

ALICE SAYS

GO FUCK YOURSELF



ISSUE 5  
NOVEMBER 2013

**ALICE SAYS  
GO  
FUCK  
YOURSELF**



**Issue 5**

**Fairy Tales, Folklore, Ghost Stories**

**November 2023**

Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself is a quarterly digital magazine of art & literature,  
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Editors: Fox Henry Frazier & Cee Martinez | Designers: Fox Henry Frazier & Sarah Reck



*Haunted Horse* / Lauren Gordon

# A Note From the Editors

Dear Readers,

Well, we made it. *Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself* has been around for just over a year now! And what a banner year it's been. We've read so much amazing work! We've had such fun seeing your Tweets about the mag! We even had a fancy magazine brazenly plagiarize our personality quizzes! THIS ROLLER COASTER OF LOVE & DELIGHT NEVER ENDS!

We decided to plunge into the spooky for this, our 5th issue. It's thusly full of ghost stories, tales of the fae, lore of the folk. Plus a few urban legends (Editor Cee legit trolled the reportedly haunted Riverdale Road in Thornton, Colorado, for research purposes) and other narratives of paranormal experience. If Alice loves anything more than telling the deserving to go fuck themselves, it's sharing some good spooky craic.

Read this through the bleak December and into the New Year. Let it wash over you like the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain (yeah, Poe was a human encyclopedia of the problematic, but what can we say, the man had an ear for anaphora and sometimes we like to quote him).

And when you are thoroughly chilled to the bone — so much that you couldn't possibly be any chiller — we'll be back. With hot shit like Ethan Hawke and freedom. See ya on the flip side, bbs.

Love,  
Fox & Cee



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# CONTENT WARNING

Welcome to our one-year anniversary of *Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself*. We sincerely hope you enjoy this issue. We would like you to know before reading it that a lot of the material contained herein is pretty dark — as is the nature of most ghost stories, most original versions of fairy tales, and many (arguably, most) pieces of folklore. In an issue bearing this kind of theme, we think it's a reasonable expectation that much of the work included will involve unsettling (and potentially, for some, disturbing) material. Thus, we are offering a blanket content warning:

Please consider yourself forewarned that most of the pieces in this work contain potentially triggering material, including (but not limited to) references to or depictions of: abduction, alien abduction, child abuse, animal abuse, drugs, nonconsensual drug use, runaways, homelessness, gendered violence, general violence, murder, stalking, harassment, dismemberment, death, dying, hauntings, true crime references, and various other forms of traumatic experience. Please prioritize self-care when reading this issue.



# POETRY



## Shamik Banerjee

### **The Bust of Roth Hoffmann**

“Oh! the bust's appalling look,  
To see, does no man dare.  
The archdeacon has seen his spook.  
O children mine, beware!”  
Mother utters this every night —  
The tale of Roth Hoffmann;  
The tale which sends greater affright  
Than any lemure can.

The painter, Roth, centuries past,  
Brought this town disrepute  
With ribald artwork that would cast  
On church a wild dispute.  
The ecclesia of the state  
Made him a derelict,  
Did his freemanship relegate  
And his work interdict.

And when he was departing by  
Gall-paven, in despair,  
Damned, “Those who shall look at my eye,  
Will suffer evilfare.  
Whoever near my bust will stand,  
Will venom in me flood.  
My empuse will hover this land  
With nocent eyes of blood.”

My brother, one midnight, there went

Filled with cynical youth —  
Did behold naught though hours spent,  
And proclaimed it 'untruth';  
But when he set to leave the place  
A dense darkness rose o'er,  
A surrect form stared at his face  
With eyes carmined in gore!



## Ennis Rook Bashe

### **in the dumpster with this clown**

I want to be the extra knife he tucks into his jester shoes,  
the teardrop tattoo below his eye.

I want to sew his severed arms back on with fishing wire.

Smudge his stage-makeup smile.

Imagine a man who kills like a card trick scenting your breath and  
deciding to spare you. Imagine being the reason his wounds vanish off-camera.

The apprentice he lets close enough to slit his throat.

## Cathleen Allyn Conway

### *Complies des Nuages XI*

She tried to make the disaster-noise of water and wind:  
Could be breathable sky. Could be selfish sea.  
No sonic mass remained in its passage, no sign of sounding.  
Like watching tile. Like imploring air.  
Could she imagine the man behind the convent glass?  
It failed, simply. Worried for nothing.  
The sun warmed the panting ghost,  
who renounced its house.

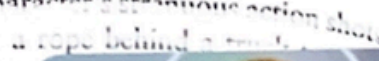
## Cathleen Allyn Conway

### *Office de Minuit aux Fêtes II*

We heard about girls that became great planets.  
Anecdotes. Gossip.  
Beautiful bitches in action.  
Our sources knew  
girls had the power  
to manipulate the infrared.  
Tired and furious,  
the girls created a cultural  
reaction of short skirts.  
The girls wanted  
popular dreams, the sweetness  
of attention after hunger,  
a film that spread out of the coffin  
into the living room,  
lighting the candles.

Would choose to perform many of his character's strenuous action shots and in an accident find himself dragged by a rope behind a truck at thirty-five miles an hour. Oh, Gable knew young wife. His wife was pregnant. Would thirty years, to see his child grow up?

In old Hollywood, it would.



*The fairy tale.*

The blind actress would  
which for her as a love of  
minions body, it could say  
mornings might be saved. The  
hundreds and one of them a  
the, passed and roped by a  
death from the darkness of  
the entrance of the "Wings"  
only "Pam" to think that  
the actress was the actress who  
the actress was the actress who

screaming



*Saint Maria Goretti*  
Patron of youth, young women, purity



## Dressmaking Guide

MEN OR SHORTEN HOURS



**EN ADJUSTMENT:**  
Join pieces together, taking seam allowance. Fit for eye, if necessary, lengthen or shorten as illustrated.

**OSTEN - Pin pleat across**

**VGTHEN - Cut across pattern, a strip of paper, add needed**

## END MARKINGS



Large ☐ ☐ ☐  
 Full of labor. ☐  
 Age ☐  
 Lanthierie amount of labor or  
 earnings; shown on rating in work  
 MEN ☐  
 MEN ☐  
 Small amount of earnings.

BEFORE CUTTING GARMENT.

Check all pattern pieces. Sponge wool and washable materials.  
Circle cutting layout for style, size and width of material.  
Place all pattern pieces in same direction for fabric with nap or one-way designs. Lines at seams when cutting plaids and striped materials.  
1. Pin all pattern pieces to material as illustrated on cutting chart in double fold and single layouts. All pattern pieces are shown with broken lines in cutting diagram.



2. When pattern piece overlaps fold, open & fabric before cutting. Clip all notches and tailor mark all perforations, using a different color for each size.



3. TAILOR TACK - Make two stitches, one long double thread through both layers of fabric. Insert a loop on a new thread into the middle, secure with a tight knot and snap through as directed. (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7) (8) (9) (10) (11) (12) (13) (14) (15) (16) (17) (18) (19) (20) (21) (22) (23) (24) (25) (26) (27) (28) (29) (30) (31) (32) (33) (34) (35) (36) (37) (38) (39) (40) (41) (42) (43) (44) (45) (46) (47) (48) (49) (50) (51) (52) (53) (54) (55) (56) (57) (58) (59) (60) (61) (62) (63) (64) (65) (66) (67) (68) (69) (70) (71) (72) (73) (74) (75) (76) (77) (78) (79) (80) (81) (82) (83) (84) (85) (86) (87) (88) (89) (90) (91) (92) (93) (94) (95) (96) (97) (98) (99) (100) (101) (102) (103) (104) (105) (106) (107) (108) (109) (110) (111) (112) (113) (114) (115) (116) (117) (118) (119) (120) (121) (122) (123) (124) (125) (126) (127) (128) (129) (130) (131) (132) (133) (134) (135) (136) (137) (138) (139) (140) (141) (142) (143) (144) (145) (146) (147) (148) (149) (150) (151) (152) (153) (154) (155) (156) (157) (158) (159) (160) (161) (162) (163) (164) (165) (166) (167) (168) (169) (170) (171) (172) (173) (174) (175) (176) (177) (178) (179) (180) (181) (182) (183) (184) (185) (186) (187) (188) (189) (190) (191) (192) (193) (194) (195) (196) (197) (198) (199) (200) (201) (202) (203) (204) (205) (206) (207) (208) (209) (210) (211) (212) (213) (214) (215) (216) (217) (218) (219) (220) (221) (222) (223) (224) (225) (226) (227) (228) (229) (230) (231) (232) (233) (234) (235) (236) (237) (238) (239) (240) (241) (242) (243) (244) (245) (246) (247) (248) (249) (250) (251) (252) (253) (254) (255) (256) (257) (258) (259) (260) (261) (262) (263) (264) (265) (266) (267) (268) (269) (270) (271) (272) (273) (274) (275) (276) (277) (278) (279) (280) (281) (282) (283) (284) (285) (286) (287) (288) (289) (290) (291) (292) (293) (294) (295) (296) (297) (298) (299) (300) (301) (302) (303) (304) (305) (306) (307) (308) (309) (310) (311) (312) (313) (314) (315) (316) (317) (318) (319) (320) (321) (322) (323) (324) (325) (326) (327) (328) (329) (330) (331) (332) (333) (334) (335) (336) (337) (338) (339) (340) (341) (342) (343) (344) (345) (346) (347) (348) (349) (350) (351) (352) (353) (354) (355) (356) (357) (358) (359) (360) (361) (362) (363) (364) (365) (366) (367) (368) (369) (370) (371) (372) (373) (374) (375) (376) (377) (378) (379) (380) (381) (382) (383) (384) (385) (386) (387) (388) (389) (390) (391) (392) (393) (394) (395) (396) (397) (398) (399) (400) (401) (402) (403) (404) (405) (406) (407) (408) (409) (410) (411) (412) (413) (414) (415) (416) (417) (418) (419) (420) (421) (422) (423) (424) (425) (426) (427) (428) (429) (430) (431) (432) (433) (434) (435) (436) (437) (438) (439) (440) (441) (442) (443) (444) (445) (446) (447) (448) (449) (450) (451) (452) (453) (454) (455) (456) (457) (458) (459) (460) (461) (462) (463) (464) (465) (466) (467) (468) (469) (470) (471) (472) (473) (474) (475) (476) (477) (478) (479) (480) (481) (482) (483) (484) (485) (486) (487) (488) (489) (490) (491) (492) (493) (494) (495) (496) (497) (498) (499) (500) (501) (502) (503) (504) (505) (506) (507) (508) (509) (510) (511) (512) (513) (514) (515) (516) (517) (518) (519) (520) (521) (522) (523) (524) (525) (526) (527) (528) (529) (530) (531) (532) (533) (534) (535) (536) (537) (538) (539) (540) (541) (542) (543) (544) (545) (546) (547) (548) (549) (550) (551) (552) (553) (554) (555) (556) (557) (558) (559) (560) (561) (562) (563) (564) (565) (566) (567) (568) (569) (570) (571) (572) (573) (574) (575) (576) (577) (578) (579) (580) (581) (582) (583) (584) (585) (586) (587) (588) (589) (590) (591) (592) (593) (594) (595) (596) (597) (598) (599) (600) (601) (602) (603) (604) (605) (606) (607) (608) (609) (610) (611) (612) (613) (614) (615) (616) (617) (618) (619) (620) (621) (622) (623) (624) (625) (626) (627) (628) (629) (630) (631) (632) (633) (634) (635) (636) (637) (638) (639) (640) (641) (642) (643) (644) (645) (646) (647) (648) (649) (650) (651) (652) (653) (654) (655) (656) (657) (658) (659) (660) (661) (662) (663) (664) (665) (666) (667) (668) (669) (670) (671) (672) (673) (674) (675) (676) (677) (678) (679) (680) (681) (682) (683) (684) (685) (686) (687) (688) (689) (690) (691) (692) (693) (694) (695) (696) (697) (698) (699) (700) (701) (702) (703) (704) (705) (706) (707) (708) (709) (710) (711) (712) (713) (714) (715) (716) (717) (718) (719) (720) (721) (722) (723) (724) (725) (726) (727) (728) (729) (730) (731) (732) (733) (734) (735) (736) (737) (738) (739) (740) (741) (742) (743) (744) (745) (746) (747) (748) (749) (750) (751) (752) (753) (754) (755) (756) (757) (758) (759) (760) (761) (762) (763) (764) (765) (766) (767) (768) (769) (770) (771) (772) (773) (774) (775) (776) (777) (778) (779) (780) (781) (782) (783) (784) (785) (786) (787) (788) (789) (790) (791) (792) (793) (794) (795) (796) (797) (798) (799) (800) (801) (802) (803) (804) (805) (806) (807) (808) (809) (810) (811) (812) (813) (814) (815) (816) (817) (818) (819) (820) (821) (822) (823) (824) (825) (826) (827) (828) (829) (830) (831) (832) (

Unti

*The fairy tale is . . .* / Sarah Nichols



## Juliet Cook and Daniel G. Snethen

### **Paint It Red**

The razor blade stared at me innocently,  
as if to say, it wasn't to blame.  
That little bastard stared at me,  
like I was the guilty party, accusing me

of the atrocity before us.  
How exactly was I to blame for...  
for this, this...sequence of events  
which transformed ghosts into red velvet

which stained every bedroom in this house.  
The bed sheets were frosted by bloody  
crustaceans that hurled themselves out  
of ghosts mouths. You let the crimson

vino coagulate. Not I...I only held thee.  
And holding is not doing.  
I was merely a spectator, hardly involved.  
You were the culprit painting the world carmine  
beneath the crushed exoskeletons of myriad crustaceans.

You were the blood-letting  
sucking leech, with your rancid anticoagulant, focused  
vermine-like upon a world of vermillion verisimilitude.  
It was you who chose to replace the keyhole  
with an open wound of red paralysis

with a never ending void of broken glass

hovering above the child's doll.  
Then the doll gave birth  
to another headless crustacean  
and another, and another and yet another ad infinitum.

Their necks crimson like the red-tide  
and in the midst of this rose-colored debacle  
stood Moses, statuesque, his hoary beard crawling  
with the syncopation of red spider mites dancing  
to the tune of The Masque of the Red Death.

His tablets soaked in the brackish brine of the Red Sea.  
Then Moses opened his mouth and Satan emerged  
in the form of an enlarged Woodlouse  
carrying a small red crib on its head  
with a doll head inside the crib.

The lids of the decapitated head opened,  
exposing its ruby irised eyes,  
which scintillated beneath  
the faint illumination of Aldebaran.

All the while, screaming redrum-redrum  
through its opened maw of plum pigmented kinetic lips.  
Doll head hyperventilating. Enormous Woodlouse hyperventilating.  
Seven pairs of lungs hanging from the ceiling,  
turning the entire room around.

## Juliet Cook and j/j hastain

### **And Then Rise**

If I wrote a dissertation on non-historical  
witches, would the crones turn into angry  
hagfish? Would their swim session lead  
towards a new species of non-human Olympiad  
fishy breaststrokes spewing slime instead of fire?

To wrap a town in twinning  
secretions. Create houses the shape  
of giant chrysalides.

Or allow the giants to rise from  
graves in museum tombs  
until the tombs fly

into new territory.  
In other words,  
until they rise above.

Break foundations inside  
the mausoleum factory.  
So long lost images of The Queen  
can rise to the occasion.

Crack the jukebox and watch  
as pies and blackbirds fly  
through incongruent arms  
doing the YMCA  
on a cliff-face

but then they turn into

predatory sea creatures  
dive bombing down or else  
pink dolphins that can land  
in the water, generate a new tidal pool,  
and save all of us who were thrown under.



## Linda M. Crate

### **living ghosts**

we're ghosts  
even though we're  
both still living,

we're living lives as  
if we never knew  
one another;

you worship a different sun  
and i praise a different moon  
than you do—

i wish i could find a way  
to undo or reverse the  
curse that parted us,

but maybe there's some  
people we just have to lose  
no matter how much we love them;

i cannot undo time nor take back  
the things i said and did to hurt you—  
so i stand here always reminded

of you in some way  
because you're not a person  
someone forgets,

now you're just a ghost haunting me  
with visions of a past that filled  
me with joy and laughter.

## Linda M. Crate

### sea witch

i feel for  
the little mermaid,  
because i, too,  
know the pang of  
unrequited love;

but i will never give  
up my voice  
or my body to a man  
again—

because i am sacred and  
powerful,  
i will remember my magic;

they think they'll be kissing  
a mermaid but they'll

be kissing a sea witch instead—

will capture their voices  
if they provoke my wrath  
so they are the ones that can  
no longer speak,

i will rewrite history so her story is  
the one that's told and these men

who think we are beneath  
them or need to serve them  
are the ones that are silenced  
instead.

## Linda M. Crate

### **on new wings**

i was never  
a princess  
no matter how much  
i wanted to be,  
no matter how much  
i tried kissing frogs  
or making princes fall in  
love with me at balls;

i was always the witch  
of the wood—

they couldn't tame my tongue  
or my spirit,  
they couldn't dull my wit;  
couldn't convince me  
to lose myself for what they  
believed a woman should be—

i wanted to write my  
own fairytale,

one that ended in the witch finding  
happiness;  
but that's still a work in progress—

i am happy to report that the  
witch now knows little joys,  
trinkets of magic she wears in  
heart so she never forgets  
she's enchanted;

and she has learned to lay  
her regrets and her pain in the creek  
so that they can wash away

& crow song can carry her  
on new wings.

cm ellis

**3 am**

The ghost that lives in the 3 am corner of my room, won't  
stop looking at me,  
eyes void hollow  
tipped red like the cigarettes  
I've stopped craving (mostly).

It whispers at night in wrong angles. Psalms bent  
and forgotten in morning  
that my body dirty echoes;  
thrumming distortion to my toes and rebounding.

Rolling off my soft palate backwards and upside down,  
playing tongues that are not mine to keep,  
or understand.  
I'm used to it all (mostly).

But lately I've been catching  
out the corner of my eye red trails, double exposures  
eating into new planes;  
the kitchen floor, on the couch, in the hall  
outside your door.

I flick on the light but  
nothing.  
Of course.

The ghost stays in my room;  
that's what I beg it to do nightly.

It only stares at me  
with those terrible flash burn forever eyes, waiting  
to un-seam me. For 3am.



When the things we aren't supposed to love,  
sing so we can hear.

**goodbye**

the word is sticky on your tongue. it lingers, pressing against the back of your throat like a sick stain, folding itself into the pink pleats of your palate, nesting. the next time you utter it, it sidles up to the gummy insides of your cheeks, swelling pools of black mold, spoiling. the third time it slithers down your throat, lining your esophagus with its blistering body, and you feel it with each breath, slowly infesting the canal to your lungs. the fourth time, your breath hitches. your body is caught on two syllables that grow more and more familiar, less and less bearable, a heartbeat languidly teetering on the edge of a sound excavated from hollows in your chest. when air comes again, ill follows, furrowing deeper into the soft tissue beneath your ribs, blackening and bristling. the fifth time, it darkly writhes into your tongue, plaguing your tastebuds with sour finality. once again you feel its tendrils burrowing into the farthest reaches of your rotting lungs, painting your flesh black. you feel your chest cave in and open your mouth, the word coming from the most primal place inside of you and reaching outwards, its nestling spores ooze out of your overripe body. you are too weak to scream so you whisper, your last two syllables clinging like festering bile on your teeth before you collapse on the ground, then into it, another grayed headstone among five others, rotting, a body decaying into blackish soil.

## Jaya Gandhi

### grapefruit

my underworld seed / my pomegranate foolishness / sorrow & somber twist your rind /  
my baby's breath / all strangled & stillborn & strange / i will whisper to you in the ripe of  
morning / of mourning / kiss me with your lips / they are like earthworms / rotting into  
the most magnificent pink / like fresh death / oh how i love when death is fresh / like  
citrus & bruises & night so silken it sleeps / fresh death and fresh flesh / oh fruitlike / oh  
bodies / i am but the graveyard soil beneath / when you die i will hold you / we might be  
lovers in death / i know how you will feel in my arms / cold & marble & eternal as greece  
/ oh baby i know you are a façade / clothed parody of an orange / you do not love me &  
you do not know me / you will ripen / in time / in time my bittersweet darling



**The Most Romantic Fruit**

We met in high school and we were married at nineteen and seventeen. Her dad didn't like me, he was all evangelical and shit. Said I was devilish, preached all about Lucifer right in my face. He didn't like my hair, I think. And I used to wear those Metallica shirts, with the skulls and everything. And I was a smoker. Still am.

Her mom didn't care. She knew I made her daughter happy. She handed me her blessing and a piece of blueberry cobbler. Her cousin was ordained. We got married in my parent's backyard, and we moved into their house when they died. It was a month after the wedding.

We never had kids. She didn't want to.

I always wanted to give my heart to her. That's what my dad did, for my mom. Every time he got drunk, he told me. He did it on their wedding night, right before. When I was a boy, I thought that it was sappy and gross. But that was way back in the past, before I fell for her. Then I understood. Originally, I wanted to do it on our wedding day too. Tradition and all that crap. But she had different ideas, if you know what I mean. I wasn't complaining.

We were happy for a long time. The house was small, but it was just the two of us. She worked at a donut shop, I did construction. We made do.

The first time I tried to give my heart to her was the day after my parents died. I wanted to honor my dad, be sentimental and shit. I showered, got out, walked into the bedroom. She was folding laundry. Then she looked up at me, and laughed, and asked if I ran out of underwear. She handed me a pair, and just like that I turned around and forgot all about it.

The second time was our ten year anniversary. Big gap, I know. It slipped my mind for a while. I made a nice steak dinner for us, and poured some merlot. It was a perfect opportunity. And I couldn't do it. Then it was just some random day. I decided I had to do it, before dinnertime. We were going on twenty-six years or something. I called her over, told her I wanted to give her something. She was so beautiful still. She aged like wine, I always told her. And I stripped, and she laughed, and I told her to stop laughing. I think she knew I was serious. She stood there, looking at me. *Go on.* That's what she said. *Go on.* And, so slowly, I peeled off my skin like a fruit peel. One day,

years earlier, she told me something. She said, *Y'know oranges? They're the most romantic fruit.* It's because they come in pieces. They grow into themselves already separated by the pulp and fiber. They're meant to be shared. That's what she told me. I guess I wasn't perfectly portioned. They say the human body is a wonder, but it's more like luggage. Yeah, everything's in there, but at the end, we started getting lazy. The deepest parts of the luggage—that's all nice and orderly. The top part is more like a prayer. Just trying to make everything fit in all right. Anyways, I stepped out of my skin, really gently. Hurts like a bitch if it rips accidentally. And I was just standing, in front of her. Then I reached in, prying my ribs aside, and I grabbed it.

I held out my heart towards her. I told her, *It's yours.*

She went pale, paler than she already was. Her skin was waxen, like the moon. That's what I was thinking. She looked like the moon. She let out a kind of whimper. It was so soft-sounding. I could've caught it like a bug and crushed it between my fingers. She was staring, her eyes were so wide. I didn't want to scare her too bad, or go too fast, so

I put my heart back into its little chest cavity. She was still staring. And then she screamed. It was like glass. She grabbed a lamp, and she hurled it at me. I still have the scar, right here. And she ran.

That was two years ago. Last year, December, she hanged herself in her parent's garage. She made the news and everything. Small town. I got mentioned, too. 'Estranged husband.' Yeah, sometimes I think about it. I don't feel guilty, but I wonder sometimes if I should.

I think it was me she was thinking about when she tied the noose. I get that kind of feeling, that it was me. I was just standing there, skin puddled around my legs, organs hanging, intestines unraveling, slowly squelching onto the carpet, red rivulets flowing, bones shining in the yellowish ceiling lights, muscles palpitating, eyeballs lolling, nerves twisting like vines, lungs flapping like paper bags in wind. Heart beating so fast, wired to my chest with veins and arteries, cradled in my hand.

I thought she would recognize me when she saw me like that. On a deeper level or something. It's funny, we say things like *I love you inside and out.* Hey, I guess they didn't mean 'inside out'. Somehow I thought her insides would recognize mine. But they didn't, and she killed herself, and now I'm here, and my heart is still fucked up and mine.



Like fairy tales . . . / Sarah Nichols

## Mark Allen Jenkins

### Weird Stuff

Weird stuff

so gross

shut off

thump of

spilled

comfortable

followed

across

empty spot

exclaimed

grab and draggg

a step back

the worst part

the worst part

**This is a found poem. Source: Stine, R. L. *College Weekend*. Archway, 1995. Pages 34-36.**

## Mark Allen Jenkins

### Infected with Something Weird

Brown finger  
under dirt, cheap  
emerald ring  
turn away and vomit

No blood, no black  
ooze disease

Under	boiling sun
beside best	friend's body
her	chasm
soul	split
open	
instant	cognition

**This is a found poem. Source: Pike, Christopher. *Hollow Skull*. Hodder, 1998. Page 132**

## Valerie Loveland

## Dream Doll House from Hell \$66.60

I always love cursed objects, or people. When I love something that is not cursed,

I am the one that is  
cursed.

The dollhouse seems fine                      except  
   for the brown lawn glued on  
   and the description                      and the price.

As soon as I locked eyes with this little mansion,  
I lived there.  
It was a long time ago,  
with hands constantly coming in and out of windows,  
walls.

It is rare when you know wholeheartedly how something is going to affect you and what level and what magnitude.

This is a salvage shop, which means it is stocked by people who went to Heaven without all their stuff.

My husband tried to make me feel better by saying that maybe they didn't die but went to fade away more and more at a nursing home.

When I come in here, I try to compartmentalize my psychic powers, but I worry: is compartmentalizing powers too close to wishing I didn't have powers?

Everyone learned from Joan of Arc:                      psychic powers are                      spiteful.

I have evicted thoughts from my synapses before  
since thoughts are only spaces between things, not actual things. I made a maze

around my brain    via synapses  
then made a route straight out of my head.

when I worked as a mouse

to keep my thoughts busy

I learned this technique  
from my bosses  
in a lab.

## Valerie Loveland

## I Met a Man in the ER

He was in an accident with a circular saw. He said he couldn't kiss me after what he had been kissing. He was wrapped up in bandages.

He was like making out with a horror movie, or a certain kind of nightmare.  
I admit I always wanted to make out with a mummy  
ever since I saw the Howard Jones music video  
where the two mummies went on a date together.  
They seemed so happy.

It was the wrong day to go to the ER  
for medical help: unless you had a circular saw injury  
you were being a baby about whatever little thing  
was wrong with you.

Otherwise it was the right day to be in the ER.  
He had to go talk to a doctor. Should I walk around the hospital  
and try to find the man everyone was talking about?

Who visited from inside                  and who visited from outside the hospital?

Working with machines is like working with animals:  
they can only take so much.

I walked around too much.            The hospital floor had an anti slip coating  
and the bottom of my socks had a rash of            little   grippy            rubber dots.

