

T H E

odenville press



S P R I N G 2 0 1 8

C O V E R A R T

Thatbinyinyu

Mary Griep

Mary Griep is a visual artist and Professor Emerita of Art and Art History at St. Olaf College. Over a long career in painting and drawing, she has shown her work from Finland to Thailand. Since 1998, she has been working on the Anastylosis Project, a series of large-scale drawings of 12th-century sacred spaces. Along the way, she has produced hundreds of studies, detail drawings and prints to accompany the series. The thirteenth drawing in the series — The Baptistery of Saint John in Florence, Italy — was first shown in a solo exhibition at the University of Northern Iowa Art Gallery in January 2018. More of her work can be seen at <https://www.marygriep.com/>

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S T A F F

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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

Table of Contents

	5
Upgraded A Short Story by Paul Alex Gray	
	9
Nikon Poem by Amanda Tumminaro	
	10
Prompting For A Narrative Art by Augusta Sparks Farnum	
	13
A Grimace Poem by Terri Draper	
	14
The Bad Darkness A Short Story by Jessee Kemmerer	
	23
Spaghettios A Poem by James Croal Jackson	
	24
Weeping Art by Hollie Savage	
	25
Smoke Bombs A Short Story by Bryan Erwin	
	33
Monarch Poem by Richard Dinges, Jr.	
	34
Ulu Camii Art by Mary Griep	
	35
Dark Side of The Sun Poem by Richard Weaver	
	36
One Month, Every Year A Short Story by Elisa R.V. García	
	38
Rift Art by Hollie Savage	
	39
Among Wildflowers Poem by Terri Draper	
	40
Incident on Train 302 A Short Story by Stanley B. Trice	
	45
White Tulips Poem by Anna Kapungu	
	46
Supplicaiton Art by Hollie Savage	
	47
Passerby and By Poem by Joe Albanese	
	48
The Franziskanerkirche Art by Mary Griep	
	49
Candy Apple Spell Poem by Joe Albanese	
	50
Company Man Short Story by Andrew Dolbear	
	54
Guantanamo Bay Poem by Patrick Theron Erickson	

Upgraded

Paul Alex Gray

WE'RE LOOKING FOR SEEKERS. *Explorers. Visionaries. Those who dare to dream. Dare to explore . . . I'm Claire Dudas, CEO of LucidLife. I have one question for you. Do you dare to discover the new you? Your LucidLife awaits—*

Tanveer bursts into the apartment, and I turn away from the TV commercial. He's grinning ear-to-ear like a real-life meme. I toss my phone down and give him an unimpressed stare, seeing who'll break first.

He laughs and plonks into the armchair.

"Guess who got implanted?" he asks.

"Lemme guess," I say. "You got an implant."

"Hells yeah! In and out in thirty minutes. Didn't even hurt."

He pulls his shaggy mop of hair up. By his left ear, I can see the slightest bump. Underneath, nanobots will be streaming from a LucidLife implant, sailing along arterial highways, synching up with organs and nerves.

"Jason," he shouts. "I just got a message . . . in my head! Quick, send me something!"

I fish out my phone and type a message.

Didn't know cyborg nerdz existed till I met u.

I'm still amazed how all this works, although it's been in the news for weeks. LucidLife's neural implants are all the rage. Hundreds of millions activated already. The ads are everywhere. *Realise your true potential! Life: Upgraded! Achieve greatness!*

"Got it!" Tanveer laughs. "Hey, Adam? This nerd's gonna make the A-list! You should get implanted too."

"No way. I'd prefer to be in charge of my own brain, not be some minion for a mega-corporation."

He laughs.

"We'll see. Hey, let's go out. I wanna celebrate."

"Where to?"

"Tapas. I just booked us a table," he says and motions to his head.

Class the next morning isn't great. Tanveer and I had way too many beers last night. Unlike me, he didn't look like crap this morning. He told me that the latest LucidLife update hooked into the digestive system to expedite alcohol decay. Unfortunately, the street meat kebab I guzzled down didn't do anything on the way down or the way back up.

I sit at the back of the lecture hall, sipping a coke. My whole brain is pounding, and I think about nanobots.

I keep my eye out for Ellie, and when I see her, I wave her over. She's wearing a white and blue polka dot cardigan. Her hair shines in the dim light, and I think it might be chestnut and . . . Yeah, I've got a big crush on her. Even

my hangover feels a little better when she's around.

"You hear Tanveer got implanted?"

She smiles, tapping at her ear.

"No! You too? What's it like?"

"It's..." she begins to answer, then stares ahead.

I wait a moment, then tap her arm "So?"

"So?" she blinks.

"What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"The implant."

"Oh," she laughs. "Amazing!"

"Mid-term grades have been posted," says our professor. "I'm impressed. A lot of you have improved."

I pull out my phone and log in to Marketing 202, New Product Development. C plus... Not good. My scholarship needs me to maintain a B average, and I'm pretty sure this will push me below.

"Check your grade?" I ask, passing my phone to Ellie.

She shakes her head, "Already got it. A plus!"

That's way better than she's ever gotten before. She's smarter than me, sure, but A-plus? No one gets A-plus in this class. Must be the implant. *Optimii-ze your lii-fe*, the LucidLife jingle rings in my mind.

"Hey, you free Friday?" I whisper.

"I am," she says with a smile.

"Wanna... get tapas? I know a good place."

"Sounds good."

I try to pay attention during class but spend most of it on my phone. My timeline is nothing but friends and family members praising their LucidLife implants – interspersed with ads to get my very own for just \$49.99 per month.

After class, Ellie touches my shoulder when she says goodbye, leaving me giddy. As I

push the doors open and step outside I collide with a guy who drops his laptop to the floor with a crash.

"Woah!" I say. "Sorry!"

He doesn't respond or even seem to notice the laptop. He's staring at the ceiling, a blank expression on his face. I follow his gaze, but there isn't anything there.

I'm sitting on the couch, trying to ignore the muted TV and focus on my assignment. It's all about launching new products, seeing how quickly people adopt them. There's the early adopters, the laggards, the... middle group? It's all so boring.

I turn the volume up on a business show.

LucidLife shares peaked at eight hundred and seventeen dollars today after CEO Claire Dudas announced one billion active implants. She's promised the new over-the-air update, due tonight, will bring new surprises. So Carl, how are you finding your implant?

Studying isn't working out tonight, so I grab a beer from the fridge and change the channel, skipping through endless reality shows, old movies and ads to try to find something. I reach the upper numbers of the channel-sphere and find a weird talk show going on. That one with the crazy conspiracy guy

It's a plague, Micky. And it's not gonna end well. You know what we'll become? Zombies Micky. LucidLife wants to take control of our brains. That CEO is getting rich while she builds her zombie army! I warned ya this would happen! Didn't I? Didn't I!?! And now it's happening, Micky. It's happening-

I flick the TV off. Too much drama.

There's a noise, and Tanveer rushes in and goes to his room.

I haven't seen him for days, so I get up to

say hi. I grab another beer from the fridge and walk down the hall. The lights to his room are off and I'm just about to check the bathroom when I see him sitting on the floor behind his bed, legs curled up like a schoolboy.

"Tanveer?" I ask but he doesn't answer.

I sit down by him. He's completely still, eyes wide open.

"I don't think you've stared at a wall that hard since that time we ate those mushrooms from that guy at the market."

I nudge him gently with the beer bottle.

"Wanna beer, man?" I ask.

He slowly moves his eyes down to the glass, then back to me.

"You ok, Tanveer?"

"Yeah man," he says at last.

"Balcony beer?" I ask, and he nods.

We lay out in our scrappy deckchairs and sip our beers. We found these one night, weeks or maybe months ago. Someone had cleared out their house and left them on the side of the road. Free furniture, we figured, even though the plastic slats were dark with grime.

"So," I ask to break the silence. "What's it like so far?"

He sits up and leans forwards, looking out to the city below.

"It's hard to explain," he says, peeling the label from his beer. "Like, I'm finding all these new... ways. New..."

"New what?" I ask.

"Imagine if you never learned how to speak. Like, when you were a baby, you got left in the woods and were raised by wolves."

My beer's empty and I feel like another, but I motion for him to go on.

"No one ever spoke to you. No one taught you how to read. How to talk. How would you know how to think?"

Somewhere below I hear a siren, and it

strikes me that it's been ages since I've heard that noise. I look to the quiet streets but can't see where it is.

"Think about it," says Tanveer. "If you didn't know how to talk... use language. How would you think?"

"In pictures?" I suggest.

"Probably," he answers, standing up and taking my beer. "Learning how to speak lets you think in words, not pictures. I feel like I'm learning what's next."

He goes inside, and I sit and wait and think about what he says and my thoughts are running, and I picture them as words flowing in and around my brain. Tanveer comes back and gives me another beer, then he lays back on the deckchair and gazes up at the sky.

It's warm tonight, the air fragrant with summertime smells. There's hardly any traffic, and I stroll down the road to the tapas place.

"I didn't make a reservation, and I know it's Friday, but can I get a table for two?"

"Look around," the waiter sighs. "Have the whole place to yourself!"

I order a bottle of Malbec and some chorizo which I nibble at slowly. The waiter hangs around, staring wistfully out at the street.

"Two guys had shifts tonight. They didn't even show up," he sighs.

"Probably a good thing," I say.

"Yeah. I get that everyone's plugging in to some better world, but surely they still need to eat?"

The guy notices two people, walking and actually talking to each other. They're not implanted. He starts chatting to them, saying he'll throw in free dessert if they come to eat.

I swallow another mouthful of wine, waiting for the buzz to kick in. I browse on my

phone, wasting time. There's no messages from Ellie.

After a half-hour, I text her, but the message stays on received. I watch the implant people walk by and I decide that they are kind of zombie-like. I don't mean shuffling about, grunting and seeking fresh brains. They're sort of smiling and focused like they're thinking about something puzzling but cool. Ok, maybe not actually smiling. Like that Mona Lisa lady.

After another hour, I pay the bill and go, following some people down to the park, walking up to the hill that overlooks the big field.

"Holy shit," I say as I reach the crest.

Below me are thousands of people, tens of thousands maybe. Even weirder is the way they're standing. They're in some sort of huge circle. No, one snake-like line that spirals out. In the middle of it all is... nothing. Just an empty patch of grass.

I move closer, pushing through the crowd. Everyone's got a blank expression, and their lips are moving but no sound comes out. They're all just gazing into the evening sky. I wander through a while and think I might as well go home when something catches my eye. A white and blue polka dot cardigan.

"Ellie!"

She blinks, then looks at me, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Oh! Hi, Jason," she says and smiles.

"What are you doing here? What is this?"

"Can't you hear the noise?"

"No," I say. "What noise?"

"We think it's the answer," she says.

"What answer?"

Her eyes seem to glow, golden bright.

Damn, she's got beautiful eyes.

"You'll..." she says and takes my hand.

"You'll need an implant to understand,"

Her fingers clasp around mine, warm and soft and I feel a rush that can't just be the wine.

"I wish you'd come with me," she says.

"You'd love it up here."

A few stars are out now, little pinpricks of silver cut into the night.

"Wait here," I say, and she nods.

I push my way through the crowd, ducking and weaving till I get to the road. I remember there's an implant center on the corner. Hopefully it's still open. I've got money and my ID. I'll get implanted now, sign up for the plan. It won't take long. I'll get it, and I'll go back to Ellie.

I cross the street and see LucidLife logo, and below it, a huge screen. It's playing one of the ads, a close up of Claire Dudas speaking as huge words flash up. I can't make out what it says but as I move closer the red letters shimmer and form into being. As I step inside, I speak them silently.

Discover the new you.

