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C O V E R A R T

Full Moon Service

Erik Johansson

Beginning in 2005, Erik Johansson studied Computer engineering at Chalmers University of Technology in moved to Gothenburg, Sweden. During his time studying he developed an interest for retouching, using this skill to render imagined images as realistically as possible. After publishing images online, he started to get requests about commissioned work from local advertisement agencies. At that time Johansson finished his studies with a master in Interaction Design. Moving to Norrköping in the eastern part of Sweden, Johansson started working full time as a freelance artist. In 2011, Johansson also started doing photography-based street illusions. In early 2012 he moved to Berlin, Germany, a very artistic city that provided a great deal of inspiration. Today Johansson works with both personal and commissioned projects. In November 2011 he spoke at the TED conference in London and in May 2013 at the Adobe MAX conference. Johansson's clients include Google, Adobe and Microsoft but the personal work and concepts will always be what's most important to him. Johansson's work can be found on his website, erikjohanssonphoto.com.

the oddville press

Promoting today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

W W W . O D D V I L L E P R E S S . C O M

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D I S C L A I M E R

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as “adult content”: it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren’t an actual grown-up then please don’t read the Oddville Press, or at least, don’t complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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A Brief History of Bullfighting

Mark Jacobs

MARIANA WENT WITH ME in the cab to the airport in Madrid. This was three years ago, and I was flying home. Before I went through the security gate she hugged me and told me it hadn't been that bad. Our relationship, she meant. Then she gave me a going-away present. It was a two-volume history of bullfighting, the one that Spaniards called *el Cossío*. Mariana was a bookish person, so the gift was entirely in character. She was the only woman I ever made love with who got out of bed afterward and read. She was also the only woman of my acquaintance who cleaned the kitchen floor on her hands and knees. She attributed both habits to her Catholic heritage. I thanked her for the gift, and we kissed goodbye. I had to carry the books under my arm because they did not fit in my carry-on bag.

The casual farewell was a complete and total act. On both our parts. The break-up just about destroyed us.

Back in the U.S., I kept moving. I changed states and jobs six times in three years. Each time I packed up I got rid of the clutter that had accumulated around me. But I held onto the bullfighting books. It wasn't that I was such a huge fan of the sport. I had spent eighteen months in Spain, apprenticed to a cabinetmaker. It didn't work out. I lacked what my boss called *oficio*, which the way he said it I took to mean any feel for the work. In those eighteen months,

I went to the stadium maybe four times. Bullfighting fascinated me, and I talked about it with Mariana. Maybe I talked about it a lot. But that was as far as it went. Anyway, it made no sense to hang onto the odd gift from my ex-lover, who also saw me as lacking *oficio*.

Finally, in Buffalo, an insightful doctor diagnosed me as having Restless Soul Syndrome. The only recognized treatment for RSS, she explained, was homeopathic in nature. Go somewhere; stay there; keep staying there. At the time, I was working in a cubicle farm downtown and living in a small apartment on a side street off Hertel Avenue. There were Hispanic immigrants in the neighborhood, and I liked being able to walk out for groceries and hear some Spanish. If I was going to take the doctor's prescription seriously and stay put, my current location suited me.

Not once, eavesdropping in the street, did I overhear a conversation that made reference to bullfighting. My *Cossío* began to feel like an affectation. Impulsively I put the books up for sale on craigslist, curious to see what kind of person might find them of interest. After the doctor's diagnosis, I had read up on RSS. Acting impulsively was one of the symptoms. It made sense. Every step I took I dragged behind me a long tail of baffling actions.

After a week without a bite I figured selling the books on craigslist was a dumb idea. But

before I got around to taking down the post I got a text from a man who identified himself as a Mexican enthusiast of *los toros*. Texts are as flat as a snake on the highway after a chance conversation with a semi. But I sensed an intensity in his request: *please don't sell the books before I have a chance to inspect them*.

Easy enough to respect the request because nobody else responded to the post. Alvaro Montes de Oca came by my apartment on Korzeniowski Street that same evening. He was not as old as I had expected him to be. He couldn't be fifty. It was winter and he was dressed in black wool, black boots, a black fedora damp with snowflakes. At the door, taking off his coat, he unwound the longest scarf that I had ever seen. The scarf was red, like an exclamation point to end his black sentence. He had enough eyebrow for two or three men. Maybe that was what gave him such an angry look. He relaxed a little when he discovered I could converse with him in Spanish.

He refused my offer of coffee. He was eager to see the books, telling me, "I am from Veracruz," as if that explained his hurry.

We sat in my vest-pocket living room, and he turned the pages of both volumes with tender affection. He read a few favorite passages aloud, adding commentary that came out as homage to the great Cossío who had conceived such a monumental project on a monumental subject.

"I confess it is rare, Mr. Van Buren, to find an American who is devoted to the bulls. The late Mr. Hemingway performed an inestimable service in his day. Alas, that day is done. In today's world the propagandists are constantly at work, undermining us with their odious cant."

"I'm the last thing from an expert," I told him.

He waved his hand dismissively, taking my disclaimer for false modesty. I was a sucker for his old-fashioned style. Courtly, a touch grandiose,

with a kind of poise that presumed his place in the world was unquestioned. Presence, I would call it, but it was bigger than that. It was a way and a kind of inhabiting that most of us had forgotten how to do, if we ever knew.

"Mr. Van Buren," he began.

"Please," I said, "call me Parker."

A controlled inclination of the head. "Certainly. And I am Alvaro."

"Alvaro, something tells me you don't need these books."

He nodded complacently. "I have a not inconsiderable collection of copies including, I am pleased to say, a signed first edition."

"Then I guess I don't understand."

Because of their spreading mass, the slightest movement of his eyebrows looked like a mood swing. He sighed. Then after a pause in which he appeared to search for words, he said, "You will certainly receive another request to look at the books. The request will come from a woman. It is my deepest hope that you will hang onto the Cossío until you hear from her."

I made a noise signifying my confusion, and the eyebrows moved again. He seemed to think I was not being straight with him.

"If it is a matter of money," he said with just a touch of aggravation, "I am happy to advance you the asking price. As collateral, you might say."

I was asking fifty bucks for the bucks. I'd have given them away to the right person.

"There's no need to leave me any money," I assured Montes de Oca.

"Very well, very well. Of course I expected no less from the possessor of these sacred volumes."

"It might be a good idea to tell me the name of the woman who will contact me."

"I think not," he said. Now I knew what peremptory sounded like. "You will know."

I was not even sure what we were talking about, but I nodded.

"It goes without saying," Alvaro told me, "that you will advise me once the woman comes to see the books. I will leave you my card. At any rate, I have disturbed your evening long enough."

He stood. He was not a big man, but he filled the room. It was that full inhabiting at which he was so skilled. At the door he told me, "I know I can count on you to play your part in this worthy cause."

"Forgive me for being dense, Alvaro, but what is the cause?"

His pause was a minor masterwork of timing. "The cause, my dear Parker... the cause is love."

He was gone, and silently I thanked the doctor who had diagnosed me with RSS. If she hadn't, by now I would have moved on to another job, another city, another temporary situation. Whatever this was, I would have missed it.

I left the ad for the bullfighting books up on craigslist. Sure enough, two days later a woman inquired, and we agreed she would stop by my apartment that night.

Soledad Gil was of the same age, more or less, as the man from Veracruz who had preceded her. I could tell from her accent that she was from Spain. Where Alvaro favored quiet black, Soledad was a continuous chirp of color. Her dress was spangly blue with a stylized green bird running the length of it, its beak at breast level. Her earrings were hula hoops. Her lacquered nails were multicolored marvels. Yet she wore no makeup, and her long hair had significant strands of gray.

She took a seat. I handed her the books. "He was here, of course."

Her voice was a warm insinuation. I felt complicit in something worth losing myself in. "Who?"

"Please, señor Van Buren. Montes de Oca.

The man leaves a residue everywhere he goes. Like a scent, I suppose. It's here, in this room."

Silly to deny it. "He was here."

"Did he tell you he was a *torero*?"

"No."

"Quite a good one, at least in the Mexican context. Until an unfortunate incident put an end to his career."

"What happened?"

"It was in Veracruz, now it seems a hundred years ago. A triumphant homecoming after some stellar performances in Guadalajara and the Federal District. Alvarito, they called him. The diminutive suggests the affection in which the public held him. At any rate, it happened in the ring. A moment of reckoning. In the final second, Alvaro turned away. He lost his nerve. After that, he had no choice but to retire. It was the end of his dream."

I had a hunch. "But not the end of your love for him."

She shook her head slowly. "No."

She opened the second volume of the *Cossío* and read me an entry about a famous bullfighter from Burgos known to the public as El Saltamontes.

"Do you know the word?" she asked me.

"No."

"In English it would be grasshopper. El Saltamontes was my grandfather. He was one of the truly great *toreros*. Montes de Oca worshiped his memory."

Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes. She accepted a cup of coffee. When the moment seemed right, I asked her if she wanted to buy the books.

"I owe you an apology. It will not surprise you to learn that I have my own *Cossío*. It is just, how shall I explain this? It gives me such exquisite pleasure to read the entry on El Saltamontes, I could not resist doing so in a new context. I should not have troubled you."

She stood as Alvaro had stood. "I presume you have enough information to compile your report."

I did not pretend not to understand her.

After Soledad left, I thought how ornery love was and felt a strong urge to call Mariana in Madrid. We were long out of touch, but I tracked her down on social media. I felt some medium-sized misgivings, doing that. You remember reading about people in pre-ironic cultures who refused to allow anyone to take their picture. They believed that the camera, or the act, robbed them of their soul, or a piece of their soul. I had the same belief about social media. Still, I spent half an hour tracking down my former lover and learned she was still single. It was not clear whether she was involved in a committed relationship. I debated sending her a message but decided against it. *The cause, my dear Parker, the cause is love.*

I made a tactical decision not to contact Alvaro Montes de Oca. I was curious to see how long he could last without asking about Soledad. The answer was eighteen hours. He seemed not to hold against me the fact that I hadn't called, proposing that we get together after work. We met at a coffee shop on Dorset Place run by a Mexican in the set of whose shoulders I saw resignation as if he knew exactly how much of life would never come within his reach. In that regard he was the opposite of Alvaro, who wore black again although this time his scarf was royal blue. He asked me what love was. We were speaking in Spanish, which – this probably says something about me I'd be better off not revealing – gave me a freedom of expression I lacked in English.

"*Deseo con jarcia*," I told him. Desire with accouterments.

It was a lame response. He sucked his lip, and those ponderous eyebrows quivered. "Cynicism does not become you," he said matter-of-factly, as though pointing out mismatched socks on the feet of an acquaintance. But the question was really just the preface to the story he wanted to tell me.

"I have lost the affection of the one woman on the planet I was destined to love. Not so much lost, strictly speaking, as squandered. Yet I am blessed with resilience, which turns out to be the single most important muscle to exercise when a person comes to the decision to which I myself came."

"What decision is that?"

"Never to give up. Never. Only death has the power to dispossess me of my love for Soledad Gil, and I half suspect I will bull my way into eternity with her name on my lips."

Some essential parts of the story emerged at don Max's, where the coffee was superb and the wait staff carried themselves with a dignity that reminded me of the picador entering the ring at the arrival of his moment to goad the bull. It was not only the matador who moved with style. There were also essential parts of Alvaro's story that did not emerge.

When we stood to leave don Max's, I knew that Alvaro had followed Soledad when she came to Buffalo for a position in the art department. He took a job teaching introductory Spanish classes to undergraduates. Not the most fulfilling work, but a necessary sacrifice if he was to stay close to the woman he could not stop loving. They had met decades ago in Burgos at a ceremony commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of El Saltamontes' birth. As her grandfather's closest living relative, Soledad stood on stage to receive the tributes presented in his honor. She spoke.