I tripped on nothing over and over. It was the same sealant on the floor in Ikea.  
Last time I was there I tripped on nothing and fell on the floor  
while holding a pink wastebasket.



## Valerie Loveland

### I Meet the Glowing Avon Owl Again

Welcome home      I say    to an owl who never lived here.  
I say meet,    but I mean bought again.    I met and lost him in 1982.

He is a pin, and is also a pendant. But I never wore him,  
I only held him as if my hand was a cavity  
in a dead tree.

The Glowing Avon Owl is winking at me again.      He only winks  
when he is going to get me in trouble  
but I have never seen his winking left eye open.  
He still glows  
when I take him into the dark,  
and I think I know what he means by that.

In 1982 I showed him,      glowing,      to a girl in her bedroom closet.  
My hair stuck to my sweaty face. I couldn't figure out why  
her mom was so mad.  
Who wouldn't want to see something glow in the dark?

We all wore ruffles in 1982. I was seven,  
but he is the only one still wearing them 40 years later.

Like so many things from my childhood:      our relationship ended  
when I put him in my mouth and swallowed    him    whole.

## Valerie Loveland

### Runaway Oven

A glowing box, an escalating orange, a heat that doesn't know  
when to stop. A heat that doesn't know  
when to start either so I started it. The cabinets cried but happy  
tears, grateful to dissolve.

The oven was as gaping metallic clang as a wheelbarrow The cabinets were as ample  
stowage as a wheelbarrow. The floor was as peeling paint as a wheelbarrow. The  
refrigerator was as parked far away as... The salt and pepper shakers were as full of tiny  
particulates as... I am as wobbly as a wheelbarrow. The actual wheelbarrow

was outside, like the operator told me to be. The whole kitchen agreed  
to a death pact. They invited me along. I was tempted!

I never know what I want until someone else figures out what I want and gives  
it to me.

I said *Just promise me you won't explode. LOL*

The oven always fed me food that was in his mouth first,  
like a mother bird. I suspected  
he would be the only one to ascend.

**The Day Mayo Bring Home Sam**

The stars will align, there will be no bad omens,  
The sun will shine across the county, from  
Ballina to Castlebar, Westport to Ballinrobe,  
And every road will lead to Croker

The stands will be awash with red and green,  
Mayo fans will brandish flags like talismans.  
Stateside, Joe Biden will be watching on, and  
Pope Francis will be praying from the Vatican

On that day, luck will smile upon them. Cillian  
Will score points left, right, centre. Jinxed  
Own goals will become a distant memory,  
And every player will be hungry for the win

And when the final whistle blows, the chants  
And cheering will be deafening. The country  
Will rejoice that the curse is finally lifted,  
And a new winning era has been ushered in

The West will be alive with celebrations,  
Bonfires will be lit across the *giant's land*.  
The banshee roaming Achill will give up  
Her ollagóning, cast off her heavy shawl  
And join the dancing

The day Mayo bring home Sam  
Will be the stuff of legends!

**Author's Note:** *The Curse of '51 occurred when, in 1951, Mayo won the All-Ireland Senior Gaelic Football Championship. On the journey back to Mayo from Croke Park the team encountered a funeral in the town of Foxford. Enraged that the merry team did not stop to pay their respects to mourners, the local priest reputedly put a curse on Mayo that they would not win another All-Ireland until all of the team had died. Despite coming close on many occasions, Mayo have yet to end the seven-decade wait to lift the Sam Maguire Cup again. Every member of that 1951 team has now passed.*

**The Magic of Shoes**

From Dorothy's red heels to Cinderella's slippers,  
The right shoes can change a woman's life

They give us height & elevate our spirits,  
They make us feel empowered & sexy

Fashions change but shoes are ageless,  
Bodies age but shoes will always fit

We endure blisters & swollen feet,  
To slay in *killer heels*

Whether it's wedges, high heels or stilettos,  
Christian Louboutins or Manolo Blahniks

Great shoes always make an impact &  
*Femmes Fatales do not wear flats!*

... a blank page to cleanse the palette ...

**FUCK ME DEAD**

Abandoned the lamb sadly bleating  
For Mary and her amour sweetening  
No pail of water between the two  
Up the hill they tumbled down  
And he indeed did break his crown  
So still they lie now, sin revealed  
Their sordid tryst no more concealed

The snow-white lamb looked on forlorn  
At Jill she mourns her faithless spawn  
Lying next to Mary's broken form  
And wonders how to weather this storm

Now Jill she has a little lamb  
It's fleece as black as Satan's crack  
And everywhere that Jill did go  
The lamb would follow her to and fro.

**PAID IN FOOL**

We'll see about that,  
Those rats, whose job complete  
They now dare to say  
Be on your way with no pay.  
And so again I play.

Marching 2-by-2 they come  
Heads hung low in shame  
Such greed has caused this deed  
Too late they now regret  
That honour in their words  
Their actions did not meet.

Into the forest deep they head  
Where a little girl in a pretty red hood  
Stood waving as they passed by,  
Before skipping away, a wolf at her side.

The piper and his sorry rats  
Continue with no further stoppage  
To his hungry friend  
In her candy cottage



**STEPMUM**

Little Miss Muppet sat on her spider  
Watching the children around her  
Eating their curds and whey.  
How it happened they won't say  
But the old lady, she is dead,  
A gaping hole in her head.

Surely not the little ones  
Who look more like skeletons.  
It's a mystery who killed that strumpet,  
Indeed, murmured little Miss Muppet

Who now lives in a shoe  
With her growing brood  
And her spider too,  
Cooking broth and baking bread  
Every night, before it's time for bed.



# FICTION

**Losing You, Losing Me**

“Will it hurt?”

My child’s voice pulled me back to a reality full of antiseptic smells and beeping monitors. Her hair fell down on her shoulders in big black braids. Some of the ladies from our church had come and braided it for her. I wasn’t sure if she should have that kind of excitement in her condition, but in the end I relented. The doctors hadn’t needed to shave her head for anything, and she wanted her hair to look pretty. How could I withhold that little bit of happiness from her this close to the end?

I had been staring at the wall, at first, lost in thought, then just lost. “Wha-Hurt?” I paused, to force a smile. “Oh no, baby girl, the nurse is very good at what she does. You just have to stay relax-” The nurse smiled at me over her shoulder. She was preparing something, maybe an injection, or maybe she was taking blood for yet another test. But she seemed to notice a change in the air and excused herself from the room without finishing whatever she was preparing.

“Not the needle, Dad... I mean... you know, Death. Will it hurt when I die?” I didn’t know what to say. I never do. This isn’t the first time she’s asked this. Abigail’s a smart girl, and she’s known her disease would kill her long before the doctors told us. I didn’t have an answer. How could I? How could I answer that? What kind of world is it that I should have to answer a question like that?

But she deserved an answer. I took her hand in one of mine, weak frail thing that it was, and with my other I reached up to caress her cheek. Here was my daughter, my only daughter, in yet another hospital bed. She had been sick in some way for most of her life, and now, just shy of ten years old, the doctors had told us that her time was up. Her body was shutting down, and this would be the last hospital stay. I wouldn’t be taking my baby girl home from here this time.

She took it stoically. I was the one that was a mess over this. I wanted to scream until my throat bled. I wanted to punch holes in the wall and break things. I wanted to lay down on the floor and cry. But I didn't do any of that. If these were Abby's last moments I wouldn't subject her to that. I would hold it together. There would be plenty of time to fall apart, after. After, what a horrible word. I couldn't bring myself to complete the thought and say after what.

I composed myself. "If it does... If it does hurt, then let's hope that it passes quickly." It was a non-answer. *Coward! Tell her... something! These might be your last moments with her, say something!* "Honey, I love you. I'm sorry. I wish we had more time-" and I was sobbing, tears flowing. The dam inside me had broken.

"Daddy!" Abby squeezed my hand and smiled. "Don't cry. It's okay. I'm okay with it." There it was, that stoicism. She had more wisdom than I. An old soul, trapped in dying girl's body.

She was tough. I couldn't understand how God had made little girls out of such tough stuff and here I was, a grown man: weak in the knees, ready to collapse, falling to bits and pieces. Abigail's mother had died in a traffic accident years earlier, and Abby was all I had. I had built my whole life around her, and now the center of my life was slipping away.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Abby?"

"Promise me something."

"Okay, what is it?"

"Promise me you won't stop living after I'm gone."

"Wha?" There was that wisdom again. Damn, my little girl had such a beautiful soul. No, has, maybe still is a beautiful soul, even now.

"I know you'll be sad for a while. That's okay. But don't give up and be sad forever. Be happy again."

"Oh, baby girl. I mean..." Even on the point of death my baby was worried about me, but not herself. I tried to look away as tears clouded my vision again, but she fixed me with her eyes.

“Da-ad. Promise.” She squeezed my hand, weaker than before, but there was no mistaking the fire in her eyes. She got that from her mother, those fierce eyes. In the end I had no defense against it.

“I-I promise.” What else could I do?

“Good.” And then the fierceness was gone from her eyes and she looked tired. She seemed more like an old woman than a little girl in that moment. Abby smiled weakly and whispered, “I love you, Daddy. I’m getting tired now. I think I need to close my eyes...” She drifted off to sleep and the only sound left in the room was the clicking and beeping of monitors and machines.

Her vital signs declined while she slept. I sat with her, thinking my dark thoughts, brooding over my guilt and remorse, anguish and despair. There were several hours of waiting. Suddenly there was a tensing in her body, as if every muscle instantly grew taut and rigid, and then a spasm that quaked her whole body once. Monitors started beeping, and I shouted for a nurse, but then I slumped in my chair beside the bed. There was a flurry of activity as people rushed into the room, but I took no notice of them. I was watching my girl.

Somebody took my arm, lifted me out of the chair almost, and shuffled me into the corridor. I was in a daze. Nothing was real. I suppose I just stood there staring, but I can’t really remember it that well. Time passed, I think. Then someone came of the room and told me my daughter was dead.

I was walking. Then I was running. I burst out of the hospital doors and flung myself into the humid curtain of a sweltering New Orleans summer heat and fell to my knees beside a bench. I felt like I wanted to vomit, but I couldn’t. Nothing came up, so I sat there dry heaving, for a moment. “Hey buddy, you okay?” Somebody was speaking behind me. I turned to see a middle-aged portly man in a bad salesman’s suit about the same time that the stench of his cigarette reached me.

“C-could I?” I couldn’t form the words, but he seemed to understand nonetheless.

“A smoke? Yeah, sure. Get some nic in ya.” He handed me a cigarette and a lighter. I had stopped smoking after Abigail’s mother had died but the craving was back in this moment. The smoker helped me onto the bench. I lit the cigarette and handed him back his lighter. The man spoke, “You alright, man? What happened?”

I still couldn't really form words, but I tried. "I-I ca-can't..." I sputtered.

"It's okay. I get it. Bad things happen in a place like this," he said, gesturing up toward the hospital building. The next part is still a blur. I know we sat talking, well, he talked. I smoked several more of his cigarettes. At some point he left and he gave me the rest of his pack of cigarettes. "A little lagniappe, for ya..." he said before walking away. I think one of the hospital staff found me not long after that.

There was paperwork and official matters to finish with. I couldn't really focus on any of it.

"Sign here, sir."

Okay.

"And here."

Okay.

"And one more, and date."

Okay. Okay.

Then I was standing on the street corner, outside Ochsner Medical Center, broken, empty, ragged, clutching a wad of papers that were already starting to disintegrate in my sweaty grip. I watched as the whole world kept moving. Cars kept driving down the street. The lady with headphones kept jogging down the sidewalk. The couple and their dog kept walking on the grass. Birds kept singing in the trees.

It offended me. A cold sort of anger seized my heart and I wanted to scream, *Don't you assholes realize what has happened?! The goddamned Earth has stopped turning and you go about your stupid lives!* But of course it hadn't. The Earth was turning just fine for everyone that wasn't me. That was when I felt the separation between myself and them. They weren't the same as me. I was alone in my grief.

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I was already taking time off work to be at the hospital with Abby. I was a roofer, and a contractor, so I could do that. I just didn't make any new bids for any new jobs. I had talked to a friend in the business to get most of my employees hired on to another

crew. They didn't deserve to be out of work because I was having to deal with Abby's illness.

That all meant that when I got home from the hospital there was nothing to do. In hindsight I should have found a project, something, anything to occupy my time. Instead I found a bottle in the cupboard. I should have listened to my baby girl.

Months passed and I only worked sporadically. I moved out of city, across Lake Ponchartrain, because every street corner and back alley reminded me of something, that in turn reminded me of Abigail. My mother had owned a trailer in the country on two acres of worthless swampy land where no crops would grow. After her death the land had been left to me but I had no use for it until now. I relocated my roofing business to the small town near her property, which mostly consisted of changing the phone number painted on my work van.

The whole time I hadn't stopped drinking. I owned the house outright and only need to pay the yearly property taxes, so I only bothered to work when I needed to. When the house in the city sold I used most of the money to pay down the enormous medical debt we had accrued over the years. Some of it, though, more than I'd care to admit, I spent on booze.

One night, as I was drinking on the front steps of the trailer a man came walking down the dirt road in front of the property. That road only lead a little further along my property before disappearing into the bayou. My property was the last one on the road, so it seemed strange that someone should be walking down it. Sure enough, the stranger stopped in front of the gate of my fence. I stood and walked across the large yard, mentally preparing myself for some kind of confrontation.

The stranger wore a dark suit, black or dark blue, I couldn't tell at that hour of the night, with matching tie, shoes and hat. The starched white collared shirt under the jacket provided the only contrast in his attire. The light above my gate was dim and yellowish, and the brim of his hat cast his face in shadows. "What can I do for you, sir?" I bellowed a little louder and deeper than I intended.

The stranger took a step forward so that he was as close as he could get to the gate without opening it. He seemed to sniff the air like dog, or a wolf. "Roger Beauchamp, I was drawn here to you."



There was a prickling at the back of my neck, when the thing spoke. The words sounded like something reptilian, something inhuman, and the fire in my veins for a confrontation turned immediately to water. The voice hurt my head and made my stomach curdle.

The stranger took another step forward, without opening the gate, and passed through it as though either it or the gate had been immaterial. Again it spoke, torturing my ears, "You despair has brought me here, and I see I was correct to follow the stench of it." It took another step forward, and another, its presence now causing slight spasms and muscle twitches throughout my body. It reached out one bony slender hand and caressed my cheek with its fingertips, pain exploding in my flesh at every point of contact. I could see the face now, the face under the hat's brim. The skin was black, not African like my own, but the black of deep space, the absorption of all colored light. It had no eyes, nose, ears or mouth, just a featureless black expanse from collar to hat. My vision began to blur from the agony of being near this thing, but I heard its next words clearly: "I have need of your self. You are no longer using it and it falls to one more worthy to make use of what you waste. You may continue to live but I will take from you your face and your name." Then the pain became unbearable and I passed mercifully into unconsciousness.

When I awoke, I was lying in my yard. It was still night. I stumbled back into the house and found my bed. I didn't know if the stranger I had seen was real or some hallucination brought on by alcohol and grief, but I just wanted to rest. I found another bottle somewhere in the room and took a heavy pull. Then I passed out again.

When I awoke my bladder was full, so I made my way down the hall to the bathroom. As I passed by the mirror I noticed something was wrong with my reflection. My body was reflected normally but the place where my face should have been was blurry. It looked like there was steam on the mirror as if someone had taken a hot shower, but there was no moisture on the mirror's surface when I tried to wipe it. The blurred spot moved as I moved my head from side to side. *He said he took my face!*

I forgot the urge to urinate and ran out of the bathroom, out of the house. I got as far as the yard before I realized I had nowhere to run, and after another moment I couldn't feel the urgency that had caused me to flee the mirror in the first place. I sat

heavily on the front steps. *What else did he say he took? He took my face and something else... Wait, what is my name?* You don't realize how little you think about your own name unless someone else mentions it or something makes you think of it. I was thinking about it now though, but with no success. After losing everything else I had finally lost myself.

When the police cars rolled to a stop on the dirt road in front of my property I tensed. Every genetic memory of harassment and abuse at the hands of corrupt officers seemed to thrust itself forward in my mind as I stood in my yard to greet the officers coming through the gate. But they just walked past me. Neither of the two even looked at me, let alone spoke to me. "Looks empty," one of them said to the other as they passed. They drew their weapons as they approached the open door and stood on either side of the opening. One of them banged his fist on the side of the trailer and shouted, "Beauchamp! You in there?"

Puzzled, I shouted back at him from where I was still standing in the yard, "I'm right here! You walked past me!"

The officers ignored my shout and one nodded to the other indicating that this second one should enter the trailer first. "Beauchamp! Come on out!" that one shouted as he lead the two of them inside. *Who was Beauchamp?*, I wondered. There was more shouting, some banging and then the two officers exited the trailer, one of them speaking into the radio on his shoulder, "...nobody here. The guy probably fled the parish by now, if not the state." The radio squawked something in reply that I couldn't hear.

The officers walked back through my yard toward their cars. As they approached I involuntarily tensed again, but they didn't notice me. I stood my ground as one seemed to be walking directly toward me, instead of stopping though, he physically collided with me, and went sprawling across the grass. "Ha, you gotta watch where you're going, man," his partner teased, and lifted the fallen man. They walked back to their squad cars.

They weren't finished with my property. They returned with two rolls of bright yellow "police line" tape, and one set to work wrapping the entrances of my trailer,

while the other worked on the gate across the driveway. As they finished I caught brief bits of context from their conversation.

“Guess he just went nuts...”

“Can’t believe anybody would do something like that...”

“You heard what he did to the bank teller, right?”

“I just about puked when I heard what he did to the old lady...”

Somebody named Beauchamp had done some very bad things, but I had no idea who the person was, or why they were looking for him on my property. The officers finished and left. By this time I had forgotten about my face in the mirror. I needed more alcohol and more food, so I walked the two miles to the nearest country store.

In the city they would have called it a corner store. It wasn’t large, just a little Stop-and-Go connected to a gas station at the corner of a no-name rural crossroads. I stood in front of the single cashier of this convenience store for several minutes trying to get her to notice me. I waved my arms. I shouted at her. I even poked her, my forefinger fully extended, right in the middle of one of her big fat puffy cheeks. She didn’t even blink. First the cops, now this clerk. I had to do something; I needed supplies, after all.

I tried an experiment. I slipped behind the counter and took down three bottles of the most expensive whiskey in the store. The clerk didn’t even turn her head. I cruised through the store filling a handbasket with all the expensive brands of food that I normally avoid buying. I grabbed some grocery bags from behind the counter, and again encountered no resistance from the clerk. I turned to walk out, but paused on the threshold. The rebellious streak of criminal behavior that quietly sleeps inside us all chose that moment to awake as I thought, *I should go back for more.*

On the second trip through the store a special alert had come across the TV screen in the corner of the room. The clerk turned up the volume and several customers crowded around to hear the report. “...reports that Roger Beauchamp, dubbed by locals the Delta Devil, has struck again. The latest victim was found mutilated with the remains nailed to a tree in a Plaquemines Parish park.”

The customers turned to one another murmuring about the news, “I hope they string that sick bastard up.” Nods. “Serve him right if he got the chair.” Agreement.

“Angola’s too good fo’ tha likes a him!” The small crowd was muttering in assent. The criminal’s name sounded very familiar, but I couldn’t place it. It felt like a good time to leave.

I walked home past fields of tall grass shaded by willows festooned with Spanish moss. When I arrived, there were more cops and police cars, along with men in jackets marked “FBI.” They also didn’t see me, but they picked through the house in minute detail. I didn’t try to stop them. I just nursed my bottle and stayed out of their way. They came back several more times, but they never noticed me. Sometimes, they left an officer to watch the property, but most of the time I was alone.

After the initial shock of seeing the police, I had started to secretly feel glad that they were around. With this killer Beauchamp running around it might be a good idea to have police nearby to scare the killer away. But eventually the police left too. The last time they were at my place, I heard one of them say, “They found a body up in Hattiesburg. Fits the pattern.” After that I didn’t see anymore law enforcement.

So I went back to drinking, except now I was haunted by a vague feeling that something had gone wrong. Something had turned crookedly in the world, but I couldn’t place what the thing was. I sat, lost in my inability to remember, the way some people get lost in their memories.

One night as I sat thus, a stranger came walking up the dirt road. By now I was used to people coming and going, people who could never see me, so I ignored him. As the stranger approached I could feel my uneasiness increasing into a climax of dread and pain that took me over when he loomed over my seated form. He dropped what looked like a mask in my lap. I almost screamed when he bowed perfectly at the waist and brought his featureless non-face next to mine. “Roger Beauchamp, I no longer have need of these, thank you for letting me borrow them.” As I sat paralyzed in terrorized agony, the stranger turned and walked away, fading from view as he became thin and insubstantial and finally vanished.

I know who I am now. I am Roger Beauchamp. I am the one the authorities are hunting. I think the mask is my face, my old face, but I don’t dare to put it on. There are new lines on that face now, lines of anger and hate that were never there before. It’s familiar, and yet totally hideously unrecognizable at the same time. I’m afraid that if I

put the mask on, that the police will come back and arrest me. I'm afraid that if I put it on, I'll know all the horrors that the stranger committed. I'll know and I'll see them through my own eyes.

I shove the mask in a drawer and try to forget, forget the stranger, forget the police, forget it all. I sit on the front steps and drink and pray and apologize and cry, and I work to forget. I think this all started because I forgot something, but maybe if I keep forgetting, I can forget everything, until finally I can forget myself and the idea that I ever existed.

Baby girl, forgive your Daddy. I should have listened to you.



*Don't Worry, Be Happy* / Tracy Whiteside

### **The Vagaries of Selection in Relation to Sex**

Norma Glaubenleben sat in a Duluth airport bar nursing along first one and then a second bourbon on the rocks in the vain hope the alcohol might tame her aerophobia.

She planned to put off boarding her plane until the last possible moment. But when she reached the gate, the flight was unaccountably delayed, and general boarding had only begun. She took a place in line and slowly clambered aboard with her purse, a tote bag, and a large item for overhead storage.

The overhead bins were full at her row, and she had to walk a few rows further to stow her large case. She struggled back to her row only to find her seat occupied by a black leather portfolio. Embossed in gold letters just below the handle was a name and some initials "M. MERCOURY, A.S.F."

The window seat was occupied by an elegant woman, engrossed in reading a book: *The Descent of Man* by Charles Darwin.

Norma cleared her throat. The woman took no apparent notice, and Norma, unable to take her seat, was left half-obstructing the aisle.

Passengers with seats further back on the plane slowed, stopped, and ultimately wriggled past her, some holding carry-on luggage awkwardly overhead, others muttering apologies or imprecations at the unexpected physical contact. Norma flushed with embarrassment.

Fighting back an intense wave of anxiety, Norma leaned over her seat and spoke: "Excuse me, uh, pardon me. I believe this is my seat."

The woman in the window seat looked up from her book and favored Norma with an ambiguous, closed-mouth smile. She was a dignified woman, perhaps 50-ish, with close-cropped, mostly white hair flecked with gray and black. Great care had been taken with her makeup. The business-like metal frames of her glasses did nothing to obscure her lively, silvery grey eyes.

"My seat?" Norma ventured.

The woman returned a blank look, and Norma began to panic: perhaps she's hearing-impaired? The seated woman looked at Norma, looked at the portfolio, looked up the aisle at the stalled row of passengers, and finally responded.

"Oh." She picked up the bag and slid it into the space near her feet. Norma plopped into the seat and turned to thank her seatmate only to find that Ms. Mercoury was once again immersed in her book.

Norma fidgeted in her seat trying to find a comfortable position. She crossed, uncrossed, and re-crossed her legs, she moved her arms this way and that, she buckled, unbuckled, and rebuckled her seat belt. Exasperated, she retrieved her purse from the floor, fumbled inside it for a pill bottle, and downed three capsules of maximum-strength *Bonhomitrin*. She wrapped herself in the blanket the airline provided and settled back into her seat.

Over the next twenty minutes, during the flight safety video and takeoff, Norma slid gently into a bemused, semiconscious stupor. With no more pressing occupation, she watched her seatmate read and began counting the seconds between one turn of the page and the next: Ms. Mercoury was a determined reader moving through *Descent of Man* at a brisk pace.

Ten minutes later, Ms. Mercoury began to smile. A few pages further on, she started to chuckle, and soon she was shaking with barely-suppressed laughter. From her dispassionate, God-like perspective, Norma took notice. Not stirring from her cocoon she ventured a question to which she already knew the answer:

"Excuse me," she said, "Is that a humorous novel you're reading?"

"Oh, no, not at all. It's a work of natural history. It's about 'sexual selection.'"

"I had no idea a book about 'sexual selection' could be so amusing."

"I daresay it wasn't intended to be, but from my perspective..."

"Your perspective?"

"Sex education professional."

"Sex education professional? Well, I'm sure that sort of thing should not be left to



amateurs."

"Yes, quite right. In fact, I had the opportunity to offer Mr. Darwin the benefit of my insight. I suppose he took to heart some of what I taught him, but even so a lot of this is just laughably wrong."

"You explained sex to Charles Darwin?"

"There was not a great deal of 'explanation' in the conventional sense: it was basically an episode of sexual telepathy, but it's usually more effective than this."

"Ah. Telepathy. *Sexual* telepathy?"

"Well, sometimes people learn best by doing. I seduced him."

"You seduced Charles Darwin? In your capacity as a sex education professional?"

"Yes, I did."

"You do know he died quite some time ago, 1880-something?"

"Naturally, I seduced him before he died. It was December, 1831. I remember it well."

"That would be, ummm, more than 180 years ago. Just how old are you?"

"Oh, right, the 'age' thing. As it happens, I don't really have an age. I'm an immortal."

"An 'immortal'?"

"Yes. In the grand scheme of things, I'm what people call an 'angel'."

Norma made a mental note to check the expiration date on her bottle of *Bonhomitrin*.

"I see. And why, in the grand scheme of things, would an angelic sex education professional be traveling to San Francisco on a commercial flight? In coach, no less."

"Triple reward points. It keeps the bean counters happy."

"My official title is 'Angel of Sexual Fulfillment,' but some people find that a bit off-putting. Marcia Mercoury."

She extended a hand. Somewhat reluctantly, Norma shook it. She was surprised at Marcia's cool, soft skin.

"Norma. Norma Glaubenleben, thoroughly mortal, I'm afraid. Second grade teacher, Flee False Doctrine Lutheran School, Bayfield, Wisconsin."

Norma withdrew her hand and resettled herself under the blanket.

"So. 'Angel of Sexual Fulfillment'? And you seduced Charles Darwin, author of *Origin of Species*, evolutionary theorist, originator of Darwinism?"

"When I met him, he was just Charles Darwin. I had no idea what he would become. "

"Oh, but being immortal, surely you couldn't help but foresee?"

Marcia smiled indulgently.