Paul Alex Gray enjoys writing linear and interactive fiction that cuts a jagged line to a magical real world. His work has been published in Nature, McSweeney's, 365 Tomorrows and others. Paul grew up by the beaches of Australia, then traveled the world and now lives in Canada with his wife and two children. Over the years, Paul has been a startup founder, game designer and mentor to technology entrepreneurs. Chat with him on Twitter @paulalexgray or visit www.paulalexgray.com

Nikon

Amanda Tumminaro

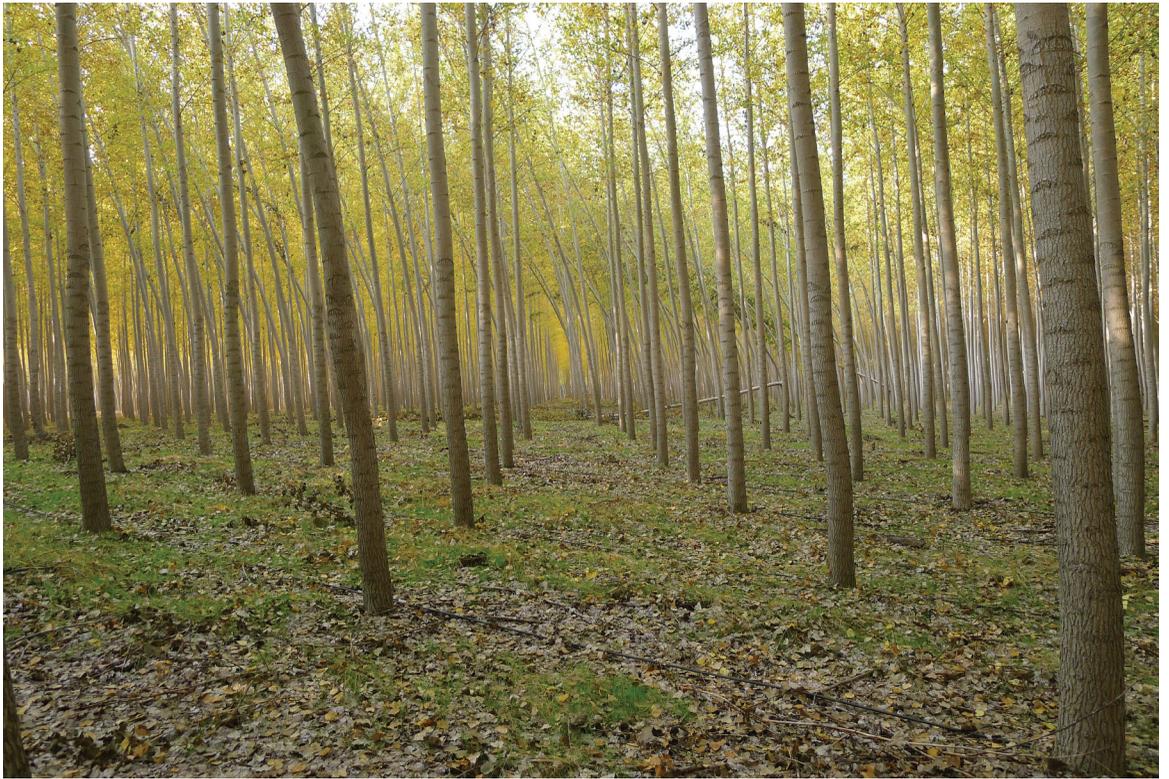
All light casts a bone to the underdog
in an eventual offering.
But all light is paired with shadow.

You take snapshots of me,
the sun carrying on my hair
as if it were a halo.

I take your picture beneath a tree,
as you break plates against the bark.
I want proof that you lived.

We're lost along the way.
Two views from a Nikon,
one day, one night.

Amanda Tumminaro lives in the U.S. She is a poet and short story writer and her work has been featured in Thrice Fiction, The Advocate and Stickman Review, among others. Her first poetry chapbook, "The Flying Onion," will be released through The Paragon Journal in the spring of 2018.



Prompting For A Narrative

A series by Augusta Sparks Farnum

Augusta Sparks Farnum is an artist from Walla Walla, Washington. She describes her mission as "constructing art to redefine spaces, reflecting where she has been and where she wants to be. her work can be seen at augustasparks.com





A Grimace

Terri Draper

The passionate gleam in his eyes
Is corralled only by the fragility
At the corners of his mouth
This isn't quite a smile
No
His expression reveals affliction
Well disguised by reassuring words
Contorted lips stretch
Over jagged yellow mountains
Slack jawed bone
Supports tired flesh
Pain is etched in the slight turn of his head
In his eyebrows
And drooping under his eyes
Holding back tears
His skin shines with perspiration
Frustration possibly desperation
Notice him
A grimace can tell
Much more than a smile

Terri Draper is a senior creative writing student attending Toledo School for the Arts. She currently lives with her twin sister, parents, and tropical plant collection in Toledo, Ohio. Terri will be attending the University of Toledo in the fall as an English major.

The Bad Darkness

Jesse Kemmerer

HE HAD TROUBLE SLEEPING ever since he was a child. He could remember nights sitting on the carpet in the living room, his mother on the couch reading one of her romance novels. “It’s getting to be bedtime,” she’d say as eight o’clock rolled around, and he would just keep playing with his army men, pretending like he hadn’t heard her. “Five more minutes,” she’d say, and he’d be relishing each second that passed, trying to stretch them into minutes. Most nights, his mother would let him go on for a while longer, waiting for him to go to bed by himself. He never would, and she’d close her book with a huff and get that edge in her voice that told him she meant business. “It’s bedtime, now,” she’d say. Even then, he might delay it further by sitting with her on the couch, asking for snuggles. It wasn’t until his father would appear in the hallway like a towering figure, his hands on his hips and a hard look on his face, that bedtime became truly imminent. “Now, Tommy,” he’d say, and Tommy would have no other choice but to go.

He’d lie in his bed with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle sheets and Power Rangers pillows and shut his eyes, but sleep was always hard to come by. When you’re lying in the darkness with your eyes closed and nothing else to do but wait, time passes slowly, and that’s especially true for children. He’d count sheep like his grandmother taught him, but

always got bored of counting before consciousness drifted away. He’d think up stories of being a superhero or of girls chasing him through the neighborhood, trying to plant kisses and lovey-dovey stickers on him, and this sometimes worked, but mostly it only made things worse. He’d get a strange, warm feeling in the pit of his stomach, like he was falling, and it would feel like he was on top of the darkness. When that happened, sleep was always hours coming.

By the time he started school, his teachers started sending notes home about him falling asleep in class or coming to school with bags under his eyes. His mother noticed how haggard he looked in the mornings and his father thought that something needed to be done, so they took him to the doctor. Aside from Tommy’s utter reluctance to go to bed, sometimes involving gross insubordination when his father was working third shift, they were concerned about his health.

The doctor had been mostly unconcerned, advising them to make sure Tommy wasn’t doing any rigorous activity three hours before bedtime and suggesting he not be allowed dessert, to see if the sugar was giving him all his late-night energy. When Tommy still struggled to go to bed and fall asleep in a timely manner (and was extra cranky about having ice cream taken away from him), the

doctor prescribed an antihistamine. It knocked little Tommy out like a light.

That's when the nightmares started.

The first happened when he was in second grade. He'd come down with the flu and had been out of school for the last four days. His fever was spiking, nearing 102 degrees, and his mother thought he might finally sweat it out, so she'd given him his antihistamine and sent him to bed at 7:30. For once, Tommy didn't mind going – the fever had so wiped him out that walking into his bedroom felt like a death march, and when his head hit the pillow (which was plain white, now – no more Power Rangers), he was already asleep.

He didn't remember much about that first nightmare – only the darkness and floating above it, his body tingling with the sensation of falling. And then the darkness was shouting at him, though he knew in the instinctual way you know things in dreams that it wasn't really the darkness, it was his father, and all that blackness beneath him even took on his likeness, seemingly rigid and cut from obsidian. He was yelling about the mess he'd made, shouting and cursing the way he sometimes did when a chore didn't get done or didn't get done correctly. There was a loud sucking sound mingled in with his voice, and the two mixed together until they were one, a sucking and roaring that drew Tommy deeper into the blackness.

When he opened his eyes, he wasn't sure if he was still dreaming or not. His father was still yelling about the mess he'd made, and he could hear the vacuum cleaner going full blast outside his door, though both sounds seemed very far away. His stomach dropped the way it does when you're on a roller coaster, and it vrooms down from its highest peak.

His father threw open the door and saw him sitting upright in the bed. The covers were held up over his mouth. He was biting

them. "What the hell happened out here?" he asked. Then, when he saw his son's face, pale and ghostly, he rushed over to the bed. "Hey, little fella," he said, holding his son's shoulders gently. All the anger had washed out of him. "Are you okay?"

Tommy recoiled at his touch. The truth was, he wasn't okay. He was still dreaming, somehow, though his eyes were open.

His father pulled the bed sheet away and saw his son's body, scratched and raw. He patted down the mattress and felt what he'd suspected since earlier that morning. "What the hell did you do?" he asked, trying to remain calm.

Tommy started crying, mumbling about being sorry, he didn't mean to, it was so cold.

His father pulled him out of bed and took him out into the hallway. "I know you're sick, buddy," he said. "But I need to know what happened."

In the hallway, Tommy saw the attic door pulled down and the pink stuffing strewn about the carpet. It hurt to walk on it in his bare feet. He couldn't seem to stop crying, though that intense feeling of falling had now drifted away, like a bad dream that slips from memory by the time you get out of bed.

"How did this happen?" his father asked. He shook his head, trying to control his temper. Insulation had been ripped out of the wall in the attic, some of it carried down the ladder, and bits of fiberglass were everywhere. On top of that, the smell of piss was pungent. His son had apparently taken a leak from the top of the ladder because the carpet below was darkened in a puddle.

Tommy kept on crying, snot bubbles popping under his nose.

"I thought we'd been broken into," his father said, as if trying to explain why he was so angry. It was clear his son either didn't know or

didn't understand what had happened, and that scared him.

Tommy looked up at him. His eyes were still leaking, but his body had stopped hitching along with the sobs. He seemed to have gained some control over himself, at least momentarily. "Someone did break in," he said. "That's why I had to hide. He was going to get me."

"Who? Who was trying to get you, Tommy?" No one had broken in, he knew; the first thing he'd done when he saw the mess was check all the locks on the doors and windows (after grabbing a knife from the kitchen, of course). They were all locked, and nothing had been stolen.

"I don't know who!" Tommy wailed. And he didn't, though he would find out soon enough.

"Easy, little fella," his father soothed. He knelt so he was eye level with his son. He brushed the tears from his eyes and gave him a kiss on the cheek like he used to do every night when he got home from work. Tommy felt the rough stubble of his father's beard against his face. It reminded him of when he'd pulled the insulation from the wall and wrapped himself in it to keep warm, the fiberglass biting into his skin.

"I want you to hop into the shower," his father said. "Wash yourself up."

"Okay," Tommy said, rubbing his eyes.

"When you get out, I want you to come help clean this mess up, okay?"

"Okay." He turned for the bathroom.

"And Tommy," his father called out. "Get a dish rag for the, uh... because you..."

Tommy turned to look at him. His head was lowered like a dog who's made a mess in the house.

"Just get cleaned up, buddy," his father said.

Though most dreams wash away from your mind as the day goes on, Tommy's seemed to gain clarity. By the time his mother got home, he could remember the whole thing.

He told her how he'd woken up shaking and shivering, how cold he felt. Even with his eyes opened, he said, he felt the darkness—the bad darkness—everywhere, and he was above it somehow. It seemed like it was sucking him down because he had that feeling of falling, like you do in dreams sometimes right before you wake up, only it didn't go away because he was already awake.