"Thirty seconds," Alvaro had told me.

"Before she began her second sentence, I was

in love with the woman, and I knew there would never be another."

It was obvious that he did not wish to discuss his own career in the ring, but with a few roundabout questions, which he answered forthrightly, I put it together that he had still been seen, at the time of Burgos, as an up-and-coming *torero*.

I walked him to his car, parked halfway down Dorset Place. It had begun to snow. In his black fedora, Alvaro looked impregnable. Anybody could see the resilience in the man of which he was justifiably proud.

"What about the books?" I asked him.

"What books?"

"My *Cossío*."

"Hang onto them, my friend. You would be a fool to let them go."

"What about the rest of the story?"

"The rest of the story. Hah! Indeed, the rest of the story."

We shook hands, and I walked home in the muttering snow composing my half of a conversation with Mariana I was determined to have. She was an early riser, or had been, and I called her mobile number at seven thirty, Madrid time. She was precisely the kind of person with whom you could skip the social pleasantries even after a gap of years.

"It's Parker," I told her. "I have a health problem."

"It's not cancer," she said. "Your voice would be different."

"It's Restless Soul Syndrome."

"Oh. I read an article in *El Diario* about that. I'm awfully sorry to hear it."

"Yes, well, I'm lucky, I guess. I found a good doctor."

"I'm glad, my old friend. You're in treatment, I suppose?"

"Yes. But here's the kicker. The most important part of the treatment is staying in

one place."

"No more aimless roaming."

"Not for the foreseeable future."

"A pity. I wish you a speedy cure."

"I'd like to see you, Mariana. I'd really like to see you. But I can't leave Buffalo."

A transatlantic pause. Then, "*Imposible*."

"Why is it impossible?"

I did not expect an answer. Good thing, because there was none. I would have liked to tell her about Alvaro and Soledad, but that meant admitting I was flogging her going-away gift on a website. I let it go. Then I let her go. Still, the conversation left me feeling buoyant. I was not generally a buoyant person. Maybe my RSS treatment was working.

I took Alvaro's advice and took down the craigslist post. There was an old-fashioned fireplace in the living room of my apartment. It didn't work anymore, but it had a narrow mantel. I put the bullfighting volumes on the mantel, affectation be damned. They looked good there. I resolved to follow my treatment plan scrupulously. The sooner I was cured, the sooner I would be free, or at least mobile.

December made itself felt with non-stop snow, conveyed to Western New York courtesy of Canadian wind. The surface of the Niagara River was icy iron. Three days after I spoke with Mariana, Alvaro showed up at my apartment. He tipped his fedora, which had a crust of corn snow, and handed me an envelope.

"I thought it best to deliver this by hand."

"Please come in."

If hair could express nuance, the wall of eyebrow had a quizzical look.

"No," I said. "I mean it. We'll have a drink."

The envelope contained an invitation to the opening of an art exhibit at U.B. called *Tauromaquia*. You can guess who the featured

artist was. We had a companionable shot of Empire Rye, and Alvaro told me we would meet outside the exhibit hall, where he would hand over a single silver rose.

"Why don't you give her the rose yourself, Alvaro?"

"Soledad scorns my company. I am not permitted past a certain ill-defined radius."

"Did she take out a restraining order?"

The idea appalled him. "Don't be absurd. We are not litigious American amateurs, we are adults. This is not a matter for the courts, it belongs to the heart."

I guess I should have known. I should also have known that I was not going to turn him down. So on a crisp, cloudless night we met at the doors of the hall as planned and he handed me a long, expensive-looking box. Tears brimmed in his eyes. I envied him his constancy. It was not just that, though. His capacity for love in the face of rejection was a thing of awe.

"Is there a message?" I asked him.

"Tell her... tell her a man is more than the sum of his mistakes."

"That's it?"

"Afterward, you will relate everything to me in detail."

In the black Buffalo night, I nodded. Watching him trudge away I understood for the first time that being noble and being foolish were not mutually exclusive states of being.

Soledad Gil's work depended on ideas. The ideas were visual. They included lots of bulls, and lots of mirrors, and a kind of psychic landscape where loneliness contended with desire. In some of the pieces, desire won. A respectable crowd of visitors strolled past the pieces talking in hushed voices, sucking it all in

like cultural vacuum cleaners.

The artist stood near the center of the large room alongside an installation that included a papier mâché bull colliding with a stop sign. The stop sign bled. She wore a purple sheath that emphasized an angularity I had not noticed the first time we met. I approached her with the box.

"Let me guess," she said. "*Una rosa plateada.*"

"A man is more than the sum of his mistakes."

She nodded. She handed me a bilingual brochure. She told me, "I hope you enjoy the show."

But I wasn't giving up that easily. "When did you stop loving him?"

The question took her aback. "I never stopped loving Montes de Oca."

"What happened between the two of you?"

"I see."

"What do you see?"

"You think being his errand boy somehow entitles you to explanations."

"I'm curious. Is that a crime?"

Her forehead wrinkled, and she assessed me. An innocuous guy in his thirties, no dueling scars, halfway decent Spanish, an American off-handedness about him that a reasonable European could reject or embrace but never alter.

"Follow me."

She took me to an office behind the gallery space. She poured us both a shot of Licor 43. She tossed hers back. So did I. She poured us another. Her eyes were creatures of the night.

"I was there for him in Veracruz."

"When he lost his nerve in the ring."

She nodded. "I was there for him when he lost the inheritance money from his uncle. Alvaro never had the slightest head for business."

"Did you live together?"

"We were alive together."

"Why aren't you together now?"

Maybe she would have told me, maybe not. But at that moment a student of hers came barreling into the office to tell Soledad that a photographer from the *Buffalo News* was waiting to take her picture. The student had a pasty face and was ecstatic.

"This is Joanie Lind," said Soledad. "She helped me put the show together. Joanie, this is Parker Van Buren. He runs a messenger service."

The end. Somehow it led to a text-a-thon between Mariana and me. I told her the story of Soledad and Alvaro, leaving out the part about my *Cossío*. I told her I couldn't stand the idea of not knowing the rest of the story. Why? Mariana wanted to know. It made me think. I put down my phone and did not pick it up again until I knew the answer. I'm 34 years old, I told the woman who had introduced me to the history of bullfighting, I'm 34 and I don't know the first goddamn thing about love. It was her turn to put down the phone. An hour later she texted me her mother's roast chicken recipe, which I used to really like. We kept talking. We kept not talking about our old dead love.

The text-a-thon finally came to an end when she asked me, What do you want, Parker? *I want you to come to Buffalo*. She did not make excuses. That was not Mariana's style. She didn't say she could not get away from work, or she didn't have the money, or she had heard Buffalo winters were brutal. She just said no.

It was the last thing from a surprise when Alvaro called me the next day wanting a blow-by-blow of my meet-up with Soledad. But it was a surprise that he invited me to an upscale tapas restaurant, and a further surprise that he seemed genuinely to want to know something about my own love history. Telling him about Mariana, I admitted openly for the first time that she had been my Soledad.

"How fortunate!" Alvaro said.

"What's fortunate about it? She's quite content for us to be living on separate continents."

"But you are young, both of you. The years have not hardened her heart."

I was skeptical. I had not passed muster with Mariana any more than I had with the *ebanista* I was apprenticed to. She was a direct person, and her words were arrows. Three years on, I still felt the tender spots where they had entered my flesh.

I gave Alvaro a detailed description of meeting Soledad: the conversation, her appearance, everything I could think of including the enthusiasm of the pasty-faced art student. He was hungry. How could I fail to feed him? I tried to get out of him the story of what had gone wrong between him and Soledad but got nowhere. He rebuffed every question with another tapa. Calamari, patatas bravas, tortilla española. He stuffed me with everything except the thing I wanted.

And then, outside on the sidewalk before we walked to our cars, it came out without any prodding on my part.

"There was a woman," he said. "A Paraguayan folksinger. She was touring Europe. Isabel was magnificence in the flesh."

"So you were unfaithful."

"Not exactly, but I may as well have been. It was a confusing time for all of us. Events drove Soledad into the arms of a Polish filmmaker. An irritating man who was making a film about those billboard bulls one sees scattered across the Spanish landscape. Sentimental tripe, pure and simple. Between Soledad and myself, harsh words passed. Some things one cannot unsay."

"That's all?"

"What do you mean, that's all?"

"You didn't say you were sorry and move on? You love each other, that's obvious. It's

only pride that keeps you apart.”

“You fail to understand Soledad. That’s not your fault, you’ve met her just once. Having a rather rigid notion of perfection, the woman is incapable of accepting an imperfect love.”

My mistake was criticizing her then, telling him I thought she was being childish. He motored off in a huff without saying goodbye, and I figured that was the last I would see of him.

A week went by. A woman at the cubicle farm took me out to dinner. We ate Thai and talked about binge-watching TV series, which seemed to have become a thing. She had an understated style that I liked, self-deprecating in just the right way. I owed it to her not to see her as a consolation prize in waiting. Then Alvaro called. He came over. He roped me into his scheme. It didn’t take much effort.

“Something you said the other night gave me the idea,” he said.

We were sitting in my undersized living room again. His eye kept traveling to the *Cossío* on the mantel.

“What did I say?”

“Only pride keeps Soledad and me apart. You were right, my friend. Why not use it to my advantage?”

Maybe he was only softening me up so I would take on the assignment. If so, it was wasted labor. I was in. The next day I visited Soledad in the art department at U.B. during her office hours. She was dressed in a high-waisted skirt and a peasant blouse and looked like the post card for an exotic destination. I told her I wanted to write the story of her love affair with Alvaro.

“You are a writer?”

I fudged that one. And Alvaro was right. Once she heard the idea, she could not resist getting involved. It took no convincing at all to get her to agree to meet at my place, knowing ahead of time that Alvaro would be there.

Pride demanded that her version of events triumph in my telling. Didn’t they say that history was written by the victors?

It was the strangest meeting I ever attended. They arrived separately, armored in identical formality, he in the most basic black, she in rainbow pastels. They sat as far apart as was logistically feasible. They spoke with clipped precision. Neither could let a statement by the other go unchallenged.

“That ridiculous moviemaker,” Alvaro said once. “You lowered yourself the day you let Bosko turn your head.”

“Bosko did not turn my head,” Soledad corrected him. “I turned his. When he looked at me, I happened to be glancing in his direction. Besides, nothing that went on remotely approached your slavish devotion to the Paraguayan woman’s breasts.”

“That’s not how I remember those breasts,” Alvaro corrected her correction.

I busied myself ostentatiously taking notes. It was an old-fashioned conversation. Only paper and pencil could capture it.

The debate went on. And on. I couldn’t make out the dividing line between sexual tension and true antagonism. The truth was in their fabrications. Their lies were brilliant as Amazon songbirds. Eventually – I felt it coming and did my best not to resent it – they joined forces and turned on me, their one-off amanuensis. My interpretation of events and actions, my occasional paraphrases for clarity, my whole project, all of it was suddenly suspect. They accused me of taking unfair advantage, of exploiting their pain. I was heartless, I was cold and clinical. I considered the meeting a success when they went out the door in a state of comradely dudgeon.

When they left, I felt pretty ragged, not to say abused. I made some coffee. I pulled down the second volume of my *Cossío* and read a

few entries at random. It really was a masterpiece on a complicated subject.

The best thing about Madrid was all the unfamous spots. Spend any amount of time walking the city and you came across ten or twelve underappreciated places that became your favorites. Cul-de-sacs at whose terminus two elegant old buildings faced each other like competitors who had reached a truce. Side streets whose uphill slant suggested their very own angle of repose. Small, out-of-the-way plazas like the one where I was sitting on a bench in the winter sun.