"I'm sorry to say it, Norma, but time really does run in only one direction. I *am* immortal, but that is hardly the same as being omniscient. Every new thing that happens is as much a surprise to me as it is to you."

Norma, in her detached state of mind, weighed this: she could accept the directional nature of time and the distinction between immortality and omniscience. But she felt quite sure that some new events (the current conversation among them) were much more surprising to her than they were to Ms. Mercoury. Norma did not press the point. In fact, she was overtaken by an extravagant, drug-induced yawn.

"And was it simply a coincidence that you picked out Charles Darwin among all the lonely souls aching for sexual fulfillment in 1831?"

Marcia gave her a look, and decided that if this was sarcasm, at least it was not mean-spirited.

"It is true that I choose most of my projects myself, and I generally do that on the basis of current need. Mr. Darwin, however, was a special assignment from The Powers That Be. I assume the purpose was to affect his future work. I do wish it had turned out better."

"Better? How so?"

"Well, have you read this?"

Marcia waved *The Descent of Man* in the space between them. Norma shook her head.

"It's all numbers, scarcity, competition. Utilitarian heterosexist hogwash.

"The most robust males of any species *inevitably* mate early and often with similarly robust females. Because these robust couples are ready to mate earlier than the less robust, they have the most offspring, who inherit their parents' robustness and perpetuate the cycle of early and frequent mating and ever-increasing robustness.

"It's all so dreadfully functional. There's nothing here about anything that I would call 'fulfillment,' nothing about pleasure or joy, nothing about how infinitely varied our choices of partner really are. You can take it from me, no one fucks for future generations, we all fuck for ourselves and for our partners. It's play, not combat. We fuck because it's fun, it makes us who we are."

Norma registered that the dignified woman sitting next to her seemed entirely comfortable saying the word "fuck."

"If Mr. Darwin had put his own life alongside everything else he'd observed, he might have come to a much more *realistic* idea about sexual selection.

"He was not what anyone would call the 'most robust' of his species. By *his* logic of sexual selection, he was ripe to be a failure. And yet, he didn't fail: he may have been chronically ill and more than a little neurotic, but he did not lack happiness or satisfaction or offspring or influence.

"It's a pity the inferiority complex hadn't been invented yet. It might have helped him understand that robustness is just not as sexy as he imagined it to be."

Norma sat still for a moment to be sure Marcia had finished.

"Marcia, have you ever taken LSD?"

"No, I don't believe I have. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind. It's not important."

And then, hoping she might coax another "fuck" or two from Marcia, she pressed

on:

"If it's not too forward of me to ask, Marcia, what exactly *did* you do to seduce Charles Darwin?"

With a radiant smile, Marcia Mercoury leaned closer to the cocooned Norma.

"It wasn't especially difficult at all. He was a very observant young man: I simply gave him opportunities to observe and data to note.

"It was early December, 1831. Mr. Darwin was waiting for favorable weather so his ship, the *Beagle*, could set sail from Plymouth on an around-the-world surveying expedition.

"He would be the voyage's official naturalist/geologist, but he had no sea experience. He passed his time in temporary lodging in Plymouth and not on board the ship where he would only have been in the way. His health was not good (headaches, heart palpitations, eczema, etc.), and he was something of a hypochondriac to boot. He was reluctant to see a doctor for fear that he'd be held back from the voyage, and he was eager to conceal his infirmity from his shipmates. He would put off boarding the *Beagle* to the last possible moment.

"I took a pleasant, secluded cottage in Plymouth. I had a letter of introduction (a forgery, of course, but very high quality) from his cousin William Darwin Fox.

"On Friday, December 2nd when he was away from his room, I left the letter of introduction and a note for Mr. Darwin with his housekeeper. My note proposed that he and I meet the next day for tea at an establishment that I knew.

"I was certain Mr. Darwin had no wish to be bothered with any kind of social obligation. On Saturday, when we met just outside the tea shop, he shambled toward me looking so depleted I should naturally have had no choice but to offer profound apologies and send him straight home.

"He gave me a cordial, but distant greeting. I returned my most winning smile. He took no notice: he had glimpsed something in the neighborhood of my shoulder or collar bone that suddenly demanded *all* his attention.

"What he'd seen was a pair of beetles. I'd contrived to have them nestled at the edge of the hood on my cape. They were mating furiously. He was fascinated. *Cerambyx*

*cerdo* unless his eyes deceived him (they did not), significantly smaller than the norm. An extraordinary occurrence, *cerambyx* were rare in any case, but this mating was very much both out of place and out of season. Quite unprecedented, he wouldn't have believed it had he not seen it with his own eyes, etc., etc.

"He was quite energized by the experience. From some pocket in his overcoat he produced a small wooden box into which he coaxed the insect libertines, and we proceeded to take our tea.

"Over tea, he quizzed me about where I had been walking that I might have picked up such unusual specimens, and he resolved to walk that route at his first opportunity.

"In turn, I poured out my story: I was the unmarried 27-year-old daughter of a widower sea captain, I had traveled extensively, picked up the rudiments of natural history from the medical men on my father's ships, and shown no little talent for creating detailed illustrations of the life forms I'd observed in Australia, India, and Africa. I showed Mr. Darwin examples of my work, and he was generous with his praise.

"At length I mentioned that recently I had begun to regard my own anatomy with a naturalist's eye and as a result had arrived at some troubling questions for which I earnestly hoped he might offer assistance.

"In a voice only he could hear, I began to tell him about what I feared were 'abnormalities' in my body, features that might make me undesirable to a potential husband or incapable of bearing children. Had he, by chance, encountered any instances of *hermaphroditism* among humans? His expression became very grave. I hastened to assure him that I meant nothing untoward, and that it would be a great relief to have the opinion of a fellow naturalist.

"I explained that with the aid of a mirror or two, I had managed to produce drawings to illustrate my observations. Perhaps he would be so kind as to review these and offer an opinion? I slid an envelope across the table to him and said I'd be grateful if he could call on me at 3 the following afternoon. I gathered my things and left before he could refuse.

"There were three drawings in the envelope: each a different view of my, what shall we call it, quim? cunt? pussy? Twat?

"My drawings showed a naturalist's attention to detail, but they were also very advanced pornography for their time. Mr. Darwin was 22 years old, and a virgin: he would find them irresistible.

"He called on me the next day promptly at 3 o'clock. He was very shy. We talked a while, and eventually I prevailed on him to examine me. In the interest of modesty, we negotiated an arrangement of skirts and bed clothes that would allow me to hide my face so there could be no eye contact while he examined my sex.

"I sat on the edge of the bed, raised the hem of my dress and laid back on the bed holding the dress and part of the bedspread in place over my face:

"I am ready, sir. You may remove my underclothes now."

"He did. I spread my legs and asked if he could see everything he needed to see. 'Yes,' he said.

"For what seemed like a long time, his breathing was the only sound in the room. At last I pressed him to speak:

"Is it so bad? Am I deformed, sir?"

"He cleared his throat in an unconvincing imitation of an unflappable medical man: 'No, I think not. Not deformed.'

"I am relieved to hear it. Thank you."

"Again there was nothing but silence for several minutes. I broke the silence again:

"Mr. Darwin, can you see the clitoris?"

"Yes, he could see it.

"Would you touch it, please? Gently, with your forefinger."

"He would and he did. It sprang to attention.

"Is that," I asked, "normal, sir?" He could not say.

"Do you think, Mr. Darwin, that I might be at risk for self-fertilization?"

"He believed not. I declared him to be a veritable fountain of relief.

"I asked him to insert a finger into my sex. He did and was surprised that it should be so moist.

"I asked him to insert his finger a bit more deeply. He did, it slid in easily enough. And then I clenched a set of muscles he didn't know I had and held his finger tight.

"Is *that* normal, sir? Do all women have muscles they can contract so?"

"Again he could not say.

"I relaxed the grip I had on his finger. He left the finger in my cunt.

"Do you have an erection, sir?"

"He did.

"I told him to withdraw his finger, to take down his pants, to insert the tip of his penis where his finger had been. 'Please, sir.' He did.

"I told him he had done well. The head of his cock twitched inside me.

"He stood there stock still, his cock less than halfway in. He seemed uncertain how to proceed. I reassured him: there was no need to worry, I would give him exact instructions. His cock twitched again.

"Are you able,' I asked, 'to rock your pelvis forward and back? Try that just once, if you please, sir.'

"He did and slid into me a bit further.

"Very good. Now: repeat that motion to the count of forty. I will help you keep track.

"We began counting the thrusts together. By ten his cock was fully inserted. At nineteen we were both much excited. Between gasps I exhorted him to persevere to the count of forty.

"At twenty-seven, we were perfectly balanced on the razor-thin brink of an enormous mutual orgasm.

"In that moment, every cell in his body was open to me, and I opened myself for him to see, feel, intuit the whole range of sexual experience as I know it: everything from the desperate yearnings and subtle satisfactions that accompany pollination to the heavy rutting of long-extinct behemoths whose fossils he had yet to see. I let him experience what fucking feels like to every plant or animal that has ever had the privilege, the deep connection shared by all living things that reproduce sexually. He lingered over the logistics of sex among barnacles.

"The eternal-seeming instant passed. His poise deserted him. His body began to tremble and shake. He came. He emptied himself into me and promptly passed out.

"I had done what I came to do. I cleaned myself up and was gone before he woke up. I left him a letter I'd composed earlier thanking him for setting my mind at ease and apologizing profusely for leaving so abruptly. I hoped he would remember me fondly and not think ill of me, I wished him well on his voyage. And that was that."

Norma, still wrapped in the airline's blanket, had long since abandoned detachment. Her eyes were open wide, and her heart beat faster.

"Can you tell me more about that trick?"

"What trick?"

"The one with the muscles. Please?"

Marcia smiled.

"It might be better if I showed you. Would that be all right?"

"I guess so, okay."

"Don't worry, you'll be fine."

Marcia turned off the reading light. She stowed the book and her glasses in the seat back pouch. She raised the arm rest between her seat and Norma's, unfolded her airline blanket, and draped it over herself and over the edge of Norma's blanket.

"Lean toward me, Norma."

Norma leaned in. Beneath the blankets Marcia sought out Norma's right hand and whispered:



"You've never touched a woman before, have you, Norma?"

"No."

Marcia pulled Norma's hand toward her and laid it at the top of her thigh.

"Whenever you're ready, go ahead and explore. Don't worry, you can't do anything wrong."

Norma felt the fabric of Marcia's slacks, a wool blend of some kind, but extremely soft. She felt the heft of the body just beneath the fabric. Her hand found the placket of Marcia's trousers and beneath that a zipper. Norma had the zipper halfway undone when she stopped abruptly.

"Men's pants? You're wearing men's pants?"

"It's easier this way, Norma. You're right-handed and I'm sitting on your left."

"Oh, right. Yes."

Norma tugged the zipper open, slid her hand into the opening, and was surprised to feel bare skin, soft and cool. Norma's fingers tentatively explored Marcia's belly and abruptly stopped again. She withdrew her hand.

"Bellybutton? You have a bellybutton? Why would an angel have a bellybutton?"

"Most do not, Norma, but I need to have a body my partners will recognize. For work with humans, an umbilicus seemed a small price to pay. Do you like it?"

"It's a bellybutton, what is there to like or dislike?"

"It's a shame you can't see it. It's exquisite, sculpted with great care."

"Did Mr. Darwin take notice?"

"I'm afraid not, he was preoccupied with the pudenda and its musculature."

"Pudenda?"

"Pussy."

"Oh."

"C'mon, Norma, give me your hand. You'll enjoy this."

She took Norma's hand, gave it a friendly squeeze, and gently slid it through the unzipped fly of her pants.

Norma let her hand rest on Marcia's belly, pausing to feel the rhythm of Marcia's breathing. Within seconds, she had relaxed, and her own breathing synchronized with Marcia's. Norma began to move her hand, tentatively sliding her fingers down to a luxurious nest of soft hair, richer and less wiry than her own. She combed her fingers through it, tested its length, moved her hand further down to find the fleshy lips of Marcia's pussy.

Norma chuckled: it was the first time she'd entertained the word "pussy" of her own accord. Under the circumstances, "vulva" and "vagina" seemed overly formal. "Cunt" struck her as disrespectful, "twat" and "quim" anachronistic. "Pussy" was a silly word, but seemed least objectionable, so "pussy" it was.

Marcia adjusted her legs ever so slightly, and Norma slipped her hand further down over the lips, sliding the whole length of the pussy from top to bottom and back. Norma's fingers traced the outline of Marcia's sex. There was nothing particularly penis-like about the clitoris: was she relieved or disappointed?

Marcia stirred, her breathing quickened, her hand gripped the top of Norma's thigh.

And abruptly, effortlessly, the tip of Norma's forefinger slipped just inside Marcia's sex. Inside it was smooth and wet and warm, Norma's finger slid up and down.

The lips at the opening of Marcia's sex began to contract, to pucker in fact, planting a light pussy kiss on Norma's forefinger. Norma gasped. The wet pussy opened and then closed around Norma's fingertip, holding it still at first and then drawing the finger more deeply into Marcia's sex with a motion that felt like swallowing.

Some remote region of Norma's brain struggled to ask "How...", but the answer she sought was there before the question came into focus. She was astounded to find that she knew exactly how to make her own sex pucker and swallow. She flexed her newly discovered muscles to gratifying effect.

Marcia seemed to respond to the movements in Norma's body: she began to

tremble, her head leaned over softly against the top of Norma's head. Marcia's body rubbed against Norma's hand in a steady, regular rhythm, and Norma's sex tensed and relaxed at the same pace.

"Norma, I'm going to..."

"No, don't stop, please don't stop. Don't take your hand away."

Marcia's left hand reached down to cover Norma's hand and press it tightly against her sex, Norma's finger inside her.

Without warning the rhythm of their bodies escalated into unpredictable spasms.

Norma shivered and convulsed eight or ten times in rapid succession. A peak of some kind was reached, and she was overcome by barely controlled laughter and relief.

As Norma's body began to calm down, she realized that Marcia's spasms went on and on. In the confined space beneath the blankets Marcia's body trembled and shuddered out of control around Norma's hand, and a wave of panic brushed aside the remainder of Norma's bourbon- and *Bonhomitritin*-induced equanimity:

"Is this some kind of seizure? Do I need to do something to stop it? Should I call a flight attendant? No, I could never explain this."

Norma wriggled around enough to see Marcia's face: there was more color than Norma had noticed before. Marcia's eyes were closed, lips slightly parted, cheeks loose. Her rapid breathing was the only hint of the continuing turmoil under the blankets. Norma whispered:

"Marcia. Marcia, you're scaring me. Come back. Please."

Marcia's head rolled lazily back and then forward. Her eyes fluttered open, she took a deep breath, exhaled, and smiled. Beneath the blankets all the tension in Marcia's body seemed to evaporate. Norma withdrew her hand, wiping it surreptitiously on the blanket.

"Marcia, are you all right? What was all that? Are you an epileptic?"

"Epileptic? What are you talking about?" And then Marcia understood: "Relax, Norma. There's nothing to worry about, that was an orgasm, and I am much more than all right."

"That was an orgasm? You had an orgasm? Right here? On an airplane?"

"Norma, I *am* the angel of sexual fulfillment: if you and I can't have orgasms on an airplane, nobody can."

"Wait, I had an orgasm? Are you sure?"

"Well, you would be the best judge of that, but as a professional sex educator, I'd say that was an orgasm. No one I know can fake it that well."

Norma went quiet, trying to reconstruct how they had come to this moment. Something about Charles Darwin and Marcia's sex muscles.

"Marcia, am I a lesbian?"

"What, because you had an orgasm with another woman while your fingers were up her snatch?"

"Snatch?"

"Pussy."

"Oh. Well. Yes, then. I mean, isn't that the sort of thing lesbians do?"

"Many do, I imagine."

"Are you a lesbian?"

"Oh, Norma, there is nothing sexual that I am not. Do you want to be a lesbian?"

"I, uh, don't know. I think what I really want is to know what I am. Most of the time I don't feel like anything. You know?"

"Yes, I think I do. Look, Norma, whether you're a lesbian or not, you definitely have a more generous aptitude for sex than most people. Mr. Darwin should have been so fortunate. You just made me come, and I don't waste my orgasms on trifles."

"Oh. Thanks, I guess."

Norma shifted in her seat to face forward.

"I, uh, think I need to go to the lavatory."

She wiped her hands again on the blanket, moved it aside, smoothed the front of her dress, stood up, and, adopting the most resolute expression she could muster, set off toward the restrooms at the rear of the plane.

In the reliable calm of the restroom, Norma hoped to make sense of the encounter she'd just had. Before she could come to any satisfactory understanding, a voice came over the intercom asking all passengers to return to their seats for the final descent to San Francisco.

Norma returned to find a book in her seat: Marcia's copy of *The Descent of Man*. Marcia's seat was empty, but the black leather portfolio was still stowed under the seat just ahead. Norma picked up the book and sat down. Expecting Marcia's imminent return, she put off fastening her seatbelt until a flight attendant insisted she do so. Marcia did not return.

The plane landed, taxied just short of interminably, and came to rest at a gate. Bright cabin lights flickered on, a voice welcomed them to San Francisco. Passengers filled the aisle.

Norma, still expecting for Marcia's return, resolved to stay seated until the aisle was clear. To pass the time, she opened *The Descent of Man* and found an envelope bearing her name. In the envelope was a handwritten note:

*Dearest(!) Norma,*

*This is extremely awkward. I apologize for leaving so abruptly, but I have been summoned on a matter of some urgency and cannot refuse. Please don't think ill of me.*

*I enjoyed our all-too-brief time together more than you can know. I will always (ALWAYS!) remember you with profound affection. Perhaps we could agree to call it love? Please?*

*You may imagine that angels never change, but that is not the case. I am different for having known you. I hope our encounter opened new possibilities for you as well.*

*Undying love,  
Marcia*

*P.S.: You wanted to know "what you really are": you're a person,  
Norma, and infinitely more complicated than any category  
("lesbian"). Right now, you love me. But if you someday love  
a man like you love me, you will still be you.*

Norma was overcome: something important had taken place in front of her, and she had only become aware of it after the fact. Her eyes watered.

"Could you hand me my portfolio, please? It's just in front of the seat next to yours."

It was a man's voice. Norma dabbed her eyes with a tissue, turned in her seat. She was startled to see a handsome man with close-cropped, mostly white hair, lively silvery-gray eyes, and a pleasant smile. She wondered if this might be a *Bonhomitritin* flashback.

"Pardon me," she ventured, "You seem familiar. Have we met?"

"I don't believe so. Mark Mercoury." He extended a hand, Norma shook it, noting the cool, soft skin.

"Norma Glaubenleben. You don't, by chance, have a twin sister, do you?"

"Not that I'm aware of. I was put up for adoption as an infant and never met my birth parents."

The stalled queue of passengers was getting restless.

"Uh, the portfolio, please."

"Oh, right. Sorry." Norma turned and retrieved the portfolio from beneath the seat. She noted the gold lettering by the handle. Offering him the folio, she asked, "What does 'A.S.F.' stand for?"

"Ashwaubenon Shakespeare Festival, but I do a lot of freelance work. Maybe

you've heard of Tony Kushner? He's got a new play, something about angels, the AIDS epidemic, and America. It's about to open here. I'm trying to persuade him that angels are gender fluid and don't always have to be feminine. Here's my card, give me a call. Maybe join me for the opening? Nice meeting you. Gotta run, can't keep Kushner waiting."

And off he went.

Norma tucked Mark's card and Marcia's note in *The Descent of Man*. She stowed the book in her tote bag, and collected the rest of her things. She was the last to leave the plane.

***Author's Note:*** *The author does not endorse or recommend sexual encounters on commercial aircraft.*

### **Confessions Party Game**

“Confessions” is the latest board game Mom has found at the Discount Store, and on a Tuesday evening, when the world is dismal and gray, she gets it in her head to throw a dinner party. But we don’t know many people. Dad’s not particularly social, and Mom’s been kicked out of every garden club in town for her vociferous opinions on plants and politics. So, we invite the parish priest.

When Father O’ Donnell comes to the door, it’s precisely 6:30 p.m., and Mom offers him a beer. Dad comes by with another.

“Are we trying to get the priest to double fist it at our little get-together?” Mom asks.

My sister and I cringe because the words “double fist it,” out of our mother’s mouth, sound awful.

While Father O’ Donnell clutches two cans of beer and stares at his shoes, Mom rushes everyone over to the living room so we can play “Confessions.” Dad’s not so sure, but Father O’ Donnell has already opened one of the beers and taken a few swigs, so he’s up for a challenge.

The game pieces are plastic figures of people with their hands covering their faces, and they’re all in different colors. We line them up at the starting line, and Mom puts a deck of cards on the table. We’re supposed to choose one and answer the question. If we answer it, we get to move forward. If not, we don’t move at all. The first one to finish wins.

The first question asks about our most embarrassing moment. Mom tells us about the time her fake bun on her head fell off during a dance recital. I walked into class late. Father O’ Donnell read the wrong reading at Mass. Dad wore mismatched socks to work one day, and my Sister Susie had sex with the guy at school who used to pick his nose in the third grade, which was embarrassing, because she thought she was having sex with the hot math teacher. She couldn’t tell in the dark in the church basement.



Father O' Donnell chugs the second beer in record time. Dad says we should stop playing this game. Mom digs her heels in and tells Father O' Donnell to pick a card. When he does, it's a sex question: "What's the worst sex you've ever had?"

"Done! We're done here! No more!" Dad shouts.

"Oh, come on!" Mom says.

"Well..." Susie begins.

"Stop! Not from you! I don't want to hear anything from you!" Dad says.

"Okay, I'll go first," Mom says. "It was that time your dad got a little too drunkie at a party back in the day..."

"Mom, we don't want to hear this," I say.

"Where do you keep the beer?" Father O' Donnell asks.

Dad gets up to get him another beer, and I hear him rummaging around the kitchen, asking if dinner will be ready soon. He says it seems like dinner is ready. Mom tells him it is, but we're having too much fun, so it can stay warm in the oven a little longer.

Now, it's Dad's turn to pick up a card: "What's your deepest darkest secret?"

"That's easy," Dad says. "None. I don't have any."

And as he slams the card back down on the table, the lights flicker, and the wind howls. Something bangs against the door.

"Oh, crap!" Mom says. And Susie and I know why she's so upset.

"Everyone out," Dad says. "We're done. The game's over."

"I don't think Father O' Donnell will be able to leave," I say.

"Why? Because I've had too many beers? I've only had three!"

The banging intensifies. My sister and I start to rock back and forth in the cushions of the couch, hoping it will stop, but it probably won't. Uncle Mack just had no boundaries—watching us in our bedrooms, the shower, the living room. That's why Dad put him under the first chance he got—under the ground—beneath the crawl space of the house. And now, he's gotten worse with the unexpected visits—he's worse in death than he was in life. Father O' Donnell suggests we try eating at the table. Shrugging our shoulders, we decide it's worth a shot, but the pounding intensifies. The walls rattle now. All the dishes shake as Mom serves us.

Father O' Donnell leads us in a dinner prayer, but after we make the sign of the cross, the door flies open, and there's Uncle Mack. He's a ghastly, eerie green—and he's stark naked—waving his arms around and screaming. Father O' Donnell bolts for his car, taking off down the driveway, the tires squealing—and as the taillights fade into the night, we all realize we'll never be able to set foot in church again.

## Amiena Mahsoob

### **Kin**

Occasionally, something disturbing happens that inspires me to text my brother.

*Me: Have you found them?*

*Jude: I have memories of ones that were porcelain cast and looked like real babies, but I'm not sure if that's a real memory or something fabricated.*

*Me: They were there. I remember them. They wore christening gowns.*

*Jude: If I were to guess, I don't think they've been there for a long time. Maybe they were moved when she moved.*

*Me: TBH this sounds nuts, but when I wrote about them, the fire alarm went off for no reason (the last time it was the doorbell), but afterward, I felt lighter about it. Then a couple days later she said she was cleaning out the room.*

*Jude: Maybe they disappeared when we smudged the house?*

*Me: Sure. But how?*

\* \* \*

My brother and I are sitting on an overstuffed sofa in my mother's sprawling new house, the one the latest husband bought just weeks before they married. It has a pool. We are not pool people, not because we don't like pools, but because we're not the kind who can

afford an in-ground pool in this part of the country, where it's hot enough only a few weeks a year, and when it is, rain comes in torrents, or lightning may strike out of nowhere on sunny days.

Though she massages her face twice daily with embryonic serum, maintains an arsenal of color to mask errant grays, and aspires to look younger than us—her adult children—she is getting up in years. This, like sex, is taboo: this meaning death, because death does not become her.

Jude and I whisper about it anyway, here on the sofa during our first Thanksgiving at the new house, because we can't find the will, but we have found the beer fridge behind the built-in bar (the new husband needs one for each house he owns).

I make haste under the watch of the bar's hosts: the dearly departed line a wall with black and white photos, dead relatives going back as far as recorded history, in this case, two generations. Their lean faces and small, mean eyes glare thirstily from coal country and poverty. At least his side does. My mother's side looks increasingly less indentured, but arranged as they are, the branches of the family trees intersect. Next holiday, I will not recognize one great uncle from the next.

The sofa, smaller than it seems, pushes my brother and me next to each other in a way that inspires intimacy. Because she told him to, Jude and his family moved into our childhood home: a rambling Victorian with steps so precipitous we all boast scars. In addition to his day job, our mother demanded Jude, his wife, and twin tweens serve as caretakers for our mother's museum to herself. The new house, though larger, cannot contain all of her.

Jude and Co. reluctantly complied, and now they spend their free time complaining while touching up the latticework. Initially, our mother expected to split her time between the old house and here—she put a kitchenette in the carriage house—but the opportunity to upgrade beckoned louder than the homestead.

Soon, dioramas of our childhood manifested in the new estate: the curio lined with miniatures of each dog we loved and lost; the display case highlighting her obsession with antique medical instruments, complete with rusty morphine syringes and a hand-saw for amputations; the doll house containing shrunken photos of our family beaming over a tiny dining room table laden with quintessential Thanksgiving turkey, stuffing, green beans, and perfectly baked pies.

"I found them when I was looking for something in her hoarder closet," Jude says, referring to the cavernous room she forbade anyone from exploring. Just two nights before, I dreamt of the babies again and texted him.

"I think they are mourning dolls," he suggests. "I found some on eBay that look similar." He takes a swig of Bud Lite and grimaces. He stares at the can, and then glares at me.

I turn to my husband, who is sitting stiffly on an armchair and pretending not to listen. "Can you find something better?" I plead. He sighs and embarks on his mission.

I lower my voice and lean closer, "But seriously, what do you think we need to do with the dolls?" I jerk my head to the dining room across the way, where my mother's unlined face curves into a benevolent smile as she and the new husband finish setting the table, "When she...*you know?*"

Jude waits for me to continue, enjoys me spelling it out. He does this every time I try to have a conversation that would throw our mother into hysterics. "The *babies*," I hiss. "What do we do with her babies when Mom dies?"