"You poor thing," his mother said.

He told her how everything became so dark, like his eyes were closed even when he knew they weren't. He looked around and saw that he was in his bedroom—he could see the trophies on his dresser and the clothes hamper by the door and the pictures on the walls—but they were all behind the darkness. Then he saw the shapes on the walls, how they were darker than everything else, like they were empty. They were dancing, Tommy said, and he knew they were coming for him, so he had to hide.

"Honey, why didn't you come get us?" his mother asked.

"I didn't want them to get you, too," Tommy said.

His mother smiled at that, though it was a hurt expression.

Tommy told her how he grabbed a chair from the kitchen, being extra quiet because he didn't want the shapes to hear him. He took the chair into the hallway with them dancing all around him and got on it to reach the attic string and pull the ladder down.

He was just in his underwear, he said. It was cold in the attic. He thought he'd freeze to death, so he grabbed some of the insulation

from the wall and wrapped himself up in it to keep warm. Then he just sat there, waiting for the sun to come up through the window. He was sure that was the only way he'd ever get warm again.

"Do you know how long you stayed up there, sweetie?" his mother asked.

It was a long time, Tommy said, because eventually he did see the sun, and he started feeling a little better. When it first came up, it was like he was looking through a tinted window – there was still the haze of darkness, but now it looked much thinner. Eventually, it just wasn't there at all, and Tommy said he wondered why he came up to the attic at all. He went back down the ladder and climbed into bed.

"Your father said there was, uh... that you may have peed a little. Do you remember that?"

Tommy looked at his mother shame-faced. "I really had to go," he said, "but they wouldn't let me come down. They said it would be funnier this way." He started crying.

His mother shushed him and drew him close, rocking him back and forth and telling him that everything was going to be fine, that he wasn't in trouble and his father wasn't even mad, only worried.

"Promise?" Tommy asked.

"I promise, honey," his mother said.

It was a long time before Tommy had another nightmare.

He breezed through second grade, bringing home straight A's on every report card. He made friends with many of his classmates, and though many asked, his parents were reluctant to let him go on sleepovers. So was Tommy, for that matter; the night he'd seen the bad darkness remained in his memory, though it

grew more distant over time.

He had a few episodes here and there. He would creep into his parents' room some nights and complain about not being able to sleep. He was on top of the darkness again, he'd say. The bad darkness. Sometimes, he would wake up from a nightmare screaming, and his mother would trace circles around his face until he fell back asleep. These episodes were few and far between, however, and his parents saw no reason to be worried, nor did they connect the incidents to the night he'd rolled around in insulation.

By the time he entered sixth grade, he had become interested in sports and, perhaps more importantly, girls. It was unclear which of those infatuations were the cause or the effect. With some training from his father, who had played ball throughout high school and the two semesters he'd attended college, Tommy made his middle school basketball team, the Woodridge Wombats.

The second incident of the bad darkness came the night his team lost to the Jefferson Cougars 58-29. Tommy had actually gotten some good playing time that night; the starting point guard twisted his ankle near the end of the first half, and Tommy was next in line for the position. He ran onto the court when Coach gave him the nod, smiling at Mom and Dad in the stands. That smile was quickly wiped away when he double-dribbled bringing the ball in for the first time; it was further wiped when he failed to score a single point the entire half.

On the ride home, Tommy dreaded pulling into the driveway because he knew what would happen next: his mother would walk up the steps to the front door, and he and his father would go in through the basement. Once they were in the garage (and his mother couldn't hear a thing), his father would let him

know how he truly felt about his basketball performance.

"A point guard is supposed to be captain of the team, a leader out on the court," his father said as Tommy pulled his basketball shoes out of his duffel bag.

"I know," Tommy said.

"I didn't see that tonight. You didn't even look confident out there calling plays. You've got to be loud and confident, a commander." He raised his voice so his son could hear how it was done.

Tommy shied away. He was plenty accustomed to his father's yelling – nothing much got done in those days without a barked command – but tonight, it scared him.

His father must have sensed this, because he scrunched his face into a ball and shook his head, looking at his son as if he were either incredibly stupid or incredibly naïve. "What are you scared for, huh? You think I'm gonna hit you or something?" He stepped forward.

"No, Dad." And Tommy didn't. His father had never hit him, though the threat of violence had loomed behind those deep-set eyes of his on more than one occasion.

"You're getting older now," he said. "It's time to stop acting like a goddamn baby all the time."

"I know," Tommy said. He looked down at his shoes and saw his father's shadow inches from his feet. It was being cast off by the single uncovered lightbulb that hung from the ceiling. The shadow didn't move, even when his father reached over and grabbed Tommy by the bicep. His hands were like steel clamps around Tommy's muscle. As Tommy looked up into those dark, hollow eyes, he had the sudden memory of that night years ago, and the shouting he'd woken up to, mingled in with that loud sucking sound that seemed to be so far away but drew him in closer so it

could devour and consume.

As if on cue to save him from all that was bad and terrible, his mother opened the garage door. "Dinner's ready," she said. And then, seeing the scene before her: "What's going on here?"

As if she didn't already know, hadn't been listening just outside the door.

"Nothing," Tommy's father said, and released his grip on his son.

Tommy kept looking down at the shadow, his face growing whiter as he plunged deeper and deeper into all that emptiness, all that bad darkness. His gut dropped down into his balls like an anchor.

"Are you okay, Tommy?" his mother asked.

"He's fine," his father barked. "Christ, Sheila, we're just talking about the game."

"I know you're talking about the game," Sheila snapped back. "I could hear you from upstairs. I'm pretty sure the whole damn neighborhood could hear you."

"Mommy to the rescue," Tommy's father said mockingly. "Go on, son. Run to Mommy."

And Tommy did. Not so much to get away from his father, but to get away from the darkness that jutted out from his body, crawled across the garage floor and nipped at his toes.

When they were upstairs, his mother comforted and consoled him as she always did when his father got on his case. "He loves you," she said. "He just has a hard time showing it."

Tommy knew that was true, though he didn't much want to believe it at the time. Truth be told, even though his father was a hard man, and stingy with his affection, he and Tommy had gotten along well throughout most of his life. It wasn't until he grew up a little that the relationship became somewhat strained. Tommy was always a sweet, sensitive boy, and although he favored his mother's looks in his

younger years, he was looking more and more like his father by the time he reached puberty, with broad shoulders and a square, set jawline. Perhaps that was the reason for the strain; his father saw weakness in him, and that weakness was becoming a reflection of himself.

Whatever the reason, after that night, the night of the second bad darkness, their relationship was never the same.

As Tommy settled under the covers, he feared what would be waiting for him when he closed his eyes. It had been years since he'd last seen the bad darkness – really seen it, not just floated above it the way he sometimes did – but tonight, he knew it was coming.

It didn't take long for it to grip him. Tommy tossed and turned as he floated above all that darkness, letting out involuntary whimpers as it gripped his guts and pulled him closer. He shut his eyes tighter, held his hands over them as if hoping to blot out the darkness with more of it. It didn't work. He briefly considered going to the living room, maybe falling asleep on the couch with the television on like he used to, but quickly put the notion out of mind. He wasn't a goddamn baby anymore. He could handle it.

Sleep was a long time coming, but when it finally came, he fell into it as if it were a hole in the ground, one that went on forever. When he woke up, he was on the kitchen floor. He couldn't stop crying.

And his mother couldn't stop screaming.

The second nightmare was much like the first. Tommy heard his mother's screaming, like a banshee in a deep, dark wood, and his father's shouting. They mixed together with that intense sucking sound until they were one.

He was standing in front the refrigerator, he knew, though everything was behind that thick film of darkness. He could see the dome light and the leftovers from dinner in their

Tupperware containers. He was cold all over – even his eyeballs seemed to shiver in their sockets. He had to get warm; he was sure he would freeze to death if he didn't. He grabbed a bottle of hot sauce from the condiment rack. He poured some over each eye, smacking the base of the bottle with the flat of his hand to squirt out more. It didn't warm him up much, but it was better than nothing, so he kept doing it.

Then that barking, sucking sound intensified. He suddenly wasn't sure where he was anymore; the film of darkness around him became deeper and emptier, and he could no longer tell what was behind it. The face of it was seemingly carved from obsidian, and it was smiling. Tommy fought against it, kicked and punched and snapped his teeth, but it grew all around him.

And then a shimmer of light, as if he were in dark tunnel, facing an oncoming train. The light sped towards him, washed over him, and it was good.

Just like the last time, he couldn't remember the dream immediately, but it became clearer as the seconds ticked by, like a high definition camera finding focus on an object far off in the distance. And Tommy didn't like what he saw.

If the first nightmare was a taste of what was to come, the second was the whole meal. After that night, Tommy was never the same.

The episodes became more frequent. Tommy's mother would find him late at night hunched over the stove, his face hovering directly over the burner. His father would find him in the backyard covering himself in dirt, shoving handfuls of it into his mouth. Most times, one of his parents would catch him before he did too much damage to himself, but

sometimes he had to be taken to the emergency room. After his fourth or fifth visit, the doctors became concerned.

Tommy's mother took him to a psychiatrist, per their request. It was a gentle urging, but they clearly outlined the alternative: institutionalization. The sessions were expensive, and Tommy's father could never quite quantify how much good they did – Tommy continued having episodes once or twice a week, even six months into his bi-weekly sessions. What he could quantify, however, were the dollars and cents that were quickly drained from the bank account. He started working overtime to pick up the extra slack, though Tommy knew that wasn't the real reason for his extra hours spent on the clock. After he'd taken a chunk out of his Dad's hand that night of the second bad darkness, his father was never able to look at him the same, always averting eye contact as soon as it was made. The times he did look at him, it was as if he were looking at a science experiment, one that had gone horribly wrong.

The sessions with his psychiatrist, Dr. Blankerton, continued for years, though they never managed to hit the breakthrough she said was always right around the corner. The heavy-duty sleeping pills Tommy was prescribed were mostly effective, but they began taking a toll on his body. The side effects were nasty, including irritability, suicidal thoughts, and drastic weight loss. Tommy hated taking them, but he continued to do so. He hated the bad darkness even more.

Sometime into his eighth-grade year, his mother booked an appointment for him at a hypnotherapist. She'd heard from a coworker that it had helped her quit smoking, and at this point, she was willing to try anything.

Tommy sat on the couch and followed the hypnotist's instructions. He wasn't even

sure he could be hypnotized; he'd read up on the process before and understood that the success of it was as much up to the person being hypnotized as the person performing the hypnosis. More than that, he wasn't sure he wanted it to work. He was terrified of drawing back that black film, that bad darkness, and seeing what was on the other side.

When he came out of the trance, he didn't know he'd even slipped into one. He remembered closing his eyes and counting backwards from ten, but nothing else. All he knew was that one moment he was falling into all that darkness, and the next he was sitting up on the couch, nodding his head to the hypnotist's questions, either yes or no.

He'd said a lot during his time under, apparently, as was evident from the tape recording.

And none of it was good.

Tommy's mother never had to divorce her husband. He died the night of Tommy's session. He'd crashed his car into a telephone pole, though no skid marks were found on the scene.

Life went on without him. It was a long time before Tommy saw that bad darkness again, and for a while, he thought he was cured of it forever.

He never went to college, though he excelled in all his classes, graduating from high school with an overall 3.9 grade point average. He took night classes at the local community college, and that's where he met Samantha, whom he would eventually marry.

After about a year of dating, Sam and Tommy moved into an apartment together. They were both nineteen. Tommy's mother wasn't thrilled about the idea, but she trusted her boy, now a man, and knew it was time to

let him go.

