

FLAPPERHOUSE # 1

Spring 2014

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The PUDDLE of ROMEO'S TEARS

Luis Galindo

WHY DIDN'T YOU RETURN MY HOWLS

Last night
 Under the moon's silver chains
 And pink undergarments?
 Were you busy? Were you washing
 Your hair in the tears
 Of half-assed Romeos
 In the unrequited evening?

I was there
 Under your balcony
 Wearing a green snake-skin
 suit that I bought
 from the Our Mother of Holy Agony
 Thrift store on the corner of
 Mistake and Trust.
 While standing there
 And howling, I could see
 The sign of the manufacturer
 Of the fire escape under your window.
 Stamped into the cold dark steel:
 Dirtyfuckingle, Inc.

I stood there for hours with
 A love poem I had written
 The night before on a napkin
 From our favorite Chinese restaurant.

I had planned on reciting it
 To you, at midnight
 But it was too late.
 You were
 Not There
 You were

Elsewhere.

I crumpled it
And threw it
Into a puddle
On the street
That other Romeos had no doubt
Left behind.
A tiny ocean of broken-hearted
Crybaby evidence.

I looked into the puddle
With the light from a match.

I saw tadpoles with golden halos
Swimming erratically
Bumping into one another like a
Miniature crash-up derby.

The match burned
My finger and
I let it drop.

The night had
Stolen my identity
And used it
To buy black
Market weapons
In the murky
Shadows up
Your
Private
Alley.

LUIS GALINDO was born near Corpus Christi, Texas. He's an acting ensemble member of the Independent Shakespeare Company in Los Angeles. His poetry and short story collection *Electric Rats in a Neon Gutter* will be released this Spring by El Jamberoo Press. He has lived in NYC, Chicago, and LA. He received his MFA from the University of Delaware Professional Theatre Training Program. He lives in Houston, Texas.

REBEL, REBEL

T. Mazzara

I GOTTA GET TO NEW YORK BEFORE 3 AM or Big Meanie, Jimmy Dread, is gonna fuckin stick-rape me with a broom handle and feed my bones to his bulls, gonna cut off my ears and chop off my head. I been driving this route and driving it drifted for two years now, trying to buy the ticket on dad's ranch house. Buy it back from my sunk-headed Moms. She's got not a marble left and they're gonna take the dump from her, she don't get square with the bank. I been driving this route since Jean Genie bit the big assfuckin farm on it. That's my cousin, Jean Genie.

Jean died when his box truck launched off this elevated road (that's Route 17 East to New York-fuckin-Shitty). Jean buried truck and driver in the woods just betwixt Beaver Kill and Roscoe. And that's Roscoe "Trout Town USA." Upstate. He buried Jean Genie good too. Fucker was a mess of blood and knotty, greasy hair and white meat and wood and red meat and metal splinters, buried in bark and sticks and branches, cloaked in wet red and steam and smoke and brake lights. Twisted metal, twisted Genie. Twisted sister. Jean Genie. Ziggy Stardust.

I'm carrying a load of H (and some blow on the side). All packaged neat in 50-pound bags of organic flour. Genie still talks to me. I'm the Jazz. It's something I do. It's something I do for the Dread. It's something that's done.

I'm passing Slaterville Springs, now. Bug zappers zapping and flashing and it's 35mph thru here so they're easy to hear over this godawful loud engine. I'm still on east 79. It goes up to 55mph after here and then I'll be headed thru Richford and past Robinson's Hollow Road and there's fuckin nothing out there.

But there's a red Dodge Charger here now and he's been behind me and beside me and I've passed him real careful-like, twice now, and he's weaving like a motherfucker. There's drunks out here. Small town, not much to do at night. Day too. Not certain if this one's a drunk. *Can't never be certain of anything, really*, Jean Genie used to say. But Dodge Charger keeps slowing and I pass him and then he'll waggle in my rearviews and he's in and out of lanes and I lose sight of him around a bend til he guns it and smashes past me, suckin wind and shakin the Bigtop.

You never can be sure of much. Jean Genie used to say black holes was planets that had evolved some species into

machines that needed to eat and needed power to eat and they then went off and e'en everything. And it wasn't like astronomers said and what the hell did astronomers know? They had theories and observations. Hell, we could make theories and observations. We could make observations and theories all we fuckin wanted, but unless they could magic his ass up to the center of the galaxy and let him stick his finger in a supermassive black hole, he didn't believe in black holes and thought the center of the galaxy must just be filled with unicorn farts and marshmallow fluff.

He always said that the world as we know it was coming to an end and that everything that is *just now*, even as I say this sentence here, is *now* the past and everything back *then* is questionable and every configuration of us was different from one moment to the next. Or some shit like that. I think I said it right. He was a confusing shit and I was faced when he told me that.

Never seen you so faced.

Jimmy Dread, the Big Meanie, hired me out for these runs. He's a big dreaded fuck. Fat like medicine ball. Fat like Tuesday. Round and tattooed and living outside of Ithaca with his big round wife and his big round kids. He owns land all over the place down around Cayuga Lake. Takes money to own land like that. Takes me. It took Jean Genie.

I'm passing the "Town of Lisle," now. And West Windsor. 175 miles from New York. I know I smoke too much. No, that's wrong. If I had the money, I'd smoke until it killed me. I would. These cigarettes, these mini thins and this Dex are all saving my life (while fuckin with my piss). And that's no shit.

No shit.

My cousin Jean. And – just so you know – he wasn't a fuckstart like me. He was upright and a under-appreciated genius, who, aside from his obnoxious obsession with David Bowie, was a Space Oddity and a smooth talker and a bean pole and we called him Patches and sometimes Skittles and he was Major Thom, and the Dancing Queen of Dryden. People said he was no-good. But most people are no-good and whatever the fuck that means. Cause what is "good" really? I mean, in a cosmic sense. Genie was a true motherfucker, the goddaughter of good times and the father of strange ideas and stranger reason. Yeah, my cousin Jean was all-white.

Just gassed up at the Sunoco at Whitney Point. I'm on my thirteenth tab of Ephedrine. Lucky thirteen. Thirteen. Thirteen. Lucky. Ah, my sweet mini thins, my supple white-cross pre-game. Yeah, Dexedrine is next. You know it is. But not til West Point.

Gotta be disciplined about it all. Disciplined. West Point. Get it? Can't hit the New York Shitty too shifted and all at once. Gotta make it just right, roll in too queered up and I might punch a hole in Union Square or flip the Bigtop – the sprinter – the too-much-van on the West-side Highway and then where'd I be? I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm doing.

I'm heading out to 81, now, just outside Whitney Point.

Keep up.

Major Thom (still Jean Genie) did this road stone cold sober, maybe hopped up on coffee, but that's it. He was clean living Jean. Pot don't count. He smoked that too. He drank an ocean, sucked a scheme – yeah – did his fair share of boozin with me and the boys. But, that thin, greasy fucker was clean as a whistle otherwise. Not like us now. Now we got the dirty ride and we know what we're carrying.

Not like poor Ziggy. He was straight and narrow by comparison. It's sad, really. They found all them bricks of Calvin stuffed neat inside the twenty-six 25-pound bags of all-purpose organic flour in the back of his truck. Two hundred bucks a weekend. He coulda been making my odds n' ends, bank and whatnot. Poor Space Oddity never knew what hit him. Didn't know what hit him when he got impaled by that branch and decapitated by that brace. Didn't know what hit him when his head was rolling off, bouncing off-kilter like a football, they found it a hundred feet from the wreck. And all the time him hauling glitter he never'd known he was hauling.

Never knew. Never knew. Never cared.

I just passed thru a smog of bugs on that stretch of 17 where it splits from 81 South to Scranton and their bodies are pasted smears of mother-of-pearl on my already smudged windshield. Approaching brights make it impossible to see and I'm all fly-by-instinct at times. It's the solstice and it's bright outside to begin with. Fireflies winking in the trees along the road. Gotta keep it above 70 to make the Shitty by 3 AM. But hold fast, this – whatever the fuck this is – this shit's about Jean Genie. This shit's not about me.

Jean was a skinny fuck and got beat up no-end in school. Me too, for that matter, so no big thing. He'd let his hair grow long and that was double-trouble when the jocks started noticing him and called him Jean Fairy cause he had a girl's name and was light-weight and had longish hair and wonderful, strange ideas about life. But he ended up winning with them too. He owned that shit. He started with thrash metal like Slayer,

Anthrax, Metallica, Sepultura, and then on to hardcore and punk. I remember he started wearing eyeshadow for a time and listened to old punk rock, day and night, head buried in noise-canceling headphones and he even talked with a British accent all one summer. That didn't help. We didn't really get along, musically or otherwise. I don't listen to anything really, or I guess I'm one of those people who listens to "everything," but I hate people who say they listen to "everything" cause that's like saying you don't discriminate and that you have no opinion and that's just weak.

Jeanie had opinions. He discriminated. He loved his long brown hair and it always seemed wet. And the kids and parents of Dryden all thought he was gonna build pipe bombs and shoot up the school. But I knew he was a peaceful little shit who secretly loved David Bowie and dreamed of starting a glam pop band.

You gotta admire the kid for giving the finger to all them fucks. He'd been sent to the school shrink after he spent a few weeks wearing a prom dress to class. *What are you so angry at Jean?* And of course Genie was like, *What the fuck am I not? You call me a fairy and I'll be your fairy, I'll be whatever you think is bad cause that's what, huh?* That's total fuckin what.

Total fuckin what.

Jean didn't leave me his bicycle. We all just went over and grabbed shit after he passed. I ride it up the hill to the farm every weekend for this shit. It's a tough ride in the summer, better come fall. It's worse this time of year. There's the stank of ginkgo and – ooooooh – then that good smell of magnolia and there must be a grove up there in the maples near the farm, or so I speculate. The moon's so bright. Solstice. Crossing the Susquehanna, now. 14 miles to Deposit. Damascus one mile. Gunning the engines to maintain speed on the uphill. Gotta love the sleeveless summer.