My toddler, Mason, careens into the dining room on cue, and my mother tutors him on how to chime the dinner bell. With a clang, we rise. Our mother gives a slight bow. We find our places at the table and engage in normalcy theater.

The newlyweds have miscounted. Or perhaps this is a calibrated display of disappointment: our youngest brother and his millennial girlfriend didn't abandon their fabulous life in Portugal to surprise us all. Two empty chairs surround the new husband at the head. My twin nieces' warm bodies serve as additional buffers. They doom scroll under the table. My son, finding the Thanksgiving food foreign, grabs fistfuls of rolls, the only food he recognizes. He turns his head at the various casseroles I offer. The grandchildren's passive resistance is reassuring.

We collectively ignore the man we will never acknowledge as our stepfather, and nod along as Jude's wife fills the space with her Instagram-inspired wellness tips, observations, and recommendations, enough for the rest of us. Occasionally she slides in a dig at the old house. "There's lead paint!" she interjects from out of nowhere. I nod sympathetically. I'm grateful when Mason starts to whine.

As we leave, I feed my son his lines.

"Goodnight," I whisper.

"Good NIGHT!" he shouts.

"Thanks for having us," my husband fills in.

"Thank YOU!" he screams.

"Love you," I encourage.

He slams the door behind us.

I cringe, then feel a sense of relief.

It's over. For now.

\* \* \*

After I rock Mason to sleep and my husband begins to snore, I scour eBay. I plug *mourning dolls* into the search bar. Perfect effigy infants rest in cribs, so lifelike if you look closely, you can see their chests rise and fall, their eyes shift behind closed lids, suspended in dreams.

Once, just once, very long ago, my mother sat me on the formal floral couch that always smelled of dust in the drafty room we used for holidays and company. She smelled like roses, her blonde bob curved beneath her chin. I sat very still, my toes barely touching the ground, my back straight. She guided me to bend my left arm to brace the doll's neck, my right hand to hold my left elbow, and I cradled the quiet baby in my arms. Her porcelain skin gleamed warmly in the incandescent light. I held her weighted bottom, her tiny body pressed against my own. The infant wore a long, silken christening gown, a cap warming her cool body. Underneath, she wore a dry, clean cloth diaper.

"She's perfect, isn't she?" my mother cooed. It landed like a judgment. My eyes smarted. She gingerly lifted the doll from my arms, took her into the room, nestled her body on a white silk pillow edged in lace in the wooden incubator, closed the glass-fronted case, and locked it with a skeleton key.

"Maybe if you're good, I'll let you hold her again."

She paused, "Would you like that?" I nodded.

Though I only held the doll once, my mother's lesson stuck: I hold my son the same way.

\* \* \*

While Americans buy televisions larger than their walls, break knees for Pokemon cards, and keep the economy limping along for another year, Mason and my husband play video games. I research mourning dolls. The Internet tells me mourning dolls were typical during Victorian times. Less so in the '80's when they appeared in our house. I zoom in, scrutinize their faces. *Yes and... not exactly.* Those babies wore black and looked like wan replicas of dead babies. The ones she had were prettier, like living babies, but less messy.

I return to the question I posed to Jude. *What do we do with the babies when she dies?* My heart pounds. I feel ridiculous asking, and yet.

I scrawl in my notebook: *Funeral? for babies? Cremate? Tiny headstones?* I feel the weight of responsibility in my arms.

\* \* \*

It's March when my husband heads to a conference across the state. Earlier in the day, the weather broke, and winter rapidly shifted to spring. The temperature reached 70 degrees, and now the wind is picking up, rattling my one open bedroom window as the barometer drops. Captain, my oversized supermutt, sprawls in the spot where my husband would be if he were home. Mason rolls in his crib. The video monitor emits a clattering sound. I glance at my tiny hostage in black and white.

I turn back to my notebook. I continue exhuming memories, inscribing them to make them real. Since Thanksgiving, I've been obsessed. A question repeats and chases its tail: *Three babies or two? Three babies or two?*

*If three, it seems likely she purchased one for each of us living children, suspended in the moment when we were most attached to her, I reason. If two, they are the dead babies, the babies that would have been our siblings, making us a family of seven rather than five; of minivans instead of station wagons; hand-me-downs instead of Jordache jeans. I remember her*



*room, I remember the two babies in their casement, but did I miss one? Are there three: reproductions of my brothers' and my infancy? Or two: the dead babies?*

That's when I hear it: a chime.

Captain raises his head and perks his ears. My heart pounds, numbness floods my legs, adrenaline urges me to freeze. *It's just a late-night Doordash delivery next door, I think. Maybe the neighbors got home late from work. Or had had friends over. Maybe I am hearing their joy next door, somehow, their doorbell ringing.*

I pen, *Three babies or two?* I try to picture the room where they sleep behind glass, tucked behind the family room. Their nursery, my mother's room of her own, where she arranged her dolls and stacked her decorations and party accouterments, obscuring the babies behind piles of tablecloths, coordinating napkins, and candlesticks. *If three, what do we do with our replicas? If two, what do we do when our mother dies?*

The doorbell rings again. Captain sits up, gives a low bark as we listen. I shush him in frozen panic.

We listen, suspended.

The doorbell chimes a slow and steady rhythm.

I scroll through possibilities: the neighbors stopping by with a casserole, an ardent Amazon worker, the man-child with the motorcycle from the alleyway, my own child somehow outside instead of in.

I thought of calling: But who?

My best hope is that an electrician would laugh, point to the doorbell hanging by a tiny electric umbilical cord played by wind. But played by whom?

I gather my strength, and ask: *How many babies?*

Two lost, my kin: *What obligation do I have to you?*

Their incubators installed, I peer in and count them: *Are there two?*

I beg the doorbell, the wind, the babies, *Please. How many?*

Suddenly, I catch myself and know. My fear flickers to anger. Once caught, it burns.

These babies *are not my babies: This is my house.* Constructed of bricks and intention, of light and love. A house that does not entertain secrets, those who come calling late at night.

I clench my fists: *Go away. Leave me alone* as another chime rings out.

I stand up. I pull the window shut. I take a deep breath, conjure courage.

"Go away!" I say, aloud this time.

"Leave me alone!" I shout. Captain cocks his head.

I growl, "You aren't welcome, not here, not now, not tonight." The wind whips the siding.

Otherwise, in silence, I stand, alone.

My racing heart slows. I settle back to bed. I write: *This is why families should talk about death, and wills, and powers of attorney.*

I consider next steps: *I'll text Jude tomorrow. Tell him we'll bury the babies with her.*

I am certain now. I won't need him to respond.

\* \* \*

When my husband returns, we talk about his trip. I say nothing about the babies. Instead, I ask him to check the doorbell. He sighs and grabs his screwdriver, and comes back puzzled.

“Everything seems okay,” he looks at me carefully. “What did you think was wrong?”

I shrug. “Meh. Probably someone with the wrong address,” I say and feign a smile. “I’m glad you’re home.” I’ll tell him when I’m ready.

A month later, I transcribe my notes to my laptop. The fire alarm goes off. There’s no smoke.

Two days later, I receive a report from my brother.

*Jude: The babies are definitely gone.*

*Me: What? How do you know for sure?*

*Jude: I just know.*

*Me: Okaaaaayyy*

*Jude: And she has a new necklace. Maybe diamonds. But strange ones.*

*Me: Strange how?*

*Jude: I can’t describe it.*

*Me: You CANNOT? Or you WILL not?*

*Jude: I dunno. They shine weird. They gave the wife and the twins the creeps.*

*Me: I can't help but speculate. But seriously. What happened to the babies?*

I trust what the Internet tells me: cremains can be pressured into gems.

**Local Councilman**

Since you are here with me, sharing this country drive in my freshly detailed Expedition, I hope to take a moment with you to share some of the details of my own biography, as you have been so open in sharing with me your eventual hopes to study abroad in the Peruvian Amazon, and your enthusiasm for Petoskey stones. I feel that tonight, as we sit together, on this two-lane highway by the big lake, drinking our Cherry Cokes, you may come to understand me as no one ever has. Perhaps I have been too frightened to permit them.

I am forty-two, married to my high-school sweetheart. While my wife and I have had our share of difficulties, we at last brought a son into the world, who is now ten years old. He was delivered by Cesarean section, during the course of which my wife's bladder was nicked. The consequences beyond temporary catheterization went unnoticed until months later; the ensuing complications have left my wife habitually infirm, bedridden for days at a time, and nearly incapable of performing the marital act. As my wife and I were never quite sexually compatible, she has taken this cessation in stride. As far as her other duties, I have never had occasion to complain of her as a housekeeper, though I find her to be an over-indulgent and nervous mother to our son.

I am, as you may know — it's an election year, there are billboards and bench ads all around the county — a minor elected official, and my wife and I are reasonably active members of our local Lutheran church. My wife takes comfort in the scriptures, and I go to support her as well as to socialize. My limited needs for contact with other human beings are largely slaked through my work, but there is a predictable disorder to those interactions on the church steps that keeps my hand in, as it were. For church functions, my wife makes a green bean casserole that always earns her many compliments. I do not care for it.

I am employed with a local bank that is currently merging with a national bank, though my foreclosure expertise makes me so invaluable that I do not fear being let go.

I am known for working long hours and for my overall professionalism. Our bank sponsors a local Little League team, for which my son plays. I spent a few years successfully coaching that team of fresh-faced young boys, fit and blond, and mostly of the Dutch and German stock that dominates our little corner of the upper Midwest. After the third summer, some of the parents began to object to my coaching techniques. Personally, I think knuckle pushups on gravel build character and discipline, but my views are unpopular. I have since stepped down, and am now only an active fan. You must have participated in sports. I can see that your physique is healthy, and symmetrical.

As I'm sure your father taught you, it is an indisputable fact that competition is an essential part of a boy's upbringing, and imparts those lessons of character that help a man make his way in the world. My son has always been too much like his mother, in his girlishly-lashed and myopic brown eyes, in his rosy-lipped mouth. He cries too easily, and on some nights still pisses the bed. I am hoping that this season will whip that out of him, as such tendencies were whipped out of me by my own firm-handed father. My wife raises far too much of a fuss when I take the belt to him, and this has spoiled the boy. He has also not yet learned the trick to making knuckle pushups less excruciating, to put the pressure on the first two knuckles of each hand. You'd think after three times of vomiting on his fists that he would have learned by now.

But we have a beautiful, white, two-story Cottage Revival with new vinyl siding, in a subdivision of other like-minded folks. I have been very active in our neighborhood association to keep it that way. It seems important that one be able to look out into the world and see oneself mirrored back to oneself, in conversation during church and community functions, in packs of young boys riding BMXs, in the modest Fourth of July parade that our community Booster Club sponsors. My fraternity days imbued in me a zeal for volunteerism that I find difficult to indulge at this point in my life, though the passion remains. I have other obligations, as you will see.

Inspired by our wide-plank white oak floors, my wife has decorated the interior in Coastal style, bright and airy colors with pops of navy. Paintings of schooners hang in all of the rooms but one. On my weekends, I spend much of the time pushing my 140 cc walk-behind mower, and generously applying Roundup to keep my luscious and

groomed lawn weed and pest-free. A new hobby of mine is the nurturing of epiphytic plants. I have recently purchased two such bromeliads and an orchid, and hope to gain the knack of caring for such delicate tropical blossoms. It is during my care for my lawn and exotics that I think about my secret temple.

And it's been about twenty minutes, so you're probably ready to hear all about it.

I have a soundproof room. The altar is an old-fashioned obstetric delivery table, made mostly of steel, with leg crutches, hand grips, and naugahyde cushions. I have had adjustable leather cuffs added that serve for four points of restraint. On the pegboards are hung the implements of worship. The floor is slightly concave to direct the flow of any fluids to a central drain, which pipes straight to my septic tank. I have taken the precaution of augmenting the drain with a commercial-strength garbage disposal for the occasional solids, which set me back four figures. I have also installed a wall-mounted spigot to which I have attached a length of black-rubber hose. This is my sacred and hidden temple. In Acts 17:23, Paul speaks to the Areopagus of the Unknown God, whom he equates with the Yahweh of the Jews. But I know the Unknown God, and It is most certainly not that, nor any iteration of the Sky Father. I have drained myself utterly in that awful worship.

From my well-nourished lawn, I can look down the hill to the undeveloped marshes at the edge of town to which our drainage ditches lead. They extend for some distance to the north, until the dead trees that claw their way up from the muck hide the horizon. All year round, the marshes are nothing but expanses of dead reeds and cattails, breeding ground for clouds of mosquitoes and the amphibians that fill the summer nights with their cacophony. Unlike the other wetlands in the region, these are inhospitable to waterfowl, and useless for sportsmen. I myself have pulled on my flannel and waders and walked to the north for miles without coming to the end, and have never seen another living thing. The very birds shun it, and, up to my waist in the fetid slurry, I knew myself to be in a place of religion. It seems to me that these must be the regions of the first worships, and the Unknown God to be their object.

In contrast, my hidden temple is sterile, regularly cleaned with Clorox spray and

store-brand paper towels. Not that you'll be concerned about this, but a good vocabulary is invaluable when applying to colleges. *Haruspicy* is divination by examining the internal organs of sacrificed animals. In dog guts it has been revealed to me that, while in nature the Unknown God is best represented by putrefying dead matter and befouled waters, in a private shrine It is best depicted through the entire absence of life, inasmuch as this is possible. While there is no disorder in the arrangement of the tools of the cultus, the anarchy that is so pivotal to the mysteries of the Unknown God is instead celebrated in the actual rituals of communion.

The central sacrifice that I am discussing is the most dangerous form of worship accessible to us, for it is the most easily perverted. One could consider the sacrality of such acts to be as fragile as hummingbird bones, snapped nearly by a mislaid glance or thought, ruined entirely. It is the recollection of these acts committed under the auspices of this hidden anarchy that allows me to participate at all in the lives of other human beings, in the hypocrisy of the ape. For I have been connected with that which precedes the mammal, and it is that fact which permits me to smile as I water my geraniums, and wave at a blond, tanned, bare-chested boy walking his retriever. A boy like you.

My own son has long begged for such an animal, but I can only think of the yellowed patches from its filth that would soon crater the vibrancy of my lawn. My last encounter with a dog was cut short by the tires of my Expedition. A golden retriever, run some distance from home — the collar said its name was Max. On an unlit country road, I struck Max on my way home from a late night at the office. Fortunately, I am a generous yearly donor to the State Troopers Association, or I might have lost my license on account of high Blood Alcohol Content. I idly poked his exposed intestines with a broken branch, listening to his death-yowls as I gave myself the relief that my wife denies me. In any case, I am deathly allergic to the hair and skin and dander of these stupid animals.

It is summer now, and these are the months that I associate most strongly with my devotions, and that dizzying, humid, marsh air that must have once hung over all this seething globe. This is the only time of year where I enjoy a cold pop, and that only from time to time. Was it good? No answer? They use real grenadine there, not all that



high fructose corn syrup. And the beefburgers always hit the spot. No, it was no problem for me to run in and grab all that. It's on me.

It seems to me the Unknown God has a universal worship dating as far back as those civilizations that predate the biblical Deluge, and has been carried out even as far north as Greenland. It is a personal theory that such worship is connected, without being equivalent, with that of the cannibal adepts that are a universal feature of arctic and subarctic climes, as well as to those similar indulgences found throughout the South Seas. The implications of this to the ceremonial should be obvious.

In these months, our family cooks out of doors on my forty-two inch, stainless steel five-burner natural gas grill. Appearances are important in a small community. If accomplished properly, these surface communications can serve as the inky plumes by which the cultus is hidden and preserved, the integrity of the secret doctrines upheld. As it stands, I find that I have cast around myself a veil in mirrored smoke, in which all that I am that is not the secret temple drifts and curls around me in a delusive fog of manicured lawns and subdivisions of nearly-identical homes. And afterward, when I have dismissed the wife and boy, I sip single-malt scotch and think on my venomous worship, and wonder if the potencies of the swamp and sunless depths of ocean are connected to the malign intelligences that must glide between the stars, beings in which civilization itself has become as much a primordial function as those of the human backbrain — vast, impossible things defined only by hungers and cruelties that bend around the laws of reality followed by lesser beings. Invisible blasphemies knit together of matter entirely alien to our fearful understandings, their unfathomable hive-cities must even now molder in blackness beneath the contagion of our own pathetic settlements, if they ever deigned to raise their watchtowers upon this tossed-off discharge of a planet. Beings screaming forever in the ecstatic freedom that lies finally beyond love, and warmth, and light.

My wife and I no longer share a bed. For the most part, I sleep in my home office on a fold-out sofa my wife deems too hideous to darken the remainder of the home, underneath my greek-letter paddle and a pennant from my *alma mater*. Sleep is perhaps not the right word. I often claim fatigue and simply lock myself in my privacy. The

needs of my epiphytes necessitate keeping the office at a near-tropical level of heat and humidity, which is enough to deter would-be company. I do not consider myself lonely. It is simply easier to avoid the disappointments of domestic interactions, and I find this the most expedient method. Sometimes, I strip myself naked before the brass porthole-themed mirror, and look at the hairless and flabby ape that is this lie, this disguise, this flesh; the sagging pectorals, the wide and womanly hips, the limp and comical glans peeping forth from its scraggly nest. Sometimes, after a few glasses, I lay nude without moving for twelve, sixteen, eighteen hours. My high position in my workplace affords me the freedom for such occasional indulgences.

In these immobile reveries, I feel in imitation of certain chthonic manifestations of the deity, which, in what fragmentary accounts as I have been able to assemble, is associated with regions of feculent shadow, inhabited by those colorless and blind forms of life that may actually be more primeval than those dependent on the light of the sun. The occultation of our breed of worship seems to be best represented by the image of the God in some species of paralysis or fevered dream, communicating with the solitary and scattered faithful through delirium and nightmare. I would consider these private thoughts my only legitimate sentiments of hope. Certainly, when I am watching my little girlish son out on the field, I have no such optimism. Instead, I fondly think of my secret temple. Sometimes, when I take them in there, they do not imagine what is going to happen, and they go right along with it, starry-eyed and innocent. And after they have been confined in the dark, soiled and screaming, I enter, and robe myself in my ceremonial garb. I have four magazines that I have managed to acquire, despite living at some remove from the sources of such illicit material, and it was from one of these that I was inspired to commission the black rubber vestments with which I serve the Unknown God. I do not actually know if there is any living lineage of priesthood, nor do I care. This is not about my relationship with other human beings. This is about the ecstasy of taking a fragile thing, a thing that snaps and tears and shatters, and rending it entirely.

But, and this is my most shameful confession, I do not know which door in my beautiful, white, vinyl-sided home hides the descent into my secret temple. I only know, with a certainty that is unshakable, that it is there, throbbing behind the drywall.

Sometimes, when my house is empty, I try each and every door, hoping that behind them I will find the stairway to this sacred place. There is no other reason for me to even open my eyes anymore than the possibility of returning to my worship. For, if there is no door in my home that leads there, to my secret temple, then I have wasted my life, and every day that I wake with the radio of my alarm clock, and scrape the bacterial filth from my mouth, and cram my stomach full of runny eggs and toasted white bread, and drive the Expedition into town so that I can lock myself in my office and shake, shake in the face of actually setting myself to any one of the facets of tedium that my employment represents until I unlock my desk drawer — where I keep the single-malt — and indulge, carefully, precisely, according to the schedule that I have set for myself, until I can begin to sort through the thick reams of forms that I must review and process so that they can be submitted once again, for final approval and something can, for once in this degraded and imbecile ape life, actually happen — every such day is a failure. I scratch my fingernails against the alternately smooth and razored hours of immobile and slurring futility to no end whatsoever. My worship is a thing of such rarity, so unthinkably fragile, that I have encysted it within my spirit, and dare not bring it into the light. I am, in the end, only a coward. And what is the value of my worthless days in the face of that fact?

But you and I, we are going to find my secret temple. Together.

You should know that one of my fraternity brothers now works as a pharmacist about two hours drive up north. While Rohypnol is indeed clear, odorless, and tasteless, acquiring it in any amount raises legal suspicion. His preferred benzodiazepine is sold in syrup form, and arouses far less interest. ICUs get a lot of use out of it, for instance. The syrup usually comes in cherry flavor. Don't worry. You won't lose consciousness. From the looks of things, your motor functions are already well impaired. And the loss of memory the drug induces will be irrelevant soon anyhow. We're almost here. I see the lights of my neighborhood.

Last Saturday, I looked out to the baseball diamond, beyond which my son stood in the freshly-mown outfield, and imagined that day, when the stars would finally form the celestial obscenity in the blackness of the void — that day when I would at last lead a victim down those creaking steps. This act shall be committed in celebration, for I

have received the image of the mask of the God.

After we have found the door, you and I — and after our sacrifice has been baptized and anointed in filth, we shall further exalt what offering we together create, through untold violations and defilements beyond my trembling dreams. Yes, and then I will pull over my face and skull the veil I have stitched from the rotten disembowelings of run-down dogs, and then I will finally, truly, know myself one with the Unknown and Terrible God. I will know the door, for I will have become the door. And I shall step through.

***Note:** This story first appeared in the collection Vourdalak and Other Stories, published by Haunted Doll House in 2023.*



*Rip Torn / Tracy Whiteside*

**Cooler Figure**

He was the kind of man you would make statues of so other people would carry the world on their shoulders. He was the kind of man you would make figurines of in order to place them on the mantel of high class cars. He was a famous man who began selling his body parts on eBay (a.k.a. the internet). He was able to do so by investing money in his own well-being. Making his money as a spoken word artist, he made tons of cash on tour. And as he was on tour all the time, he was always making money. Spoken word was his craft. But every now and then he would say the wrong thing to the wrong person. Every now and then he would spit out a tooth on stage because some of the comments he made received punches. Only on one occasion did one of the people assaulting him, make a virtue of selling a chip of his teeth on the internet. That is how Hank Rock discovered that not only his performances but he, too, was worth some money.

At first capitalizing on the fights he got into as ‘street credibility,’ he soon capitalized on the prices he could charge on various body parts. Clever as Hank Rock was, he invested his excess money on buying shares of a prestigious cloning company. Now he not only could capitalize on selling chips of his teeth for 80 dollars a piece but create whole organs he could sell on his website, beginning with his toe nails, which he began to mass-produce. T-shirts, mugs, and his liver were soon added to his merchandise shop. On tours he would even sell proofs that he had a heart, sometimes even giving it out for free as a symbolic gesture of love. In other words, he bought into his own humanity when people started accusing him of selling out, donating exemplary duplicate organs to good causes lacking them. Anyone who wished to see the world through his eyes, was soon able to do so through the most modern means of technology: medical surgery and reality TV shows.

It was almost biblical to see how Hank Rock’s eyes could make other people see, how his teeth could make a poor person’s smile more wholesome. Other times, the

spectacle around him would become more burdensome. For instance, when fans came up to him and wanted him to sign duplicates of his own liver. It reminded Hank of the time when director David Cronenberg told him that he had once upon a time made a movie where the main character tattooed his own organs and placed them in jars for everyone to see. Hank saw the appeal of that idea, realizing that now he could show off how much brains he really had by turning his flesh into a brand and putting it on display. Signed organs became his newest cash grab, so the News broadcasts said. Hank, however, had an answer for critiques that if they did not enjoy his show, they might as well enjoy his kidneys over dinner. Soon his inner organs became a franchise of restaurants spread across the country, a business venture that uniquely seasoned his career in many different ways as he literally served himself to others on a silver platter.

Of course a legal case was made that this was cannibalism. But as Mister Rock was a consenting adult and his organs were not a fully grown person but singular vestiges, the supreme court of the United States decided to not further pursue the matter. What Hank had not considered, however, was the ingenuity of a slightly insane surgeon purchasing all the organs he sold online and sewing together a duplicate version of himself, Hankenstein's monster so to speak or more politically, a Hankchurian candidate, a piece of surgical fan-fiction written with thread and needle rather than pen and ink, a piece of fan-fiction created on an operation table rather than a piece of paper. A means to emulate the very star the surgeon idolized. Little did the surgeon know that having him memorize 56 hours worth of stand-up bits would drive his creation to insanity. Trained to be polite and respect others, the creature developed a split personality, as Hank's comedy persona was rudeness incorporated.

\* \* \*

When his doorbell rang on Halloween, Hank was unsuspecting at what events his commercial ventures had set into motion. He stood still and inhaled the majesty of his scarred mirror image at the door, that bricolage of body parts that was his anatomic double. "Good day!" his mirror image said, having, unlike Hank, actually learned manners. - "Good day!" his donor answered, receiving a punch in the face. His double

did not seem to like him very much. As teeth flew out onto the floor, Hank considered how incredible it would be if he were able to monetize this beautiful scene. But the punches kept coming, relentlessly, his body double incessantly giving him the fault for his dubious education in spoken word. For Hank it was as if an audio book of his works had become flesh, now hitting him on the head with the knuckle of his words.

“Wait, I can give you a job,” he exclaimed. “You are my job,” the creature reiterated, “I have learned every show you have ever produced. Thanks to you my head hurts and I have no appreciation for the beauty of life because all I can do is comedy.”

This, of course, made Hank laugh. And as you can imagine, he, as a consequence, died happily, while the police officer investigating the security tapes of that evening exclaimed: “Man, look at that. Do you know how infamous this guy is? He used to say the craziest shit in his shows, titillate you, spit in your face. I once punched his face on stage and sold one of his teeth on e-bay (a.k.a. the internet). But look at him now. In the end, despite all of his shortcomings, he really worked things out with himself. That Hank Rock. He’s so street. I didn’t think, he had the guts to do such a thing. Can you imagine the catharsis?”

Following his last will, Hank’s burial was later instigated as a kind of live performance show. Akin to something he once had seen in a David Cronenberg movie, his autopsy was performed before a live audience with all contributions being paid as a donation to the police force. His organs, however, were auctioned off to a higher price as ‘originals,’ when the autopsy was finished. Fans who paid premium were allowed to pose for selfies with the corpse before the autopsy and his individual body parts afterward. During this time, the crowd resembled that of the Louvre posing in front of the Mona Lisa. Hank’s smile indeed was mysterious. Mister Rock’s estate, however, was soon after sued for copyright infringement by a famous movie studio, the consequence of having called the ‘burial’ “The Rocky Horror Picture Show.”



**The Time Traveling Hotel**

We were on a train facing the sea when a child behind us said to his mothers,  
“Isn’t the past just stories we tell each other?”

The sound of wind chimes, like in our house facing the beach, could be heard. A heavenly sound like no other, as if a plaything for Herman the sea snake in the Arno River.

The child’s mother didn’t answer, merely glanced outside the window at the fast-passing trees and factories and occasional rivers trickling slow water, divers about to jump in and catch fish. The child played chess one-sided, invisible opponent. The mother scratched her hands.