She still dropped by unannounced from time to time, sometimes late at night while Samantha and Tommy were asleep. She never knocked on the door passed 9 PM, but Tommy sometimes saw headlights through the window that overlooked the apartment parking lot. They reminded him of the light that had washed over him, saving him from the bad darkness the second time around.

He was always glad to see them.

Dear Dad,

I'm not sure why I'm writing you. This letter was Sam's idea. You've never met, but she's my girlfriend. Fiancé, I guess. She thought it would be good for me to put everything down on paper. Closure, she calls it. I don't know if that's what I'd call it, but I'm here writing you all the same.

Do you remember the nightmares I used to have? The bad darkness I always used to talk about? Well, Dr. Blankerton (you remember her - you certainly wrote her name on enough checks) thinks that was my mind's way of protecting me, of blocking out all the times you came into my room late at night. You were the shadow, the emptiness, the bad darkness, and she thinks the reason I rolled around in insulation and pissed on the carpet was because I was trying to punish myself for it, that somewhere deep down I thought I deserved all those things you did to me.

I don't know how true that is, and I told her as much. But what did you always say about head-shrinkers? That they can never be wrong, because they never actually say anything – that's the job description. I see what you mean now.

I've never told anyone this, but when the

hypnotist put me under, I remember getting that rush, the one where I know the darkness is going to become a living, breathing thing. I've tried to describe it before – to Mom, to Sam, to Dr. Blankerton, even to you, on one timid occasion – but I don't think I've really come close. I imagine it's the way a person would feel skydiving, like your body is dropping a million miles an hour but your guts are shooting back the opposite direction.

Usually it's like a film. I can see everything around me, I understand what's happening, but it's all in the background, like my eyes are closed but I can see through my eyelids. This time was different. There was nothing but the bad darkness.

I could hear the hypnotist's voice, slow and cadenced, and I could even hear my own as I answered her questions, though both were far away. What I could hear most was the laughter, like children on the playground. And I knew who they were laughing at.

It didn't take me much time to understand what was happening, as I'm sure you do now. Whatever they are, they're just having fun.

I don't know how long they played with me. I can't remember anything they did or anything they made me do, but I think that's the point. I think they just wanted me to remember that I was there and that I'll be there again. For good.

I cry sometimes thinking about it. I'm not ashamed to admit it.

It's been years since that night at the hypnotist's office, and for the most part, I've slept like a baby.

Sam and I are getting married, as I've said. It's going to be a small, intimate ceremony, and by that I mean we're going to the courthouse next Wednesday. We've been living together for years now, and her belly is already starting to show. The doctors say it's going to be a boy.

She's the one who made me write this letter. She's on the couch right now pretending to read, though what she's really doing is making sure I put pen to paper. I don't blame her for it. She's just trying to help.

(Guess what kind of books she reads? Ha!)

I'm scared, Dad. I don't know how else to say it.

I'm writing you because they're coming back. Last night, I saw the bad darkness again. Sam woke up and found me with a twisted coat hanger in my hand, standing over the

bed. I didn't hurt myself, and she said she was thankful for that, but I remember being there. It's not me I'm worried about.

I try not to sleep much.

I've been writing for an hour now, and I think that's enough. For Sam's sake, anyway.

Did you feel it too, Dad? That's all I really want to know.

Do you still?

Help,
Tommy

Jesse Kemmerer lives in West-by-God, where he runs a website design company. He plays drums in a blues band and shoots pool on Wednesday nights. He hopes you enjoyed his story.

Spaghettios

James Croal Jackson

The bowl is where
the howls come from—
OoOoOoOoO!
A broken-record werewolf
in this microwave-boiled,
tomato-red September.
I have been trying to form
the words to say to you
with only a vowel.
When you left
for some knockoff white-hat,
greasy Chef Boyardee
I went to the zoo
to study manatees,
but they, too, are a migratory
species. I saw the first of its kind
take on a mangrove but emerge
fish-in-mouth. She floated to her
friend or brother or lover
and squealed syllables

until the other swam away.
I guess no one communicates
with each other the proper way
anymore. All these sounds
these OOs and Os
processed uneaten

James Croal Jackson is the author of The Frayed Edge of Memory (Writing Knights Press, 2017). His poetry has appeared in The Bitter Oleander, Rust + Moth, Cosmonauts Avenue, and elsewhere. He has won the William Redding Memorial Poetry Contest and has been a finalist for the Princemere Poetry Prize. Find him in Columbus, Ohio or at jimjakk.com.



Weeping

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.

Smoke Bombs

Bryan Erwin

HE'S NOT GOING TO LISTEN TO ME.

He never does. But I feel like I need to say it anyway. I am head henchman, after all, and if he didn't promote me to that position because he trusts my opinion then why did he?

"The green tux seems a bit over the top," I say. We're only a couple of blocks from the lavish estate where Iguano-Don, posing as my chauffeur, will drop me off.

Iguano-Don says nothing, but that also means he doesn't tell me to stop. Although I really should have brought this up before we left, I feel more confident now that I've spoken. I decide to expand on my point. This should be a routine jewelry heist from a billionaire's exclusive private party. My boss likes to add these flourishes which only complicate things. Most of the time I indulge him, but I really need this one to go well.

"I won't blend in," I say. "People in this town see green and immediately think of you. Someone may call Handyman before you even get to your part."

"Nonsense," Iguano-Don says. He draws out the 's' as long as he can, letting his forked tongue (the result of an expensive plastic surgery, not a melding of his DNA with that of a dinosaur during a nuclear accident like he tells people) flicker outside of his mouth.

I wish he wouldn't do that. I've known him long enough to know it's purely an affectation. If he wants to do it in public, fine, but there's no need to put on airs when it's just the two of us. I've never said anything, but I swear he knows it annoys me and chooses words with s's in them specifically to get to me.

"Imagine if I was in a regular tux," I say. "I could just snatch it and run. By the time Handyman figured it out, you'd have already sold the necklace to the One Percenter. Even if Handyman came looking for it, there'd be nothing to find."

Iguano-Don glares at me via the rearview mirror, his contact lenses tinting his eyes yellow. He taps his thumbs, outfitted with spikes, on the steering wheel. Knowing his reputation for violence against anyone who opposes him on the smallest of issues, I decide I've said my piece. I shift in my seat, straighten my posture and adjust my seatbelt accordingly.

We pull through the wrought iron gates of the Kirkman estate. The driveway stretches what seems another mile until it reaches the enormous four-story house. Limousines line both sides of the road, narrowing the path. I worry that our black Cadillac makes it obvious that we shouldn't be here.

"The smoke bombs are in your pockets?"

Iguano-Don hisses.

I pat my pants pockets, though I know they're there. They bulge out a bit when I sit down which means I'll need to stay on my feet during the party.

"Yes, sir."

"When the necklace appears, you will send me a message, then immediately set your stopwatch. After six minutes and sixteen seconds, you will release your smoke bombs. That, plus the chaos created when myself, Sven and Sebastian burst in on ATVs will serve as cover while you steal the necklace."

We've gone over the basics of the plan a hundred times already. One foolish junior henchman asked Iguano-Don what to do if Handyman shows up. Iguano-Don said to kill him, then used the junior henchman to demonstrate to the others exactly how to do so.

It was a valid question, but I learned long ago that Iguano-Don does not operate with a Plan B.

Our car pulls up to the front of the home, my drop off point. I open my own door. It's an unusual move, but Iguano-Don can't afford to step out of the car and reveal himself. If no one notices his eyes, thumbs, or tongue, they would surely recognize his scaly skin. Some say it's his defining feature, though I was disappointed to learn that the "scales" are actually a nasty, untreated case of psoriasis that he spends an hour and a half each day dying green.

"See you soon," Iguano-Don says as I close the door and turn to the home. For the next couple of hours, I am not Iguano-Don's head henchman, but noted investment banker Benjamin de Loughrey.

"And tell me, Benjamin, what year did you win the Masters?"

The two older men around me laugh in appreciation of the other's joke. I've found a group to converse with, which was my first objective for the night. It keeps me from roaming around a party where I obviously know no one. I think my green tuxedo was the attraction, so I suppose I must give Iguano-Don some credit.

The joke teller, a man named Winslow, is rotund with pure white hair. He doesn't look much different from his friend Featherstone. I can tell them apart mostly by their spouses, who have stepped away from the group. Winslow's wife is roughly his age, while Featherstone's may still be in college.

These are important details. Should things go sour and require me to take a hostage, Winslow would be the better candidate. I assume his wife has a deeper connection to him and would be more willing to negotiate, whereas Featherstone's wife is likely waiting for him to die.

I don't understand Winslow's joke, and it gives me a moment of panic. I've been able to keep up with the conversation just enough to throw in little asides meant to indicate that I fit in with the rich crowd. I should; for the last six months I've read countless newspapers, finance websites, and blogs, memorizing the trends of the stock market. When I wasn't doing that, I read up on topics like high tech gadgets and luxury resorts.

I also combed through pictures of billionaire estates which kept the awe factor down when I entered this massive ballroom. The floors are marble; the chandeliers are glass. A staircase spirals into the room from the second floor. Iguano-Don assures me I'm equipped with the extra-strength smoke bombs, but two of them don't seem adequate to trigger the smoke alarm in this room, let alone provide a screen for a theft.

I force a smile and sip from my third glass of sparkling grape juice. I don't think it wise to consume alcohol prior to a heist. My hand goes down to my pocket, feeling for the smoke bombs one more time.

"Don't be silly," the third member of the group, slightly younger than the others, but older than me, says, "he's not a golfer. The only people who would wear a tuxedo like that work for Iguano-Don. He's clearly planning to rob the place."

I nearly choke on my grape juice, though Winslow and Featherstone find the comment uproarious. Who is the man who spoke? He's not Handyman – he's too old, plus his skin isn't made of sandpaper. As far as I know, Handyman works alone; I don't recall anyone but him ever bashing me over the head with an array of tools.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I don't think I caught your name."

"You may call me Bradley."

I try to place his accent. It sounds like a mixture of a few I tried on before the party, knowing my regular speaking voice is too gruff not to stand out among the elite. There's a hint of faux British in there, plus the clipped, stodgy speaking patterns I associate with the ultra rich.

"Bradley. Is that your first name or your last name?"

He stares at me as if I have insulted him.

"You may call me Bradley."

He says it calmly, but with menace. I'm not intimidated but am a little concerned. There's something about this guy that's not right. I like everything to be right in these situations.

"And what do you do, Bradley?" I say.

"Clearly—"

He pivots on his heel one hand held out palm up to indicate the room.

"—I make money."

Whether this is meant as an indication that

he knows I'm out of place, a clever dodge of my question or a smarmy response, I can't tell. I'm not sure who this guy is, but he's good.

Of course, I am too. Dealing with these situations is what got me a high ranking position in Iguano-Don's organization.

"And I assume you must too, Benjamin, given your tuxedo is the color of money," Winslow says. His nervous laugh betrays his clumsy attempt to break the tension. I take a moment before releasing my gaze from Bradley.

"Do you work in finance?" Winslow says.

"When you boil work down to its essence, isn't everyone in finance?" I say.

I turn to look around the room, following Bradley's eye line to see if he's in cahoots with anyone here.

"Tell me," Featherstone says, "what is your opinion of Cushing?"

I allow myself a smile of satisfaction.

Featherstone has provided me a showcase for my preparation, so I push the Bradley question back for a moment. The Cushing Corporation came up repeatedly in my reading. They're a company led by some hotshot 24-year-old that will have an IPO in two weeks.

"That depends."

Featherstone cocks an eyebrow.

"Upon what?"

"Do you consider blackjack a game? Or a lifestyle?"

Featherstone wags his finger at me, his head bobbing up and down and his smile widening.

"Yes," he says. "Yes. I like the way that you think."