This was my fourth afternoon in the spot, which a brass plaque in the wall identified as la Plaza de los Flechazos. Bollards kept out vehicles, and I had the place to myself. The bench was urban black iron. A white cat soaked in sun on a sidewalk that had been polished by time to a gray gloss. Across from me, the ocher bricks in the wall of an eighteenth-century building rose two stories like perfectly laid words that constructed sentences that made a story that was there for the beholding of anybody with a literate eye.

Coming into the plaza, she was carrying a book with a dark green leather cover. Her brown hair was longer than it used to be. The frames of her glasses were red plastic. She looked as jaunty as a bookish person can look. I knew if I waited long enough she would show.

"Good morning, Mariana."

"I thought you weren't supposed to

travel," she said. "You're sick."

"I got better. What are you reading?"

She looked at the book as if she'd forgotten she was carrying it. "It's a biography. Saint Isodore. He is the patron of Madrid, you know."

"Will you sit down for a few minutes?"

She sat. The white cat moved away. Out beyond the bollards, the life of the city went on in its self-important way. For a while, neither of us felt like talking.

Once I told her, "I really like this spot."

The sober manner in which she nodded brought back the gravity of person that had drawn me to her when we first met. She told me, "You had to come to me, Parker."

"I know."

"It wasn't going to work, the other way."

I knew that, too. We sat on the bench a while longer, long enough for the cat to change its mind and return to its original spot on the sunny sidewalk. It was good, it was sufficient, just to be there, next to her. I was thinking about love and about luck. Alvaro and Soledad hovered in my imagination, and I was glad I did not know what happened to them after they left my apartment. I was a balloon, floating just below popping altitude. When Mariana told me her mother was roasting a chicken for lunch, the two unknowable things that were consuming me — love and luck — came together and made something new.

"Shall we go to my mother's?"

The white cat looked over at me as if there might be some doubt. There wasn't. We stood together. We left the plaza together. Forty minutes later we were eating roast chicken.

Mark Jacobs has published more than 130 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *The Baffler*, and *The Kenyon Review*. He has stories forthcoming in several magazines including *The Hudson Review*. His five books include *A Handful of Kings*, published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy*, by Soho Press. Stories of Jacobs' have won The Iowa Review Fiction Prize and the Kafka Award. His website can be found at markjacobsauthor.com.

Flying Over Your World

K.P. Kulski

Loose and languid,
sleepy lips fall,
Like rain on the summer pavement,
too cracked and artificial to feel its supplication,

The crook of your arm has become like a belt

My feet are torn,
and bound,
again and again

By your love, your kindness and your gentle spirit—
is dry like the aching log on the beach at low tide

I consume air,
in gasps,
in hungry, greedy frenzies,

I burn it all with passion and atmosphere,
And let the hot red road melt the soles of my shoes,

Because the eyes of my realm
Are like butterflies,
and cherry blossoms.
My fingers extended in unison,
With the thrust of death,

But you don't remember;
The life I breathed shining like a doomed star—
this chunk of comet flesh

Flying over your world.

K.P. was born in Hawaii but grew up along both mainland U.S. coastlines. She likes autumn leaves and woods that overlook an expanse of a chill ocean. She holds degrees in history and writing and is a veteran of the U.S. military. Look her up at garnetonwinter.com and [@garnetonwinter](https://twitter.com/garnetonwinter).



English Bay Sunset

Bratsa Bonifacho

Bratsa Bonifacho is a senior artist based in Vancouver, Canada. His work is held in many private, corporate and permanent museum collections across five continents. Major collections held include the Canadian Embassy in Argentina, Museum of Modern Art in Yugoslavia, the National Museum of Serbia and the Department of External Affairs in Ottawa. Internationally recognized for his deeply layered abstract paintings, an intense interest in technology, communication and cultural identity is at the forefront of his current artistic practice. His work can be seen on his website, bonifacho-art.com.

The Censer

Katherine Davis

I have made my living room
Into a cathedral, extinguished
The fluorescent overheads,
Lit tapers in alcoves carved
By fists and fingernails.
I process in circles with burning
Censer, incense on coals to
Drive away shadows of a million
Miserable selves. I command
The ghosts back into hell,
Swinging smoke into their torsos,
Their ghoulish faces. They surrender
But I still sense them, my hair prickling,
My spirit festering, body with boils.
The censer rings eleven bells, one for each
Apostle, except for Judas, a clamped tongue.
That's fine--I don't need advice on despair,
Dirtier than change collected by a traitor.
Smoke cuts the garrotte around my throat,
No longer crushing bone, and I am free to amble
Outside, beyond the dead flowers that the hardware
Sells but can't fix, revivification, some ancient
Miracle, now obsolete.

Katherine Davis earned a Ph.D. specializing in American poetry from Duke University. Her poems have previously appeared in *Weber*, *Stepping Stones*, *Wild Goose Review*, and *Convergence*. After working as a writer and an editor around the U.S., she recently relocated to Alberta, Canada.

Her Man in Havana

Ewa Mazierska

FOR SURE, Havana was a beautiful city, but Anna couldn't imagine a worse time to visit. Not only was she unable to communicate with the locals, because she didn't speak Spanish and most of them didn't know English, but, on the way there, she caught a cold. There was no air conditioning in the room and, when she went to bed, it felt like somebody was pumping hot air on her face in order to suffocate her. Robert's body was also pressing against her back. Unable to sleep, she eventually got up and went to the terrace. It was even hotter up there than in their bedroom, but at least it didn't feel as if the elements and the people were conspiring against her. Anna put on a light and tried to read the book she brought with her, 'Our Man in Havana' by Graham Greene, but she couldn't concentrate, or even see the letters, as her eyes stung with tears. The sky was full of stars on the darkest of backdrops, and there was music coming from two directions. The louder was traditional Cuban music; the quieter were covers of old English and American hits, 'You Really Got Me', 'Heart Full of Soul' and 'Hotel California'. It was refreshing to be in a place where Ed Sheeran wasn't played on loop, as was the case in the resort where they'd spent a week before arriving in Havana. Anna thought that she might stay on the terrace the whole night but, after an hour, Robert came up, asking

her to return to their bed as he couldn't sleep without her. Indeed, when she returned, he fell asleep immediately, while she remained awake. To make the night pass quicker, she tried to list all the songs she knew by the bands she had heard that night, but she couldn't exceed more than three for each of them, except for the Beatles.

It was only as the day broke that Anna managed to fall asleep and then it was already time to get up. The breakfast the host had prepared for them, made of potatoes with fried onion and pieces of papaya, made Anna nauseous. She suggested she would return to bed whilst they explore the city on their own, but Robert said they hadn't made the effort to go to Havana to give in to illness and weakness. The kids added that it would be boring and harder for them to walk without her, as Robert walked too fast. But they all agreed to make a concession – instead of travelling to the Hemingway house in a wobbly taxi, which would make Anna nauseous, they would go to the famous Colon Cemetery. Cemeteries were Anna's favourite tourist attractions, and this one was a mere fifteen-minute walk from their apartment. No doubt it would be cooler there than elsewhere too. But the walk dragged on and Anna's nose was running and her skin was raw from the cold and the burning sun. To make matters worse, she forgot

her sunglasses. When they reached the cemetery, she was exhausted. David, on the other hand, needed to use the toilet, but wouldn't go behind one of the graves, even though nobody would see him. This was the thing about their children – they never compromised, especially when their hygiene was at stake. The only available toilet was in a chapel, so it was decided that Robert, David and Ella would go to the chapel and wait there for Anna, who would follow them at her own speed.

'There is no way to get lost here.'

Anna thought that this was always what Robert was saying when he left her somewhere, and she was the one to find him, which she always did. But sometimes after much effort.

Like everything in Havana, the cemetery was impressive, but not suitable to her needs. She'd hoped for paths covered in soft green grass, on which one could sit or lie down, as she did once in Vienna's Zentralfriedhof, where the trees also provided cover from the sun. Instead, the paths were paved, and the cemetery was so crowded with graves that there was little space left for trees. There were some bushes, but they were so well maintained they looked like a disciplined green army, protecting the ornate graves and mausolea, which stood behind them, from attackers. The polished white tombs looked like mirrors trying to capture the sun's rays. Anna felt that no other cemetery she'd ever visited tried so hard to look like paradise's vestibule, but this only made her think that she wouldn't like to go to heaven because it would intimidate her. Rotting slowly under an old tree felt like a better option.

Suddenly, among the blinding whiteness of graves, something black emerged. For a moment Anna thought that it was a tree trunk, but the object moved and turned out to be a

man – a very tall man with a coal-black face, clad in a dark grey labourer's uniform. The only non-black thing about him was his straw yellow hat. He had a broad, angular face, and a big mouth with large teeth, which cut the face into two distinct parts as if he was a Canadian from the 'South Park' cartoon series.

The stranger touched her arm with his big hand, which startled her so that she took a step back and almost fell on a pile of stones, but he caught her and helped her steady herself.

'Are you okay?' he asked her in English.

'Yes, why are you asking?' she replied, frightened, realising that there was nobody around and her escape route was blocked from all sides by the graves.

'Because you were standing among the graves as if you didn't know what to do next. And you looked so pale as if you were about to faint.'

This must have been true. It made Anna sad to think that it was a stranger who offered her sympathy rather than somebody from her family.

'I'm a bit unwell, and I'm not used to such heat,' she said.

'You should wear a hat and sunglasses,' said the man, 'as the sun is very strong here. This is the hottest spot in the whole of Havana.'

'I know, but I forgot to bring them with me,' she said.

'Take this,' he said, putting his straw hat on her head.

Anna smiled, thinking of what her family would say seeing her in such a garment.

'Thank you, but I don't want to deprive you of your protection. I will survive.'

'I don't mind. You can return it to me another day,' he said.

'No, I really don't want it, as I will be

leaving soon. I have to find my family now,' said Anna.

But she had no strength to walk any further. She sat down on the pavement, supporting her back against a gravestone. But even this position required too much effort. She needed to lie down. He must have sensed it, as he helped her up and took her to a crypt, where a blanket was spread on the floor. There she lay down and maybe even fell asleep for a short while. When she woke up, he was standing above her with a glass of water.

'I have my own water,' she said defensively.

'This is special water, it helps de-hydrated people come back to life.'

Anna feared that the drink might be some sort of poison, but she had little to lose – she was in a grave already, so gulped it down.

The liquid wasn't poison, and she felt much better after drinking it. A couple of minutes later they climbed up to the surface. The sun was again powerful but, against it, the tall man looked now like an angel or a god, with rays surrounding his head and arms.

Anna felt ashamed that his blackness had startled her. This was called 'unconscious bias', as she was told at work, except that she was now acutely conscious of it. She also now realised that he spoke excellent English, which was unusual in Cuba, but his pronunciation was bizarre, most likely because he was only reading books in English rather than talking to people in this language.

'Who is your family?' he asked when they started to walk.

'My husband and two children. They went to the chapel. I was meant to go with them, but I wanted to spend more time on my own, looking at the gravestones.'

'I can tell you about the gravestones. I can be your guide,' said the man.

'It is unnecessary. I better go,' said Anna,

suddenly worried about what Robert and the kids might say seeing her with this stranger.

'I will go with you, in case you faint again,' he said.

There was no point to protest, and indeed Anna felt as if she was about to pass out again. They walked towards the church, and he held her arm and pointed to obstacles which stood in their way, of which there were plenty. His manner of walking was very distinct, with his knees hardly bending, as if he lacked joints there. Anna thought that, if there was a god, her companion was near the end of God's assembly line and the almighty didn't put much effort into making sure that all parts of his body fitted together.