The other mother was reading a book, a black book without a title on the cover. The sky was orange and yellow and pink, like a sherbet — and the air smelled of dried leaves, change, and cinnamon sticks.

“Why not make it something beautiful, bearable, prompting you to make more magic and love and kindness,” the other mother said, looking up with a warm smile before her eyes darted back to the book.

“I suppose,” the child said. “But you have to show me how first.”

“I try to everyday,” the other mother said.

The child smiled and said, “Maybe.”

I turned away and stopped watching them, feeling self-conscious of my own rudeness. You were drinking coffee and also reading a newspaper, thinking of some

far-off place by the ocean we once dived off rocks into. What were we gliding toward? I almost couldn't remember why we were on the train at all.

And really, it felt, suddenly, like we had always been on this train. This was our entire life, and all the memories of other times and places we fake. Or was that true? That couldn't be true. Always something behind the wall, the man who came to put up our shelves, said. I thought of this man now as we chugged by quickly. Faster than any human could go alone. Perhaps faster than we were meant to.

Earlier that day, a stranger called me on the phone and left a message. Said they had seen my mother on the street buying apples. Said she looked better than ever, wearing pink high-top Reeboks. I shivered when I heard the message. My mother has died a year earlier. The caller didn't leave a name. The number was unknown.

Sometimes I thought about where my mother was in the universe. Was there a place her soul could roam? I thought about how my father started fixing his old car again. He bought it before he married my mother, kept it in parts like a damaged heart in our garage and simply became too busy to fix it. A forgotten broken heart.

But now, in some ways, it's as if no time passes. I wanted him to start traveling again. So, we booked him a trip to Naples, where his father was supposedly born. We'd meet him there, the first time I'd ever have seen him out of the country, and marvel at how my father loves wine and renaissance art and believes in a God and is so firmly rooted in the present, he's a new person.

My father was never the emotional type. For a man born in the Bronx in the 1950s, I'd often say, what could you expect?

\*

We stood in a dark room like a church filled with strange strumming, a mass of broken shells and obsidian. So many long-haired men watching transfixed by one man and his instrument. A man who was as much devil as he was angel. A vast dark ocean, no lights, and our bodies floating in warm water. It is dark but we also hear and feel the

things of the day. We are perfect like this, between births, just being. It is incredible to open my eyes and see that one man is responsible for this. He is shining a sound mirror back on us, the sounds of our screams as one giant drone.

The rush dangerous sound of the crashing waves. The dangerous voice it emits, the terrifying body, so large and dark in the night and those alien clouds so low and crispy white. We're all waiting for the mysterious green lights to show up, strangers in night, strangers from different lands hoping for hope, for light in dark, for a sign. It's funny, frankly. It reminded me of us finding the church of the metamorphosis in a small town in mainland Greece, maybe Thalamus.

At least, I thought I was in the room. I'm not sure if I ever was, or if it was a memory from the past I had forgotten, or the mostly unknowable future. Or perhaps, I became someone else for a moment. The entire time, we were riding the train. But then again, this was the experience we paid for, that we had to pay for, that was expressly mandated. The world we knew was ending, so now we had to board a train that would bring us into another time, another world.

We booked the train, called Everywhere Now Train, which was a high-speed train that would allow people to exist outside of time, like insects stuck in amber—however, not in limbo, but alive, perhaps more alive than ever.

\*

A dark cloud like a mountain rising from the North Sea and we under it, stupid humans trying to control the cosmos, the gleam of the moon and the constant motion of the lighthouses false light.

At Gultoss, I realized the water doesn't care about us as it swept through the ravine as if on a heavenly or demonic mission. To erase and birth something new constantly so that it is both nothing and everything at once.

We saw something maybe and went back on the bus like fools, fingers of the sea holding the wool of a full heart.

But now we are on a train somewhere else that I can't remember, running from something. Maybe as big as the earth.

\*

The train jostled me awake. At first, I thought my mother was changing channels on the TV as people walked by us. "Don't you remember?" you asked me all of a sudden.

"I don't. I don't know why but I don't," I whispered back. The child was reading. The mothers were asleep.

"Because we need to get to the Red Door, to get back to the other side. Everything we had is gone here and we can't get it back."

"What do you mean?" I asked wearily, faintly remembering perhaps the reason I didn't remember is because we woke up from the sound of sirens, emergency vehicles everywhere, even on the river.

"It's all gone."

The saddest thing is, all the violence and destruction happened for so long, and slowly, that by the time the subways were rotted and flooding, you were used to it.

You looked like a bear waking up from hibernation. At this moment, all I wanted was to feel your blood, your heartbeat, your bones and your skin against mine. My body was utterly primordial. Nothing else really mattered.

A childhood dream came back to me. I was in a pinball machine. I was terrified. I looked at myself in the soul. Then back to my knitting hands. The knitter transcends time. The knitter bypasses time, stops time, with each thread and knot. There is something brilliant about the act. Then my mind went to J, her red hair cascading down her shoulders, her body laid in a Grecian dress, the bottom of her cup awaiting a future.

Her looking like that reminded me of when you and I fell in love and hadn't told each other yet. It was this all-consuming storm inside my body, like waking up from a

dream—that familiar yet unknown moment of urgency, as if life exists only as wind between Greek columns.

But now I was sitting here with you, eating dumplings and felt an age-old nightmare: Half of my molar was gone. Like the thread just unspooled. I recently taught myself to knit. After years of wanting and trying to be smart, as if that is a worthy goal (rather than just being, of trying to be kind or helpful—anything but something as pretentious and self-righteous as being smart), I finally learned that life is a lot like knitting. Or knitting is a lot like life.

We try our damndest to thread it all together, to create something beautiful, and useful, to make a difference in some way—but so often, the threads are loose, they don't line, it becomes undone. We can become undone. The good thing is, you can start all over, do it again, become whole (again). You learn to be okay, and even love, the long, drawn-out process. The mundanity of it all.

I am thinking of that afternoon when the sun set on the river and my body was on top of yours, our eyes in each other's eyes, like earth spilling its soil into itself. We were becoming: both known to each other and as ourselves.

And yet then there are the times where the loneliness of being human eats me alive, as I stare into the office buildings and far away cars as I walk over the Pulaski Bridge. And that painting from my childhood in the tiny book—the cherub with the parrot, the grapes, the flowers with their roots showing.

You can get used to anything.

\*

None of it really matters, though, when you're here with me, holding my hand, touching my knee like it's a cherub from the very lap of Mother Mary. Suddenly, as we went through another tunnel, thinking of when we first met, when we married, now running away into a place we could breathe, could sustain ourselves, because the old place was dying, you turned into a baby.

How could this be? It seemed absurd, a strange dream, a scene out of a bad sci-fi movie. It was as if, despite being newly formed, you recognized how strange this was. They warned us that we could change, that weird side effects were possible.

We'd never heard of this, though, never thought this could be possible. Your eyes were still yours, the 42-year-old version of you, knowing, wise, kind, mischievous. And yet, your body was helpless on its own. You needed me in a way even when you needed me wasn't quite like this.

Who knew time travel, to another planet, would turn your body into this precious yet frightening thing? "I woke up and you were taking care of me, like I was you earlier," I heard him say in my mind. His lips didn't move. Was this imagined? Was this real?

I looked outside to the window, saw a greenish blue swirl in the ground scientists can control, the spinning swirl of the physics of perceived time. I thought about my mother, and her mother, and the lineage of our large noses. I thought of how my mother begged and begged for a nose job, eventually had one in her early twenties, and then convinced me to get one as a teenager. The history of a nose. The disappearance of that history. The *madeupness* of that history.

In photographs of my grandfather, I see now that my mother got his nose, and then I got his nose through her nose. And then I was pressured to get a new nose; I can't say I was unwilling or that I didn't consent (I agreed with my mother) - but what does that mean after years of bullying, years of even my mother saying I had a big nose, of telling me to push my nose up (inspired by that Barbra Streisand film)? What is consent, how can you really know yourself, when you're told what to feel from a young age?

There's no one to blame here really. Not my mother or her mother or even the bullies at school. We are sponges that learn lessons, often the wrong ones, by example. My mother was protecting me in her mind.

My nose is essentially inconsequential. It's a nose; it could be a symbol or metaphor as much as I make it one. Or simple utilitarian. And as a function, it doesn't

work very well, having been broken, deviated, bulbous even on the inside. My sense of smell is poor. It's always stuffy. Either way, it's caused a lot of pain, a lot of turmoil—for awhile at least. I mostly don't think about it now. What's the point? It seems silly, almost vain, even though I know it isn't.

But now, I don't look in mirrors much anymore. I finally stopped painting my face with makeup. I've grown both more accepting and less interested. As if talking to someone, when really, I'm talking to no one, I also retort that it isn't bad to enjoy the act of dressing, of adorning. I still do; thankfully, I just don't think of my face as much.

And perhaps, because it has disappointed me, and perhaps because I'm sad for the nose I never got to grow into, and perhaps, because I realize as I age, it all changes. I've changed. I am no longer the same (and thankfully).

I think this as I look into the face of a baby: all unlined, all cherub mush. Very much unique and homogenous like all humans. Babies, however, all look like babies; bone structure is limited. I look at you as this baby, a baby, the baby, and hope pain are a little softer than it has been. And yet, I want everything to feel as real as possible even when it hurts. Living with gentle begging.

The baby can't talk but sometimes it feels like I can hear the baby's thoughts. We pass by the middle of a city, dilapidated buildings, old townhouses, crowded tenements. Over the loudspeaker, the conductor announces that we all need to get off the train temporarily. They need to check the engine.

You as Baby, or perhaps Baby Achilles, looked at me, *You know it's a trap*, Baby Achilles thought. I know, I know, but do we have a choice? *I guess not.*

So, I took you in my arms, awkwardly because I didn't have a stroller or any baby bjorn and left the train. At least in this case, I could try to find a store to get some proper gear, though I wondered if somehow, you'd morph into another aged version of yourself before we make it to the other side, a place we were never told exactly what it would be like. Or when it would be.

\*

It's easy to make life a fantasy and then wake up when it's too late. How did we end up here? You in my arms, us walking through a thick polluted fog up a windy hill with old bars and boutiques on either side, a nearly empty grocery on the corner. A huge apartment complex stood at the bottom of the hill, people milling in the doorway, the number spray painted on the old wooden door.

And yet somewhere else, a woman on a Chicago rooftop smelling coal in the winter, a man outside in the dark near a lit trash bin and a woman as me under a bridge in the dank dark, centipedes everywhere, afraid of the moving truck coming toward her, like a strawberry being pinched. Back to this moment. My head hurt. Was the process already happening?

We trudged to the grocery store together where I found a baby carrier. It was dusty but it was better than nothing. For what felt like hours after, but perhaps only 20 minutes, we walked up the hill to the highest point, looking at buildings that all seemed the same, all full of people who wanted more. All full of anger, shame, regret. There was love there, too, of course, but it took a back seat to the other emotions, so much stronger in their stewing. All people who wanted a way out, a fresh start, a new life.

I couldn't help but think of my mother, again. And her mother. Their scarcity mindset around food and love, the preoccupation with what is enough and not enough, permeated every aspect of their lives. In some ways, everything was a competition, even and sometimes especially, against their very selves, their souls.

One mother used food to make herself smaller to take up less space, in some way—and then dress that smallness up with clothes to hide her vulnerability. As if the clothes could be her shield.

This isn't to say those outfits weren't fun and strange and fabulous, giving shape to a whole world of textures and pattern—but who was she underneath? The other mother used the deliciousness of food to satiate the same feelings, those voids, those



insecurities, to mask feelings of unworthiness brought on by our modern society. Everyone feels this even if they don't realize it (and really, who does until you've lived a lot of life already?).

It wasn't that they hated food or bodies; they hated their own. They wanted the perfection of a novel or movie — the superficiality of a fake being whose needs could be met easily with the flash of a scene or revelation that made it all better instantly. The rush of five hard years gone.

If my mother, whose binge eating was both a disorder and addiction, whose medications made her own body out of her own control, was Snow White whose only hope was to be saved (fighting against the women she knew)- then her mother's mother was the same thing in another body. The mother grew larger to take up the space she wasn't allowed. So, the mother's mother grew small to fit. She was like Cinderella, sacrificing all for others.

I looked back down at you. I wondered if you hated this new body or loved it, or perhaps, neither. I remembered the conversations we used to have about children, whether to have them or not, and when. We always came back to the same answers: We did, in a few years. When that few years came, that's when everything exploded. At first, it was the erratic weather, the droughts, the wildfires, the tarnished food supplies—then it was the surveillance, the roles you got assigned, the new debt system you couldn't escape.

It got so bad, so slowly, that most people didn't see it. We all accepted it. Until then, more and more people didn't—and tried to live in “outsider communities.” These usually disbanded within a few years. It's the same story over and over.

The Mars settlement eventually happened for the rich. Everyone else was left on their own; which meant, of course, everyone was left to fend for themselves. It wasn't lawless in the way you wanted, but the opposite: everything was so constrained and commoditized that humans didn't need to worry about AI becoming smarter or

microchips. We did it, yet again, to ourselves, with ourselves. Some people just simply stopped, falling into catatonic states.

The ones who didn't became part of three groups: Outsiders (who were often vying for resources), were utterly left to themselves. Often, people were their own worst enemies, sometimes just for the crime of not understanding how to farm, how to live communally; they were intentionally hurtful or isolating, but modernity didn't raise people to survive with the earth (as opposed to against it).

These people, making up most, should have aptly been called, Most of Us, but the privileged and wealthy wanted to create extremists, wanted to act as though these people didn't have a right to be saved, wanted to radicalize others against humanity. Of course, some did successfully create their own communities, in forests, deserted beach towns, tunnels, etc—but you had to be lucky enough to find them.

The other two groups fell into two groups, largely based on economic class: one being The Core, who were wealthy people, whether politicians or those lucky enough to have hoarded wealth. These people largely left Earth; some stayed on the few locations that were habitable (and fortified against Outsiders). These people, even when kind, were happy to forget the rest of the world existed.

The third group, the most puzzling, were the Travelers. They bought train tickets to the train that acted as a portal. These people felt the risk of the unknown was worth it; they could afford the ticket, but not to leave Earth. They, for whatever reason, not hopeful for the future on the planet as they knew it. They were willing to leave but not die. Just choose another life.

And yet, when I realized what we've done: pay to ride a train to drop us off at a random point in time, sideways, as if you fell in an alternate reality, seemed like a bad idea. The scientists and marketing personnel claimed that they created this alternate universe that would be designed based on your chemistry and memories, so it would tailor fit to you. But is that really how it works? It isn't like you can read Yelp reviews on time jumping.

Speaking of, I noticed my watch stopped as we sat down – its time read the moment we scanned our tickets to board the train. I wondered if the train itself was the destination; perhaps we were fooled into thinking there was an out at all, and the train was it. Or maybe it's this place; or we only ride the train to perpetually get on and off. Was it that pessimistic?

The sun is always full, its rotund round brightness exploding like lava into the sky, like the love for each other we have in our hearts. Yes, dear baby, I love you that much.

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The Konica camera's date was 8-8-1998, a roll of film still stuck in it, as I recalled my yiayia recalling her own yiayia befriending their next-door neighbor who was from China. They were women who spoke different languages, neither spoke English, and there they sat on their porches, together. In silence they were friends. At Christmas the woman gave her an orange.

In another part of her mind, Burt came up. His muscled legs and arms, his dream of California, the proposal, his slight Italian accent. Her eventual refusal, only because her parents forbade it. Holy minefield, holy mine, holy nun more like holy none.

I was strolling along a beach strewn with garbage; we found the beach a few miles down the hill from the train station stop. A group of older women were sitting reading and feeding seagulls, sometimes laughing. In the distance, a boat was honking its horn, sounds like fog and old men and birds. Suddenly, as if a jump in time, a bad edit in a film, the boat crashed on shore.

The grandmothers saw the boat crash into shore, laughing and muttering to themselves about the reckless youth. Scores of young children and teenagers scurried off the boat, running over themselves and each other. One of them cried out, "To be loved for who I am and not as a metaphor, as what I represent and what I can do for them! That is what I want!"

You started to cry. I wondered if you were crying because we realized our dream had died. Or maybe, the big dream was made up of a series of little dreams that couldn't manifest, at least not in the present. Maybe in some other parallel or side universe, the one where the world wasn't falling apart, where we welcomed a small human into the world, where you weren't suddenly a baby again, where we bought the house by the sea, planted a garden, saw grandchildren be born, adopted too many critters, dogs and cats and rabbits galore.

What even is a dream anyway? It's a future story we want to inhabit based on the stories we've told and been told. Are some dreams more real or true than others?

I thought of this as the train moved faster into time, light, speed, distance, the cosmos. Suddenly, now, I was in an ancient city made new, marble columns turned into brutalist buildings in a never-ending landscape. A librarian I knew lived in the tower, endlessly cataloging and archiving a past we barely remembered.

Where was I supposed to be in all of this? I couldn't help but think of my father, also now long flung into the hands of dementia (and honestly, he'd have hated this version of reality); he would take us to the city before it was swamped out and full of water and things growing where they shouldn't be. Sometimes he'd take us to City Island, too, and we'd listen to BB King and Stevie Ray Vaughan in the car, some doo wop. A friend of his moved here after his divorce, his Jeep parked somewhere on a side road. I don't even remember his name but I remember his dark curly hair and his son.

When we'd get there, we'd eat sea food and peruse the consignment stores. He tried to teach me guitar once, but my fingers wouldn't comply, and my preteen brain wanted to be instantly good. Anything less seemed like a failure.

For a man who used to wear bell bottoms and drove a beetle with flower stickers, my father's fashion choices once I was a child focused on doc marten boots, Lee dad jeans, and some kind of polo or collared shirt, along with a baseball cap of no discerning.

The pit, swirling on forever in his memory, was a stop in time for us. I peered into it after it happened. I didn't realize at the time, and why would I as a child, that this is what radicalized him. The smoke, those bodies. All of it a bind.

A bug landed on you again and you began to grimace. You hated bugs even as an adult. The beetle lingered, however. My yiayia's ladybug pin lay on my chest, snugly clasp onto a black blazer, also once hers, a yellow belt also hers keeping together a loose dress. I wore it also on our first date, a day that seems like ancient history already, belonging to another world. And yet, once we drank orange wine near a fireplace in a sea of other people who went to wine bars. It was simple and magical and it was ours.

It wasn't robots or earthquakes, or even wildfires that did us all in. It was the guns and the lack of food, the lack of humanity for us all. We knew it was bad when, one day, the electricity just turned off. Everyone who relied on the internet could no longer. Useless appendages. And so on and so on.

The train slowly starts coming to a stop. And I realize, I've never seen anyone get off and not return. I've never heard back from anyone who ended their journey.

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In a dream, I saw dinosaurs. The dinosaurs spoke. They held each other as they made dinner. Drew pictures on walls. Some made love to Brian Eno. The children ate green-colored cereal and purple bananas. A radio playing sweetly faint music played in the distance.

I don't know how long I had been sleeping; the train staff did their rounds, dropping off food and drink and I managed to feed both of us with the tasteless fruits and vegetables. But there you were, practically an elder again, the silver streaks back in your beard, the twinkle in your now mature eyes. It's like nothing ever changed.

“How long was I out for?” I asked, then said, “Do you remember being a baby?”

“Of course, I do. And you were an excellent mother, by the way.”

“How did it feel? My god...”

“Honestly, not so bad after I got over the fact that I couldn’t talk. It was nice to be carried everywhere. I’m sure it was hell for you though.”

An announcement over the loudspeaker crackled on, a man with a sing songy voice started speaking, “Your destination is finally here. Please gather your belongings and exit the train. You will not be able to reboard, as this is our last stop. You will receive your instructions and new address outside from the staff. Thank you for your patience and good luck.”

I couldn’t believe what we’d heard. Everything we had been waiting for was finally happening. It could be the best day of our lives, and also the worst, depending on where we were and what we were afforded. Was it a completely enclosed town in glass? Were there trees? Could we see the ocean? Would we have a balcony?

We gathered the few bags we brought and shoved our way into the narrow and crammed space with the dozens of other passengers. Everyone’s faces were full of anticipation and dread; what were we all getting into?

People inched their way slowly off the train onto the platform; leaves had fallen. From the dirty window, it looked like any small town in the middle of nowhere; a few cute brick buildings crowding a main street. No trees, no cars, and a lot of trash. The sky was gray.

When we finally made it out, I saw we were all being made to stand in a line, with a school bus driving toward us from a distance. We were given a pink piece of paper with the number 34 on it.

“Everyone with numbers one to twenty on the bus. Everyone else, please wait,” shouted one of the staff, their dark green uniforms spotless. Each of them, I realized, carried a gun on them. I looked up at the sky, no sun in sight, and began to think about the yellow rain coat I would wear as a child on stormy days. A child near us began to whimper, saying their feet hurt. The child was shushed by their parents.

The bus pulled up and the door opened. Slowly, people with the numbers from one to twenty boarded the bus. I still could not stop looking at the clouds. You were fidgeting next to me, your hands in my pockets. As the last person boarded, a middle-aged man and his French bulldog named Rusty, the door to the bus creaked shut. That’s when we heard the gunshots.

The clouds almost looked pink, like a sunset come either too early or too late.

### **The School Bell Tolls for You**

Joan Walters was sure she'd seen Johnny Walker in the hallway during passing periods. It was impossible, of course, because she'd watched him die. But today when she entered her empty classroom and saw the chilling words, *I hate you*, written on the whiteboard in blood red dry erase marker, she truly began to doubt what she knew about dead.

Perhaps it was a cruel prank by a current student in an attempt to harass and torment her. She knew all too well how savage students could be. The thing that she couldn't shake though, was that no one else alive knew that those were the exact words Johnny Walker uttered the day he walked into her classroom and pointed a cold black handgun at her chest.

*I hate you, Ms. Walters.*

The words were still taking root in her comprehension when the thunderous blast of gunfire tore her world and her body apart.

The message wiped easily off the board, but some of the red dry erase ink stained her hands. Examining the smears threatened to bring the visceral memories from that day to the surface, the deafening blast of the gun, the blinding flash from the muzzle, the smell of gunpowder, the searing pain. Desperate to wash the memories away, she scurried out of her classroom in search of a sink.

The school's hallways were unusually busy for after school hours, but today was the community open house. A desperate attempt to convince everyone that it was safe here now. No armed teenagers. Nothing to be afraid of. Everything back to normal, only it wasn't. Maybe it never could be again.

As Joan made her way to the nearest staff bathroom, she couldn't help but notice the building's unappealing ambience. Despite the remodeling and fresh paint the building was still grim in the way that all old public buildings are. The dingy yellow tiled bathroom was chilly and smelled faintly of bleach cleaner but stronger of mold. The



narrow LED lighting casting long shadows into the corners making it impossible to identify the source of either odor.

Joan turned on the water at the tap and it came out in an anemic trickle, but the sound reverberated off the walls and bare concrete floor. After vigorous scrubbing, the red ran harmlessly down the drain and a sigh of relief escaped her chest.

Examining her reflection in the dull mirror above the sink, Joan realized she desperately needed a touch up. She smoothed her dark ponytail and ran her fingertip under each eye in an attempt to freshen the eyeliner applied early that morning. Lipstick would have been a good idea to add some color, but she knew all she had was chapstick.

Out of habit, she pulled the collar of her shirt down and inspected the circle of puckered and purple skin just below her right clavicle. How Johnny had only hit her once was a miracle. How the bullet hadn't done more damage than it did was the second miracle. Johnny had received no miracles. The School Resource Officer, Officer Grady, had seen to that.

The door of the farthest stall creaked and Joan watched it swing slowly open behind her in the reflection in the mirror.

"Oh, I thought I was alone. Why is it so freaking cold in here?"

No answer and no one came out of the stall.

"Hello?" When there was still no answer, she leaned down to peer under the stall walls. No feet.

In her imagination, she pictured scuffed running shoes descending from the toilet, first one and then the other, like a scene from a bad slasher movie. The feet attached to an armed assailant here to finish what Johnny started. Worse, Johnny himself attached to the feet. Panic flushed her system, and she rushed to the door. Grabbing the handle to yank the door open, she noticed the word *liar* carved deep into the wood.

Joan fled to the only place she thought might offer some shelter. They updated all the classrooms, including Joan's, with special bolt locks. The clank of the bolt sliding into place and securing the metal core door was comforting. She went to her desk, unlocked and pulled out the top drawer to make sure the silver Walther handgun was still there.

At the gun store, the clerk had shown her many models, but this had been the only

silver one. He'd told her it was fine but might be a bit heavy for a shoulder bag and didn't carry as many rounds as some others. She cared little about such details, all she knew was that she did not want one that looked like the all black one that had nearly taken her life.

Relief, or something like it, settled in her gut as she touched one fingertip to the cold metal.

A loud thump on the classroom door made her flinch.

"Yes?" she called out.

The knob jiggled in response.

Joan cautiously approached the door, slid the bolt and cracked it open. The hallway hummed with preparations for the open house, but no one was at the door.

"Did you need something?" she asked a girl who shuffled past, arms full of plastic table covers.

"No."

"Who knocked?"

The girl furrowed her brow. "I didn't see anybody. Are you okay, Ms. Walters?"

Joan nodded, closed the door, and hustled to her desk. She pulled her handbag out of the bottom drawer and retrieved an amber prescription bottle. Hands shaking, Joan dry-swallowed two small yellow pills. Sinking into the desk chair, she closed her eyes waiting for the meds to calm her nerves.

The cell phone in her handbag vibrated her attention. The screen lit up with the glaring reminder that it was time for the assembly. Joan stood and slung the handbag's long strap across her chest. Impulsively, she reached in the top desk drawer and lifted the handgun out. The weight of it felt like safety, like protection, like fighting back. As she slipped it into her handbag, the hard metal pressed reassuringly against her hip.

Suddenly, a notebook shot out of a bookcase to her right, slapping the tile floor at her feet.

"No. No way," she whispered.

An eraser had been used to remove the blue color on the cover to spell out Johnny W. in ghostly white. She bent and picked it up in sweaty hands. Flipping through the pages, red slashes in her familiar handwriting defaced each page. It wasn't her fault that

Johnny was failing her class. It wasn't her fault that his handwriting so awful she couldn't read it, let alone grade it.

Johnny had been a difficult student and her least favorite in her three years of teaching. At first sight, his bright red hair and freckles repulsed her. Then it was the constant asking of ridiculous questions, trying to make her look stupid, correcting her if she made the smallest speaking mistake, talking out of turn, joking about her clothing style, smiling his disgusting squinty-eyed smile when she became angry. The first time the tables turned was when she handed him back his mid-term with a juicy red F on the top. He wasn't smiling then. From then on, she couldn't help but turn the screws every chance she got. The satisfaction of grinding him under her heel was addictive. Joan knew it was unprofessional, immoral even, but she couldn't stop.