I smile back, but I'm getting impatient. This party is supposed to be about the necklace, so let's see the necklace. My antiperspirant can only last for so long. It's a lot of work to appear loose while conversing on unfamiliar topics. I'm running out of cryptic aphorisms.

A bell jingles, like someone sick in bed summoning their caretaker from another room. It quiets the crowd, and we all turn as one toward the back of the room. A two-foot high platform sits against the floor to ceiling windows that look out onto the dark night. Those are the windows Iguano-Don will crash through once I drop my smoke bombs.

“Your attention, please,” an elderly but lively man says into a microphone. I recognize him as Everett Kirkman, the owner of this palace. The last murmurs of conversation quiet.

“Thank you all for coming tonight,” he says. “I know you’re eager to see my recent auction purchase, especially those of you whom I outbid for it.”

A gentle laugh ripples through the room. Several people look toward Bradley, who does not smile. Are these his cohorts? Was that line some kind of signal?

“But first a few words . . .”

I’m not sure how Everett Kirkman defines “a few,” but I quickly grow bored with his speech. He starts off with some thoughts on philanthropy, which, to my ears, descend into rambling within 45 seconds. I glance around the room; everyone seems riveted to what he’s saying. Surely they’re putting on a show.

Only Bradley, standing to my left, seems as disinterested as me. He checks his watch a couple of times, taps his fingers on the side of his thighs.

“And now,” Everett Kirkman says, “I present two of the most beautiful, precious things in the world.”

He points toward the huge staircase.

“My granddaughter, Anne, and the Kesseling necklace.”

Oh damn. A young girl makes her way around the bend in the staircase. She’s dressed in a sleeveless white gown, like a bride. The lights gleam off the huge diamond necklace

around her neck. She can’t be more than nineteen years old. This is a complication I do not need.

The way Iguano-Don presented this, I thought the necklace would be on a red velvet pillow. My plans are all based on that assumption. I start re-working them on the fly.

It’s easy to lift a necklace off a cushion and run. If time is an issue, the whole pillow can come along. But now I’ll have to get the chain unhooked. That’s hard enough to do when someone’s cooperating. I’m sure it’s a tiny clasp. I can never get a good grip, but I doubt Iguano-Don’s going to accept me ripping the necklace off and possibly losing some of the diamonds. The One Percenter won’t buy damaged goods.

Just look at this poor, innocent girl. All right, she’s not poor. But I can be pretty sure she’s never had a goon like me wrestle a necklace off her neck. She looks so happy to be gliding down that staircase. This is her princess moment.

Eh, she’s probably not that nice. I’m sure she goes to some ritzy all-girls school. I bet she makes fun of the kids who only have 72 inch TVs, not home theaters.

I know I’m trying to justify this. If I couldn’t rationalize crime, I’d have quit a long time ago.

Maybe I should have. It hasn’t gotten me as much as I thought it would. Mostly concussions – Handyman alone has given me eight (or is it nine?). Plus, now I have to pull the dick move of stealing the necklace, then hand it off to Iguano-Don so he can hold it up as if he’s the one who took it. Why, because he’s a muscular guy who looks vaguely reptilian? Doesn’t seem fair.

Ah, crap. The girl’s at the bottom of the staircase. People are starting to push in for a closer look, and I forgot to notify Iguano-Don. I reach into my pocket and tap the button on

my phone to send the pre-written text message. I also poke a button on my watch to kick off the timer. Six minutes, sixteen seconds until show time.

I follow the crowd as we sway toward the staircase, the gap between each person narrowing.

"It's magnificent," Featherstone says. He's put on a pair of glasses.

A waiter with a tray of hors d'oeuvres weaves his way through the staggered rows of people. He cuts diagonally in front of me. I see him do it, but the person behind me has their hand on the small of my back and is giving me a mild but persistent shove as if their life will fall apart if they don't see the necklace in the next ten seconds. A lean to the right is the only evasive maneuver I can attempt as I'm propelled forward, but the collision is inevitable.

Fortunately, it's not much more than a tiny bump, his hip against the outside of my left thigh. The only damage seems to be a slight smear of white sauce on the left shoulder of my jacket.

"I'm so sorry, sir," he says. "So sorry."

I hold up a hand while using the other to swipe at the sauce. The person who was behind me moves past without pausing. The waiter looks panicked.

"It's fine," I say.

"Are you sure, sir? Can I get you a napkin? Do you need ice?"

"It's all right," I say again. The waiter stumbles as he takes his first step away from me. He seems scared as if I might have him fired on the spot.

It's only a couple of seconds later that my thigh starts to feel warm. I wonder if I'm bleeding, although it didn't seem like that strong of an impact. And what would cause a cut? I have nothing sharp in my pocket. All that's in there are...

Oh, no. A wisp of smoke emerges from my pants.

One of my smoke bombs has ruptured.

It's another scenario we could have planned for with a pre-game meeting. Now I'm left to improvise. One option would be to set both off now, but I would have to stall for nearly six minutes while I wait for Iguano-Don and the guys to arrive.

I must act soon. The man behind me coughs. A thin but steady stream of smoke rises from my pocket and the hiss is as loud as a running faucet. Not to mention the heat on my leg is becoming unbearable.

I move sideways toward the exit.

"Excuse me," I say pushing past the three men I've chatted up.

"Oh, but this is the high point of the evening," Winslow says.

"You're missing something quite remarkable," Featherstone says.

I nod as I move past. Only Bradley makes no attempt to persuade me to stay. Those I haven't spoken with barely notice me or, if they do, they treat me as a minor annoyance.

I make it to the spacious hallway just as my leg starts to burn. I reach in and pull the smoke bomb from my pocket, leaving a trail behind me. It didn't open all the way, so it's not the blinding screen that was planned, but there's no doubt about what's in my hand.

The hallway is long, the ceiling high enough that the plume of smoke dissipates and looks more like a heavily localized fog than a smoke screen. Only one man, an older gentleman in white gloves, is out here. I take a chance that he's an employee and not a guest.

"Bathroom?" I shout.

"Fourth door on your left," he says, bored until he notices the smoke swirling around my hand.

"Is everything okay, sir?"

“Cigar got a little out of control,” I say, already sprinting down the hall. “No big deal.”

I fling open the bathroom door and dash inside with an urgency I haven’t felt since I ate some bad fast food a few years back. Though it’s the size of a truck stop bathroom, there’s only one toilet. I scurry to it, lift the lid with one hand and toss the smoke bomb into the water.

It sizzles like a fajita as the smoke wanes, leaving only a patch of haze hovering over the can. Finally able to catch my breath, I realize how choked all that smoke made me and I cough with vigor.

My left leg still burns; I give it a shimmy to try to shake the pain off. I hope the cloth of the pants hasn’t melted into my skin, though that would make me more legitimately green than Iguano-Don. I start to loosen my belt so I can check out the damage, but realize the clock is ticking. Iguano-Don has no idea he’ll be bursting into the ballroom without the distraction of my smoke bombs.

Surely the sudden appearance of a dinosaur man and two goons on ATVs will be startling enough to freeze people while Iguano-Don seizes the necklace.

No, wait. It’s me who’s supposed to grab the necklace. And I’m supposed to do it in...

I pull the stopwatch from my right pocket to check...

Three minutes and eighteen seconds. I have to get back to the ballroom.

“He’ll kill you, you know.”

I’ve been so focused on what to do I didn’t check to see if anyone followed me into the bathroom. I heard no footsteps behind me.

But Bradley stands just inside the door. Maybe I’m projecting, but I think he looks a little smug. I don’t have time for this. I’d shoot him, but Iguano-Don and the gang were going to provide my cover while I stole the neck-

lace. There was no reason for me to have a weapon.

I straighten up, hoping it will get more blood to my brain to help me figure out what to do over the next couple of minutes. Bradley walks toward me with long, slow steps making sure each footfall echoes.

“I’m sure you know his reputation for killing employees who fail him is well founded. And it seems to me you’ve failed him.”

“Do you work for Handyman?” I say.

It’s all that makes sense to me – how he immediately knew I was one of Iguano-Don’s guys (I mean, the green tux was an obvious giveaway, but maybe not to your everyday rich person), why he followed me in here.

“No,” he says, holding on to a chuckle. “The work I do is a bit outside of Handyman’s purview.”

“You FBI?”

“Is it true that Iguano-Don doesn’t offer you a guaranteed salary? That you get only a percentage of the take from heists? Money which Handyman inevitably finds and returns, leaving you with nothing?”

That is true. I’m barely scraping by, money wise. I’ve had to resort to some freelance convenience store holdups and, frankly, I feel like I’m getting a little old for that level of crime. It’s degrading.

“Look, this is not a good time for me to talk.”

I move toward the door, intending to barrel right through the old man. But when he holds up his hand, I feel a compulsion to stop.

“This is the best time for you to talk. You’ve botched this operation. You are likely in the final twenty-four hours of your life. A shame for someone with such potential to go out a small-time hood.”

Getting sucked into an argument with this guy is the most counterproductive thing I can do right now, but I can’t let that stand. I have

my honor to think about.

"I'm Iguano-Don's head henchman, you know."

"Yes, I know. Hence my use of the term 'small time'."

"He's at least the third most powerful super villain in Crimson City. Maybe he's no Pre-Fab Man, but there are plenty of people who would rank him higher than The Judge."

Bradley puts his hands in his pockets and paces to his left. He is clearly unaware of the time constraint I'm under. I should leave, but his mystery has me roped in. If Iguano-Don were this mysterious, perhaps I wouldn't be in this situation.

"Your loyalty is admirable," Bradley says. "And how has Iguano-Don repaid it?"

I pause for a moment. I can't think through examples of Iguano-Don being generous at the same time I'm trying to get this robbery back on track. I've never been a good multi-tasker.

"Whenever I go in the hospital, he's real good about stealing someone's identity and letting me use their health insurance."

I should really apprise Iguano-Don of the situation. I can still fix things, maybe, but I can't do it from the bathroom.

"You asked me if I worked for Handyman. Of course, I don't. I do something far more lucrative. And the best part? Technically, it's all completely legal. Stocks, bonds, tax shelters, shady dealings with banks on tiny islands in three of the four oceans.

"All registered and licensed with the state of Delaware. My employees get a guaranteed salary and their own health insurance. They don't have to remember which name to give the nurse after being concussed by the hammer hand of Handyman yet again."

I give the bathroom door a token glance. I think I hear the hum of ATV motors in the distance.

"I've decided I could use my own henchman. I wouldn't use that word, of course, but you and I would know what we mean. I need a man with pliable ethics. Given that you're about to rip a necklace off a young girl's neck, you certainly seem to fit that bill."

"I thought the necklace would be on a pillow."

Bradley smiles at me in a grandfatherly way. There's no way I can make it down the hall, back into the ballroom and explode the remaining smoke bomb before Iguano-Don bursts in.

"The job is desk work, mostly, much safer than what you do now. I assure you, you'll have no need to carry smoke bombs in your pockets. All you have to do is take a left out of this door. Iguano-Don will never find you."

"Let me guess, there's a car waiting?"

Bradley laughs again.

"I only use cars when no other option is available. No, there's a helicopter on the back lawn that will take you out to the countryside where you can hide for a few days."

"Look, I don't even know who you—"

Then it hits me. This guy pegged me from the beginning. He clearly does something with finance and it's shady, but not so outrageous that Handyman would get involved. And he owns a helicopter.

"You're the One Percenter," I say.

He smiles again, though his lips remain pursed, hiding his teeth.

"You don't want the necklace? Iguano-Don said—"

"The necklace was available at auction. If I wanted it, I'd have paid for it. No sense attracting attention by trafficking in stolen goods."