'What is your name?' asked Anna.

'Lazarus,' said the man.

'Do you know what it means?' she asked.

'Being raised from the dead,' said Lazarus.

'That's right, it's funny to meet at the cemetery somebody raised from the dead,' said Anna.

'I think it's very appropriate,' he said.

'What is your name?', asked Lazarus.

'Anna.'

'What does it mean?'

'I don't know. Whatever it means, it is a very common name, and international. If you are a writer and don't want a reader to know the nationality of your character, call her Anna if she is a woman, or Alex or Robert if he is a man.'

Talking made walking easier and Anna was almost disappointed when they reached the chapel. There was a service taking place for somebody who recently died and Robert, Ella and David were sitting in one of the back rows as if they were guests at the service. When they noticed Anna, they gave her a sign to leave the chapel.

'This is Lazarus,' said Anna outside the

building. 'He was my guide on the way here.'

She noticed that they looked at Lazarus as if they weren't sure what to make of him. In the end, Robert turned to Lazarus and asked in his typical way which, in Anna's view, betrayed a narrow-mindedness of a low-level clerk: 'Are you a certified guide? Do you have a badge or the documents to prove it?'

'No, but I know the cemetery well. I can show you where all the famous people are buried.'

'Okay. Show us,' said Robert in a high-pitched voice, suggesting nervousness.

For the next forty minutes or so they walked with Lazarus, with the children trailing behind and occasionally giggling. Anna wasn't sure if they were mocking their guide's clumsy pronunciation, his Frankenstein-like posture or the way they looked together. He was showing the graves of various famous Cubans, but not known to any of them.

'Can we see Batista's grave?' asked Ella.

'It is not here. It is in Madrid,' said Lazarus.

'This is a pity. Looks like everybody famous who was meant to be here is buried elsewhere,' said Ella, who clearly had enough of this walk.

'Fame is relative,' said Lazarus. 'You can be famous in your time and forgotten tomorrow. If you want, I show you something about fame.'

And he took them to the mausoleum full of boxes with hand-written names on them.

'These are graves of people who once had proper graves, but were kicked out of them. Some were famous. Look here,' he said and took David's hand, showing him a box. 'This was once a popular writer,' and then he showed another one: 'And these are remnants of a painter.'

'Why were they removed from their graves?' asked David.

'To make space for new corpses. If the families do not pay for the upkeep of their graves, the buried are dug out. And artists in Cuba often have no families or their families are poor, so they are the first to lose their homes.'

'Maybe the fans should organise crowdfunding campaigns to save their graves,' said David.

'I don't think that would work in Cuba,' said Lazarus after David explained to him how 'crowdfunding' worked. 'For a start, we don't have proper internet here and most people have other things to take care of. They don't have money to indulge in philanthropy.'

When they left the mausoleum, he took them to the back of the chapel, which was surrounded by large containers and dumpsters full of bones. This was too much for Ella, who vomited. Anna noticed that some of it landed on a skull which had fallen on the ground. Anna lifted it and tried to clean it with a tissue, before putting it back in a container. She thought that it must have belonged to an attractive woman, as it had small and nicely shaped teeth and a small hole for a nose. The skull seemed to be smiling at Anna, and she thought that maybe she should take it back with them, to arrange a proper burial for her. She could give the skull a name and it wouldn't matter if it were true or not; the important thing was to save her from anonymity and these multiple profanations.

'Thank you, but we better go now,' said Robert, again adopting the formal manner of a petty bureaucrat, handing Lazarus some money.

'Please, don't go,' said Lazarus, looking at Anna, as if making no secret of the fact he didn't want her to go but didn't care about the others.

'We have to go. You see that our daughter

is unwell,' said Anna.

'So come tomorrow. I will wait for you. I will find you,' he said, his large hand taking hold of hers, with an imploring quality that had been absent in his assured voice.

Robert looked embarrassed, while Ella and David were sniggering at the back.

'Maybe we will. We will have to check our plans,' said Anna.

'Promise me,' said Lazarus.

'Okay, I promise,' she said, worried that otherwise, he wouldn't let her go.

'Did you seen how that creep held mum's hand?' said Ella to David, when they left the cemetery. 'As if he was in love with her. What an adventure,' she sighed and then turned to Anna, sneering, 'You always attract the freaks. Remember these junkies who followed you around in India?'

'At least somebody follows me. I don't see you being followed by anybody, freaks or non-freaks,' said Anna, who couldn't stand the aura of superiority her daughter had acquired recently.

'Okay,' said Robert. 'The cemetery is ticked off. We need to move on, in all senses.'

'I might return here tomorrow,' said Anna. 'There are many graves I would like to see and take pictures of. I haven't taken any today. And I want to see the places Greene wrote about: the squares, the restaurants.'

'I took some photos,' said Ella. 'Of the gravestones, the chapel and you with the creep. I will show you in the apartment.'

'I don't think it is a good idea to come back here,' said Robert. 'We should stick to the plan and see Hemingway's house tomorrow.'

It turned out that Hemingway's house was closed and Ella was now sick, so they didn't do much for the rest of the day, just walked in the city centre and visited a couple of churches and restaurants. Two days later they were back in

the resort, where Anna and Ella tried to rejuvenate before their long return flight to Manchester, whilst Robert and David went diving every day. And then they travelled back. On the plane, it occurred to Anna how holidays don't change anything, only ensure that one endures the rest of the year without protest, because dissent would somehow jeopardise the chance of taking another holiday.

However, after this holiday Anna started to learn Spanish, not least because by this point she'd given up hope of promotion and she sought a little revenge on her employer by not devoting all of her time to work. She bought herself books, got some private lessons, became a voracious consumer of Spanish films, and had imaginary conversations with Lazarus. After less than two years she was able to explain to him in Spanish why she didn't return to the cemetery, even though she was still far from mastering the Spanish tenses.

'My family asked me not to go,' she said.

'You didn't need to agree.'

'I'm not a fighter. I do what I'm told.'

'Why?'

'This way I'm left in peace. I can keep the tsunamis of reality at bay and concentrate on my inner life.'

'This is not the right way. The enemies will go first for your external life, then they go for your soul.'

'Nobody is interested in my soul,' Anna laughed.

'I am.'

'Yes, but this is because you are in my soul. You are my creation. I can make you whatever I want you to be, and I want you to stay there.'

But then a moment came when this was about to change. A lecturer from the Spanish department at her university, who was meant to take a group of postgraduate students to

Havana, broke her leg two weeks before the trip, and a heavily pregnant colleague couldn't go in her place. The head was looking urgently for a replacement – somebody who spoke Spanish, as the students couldn't travel on their own. It turned out that Anna was the only person who was able to step in at short notice. Not only would the trip not cost her a penny, but she would receive an enhanced subsistence and extra holiday to make up for the additional work.

Before she started packing her things, Anna asked Ella to find the photos she took in Havana. It wasn't easy, because they were on an old phone which had disappeared somewhere in her bedroom but, in the end, Ella managed to dig them out, including two with Lazarus. She was taken aback, not so much by his lack of beauty (which she still remembered), but by his materiality. Ella, by contrast, looking at him, said:

'I remember we were mean to him. What a shame, he looks so kind-hearted here: a gentle giant, ready to protect you. I wish men like him lived in England.'

'What about your dad?' she asked.

'He is not a giant, for a start. Not even speaking figuratively.'

Anna smiled thinking how Ella had grown up since they'd returned from Cuba.

The trip to Havana passed without any complications. To make conversation Anna told the students that on her first trip to Cuba's capital she was reading 'Our Man in Havana' and planned to locate the places described there, but hadn't had time. The students smiled condescendingly. One girl dismissively said that Greene is unfashionable, simplistic and colonialist. Most likely the places he wrote about didn't even exist. The students had their own literary tour to do, following Cabrera Infante's 'Three Trapped Tigers', a

novel about pre-Castro Cuba, written by an insider, unlike Greene. Some were also keen to see Hemingway's house although, with the arrogant self-confidence of youth, they weren't convinced that he, or the house, were sufficiently authentic for them. Anyway, they were happy to be left to their own devices and leave Anna to her inauthentic pursuits.

The first afternoon Anna went to the Malecón and, after walking for an hour or so, sat opposite a row of colourful houses. The sun was as intense as three years before, but this time she enjoyed it, thinking that there must have been a secret pact between the sun and the city. Havana allowed the sun to penetrate its every corner and it repaid it by polishing its surfaces so that everything looked perfect, even though in reality the city was crumbling. As Greene observed, Havana did not give away its secrets cheaply, although they were hiding in plain sight, unlike Saudi Arabia, perhaps. The locals acknowledged the presence of the sun, looking defiantly straight into its face, without protection. At least it was the case with the old Cubans with their deep wrinkles on chiselled faces; the young were more likely to use shades and sunscreen.

The following morning Anna said 'good-bye' to her students and went to the cemetery. She was walking there for several hours but couldn't find Lazarus. Indeed, she couldn't find anybody worth approaching. Eventually, she asked a gravedigger about him, but he said he didn't know anybody with this name and, when she showed him Lazarus' picture, he told her that he'd never seen him. However, he only started working at the cemetery six months previously, and the turnover of people there was very high.

'Why is this the case?' asked Anna.

'The wages are low, the heat is blazing, and it is not nice to dig up bones to put them

in dumpsters,' he said. 'What more is there to say?' he asked rhetorically.

'So who works here?' she asked.

'Poor people, those who cannot find jobs elsewhere,' he said.

Anna looked at his hands. They struck her as the hands of somebody who wasn't used to working physically.

'Why do you work here?' she kept asking, preparing herself for a rebuke, but he said: 'I was caught trying to escape Cuba. This is punishment for betraying my country,' he said.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' she said, giving him the equivalent of three dollars, and went to the chapel.

There was a service taking place so she left and went back to the hotel, where she fell asleep. When she woke up, some of the students were back, and they suggested that they go together for supper. It turned out that they were less snobbish and arrogant than it initially appeared. After a couple of glasses of wine, and several praises of her language skills, Anna was about to tell them about Lazarus but, in the end, decided not to.

The next day Anna went again to the cemetery with Lazarus' photo. She learnt that people worked six-hour shifts so, in order to not miss anybody, she decided to spend the whole day there, only taking short breaks to go to a nearby cantina. By the evening she had spoken to seven people, gravediggers, guides and one cemetery administrator. None of them knew who Lazarus was. Even though, in each of the Republic of Cuba and in death, all men are supposedly equal, the cemetery was not conducive to forming a community. There was a high turnover of workers and, basically, everybody worked and stole for himself.

Anna also tried to find the crypt where Lazarus took her, but without success. It was unlikely for it to still be open, given that the

Colon cemetery was a permanent building site. The following days she repeated her routine, mainly because it became a routine, but also because she felt as she now belonged to this city of miniature white houses without windows and with vast cellars. As if to confirm it, the workers started to recognise her and call her 'white lady'. Some asked her to buy them things from the shops for foreigners; she did so without asking for the money. Only on the day before her departure, when she conceded that she would never trace Lazarus down, one of the workers took her to a short and stocky man called Raul, who administered records of the graves. Like everyone else, he didn't know about anybody named Lazarus who worked at the cemetery, but he recognised him from the photo.

'His name was Pedro, not Lazarus. He worked here for seven, maybe eight months. Then he was found dead in the room he was renting.'

'What happened to him?' asked Anna.

'He probably committed suicide.'

'Was there a police investigation?'

'I don't think so,' said Raul.

'Do you know anything about him?' asked Anna.

'Well, like every second guy working here, he was an ex-convict. He was accused of raping and killing a woman and served twenty years in prison.'

