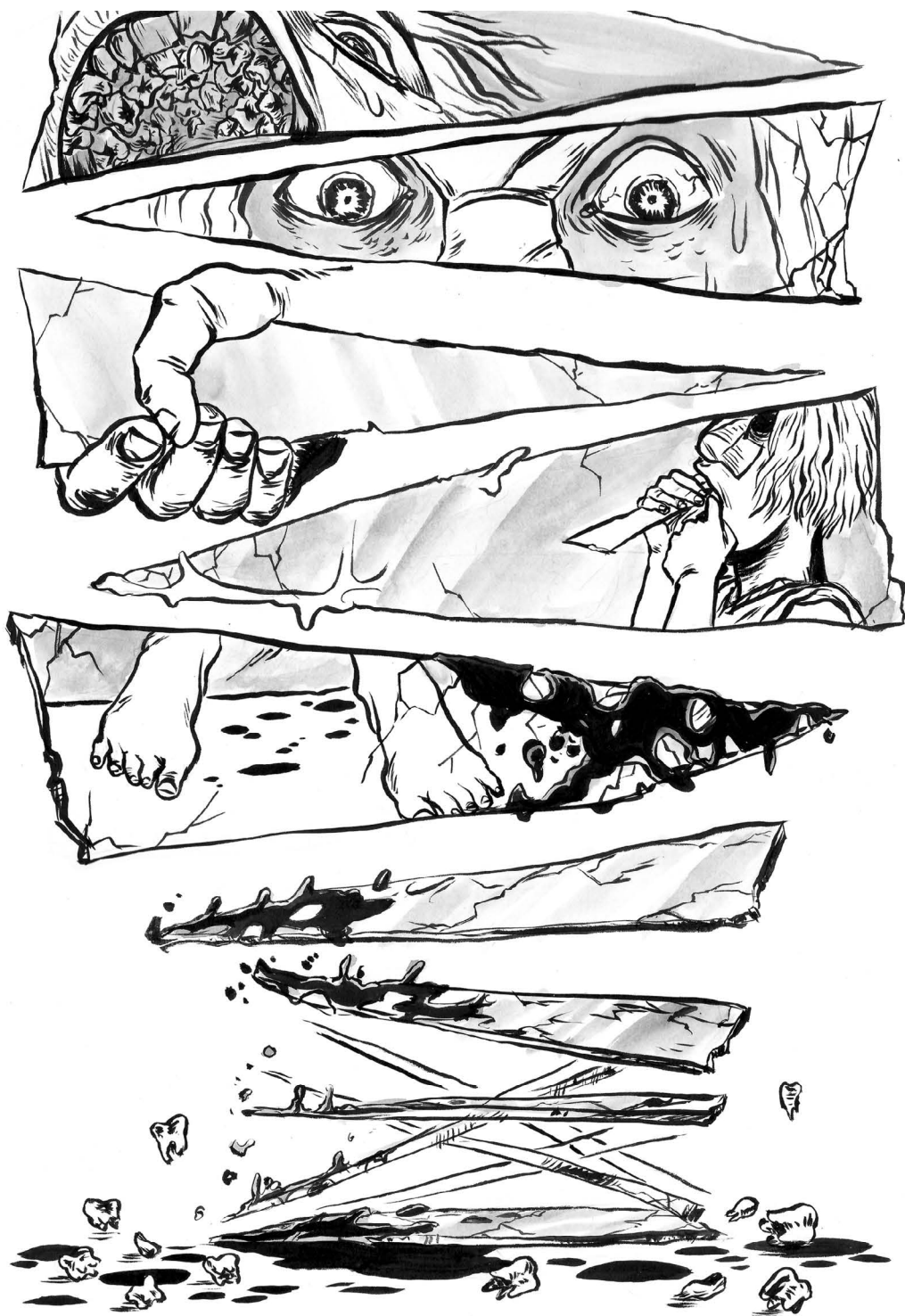


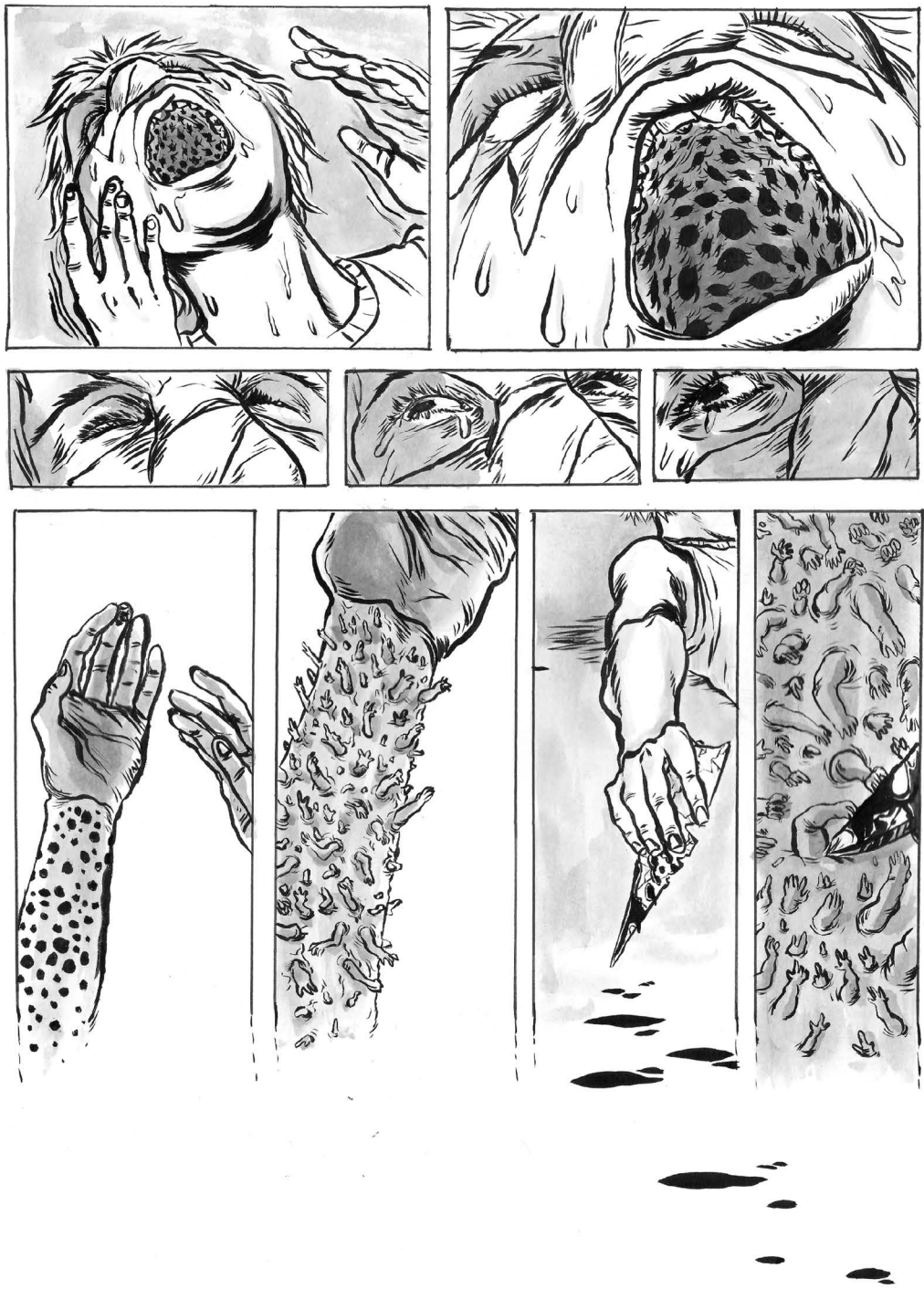