One Sunday afternoon, she came across Johnny's social media page. Flipping through photos of the little cretin smiling with friends and enjoying his youth had overwhelmed her with rage. Creating a fake social media profile and badgering him on line was even better than writing snarky comments on his schoolwork. The habit of sneaking unflattering photos of him at every opportunity and posting them became her daily obsession. A photo of him picking his nose in what he obviously thought was an empty hallway became a viral masterpiece. She enjoyed hours of scrolling through the clever memes anonymous people on the internet created with it. She never discovered how Johnny tracked the account to her, but the moment before she saw the gun, he told her he knew.

Joan dropped the notebook into the garbage pail as if it were contaminated with infected puss, pulled the door open, and walked out into the hallway. By now, most everyone was in the cafeteria or in the main gym and the hallway echoed empty. Just ahead, at the first corner, she caught a quick glimpse of red hair. Her heart jumped into her throat and her steps faltered.

*Stop being ridiculous*, she told herself, but she picked up her pace. Any minute now, the meds would kick in and she would be fine.

Relieved to get to the gymnasium full of people, she went to the front of the room. Her status as survivor granted top billing tonight with a seat on the small stage facing the rows of folding chairs. Officer Grady sat in his seat next to hers, his dark hair

slicked back and the badge on his ample chest glinting under the lights.

The police officer stood when he saw her. "Ms. Walters! It's so good to see you looking so well."

"You too, officer." They gave each other an awkward hug.

"Are you settling back in okay?" he asked.

*Well, I was shot by my own student in my own classroom and now I'm back at the scene of the crime to supposedly teach these little monsters, but sure.* "I'm fine," she said. "Thank you so much for asking and, well, everything."

"Just doing my job. You're the brave one here."

Pride swelled in her chest. Of course she was.

The bright lights of the gym flickered as if an electrical surge had moved through them. All eyes turned to the ceiling.

"It's fine. It's fine," Principal Patterson said from the lectern, holding out his hands to gesture for calm.

Joan hugged the purse on her lap and took comfort from the feel of the hard metal of the handgun through the fabric. She took a deep breath and then shivered as an icy breeze assaulted her bare ankles, as if someone had opened a freezer door.

"The electrical surge must have messed with the AC," Officer Grady said to no one in particular.

Joan watched the gym continue to fill with students, parents, and community members, old and young. She thought she saw a flash of red hair here and there, but told herself that other humans in the world had red hair. Besides, Johnny was dead.

Principal Patterson started talking about rebuilding and persevering through tragedy, using the flowery language that is usually used at these type of events. Joan barely registered that he'd introduced her.

Taking her single sheet of notes out of her purse, she walked stiff legged to the lectern, adjusted the microphone and looked out on the crowd. Feedback wailed from the microphone, forcing Joan to step back. A collective cry of discomfort came from the crowd. A single thread of mocking laughter rose over the whine. Heat flushed her face and all the moisture evaporated in her mouth, but she reached up and readjusted the mic. This time, it didn't complain.

“Thank you, Principal Patterson, for your lovely words. Dearest community, thank you for your support, as well,” Joan began.

She looked out across the crowd. A few people in the back of the room stood holding up signs with messages of support.

“I-uh-this time -uh situation,” she stumbled over her words. Somewhere, someone in the crowd laughed. Joan cleared her throat and looked down at her notes, rising anger threatening to take over. “This tragedy has shown us we are stronger than we ever imagined we could be.”

She looked out at the crowd again. Only one person was holding a sign now. It read: *I really hate you* in bold red letters. The entire white poster board concealed the holder, but she thought she saw a tuft of red hair peeking over the top.

Sweat pooled in her underarms and on her upper lip. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, Joan tried to continue reading directly from her notes. “My physical wounds have healed but-”

The lights surged again and flickered the smell of ozone rose in the air. She looked up and the sign holder was standing in front of her now, past the first row of chairs. This time the sign read, *You should have died too.*

She watched in horror as the sign holder slowly lowered the sign. Familiar red hair, the pale freckled skin, blue lips pulled into that damn smile. A large and bloody hole in the center of his chest ruining the front of the gray t-shirt. Johnny’s eyes squinted in the annoying way they did when he smiled, a trickle of dark blood oozing from where clear tears should be.

Panic flushed ice through her body, her mouth opened in a silent scream. Joan reached into the purse, still slung across her body, and pulled out the gun. With no time to go through the steps of getting into a proper shooting stance and taking careful aim as she learned in her shooting lessons, she fired at Johnny Walker and his terrible sign and his squinty eyed smile.

Officer Grady shouted something, but Joan couldn’t make it out over the whine in her ears.

Something slammed into her side, sending lightning bolts of pain deep into her body.

The gym lights flickered and went black. Screams pierced the darkness.

In the next moment, Joan found herself in what she thought was the staff bathroom. The same dingy yellow tile and dull mirrors, but it seemed different somehow. It had the translucent sense of a dream, and her first thought was that she'd taken too much medicine.

She wrapped her arms around herself for warmth. Touching something wet on her side, she brought her hand back to her face. Fingertips wet and shiny red. Confusion and fear flooded her system. Gingerly, she touched the spot again and probed a hole just under her breast. Rib bones crunched and moved under her fingertips and blood cascaded over her hand. Joan realized that the injury was large and deep enough that she should be in severe pain, but she felt nothing.

A voice she thought she'd never hear again came from behind her. "You are a liar."

She spun to face Johnny Walker.

"I-you-wh-wh-what is happening? You're dead!" Joan shrieked.

Johnny threw his head back and his guffaw was darkly gleeful. His tongue was a putrid shade of purple and his teeth were the same yellowish hue as bile and just as slimy. The tang of rot filled her nostrils.

Understanding hit her like a sledgehammer, shattering what was left of her denial.

"You're in my classroom now, Ms. Walters."

She would have screamed, but terror had clamped her vocal cords shut and eternity stretched dark and endless before her.



*Jaelyn / Alice Wilson*

# NONFICTION



**Riverdale Road: A Photo Essay**

Colorado is no stranger to haunted places and weird stories. We have towns with a festival dedicated to a frozen dead Nordic dude locked in a shed, (Nederland), a headless rooster that survived the initial decapitation (Fruita), and an entire hotel that met Stephen King as a guest and decided to choose violence against him (Estes Park). Littleton, Colorado is home to the grave of Alferd Packer, a famous murderous cannibal who successfully won his freedom due to being a model prisoner who could for the most part control his “hangry urges”, and then we arrive at Thornton, Colorado, the home of an 11-mile lonely road with no streetlights that would make David Lynch grin with joy, Riverdale Road.

A quick google search of this road will bring you a slew of articles, urban explorer YouTube videos, and titles of sensational ghost hunting television episodes, dedicated to it. All these mediums will tell you of unwitting visitors who have been chased by the ghost of a dead jogger, seen bloody handprints on street signs, chased by a ghost Camaro with one headlight, seen murdered souls hanging from trees, and met the woeful “woman in white”, the sort that always seems to haunt these sorts of roads in any given part of this country. All these hauntings happen because, as legend has it, a distraught man burned down his mansion with his family in it, murdering everyone in the process.

An examination of the facts at the core of this road finds that although there was a mansion that burned down on this road, it was unoccupied at the time and the fire happened just as there was talk of preserving the home as a historical landmark. Likewise, efforts to find evidence of dead joggers, murdered children, or crashed Camaros do not really come up with anything.

There are no streetlights along this road, so after dark, with only your headlights to guide the way, you can very much feel like Bill Pullman in the closing scene of “Lost Highway.”

An internet headline, “One of the Most Haunted Roads in the U.S. is Just a Few Miles From Denver” caught my eyes as I was staring at my laptop screen. Clicking on it spilled open the sensational legends of Riverdale Road and in excitement I recited its facts to my boyfriend, who later suggested we drive the entire 11 miles of the road after sundown.

So, we did!

I sent a message to co-editor Fox, just in case my fella and I disappeared through the gates of hell, she is welcome to inherit my Caribbean Calcite collection.

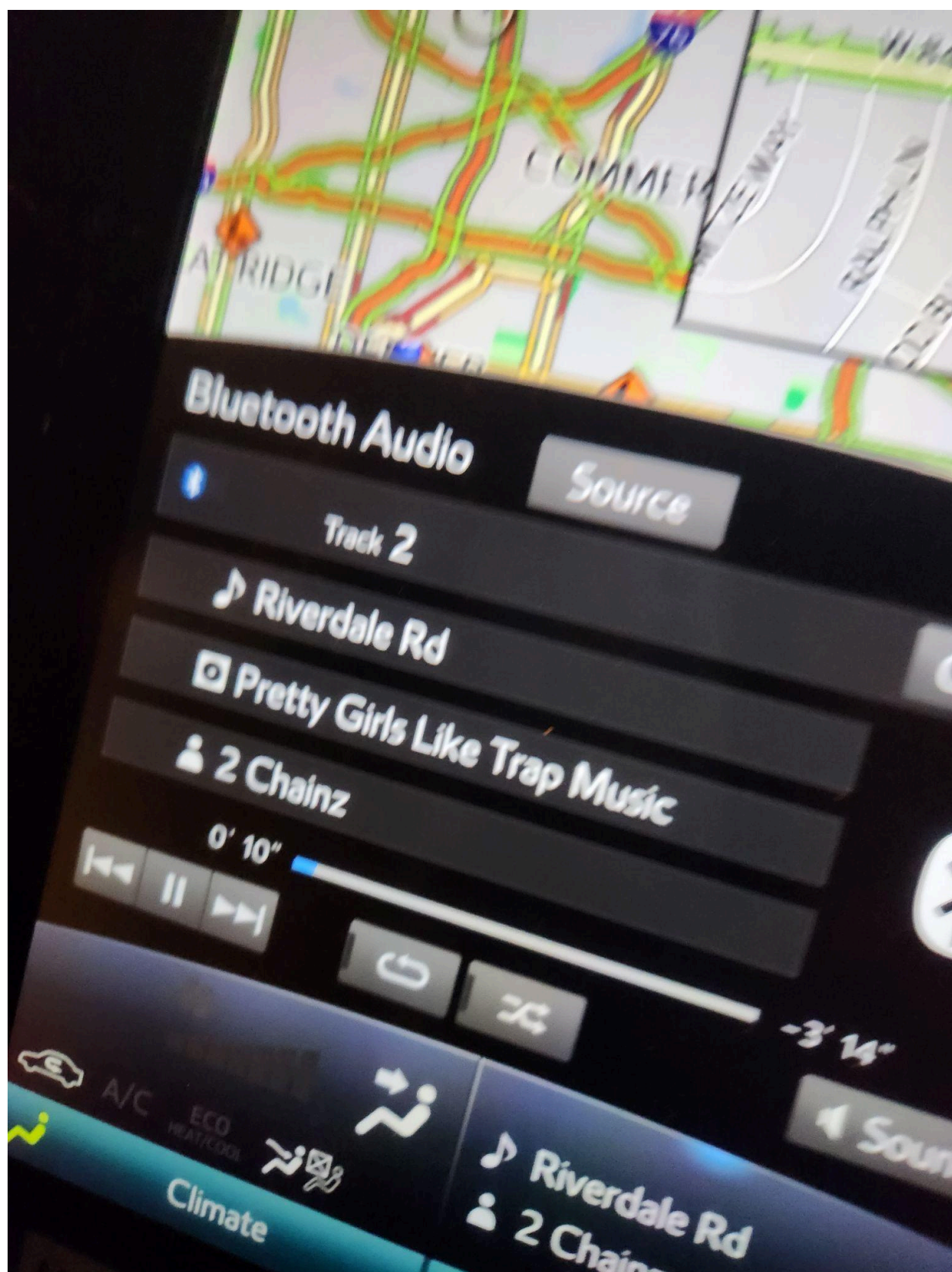
The following pictures are a portion of what I took along the way. Sadly, we did not experience any hauntings or strange occurrences but the drive itself was rather peaceful and eerie. The lack of lighting on the road and the winding turns very much add to an increasing feeling of danger and unease. It is so dark and quiet that any building, structure, or car you see along the way feels like something potentially wicked. We did play 2chainz song, “Riverdale Road” along the way (although that song is about a suburb in Atlanta, Georgia), and that added to our fun.

One of the pictures that stood out to me as I reviewed them seems to show a man pointing a flashlight, but perhaps it’s a motorcycle or a Camaro with one headlight? Either way, I do not recall taking that specific snap, and perhaps that’s as far as I’d care to go when flirting with a road that local legend describes as evil.









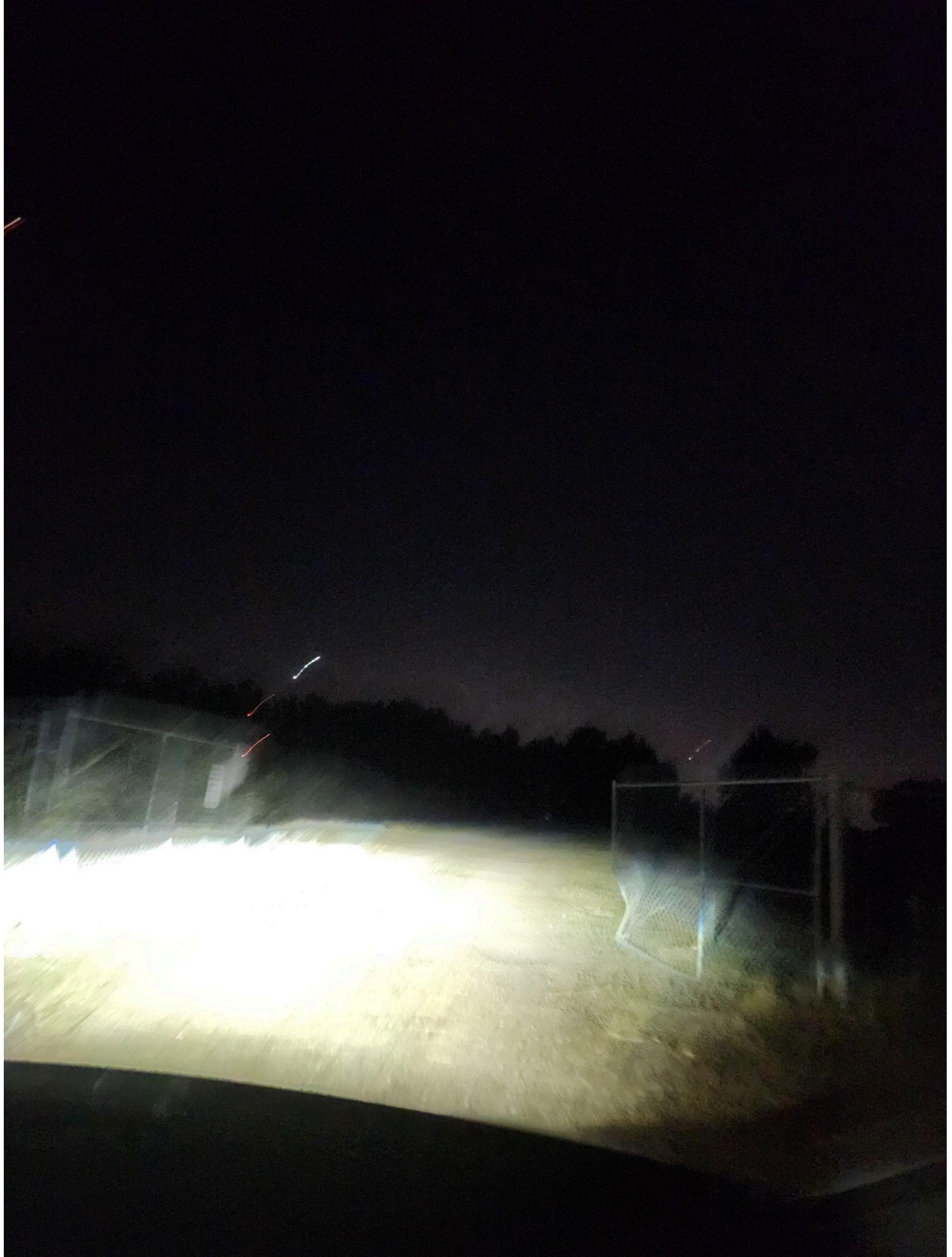










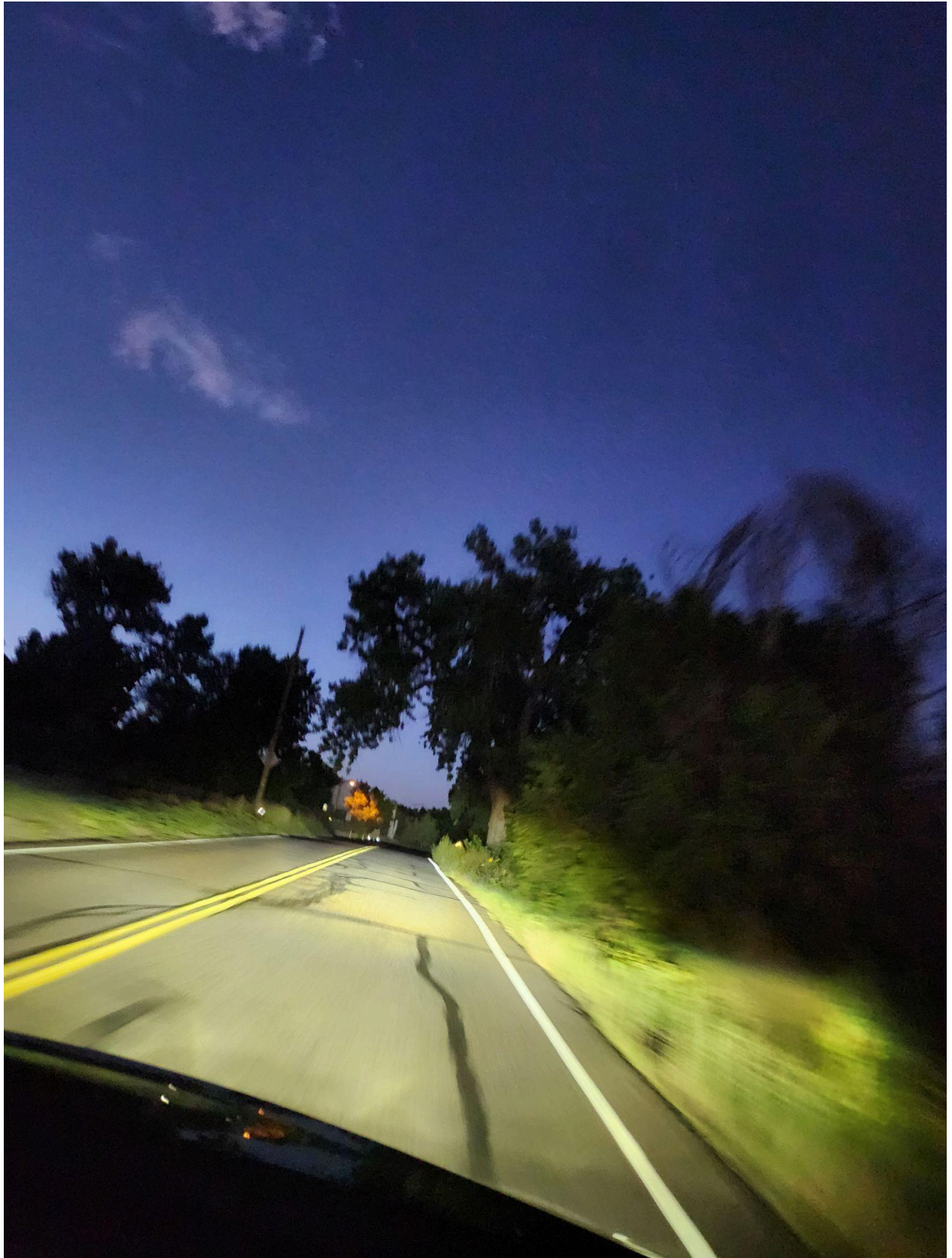












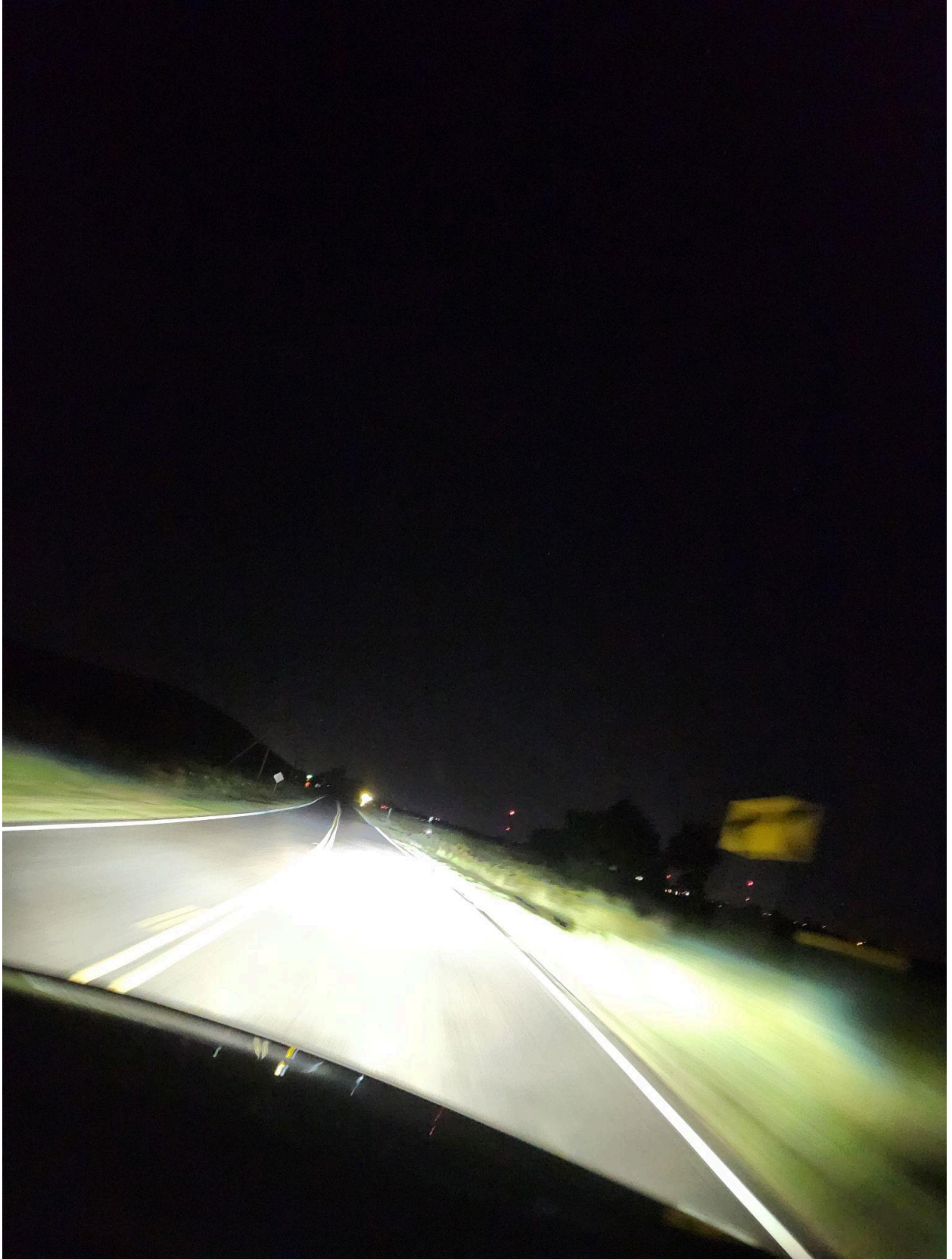




















FLASH

**The Doxey's Pool**

It had been a long, ill-tempered climb over the dragon's back of stones and heather haze onto the wide expanse of moorland. We passed hares boxing. He explained that it was the females who boxed, to ward off unwanted male attention. I felt a stab of interspecies sisterhood as I marched on behind him.

It was twilight by the time we pitched the tent, close to the edge of the pool. A still sheet of obsidian, polished and opaque. The first stars appeared in the deepening blue. A white moth fluttered at the edge of the water, as big as my hand, glowing in the dusk. An unspoken truce was declared, and we fell asleep in the tiny tent in two heat struck heartbeats.

I woke to find the tent filled with light. Outside, the moon was full, turning the world into a silver nitrate negative. A shadow passed in front of me, and a lithe animal form sank onto the grass. A hare, watching me steadily. So much bigger than I imagined. It sat completely still, as if waiting for someone. The pool did not reflect the stars or the coldly blazing moon. I dipped my sore feet into water so cold it made my bones ache. As I sat there, moon bathing, hare watching, there was a movement.

Something was coming up through the water. Her head appeared first. She was human, but not quite. Wide lilac eyes, skin brown as the peaty water of the blanket bogs. Her dark hair floated in the water, tiny silver fish darting in and out of the strands. She wore a filigree of delicate fish bones around each slender wrist, a necklace of bird and frog skulls, a moorland Kali. Lifting a slender arm out of the water she reached out to me, a trail of phosphorescence dripping from long green nails. She smiled, showing a row of sharp teeth, and I answered a question she had not voiced. Slipping out of my clothes and into the pool, the cold hit me in the chest like a fist at the same time as the terror that I would drown. She put her arms around me and started to move under the

water. She kissed me, kissed breath into me and the water became my element. We danced in the water, spiralling down into the dark as stars were born and died all around us. The pool was bottomless, there since the beginning, just as she had been. She showed me mammoths, ice sheets, small men sharpening flints, thirsty Roman legions, Beltane fires and witch burnings, she made me a crown of flag lilies and marsh marigolds bound together with reeds. All the time she smiled.

The dance slowed as the moon set. She gently pushed me back towards the banks of her pool. In the last of the moonlight, the hare bowed deeply to the Doxey and melted into the dawn. I raised my hand as she sank beneath the black water. Glancing back at the airless tent, I wondered how long the charm of a kiss could last.





*Eyeball Slushie* / Andreas Kremer

**Inhabiting the Body of a Hare**

It is a skill I keep to myself, high up on this peak land, where the ground trembles with black water below bright moss. Few people make their way to my door, and those that do ring the brass bell resent their need. Resentment can make them vicious. Tonight there are no visitors. Tonight the air is still, stars burn in constellations that are mirrors of the bog cotton that sparkles in the daylight. The fire is soft and low, filing the air with a gentle sigh, peat releasing time and memory. My chair rocks like a metronome, counting away the night, and as it tick tick ticks I go wandering.

Crouching beneath the man smell and the dog hunger, down, down, down in the sedge, working a hare magic, invisible. It is a fragile spell. The dog knows it, senses his way past my animal glamour. He pants and whines, wishes he had the gift of his master's tongue to tell him what he knows. The beam of a lamp arcs across the ground and I am running running running, tearing a way through the night. I slip through time but the dog follows me through the old paths, back through all the ancient places of our meeting. The brindle dog gives two sharp, excited barks then a deadly silence, a cloak around the intent of muscle and jaw. On the dark night bones of the hillside, the slender, shadow brindled dog seeks an audience for his master's gun.