Big Meanie hired Jean just outa school. Hauling organic all-purpose flour to the City, from one of his farms just outside of our sweet, sweet Dryden. Good gig for an outa luck shit like him. Good work for a shit like me.

And what the fuck? A firefly just landed on my collar and I killed him on accident and he's all smeared on my hand and it's like the lights coming off that not-working radio. Dodge Charger's back. Seems like he's followed me from 78. There's that shudder and vacuum as he passes. Windows tinted.

Dunbare road, Occanum.

Done-done-done bare, oh come on.

Where'd the Charger go now?

All Jean Genie wanted to do was save up money and go be a jackass in Brooklyn. Holy shit! That fuckstart in the Charger is behind me and he's still got his freakin brights on. Fuck me. Cop.

No. Just some ass that all geared up on probably something you got in quantity in this van.

Delaware county. Exit 84, Deposit. The van smells like moldy flour and it's 10 miles to Hancock. Lightning barking in the distance. Pretty, anyway.

Hale Eddy. Hale.

Roods Creek Road.

Oh by the Roods Creek Road.

Man, another dick just passed me with his brights on and some bat just come pinwheeling outta nowhere and spun past my mirror, shrieking the whole fuckin way. Dopplered the fuck by, he did. Poor bat. That's most likely how Jean Genie bought it. Speculating here, but I bet it was some stupid fuckin bat or some stupider fuckin bird come hurtling outa nowhere what made him lose control. Made him lose it on the highway and lose it all over the woods after passing the shoulder. Rolling stony over the shoulder, like some border, some skipped moment of lookout! just before some big moment of real peril. Aw, who the fuck is this?

Not Dodge Charger.

Not Dodge Charger. Good. Coming up on Callicoon.

The village of Hancock.

Exit 89 and Fishs Eddy. That's fishes. Fish's. Ed-ed-eddy.

Sharp curve, Bitch. Watch it.

Liberty, 31 Miles.

East Branch and Downville. Here comes Charger.

Slow to 55. Let that Charger pass. Again.

Sometimes there's fog, sometimes there's rain, sometime there's rain and fog.

There's a bend right after the Beaver Kill sign. Head in the game, Jackass.

Fog and clouds break and then there's stars. So many. Awesome.

Big gully to the right after Beaver Kill. Wow, pay the fuck attention, Jazz.

And here it is: mile marker 308. And why the fuck did the highway patrol tell us that? What fucking difference did that make what mile marker he bought it at? My addle-brained moms had tears in her large addle-brained eyes and I never thought she even gave Genie two thoughts. But those tears was big and real and reflected red and blue off the cruiser's lights spinning in our

drive. Small funeral, he weren't missed by a town that paid him nothin but criticism. He weren't missed by nobody but us and stitched-up old Big Meanie. Oh, Genie. Why'd I take this job? Why'd I listen to the Dread?

You're a big pussy. That's why.

He's got me by the short hairs now. Fucker put in the papers to buy dad's joint. Moms is in peril and doesn't know up from down. I been telling her not to give up with the bank, but she don't know. She don't fuckin know. Advantage-taker. Big Meanie, you big, fat, fuckin slob. I got your number, fuckstart.

He's gonna own you.

Nobody's gonna own me.

Oh, hey. Exit. And there goes Charger up the highway.

I just swung a left, under the overpass, past the Roscoe Fly Fishing Museum. Trout Town, USA. Newspapers Sold Here. And groceries, apparently. Bank of America. They call this downtown area "the Commons," but it's really just a single street in the middle of fuck-where. Guns and Ammo Country Store. Might need a bit of that if I don't make time. Zipped past Raimondo's Restaurant. Left past the Roscoe/Rockland Fire Department. American flags hanging from a light pole. And that always makes me laugh. The United Church, red, big, and useless, like the stars and stripes. Beaver Kill Angler. Still in Roscoe. NYC 117 miles. Prohibition Distillery Tasting Room, Railroad Museum. That's Roscoe.

I pick up a load of pasta out at the Rockville Farm and that's a scary, dead place (there's a little packet of pills in between the folded invoices and bags of organic pasta) and I'm out-out-out on to the 27th Division Memorial Highway, again. More dead bugs.

Keep driving. Keep on. Make it before the morning.

Before dad died, he gave Genie space on our property to build a place of his own and he did just that. That kid could build anything. He'd find plans and just build. Built my moms a farmhouse coffee table and a end table and a chair that nobody could sit in cause it wasn't all that comfortable. But he fuckin built it. Built a cabin out back our place. One room shack. A nice professional job and sturdy as fuck and just enough for him. Loft bed. Little desk on the ground floor. Even drew electric from my dad's place. Had sound power and listened to his Bowie and his seven inches. Genie had plans. Nobody else seemed featured in those plans.

You did. You featured.

He spent that springtime just before dad died collecting trash cans, metal cans, and he'd gut out the bottoms. Sparrows hunting bugs in low bowling swoops in our backyard. Stacked them cans on their sides in rows on top of rows, not ten paces up-wind from his cabin, like stacked sewage pipes at a construction site. Said he got the idea from that, from seeing webs inside the sewage pipes over on 79 when they built that McDonalds outside of Lisle. Strapped them down with cargo straps and rope. And he'd spend every day for a month picking spiders from around our property and relocating them to the inside of these cans. Tried to coax them into setting up shop. I heard him talking to a few. Some took. Some ate their neighbors. Some just wandered off, but by mid-summer he had a nice collection of spiders and webs and all of them inside these gutted trash cans. The grass grew up between the cans and he'd let that be, but was highly concerned about the grass near his little hut. Cut it low like the putting green on the nineteenth hole. Said low grass kept the bugs out. Said the spiders killed the interlopers. A spider colony. Go fucking figure. Not certain if all that shit about low grass and bugs was true, but drinking High Life outside that cabin late summer was about mosquito free. That's when he said it to me. Out back. After Dad's funeral. *All we can do is be good to each other. We can't eat each other. We're not like them. All we can do is take care of each other. It's not who we are. Not where we come from, but what we do.* And it hit me. It did. Even a fuck like me. It stuck.

Gotta get the ticket on the house. Gotta do a few more runs like these. Gotta be free.

Dodge Charger just showed up again and if I was a paranoid fuck instead of just a regular fuck, I'd think he was tailing me. I'm pretty sure he's a drunk though. It's hitting him pretty hard now.

He is just plain unsettled back there. Those skinny new lights doing a zig-zag right near my back bumper. I can't even let up on the gas, cause he'd plow right into my ass.

Watch it.

Yeah, thanks, Ziggy.

Woah! And fuck me! He did just spun the fuck off.

He did and just that.

I seen his lights go left and then go right and then I seen his tail lights disappear off the shoulder. My brain's yellin at me. Should I stop? Hey, Genie, should I fuckin stop?

What would Jean Genie do?

—

Fucker's probably just passed out, head on wheel, and gonna be found by the next person might pass. But, Man. What if he's dead? Like Jean Genie was dead. What IF he's dead? What the fuck do I do then? Getting distance between us, now. No time. No time. No time. Jimmy Dread's gonna fuck me. Gonna fuck me without passion. Without affection. FUCK ME.

—

What would Jean Genie do? And my hand is turning the wheel on its own now and it seems like it's outside my own control and I'm rumblin on the shoulder. The rocks on the shoulder skip and spit as my foot slides up on the brake. Fuckin Big Meanie is gonna whack me. I know it. But, I'm stopping. Can't help it now. Can't stop the stop.

Reverse.

About a quarter mile.

Took you long enough.

Fuck you, Ziggy.

I'm walking up to the Charger now, and there's steam and smoke coming up from the engine. Stupid drunk. My legs don't want to move. I'm light-headed. I want to sit down. I'm not gonna. He's got that Charger all twisted and accordioned against an oak. Windows smashed out and his blinker is on. Yellow, yellow, yellow and the casings smashed and in the grass. The engine sounds like it's complaining and the front wheels are still spinning, but slowing. What the fuck. Hope Drunk's not dead. I can't call the cops no way. No fuckin way. I'm loaded to bear with a ton of illegal chems, and that's just the van. Got enough inside me to spook any Barney Fife. Don't be dead, Mister. Don't be dead.

Blinkers flashing in the smoke.

Driver's side, no glass.

There's blood.

Shit. Fuck.

There's a arm hanging out the window.

He's got black marks and blood on that arm.

And the winds picked up and my flashers are winking and warning from the shoulder.

Too bright out here for this late.

Window.

Big Meanie.

Jimmy Dread.

Jimmy Dread is dead.

That is, unless he can function with a oak branch stickin outa his neck and half his fat face gone.

Possible, but unlikely.

And in one godawful moment, I'm free.

And Jean Genie is free.

And Jean Genie is paid the fuck back.

Paid back in full. Even if we don't get the ticket back.

Some other Dodge Charger will fill the vacuum. No doubt.

But it ain't gonna be Big Meanie no more. And you can't sell a house to a dead man.

Door slams. Key turns. Engine lives. Popped two whities. Foot slams hard on the gas. Rocks spit in a hundred different arcs out the back. Red flying rocks in the sideviews.

I'm singing now. Roaring down 17. Doing eighty. Breakin all the rules. Even my own. Hop, skip, and jumped up on my pretty-boy, Mmmmm, Baby White Cross. I'm thinking of you, Jean Genie.

I'm thinking of you right now and I'm howling at the moon and at the top of my lungs. There's enough powder in the back of this big stupid sprinter to buy Dryden. There's enough to put Moms away and take back Dad's ranch house. Just gotta find a buyer. And how hard could that be? It is New York fuckin Shitty.