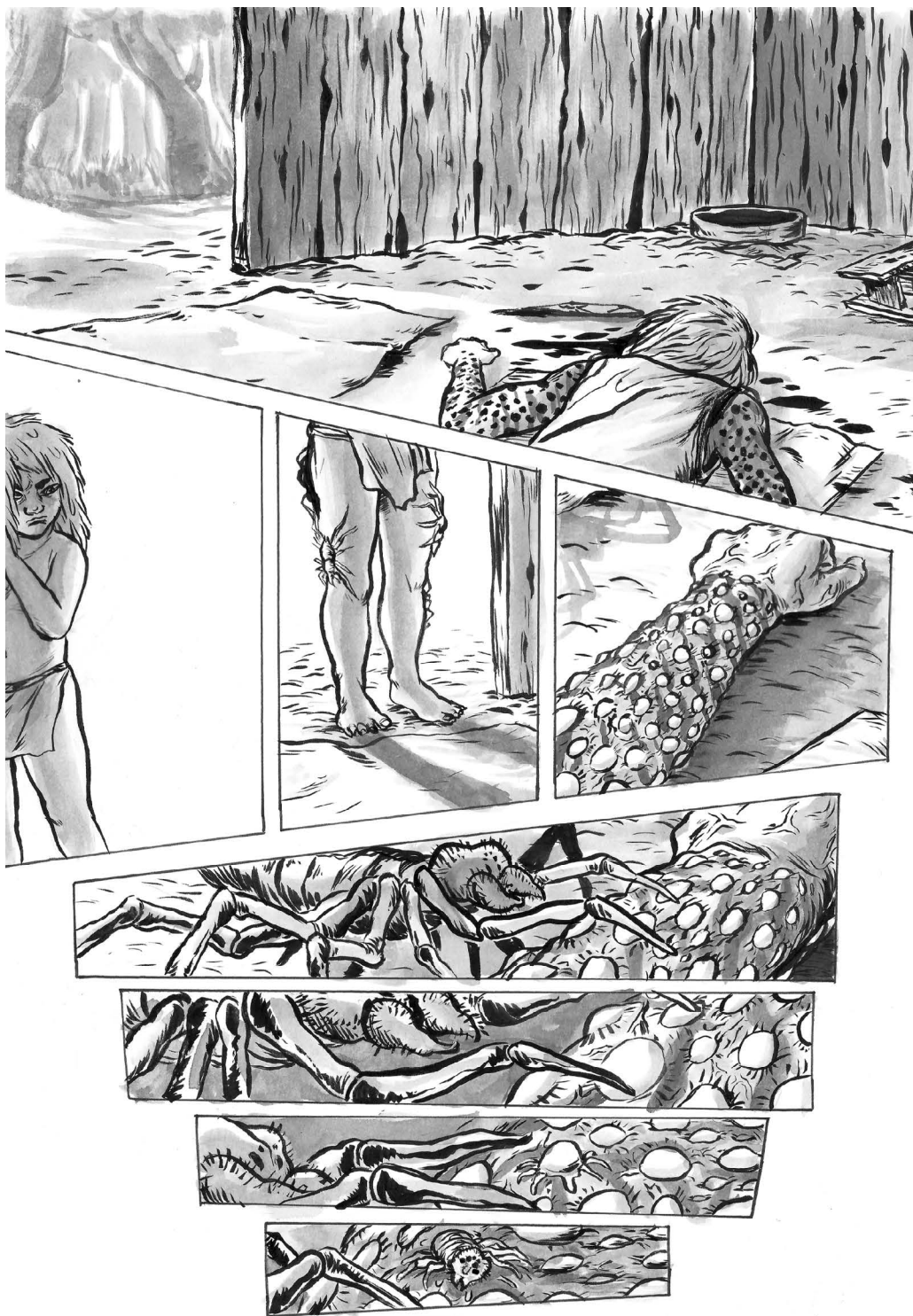




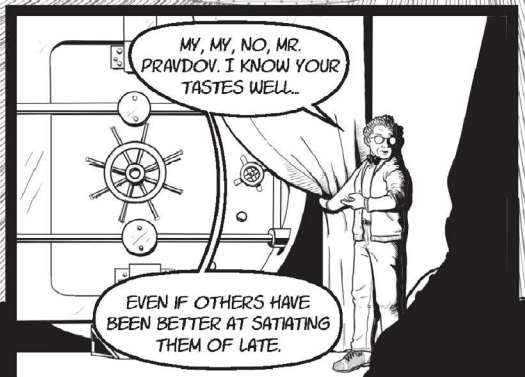












FEEL ITS POWER,
MR. PRAVDOK.