He does seem like a sensible scoundrel. Maybe he'd listen to me. I wonder if he's murdered any of his employees over unpre-ventable errors.

“Iguano-Don speaks highly of you whenever the city’s super villains get together for a Chamber of Crime meeting. He always says he dreads the day he’ll have to kill you.”

I’m flattered, touched even, but don’t have more than a second to enjoy it. There’s a commotion down the hall - the crash of broken glass, a swarm of motors revving, then gunfire. Iguano-Don’s in the ballroom. People will flee soon. They’ll come in here.

I imagine Iguano-Don raging at the lack of smoke. It might derail the siege if only because he’ll be looking for me instead of focusing on the task at hand. And when he finds me...

A desk job. My knee is still bothering me from a robbery a couple of months ago. It gets tiring constantly fighting a superhero I know I can’t defeat. After all, he’s got superpowers. I don’t.

“You planned all this?” I say.

“No. Of course, I thought through the possibility of the robbery going wrong and made a contingency plan for it. And here I am enacting it.”

I like that. Here’s a guy willing to admit things might not go exactly as planned. If you’re going to be a successful criminal, you’ve got to do that.

The One Percenter pushes open the bathroom door. The clean air rushes in, clearing out some of the fog from the smoke bomb I dropped in the toilet.

“Iguano-Don.” I hear a painfully familiar voice say. Handyman. “In the ballroom, I see. Let’s cut a rug.”

The whirr of a table saw rips through the air; no doubt it’s what Handyman’s transformed his hand into. I look at my left pinky finger, permanently crooked from when Handyman grabbed it with a wrench and twisted.

“To the left, you said?”

Bryan Erwin lives in St. Louis, MO. His fiction has appeared in Barrelhouse and Defenestration and he is a co-author of the true crime book Slaying in South St. Louis.

Monarch

Richard Dinges, Jr.

Among rot and ordure,
garden's remnants,
tomato ooze, brown
apples smashed into
dark dirt, vines tangled
into withered varicose
veins, two monarchs
flutter by, land
delicate legs and sip,
soft wings sweep,
draw out the last
sweetness of summer,
carried by wind
into a dark red blur.

Richard Dinges, Jr. has an MA in literary studies from University of Iowa and manages information security risk at an insurance company. Avalon Literary Review, Home Planet News, Olentangy Review, and Studio One most recently accepted his poems for their publications.



Ulu Camii

Mary Griep

Dark Side of The Sun

Richard Weaver

turns to face me tonight, much to the moon's
mad grinning chagrin. Much is at stake.
We've not spoken or looked at each other,
much less touched since . . . neither of us
remembers. Perhaps, in our long history together
it never happened, we never married or sired stars
or planets, held reunions in all the galaxies.
Even the ones so distant or parallax.
All was a dream within a dream within. Your face
facing mine, and time measuring us for once,
naked in our needs, our needs unbroken.
Carnivorous desire without shame in distance
and truth a solar wind, breaking, brushing aside
the hardened heart of the void.

Richard Weaver lives in Baltimore's Inner Harbor where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank, acts as the Archivist-at-large for a Jesuit college, and is a seasonal snowflake counter (unofficially). Some recent 2018 acceptances: Aberration Labyrinth, Slant, FRIGG, Slush Pile, decomp, South Florida Poetry Journal, & Concho River Review.

One Month, Every Year

Elisa R.V. García

THE MONTH WAS FINALLY OVER. I folded the wheelchair and put it in the hall closet, relieved to see it disappear for a year. I went to the living room, longing to sit and chill with a cold beer in my hand. I felt a tingling in my legs after spending the past month in a wheelchair. In my heart I longed to climb stairs, to run, to skate...to do all the things I hadn't been able to do for thirty days. But my legs felt too wobbly and weird, so I took a beer out of the fridge and went back to the living room. I sat on the sofa, ready to relax and forget all the frustration and discomfort of the past month. But a question kept coming back to me, haunting me, nagging me. Had it been worth it?

I had almost lost my job because I kept arriving late. I had alienated the woman I was dating – making her think I am a monster for telling her why I was sitting in a wheelchair for a month! I had to hire a nurse to help me shower the first few days until I got the hang of it. I had lost valuable time getting used to the damned thing...

Had it been worth it? The discomfort, the costs, the long explanations – the awkward silences. Sure, I got to keep my boat, my money, but the agreement was that I would have to do this every year for twenty-five years. Twenty-five years! Twenty-five months in a wheelchair instead of paying a million dollars... I saved a lot of money with the deal. But a lot of things went wrong this first month, despite

all my preparations. But maybe if I write down all that went wrong I could plan the next month better. I bet I could really make it work! I bet I could make the month in a wheelchair roll by smoothly – with just the right planning. That must be the key.

Planning is really everything. I mean, that's my *job!* I am a logistics manager – nothing works without planning. And excellent planning even saves work. Living in a wheelchair can't be as bad as I experienced it, or as Marigold experiences it. If it were so, hardly anyone in a wheelchair would survive in the long run. They would roll themselves into a river or off a bridge or whatever it is people in that condition do to commit suicide. No, I am sure my discomfort and frustration came from my own mistakes. And Marigold's suffering is probably just as self-inflicted as mine was. Maybe I can share some of my strategies and insights with her after I have tried them out the next month I spend in the chair. "After all, we don't want her killing herself do we!!!" I laughed out loud. I turned around, startled by the echo of my voice in the empty living room. God, I have to pick up Ralph from the dog sitter. It must have been a hard month for him, a beautiful golden retriever wasting away with who knows what kind of trash at the dog sitter's just because I could not care for him while I was sitting in a wheelchair.

It is such a damn shame Marigold's dog had

to be put to sleep. She might not have known it, but that was one fine golden retriever. Almost as good as Ralph. I would never have thought it was already ten years old. He was walking so sprightly when it all happened. I can see it all in my mind, the beautiful dog crossing the street like a king. It was hard to see Marigold was right behind him... such a wonderful dog. I know the judge sees it differently, but it is hard to regret running over Marigold instead of her dog. It was too late to stop the car anyway, and I had to choose. Her dog would never have survived the impact with my SUV, and Marigold certainly did. Sure, she can't walk anymore, but her whole tear-jerking story about her dream of becoming a dancer being over is something not even her mother would believe. I mean, with her weight?! That was so ridiculous of her! Did she honestly believe she would become a dancer? I cannot believe the judge fell for it. Although to be fair, the judge didn't say that I had to compensate Marigold for ruining her career but for interfering in her career *chances*, whatever they might have been. But I can hardly picture her doing anything but an office job, with or without the wheelchair. In a way, I think the accident happened just in time for her to get realistic about her prospects. What good would it have done if she had graduated from high school and then experienced the heart-break of being rejected in every single dance school in the country? I have spared her. Really I spared her loads of suffering. Maybe she should have even paid *me* for giving her the reality check she needed!

"But damn Marigold had to go and kill the

dog!" The dog / didn't kill. The dog whose life I spared that fateful day. Man, she really got what she deserved. What kind of heartless bitch has her dog put to sleep just because she cannot take care of it anymore and he is too old to find him a new home?

I really should get Ralph; I miss him. And now he has to spend a month of every year at the dog sitters because of this stupid agreement. Sure, the twenty-five-year-clause makes sense for a human life, but not for a dog! My dog won't live that long, these months of separation weigh much heavier for him. Twenty-five years are the years I have until retirement, the years left of my active working life – as a benevolent trade for the many more years until retirement that Marigold will spend on the wheelchair. I never quite understood how the judge came up with this calculation, but I guess she assumed I would be a cripple by the time I retire anyway. I can see someone as fat as Marigold evolving into a cripple on a scooter at 65 – even if she hadn't had the accident –, but me? Well, I should be thankful the judge did not see things differently, otherwise she would have given me many more years of punishment. But what bothers me is that my dog's life was not taken into account. She should have taken that into consideration. I know Marigold can no longer have a dog because she lives in that shitty apartment and the dog needs its exercise, and she cannot walk it anymore... But my punishment is to sit in a wheelchair one month a year, and for *my* dog that month is more than a month. It is more like a year. Why should he be punished?

Oh, damn it. It really wasn't easy.

Elisa R.V. García is a writer and researcher with a PhD in Comparative Literature. She is currently working and living in Germany. When writing fiction, she likes to explore questions dealing with identity, independence, and the complexity of human relationships. Her short stories have appeared in The Short Story Project, The Literary Nest, and Thrice Fiction.



Rift

Hollie Savage

Among Wildflowers

Terri Draper

Today,
I am Hyalophora cecropia

And my heather wings twitch
With rhythmic anxiety
At the thought of the coming winter
I know
Frost shrivels my heart
And numbs my mind
Like dead shoots
Sprouted late
Crackling in the wind
Moth beauty
Mistaken for butterfly brilliance
Takes the shape
Of smoldering eyes
And ember stripes burning tangerine
A small inferno
Of blood vessels
Vulnerable and unafraid
I am at home among
The shadowed maples, elms
And blowing snow like ash
Tinged yellow in the fading rays
Lamp light, inviting
Sets fire to the blooming night
Darker, spreading
Sun, setting
The only warmth for miles
Coming from within
Is dying

Incident on Train 302

Stanley B. Trice

ON A BRIGHT SPRING MORNING that did not require jackets for the first time that year, a band of commuters crowded the train station platform watching the diesel engine approach. The growing sunshine on the horizon and shedding of excess clothing had people in a festive mood, until it was time to climb onto a crowded train to jobs outlined by cubicles.

A stylishly dressed, thirty-something man pushed in front of Tony. His trim body stomped up into the train car with a flare of arrogance and an air of importance. Tony followed him since people behind were pushing.

Dual seats flanked both sides of the train car. One seat by the window, prized by commuters, and the aisle seat where passing commuters bumped anyone sitting there. The rude guy plopped down in the only window seat remaining, as if it belonged to him. Tony did not want to sit beside someone with this attitude. He sat across the narrow aisle on the end seat next to a petite man who did not take up too much seat space.

Quickly, a youngish woman sat beside the thin man. She wore a blunt cut to her dark hair and sharp heels to match her flowing, beige dress that needed ironing. To Tony, she had the poise and style of being proud of her looks, just like the stylish man. She had the expression she would rip someone's face off who disagreed.

This was Tony's commute that morning. Twenty minutes later as he got to the good part of his book, the stylish man slumped over onto the proud woman's shoulder. Tony realized this when she screeched, "Are you kidding me?"

She gave the top of his head a look of disgust. But, the look and her hard shove did not work. He kept falling toward her lap, which is when she threw her hands in the air and stumbled into the narrow aisle to get away. The thin man continued falling across both seats like they were his and right now they were.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" She leaned over the man about to say something else when she froze. Everyone woke up when she let out an ear-blasting scream.

People jumped, cussed, and stood up to peer over the tops of the high-back seats like gophers bobbing out of their nested holes. Overhead in the balcony section, heads leaned over the top railings, and Tony hoped no one spilled drool on them.

Sitting across the narrow aisle, he found himself facing the woman's firm butt. He hoped the screaming woman didn't fart in his face as she let out another high pitched yelp letting everyone know the guy was not moving out of her seat.

"Do something, someone." She stood up and turned around to look at Tony.

Before he talks about getting the con-

ductor, an unknown man yelled from a seat somewhere behind Tony, "I know CPR."

The woman turned back to look at the fallen over man and screamed again. Tony did not know what the screaming could do to help the man get up. Meanwhile, the commuter train continued happily along on its schedule to the next station.

"Get out of my way," said another would-be hero from the other end of the train car.

As both men approached from opposite ends, the woman stepped back to get away from the man. She stepped onto the approaching CPR hero's shoes with her high heels.