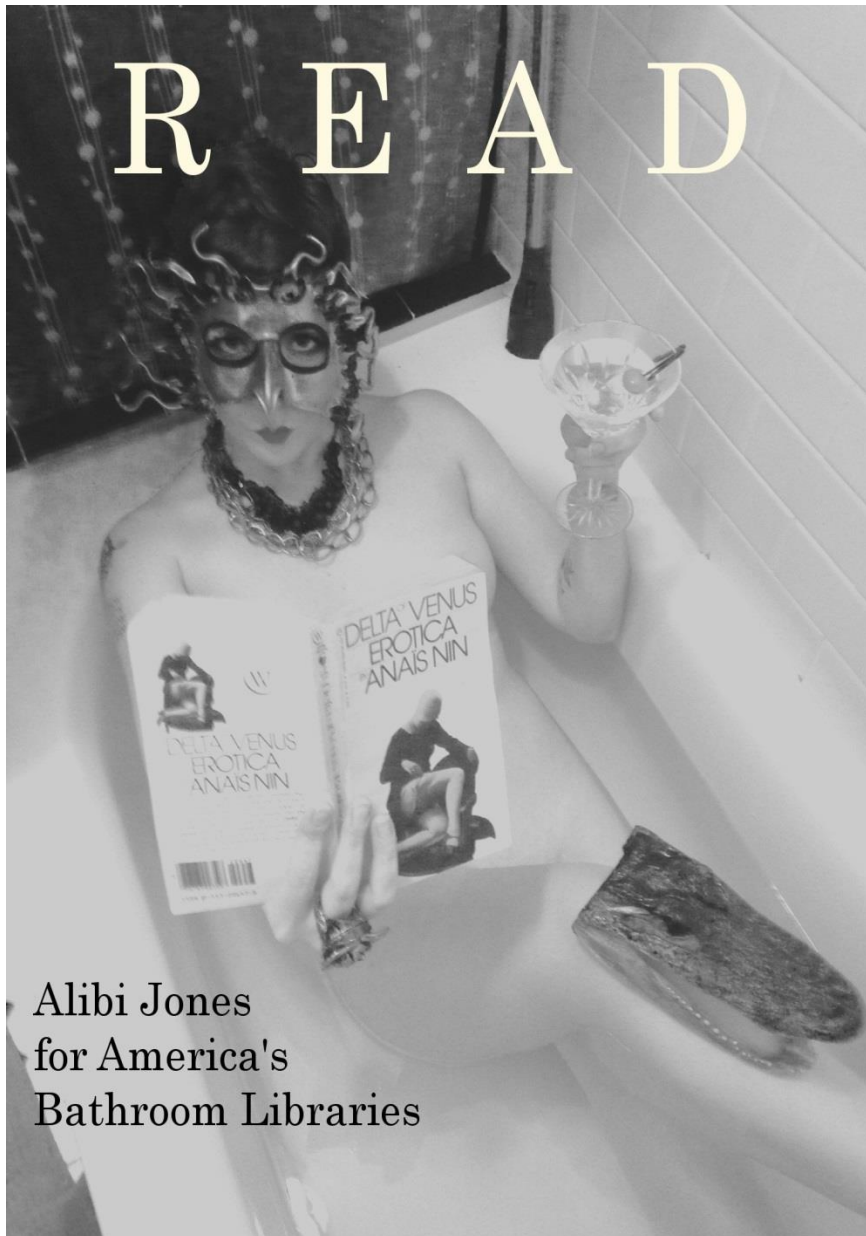
I'm belting it out for you, my hero, Ziggy fuckin Stardust, Rebel Rebel, Major Thom, Jean Genie. You big fuckin Space Oddity. I'm gonna drive this route til another bat, my own bat, comes pinwheeling outa the night. But maybe it were't no fuckin bat to begin with. Maybe it was Big Meanie and his Dodge Charger that done in Genie. And maybe that makes me the big fuckin hero, just for one day. The world as we know it has just come to a motherfuckin end. I'ma get to the Shitty by 2AM. Just a'cause. I'ma sing for you the whole way, Jean. I'ma keep on keepin on.

Turn your fuckin brights off, asshat!

I wish I could swim! Like dolphins can swim!

T. MAZZARA was born in Virginia and studied at Trinity College Dublin.

READ



Alibi Jones
for America's
Bathroom Libraries

DARE

Lauren Seligman

SPLIT ME WIDE OPEN, an egg on the side of a dish. Eat me alive, attack without permission. I dare you to come. Godzilla on the prowl for me. Turn over billboards, trucks on your way. Take me by the shoulders, shake me hard, a natural disaster. Burn down

forests thickened in black ash so villagers choke. Collapse houses into the pea green ocean. Do not flash, a lightning storm, be no mumble of thunder that a midnight shower can bust. I am a flamenco dancer standing in an adolescent boys' choir, exotic in my obsessions and intuitions. I am dark

Poland, fragrant bark on the backyard beech tree I climbed, crouched in the fork, scars on my knees the color of persimmon fruit. I am July-hot Washington Square Park, those gypsy guitar tunes played at sticky night time, London's Cheshire Street stones slicked with moss where I slipped, laughing on my back. I am veiled

an Egyptian daughter, an innocent bred on old Astaire Hollywood fare. I outfit myself in liquid navy eyeliner, lingerie inside trench coats like Anouk Aimee. Oui, j'ai peur. Oui, je suis timide. Oui, je disparais. I am masturbating under the table, come on, knock it over. Turn me upside down until the change falls out of my pockets, tinks, plinks on

the sidewalk. Come on-- do not intimidate. Do not read signs, interpret vibes. Come at me undaunted. Question when I turn back on myself, apologize or shy away from myself. Call me out, judge me, want me regardless in spite. Come on man, hurry up. Look good long, into me, put your palm over the face of my hand, lead. Be sure just like

that, be quick. Come to me. I will conjure balloons I could chase down with you, delve selves to then unseal to you, wash my sheets to keep the clean smell on them, blank in that no man has branded them. Make a racket. Bang, a bass player doing the Beacon Theater. Turn up

the amplifier. I want my eardrums, intestines to ring reverberating. I want to get lit from my tip. Scratch the vinyl. Rust me like wet tin. Wrench me in two a cloud multiplied by the storm. I dare you. Be good, be brave, begin.

LAUREN SELIGMAN writes things – poetry, fiction, emails. She also edits them. She is currently writing her first novel and has chucked in her expat status in Paris for the East Village, New York. A website is imminent but for now, find her on Facebook.

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The ROOT of EVERYTHING ARTY

Jenean McBrearty

“AN APPOINTMENT IS IMPOSSIBLE, and Salvador wouldn't keep it anyway," Gala told Mrs. Green, the crinkled-lipped woman who had roused her at ten. It was too early to juggle American dilettantes. The Dalí Ball had been tiresome after the first half hour. Dalí's glass case and brassiere, worn on his chest to shock the fawners, would work well with the press, but would soon be followed by a *what's next?* from the American public.

"I spoke to him about my nephew. Donald. Bunny Babcock's son. He's an artist."

"I know my husband's an artist, Madame." Gala was at the phone about to order breakfast.

"No, Donald's an artist." Although just sixteen, he was also a high school graduate and his Uncle Marion's protégé. "Señor Dalí will remember, I'm sure..."

It's clear why time melts under the persistence of memory. Americans seemed to have infinite recall capabilities no matter how much gin they consumed, and their persistence jellied the nerves. "Could you bring *tres huevos* and toast?" she said into the phone, and gave Mrs. Green a nod. "Perhaps this afternoon."

Mrs. Green hoisted a brown leather portfolio case in front of her. "Donald gave me this. He's says they're his best portraits. You could tell me if Dalí would be interested in them."

The woman in the crepe dress and open-toed shoes was giving her a way out. She'd take a quick look and deliver a swift dissuasion. "All right." Gala removed the white porcelain vase stuffed with orange and yellow gladiolas from the table and set the case on it, untied the laces and peeled back one side. She turned the separators slowly, as though reading a manuscript, feeling Mrs. Green's expectation at her back. "Have you seen your nephew's portraits, Madame? They're all pudenda."

"What?" Mrs. Green peeked over Gala's shoulder, the two women staring at one vagina after another, some thick-lipped and bushy, others narrow slits crowned with porcupine quills. Some with half legs, ending at the knee. Others between the gaping legs of cranes, as though the essence of the female human and wild animals were deconstructed and reassembled with surgical precision. One pair of labia wore a halo between legs that were feathered wings, the gold ring-line slicing through black curls.

"Oh, my. This one's titled *Bunny Babcock*. What do you make of that?" Mrs. Green said quietly, dismayed. Her wilting body molded itself into an egg-shaped chair, becoming a mass of color pierced with geometric appendages.

Did the golden wire thread represent homage or torture? Gala folded the case and retied the laces. Dalí was right about surrealism's appeal to the subconscious. Mrs. Green had transformed into transparent gelatin. "It looks like your Donald has perfected his genre, Madame. The portrait of Bunny looks just like her."

{ X }

The closest Donnie Babcock came to meeting Dalí was lunching at the Plaza Hotel with his Aunt Rebecca Green, who had more gumption than any of the Babcock-Green bankers he worked with. He'd wanted to loan Wilson Mier five thousand dollars to start a restaurant, but the loan executives turned Mier down with a curt, "Not enough..." of some nebulous thing that translated into, "because he's a Jew".

"I'm already an artist," he confided to his Aunt Becky. "I want to be a famous one to prove to the bankers that Narcissus can be what he sees in the pool."

"If Narcissus'd had a decent mother, she'd have dragged him away from the water and cemented his behind to a school desk chair," Becky said over a Plaza Hotel lunch of watercress and cucumber sandwiches and iced tea.