I'M SURE
EVEN MY MOST
SUCCESSFUL
COMPETITORS
HAVE
PRESENTED
NOTHING OF
IT'S SORT.

IT IS A TRULY
SINGULAR
PIECE.

IT IS A NAMELESS
BEING, THIS MONSTER
OF ANTIQUITY.

MORE ANCIENT THAN
MAN'S OLDEST STORIES,
ITS KIND HAS INFLUENCED
MYTH AND LEGEND FOR
MILLENNIA.

I TOOK A PAGE FROM A
COMPETITOR YOU PREFER AND
HAD IT LOOTED FROM A VAULT IN
AFGHANISTAN DURING THE WAR.

I AM SURE
YOU DO NOT
POSSESS SUCH
AN OBJECT, AS
THIS OBJECT
CANNOT BE
POSSESSED.

YOU MAY
SERVE IT... OR BE
DEVoured BY IT.

A WISE CHOICE,
THOUGH MOST
UNFORTUNATE
FOR YOU.

I—GOD IT'S HORRIBLE!
I CHOOSE TO SERVE!

AS I SAID, I FELL OUT OF
FASHION WITH PRAVDOV.

THE CREATURE TAKES BUT
ONE SERVANT, AND I AM HE.

HE HAD SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE
THAT I COULD NOT CIRCUMVENT.
IT'S A SMALL FIELD, THIS MARKET
OF FORBIDDEN RARITIES.

ALL WHO
CANNOT SERVE ARE
DEVoured!

I MUST BE LESS SCRUPULOUS IN MY
PRACTICES IF I AM TO COMPETE.

-END-

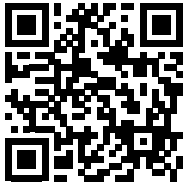
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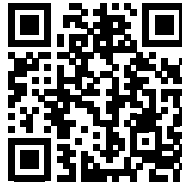
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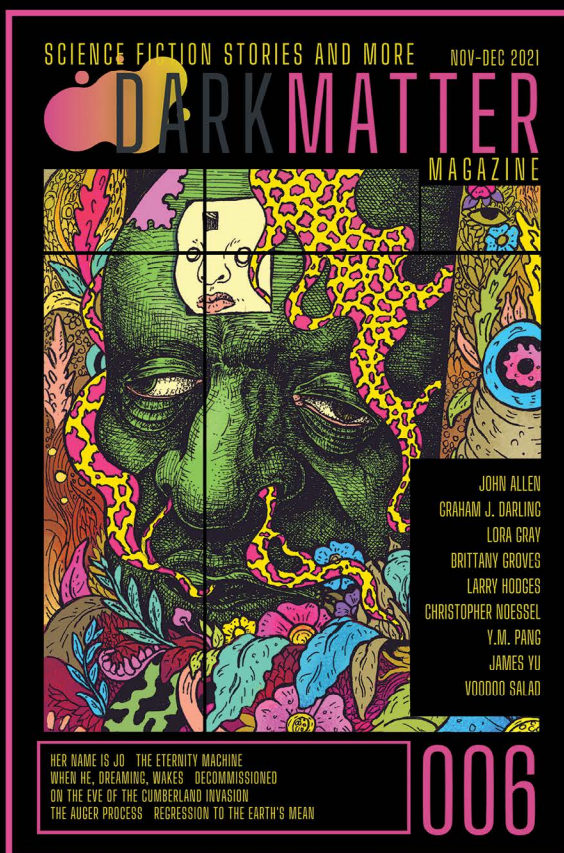
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