The hero yelped like sheet metal scraping sheet metal, and they both fell backward into the aisle. The woman on top still hollering.

With her butt finally out of the way, Tony found himself staring at the top of the guy's head. It lolled around on the edge of the vinyl seat keeping time with the train's rollicking movement like the beat of a hip-hop song. For such a thirtyish guy, he already had a receding hairline, thought Tony.

Tony concentrated on the guy's face as it rolled toward him. The cheeks, forehead, and lips showed a shocking lack of blood color. Tony could not bring himself to do anything but stare at the pale face getting paler.

"Get off me. I've got to save that guy," CPR hero man said shoving Screaming Woman up and into the second hero guy coming from the opposite end. The two ended up on the floor, Screaming Woman on top.

CPR hero stuck his butt in Tony's face and knelt down to give his CPR. Seconds later, he jumped up and started gagging after touching his warm, red lips onto cold, blue ones. He was last seen heading north toward the bathroom in the next car.

The second would be hero man finally

uncoupled himself from Screaming Woman and pushed her past Tony who wondered where the conductors were. Too busy taking the commuter train to the next stop? Must protect the schedule.

Screaming Woman fell butt first on the dirty floor. When she tried to get up, passengers pushed her down and out of the way so they wouldn't miss anything. She screamed some more, but this time people ignored her.

A short, plump man in an expensive brown suit, second hero guy, leaned over into the man's rolling face. Tony sat there two feet away just looking as this hero did not dare touch the man and instead declare that he wasn't touching a dead man.

He looked at Tony with a puzzled look as if his heroic presence should have justified a resurrection. Tony did not know what to say as the hero man backed away leaving Tony to face Dead Guy alone.

Tony wondered what his wife Jessica and seventeen-year-old daughter Brittany would do. They had never been sympathetic with the plight of his three hour a day commute.

"I don't like that our schedule is tied to your train schedule," said Jessica last night. He had eaten a late supper alone because his train was late and his family did not wait.

"It must be boring riding the train. It's the same thing every day. Those train cars really do look like metal coffins," said Brittany.

"Riding the train is not boring," said Tony. He wanted them to believe that not all he did was boring, including riding the train. Stressful making train schedules and crowding in a metal boxes with smelly people, he wished he had told them.

"I don't think you'll ever stop riding the train. You're not making enough money to ever retire," said Jessica. "You'll be riding that commuter train forever."

"I only hope I don't die on the commuter train," Tony said into his late supper. Lately, a lot of suppers had been late because of the train.

"You need to make some friends on the train," said Jessica.

Tony wondered why he did not have friends at work or on the train since he spent most of his time at either his job or on the commute. Tony's closest 'friend' was his current seat companion. A short man of likely Catholic descent since he couldn't stop making the sign of the cross. He apparently got impatient for Tony to get out of his way and leapt over the tall train seat to be part of the exodus off the train car.

A shift of the train relocated Dead Guy's torso so that his head and left arm dangled closer to Tony. He tried to think of something to do, but this incident had overwhelmed his ability to think.

For the first time, he wished he was in his cubicle. The three-walled, claustrophobic enclosure felt like he was a hamster in a cage, yet now felt like his safe place. This realization was scarier than dying, Tony thought.

He did not consider himself an opinionated guy. He just had concerns about dying on a commuter train while traveling to an office cubicle that was smaller than a jail cell. At his job, no one heard me living inside my padded cloth walls, he thought. Someone needs to hear that I'm alive in the crypt I work in every day.

Tony felt guilty for not helping the would-be heroes. He felt guilty not doing anything to help himself stop this endless commuting. He did not even have a relationship with the other commuters or his cubicle lifers. Tony spied his office mate Larry standing in the last seat on the northern end of the train car.

He talked on his cell phone with a look of intensity. In the two years they had been riding together, Larry had yet to notice him

even though they worked in the same cubicle farm. Tony looked back at the Dead Guy's face which started to look a lot like his own.

The wandering, lifeless arm dislodged and swung into the aisle, blocking further passage. It dangled in motion with the train. Tony thought the dead man was waving at him and he considered doing something. But, he did not want to touch someone who had just died. Suppose police forensics needed an uncontaminated death scene?

Thinking and thinking, Tony had no thoughts for the startling events happening a little over a foot from him. He wondered where along the train tracks Dead Guy was alive last. Where was the spot of Earth where he died without even a belch of gas to tell them goodbye? Tony wondered why the train kept moving down the track.

He guessed it had to do with why make an emergency stop in the middle of nowhere with a dead man aboard. The few remaining passengers and Larry looked around to make sure no one else had died. Nope, everyone was trying to catch a glimpse of Dead Guy as the conductors pushed through from both ends of the train car.

Abruptly, it occurred to Tony that maybe Dead Guy's spirit might not have gotten off. They could be on a haunted train. It would be hard to sleep on a haunted train.

The conductors finally reached Dead Guy and Tony moved into the empty window seat. This gave the conductors more room to make sure the body did not dump into the floor. The floor looked dirty to Tony.

In a series of short pumps, the commuter train eased into the next station. Sirens and flashing lights mixed with a bright sunrise and a cloudless, blue sky. Good day for dying, thought Tony as it did not take long for everyone to get off. Is death contagious?

Overhead, Tony saw the news helicopter taking their picture. Some waved. Someone came with free coffee and sugar donuts. After twenty or forty minutes, a black bag on a stretcher came wheeling past them. Most commuters finished their second or third helping of donuts. A few raised paper coffee cups to the black bag in a salute of appreciation for the free food and drink. People hesitated when the conductors hailed for the passengers to get back on the commuter train.

Tony thought there should have been some sanctifying, holy blessing of the train cars to get rid of the guy's ghost. At least a thorough cleansing with formaldehyde for any physical remnants. No worry, the conductors assured everyone. The train car where Dead Guy died had been sealed off so could everyone please cram onto the other cars like meat packed into tin cans.

Before getting on, Tony saw Screaming Woman with an oxygen mask sitting in the back of an ambulance. She must have screamed all her air out. Some people huddled around her with the laying of hands as if this would make her forget. Tony did not think he would forget a dead man flopping on top of him. He already had trouble with what he had seen.

Tony found himself standing in the aisle of the crowded train car beside coworker Larry who sat in the aisle seat. "I'm Tony. I work on the same floor with you."

"Oh, hi! I didn't notice you there. Isn't it terrible about Bill? How awful. How are we going to tell people?"

"Bill?"

"Yeah, the guy who died. The one who sits two cubicles over from you at work. It's terrible that he died like this on a commuter train."

Epilogue:

The local newspaper said Bill had a coronary

and died before he knew it. The article also described his wife's upcoming vacation to Jamaica with her friends using the insurance money. Tony did not ask Jessica and Brittany what they would do with the insurance money if he died.

Bill's wife planned lawsuits against the commuter train and the freight company who owned the tracks. Tony did not understand what either organization had to do with causing Bill's death. But, he was sure there would soon be a seat notice asking people that, if they felt like dying, please get off the train or sign the appropriate non-liability forms.

No one moved into Bill's cubicle. Maybe because Tony helped spread the rumor that it was haunted. Sometimes he sat in the cubicle thinking of Bill. Why did he not notice him at work and sit beside him on the train? They could have been friends. All Tony could remember was Bill's dead face. Eventually, someone rearranged the cubicle to store office supplies.

Before that, Tony went to Bill's funeral since it was on Saturday. He took his wife and daughter so they could see where his life was headed.

He explained to them the quirks of each commuter standing there. "These are some of the people from the train I could be friends with," he told them.

"They look just like you – old balding men," said Jessica.

"Why is it that when men lose their hair, their stomachs get bigger?" Brittany asked.

After a closer look, Tony decided against making friends on the train. They looked too much like him.

He never saw Screaming Woman again and never got a chance to make friends with Larry. The week after the funeral, he got a promotion and moved closer to his job. He

stopped riding the train, the only thing he and Tony had in common.

After the funeral, Tony took a CPR class so he would be certified to do something if anybody dropped dead in front of him again. He also decided to meet other people on the train and eventually found Bob and Greg.

They carpooled together since they all lived in the same subdivision. Yes, it took longer to commute than the train, but there was no chance Tony would die with a lot of strangers. If he died in the car, at least he knew the people. Even if he did not like them.

Stanley's short stories have been published in two dozen magazines. He is a member of the North Carolina Writers' Network, two writer clubs, and a local critique group. For several years, he conducted interviews with editors from around the world for an online journal. His blog is stanleybtrice.com.

White Tulips

Anna Kapungu

White tulips in the cozy fire
Report your day as if a lecture
Dinner with Anita Baker
The deceit you bear
Telephone messages you seen to favour
Catch my voice wage a war
The woman in me weathers
The cold distant and unfamiliar silence
Bitter days without saccharine
The vacuum I bear
Our love thawing in layers
Like springtime snow
Base myself to entice your ego
Permit your masculine allure
Open my territory to intimacy that is hollow
Into hostility and choler
My imperfection to endure
Eyes of neglect
Emotions of discredit
The other side of Bliss
Is where my disposition resides

Anna Kapungu is a poet and children's book writer who has published a poetry collection entitled Water falling between word by Austin Macauley Publishers. She is a Canadian citizen currently residing in United Kingdom. She has a B.A. (Hons) Degree in Hotel Management from Southbank University London and a Diploma in Marketing, Public Relations and Sales Management from Commercial Careers College. Her publishing credits include, Aadun Journal, Adelaide Literary, Carillion, Halycon Literary, Scarlett Leaf, Austin Macauley and Blazevox Journal.