"Myths weren't written by Horatio Alger—thank God," Donnie said. "What did Gala say about my drawings?"

"She was very upbeat about your work. You've got a great technique. But the subject matter..."

Donnie watched her dab her mouth at the corners with a linen napkin. "Gala wasn't shocked. I know that." The waiter brought vichyssoise. Nothing warm before two o'clock, Aunt Becky said. "Was she?"

"Was she what?"

"Shocked?"

"No. No," Becky said. "She went on about the essences of the sexes. Freud understanding the essential core or irrationality and the surrealists letting us see the unseeable... I don't know what she was talking about, but she sounded like you and your friends. If people have real talent, why do they need alcohol or drugs to display it? That's what I want to know."

He smiled and patted her hand. "Look at it this way, Auntie. Everybody has a deep, deep well inside. At the bottom of that well is all the best and worst, God and the Devil, ugliness and beauty, but we can't get to any of it—the truth about ourselves—because of this." He waved his hands in the air.

"Because of uncontrolled body movements?" Donnie had once dragged her to an awful marathon where exhausted people would dance frenetically, then shuffle around the floor as one person tried to sleep. Donnie called one of the dances the Lindy Hop. It reminded her of the Dervishes she'd seen in Calcutta.

"No, Auntie. Because of all the crap around us. Noise. The need to eat and sleep. Other people. Distractions."

She grabbed his hands. "You haven't left the Church to be a Buddhist, have you, Donnie? Oh, God..."

"I haven't been in the Church since I was twelve."

"Reverend Butcher said he hasn't seen you in a while." In fact, Reverend Butcher had called Donnie's name in church and asked everyone to pray for the wayward youth who took part in dance marathons. "Do you know people are praying for you?"

"I just know that the well is in a locked room in our minds, and for some people, alcohol or medication or meditation or running very fast unlocks the door so they can jump into the well. We artists, climb back out and say, 'See, this is what I found!' Does that make sense?"

"My brother was crazy to have children after getting gassed in the war, God bless his soul. That Gala... I hear she's Russian. Is she a Communist, do you think? Stay away from those people, Donnie. They're dangerous."

"I'll have to stay away from everybody for a while. A week at least. The bank's sending me to a rural banking conference in Indiana—Merchant's National Bank—my uncle's way of teaching me the business."

"Good! Nothing avant-garde about the midwest." They'd put too much lemon in the tea and she'd have to add two more sugar cubes to make it palatable. The restaurant obviously wanted customers to drink wine rather than tea. She blamed the French.

{ X }

Something ancient accosted Donnie Babcock at a bank in South Bend. Call it bloodlust. Call it sin. Call it adventurism. He looked first into the eyes of John Dillinger and then down the barrel of

his pistol, and saw... what? Mortality? Depravity? The Devil peeping over Dillinger's shoulder and grinning in recognition? "Fancy meeting you here," the Devil might have whispered in those first few seconds when women screamed and Dillinger shouted orders that everyone stay calm. Everyone froze, but Donnie could hear the blood pumping adrenaline to their collective hearts.

"I was there. I was there," Donnie would tell anyone who would listen. "Standing as close to Dillinger as I am to you. He's German, you know. As steely-eyed as Hitler. Steady-handed. Not a second of hesitation in his soul." It was the way of things heroic. He'd obeyed Dillinger and lived, lived to fall in love.

Four months after the Merchants National robbery, Dillinger was gunned down outside the Biograph Theater in Chicago. Donnie wept for three days, holding his father's Smith & Wesson close to his heart. In September, the Nazis held a rally in Nuremberg. In October the Chinese Communists began their Long March. And in December, Donnie Babcock was sentenced to life in prison for the rape and murder of his cousin Selena, after the Spring Cotillion at the Parkside Country Club. They'd won a trophy for a finely-executed fox-trot.

"Really," Gala told Mrs. Green over martinis at Sardi's, "You've got to tell Donnie to stop sending Salvador letters. It's becoming... uncomfortable. Painful."

Donnie had changed his genre. His portrait sketches were lingams with faces drawn on the tips, some melting over rocks, some lunging out from between cue balls, and bowling balls, and tennis balls. Some dangling from the Capitol Building, from St. Peter's, from the Brandenburg Gate. One had a funny moustache. Rebecca found them curiously amusing. "I do apologize, Mrs. Dalí. They do seem obscene."

"It's not the pictures, for God's sake," Gala said, "It's his begging. His constant begging for someone to pull him out of a well. Look here, twelve lines of nothing but, *please pull me out of the well.*"

"I don't know what he's talking about. We don't see him much. Prisons are so dismal."

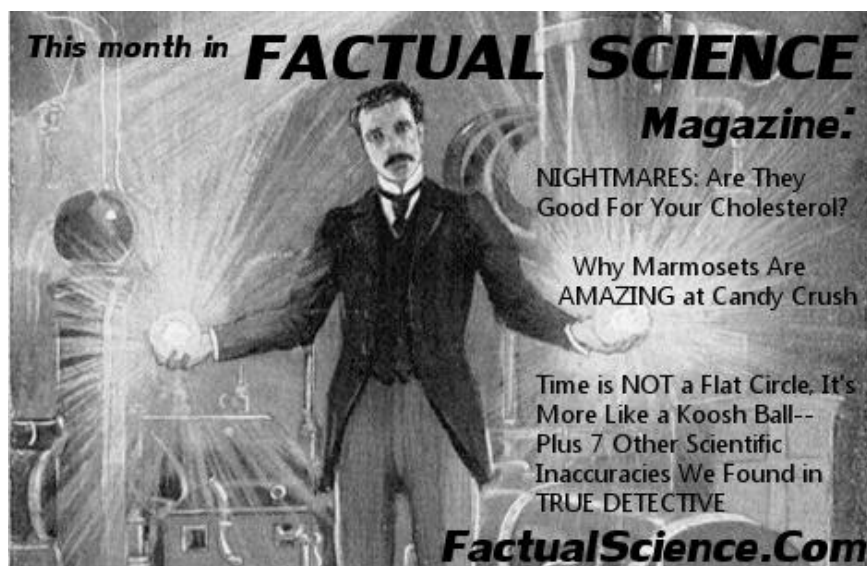
"You have to help him," Gala said.

"How? He's dangerous and prison is exactly where he belongs. We can't have murderers running about the world killing innocent people. That *would* be insane." It seemed odd that someone like Gala could be so out of touch with reality, but Rebecca Green was flattered that someone famous had invited

her for lunch at the Astor. "I was sitting as close to her as I am to you," she told Donnie's Uncle Marion.

It was September, a year after pieces of Selena's pink formal were found bloodied and shredded in the Country Club boathouse. The Nuremberg Laws were being enforced all over Germany, and in Columbia, Mississippi, Earl and Weldon Bascom produced the first night outdoor rodeo thanks to electric lighting.

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Cameron Suey

CAPTAIN ELISHA DRIFTS BACK TO HER BODY. Sedative fog curls around her edges for a long, liquid minute before she remembers she has eyes to open. Lids slide across her sclera, a syrupy-sweet motion that tingles her spine like some small secret pleasure. Her forearms feel hot and then cold, as catheters spit the next layer of the wakeup cocktail into her blood. Already, the induced euphoria's fading, shepherding the last of the delirium and confusion away to be replaced by a conscious, knowing glee. They've arrived.

Her new stateroom smells of wood and leather, warm aromas painted in crimson and deep oak hues. The armchair creaks as she moves, and smartbands retreat into its folds like startled snakes. The catheters slip from her flesh, spraying a thin mist of skinbond to cover their tracks, and constrict away into the arms of the chair.

Her vision drifts to a far wall, her eyes looping on a pleasing swirl in the burlwood, where Mithradates projects her feeds in layers of soft amber light. The most important detail rises to the surface in pulsing cobalt: No one has followed. Right up until their unscheduled departure, no alarms were even raised.

Now the slip is over, only a few hours passed, and the slick ebon needle of her new ship, the *Mithra*, drifts above the ecliptic of Gliese 667C. Mithradates maps the bewildering orbits of the neighboring stars and the six rocky planets around 667C, adjusting for any local eccentricities since the stellar event. The third star, a dull red coal, squats at the center of a tangle of scorched planets. Elisha waits for Mithradates to find any sign of their quarry, but so far she only sees the purples and oranges of worlds and moons.

The nausea arrives as she scans the display, inevitable postslip vomit rising up at the back of her throat. A small basin of burnished silver extends on a silent pseudopod, awaiting her purge. Everyone must sleep during the slip, and only Goetsch claims to have conquered the purge. Elisha could have asked Mithradates to confirm, to see if it's just more bluster from the mission's XO, but she'd rather let the man keep his boasts.

With a twinkling of glass bells, a white dot appears in the orbital map, then another. The *Odin*, and the *Yggdrasil*. The ghost

ships, in the shadow of the third planet. Elation rises up in her, along with something else. Elisha leans into the gleaming mouth of the basin and gags before her throat unlocks to spray a hot foam of sweet pepper bisque, her last meal before their covert flight from Terrapin Yards.

As she blots her lips with a soft cloth, the remains of the first slipprobe from the Reclamation Society appears on Mithradates' map. Closer in, trailing the orbit of the third planet, it's just a few hundred thousand kilometers from the *Odin* and the *Yggdrasil*. It reads as a scattered cloud of pinprick fragments in the readout, the slip engine still bleeding weak exotic energy signals even a few weeks after the probe's demise. The second probe, following hours after and launched at great risk of detection, had been more circumspect. From a high and silent orbit, it brought back word of the *Odin* and the *Yggdrasil*, their distant silhouettes barely visible in the shadow of the dead world.

If there were still survivors aboard, separated by more than 900 years of cultural and technological drift, they would need to be approached with cautious grace. Her spine crawled with excitement at the thought, as if the universe had unfurled to give flesh to her dreams.