Anna was about to say that this couldn't be true but stopped. There was no point to say anything. Instead, she asked: 'Do you know where his grave is?'

'No, I don't know. But most likely it is unmarked.'

'A mass grave?'

'Possibly', he said.

'Thank you' said Anna and gave him ten dollars. Maybe it was because this was much

more than tourists normally gave him, or maybe he felt guilty for not giving Anna a lie that might send her away happy, but as she went to leave he caught her arm and said: 'Wait. I will show you something,' and he took her to the crypt where she had fallen asleep.

'He was living here when he started to work as a gravedigger. Later he rented a room. We keep this place for homeless workers, but now nobody lives here. There are still some of his books.'

Anna looked around what in her mind had become a miniature, underground palace but, in reality, was more like a cell. She noticed some old editions of Dickens and Shakespeare and a picture of the Holy Mary on the wall.

'Was this his too?'

'I don't know. Maybe somebody else left it. Gravediggers tend to be religious, obviously,' and added after a while: 'You can take the books. Nobody will read them.'

'Better if they stay here,' she said.

Then she returned to her hotel room, took a shower, went for a walk and ended up in the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She found a small altar, where people put photographs in the sand and burned a candle. She did so for Lazarus. She looked at the stained-glass windows, trying to imagine that Lazarus was on the other side, touching the roof of the church with his giant hand. It was a nice

thought, but it didn't work – she couldn't force herself to believe it.

Back on the street, there was music coming from all directions, and Anna decided to go to one of the café-cum-restaurants which played it. Slightly off the tourist trail, it seemed to be packed with Spanish speakers. She took a small table near the corner, ordered rum with soda, which she sipped very slowly, listening to the conversations. Several men tried to join her, but she asked them to be left in peace. When she was leaving, she heard 'Hotel California', most likely playing in a nearby café. It was strange to hear this old song for the second time in Cuba, given that she couldn't remember the last time she had heard it in England. She imagined herself saying, 'it's a sign,' to Robert or Ella, who would reply: 'A sign, for sure, of the same song being played twice.'

Back in the hotel, she had a drink with her group in the hotel lobby. They told her how grateful they were for accompanying them, gave her a bottle of rum and 'Three Trapped Tigers', all bought in Havana. Anna felt really touched and on the plane opened the book which had a different map of Havana from that in her copy of Greene's novel. It occurred to her to compare these two maps if she ever had a chance to return to Havana, although this was unlikely.

Ewa Mazierska is historian of film and popular music, who writes short stories in her spare time. Several of them were published in literary magazines: *The Longshot Island*, *The Adelaide Magazine*, *The Fiction Pool*, *Literally Stories*, *Ragazine* and *Terror House Magazine*. Ewa lives in Lancashire, UK.

My Gorgon Rejection

Serena Jayne

Her stony-eyed stare
Captures all but me.
Lethargic snaky locks
Deny venom kisses.
Webbed lace-like wings
Dodge my embrace.
I would give my life to
Still Perseus' blade.
Yet my dear monster musters
Just weary indifference
For the heroic heart
That beats only for her.

Serena Jayne received her MFA in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University, and is a member of Romance Writers of America and Sisters in Crime. She's worked as a research scientist, a fish stick slinger, a chat wrangler, and a race horse narc. When she isn't trolling art museums for works that move her, she enjoys writing in multiple fiction genres. While her first love is all things paranormal, the mundane world provides plenty of story ideas.

Accord

Chris Cleary

WHEN HE WAS FOURTEEN, Austin Gattis threw a book at his social studies teacher, the act a culmination of what had been a series of missteps the past three years. His stepfather eagerly contacted the boys home outside Corbeton, and there Austin surrendered his valuables—his phone, his laptop, everything save clothes and toiletries. His loss did not become poignant until he began to write it all down for the man, as if the list he generated was the sum of his identity easily consigned to paper. His scrawls made him feel brief and insubstantial, limited to a beginning and an end. The man asked him to sign, and all the importance of his world went into a locker.

His ma had told him they were to be greeted by the retired army ranger in charge of running the home, his identity confirmed simply by the word RANGER on the dark beige T-shirt across his broad chest. Rohrbacher according to the nameplate on the desk. He chatted politely with her in soft undertones as Austin's stepfather hung back and glanced disinterestedly at the promotional posters on the wall. They said goodbye to him with little ceremony.

Austin watched from the window as the car pulled away and then pointed to the locker. "When can I get my phone back?"

Directly the ranger's cheerful eyes went dark. "Tuck in your shirt. Pull up your pants.

Put your belt on right." His voice was professionally emotionless.

Austin worked up a sneer. "Aye aye, Cap'n!"

As he adjusted his belt, he stared at the banner on the wall behind Rohrbacher's desk. There was a shield with a sun and a star and a red lightning bolt and the cryptic inscription *Sua Sponte*.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Of their own accord."

"And what's that mean?"

"What it means is one day you'll tuck in your shirt without my having to tell you."

Austin nodded slowly.

"Oh, 'sponte' means shirttail then, does it?"

Rohrbacher's eyes remained fixed on Austin's as he told him to grab his bags.

He walked Austin to a cottage of four small rooms, each with three meticulous beds and a large foot locker at the end. Brick walls painted white permitted little decoration. In the common area, an old vinyl sofa once a dark green had been planted in the middle of cushioned chairs and smaller tables. There was no television but plenty of young adult adventure books and magazines. A rickety rolling gate barred access to the compact central kitchen. The cottage was devoid of boys, who Austin assumed did not want to

be trapped indoors with nothing worthwhile to do.

Rohrbacher pointed to one of the beds.

"This one is yours. Have it made by 8 a.m. every day, just like you see it now. Clothes in the foot locker. Dinner in twenty minutes. I'll send someone to get you."

Left alone, Austin instinctively tried the side and rear doors to the cottage. All were locked. Kicking them proved futile.

In the refectory he estimated his new society, about fifty fellow inmates seated in clusters at various tables. He found nothing remarkable about them. "Sit with us," said the boy who had escorted him from the cottage up the hill. He introduced himself to the small group but was careful not to disclose much else beside his name. They pressed him to reveal more of his background, but he carefully studied the slices of roast beef on his fork and grunted. One of the staff members came to sit with them, a young woman, damned ugly, he thought. She placed her tray on the table and asked how they were this fine evening. He heard the already familiar voice over his shoulder.

"Remember, gentlemen, we stand for ladies."

The boys leaped to their feet, hasting to make apologies. Austin stirred grudgingly and ended in a half-stand, half-lean. He turned his head and regarded Rohrbacher, who seemed not to have noticed him in particular, studying instead the far wall. Yet he winked, and he knew the wink was meant for him. This ranger, he thought, had a quick eye, dark and frigid and dangerous, like a black snake hidden beneath a layer of snow, if there ever had been such a thing. He wanted to seize the plastic butter knife and, if he could only have reached him, stab him in the eye. It was not the ichor or the screams of the suddenly

powerless man that mattered. It was the thrust itself.

A month and a half later, he moved up the hill from his first cottage, a promotion of sorts. He was no longer forced to climb to the refectory or the classrooms or the gym. With the move came more personal freedoms, the occasional video game or hike into the mountains or a trip into Corbeton for Burger King. He guessed it was some sort of reward. He guessed he had earned it somehow, but he was unsure of exactly how he had changed, or if he had changed at all. His new roommates, most older, explained that he must have kept his nose pretty clean during the trial period, at least in the judgment of Rohrbacher, an almighty being who giveth and taketh away.

His bunk mate was a boy named Cameron, who was largish and frustrated by his awkwardness. Cam's problems with acne stirred in him an unaccustomed impulse of pity, and the two began to explore common interests, particularly basement billiards and horrific slasher movies. To wake each other they used a rope three inches thick that Cam had stolen from a work shed the year before. The beatings they traded were good natured, not a scourging of personal demons, at least that was what Austin might have assured any staff member curious about their ritual. They learned to team up with other boys to expend their late-night energy. In the winter, for example, they might roll a sleeping roommate in his mattress and toss him down the snow-covered hill. That was great fun. The victim was often still too sleepy to fight them off and, by the time he had dragged his mattress back up to the cottage, seemed to have forgotten about the prank, and nobody ever tattled. So Rohrbacher was not infallible.

Of all his newfound freedoms, he

enjoyed fishing the most. He rediscovered the moments of quiet contemplation he had enjoyed back in Stopes. Fishing was much different than basketball games, which usually ended when someone slapped an opponent's arm or had supposedly stepped out of bounds and the whole thing ended in a brawl. Waiting for a fish to bite demanded patience, and nothing stood in his way but time. The fish were on their own schedule, and he knew there was nothing he could do about it. Fish had it way over people. People were always trying to force him into their own schedule. They were always telling him to do this and not that. Giving in to anger was an exquisite thing. He owned it completely.

Two older boys left the home at the same time, and so he and Cam were tapped to replace them in the employ of a widow who did her best to maintain a small farm adjoining the property of the boys home. Mrs. Wheatley was short and sturdy, with a harelip and upswept bangs dyed bronze and a one-eared tuxedo cat called Cool Hand Luke that, against all instinct, befriended the barn mice. Beside the many chickens and a few Muscovy ducks that mingled freely behind the house, she owned a stable mostly filled with unremarkable brown quarter horses with boring names like Daisy and Dusty.

Although her shelves were crammed with books on horse care, Austin swore the woman had no idea how to tend to them herself, as if her husband when alive had taken charge of everything and kept her locked inside the house. She cooed to them as if they were babies, *precious* this and *honeylamb* that, scared to scold them when they were unpredictable, as if she would hurt their feelings. But coy whispers she reserved for the horses; for Austin and Cam her voice became a shrill clarion of what to do and how

soon it needed to be done. Austin grumbled and often mocked her behind her back, but he knew if he lost this job, he would lose other privileges as well, and so he relented. Besides, where would the old girl be without him? He brought her tea and assured her that all was well outdoors.

One horse stood out among the rest, Mr. Wheatley's prized Friesian named Justice, solid black and so sinewy that when Austin ran his hand along its flank, he felt its muscles about to explode out of its skin. It took dominion of the field snorting challenges, and watching it canter filled Austin with breathless envy. If he could only learn to ride it, he would be invincible. He dallied with its wavy mane and whispered provocative imprecations upward toward its ear. "Fuck you, you sleek son of a bitch," he crooned.

Together he and Cam learned the basics of horse care. Not so bad when you could send them out to forage on their own, but harder in the winter to judge how much hay to bring them. Making sure to break the ice out of the trough. How to brush their mane and tails, as long you didn't stand behind them, otherwise you could be in for a world of hurt. How not to yank the lead line but instead to give it a gentle pull so they'd understand. How to take them through the center of the door so they wouldn't injure a hip on the jamb. How to walk yourself into the stalls first so they don't rush in—animals could be so impatient sometimes. How to stroke them and talk to them quietly as you take off their halter. Mrs. Wheatley said it was all a matter of teaching the horses manners. Even Justice would cooperate when treated right.

Three in the morning was much too early for Austin to be roused, but he could not ignore Cam, shaking him by the shoulders,

urgently whispering his name. He had been dreaming of the exhausted quarry back in Stopes, a convenient escape from his stepfather, and the sibilance in his name conjured vipers hiding beneath the stones.

"Get up, damn it. They've busted loose."

"Who?"

"The old lady phoned Rohrbacher. The horses are out of the stable."

Austin first assumed that some of the other boys had sneaked onto the Wheatley farm and engineered an immature prank. He fumed with the sense of the superiority that comes with having to clean up someone else's mess. But on second thought, he remembered rushing his duties earlier that evening and leaving the stall doors unlocked and the barn door ajar.