Supplication

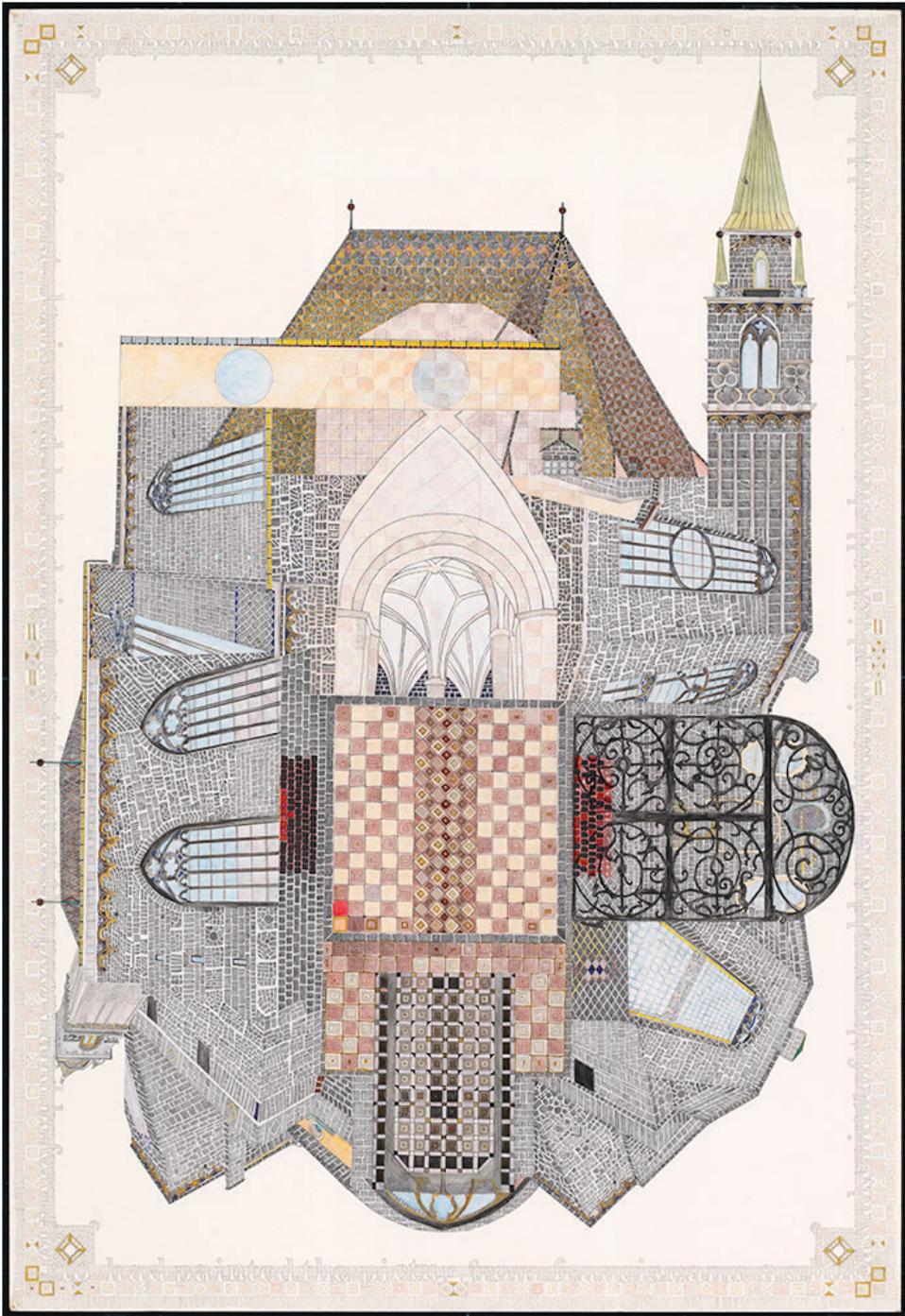
Hollie Savage

Passerby and By

Joe Albanese

She inhales from the east coast and
exhales smoke to the west
If this ghost should find her, she'll
simply let it float away
He's a masochistic preacher, attempting
to find meaning in nonsense
Always trying to hold on to what
already flowed away
They're sleeping on tracks with the
train in sight, just unsure which
direction it travels
Feeling its rattle is proof of life
A palm face-up twitches closed with a single
drop of rain — how much can it hold? We
lose more with a tight squeeze, and always
drown in what first stirred us alive
The winds of treason brought them
here, now each blow is a pull
apart. There is no need to force, they let
it float away
The train rattles where it comes from,
to. He inhales her trail of smoke from a
passenger's cracked window, but
long ago knew they already flowed away.

Joe Albanese is a writer from South Jersey. His short fiction, nonfiction, and poetry can be found in publications across the U.S. and in seven other countries. Joe's novella Smash and Grab (Books to Go Now) was recently published and his novel Caina (Mockingbird Lane Press) will be published later in 2018.



The Franziskanerkirche

Mary Griep

Candy Apple Spell

Joe Albanese

I got lost in that
candy apple spell,
she's got

3
candles behind those
eyes and
moonshine lipstick atop
her smile
of lye. I
grieve from
our treaty and her
heel fell
down the well,
we're trying
to retrieve the magic
that we
lost
from the spell.

Company Man

Andrew Dolbeare

I WAS IN THE OFFICE LATE finishing a project when I heard a clatter in the hallway. The cleaning people had already come and gone. It was unusual for anyone at all to bother me after midnight. Imagine my horror when I then heard the swipe of a cardkey and the main door open. Two people entered laughing.

“What did you say your name was?” An unrecognizable woman’s voice.

“Jeff...Jeff.” I knew that voice to not belong to a man named Jeff but to Steven McMahon, two cubes down. Frankly, not a team player and it was a rare lapse in judgment on my manager’s part in hiring him. I stopped typing and waited for what would happen next. I heard osculation. Not appropriate for the workplace. Especially not appropriate after the midnight hour.

“You work here?” the woman asked, a hint of appropriate awe in her voice.

“I do.”

I got the feeling they were under the influence of something. Possibly alcohol. Possibly worse. Again, adding to the mountain of inappropriate behavior I’d seen already, this is a drug-free environment. They bumped their way towards the supply closet, and that’s when I knew things were going in a more

egregious direction. When I opened the door, I saw them on the floor covered in forever stamps.

“You’re a package,” she yelled just as I walked in. Her face went limp.

“What?” Steven asked as he turned around and saw me. “James, what are you doing in the office still? It’s almost one o’clock.”

“Steven you’re wasting office supplies,” I said, “for which we all ultimately pay for come bonus season.”

“Oh...” he said pulling them off.

“Steven,” I said, “what are you doing here?”

“I was just...I was in town, and I needed- What does it look like I’m doing here?”

“It looks like you’re stealing office supplies,” I said, “for which we all end up paying for come bonus season.”

“Shit, I’m sorry. Please don’t tell anyone.”

“How long have you been doing this, Steven?”

“I’ve never done this before.”

“We’ve been missing boxes of staples, Steven, on a fairly regular basis for months now.”

“I don’t know where those-”

“Steven, those are ordered through the company account. I order those because we

keep running out. It didn't make sense to me but now..." I closed the door behind me.

"What are you doing?"

"This needs to stop."

"What is he doing?" his accomplice asked.

Steven lunged at me, perhaps to silence me on the subject of his larceny, and I have no doubt that had I not stabbed him and his accomplice in the face with a pair of scissors, I would have in turn been stabbed. And moreover, we would have no idea who had been stealing from the supply closet all these months.

This distraction had taken me away from my work for ten or more minutes, so I went back to finish my spreadsheet. The cleaning people wouldn't return for the rest of the night, so it was my responsibility to make sure the office was ordered in a manner beholding to our company image. I must've finished my spreadsheet around two in the morning.

I started disassembling the bodies shortly thereafter.

I used the paper cutter, it was the largest blade we had in the office, and went to work on both of them. I utilized one of the lesser-filled trashcans in the kitchen for disposal. Unfortunately there are no paper shredders for thieves, so this took me a while. Once the bodies were safely in my van, I sanitized the area with a rubbing alcohol solution and reordered the office supplies.

It wasn't until three days later people started asking about Steven, which is no doubt a sign of his work ethic and value to the company. I did not realize he actually had friends in the office, but some people started a GoFundMe to pool a reward for tips on his whereabouts, for which I donated five dollars. It was not much money, but it was received very warmly, and I said I hoped they got closure soon--because Steven was eaten by dogs.

I have found more often than not that there are wild dogs on the edge of town just looking for a meal, mangy, starved scavengers that will eat literally anything you give them. As you can imagine the two fresh pieces of meat were well-received. Nobody looks after these dogs and no one looks in their feces for missing thieves. It's sad really, but in this case, it served a mutual benefit to them and the company. I have no idea what kind of lawsuits a death on company property can result in, which might negatively impact EBITA, from which we all get paid come bonus season, so it was of the utmost importance that things remained discreet.

The search for Steven became more robust as the months went on. The police interviewed people at the office, trying to figure out who might have seen him last.

"Does he have family?" I asked during my interview. "Perhaps they know where he is."

I was informed by one of the police that Steven's wife and young son had apparently died in a car accident just over a year ago. I hadn't been aware that he was a widower until that point. "It's sad too because it seems like he was just starting to recover from that devastating loss, getting out and dating more," one cop said.

"It was actually the orphanage, where he reads to children several times a week, that called us first to give us a heads up on his disappearance," the other cop added. "I hate to think something would have happened to such a good guy."

And I thought, "If only they knew that he had been pilfering from the supply closet. Stealing from the company's bottom line, from which we all get paid come bonus season."

I wondered why no one came looking for the girl in the same way in which they searched for Steven. Perhaps it was because

she had no reason for being in our place of work that night. It would be unthinkable that she would have been in our office after hours because people probably assumed no one would be so flippant about company policy and would have informed the proper channels before bringing a guest in. I feel like it says a lot about the culture of whatever company she worked for that no one phoned the police to have them look into her disappearance. It just makes me feel lucky to work at a place where people are team players who care about what happens to each other. That's a great team ethic, and I think it's why we're so successful as a company.

Almost half a year had gone by before I heard anything further on the matter. An email from HR circulated, advising us that DNA evidence had popped up and there was going to be a break in the case. I wondered what kind of DNA evidence. I inquired with HR, who said they would know more soon. I retraced my procedure that night over and over looking for a situation in which my DNA might have become a liability. It was unsettling not to know, and I began to panic, certain the police would knock on the door and take me away at any moment. People would surely understand the reasoning for my actions, but what would they think about doing business with a company that employed thieves? It might shake the trust we had worked for so many years to build.

I would be compelled to confess to my manager's lapse in judgment hiring Steven, dragging the company down with me. No, I wouldn't wait for them. It was unbearable to wait for the police to come to me. I would have to kill myself far from company grounds, so as not to burden the corporate plaza with tragedy and intrigue, and I would have to leave a note explaining that my actions were for my

own purposes and under no circumstances reflective of the company culture.

That's called being proactive, and it's one of our five corporate values.

I would quit first. It would create more space between the company and me. Also, it would allow them that much more time to find a replacement for my position. I got up from my desk shaking. I began packing my things: the little stress reliever they gave to us ten years ago after the acquisition, the mug they had given to us after the announcement of a new product. Each of these items reflected the demonstrable importance and care the company took in making sure that the employees were part of even the higher up decisions. They didn't skimp, and they were always kind.

My boss walked by my cubicle then and circled back.

"James, what is going on?" he asked, perplexed.

"I need you to fire me."

"Well, your performance has been stellar. I have no reason to lose you unless you found a new opportunity..."

The tears began welling down my face. A new opportunity...as if.

"No, I've...been giving less than my all lately."

"Your numbers are great. If you're worried about something--"

"I mean, I stole from the company." He believed in me so much.

"Stole what?"

"Staples," I stammered.

"That's...well I think we all take staples from time to time. I took a box home the other night." He laughed. "I didn't even think about it. It wasn't the first time. I guess we should all stop that."

"But those come out of the company

expenditure account, from which we all get paid come bonus season!" I protested.

"Yeah, no. You're right," he said. "Are you okay?"

"No..." I could feel the walls screaming around me, heartbeats emanating from the floorboards. I thought of the way the dogs ripped Steven's body to shreds.

"If you're going through something personal maybe we could get you a short leave," my boss said, squeezing my arm gently. "I have to get to a meeting with the board. We're discussing the year-end results. Working out bonuses," he added with a wink.

"Right, of course," I said sullenly.

I felt powerless as I watched him leisurely walk to the meeting room and close the door behind him. I thought about the cops inevitably on their way. I thought about them entering the building. Walking up the stairs. I had been

trapped now. I had to say it, or I'd never get a chance. I didn't know what I expected to happen. I ran towards the meeting room and ripped open the door.

"I killed Steven!" I yelled to the very silent room.

An old man, who I knew to be a board member studied my face. The news was on. It was about the capture of the man they believed killed Steven McMahon. His disheveled mug shot appeared. The anchors went on to specify that he worked for one of our rivals. My boss walked to the door and closed it again. Clack.

"James," he said calmly, "I need you to go back to your cubicle and never say what you just said in here ever again. I don't know if you know this, but news like this could damage our reputation and hurt our bottom line, from which we all get paid come bonus season."

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Guantanamo Bay

Patrick Theron Erickson

After torture
an ex-detainee
is still captive
to the darkness
but free
of the captivating
torturous darkness
he perpetrated
and spread
I say
crack open
that heart of darkness
and let the light in
Who knows
what denizens of the deep
will come to light
like graffiti scrawled
on the public conscience
or cave drawings
long hid?

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, Cobalt Review, and Burningword Literary Journal, among other publications, and more recently in The Oddville Press, The Main Street Rag, Tipton Poetry Journal, Right Hand Pointing, and Danse Macabre.