When they had told her about the probes, she'd thrown every ounce of social capital she had to get the Reclamation Society's nomination, abandoning the last of her studies. She'd been the one to propose the theft of her mother's ship, the *Mithra*, and she and Goetsch had arranged to patch the ship's entity, Mithradates, in secret. In the end, they were the only possible crew. She bent and twisted the world to deliver them to this moment.

More sounds, ringing steel this time, as Mithradates tells her the rest of the crew are awake and ready to begin. With his new software, he vibrates with excitement, almost as eager as her to begin. A third tone, hollow wooden chimes, and Mithradates paints new information in the air above the *Odin* and the *Yggdrasil*. Her brow furrows. The numinous excitement that suffused her since her selection fades into the background. She leans closer to confirm what Mithradates is showing her.

Around the great sphere of the *Yggdrasil* drifts a cloud of objects, an accretion disc of ablative armor shrapnel from a thousand years of micrometeorites, drifting screws and abandoned tools, and corpses. Thousands of frozen corpses, lashed by ropes. Loops and whorls of the dead sketching glyphs

and geometric shapes drift around the ghost ship, held close by *Yggdrasil's* gentle gravity.

{ X }

The two other members of her crew float at the galley table, feet looped into velvet footholds to keep from drifting, still queasy and gray from the slip. They pull steaming bulbs of coffee, mate, or less rustic stimulant broths from the maker, one after another. Elisha floats over and hooks her feet in. In the silence, as they shake the dust from their drug-addled brains, Elisha calls up her own briefs on the two other generation arks onto the table, working the well-worn text smooth with repetition. Even before she'd joined the Society at academy, these tales of the age of conventional thrust had been her bedtime stories.

The *Eyz Hayim* is now a dusty mausoleum lying in a crater on a dead world. The collected last logs and transmissions of the crew as they prepared to euthanize their entire culture, once they'd understood that the planet they'd chosen would never support life, are the stuff of modern myths. Their command vessel, the *Adonai*, found a stable orbit and vented its atmosphere into space, in order to preserve the last words of their people, a culture already unique in all the stars after 200 years of isolation.

What happened to the *Ashvattha* and her crew is less understood. Elisha has heard nearly every theory, but in the end, the simplest one seems the most likely: At some point during the centuries-long drift, the people of the *Ashvattha* split into multiple factions, the nature of the disagreement lost without hope of understanding. The incident occurred mere months before they reached their target star, where it appears that the command vessel *Siddartha* intentionally reoriented to point toward the mother ark, and accelerated rapidly into impact, destroying both ships.

Elisha had spent long hours reading the glittering debris field in orbit around Tau Ceti like tea leaves, but no revelation emerged. It remains, simply, a graveyard cloud to be mapped and avoided by the new colonists arriving at the fourth and fifth worlds by the expanding cloud of the slip.

But the *Yggdrasil* remained a phantom. Early slip probes that passed through the Gliese 667C system noted only the inhospitable worlds, scoured clean by the stellar event observed a few centuries prior, and presumed that any colony on the third world would have been blasted to ash. The star would have

remained just an unusual entry in the expanding catalog of systems if the Society hadn't sent their illegal probes.

Elisha clears her throat to get her crew's attention and then clucks her tongue in a stuttering rhythm to summon Mithradates. He answers by unfolding in the air above the galley table, a moss-green and amber cloud of lines and points that solidifies into a model of the system. Goetsch blinks rapidly, brushing his shaggy hair from his brow as he adjusts fogged-over eyes onto the display. Flynn reaches into her breast pocket for her lenses and jaw piece. Flynn's pathological rejection of augmented ware nearly cost her position on the expedition, and Elisha has to suppress a small shudder of irritation at the affectation.

"First thing's first," Elisha intones, "As you've gathered from the general calm, we got away clean." She takes a moment to savor their grins, mirroring her own giddiness. "Even if they scrambled right after our departure, they'll have little hope of reading the direction of our slip. Mithradates' most-likely is that we have days, at least."

Goetsch and Flynn raise their drinks, and Elisha returns the informal salute.

"Now for the situation at hand: As we knew, the planet's dead. Mithradates has identified what might be the shadow of a few human structures, but he thinks it's most-likely just noise in his pattern recognition." The display in the air swims as she speaks, diving down toward the planet to focus on the image of a few squarish impressions against a flint gray plain. "During the instability, the star ejected a sizable portion of its corona, blasting the planet down to the bedrock. The ocean and atmosphere flashed right off. We're not going to find anything there."

"How damaged are the ships?" Goetsch interjects before Elisha can shift topics. "Do we know how they survived the instability?"

Mithradates is already displaying his most-likely before Elisha can respond, mapping spherical waves of superheated plasma across the breakfast table. They wash over the little world, sterilizing the surface. In the shadow of the planet, *Odin* and *Yggdrasil* dance in a calm eddy in the solar storm, a complex twirling orbit that keeps them both hidden on the dark side of the world from the face of the star.

"Good piloting," Elisha answers, "and remember they didn't have reliable synthetic entities. They did it manually. Probably lasted more than a few years, in a constant state of

alert. And it left both ships pretty cooked. The *Yggdrasil*'s ablative armor is all but gone, and neither ship has anything in the way of long-range transmitters. But they're still here, and Mithradates is seeing some pretty strong indication that many major systems are still on. They may predate our makers, entities, and slipdrives, but these ships were bleeding edge when they launched. They'll be on backup or tertiary support systems but - both ships are still filtering air, nutrients, and water."

"Someone's home?" Goetsch's eyebrows raise. "Do we know for sure?"

Elisha can feel the weight of her response. She already knows, but she hasn't said it aloud yet. The word, hanging in the air, makes it real.

"Yes."

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They argue for hours, poring over the data and Mithradates' most-likely models.

The *Odin* has lights in one section, tiny pinprick portholes glowing in the visible spectrum, and they've cycled once in the 12 hours they've been observing. There are humans onboard, clustered around the lit habitats. Unmistakable thermal and electrical signatures drifting through the dark corridors of the *Odin*, at least 700 of them. There's a rudimentary short-distance antenna, cobbled together from the remains of three unrelated systems, probably just enough to keep *Odin* in contact with *Yggdrasil*. Mithradates can track the other systems on board, but there's not much to parse. Water and air filtration, nutrient reclamation. *Odin* is self-sufficient, for now; the water system's on its last leg, bound to fail within a decade.

When it comes to the *Yggdrasil*, Mithradates glows in apology, tells them it can't provide a most-likely scenario, only unsatisfactory guesses. There are no lights, and the heat's too great, with no individual signatures, just one pulsating thermal smear. Perhaps the air temperature's tropical inside, but Mithradates sees no sign of functioning heat sinks or generators that might account for the readings. After weighing several increasingly outlandish theories, Mithradates decides that there's likely no one alive on board, and that some systemic failure is producing the heat.

The matter of the bodies ringing *Yggdrasil* still lingers. They stare in silence as Mithradates shows them the vast network

of corpses lashed together by crudely-made ropes of plant matter, frozen in the vacuum. In a few microseconds, Mithradates correlates the degradation of the corpses and other points of data to shade the map with time. The oldest corpses, the simplest circles of six to ten bodies, bound head to feet, date from the time of the instability, or just after. The most recent, still two or three hundred years old, are massive, coiling, helical structures made of hundreds of bodies, split, flayed, and rendered to create complex shapes hundreds of meters wide.

Mithradates can't offer a definitive reason for this behavior. He wants to suggest a ritual form of burial, but the large clusterings don't match the patterns of a natural cycle of death. Too many young, healthy, and incomplete bodies. The oldest bodies are still whole, but the newer, more ambitious structures are knit with individual limbs and torsos, with almost no heads. The most-likely is some form of ritual sacrifice practiced for a century or so after the stellar instability, and then abandoned. Did the colonists run out of people to sacrifice? The corpse-ropes remain a cold pebble in Elisha's gut, an ugly blemish on what was poised to be the most important event of her life.

Once they've aligned the original plan with their new information, Elisha hesitates giving the order. She wants to hover in this last moment forever, like the glorious second of anticipation just before you tear the wrapping paper off a present. But Flynn reaches out with a manic grin, and cuffs her on the side, sending them both drifting away from the blow.

"Let's go," says Flynn, "Let's start talking." She glares at Goetsch in a challenge. He narrows his eyes, dragging his bushy eyebrows into a low flat line, and scrunches his mouth to one side.

"They attacked the probe, looking at the wreckage. Probably lobbed something blind and dumb at it, scored a lucky strike, but that means they're aggressive," he says. "We approach, slowly. I set the speed. I say when we rabbit, no questions. Yay?"

"Yay," Elisha says, jaw clenched.

"Yay," says Flynn, eyes locked on Goetsch. "If you somehow feel threatened by an unarmed preslip spaceship, we can bug out, but you'll never hear the end of it."

"If you're pissed, you're alive, Flynn. I want to do this as much as anyone."

Elisha doubts that. She feels the pull of the moment, waiting for her in the future, just beyond the cloud of corpses.

{ X }

They come in slow, the slender shape of the *Mithra* running dark and silent. Tiny fusion reactors on chameleon eye pods align together and cough, accelerating them down towards the orbital plane. Elisha feels a creeping pressure on her chest as they watch the vast round bulk of the *Yggdrasil* resolve from the stars through Mithradates' simulated observation dome. The uncanny sensation of standing on the outside of the ship always makes Elisha a little giddy, but now she's too busy staring at the third planet. A cinder, scorched and steaming, it strikes her as somehow profane, upsetting in a way she's not prepared for.