Whatever the cause, Cam never named it, nor did the old gal, fretting herself into tears and picturing worse and worse scenarios for her four-legged children wandering beyond the post rails along the property line. "No, ma'am, no chance of that," Austin replied. He and Cam had taken her handheld search light and could see three or four of them aimlessly roaming the field. "We'll get them back in no time."

He and Cam worked in tandem on walkie-talkies to spot the strays. After slipping them into their halters, he let Cam lead them back to the stalls as he remained to sweep the light across the grass and find the next fugitive to rescue. The black of the night sky seemed to intensify the damp, and the beam of the search light made for him a little outpost of humanity and affirmed his presence, one that not even the relentless chirping of the crickets could deny.

At the end of an hour, only Justice remained unaccounted for. Austin had been counting them off in his heart. With Cam on

his way to the stables, Austin hiked to the far end of field where the ground sloped away toward the creek beyond the fencing. Austin could not understand why he suddenly hoped that this last one had simply vanished into the air never to be found, or else had come upon an imaginary ravine, took a wrong step, and plummeted over the edge.

He heard a snap in the distance and, leaning on the fence rail, he shone the light into the woods. He almost missed it in the slow sweep of the beam, but the proud swish of the tail caught his attention.

"Found you, you bastard. Get back here."

He was roundly ignored. He climbed over the fence. Dodging the sharp twigs that lashed his face and poked him from both sides, he made his way closer.

"You hear me? I said get back here!"

He felt ashamed that his voice had cracked.

The horse continued to flip its tail in languorous circles and take a long, casual drink from the creek.

"Hey! Listen to me!"

It turned its head, regarded him with a gaze that burned red and seemed to outshine the search light. Austin feared it, and rising from that fear, an intense loathing gripped him. He yearned for some way to wipe it out of the world.

"You hear me? I'm not coming down there to get you!"

He looked about his feet for a sharp rock to sling and put out its eye. Finding none, he collapsed himself onto a fallen log. He sat and waited five, maybe six minutes, shifting his body every now and then to discover some comfortable position on the bumps and knots beneath him.

Then the horse raised its head from the creek, satisfied. It ambled back toward him,

breaking the dried twigs that jutted from the trees with its smooth, impenetrable hide. Standing before him, it lowered its head and nudged his shoulder, as if humbly requesting

the halter that would allow him to be led back to the stables.

Austin was amazed, too amazed to speak. Then suddenly he understood.

Chris Cleary is a native of southeastern Pennsylvania, in which many of his stories are set. He is the author of four novels: *The Vagaries of Butterflies*, *The Ring of Middletown*, *At the Brown Brink Eastward*, and *The Vitality of Illusion*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *Belle Ombre*, *Easy Street*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *The Brasilia Review*, and other publications. His short fiction has been anthologized in the award-winning *Everywhere Stories*.



To Aspire To

Hollie Savage

Hollie Savage is a photographer from the scenic Puget Sound region of Western Washington. Hollie is a mother of three who manages a family business

Revery

Patrick Theron Erickson

What makes the desert beautiful

is the stars it hides
in its hourglass
before the sands of time
run out

You have only
to turn the hourglass over
to see the stars
it hides come alive

before the sands of time
run out

and you are turned
over to kinder hands

the stars come out

and the desert is beautiful
once again.

Patrick Theron Erickson, a resident of Garland, Texas, a Tree City, just south of Duck Creek, is a retired parish pastor put out to pasture himself. His work has appeared in *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *The Main Street Rag*, among other publications, and more recently in *The Oddville Press*, *Vox Poetica*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine* and *Futures Trading*.

The Harlequin

Katie Nickas

ANOTHER CARNIVAL almost came and went before I discovered a loophole in the Harlequin's game.

It all began one autumn morning when I visited him at the carriage house for the first time. The house sat in a quaint, historic village on a meandering street next to an old drug store, stable, and turnverein. A brick walkway led up to the entrance, surrounded by an oak grove covered in ball moss and tangled vines. Its stately facade stood in great contrast to the wonders occupying the usually recumbent grounds.

The Harlequin worked in the building year-round. As a staunch patron of the courtesan arts, he was known to linger there during carnival season, gazing out the window at the tents and rides dotting the midway.

To the west lay acres of woods where I often ventured as a child. I would have spent the hours wandering the trails and admiring the sunlight glittering through the leaves if not for my duty as a correspondent to keep up on all the latest fair events.

After entering the property, I climbed the wooden stairs to the spacious office on the second floor to find him sprawled across a red velvet chaise longue. With the festivities in swing, I expected he'd be dressed in full attire. Instead, he wore a plain, white shirt and black pants.

Still, there was an unmistakable air of mischief about him, and our eyes met in faint recognition, though I wasn't sure why. He studied me with a look askance before rising off the seat and crossing the room with a nimble hop.

"You look very fresh-faced this morning," the Harlequin said in a tone that made me unable to decide whether it was a compliment or accusation. "Are you prepared for a riveting exposé about grits and corn on the cob?"

"Of course."

I offered my hand, which he shook vigorously.

"Your career is improving, I take it?"

"Every day. You must be excited it's that time of year again."

"I'm ebullient! Please have a seat and let's talk."

The furniture seemed garish in the business office, but I didn't question why it was there, knowing the Harlequin likely lugged it up the stairs himself. I sank into the cushion beside him, noticing his cheeks redden and lips part in a friendly smile.

"So, you're a—*correspondent*?" he asked.

"I'm *the* correspondent. Company's made me chief dispatcher this year."

"Well, then, you should ask questions. Be inquisitive."

Just as soon as he sat down, he leapt up again, capering toward the window. I watched

his calves and thighs flex beneath the pants. His body appeared to be molded from a ball of clay—something sculpted on a whim, but with no less skill.

The Harlequin peered over the veranda as he added water and several scoops of coffee to the machine on the ledge, replacing the decanter.

“How do you like it?” he cocked his head over his shoulder.

“Black.”

“Good for you.”

He stood with his back turned, humming under his breath until it finished brewing. Then, he poured some in a paper cup for each of us—topping his off with cream and sugar—and carried them over. Returning to the seat, he crossed his legs and spread his arms across the back to occupy as much space as possible.

“So, you said you were excited,” I said. “*Ebullient*, I think, was the word.”

“Yes,” he grinned.

“Why don’t you tell me what all the excitement’s about?”

He took a sip and gulped loudly.

“We have the best lineup in years—a grand championship drive, horses and acrobatic riders, impresarios and world-famous performers...” his voice grew livelier as he read down the roster, “...with the newly-renovated hippodrome, it’s sure to be a phenomenal season.”

I tapped my pen thoughtfully against my lower lip.

“Nothing terribly new, though,” I said.

The comment seemed to catch him unaware, and he pursed his lips in response.

“Pardon?”

“It’s a wonderful carnival, but as the saying goes: *Once you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all*, don’t you think?”

That was a cheap shot since everyone

knew carnivals were meant to offer old-fashioned thrills. In the past, I’d been more than content to partake of the usual amusements, recalling a particularly bawdy rendition of Carly Rae Jepsen’s *Call Me Maybe* whistling out of the midway calloope.

Knowing I misspoke, I straightened up to apologize. The Harlequin accepted, looking chagrined.

“I forget that not everyone appreciates a good ballyhoo as much as I,” he said. “Please be sure to inform your readers that it’s a fresh, new season that will delight newcomers and regulars alike.”

I nodded and wrote down what he said, pen flicking back and forth in my hand. He waited patiently until I finished before speaking again, though I felt him monitoring my nervous habits the whole time.

“I took the time to read some of your previous articles,” he said. “I think you’re a very good writer, and I’d love to have someone cover our commission on a more permanent basis if that’s something that would interest you.”

I stared into my coffee cup. The notion of my working for him seemed ludicrous—even dangerous. But when my mouth opened, I spoke without thinking.

“Would it be per diem?” I asked.

“We could begin per diem to see how it went, and then hire you full-time. Think of it as an apprenticeship. What do you say?”

He waited with bated breath, face plastered into a tight grin. It was strange: The Harlequin seemed to have no identifiable age. There were the usual signs of advanced years: skin that clung looser to his face, hair greying at the temples, crow’s feet marking the corners of his eyes, deep voice belonging to a full-grown man. Otherwise, he had all the characteristics of someone much younger—a small child, even.

I drank the rest of the coffee, swirling the sediment in the bottom.

"I'm not sure I'd be suited to an apprenticeship," I said.

"Oh? Why's that?"

He rocked his heels back and forth on the table as his gaze hovered over my breasts, flirting ostentatiously.

"Because I'm thinking of leaving work," I said. "I'd like to get married, have children, and settle down."

He shook his head.

"I hope you don't think me too solicitous, but it seems like a terrible waste of talent. Really," he said.

"I've been doing this for a while. Traveling back and forth across the state, getting lost in the countryside without knowing where I am...always finding my destination eventually, of course."

"You never miss a thing."

"Ten years have passed since I began a career as a correspondent. It's been very fulfilling—so much that it feels natural to leave it behind."

"You're young yet, though."

He turned his head, glancing out the window at the midway, where neon lights pulsed and rides spun. A handful of people ambled around the bare patches of grass, their voices echoing off the racetrack's lower wall, creating shock waves that punctuated the air with a sonic boom. A funhouse sat between two of the rides, a clown's cherry-red tongue unfurling from the clapboard walls leading up to the entryway. From a distance, it looked worn and sad.

My attention returned to the room, noticing the cloisonné jars and art lining the shelves. I half-expected to see Arab servants standing there keeping everything in order, but there appeared to be no one in the building beside us.

Glancing over, I noticed the Harlequin's

mouth was now slack—a smudge of strawberry jam on his pale face. I sensed he was trying to throw me off by acting aloof, though my real concern was the cold cunning that seemed to lurk beneath his bonhomie, along with the nagging sensation that we'd met before.

Closing my eyes, I tried to remember sliding my hand up the elegant balustrade to the room at the top of the stairs. Was there a previous meeting that slipped my mind?

Meanwhile, he'd resumed talking about the fair—or rather, his ideas for it.

"One day, this will be much more than a carnival," he said. "It will be a full-fledged odyssey...host to elaborate floral parades...fountains of jewels with performers gliding down waterfalls...a most interesting tableaux. You might even become a star here yourself."

I noticed his body started leaning to the side so it touched mine. I pictured the world inside his head—a realm where chaos and upheaval were the norm, and the carnival never ended. Then I desired nothing more than to get out of there.

"Something to think about," I said, offering him a quick smile as I grabbed my notepad and pen and rose off the seat.

"Going so soon?" the Harlequin asked. I hesitated in the doorway and turned to see him now fully reclined, shirt clinging to his concave chest. "There's still some coffee left."

"I've got to get a start on this."

"Of course." He winked. "We wouldn't want anyone to be deprived of the latest scoop, would we?"

"Time waits for no man."

"Words for the wise. *Salut, mon ami.* Bonne soirée. Until next time."

"Salut."

My footsteps echoed along the hall as I scurried down the stairs and out of the house. Heading toward the bridge spanning the main

road, I sensed a presence behind my shoulder and turned to find the Harlequin standing in the second-story window, watching me walk away.

The nightmares began shortly afterward, growing more terrifying with each recurrence.

A long hallway leading to a dark room appeared in my mind. The walls were covered in mirrors that cast my body in infinitely smaller reflections until it became a kaleidoscope of fractured images. I saw the past, present, and future merge into a timeless, eternal profusion.

All of a sudden, a hand appeared in a narrow opening high up on the far wall. An elegant hand wrapped in a silk-white glove slipped through the enclosure and descended into the room, writhing toward me.

Seconds passed as the hand came closer. I felt its icy grip on my hair and shoulders, fingers running up and down my spine before it ever touched.