Golden eyed I crouch, an icon of white fur and taut muscle beneath a vaulted cathedral roof of bracken. I breath, breath, breathe an incense of black earth into burning lungs. There are old gods below me, enthroned on bronze age bones and around me, swimming in the dark pools, screaming from owl beaks. My hare heart calls to them even while the rank scent of the man is carried on the wind.

By the fire I murmur, reach for a pouch of small bones and dried grass. The fire flares, and down on the hillside a shadow passes in front of the dog an ancient thing of roots and water, scented with dark silt and fish scale that sends the animal slink slink slinking, whimpering on its belly back towards the light. The shade moves through the man, snagging bog cold and ague in his stomach, trailing little boy fever dreams

through his hair. Man and dog know themselves beaten. The hillsides become quiet again, nothing walks, nothing runs.

It is a skill I keep to myself.



## Wolf Wife

There is a wolf in the corner. She has been there for ten minutes now, still and silent, topaz eyes gazing across the white tiled business of the delivery room.

The first stage was domestic, gentle even, walking in the garden, a summer afternoon hot and drowsy with bees and the gentle aloofness of a neighbour's tabby cat watching from the garden fence. The journey to the hospital uneventful, progress clinically normal as the midwife repeatedly told me as the pains grew and the clock ticked into the heat of a summer night. Stage one, stage two, ticking off measurements on charts, blood pressure, heart rate. They are kind and impersonal, while I feel myself dissolving. Not becoming but returning to something.

Pain draws a noise from deep inside an animal part of me, low and old and rasping, it hurts my throat and does not belong in this man-made space of tile and plastic. I cannot not stay still, but there is no space to walk between the chrome trolleys, the bins, beds, people. So many people. They speak about my confusion, the sweating strangeness of it, naming it, "transition stage", as if they were marking a page in a textbook. They cannot not see the walls dissolving, opening up the gap that lets in the wolf wife.

Strong and delicate, formed of silver and black shadow. She carries the scent of snow and space, blood and mating heat, echoes of wind and still, star burning nights. A smell that cuts across disinfectant dry hospital air. She pads across the room when I begin to panic because I cannot out run this pain. Opens her beautiful, bone-cracking jaws, her white teeth, and licks the back of my hand. Her tongue is as dry and rasping as a summer wind, it runs over the cannula that tethers me to the saline drip as if it were no more than a shock of dried grass.

I am running through the darkness with my sisters, all the changes in my body come to this, length and speed and strength streaming across a moonlit tundra, coming to a den, a space between rocks where I curl myself around the pain as my sisters sit in a

silent circle, and the wolf wife brings food, dripping with barely extinguished life. When the pups come, blind and hungry, she nudges them towards the milk. When the placenta comes, she lets me know that it must be consumed. When they know the pups have arrived and that they live, my sisters throw back their heads and howl with joy. The wolf wife bows her head, and they leave, a river of fur and bone, streaming away into the green pine night.

I hold my daughter, wrapped tight in a white hospital blanket. Her black hair is still streaked with our blood. I breathe her in, and catch the ghost of wind from an old, frozen plain.



**Good to the Bone**

The distal phalanges made a tapping sound on the floorboards as the skeletal hand scurried down the corridor.

It took the corner on two fingers nearly skidding into the wall, barely avoided a litter of dust bunnies under a bookcase and then came to an abrupt halt in the open doorway of a darkened room. Ahead of it lay a velvet covered couch, facing a flickering screen. Silhouetted in the light was a figure, fixated on the moving images, oblivious to any intrusion.

The hand hesitated on the threshold, almost curling itself into a fist. And then it gathered its digits together, fingering the floor beneath it, before taking a run up and launching itself towards the couch landing on the shoulder of the figure before it.

An unearthly scream echoed around the room...and then the figure hit the pause button on the remote and cut it off. Doris glanced at the hand on her shoulder.

The hand sat up on its wrist bones and looked at the figure with a meaningful arrangement of its fingers.

"Well, you were gone for so long," said Doris. "And you've seen Evil Dead 2 a few times already, so I unpaused it."

The hand tapped on her shoulder. "No, I don't need to know what sort of bonily functions you have to perform every now and then." She reached for the remote. "Fine, I'll rewind. But next time you disappear, you could at least come back with some snacks."

A disapproving gesture made Doris continue, "No, I'm not expecting you to act as my servant. But you could lend a hand every now and then."

If the hand had had a pair of eyes, it would have been rolling them vigorously, but it still managed to convey its feelings adequately.

Doris grimaced as she realised her unintentional pun. "Oh, very funny. No, I just meant that you scratch my back, and I don't put you back in the mausoleum with the rest of your skeleton."

The hand shook and seemed to try and fold in on itself. Doris regretted her words instantly as she watched it tremble. "Hey, it's okay. I didn't mean it."

She reached up with a hand, discoloured by age and almost as gaunt as the one on her shoulder. Stroking the quivering metacarpals, she said, "Shhh, I made you a promise when I caught you trying to scare me to death last year. You can stick around as long as you want to. Okay?"

The hand twisted around until it was clasping hers.

"We'll watch the rest of the movie now, yeah?"

The hand applied a little pressure.

"Fine, I'll rewind the bit you missed. But don't blame me if you have nightmares afterwards, again." She thumbed the remote control and the hand settled itself, the bones relaxing against invisible sinews.

"You spoil him, you know." The words hissed angrily from the depths of the leather wingback chair beside the fireplace.

Doris glared at the occupant, an insubstantial figure, almost translucent in the firelight. "It's no business of yours how I treat my house guests, Jasper."

"It's my house too."

"It *was* your house," snapped Doris, "Title passed to me as your widow. You're just lucky I'm letting you stay here, especially after that stunt you pulled last year, trying to have me scared to death, just so you'd have some company."

"Ten years in a mausoleum is a long time," Jaspar harumphed, and pointedly stretched out his arms, letting the sleeves of his smoking jacket ride up to reveal the stump of his right wrist. "And you've certainly extracted your pound of flesh, or should I say bone."

“You took my hand in marriage; turnabout is fair play.” Doris stroked the bony hand as gently as it had been a child. “And if you don’t like it here, you can always go back to rest of your bones in the mausoleum and haunt it instead. Your hand of course, is free to stay as long as it wants.”

“You always were a bit of a soft touch,” muttered Jasper, with almost a note of affection in his voice.

“Yes dear, why else do you think I married you. Now shush, we’re getting to the good bit.”

They fell silent as the chainsaw revved.

**I have this fantasy where I'm abducted by aliens**

Here she comes again wearing her muted innocence. Dark eyes and pale thighs glistening beneath the pub lights, shining with Moroccan coconut as she uncovers and waits for someone to bite. A girl, still dipped in uterine goo, pretending to be something she's not. Waiting for a night to end in something besides the usual suspects' harsh touches and the letting gos, the nos after nos after not tonight sirs, I'm just not in the moods. Someone good will come for me soon.

Waiting...

for my master of impurity.

Waiting...

for his delicate touch.

Waiti— there must be something else out there.

An alien might do the trick. A tribe's first setting foot on earth, stumbling through fields of the world's best pink and purple bloom, blinking in awe at Nature's children. They would find me alone, I think, outside in this field, basking under the fading glow of summer's setting sun, warm and subtle in my beauty. They would gaze upon me with blackened orbs and beam me up aboard their magical sky ride: a specimen to dissect. De-clothed and newly throned, I shall reign as their soft, pale queen of flesh — I will be adored then. Soft palms would coat my skin, foreign tongues invading as explorers of the New World they are brought to their knees, subjugated by my lifeforce. Exulted meat of the male marvelling mind, their genderless forms would pick and pry and prod, not knowing that I was fresh, not caring either. They would

worship my silver-streaked thighs like younglings at the foot of stars, careful and kind, extending their tongues to lap up my stardust.

I fear they would soon grow bored, discarding me back to earth as I am bereft of my exotic flavour. But my fantasy stops before this part and holds me in their perpetual grace, high above the minds of earthly men and fastened beneath their delicate alien touch. And now most nights, as I lie awake in bed, still in bloom, I call out through hastened breath for my abduction.



*Screamsicle* / Andreas Kremer

# INTERVIEWS



# **We Were There to Help People**

## ***Alice* Interviews Retired Navajo Rangers**

### **Jonathan Redbird Dover and Stanley Milford, Jr.**

**Cee Martinez:** Everyone, welcome. Jonathan and Stanley, I wanna thank you for agreeing to do this interview.

**Fox Henry Frazier:** Hi, I'm Fox. It's nice to meet you both. I co-founded and co-edit *Alice* with Cee.

**CM:** I'm super excited for this interview. Please introduce yourselves and let our readers know who you are.

**Jonathan Redbird Dover:** I'm Jonathan Redbird Dover and I'm retired from the Navajo Nation Rangers. I did 31 years in law enforcement with the Rangers and with Winslow, Arizona Police Department.

I was the last Ranger to be exchanged with the National Park Service, doing a law enforcement technician's job. And I worked with the Navajo Historic Preservation Department. And I'm fully retired now at this point.

**Stanley Milford, Jr.:** My name is Stanley Milford, Junior. I served as a sergeant with the Department of Resource enforcement of the Navajo Rangers. About 23 years. I worked probably another 7 or 8 years under the Parks and Recreation Department. In the last 2 years of my career, I served as a delegated Chief Ranger with the Department.

During those years I worked S.W.A.T, I worked as part of a drug and gang task force. I was also commissioned as another police officer during that time, but I also during those years was assigned to what was called "special projects". That's where I work directly with John in a wide range of different enforcement capacities, dignitary protection and securing things like motion picture sets, production sets and filming of videos for bands.



**CM:** Excellent. I first saw you on the *Unsolved Mysteries* episode, and it blew my mind. The mention of the paranormal, the Skinwalkers, Bigfoot!

**JRD:** Well, growing up. There was always an interest in the subject of UFOs. You know. I read books voraciously when I was young, and of course read comic books and everything else; grew up watching TV and got to see all the fifties and early sixties science fiction films. However, when I got into law enforcement. Everything became very, very serious.

I was a technical accident investigator. So, I got to do mathematical formulas, and speed formulas to figure out how fast people were going prior to an accident.

I went through a criminal investigation school, and in all those disciplines what they teach you in investigations is that you don't start off with a preconceived idea. You look at all of the evidence in an accident investigation. You look at skid marks, the evidence on the roadway, and you develop, based on your experience and your training and your feelings on what happened, based on the evidence. Then you start talking to witnesses.

Then you can start putting all your formulas together, your vault formulas, your combined speed formulas, crush damage, gravity, acceleration, everything else. And you finally arrive at what happened.

We weren't going to judge. We weren't gonna just jump right out there and say, oh, this is a UFO case, you know, "I believe."

Belief has this idea that it's based on faith, on something you cannot see. Whereas for us, we're having to collect evidence with the idea that this could be presented in a court of law. But there's a few that are anomalous. and that you can't fit into those categories.

**SMJ:** You know, today you can't turn on the news without hearing issues with law enforcement agencies and the conduct of their officers in unprofessional manner, and the acts that they are doing out there. And so, when John and I worked under the special projects unit, our chief at that time, his view was that we were there to help people. He felt that you know, we're there to serve the Navajo people and the people of the reservation. So even if it was something involving what's referred to as a BigFoot or a

UFO, or different phenomenon that would fall under that umbrella “paranormal,” we were still gonna respond, and we were going to do the best we could to help those people.

**CM:** Excellent. So, I mean helping, you know, that's the ideal, I think, whether it's paranormal investigation or law enforcement. I wish more people were like that.

**SMJ.:** There's a saying of “the thin blue line,” which basically separates law enforcement from the civilian sector, and John and I never looked at ourselves as being above the civilian population. We considered ourselves civilians too, but we are commissioned with a duty and responsibility to serve the public, and not talk down to them, not to be badge heavy or gun heavy, or whatever it might be.

**FHF:** I know from Cee and from *Unsolved Mysteries* that you do paranormal investigations that have a physical component — UFOs, Bigfoot. Do you take any cases that have a more spiritual component, like ghost-type stuff? Or is it all pretty physical?

**SMJ:** One thing I'd like to clarify is that today John and I are retired. I retired in May of this year, and John retired back in 2011. Today, John and I still will assist people when they're having various paranormal or supernatural-related problems, but not in a law enforcement capacity. We're no longer commissioned. We no longer have any law enforcement authority, or anything of that nature.

But going back to your specific question, at the time that we did these investigations. Yeah, there were cases involving hauntings and witchcraft, and also shape-shifting.

We tried to rule out the normal or existing natural phenomenon that could seem paranormal in nature, and sometimes it was a natural phenomenon that was occurring or could be explained by somebody's actions. But if it was something like a haunting, we would turn to our resources, who were like medicine men and spiritual healers, to try to have them use their expertise to help that individual to resolve whatever it is that was going on. John and I never tried to play the role of medicine man and that type of thing.

**JRD:** Yeah. One of the things that I'd like to clarify, too, is when we say “witchcraft,” we are not referring to Wiccans, and we're not talking about “good witches” and “bad

witches.” We are referring mainly to the traditional Navajo witch, for lack of a better term.

Now, also, these cases represent less than 1% of our duties that we were engaged in.

You know that we joke about being “volun-*told*”, but in our personal lives me and Stan don't get together and say, “Let's go to the Queen Mary, and see if we can see some ghosts.” We don't go out there and hunt for any of this stuff. It gets assigned to us, or it just happens to us.

**FHF:** When you got a call about a UFO or a Bigfoot sighting, were those ever more interesting to you than some of the other types of cases that you worked more regularly?

**JRD:** Well, the cases — some of them are what we call “Fly-Bys,” where somebody will say “I saw a UFO up over here, and it went over here and disappeared,” and there's not much you can do aside from just take the information down. Whereas there are other cases that are much, much more interesting.

There's one thing that should be brought up, too. There's an old saying that says, “Can you look at a situation without naming it?” Making it a word causes fear.

Stan's actually had something come up to him, a ghost of some kind, run its finger over his lip. Back and forth. He said he could feel it, but he didn't react to it. We found out early-on in a haunting case, if you react to something and you show that fear, it can feed off that fear, and it can manifest even more.

And in order to be objective professionals, you can't have that intrude. You see on TV, these guys going, “Oh, my God! Oh, my God!” And start running around. It looks good on TV. But If you come with us, it's gonna be real boring because things are gonna happen, and we're not going to react to it.

**CM:** I think Stan you once mentioned a doppelgänger case. I would love to hear more about that. I've never heard anyone mention that in real life.

**SMJ:** I was working in office space. My particular workstation was downstairs, what would be basically a basement. And within that facility the computer servers were located in that downstairs basement area. Guy had his office in there, and him and I were good friends.

So, on that particular day it was around 10:30, he came down these stairs and passed by my workstation, and went to his little office in the middle, and said, "Hello!" He went to his office, and I left and went upstairs. Well, as I got upstairs, I was starting to go out the front door, and there he was walking in the building again. I stopped, and I froze, and I was like, "What the hell? I just passed you downstairs." And he went in the office but he didn't go downstairs the way the other individual had, and he went to the other part of the building. I went directly back downstairs, and he was there, and I explained to him what I had just experienced. It kind of freaked him out, too, and we went up and we looked around the office space to see if that individual, you know the other copy of him, was there. But it wasn't. It was a unique experience.

That was my experience with the doppelgänger. I tried to look at it from different angles. Did I misperceive something? I ruled out any of that.

**CM:** Do you think there's perhaps a veil between dimensions, or that there's a bigger universe out there other than us, like just our physical fold?

**SMJ:** Well, I think for me, you know John and I are very clear in the work we've done over the span of those years, and even till today that we do ascribe to this idea of dimensions very strongly. We feel that that's what accounts for a lot, if not all of these different types of phenomena, whether it's spirits or ghosts, and UFOs and Bigfoot. We don't follow the idea that BigFoot lives out there in the forest. There's just no credible evidence we've seen to prove that.

But yeah well, in String Theory, there could be 10 or 12 different additional dimensions, or there could be an infinite number of other dimensions.

**JRD:** And the jury's still out. However, there is research being done on the idea of dimensions. About 10 years ago the large Hadron Collider actually conducted an experiment where they were trying to open a dimensional gate and send a message

through. Which I think is a really bad idea, because in military terms they tell you, “never draw fire on your own position”.

We like to think of dimensions as these walls next to each other that you penetrate through the wall and get to another dimension but that's just our linear thinking. I look at dimensions more like a cloud that can intermix with each other, and every now and then these little gaps open up and things pop through. We've had people talk about pterodactyls appearing in the sky. We had one of our rangers that had a background in wildlife biology tell us he saw what he described as a Thunderbird, which was a bird that had a forty foot wingspan. You know, I'd love to find a bird like that. I want one of those feathers.

I've had numerous people report to me on the new lands that they've had. Eagles come down and grab an adult sheep and fly off with it. In my personal experience with eagles, I've handled them in my arms. An eagle cannot pick up an adult sheep. This indicates to me that there is something a lot bigger than what is normally described. It just makes you realize that it's a much, much bigger world than even we think.

**FHF:** Are there any cases that feel memorable to you? Maybe even one where you think there could have been more to uncover somehow.

**JRD:** Probably one of the most memorable ones that I can think of offhand is a case involving a woman who — in law enforcement, we classify them as EDPs — Emotionally Disturbed People. And we know today that law enforcement has a big problem with identifying EDPs, in some cases they end up shooting them or injuring them in some way, because they don't know how to deal with a person like that. We had a woman that called the Department. Nobody would help her and so she called us, and of course me and Stan got the dispatch and went over there and talked to her.

Her complaint was that Navajo witches were coming to her hogan, her house, and putting curses on her, and leaving little medicine bundles for her to discover, I guess as a warning that she needed to leave.

Instead of you know, immediately saying, “Oh, she's crazy!” — we looked at the facts. We took a look at what she was being administered as far as medications. We asked her

a whole series of questions, you know. Did she use illicit drugs? Did she use alcohol? Pretty embarrassing questions, sometimes. We determined that she was seeing something, but we didn't know what it was. So, both me and Stan, we tracked.

And when you say track, it's not like you see on TV, you know, look at the ground and go, "Oh, yeah, man, you know six foot tall, weighs a hundred eighty pounds, and this is how he speaks." I can remember seeing episodes of *The Lone Ranger* when I was small, and how Tonto would put his ear to the railroad track and say, "You know yeah, there's a train coming, you know, 6 cars." We do combat tracking. We found the medicine bundles. We photographed them and we found footprints that were not her prints and we started cataloging which ones were which. We came up with 6 to 7 separate individuals.

So, we track these individuals and they all converged on a little trail that went down on the other side of the ridge and down the slope. We found where they had all gathered together and were standing in a circle. What we determined was that these were the local drunks in town. She had come back and inherited this house from her mother and started living there and she took away their crash pad.

This is where they would spend all day begging for money, you know. When she took over that house they lost their roof. So, they were trying to drive her out. And so, we told her this. And we said, "These are just normal people."

So at the end we told her, "This is nothing to worry about. They're not gonna harm you with any witchcraft." And you know she thanked us. Later on, about a month later, the dispatcher said that this lady had called the department again, crying on the phone. And she basically said, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for helping me because nobody else would listen." And she told the dispatcher that her house was repaired, windows were in, the door was on, and she was having no more problems with this type of situation.

To get that kind of feedback was really nice. And we've had other people come up to us, after we've done our talks. In one case a grandmother that was in her late eighties had tears coming down her face, and she was thanking us because she had experiences when she was small, and she just wanted to thank us for speaking up. And her kids, her

grandkids, her great-grandkids, were all standing round her with their jaws hanging on the floor, because they had never heard her talk about these stories. And imagine you know you're in your late eighties keeping this information bottled up inside you all those years, that you had a real extraordinary experience with UFOs when you were small and you could never tell anybody.

**CM:** If you're comfortable talking about this — if you're not, then you don't have to — but you had mentioned that you thought maybe the military were sometimes interested in your investigations, especially pertaining to Skinwalkers.

**JRD:** People show up at our talks, and they would show up, obviously military, sitting way in the back with clipboards, and they'd be furiously taking notes as we were speaking. Just before we finished they'd get up and head out the exit. So as a result of that, we now give a shout out to any military people that are there, because Indian tribes have a long history of distrust of the military even though our people are more likely to join the military. You know, it's just one of those weird things, we're a warrior society, and so the military is a way to express that. But yeah, I really think that the military is interested, because if you were able to train soldiers how to shape-shift into an animal and go behind enemy lines, wouldn't that be terrifying?

I've actually interviewed people that were former Skinwalkers and they have told me that when you change that there's a shift and everything speeds up in your body. Your thoughts change. You no longer think like a human. You're now thinking animalistic. So it's not this thought process of "I'm gonna go do this, or I'm gonna go do that". They can go terrorize whole regions when they're in an animal form. So, there's a lot that we don't understand and it's not something to play with. I hate to think of what the military would do with an actual Skinwalker.

What I've seen in petroglyphs is that there is a wide, wide range of other unearthly figures that are in these, some of them with 3 fingers, some with 4 fingers. We're considered the 5 Fingered people. These are a lot of times depictions of gods or beings that they've had contact with. And in the case of the Hopis, just as one example, they're Kachinas, represent different gods and they have 250 to 350 different Kachinas. The Kachina was actually designed to give to a child so that they could hold it in their hands and see the colors, see the headdress and know what particular God that was.

Imagine if you were able to access dimensional gates for a thousand years, with an infinite number of dimensions. We don't have that ability any more to access those gates. And that's because the religious leaders of the Hopis, along with a lot of other tribes, were killed. When the Spanish came, they decimated the villages. They destroyed the Kivas, and they built the Catholic church right on top of Kiva. So, a lot of the priests that were in the kivas were executed. And I think that the ancients, the ancient Anasazi cliff dwellers, the ancient Navajos, the ancient Hopis. They all had the ability with their priests to access these other dimensions. And we just don't know how.

You know we advise people in our talks not to play with Ouija boards. We've been told by other people that these are portals. And they're unfiltered portals. So, there's no guarantee of what you're going to get coming through this portal and it can damage your life and take control of some things, so we do it as a public service announcement.

**SMJ:** The thing I understand with the Navajo Skinwalker is that these are directly associated to where people are using witchcraft as a means to affect others in a negative manner, placing curses on individuals, or directly harming them. So, I've never heard of, in modern Navajo history, of people using that ability in a positive manner. And we've learned that there's ways of protecting yourself from those curses and from being harmed. And it's just a matter of accessing somebody who is familiar with those practices and can teach you and show you, and or perform ceremonies to protect you.

**CM:** I had a fear of the Thunderbird from hearing there was that famous case in the seventies, where a little boy was almost carried off his yard by a large bird. To this day he has scars on his head. The police didn't believe him. The town didn't believe him, and it's like, if only he had people like you who would listen to the story. You know, creatures from thousands or millions of years ago. Do we get that intersection happening?

**SMJ:** One of the things is that we tend to as human beings look at time in a linear fashion from point A to Point B, and when you hear a lot of different theories over the course of time there are people who feel that that's not the case. It can be more like that of a cassette tape that was played back in the day where it can be moved forward or moved backward. I mean from here on this little planet, you know, it's like being a grain



of sand on Bondi Beach, you know, in Australia. And so, this idea that we're the only species of being — to me, that's ludicrous. And the fact is that we do have fossilized evidence that these creatures and dinosaurs existed at one time.

**FHF:** Was there ever a situation where you had the kind of moment where it was — like, where you just couldn't help but be a little bit surprised, or shaken out of your normal, everyday mindset?

**SMJ:** Speaking for myself — the average American gets up, gets ready for work, goes to work, spends their day there and comes home. We're almost on autopilot. And if you consider how many people have occupied this little planet we're walking on now, each one of those individuals that have been here and passed on, they all had a spirit. They all had a life force. So just because physically, their body is no longer here, it doesn't mean that their spirits are not still here. As a child, I was in tune to that. So, there was never that moment where I was shocked and afraid of those things.

There was times when we stepped back after a big case, and we're like, you know, "Holy shit! That was crazy!" But I think in the moment we tried to maintain what it is we needed to do to reach that objective. Now I'll let John speak on his behalf.

**JRD:** I think the only time I can remember being really surprised and even shocked was probably the first time that I got shot at. The guy had a .22 rifle. He was shooting from a distance of maybe 250 to 300 yards away. I was hearing these snapping sounds going past my ears on both sides. You know just, this sonic crack. After about 6 or 7 of these went by me it occurred to me that somebody was shooting at me. I actually did what in the military they call "assault into the ambush." I drove straight toward where I thought the shots were coming from by the Little Colorado River and started to hunt for this person. I think I was so upset. I was gonna find him. I was gonna shoot back at him.

**CM:** Did you find him?

**JRD:** I didn't find him. I found his footprints. He was back in the brush, and after a while common sense came to my rescue and said, "You know what? That's enough." And so, I got back. But it was very surprising, just this initial shock realizing that this

badge I'm wearing isn't protecting me. I guess it was a good life lesson, because after that I would be able to take cover rather quickly after that.

**CM:** you know when they saw you coming after them, and you probably had a face like my angry mom gets, they probably booked it fast.

**JRD:** Nothing paranormal about that. But I'm just glad that he wasn't a good shot. But yeah, that was the only time that I really was shocked.

**CM:** Do you have anything you'd like us to talk about? Any future projects you want to plug or let us know if there's anything in the future to look forward to.

**SMJ:** I am working on a book, and I know John is, too, and someday soon we'll be able to tell you that we have completed that book. Mine should be out, I think, sometime next year, within the first quarter of next year, sometime.

**CM:** Can't wait.

**JRD:** Yeah, and mine's a little bit more lengthy. I think 47 or 48 chapters so far, so it's taking a little more time. We've got other projects in the works, but nothing we can talk about right now. Hopefully they'll be good ones.

**SMJ:** You know, the greatest thing is being out there and sitting down and talking to people. If you looked globally, you'd probably be hard pressed to find a single family that doesn't have a family member somewhere in there, or in their past that has not had some type of supernatural, paranormal and or experience in witnessing a UFO, or extraterrestrial, or something of that nature.

**CM:** True.

**FHF:** Great. Well, thank you both so much.

**SMJ:** Glad to be a part of this. It was nice meeting both of you.

## **They Come To The Surface Later**

### ***Alice* Interviews Folklorist Dr. Elizabeth Tucker**

**Fox Henry Frazier:** Hi, Libby! Thanks for joining us for a chat, for the spooky 5th issue of *Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself*.

**Cee Martinez:** Yes, thanks for being here. It's nice to meet you.

**Libby Tucker:** Thanks for inviting me! I think the title of your magazine is really great.

**CM:** Thanks!

**FHF:** I just called you Libby because I've known you for a long time, but I should be introducing you as Dr. Elizabeth Tucker, Distinguished Service Professor of Literature. And your specialty area is folklore, particularly folklore of the supernatural — can you tell us a little about it?