As they approach, Mithradates begins to buzz, drawing up new most-likes for *Yggdrasil*. He has a better view of plant matter on the surface of the ship as well as the *Odin*, in tiny frozen fields, covering micrometer strikes, patching cracks in the ancient hull. He sees a clearer picture of the vast interior, and estimates that the ship's biosphere has been drastically altered, and may indeed be supporting a very small human population.

"This is the same plant as on the corpse rings?" asks Elisha, and Mithradates gives her a most-likely, comparing a few dozen images of frozen purplish flesh, sharp webbed ridges and clusters of fine tendrils. "That's not Terran, is it?" The answer's almost-certain.

Elisha tries to reconcile this new information with her expectations, like trying to join two pieces from different puzzles. She should've been ready for the unexpected, she chides herself for letting it affect her so much, but she can't let it go. It's the shape of a word on the tip of her tongue, just out of mind, and it gnaws at her.

She's putting too much weight on this expedition, she realizes, willing it to match her old personal fantasies of contact. She breathes deep, squares her shoulders and unhooks her feet, lets the gentle acceleration of their approach hold her against the leather couch in the center of the operations lounge. Let it go. Exhale.

This is still important. These are still people who need help. Inhale. Exhale.

Thrust ceases for a moment, and the couches sway as the lounge reorients itself inside the *Mithra*'s hull. Mithradates flips and adjusts their feeds, and they sink back to the couches as the *Mithra* slows to approach.

When they're just a few kilometers out from the *Odin* and *Yggdrasil*, Elisha turns on the running lights, a warm welcoming swirl of pulsating colors. They have no way of knowing if the *Odin* has sensors, but there are actual portholes, physical windows made of half-meter thick plastic. As long as they have eyes, the survivors can see the *Mithra*.

They drift closer, alive with color and light. The *Odin* is an enormous, ugly, ancient-looking vessel with gaping wounds in her lower decks. *Yggdrasil* hangs like a moon, so unlike any other craft she's seen. Elisha conjures on a gentle spotlight, and plays it across the *Odin*'s pitted and weathered hull with her fingertips. She sees only the reflected black of space from the portholes on the upper decks, where they'd seen lights earlier.

Flynn calls up a small panel in the air and tinkers with the lights, cycling through color schemes, rhythms, and intensity. They wait. Elisha's light passes over another porthole and she sees a brief flash of movement, the impression of a pale head vanishing from view. Her heart leaps and she can't stop the corners of her mouth from rising.

"Mithradates, can you play that back?"

A screen unfolds within the dome, stabilizing on a close-up view of the window. Elisha's light creeps across the porthole at quarter speed, illuminating a white face for a split-second. It's fast, and they don't have a perfect recording, but Mithradates gives them a few most-likely composite images of a face: male, bald, elongated skull, covered in markings.

She can barely control her breath as the excitement returns, washing out the doubt like a flash flood. "Can we see an overlay of where you think the people are?" she asks, and Mithradates maps a field of probable locations of humans inside the *Odin*, showing little hot orange silhouettes clustered around the portholes, peering out of the darkness. She moves the light slowly, and they slide out of view as she approaches. A little shiver runs down her spine.

"Are we getting any transmissions from them?" Goetsch asks, and Mithradates gives him a negative with a red pulse. "Well, should *we* try?"

"I think it's about time. You feel like running?" Flynn asks with a grin, but Goetsch frowns and shakes his head.

"This is unnerving, but I don't think it's dangerous yet. I just don't like it. Send a hail."

Mithradates sends the text the Reclamation Society has agreed on, a brief paragraph in all the most-likely languages of

the original expedition. A vague, mealy stew of platitudes and grandstanding written as much for posterity and to project legitimacy as it was for communication. It embarrasses Elisha every time she sees it, as much as it embarrassed her to write it, revising her original draft with Society feedback from a dozen academies.

The message goes out across all the most-likely bands the *Odin* might have, as well as a few unusual methods, including coded pulses on the surface of the ship. On each channel, the message repeats, asking for a response.

Silence from the *Odin*. The watchers aboard stop fleeing from the light, and stare openly with blank faces, wide flat mouths like gashes in the white belly of a fish. Huge shining eyes inside too-large skulls. Hairless, eyebrows and eyelashes plucked, fields and ridges of scar tissue where the follicles were destroyed.

Elisha finds herself wishing they would hide again, or respond to the message. They feel less and less like people as she watches them stare back at her. She turns off the spotlight, but she can still see them, vague shapes in the dim glow of the *Mithra's* lights.

The message repeats, and on a low-frequency microwave band, Mithradates reports a response. A squelch, just a blip of information from the *Odin's* transmitter, but it's enough.

"Contact," says Goetsch, and turns to Elisha to wink. "They're pinging again."

Mithradates throws a display across the void, an oval of shredded static that begins to resolve into an image. Somewhere inside the *Odin*, an ancient camera points into the dim corner of a chamber. The walls are filthy, layered in centuries of dust and organic detritus. Elisha fights the sudden sensation that she can *smell* the wet, filthy air on the other side. Her lungs feel somehow sullied and dirty. Some warm diffuse glow paints the scene a sickly yellow.

There's a flurry of motion as a figure drifts into view and locks a pair of giant golden eyes directly on the camera. A naked youth, can't be older than fifteen. Up close they can see the extent of the scarification covering his hairless face and head. A pale, nearly lipless mouth works frantically around a mouthful of shattered teeth. It seems as if the youth is looking directly at Elisha now, through the gulf of space and time, begging her for something. There's no sound, but still he begs, his owl eyes filling with tears. He snaps his head to the right, the expression going

slack. The signal ends, and the round window collapses. Elisha stares at the *Odin*, floating just ahead of them, silent and black.

“What just happened?” Goetsch asks, knowing full well no one has an answer.

“We’re lucky they still know how operate a two-way,” sighs Flynn. “Let’s cut them a little slack for not remembering etiquette.”

“Start the signal again on that same band,” Elisha says. “Maybe they’ll hail back.”

The signal returns in under five minutes. The viewpoint’s of the same room, now pointed straight against one moss-covered wall. There’s a light, flickering just offscreen to illuminate the wizened face of an ancient woman with cloudy eyes that stare straight into the camera. She’s grinning, too wide and too severe, and her filed-down teeth look like tiny gray nubs in her pale gums. Another electric chill cascades through Elisha. She can’t separate fear from anticipation.

The old woman speaks in a voice like the flexing of a broken branch, a cacophonous reedy rasp, spitting out a series of hard syllables over the hissing static on the band. Flynn’s in motion, playing back the audio on a half-dozen repeaters analyzing stresses and sounds.

“That was *Lingua*,” says Goetsch, before Flynn can confirm. “Weirdest accent I’ve ever heard, but it’s not one of the old languages.”

“Mmm,” Flynn says with an edge of irritation. “We got lucky. They had five or six languages spoken on the manifest, including the one that would become the *Lingua*. Could’ve been any of them.”

“So we don’t need a linguist after all,” he says, digging further until Flynn’s scowling.

“Language isn’t words,” she mutters, and flicks at the cloud of data around her, subvocalizing to Mithradates. Beneath the old woman, a shifting series of words appears, providing Mithradates and Flynn’s most-likely transcription of what she’s saying, adjusting for a thousand-year shift in phonemes and cognates.

Elisha has to read the text closely to even consider that it might be in *Lingua*. The vowels are all wrong, the O’s swallowed and elongated almost into a low vibration of her throat, and the normal hard plosives came out like hissing fricatives. Occasionally she utters a word that neither Mithradates nor

Flynn can account for, some local variant with no meanings without an entire cultural history for context.

“Praose Goawhd, wayve woughted foar <unknown phrase> ah tho-“

With the subtitles rapidly improving, Elisha starts to adjust to the alien pronunciation, until she can almost understand what the old woman is saying.

“Transmit,” she says at once, “both ways. Let’s speak.” She looks to Flynn, who nods once.

“Praise God,” the old woman continues. The dark beads of scars covering her bald skull shift and flow like a wheat field in the wind. Mithradates throws up a potential model that has manipulation of the scars via facial muscles as a second layer on the communication, but the theory evaporates a few moments later. “Praise be <unknown phrase> who drew you from the outer dark. Glory be to the guardians of God, may they pass into It for all eternity.” Tears build in the corner of her eyes, and she shakes her head to fling them away.

“Greetings,” Elisha says, momentarily losing her prepared words in the aftermath of the woman’s confusing prayer.

“I cannot see you,” the old woman says, nodding in apology, “but I hear your words. You are <unknown phrase>. You are human.”

“We are human,” Elisha confirms, trying to speak with the measured, enunciated pace Flynn has drilled her with. “We are relatives of your ancestors. It is a great honor to find you living. I am Captian Elisha, of the vessel *Mithra*, representing the Reclamation Society. What may we call you?”

The woman raises one spidery hand, covered in colored and dyed scar patterns. The nails are gone, torn away to leave little fleshy nubs at the tip. She taps her breastbone.

“I am No One,” she says. “You are No One. We are all No One until God <unknown phrase> our flesh. Until then, we serve.”

“Oh hell,” mutters Goetsch beneath his breath, and Flynn exhales sharply, sending him a subvocal command to be silent. She’s scanning a few models that reinterpret and re-parse the words to change the meaning. Elisha hopes she misheard it.

“If it pleases you, I will call you No One, but my name is Elisha. I am a citizen of a culture descended from your own. We are separated by nearly a thousand years, but we have a common origin.”

“Our history has wounds upon it,” the woman intones, seeming not to hear Elisha. “We cannot *<unknown verb>* that the truth was always passed on. We have known heresy.”

Elisha’s feet are looped into the couch, but she feels as if she’s drifting. None of her expectations are solid, and she struggles to hold onto the moment. Flynn senses her confusion. The linguist works her jaw and sends Elisha a non-verbal encouragement, and a reminder of the planned questions.