My screams awakened me just in time. The memory of the nightmare pulsed at my temples as I stood at the sink and knocked back an ice-cold glass of water. The night was black as onyx outside the kitchen window, staring back at me.

At dawn, I stepped beneath a sky of tempestuous clouds. A chaotic wind threw me into a café, where I sat drinking in one of the corners, thinking I'd find solace.

But the Harlequin followed me there—his face appearing on the opposite side of the glass, cheeks flexing into a grin that filled the entire pane. I watched the white glove lift and wave back and forth.

He entered the café pretending to be a stranger, sitting in the corner to cast sinister glances in my direction.

The nightmare became a casualty of sleep,

haunting me for years. Each time, the gloved hand entered the pitch-black room in a sleek, effortless motion and reached forward, shifting across the mirrored plexus. As time passed, I began to think its possessor was involved in a secret legerdemain. Always, I woke up just before it touched.

Lying awake, I wondered if it would ever go away. Spring cycled through summer, fall, and winter on an incessant loop, and the Harlequin's game seemed like it would continue without end.

That was, until one night not so long ago.

It was early autumn, and the carnival was in town again. A storm blew through one night, bringing a strong wind that shook the walls of the room. When the hand entered, pausing in mid-air, I noticed a tremor in the fingertips.

Sweat began to collect on my forehead, neck, and lower back as I gathered the nerve to finally confront it.

"Who's there?" I called out, my voice reverberating off the walls of the chamber. A cool mist began curling into the enclosure. The room turned cold quickly, condensing to ice crystals on my skin. I shivered feverishly but remained undeterred.

"You can't hide forever!" I exclaimed.

"Come out and reveal yourself!"

The air prickled with suspense. Finally, the Harlequin spoke, though in a much higher pitch. I didn't recognize his voice until the timbre returned.

"I do not plan to come out," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

Silence.

"I don't believe you really want me to do that."

"But I do," I lied. "What if I joined you?"

While I had no desire to join the Harlequin, I knew it was the only way to learn the truth.

"Don't you find your reflection alluring in all those mirrors?" he asked. "A woman of enchantment and mystery. Why would you ever desire to come out of there?"

The loophole. That was it, I realized. *The Harlequin would try to entice me in any way he could.*

"Enchantment?" I remarked. "What is—you encroaching on my sleep night after night? I find it ludicrous. Where is this place?"

"It is the room of dreams. A place that people struggle their whole lives to reach. Look—I've even given you a luxurious place to rest."

He pointed a finger toward the corner, where I was shocked to see the red velvet chaise longue nested in shadows.

"Why don't you lie down and rest while I entertain you with some of my latest exploits?" he suggested.

"I don't want to rest," I said. "I want to know where I am."

My heartbeat resounded in the thin silence. I was sure the Harlequin could hear it.

"Very well," he said. "Come a little closer, and I'll let you have a glimpse."

As the hand retreated, I left my spot and walked up to the wall, pressing my eye against the narrow, vertical slit. But there was nothing but more dark empty space within.

"I don't see anything."

Silence.

"Try again."

I looked. Nothing. The Harlequin heaved a weary sigh.

"Do you really want to see?" he asked.

"Yes. Very much."

"Alright, then. Close your eyes, and I'll tell you when to open them."

I did as he asked. Mist continued to gather on my forehead in a thin rime. I was perspiring heavily, despite the cold. Seconds passed slowly as I waited, faint breaths punctuating the

silence. The hand hovered above the enclosure. I pictured the skin clammy beneath the silk. Then the smooth softness of the glove met my palm, filling the contours. As our fingers interlaced, the hand pulled me forward through the dark. My footsteps quickened. Suddenly, it was lifting me off the ground and carrying me upward. The voice resonated through the chamber, ascending to a higher and higher pitch. I felt a change in energy as my body rose into the air.

"Alright," the voice said. *Open.*"

My eyelids fluttered to meet the night, but it was gone. I'd crossed some sort of threshold into morning. The ground was real and marshy beneath my feet with fresh-fallen rain, and the warm air stirred. Far-off voices of children and band organs flitted above the treetops.

Surrounding me was a floral and faunal menagerie like something out of a storybook. That was when I knew I was standing in a clearing in the woods near the fairgrounds.

Thick beech and maple trees cast the undergrowth in patchy shadows that scattered across the mesophytic earth. Except for the transient flutter of a bird's wings, the woods were beautiful, ethereal, and still.

But as I peered around the wilderness, a disquieting feeling began to creep in from somewhere unfathomable. I sensed I wasn't alone.

A voice stirred beyond the trees. I walked to the edge of the moraine, standing knee-deep in spicebush and sage to try and see past the brush.

My eyes picked up a bright square of red fabric, and seconds later, the Harlequin emerged dressed in a checkered costume, diamond tights, and a motley cap with bells on

its pronged ends. He held a scepter proudly upright. The soft tinkle of bells filled the air as he stepped into the clearing.

Looking closer, I noticed something else had changed besides his clothing: He appeared much younger—the signs of age erased from his face and his skin fresh and glowing.

The Harlequin had turned into a little boy.

He lowered his chin in a debonair manner and winked, which—due to his puerile appearance—struck me as deeply unsettling.

“Hello, troubadour,” he said in a much higher tone of voice. “Remember me?”

As hard as I tried, I couldn’t recall him from anywhere. Standing together in that ancient wood, he seemed stranger than ever.

When I shook my head, his mouth turned down in dismay.

“You don’t,” he lamented.

“I’m sorry.”

He took a step closer, feet crunching over dry leaves.

“I’m your childhood playmate, Daniel.”

Daniel.

Pain needled my head like a tiny lightning bolt. Slowly, the memory returned.

Daniel! Of course! We used to play in the woods together all the time, though I wouldn’t have recognized him after all these years.

“Daniel?” I said in disbelief. “You’re—the Harlequin?”

“Yes. Well, I am *now*.”

“Why are you so young?”

“As a humble servant, I have no age.

Though my chronology likely falls somewhere near yours, I’m wont to travel back and forth through great expanses of time. Sometimes I even forget where I am, though I’m fortunate to make it back to my office each morning on schedule,” he chuckled.

“You mean you’re—a *time traveler*?” I asked.

“You might say that. However, most of what I do is too eccentric for people to appreciate. I must endear myself to my fellow man by doing what I do best.”

He noticed my dumbfounded gaze.

“I’m sure it’s confusing,” he said. “And I’m not surprised you don’t remember me. Many years have passed since we were kids, and much has happened since then.”

“Why do you come while I’m asleep?” I stuttered, fighting back fitful tears. “Why do you reach for me with your white glove?”

“Reaching is what I do. I may excel at parlor tricks, but at heart, I’m an entertainer. Even my charms have their limits. Soon, the carnival will be over and I will have to go back to being my ordinary self.”

Somewhere between the sound of his voice and the woods’ elegiac whispers, the past came into being. It now felt as alive as the old trees, centuries passing in their sere and withered figures.

But Daniel’s story seemed odd. Though I now knew his identity, his absence all those years made it hard to believe. Aside from the cheery mood, he seemed a figment of the man I visited at the old carriage house. It was difficult to believe they were the same person.

“With my office so nearby, I often come out here to think,” he said. “My job can be very demanding, and I like to take every opportunity to get some fresh air. It’s such a magnificent place.”

He drew in a gustatory breath and marveled as he peered around. Eventually, his eyes landed on me. I noticed the pupils were teeming with light.

“Look at you. You always were lovely and intelligent. Still, I can’t help noticing how serious you’ve become. Have you forgotten the games we used to play together?”

I cleared my throat and spoke guardedly.

"Of course not. But I had to grow up eventually."

"We all must grow up, but I haven't seen you smile or heard you laugh since you came to visit me that morning," he frowned. "You've gotten very grave."

I closed my eyes and tried to picture Daniel amidst the lighthearted ephemera of my youth, but all I could think of was the white glove. Even now, I shuddered at the thought of it returning.

"It's important to stay focused so I can keep growing and moving forward," I said.

"You could grow with me."

"How?"

"By becoming my apprentice as we discussed."

I furrowed my brow and stared at him.

"If you're so light and carefree, why are you always hiding up in that house?"

The Harlequin looked downcast, and the scepter slipped through his loosened grip.

"Every year, when the carnival visits town, I come alive," he said. "But the rest of the time, I'm like the others, waiting in the shadows. So much time passes between life's pleasures, and then they're over and it's back to dutiful propriety."

He reached up to touch my cheek.

"It would be nice to have a companion. I get so lonely up in that old domicile. Think of what fun we'd have reliving earlier times. Good, innocent fun, laughing and rejoicing like children."

All of a sudden, a beam of light punctured the crowns of the tree canopy, illuminating his scarlet-flushed skin and the pulse of veins beneath. I studied the inlets of blood running through like tiny, red spiders. Again, I sensed coldness beneath the corporeal warmth—coldness of unknown origins.

"We make our lives magical," he said, eyes

narrowing to tiny points. "This moment exists for us. It wouldn't be otherwise."

Now, the Harlequin stood close enough that we touched. The plants around us radiated the heat of our bodies—plants with giant hearts that beat at an immeasurable pace. For a few seconds, the woods existed in a more vivid shade of green and brimmed with energy.

I thought of the fingers weaving through the dark chasm. How at first, the dream was nothing more than a splintered image that insinuated itself slowly on my subconscious—the Harlequin's deception gone through countless permutations to become convincing reality.

As the seconds elapsed, my brain steeped in such intense concentration that I forgot we were both standing there. When I looked up, he was watching me expectantly.

"Come with me, and every day will be an adventure," he importuned, face stretching into a balloon-like grin.

The woods breathed deeper, enveloping us. I heard the far-off crunch of leaves, life mushrooming in the cloistered dark, fetal ball unwrapping itself...

"So serious," he said again. "How very serious you've become."

My eyes hung heavy and would have fallen shut if I weren't suddenly alarmed by his changing appearance. His head was no longer still and composed, but bulged beneath the motley cap with numerous odd-shaped protuberances. For a protracted second, one of the buds unleashed a long tentacle that whipped free of the cap, flexing through the air in wave-like patterns before retracting beneath.

Then, there were more. I watched as two thin strands of flesh shot out and rippled around at wildly opposite angles. The strands fused with his cap and transformed into three, writhing snakes, which quickly multiplied to six and then nine, until the whole thing was an

undulating mass of swollen, white bellies and flickering tongues.

One of the snakes lashed out at me, the forked appendage tapping my ear.

My instinct was to recoil and run away from that horrifying sight, leaving the Harlequin in the woods. But I could only stand and watch, mesmerized, considering that as much as I resented his cruel charade, I now pitied him, for it didn't seem like he could help becoming this: a man with a head full of snakes.

Behind the mask maintained all those years was a close companion harkening back to childhood. Like the carnival's giant zoetrope, I wondered if he were the same—trapped in the never-ending gyre of phantasy rides, and doomed to loll around in oblivion long after it ended.

"Curses!" a voice called from within the circlet of snakes. "This might have happened today."

Feeling the overwhelming urge to intervene, I searched around the forest—eyes landing on the trees with missing limbs—for a sharp object that could be used to kill them. When a limb fell, a thousand tiny branches often grew in its place as it regenerated.

But then I worried that slashing off one of the heads meant two more would grow back in its place like I'd heard about in myths.

The Harlequin remained on that same patch of ground as the serpents writhed, showing no signs of torpor. He was talking and being expressive as usual, though his voice was now stifled—a Lilliputian scream trying to wriggle free of the uvula.

"I hadn't intended this," I made out from the garbled speech, with a complex of voices now speaking together—the childish voice overlapping with the adult one to create a bizarre mesh of frequencies.