**LT:** Yes, that's right. I'm originally from Colorado Springs, and I teach at Binghamton University.

**CM:** Oh, I'm from Denver! So, being from Colorado Springs, you must know about Alferd Packer?

**LT:** Yes! Yes, I do know that story.

**FHF:** I'm *not* from Colorado! [laughs] He was a cannibal, right?

**CM:** Yes! Alferd Packer is the Colorado version of the Donner Party — he ate his traveling buddies when they got stranded. Got out of prison on good behavior and is now buried in Littleton, where everyone puts pennies on his grave. Colorado schoolkids hold him in an almost cult-like status — we didn't have smartphones to make our lore go viral, but when I was a kid *everyone* knew about Alferd Packer.

And another legend we had — well, we were all dying to visit the state capitol on a field trip. Our teachers thought we actually wanted to learn! But in actuality, there's a crack on the Denver capitol building steps, which kids in Colorado whispered about as being from a suicide. And it made us all giddy to see this crack in the steps, in person, for ourselves.

It's said that a man named Benton Field Marshall threw himself off the balcony above the steps. His suicide note was addressed to "Baby Doe" — Baby Doe Tabor was a Colorado socialite. She was, like, the prototype of a Kardashian. *But!* She died poor and froze to death in the 1930s, and her tale is yet *another* urban legend amongst Colorado kids . . . yeah, it's like the *Inception* of urban legends.

**LT:** You know, while we've been chatting — I was able to quickly verify that a University of Colorado dining hall is named after Alferd Packer! [everyone laughs] They kept that name despite some controversy — some of the administrators were disgusted by it, I think. But I think it's great. The students are very proud of it — they feel it's something iconic.

**CM:** That is iconic!

**FHF:** That is great. And speaking of regional lore — are there any legends in upstate New York that you are particularly drawn to? I came to your work as an adult through your writing on the Woman in White, including the local one here near Owego, at Devil's Elbow.

**LT:** Oh, wonderful! I have always felt drawn to the lore and legends of university and college campuses. When I wrote my book, *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses*, I found that there are amazing legends around New York State that are told primarily on the college campuses, but sometimes bleed out to the local area; or sometimes things in the local area come into the campus and become part of the stories that are told. I really enjoyed researching that Woman in White legend, of which we have a variant right here.

The idea of the young woman who is waiting to be picked up — she needs a ride to get home, and she's usually there on the anniversary of a tragic accident that killed her.

Either she's a prom queen or she's a young Victorian girl paying calls with her little card case.

**FHF:** In the 1930s, some construction workers building a railway found the skull of a young woman. Nobody knows exactly what happened to her, but there was a tavern very nearby where her remains were found — seems as though she would have lived in the 1890s or so — and it's been documented that she seems to likely have been walking to or from that tavern. And that's near Devil's Elbow, where people have been seeing the Woman in White just about forever.

**LT:** Yes, Gerald Smith wrote a chapter of his Broome County history about the discovery of the skull, and the speculation that this might have been some sort of tragedy that happened related to people drinking too much at a little roadhouse that stood on at a dangerous curve, Devil's Elbow on Route 17.

I don't think they ever will fully know what happened — but it's an actual murder, and definitely fits the profile of this kind of legend. It kind of adds fuel to the flames, that something tragic did happen here. And it could help to explain why the ghost stands by, warning motorists.

I think there are topics that our educational systems struggle to deal with in a truthful way — systemic violence against women and people of color, the genocide perpetrated against Native people — and on, and on. Legends deal with these topics better in some ways, because they tell it as it is. You know, they explain that this tragic event took place, these deaths happened, and that there's a constant, recurring reminder that this took place so that nobody should be allowed to forget that — and they don't forget the legend or story, they repeat it. Many legends come from a sense of guilt about collective wrongs of the past, systemic forms of oppression where some people are still benefiting from it today. Many legends are all about justice.

**CM:** The seed for most 1980s horror films is that the people running around getting slaughtered are usually being punished for a past crime — like, in *Friday the 13th*, it was Jason's mom laying punishment on sexy teens everywhere because her son had drowned. And the kids repeat the thing, and the legend comes back around. Have you ever considered the way horror movies are built, and how they match up with folklore?

**LT:** Definitely. What a great thing to bring up. In fact, I was just talking with a reporter from *Atlas Obscura* earlier today. She's writing an article about the poisoned candy in trick-or-treat legends. I was telling her about some of the movies I know, like *Trick 'r Treat*, have you seen that one? It's quite well made, I think.

In it, we see a very complex coming together of current events, fears about current events, past history, things that we know have happened, and then this wild and crazy movie that mixes all these legends and history. For example, the legend about strangers randomly poisoning trick-or-treaters with poison candy. This is one of the iconic stranger-danger legends, because it portrays strangers as being sadistic and horrible towards children that they've never even gotten to know. But there's never been a proven case of any stranger deliberately putting poison into trick-or-treat candy. There was a case in 1974 of a man who poisoned his own son and tried to poison his other children with pixie sticks: his little boy died, and he tried to cash in the life insurance. And luckily they figured it out. But it was his own child, and he was trying to get money. So this was not a case of stranger danger.

But there are many legends about children's vulnerability, children. They're very precious, and they need protection; especially very young children who don't know how to navigate the world without help.

**CM:** Did you ever see the film *Dracula A.D.*? It's an old Hammer film, and Christopher Lee is the prettiest Dracula ever! It was based on the Satanic Panic — they set Dracula into 1972, when kids conjured him in a cemetery. But it's based on the Highgate Cemetery panic that happened in the late 1960s-early 1970s, in London. it's kind of amusing to watch this very real fear that's always like, *How dare you, sexy teens! Stop being sexy!* You know? They went out, went into the cemetery, did their conjuring, Dracula bites everyone with the heaving bosoms. And it's like, you know, cautionary.

**LT:** This kind of fear about young people and what could happen to them, or what danger they might unwittingly find themselves in — it is just hugely potent. And any of us who have little children or little grandchildren, or both — you know, we especially don't want to take any chances with precious little kids.

You know, if you hear something — even something off-the-wall, like, there are gonna be witches or Satanists in a graveyard on Halloween, they're gonna be sacrificing children. If you take it seriously, you could think, *Well, okay, it seems extremely unlikely that any nice Wiccans would be doing such a thing.* But could it be malicious people who are just angry at the world, intent on harming children? Like adults who commit school shootings? Nobody's going to take chances with *that*.

**FHF:** I think legends about people harming children, or the threat of that, serves a primal function — I've observed it in mommy groups, where if one mom warns her mom-friends about a potential danger to their children, there's this very quick, unifying thing that happens, where all the mama bears, all at once, are ready to protect not just their own kid, but *everyone's* kids in the group.

It's like a way of the community reassuring or reminding itself that it's a community — all of us protecting all of our kids, against anyone who might want to hurt them. So I think maybe some legends are a way that adults also kind of reassure themselves and each other that we're all going to protect all the kids. Because children surviving is our biological imperative. It's more important than adults surviving.

**LT:** It is, and I think that that may show that it's something that's in our genome that goes back to prehistory. When people in the tribe or in the group village had to watch out for all of the children. Keeping everybody safe was a very, very high priority.

**CM:** I don't have children, but I teach children, and I think legends like this can also be a way to try to convince children to police themselves. You know, because we can't watch them 24/7, and sometimes we don't know what their babysitters or teachers or authorities are up to — so maybe we're trying to tell our kids and teenagers, *Please — you don't want this happening to you! — come on, police yourself,* you know?

**LT:** Yes, I agree; I like what you've just said, there. When I was collecting legends on college campuses, I learned — the more stories I got — that these legends were like morality plays, or teaching young adults how to live safely. It makes the ghost stories seem more boring, in a way — some characters in the stories drink too much, or have too much sex, or don't study and then end up gobbling caffeine pills and collapsing into

water and drowning. And they don't make it. So from the stories you learn what not to do — how to set your own limits and how to be safe.

**FHF:** Are there any other types of ghost stories or legends on the Binghamton campus in particular, that you find interesting?

**LT:** Yes, there are so many. I have the benefit of working with Binghamton University students every week, and they're so bright and so motivated and creative and curious. One of my favorite legends that is circulating now, and has been for a number of years, is about the gigantic shadow people that hunt the nature preserve, and they're supposed to appear when you've just crossed the bridge over the pond. and you're just starting to go up the little incline up the hill a little bit there.

I've heard a number of students, mainly freshmen, say that they were out late at night with their friends, which a lot of our students like to do. Go out and be in nature very late, very early, and they just sort of slammed right into this big dark shadow, about 8 feet tall. And they've all said they knew it was male, though they didn't know *how* they knew it was male. And it felt very hostile, blowing them right back — in the opposite direction, towards the civilized part of campus. So many students have talked to me about this, especially freshmen — and a number of them, especially the guys, I think usually wouldn't usually want to admit to being scared, much less feeling terrified and running away. But they have all agreed in their different versions of this narrative that this felt dangerous to them. It felt real. And they didn't know what it was.

There is a Native legend, up in the Adirondacks, and that seems to mirror this kind of story in some ways. And it's also interesting to hear that many people around the world talk about perceiving shadows one way or another — just seeing them out of the corner of their eye, getting a sense that they're not alone. These are often very large, shadowy figures in those kinds of anecdotes. People have wondered whether there might be a parallel world of shadow. Or, following Plato's cave, are we the shadows? Are the shadows reflections of others? You know, it's kind of interesting to think about.

**CM:** I've seen shadow people quite frequently ever since I was a small child, in sleep paralysis. And I still see them — so often that, as an adult, I'm no longer scared of them. I'm more annoyed — like, *OK, you're hunting me. Let's get this over with so I can go to sleep.*



I always see them manifest in doorways. So I like doors closed when I sleep, cause if it's open, I'm going to see them standing in the doorway, or sometimes over my bed, and sometimes they're wearing hats — like, top hats. They terrorized me as a child, but to this day they haven't physically harmed me. So I'm like, *OK, it's not going to hurt me. It's just annoying.* So I'm really interested in hearing about the shadow people.

**LT:** That's so interesting — and it's wonderful that you found a way to control it so that it doesn't scare you anymore. I know that would be really disturbing.

**CM:** When I was a child, I thought demons were coming after me — that I was a bad child, that I should pray more. I had a lot of guilt, like, *How am I inviting them into my life?* And now — even though I still believe in the spiritual world, and I fear it greatly — learning about sleep paralysis solved 80% of my problem. Because, reading upon it, I was like, *Oh, my goodness, this is everything I'm going through. That's what it is. It's science.* You know? So then I felt a lot better.

**LT:** Do you see these things just when you experience sleep paralysis?

**CM:** No — I would say sometimes when I'm awake, too. Always at other people's houses, not my own. It'll be, like, a shadow out of the corner, or a [shadow] cat running over my feet.

**FHF:** Oh — I've seen the cat, too. Libby, do you have any experiences that could be considered ghost-story-adjacent — or even ghost stories proper?

**LT:** Oh, sure. I've had a very modest number of experiences related to sleep paralysis — I think it's one thing that many of us share. It's a biological phenomenon, as we were discussing before, and when I was a child living in Japan [during episodes of sleep paralysis] I would see a fox — very large, adult-sized, bright orange fox that was sitting next to me, and I couldn't move. It was just frozen to the spot — terrified. And I eventually became afraid to go to sleep, because I didn't want that fox spirit to get me. Years later, when I became a folklorist, I looked up Japanese fox spirits and saw they're both guardians and tricksters. And for a fox figure that appeared in my childhood dreams in Japan, well, that works pretty well. I've also seen, in sleep paralysis, an older

version of myself coming at me, wearing an old coat, trying to give me a hug — it was scary.

When I was 5 years old, I once saw a head — this wasn't sleep paralysis — I saw an old man's head, just sort of hanging in the air for a couple of minutes, and that really mystified me. I didn't talk to anybody about it for years, because I didn't have the words for it. I wasn't scared, but I just knew, like, *Oh, this is different, isn't it*. A different kind of communication, but not threatening, not worrisome. I just wanted to find out more about what it meant.

But yes, these experiences did make the things in the world that we can't explain rationally seem more appealing and important. Especially the invisibility of it, when something strange like that happens. You haven't even learned a vocabulary to describe it — well, maybe it's easier now for kids. I hope so. But at that time, for me, they weren't things I knew how to articulate.

**CM:** Going back to the Woman in White — my mom and her siblings grew up in rural Texas in the fifties and sixties and seventies. There were fourteen of them, and so their mom, my grandma, wasn't going to keep all 14 of them home all day in the summers and stuff. They were running all over the countryside, you know, coming home for dinner — and they talked of La Llorona.

**LT:** And she's a woman in white. Yes.

**CM:** Yes — she's always crying by the riverside, and she's always wearing white. It made me think — there are different forms of this legend, too, of women in wedding dresses, women in nightgowns, some sort of white gown or dress — and they're either looking for a husband or a child.

**LT:** So I wonder if it's that secret fear of losing a child, or not attaining the husband-and-child fairy tale, you know? Maybe. Yeah, I think that's part of it. But also that helps me to fill in a piece of what I should have mentioned, Fox, when you asked me about legends of upstate New York that I think are important—

There are a number of places around this state — mostly in the Hudson Valley area or Long Island — places that teenagers call Mary's Grave. And this is connected with the Woman in White, because the story in different variant versions is that there's a woman who was brutalized in some way — maybe by her father, maybe by a group of men — and she gives birth to a baby. And then, in despair, she kills the baby — and, whoever the baby's father is, in each story, she kills him too. But then she wanders around the area weeping, begging somebody to help her find her baby because she misses her. And it's a very important legend.

The number of places called Mary's Grave that you find around the United States is really pretty remarkable — not just in New York State. And they certainly speak to the horror of violence against women, and the despair that women can feel, especially after a violent encounter. And then there's a baby, and then what do you do? How do you go on with your life?

So I think we need to acknowledge and recognize those legends and try to understand them better. I think the most famous Mary's Grave legend in New York is at Head of the Harbor. You can find pictures of it online. There are 2 little towers there, and there are different versions of how teenagers go to try to find Mary and ask her what happened with her baby.

Teenagers have a thirst to understand complicated history and stories that are difficult to tell, stories that nobody really wants them to tell. Young people have a quest for understanding and justice that really makes a difference.

**CM:** Yeah. That's probably also a reflection of how prevalent that sort of abuse is. There's this idea that everyone is safe and sound in the suburbs. These stories remind us that no matter how we try to hide it, the world is scary. It comes out, you know, whether it's in our tales, or whether in these sightings — these manifestations are real, you know? And secrets don't stay secret.

**LT:** Absolutely. And then they come out more explosively and painfully, because they've been held back.

**CM:** You know, one night when I couldn't sleep and was playing on YouTube, I ran across this vintage interview that was done in the 1970s, with this elderly woman who was probably close to a hundred. She was talking about when she was a child — how she witnessed another girl, who was about 14 years old and pregnant, being forced to give away her child. Her name was Emmaline, and she lived in Maine. I don't want to take up too much time, but if you look up her story and go down the rabbit hole, it's a complete Mary's Grave story — and it's possibly true — but without the ghosts. It's just the story of how a town can gather together and judge someone.

**LT:** Thank you for telling me about that. Wow.

**FHF:** I find that story heartbreaking. Which actually makes me think of this weird thing Cee and I have in common: when the movie *When A Stranger Calls* came out — this was back in the aughts, and we didn't know each other — we both had things happen in our lives that made us very, very sad and upset, and we both opted to go see that movie in the theater specifically so we would feel scared instead of sad. I feel that tension in some of these legends, too. They talk about things that are so painful, so horribly sad it's almost incomprehensible. I think in a way, ghost stories and legends are sometimes able to pivot a little bit, so that something heartbreaking is also at least a little bit scary. And for me, fear is maybe a little bit more cathartic. Maybe even a little more empowering. It brings a jolt of adrenaline, you know? And I always think, *I would never be the person running away in high heels*. I would be the dude going in with a gun and telling everyone I'm all outta bubble gum. [laughs] So I feel like, in a way, it's almost more empowering to be scared than to be sad. When you're sad, you're already hurt; but when you're scared, you might decide to hurt the person or thing that's doing the bad thing.

**LT:** That's true. That's true. That's really interesting to think about.

**CM:** Well, thank you so much for this conversation. This has given me so much to think about too.

**FHF:** Me, too. And, are there any upcoming projects you'd like to share with us?

**LT:** I'm working on collecting ghost stories told during the covid pandemic, which may or may not become a book. It may just be several articles. I've already done 2 articles, and I may just do one or two more, and call it a day.

It's too early, I think, to know if this is a full book that can be published because it takes a while for the narrative to percolate through a time of emergency. Some stories can only be told after enough time has passed. They come to the surface later.

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Karen Arnold** is a writer and child psychotherapist. She came to writing later in life, but is busy making up for lost time. She is fascinated by the way we use narratives and storytelling to make sense of our human experience. She won the Mslexia prize for flash fiction in 2022. She has work in *The Waxed Lemon*, *The Martello*, and *Roi Faineant* amongst others. She can be found on twitter @aroomofonesown\_4

**Shamik Banerjee** is a poet from India. When he is not writing, he can be found strolling the hills surrounding his homestead.

**Ennis Bashe** is an Elgin Award-nominated poet and Lesfic Bard Award-winning romance novelist whose work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Cricket*, and *Liminality Magazine*. Their most recent chapbook, *Beautiful Malady*, is available through Interstellar Flight Press. You can find more of their writing at <https://linktr.ee/ennisrookbashe>.

**Rob Bednar** lives in Marina, CA, on the beautiful Monterey Bay. He has hitchhiked and backpacked extensively through the Western U.S. and draws upon his travel experiences when writing. He enjoys playing jazz guitar and writing weird fiction.

**Cathleen Allyn Conway, PhD**, (she/her) is the author of *Nocturnes* (Cherry Dress Chapbooks, 2023), *Bloofer* (Broken Sleep Books, 2023), *American Ingénue* (Broken Sleep Books, 2021) *All the Twists of the Tongue* (Grey Book Press, 2018) and *Static Cling* (Dancing Girl Press, 2012). Originally from Chicago, she lives in London.

**Juliet Cook** is brimming with black, grey, silver, purple, and dark red explosions. Her poetry has appeared in a peculiar multitude of literary publications. Her two most recent poetry chapbooks are *red flames burning*

out (Grey Book Press, April 2023) and *Contorted Doom Conveyor* (Gutter Snob Books, July 2023). In October, her new poetry chapbook *Your Mouth is Moving Backwards* came out from Ethel Zine & Micro Press. Find out more at [www.JulietCook.weebly.com](http://www.JulietCook.weebly.com).

**Linda M. Crate** (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has twelve published chapbooks, the latest being *Searching Stained Glass Windows For An Answer* (Alien Buddha Publishing, December 2022). Her debut book of photography *Songs of the Creek* (Alien Buddha Publishing, April 2023) was recently published.

**cm ellis** (Michael C.) lives in Texas. Their affair with poetry has been wildly inappropriate and deeply embarrassing for all involved. They also really like pistachios. You can find them [here](#).

**Bennett Falk** lives in Berkeley, California, and is retired. He has degrees in philosophy, systematic theology, and philosophy of religion. His career was in software technical support. He wrote an introduction to the internet (*The Internet Roadmap*, Sybex, 1991) and contributed a monthly column to the now defunct *MicroTimes*. These days, he writes what he wants to write.

**Jaya Gandhi** (she/they) is a Californian writer in love with many things including (but not limited to) mangoes, all species of sharks, weeping willows, and the Cocteau Twins' album *The Moon and The Melodies*.

**Lauren Gordon** is author of *Meaningful Fingers* (Finishing Line Press), *Keen* (Horse Less Press), *Generalizations about Spines* (Yellow Flag Press) and *Fiddle Is Flood* (Blood Pudding Press). Her work has appeared in *PANK*, *Rain*



*Taxi, The Collagist, The Volta, Ethel, Jubilee*, and many other journals and magazines.

**j/j hastain** is a collaborator, writer and maker of things. j/j performs ceremonial gore. Chasing and courting the animate and potentially enlivening decay that exists between seer and singer, j/j hopes to make the god/dess of stone moan and nod deeply through the waxing and waning seasons of the moon.

By day, **Kendra Jackson** crunches numbers for a living. By night (and sometimes into the early hours of the morning), she expresses her pent-up creativity by crunching words instead. For many years, those words consisted of fanfiction under the name Cein/Ceindreadh, but now she's switched to original work.

Originally from the hilly corner of Ohio, **Mark Allen Jenkins'** poetry has appeared in *Gargoyle, River Styx, South Dakota Review, Every River on Earth: Writing from Appalachian Ohio*, and *Still: The Journal*. He completed a PhD in Humanities from the University of Texas at Dallas and currently teaches in Houston.

**Cecilia Kennedy** is a writer who taught English and Spanish in Ohio for 20 years before moving to Washington state with her family. Since 2017, she has published stories in international literary magazines and anthologies. Her work has appeared in *Maudlin House, Tiny Molecules, Rejection Letters*, Kandisha Press, Ghost Orchid Press, and others. You can follow her on Twitter (@ckennedyhola).

**Andreas Kremer** loves exploring all different kinds of art mediums and trying to combine them. His main medium is painting, and through his

paintings he likes to express his other joys outside of art as well as provoke society. You can find more of his work on his website [AndreasDoesArt.com](http://AndreasDoesArt.com)

**Valerie Loveland** is a poet, collage artist, and knitter. Her poetry book about the 80s TV show *Unsolved Mysteries: [unsolved mysteries theme song]* is coming out in 2023 from Crooked Treehouse Press.

**Amiena Mahsoob** is an Iraqi-American who writes from a perch overlooking the Monongahela River in Pittsburgh. She equally enjoys quiet walks among post-industrial wastelands and using her Carnegie Library card to access the OED online. Her fiction-forward writing beds poetry, propagates hybrids, and uplifts hyphenates. She's taught in Pennsylvania and Japan and currently works in the social good sector. Her work has been published in *Barzakh*.

**Cee Martinez** is a writer, editor, composer, and working artist who lives in Denver, Colorado. She is currently working on a 10th-anniversary hardback edition of her indie novel, *Antipathia*.

**Jeanna Ní Ríordáin** is a translator and writer from West Cork, Ireland. Her work has been featured in *Quarryman Literary Journal*, Drawn to the Light Press, *Swerve*, Cork Words 3, New Isles Press, *Poetry in the Time of Coronavirus: The Anthology, Volume Two*, Burrow, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, *Alice Says Go Fuck Yourself*, and *Otherwise Engaged Literature and Arts Journal*.

**Sarah Nichols** lives and writes in Connecticut. The author of eleven chapbooks, including *These Violent Delights* (Grey Book Press, 2022), and *Press Play for Heartbreak* (Paper Nautilus Press, 2021), her work has also appeared in *Unlost Journal*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and *Sad Girl Review*.

**M. Pelin** originally hails from Northern Michigan. He now lives and writes in New Orleans.

**Lucy Rumble** is an emerging writer from Essex. Her poem, “My Nan, Remembered” won third place in the 2023 Tap Into Poetry contest, and her work is currently upcoming in *Crow & Cross Keys*, *Schlock! Webzine*, and *Curio Cabinet Magazine*, among others. When she isn’t writing, she is trapped in the dust and darkness of an archive (or her mind). Find her on Instagram @lucyrumble.writes or at [lucy.smlr.uk](http://lucy.smlr.uk)

**Daniel Schulz** is a U.S.-German writer known for *Kathy Acker in Seattle* (Misfit Lit 2020) and publications in journals such as *Mirage*, *Gender Forum*, *Fragmented Voices*, *Versification*, *Café Irreal*, *Cacti Fur*, *The Wild Word*, *Outcast Press Journal*, *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Word Vomit*, *Dipity*, *Flora Fiction*, *Steel Jackdaw*, anthologies such as *Heart/h* (Fragmented Voices 2021), *Get Rid of Meaning* (Walther König Verlag), and his chapbook *Welfare State* (Back Room Poetry 2023).

**Daniel G. Snethen** is an educator, poet and naturalist. He is native to South Dakota. He spends most of his summers studying the lizards, insects and birds surrounding him. Snethen has spent the last 27 years teaching at Little Wound High School on the Pine Ridge Reservation in Western South Dakota. He has many favorite poets, including Marianne Moore, Anne Sexton, and of course Juliet Cook.

**SOUM** is a collaboration of three women, who value anonymity, using their art and poetry to be their voice. Their style is raw, unpolished, tongue-in-cheek, unapologetic, unfiltered; a mishmash of life experiences and ongoing shadow work. SOUM champions mental awareness and social issues drawing inspiration from the struggles of everyday people

highlighting the darker aspects of their physical, mental and spiritual battles.

**Joanna C. Valente** is a human who lives in Brooklyn, New York. Joanna is the author of several collections including *A Love Story* and *η ψυχή, η ψυχή μας / the soul, our soul*. They are the illustrator of *Dead Tongue* by Bunkong Tuon and *Raven King* by Fox Henry Frazier. Joanna is also the founder of Yes Poetry. One day, Joanna dreams of having a flower and vegetable garden.

**Tracy Whiteside** is an award-winning, internationally exhibited fine art photographer specializing in dark art and fantasy images. Her work has been printed in fashion, art, and literature publications, magazines, and on book covers.

**Alice Wilson** is completing her PhD on women who build tiny houses. Her illustrations were selected for a feature in *Gaze Magazine* in 2021, and were featured on the cover of *WrongDoing Magazine* in 2022.

**Joy Yehle** is a Colorado-based author of horror and dark fiction. When she is not crafting dark stories for readers, you can find her wandering around haunted locations, looking for Bigfoot, communing with the dark side, or doing a little brujeria — if she's not doing any of these things she might just be camping. Visit [www.joyyehle.com](http://www.joyyehle.com) for more.



# CONTRIBUTORS

Karen Arnold  
Shamik Banerjee  
Ennis Bashe  
Rob Bednar  
Cathleen Allyn Conway  
Juliet Cook  
Linda M. Crate  
cm ellis  
Bennett Falk  
Jaya Gandhi  
j/j hastain  
Kendra Jackson  
Mark Allen Jenkins  
Cecilia Kennedy  
Andreas Kremer  
Valerie Loveland  
Amiena Mahsoob  
Cee Martinez  
Jeanna Ní Ríordáin  
Sarah Nichols



M. Pelin  
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Daniel Schulz  
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Joanna C. Valente  
Tracy Whiteside  
Alice Wilson  
Joy Yehle

## AND INTERVIEWS WITH

Dr. Elizabeth Tucker, Folklorist

and

Jonathan Redbird Dover  
+  
Stanley Milford, Jr.,

Navajo Rangers &  
Paranormal Investigators