“Are you in any immediate danger? Do you require medical attention?” No One cocks her head at this, as if the idea is absurd, so Elisha changes tact, and advances down the list. “What can you tell us about how you came to be here?”

No One shifts her body, short stumps of her teeth flashing as she works her thin, dark lips. “You wish to know the Matter of God...”

“We wish to know the story of how you came to be, whatever you can recall,” Elisha offers, but No One waves one long-fingered hand.

“Your vessel is too small...” No One says, after a long silence. “How did you *<unknown verb>* the night ocean?” Mithradates spits out a most-likely interpretation, but Elisha already understands, and the question fills her with a solid sense of purpose.

“When your foreparents left their home world, they were limited by the laws of the universe, as they understood them. They travelled faster than any human before them, but it still took them nearly 500 years. Do you understand this?” No One waves her hand, a gesture Elisha takes to mean either a dismissal of the question, or a command to hurry. “We have learned much in that time. One of the things we have learned is how to bend the space between two points, and slip across the gap. We left another star less than a day ago.”

Elisha opens her mouth to continue, to ask if this crude explanation of the slipdrive makes sense, but No One’s reaction stops the words in her mouth. The old woman’s crying, great gasping sobs as much joy as grief, and her dark lips spread into a wide grin. The signal cuts out with a massive burst of noise. The three of them are left in the silent dome staring at the drifting *Odin*. Countless faces peer back from blackened windows.

“I do not like this,” Goetsch says, in a flat tone that Elisha knows will brook no argument or discussion.

“Try to see it from her point of view,” Flynn offers, “They’ve lived in what is effectively a prison for generations. This is... a lot to take in.”

“No, that last part of the signal. It wasn’t just an overload. Mithradates is chewing on it, but it’s... actually taking him time. Let’s hold off until they’re ready to speak again, see what that was.”

As if in response, the microwave band squawks again, and a portion of the dome fills with No One’s scarred face. The grin remains, a wide string of flattened teeth. Behind her drift six figures, all hairless and scarred. They’re naked, pale and delicate limbs floating in the air, all wearing the same mad grin, and spheres of water build up at the corners of their eyes.

“We have conversed with God *<unknown phrase>*. God has *<unknown verb>* us our brothers and sisters would come to break the chains of light that bond us. And so you have.”

“I don’t see any other communications traffic with the *Yggdrasil*. The anomalous signal was sent to us, not the ark.” Goetsch mutters. Flynn swivels her head to fix him with a stare. Elisha catches sight of Flynn’s eyes, and can see that she too is rattled. Too many strange variables at play, and they’ve fallen far off script. When the pause is too long to bear, Elisha feels the pressing need to fill the void, and asks the first thing she can think of.

“You mentioned the Matter of God. Can you tell us more?”

“God would prefer to tell you,” No One murmurs, the syllables warm and liquid with reverence. Elisha hardly needs Mithradates and Flynn’s transcript to understand the woman’s strange pronunciations now.

“And, how do we speak with him?” Elisha asks, feeling her skin prickle and go cold. She’s on the edge of a cliff she can’t put a name to, and gravity’s tugging.

“God is *Yggdrasil*.”

Nobody breathes in the command lounge. Elisha is sure she misheard No One.

“I think the Society made a mistake,” Goetsch subvocalizes. “We’re in over our heads here. They worship a derelict.”

“Don’t you dare rabbit, Goetsch. This isn’t a threat, it’s just unusual,” Flynn hisses. “*Yggdrasil* and *Odin* held complete biospheres, it carried them here, made their colony, and saved them from the stellar incident, and has been their home ever since. That’s more like God than any other folk tale.”

Flynn's theory is too sound, too neat. Elisha knows that it can't be correct, as much as she wants it to be. There's nothing logical or sane in No One's shining eyes. This is no cargo cult. This is something else. She half-wishes Goetsch would pull the switch, sending the *Mithra* back to a safe distance. She needs time to digest.

"God says, there are four of you on your vessel," No One says. "Three humans and something else. What is the other one?"

Goetsch spools up six feeds, shaking his head, then slides the reports over to Flynn and Elisha. The *Odin* has no functioning sensors that he can see. Nothing to scan them, nothing to distinguish passengers. The feed camera has only shown Elisha's face, as per the Society's protocol. Goetsch throws up another cluster of feeds from Mithradates, an orange warning somewhere deep in his autonomous system, in maker control. He glares at Flynn and Elisha, eyes hard. Elisha feels the moment slipping out of her grasp.

"How do you know that, No One?"

"No One does not question God. It speaks, we listen."

"When did you first know God?" Elisha twists the conversation, feeling a fierce protective urge to keep No One's questions away from Mithradates, even as a cascade of little errors streams across her feeds. "When did he first speak to you?"

"You *<unknown phrase>* us mad," No One says with a sympathetic cock of the head. It looks like sympathy and concern, but Elisha knows that body language will have shifted as much as words in a thousand years. "God was here, on the third world. He made us welcome, so that we might *<unknown verb>* him. He called to us, and we came, crossing the night ocean. When the star unfurled, desperate to undo the creation, God saved us as we saved him. And together, we waited. We waited for you."

The last fragments of her fantasy fall to the floor, replaced by a swirling fog. These people are too far gone, driven mad by generations of scarcity and desperate survival. Elisha finds herself unaccountably angry, disgusted and embarrassed by the old woman's mania, and lashes out with the only weapon at hand.

"Tell us about the bodies, around *Yggdrasil*. What happened?"

"We did not speak God's language, nor it ours." No One says, waving her hand again in dismissal. "It took time and flesh to learn."

"Is there anyone alive, aboard the *Yggdrasil*?"

“They are all alive. They are one with God. We few <unknown phrase> remain, suffering the separation, so that we might speak for them. Only three of you are flesh, God sees the false <unknown phrase>, and demands an answer: Who is the fourth mind?”

“Elisha,” murmurs Goetsch, “I think they did something to Mithradates. I don’t know how, we never dropped our counter measures for a second, but there was *something* in that signal.”

The small errors compound on the feeds, still nothing threatening, but now Mithradates admits with a sheepish tone that he may have been compromised, and that the maker subsystems are no longer responding. He doesn’t have anything like a most-likely to explain how, but he’s confident they can cut the signal and reboot him to flush the corrupted nodes.

“No One,” Elisha says, barely holding her frustration in check, “Much has changed since you were—”

No One’s face constricts into a pinched mask of rage, and she keens aloud, one high note. The other scarred faces take up the cry, a dissonant swelling of sound that overwhelms the audio feeds. The screen goes blank with another burst of static, and the chord hangs in the air like a foul miasma. A distortion passes across the dome of the lounge, and the image of the *Odin* and *Yggdrasil* suspended in front of them ripples.

“We’re done,” says Goetsch, “let’s move,” and not even Flynn challenges him. Elisha sits back into the couch, and secures her feet into the stirrups, ready for the acceleration. Goetsch pulls up a panel in the air, and executes a prepared sequence.

The dome vanishes.

Elisha sees the cold sterility of the room’s true walls without Mithradates’ images and overlays, and feels suddenly naked and entombed. She clicks her tongue, awaiting the entity’s response. Silence. The *Mithra* drifts in the void.

“Shit. Shit. Shit,” Goetsch hisses in the still air. Elisha hears his tongue clicking frantically in time with her own. “Mithradates is gone.”

“No,” Flynn whispers, “He’s—”

The ship lurches as sudden acceleration throws them against the couches. One of Flynn’s legs slips from the stirrup, and she crashes back against the curved wall, her trapped leg twisting beyond the bone. Mithradates’ simulated dome reappears, washing the claustrophobic chamber away with a vast

and yawning chasm. The *Odin* and *Yggdrasil* loom above them, swelling to fill the vista.

Mithradates barks a dozen warnings on his return, most predicting his own imminent failure. The entity can't give a most-likely for the cause, can only highlight a series of unexplainable interferences directly on his physical substrate, culminating with the *Odin's* transmission moments before the crash. The *Odin's* hailing them again, and although Elisha screams at Mithradates to block the signal, No One's face fills the dome. Behind her, the choir still hums a vile and slithering chord.

"God forgives your sins," she sighs, her luminous eyes down cast. "God has turned the heart of your false mind, as It will yours."

Elisha becomes aware that Flynn is screaming, her twisted leg still binding her to the couch. But it's not a scream of pain. She's pointing at the dome. At *Yggdrasil*. The vast pockmarked sphere catches the light of the star, and Elisha sees it too.

From a hazy patch of frozen plant matter, something slithers into the night. A vast, braided rope of vines, steaming and cracking in the vacuum, reaches across the gulf. It freezes and shatters as it flows, tendrils across its surface cracking and drifting away, but from deep within the writhing mass, more vines emerge, flowing like water before they succumb to the primal cold.

They can do little but watch. Mithradates will only answer their queries with a stuttering series of lights and sounds that Elisha interprets as an apology.

The winding indigo tentacle splits at the tip and unfurls like a hand. One tendril freezes solid, cracking off and spinning away, and fresh vines burst from beneath the hardening carapace of ice to continue the slow, grasping motion.

Mithradates takes them right into the tentacle's grasp, toward the oceanic bulk of *Yggdrasil*. The *Mithra's* hull shudders as the many-fingered hand closes around and locks them fast. Goetsch's head slams sideways into the edge of the coach, and the impact jars Elisha so hard she bites the inside of her cheek. Flynn stops screaming when the motion forces another unnatural joint into her leg, and her eyes go dull and glassy against her pale face. The frozen web of vines envelops them, and begins to slide back into the opening, pulling the *Mithra* down to the surface of the ark.