Reaching out, he began to feel his way around the vast clearing like a blind man, the snakes having subsumed all his cephalic senses. At one point, he stumbled precariously close to a sinkhole brimming with stagnant water. Somehow, he knew to maneuver in the other direction. Sensing I was nearby, he used the low-hanging tree branches and vines to grope his way over. The silk-white glove reached out in a fluid motion, close enough to brush my arm.

I knew the only recourse was to do what I must. After being the Harlequin's antagonist for ten years, it was time for me to embrace him.

But that was very risky. What if the snakes released their venom, or suffocated me? What if they had poisonous breath that could stun me in a moment? Through the snakes, the Harlequin's evil nature had finally revealed itself. I imagined being strapped like Mazeppa to a horse and galloped to death around the clearing, or reared up onto the back of a rampant stag and pitched headlong into the grass to be trampled unconscious. Joining him would likely seal a similar fate.

Somehow still—perhaps due to my appetite for adventure often bordering on delusion—I curried the guts to reach beneath the harem and wrap him in my arms.

He startled at my touch, and I knew it had been a long time since anyone held him. The sensation must have felt so foreign and his psyche so deprived that it overwhelmed him in no time at all.

The silken hands dropped to my waist, indenting the flesh.

It frightened me to be held by him, and I shrank away myself. But the longer we embraced, the less awful it seemed—the initial panic transmuted into an edifying calm—and I made a silent wish that nothing bad would

happen to either of us.

"What can I do?" I asked, pulling closer.

"Just hold me," he said, swaying gently back and forth to the faraway carnival music. "Until tomorrow, *Don Giovanni* and *Cham-pagne Arias*, for today belongs to my love, and our hearts to each other."

Through his parted lips flowed a soliloquy about how his long, lost companion had finally returned. He held me gentle and close, and though the snakes hissed and rattled in my ear, their tongues lacerating the din, I sensed he was enjoying a rare moment of happiness and serenity, though the savvier part of me knew I'd yet to meet the worst if I remained there.

He stood with his feet planted on the forest floor as the aria played, the snakes leaving ghostly wreaths in their wake. He may have still been a little boy, though it was hard to tell. The carnival's dissonant melody seemed to have carried us to the same page of our journey.

"Won't you stay?" he repeated softly.

Stepping back, I pivoted on my foot to turn away. A tear formed in my right eye and rolled down my cheek. It felt wrong to leave him, but foolish to do otherwise. I might have remained had I not known how evil he was.

I looked down to find my feet thumping across the lowland, pants shredding unconsciously through sassafras and Dutchman's breeches to carry me out of the clearing. The Harlequin's voice trailed behind as I thought of what a story I'd have to write, and on what

disbelieving ears it would land. His voice grew fainter the longer I ran, until it was gone.

At the edge of the woods, I paused to catch my breath and wipe the sweat from my forehead. When I turned back to search for a hint of red fabric through the trees, my eyes met nothing but depthless green. Across the field, I made out the distant shapes of the fair—funhouse arching up to the clouds, Ferris wheel milling through the haze.

It was raining, and the attendants were pulling down their canopies and tarps, creating an array of lollipop-shaped domes. The rides ground to a halt, sending the passengers scurrying across the slick ramps.

A little boy clutched a colorful umbrella as he and his mother ducked beneath the water spilling down the awnings. I noticed something about him that would have been easy to overlook if I weren't watching.

The boy stopped beneath a chute of water and peered over his shoulder as if sensing someone nearby. Spotting me standing by the woods, he offered a mischievous wink as he let the rainwater splash on top of the umbrella, laughing fiendishly before his mother pulled him forward.

For a second, I thought I detected a faint sparkle in his eye suggesting the two of us might have been privy to something more than a lighthearted joke. Then I remembered that as many carnivals came and went, it was easy to mistake a stranger for an acquaintance, and a chance encounter for an essential one.

Katie Nickas lives and writes literary and speculative fiction in her hometown of San Antonio, Texas. She once joined a caravan of dancers and drummers before deciding she'd rather watch and write about them. Her work has appeared in *Asymmetry* and *STORGY* literary journals, as well as on websites including CultureMap San Antonio, The Rivard Report, and her personal blog at katie Nickas.wordpress.com.

Fair Trade

Lilah Clay

These years in the scallop
shell with Aphrodite.
Braiding foam roses
into our long hair,
collecting barnacles on our tongues
instead of men.

Nautical quarantine,
in which flying fish
jump into our naked laps
for the gutting,
and raindrops die a thousand
deaths
to plunge our throats.

One bolt of lightning
and her father splits
our raft in two,
sends her ashore in Cythera
to marry the god of blacksmiths
and take many lovers.

I surrender on half shell
to currents of
gibbous moon
that grows back every lizard's
lost tail
to form a mane

in which I must plant
my foam flowers
to guarantee
a ride home.

Lilah Clay is a poet and writer. Her poems have been published in *World Literature Today*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *North of Oxford*, *Right Hand Pointing* and many others. She enjoys a quiet life reading and writing books, picking apples, and chatting with the passing hawks.



Falling Asleep

Erik Johansson

Sweetchild

Arlyn LaBelle

They call me dear though I am dear
to no one, so I give them Sweetchild
in my voice though she died at
fourteen I can still move through her
mouth like cheesecloth, glistening
and fine. She must stay inside
somewhere, nestled in my throat
with her sisters. I hope they braid
each other's hair. I hope they
never think of me.

Arlyn LaBelle is a poet and flash fiction writer living in Austin, Texas. Her work has appeared multiple times in the *Badgerdog Summer Anthologies* as well as *The Blue Hour*, *LAROLA*, *JONAH Magazine*, *The Oddville Press*, *Songs of Eretz*, *Grey Sparrow Press*, *Cease*, *Cows* and *The Southern Poetry Review*.



Do Not Pass This Point

Bratsa Bonifacho

Sharp Edges of My Glass

K.P. Kulski

Capture my soul
Put out the buckets
As the rain falls from the heavens
Like sentiments on a lost day

Let the musk seep into your bones
And the moss cover your face
Like decoration, hanging with fierce intensity
Clinging like tinsel to a dead Christmas tree

Drink the soft cinder of my affections
Like the ache of caffeine
Alcohol, misplaced shoes
And missing pets

Drowning like I do to them all
Covered by the growth
And the sharp edges of my glass

Hackers

Dick Bentley

ON A SUMMER EVENING some friends are seated at the Morrissey's house having dinner. Jack Morrissey is a lawyer. He is the executor of many estates and a trustee of many others. Reading wills has become his vision, his private view into the human heart. Most of his files are in locked metal cabinets.

Next to him sits Ambler Skywood, a young man in his thirties. Skywood has long strands of dark hair draped down over his ears. He is from Silicon Valley and has made a fortune in mainframe analytics. He proposes a toast to the new world of information sharing and to the broader and more open society that will be brought about by electronics.

"Computer technology," he says, raising his wineglass, "has brought us all out of our caves and created a new world of human brotherhood."

"And sisterhood," declares his wife.

Barbara Dwyer, another guest, is pouring some wine for herself. Her napkin covers a small splotch on the tablecloth where she has dribbled a previous glass of wine.

Barb Dwyer asks, "But doesn't coming out of our caves imply a lack of privacy? Will a lack of privacy bring us happiness?" She says that her husband left her after she hacked into his computer and found out about his love affair with their daughter's field hockey coach.

"My invasion of my husband's privacy

ruined my life," she exclaims. She hiccups softly.

"Excuse me," says Ambler Skywood, "but that sort of thing happens every day. Computers have nothing to do with it. You lived in deceit throughout your marriage. Then you hacked into his computer. If you had hacked earlier, you would now be happier."

There comes an outcry from the rest of the guests at the table. They feel like the warbling chorus of a Greek tragedy. Barb Dwyer hisses at Ambler Skywood, "Hacking doesn't bring happiness."

"The loss of privacy," Skywood insists, "brings us all to a new vision of truth. And the truth shall make us free."

"What is truth?" someone asks vaguely.

"I don't want truth," Barb Dwyer declares, "I want my husband back."

Ambler Skywood puts a napkin to his mouth while pushing his glasses upward with an index finger.

"What is truth?" he asks and begins to answer his own question...

"Insight!" someone cries. "You have good insight. What is truth? Yes."

Ambler Skywood smiles and nods.

After dinner, the guests wander outside into the garden. Barb Dwyer excuses herself and retires upstairs. She enters a large bathroom that overlooks the garden.

Her heart almost stops — she catches sight of someone in a mirror. It takes a few seconds before she realizes that the person in the mirror is herself. As she looks more closely, she realizes it is not a wholly recognizable version of herself. She looks illicit in the soft, grainy light — like an intruder. Then she understands suddenly that she is lost. Recently she had hoped to be found somewhere by somebody, but for now she is lost. She continues to look at herself. This is not a normal dinner party, she thinks. She has wandered into the bathroom of lawyer Jack Morrissey, a bathroom for demons. She searches for the lock. Then, without thinking, Barb Dwyer begins to remove her clothes. She is puzzled by what she is doing. Soon, there in the silence, she stands naked.

Looking out the window, she sees Jack Morrissey in the garden below. He is talking to a group of people, as if giving them advice. He is good at this, she knows. He has led a life of serving others, as well as serving others to each other. He arranges contracts, dissolves

marriages, defends people against each other. In his locked files are letters, contracts, memorandums containing peoples' dark secrets.

Barb is now dazzled by what she is doing. Here in the silence of the bathroom, she stands slender and naked while the party continues down in the garden. She feels like a missing image of herself, of all women.

Laughter from the garden brings her abruptly to her senses. She starts to step back into her clothes; then she listens as the laughter surges. The party is nothing, she decides. She catches sight of someone in the mirror and turns toward the reflection.

It is Ambler Skywood, staring intently into an electronic device he holds in his hand.

"I knew I would find you here," he says. "To tell the truth, only naked people can convey their dark secrets, but they must come out of their caves."

Barb Dwyer suddenly realizes that she has been hacked. Should she step out of her clothing again? Will she become public? She contemplates the possibilities.

Dick Bentley's books, *Post-Freudian Dreaming*, *A General Theory of Desire*, and *All Rise* are available on Amazon. He won the Paris Writers/Paris Review's International Fiction Award and has published over 260 works of fiction, poetry, and memoir in the US, the UK, France, Canada, and Brazil. He served on the Board of the Modern Poetry Association and has taught at the University of Massachusetts. Check his website, dickbentley.com.

Thrown Shade

Sarah McCann

My teeth turn seizing zipper,
and I shiver, an anger
invading my inturning.
I tense, skin threatens,
leathers over to bark,
my veins already petrified.
Black, black ink undulled
in dilution, its roots
frayed out over page
that is brain
that was best.

My headache unsolved,
tightened, tightened, tightened,
stripped.

My lawn averaging out to violets.

Sarah McCann's poetry has been published in such journals as *The Bennington Review*, *The Matador Review*, *COG*, *The Spectacle*, *The South Dakota Review*, and *Hanging Loose*. A Fulbright Fellow, she has published translations from Modern Greek in such anthologies and journals as *Austerity Measures*, *Tripwire*, *Words Without Borders*, *Poetry International*, and *World Literature Today*. She also edited a collection of poetry by Robert Lax, *Tertium Quid*, and a book of her translations of the Greek poet Maria Laina is available from World Poetry Books..

Lapis

Lilah Clay

This
evening I will dance
through your mind until my
feet are stuck
to wet leaves
of slanted forests
scented in cinnamon.
How I touch desire—
tonguing the lock
on the cage, *kissing my way out* of confinement.
Yellow as a dandelion or
canary... knuckles
adorned in mourning
dew, tilting the past to lapis.
Blue, unmalleable, and set
in a stone I can gently
back away
from.