The impact is almost gentle, sending soft reverberations down her spine as the *Mithra* slides into an organic dock made of indigo frost-covered flesh. Mithradates apologizes again, far away and quiet, and the images in the dome vanish. Flynn's ragged breathing fills the dark, cramped space. Goetsch is up, fumbling with the buttons on the door's physical panel, as Elisha struggles to free her feet. In Mithradates' absence, the straps are reduced to mere dumb webbing, and she tears the tips of her fingers before she works herself free.

Elsewhere in the ship, they can hear the chimes of alarms and warnings as their airlock vents into *Yggdrasil's* atmosphere. Elisha's ears pop violently when the pressure equalizes. Goetsch wraps his hand around a small yellow shock prod, holding it like a talisman out ahead of him and pulls the lounge door open. He vanishes down the hallway, the air swirling with his passage. A smell wafts toward her from outside, fecund and sweltering, like the raw interior of some great beast.

Elisha drifts to Flynn, checking for a pulse and finding only a faint hummingbird flutter. She clucks her tongue like a reflex and subvocalizes to Mithradates to administer emergency care but of course, there is only the thundering weight of his absence. She probes the dull walls, unfamiliar and alien without Mithradates' overlays, in search of the compartment of emergency supplies but she cannot remember where it is.

From outside, she hears the whisper of something touching the walls, smooth flesh against metal and wood. The air stirs and agitates the alien smell. It's somewhat like ginger, a pungent spice on top of something else earthy, nauseating, and complex. Goetsch drifts through the doorframe, dragging his fingertips to slow his flight.

"It's too late," he whispers, looking back down the long central spine of the *Mithra*. "Sorry. We're breached. Mithradates didn't even get a chance to call for help, and all we have are the dumb mechanicals. We weren't ready for this, Sha. Dumb fucking kids playing explorers."

"We should stay here," Elisha whispers, "We should stay here, barricade the lounge. Flynn needs us. If we can get Mithradates back online, we can launch the slipbeacon." She doesn't know if she's pleading with a friend or giving an order to a subordinate, but he shakes his head, beads of sweat drifting away into the air.

"And then what? No one knows were here. You think the Society is going to take responsibility when we don't contact

them? We're already gone. This thing got us. Came right in through the maker on that signal. I just... I just want to see it. You should too." He grins, and Elisha can see rivulets of blood limning his teeth. "Here's your contact."

Elisha feels her tongue, heavy in her mouth. It feels like a slab of meat, not part of her body at all, and she knows he's right. She nods once, and drifts back to Flynn, undoing the footstraps that trapped her shattered leg.

"We can't leave her here," she says, anticipating Goetsch's impatience. "We go together."

But he's already gone, back down the hallway. Elisha follows, careful to protect Flynn's leg, but it still bends and flows at unnatural angles as she pulls them down the spine of the ship.

Lights glow around the maker in the hall, a recessed cubby filled with a vibrant, alien green. A thick slime of plant matter is printed right onto the forgeplate, reeking of something sharp and alive. She can see where the slime has flowed and forced itself between the wood panels, deep into the guts of the ship. She imagines it coating the physical matter of Mithrdates' mind. A biological hack, printed from their own compromised makers. She wants to scream, to tell the universe that it's not fair, they couldn't have known how to do any of this. But it's right there for her to see and smell.

Something slithers at the far end of the corridor, casting indecipherable shadows in the emergency lighting, and the air shudders with a wet, cracking sound. Her body floods with cold and liquid fear, prickling her skin and stealing her breath, but she moves faster, even as Flynn begins to moan in her grasp. She's so close now. The smell is overpowering and the air so thin she finds herself gasping for breath.

But Goetsch is right, she has to see.

She lets go of Flynn's hand, and kicks off the ridged walls, leaving the comatose woman behind her. At the base of the spine she bounces off the end panel, and reorients herself to look down into the breached chamber of the ship, where the hull of the *Mithra* touches the hull of *Yggdrasil*.

For a few swirling moments, her mind cannot fully comprehend what she sees. Her eyes see the countless fractured skulls with cloudy eyes embedded in the flesh of the massive plant. She can taste the hot copper of Goetsch's blood in the air, and feel the warm flush of urine against her thigh. She can hear the slithering, yawning world beyond the breach, the interior chamber of *Yggdrasil*. But she cannot accept it as a whole.

Not just yet.

When she does, she begins to scream.

A tentacle of purple flesh, flowering at the end into a dozen digits, floats in the air. Without a vacuum to slow and freeze it, the plant moves like a viper, shuddering and lined with thorny webbed vanes like a lizard's crest. Three of the digits probe the walls of the room. Another cluster of four tendrils are engaged in the slow dismantlement of Goetsch's body. They've already twisted off one of the man's legs and as she watches, his left arm twists free, trailing a shiny beaded trail of blood in the air. Another digit laps the blood from the air. A few more tentacles hold his head, digging into the raw stump of the neck and tearing at his jaw.

Embedded in the stalk of the wriggling vine are heads without jaws. Outside the gaping breach, in *Yggdrasil*, there's a vast jungle of swaying purple, dotted with skulls. Some are mere dark bruises in the plant's flesh, but she can see thousands of human heads. Living heads, Elisha realizes, as hundreds of eyes track her silently. Still more eyes are clouded over, twitching and vibrating in their sockets, or dead and liquefying.

Here, at the base of the tentacle thrust deep into Goetsch's skull, a pair of shining blue eyes watch Elisha. The upper half of a child's face stares at her from the waxy surface of the plant.

Flynn's limp body finishes its slow drift down the spine, jarring Elisha from her stupor. She turns to grab her friend and flee, to gain whatever seconds she can, when one of the digits, still smeared with Goetsch's blood, reaches out and wraps around her throat.

She claws her hands upwards, to pry the thing from her neck, but it only tightens. Vines wrap around her shoulder, her knees, immobilizing her. They extend the sharp webbed vanes, biting through her coveralls and into her skin. They tighten again.

She wants to scream, but she cannot inhale. The webbed vanes bite deep again, and she feels one of her arms give way. The noose of vines squeezes her ruined shoulder, and the arm leaps away from her on a fountain of blood. She tries to look away, but all she sees is Flynn, mercifully unconscious, as the woman is flayed and rendered.

Elisha's legs go, one at a time, and then the pressure at the base of her skull begins. She feels a shining wave of elation at the thought that she might die. The pressure builds, until it pops, flesh and thin bone giving way.

The last thing Elisha feels is the indescribable strangeness of something blossoming inside her skull.

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Elisha drifts back to her body. She opens her eyes and sees her arms gliding past, wrapped in one thin vine. The pale white hands seem to wave goodbye. She wants to say goodbye too, but she doesn't have a jaw.

But it's all right, because she's never been happier. The flashed image of her missing body still burns and crackles, a holy, glorious pain. Orgasm in a phantom limb. She shudders with happiness, her tear ducts clenching uselessly.

Her body will go to feed God, and she will tell It everything she knows. She would have offered herself willingly for the reward of becoming one with God.

It speaks directly to her, as it cradles her skull in its flesh. She knows how happy she has made God, and in turn how happy It has made her. They are new lovers. She can feel the hundreds of thousands of minds within God's great body. Somewhere she can hear Goetsch, his mind a stuttering stream of praise for God. She can feel some small fragment of Flynn screaming, as Elisha herself had done before God filled her with light. She can feel all of them, a vast choir to God's glory, and still she knows that she is special.

This is fate. This is the point that all worlds orbit around, the holy center. Without the miracle of *Yggdrasil*, God would have been extinguished from the world, Its gifts denied to the galaxy. Without the *Mithra*, God would have stayed a prisoner above a dead world. But man and God were meant for one another, and Elisha will be at Its side when a billion years of waiting bears glorious fruit.

She is a prophet. She has brought God the gift of the slipdrive, and the knowledge to use it. God once covered a world, and now, thanks to her, It will stretch across the stars.

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RULES and SECRETS

Judith Skillman

THE MOON RISES FULL OVER,
 constructs its premise of light,
 followers, hangers-on, into August.
 Glints in a tree, its hunger for clothes
 left from the first two who fled.

Moon-sultan. Wicker baskets fixed
 just so inside the house, where sleepers lie.
 This gift of reflection—how long the breath
 of lemon balm, cut, exhales & inhales
 through an open window.

What was fresh is sullied.
 A man and a woman discuss philosophy
 in a bedroom, in fluorescence.
 Insinuations. Institutions. How many days
 left in the domain?

The moon continues south over sleepers.
 River harbor colors of stones.
 This month passes like a dream into the season
 of gathering. The lemon will rise like the sun,
 the schools will fill.

Moon of corn, of *don't-tell*.
 Perfection-moon, rimmed, haloed, dogged.
 Moon of not playing the violin with a newly-haired bow.
 Of never being good enough to live in the body
 that continues to die.

JUDITH SKILLMAN is the author of twelve books of poetry. Her work has appeared in *Field*, *The Iowa Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Poetry*, *Southern Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*.

STAGE MANAGER

Rebecca Ann Jordan

EVERY THEATRE HAS A GHOST. Ours has three.

“Stage Manager is a thankless job.” This was from Stage Manager, the man I was currently apprenticed to. “Director gets artistic credit. Actors get the glory. And everyone loves the beautiful set, the lights, the costumes.” He shrugged thin little shoulders and tore purple spike tape with nimble fingers. I was a good head taller than him, with his faerie-red hair and green eyes, and I didn’t yet know the art of tearing spike tape without a pair of scissors, tucked now in my pocket like a rumble knife. “Most people don’t even know there’s such a thing as Stage Manager.”

“So why do you do it?”

“Well,” he said, “someone has to.”

We ate lunch at 8:35 exactly. A chocolate muffin, hot chocolate, and a carton of Cherry Garcia to split. It was his idea. I had no complaints.

“Do you know we have three ghosts in Smothers?”

I didn’t really want to know about it. Nightmares really liked me. “Oh really?” I wanted him to like me, too.

“Yeah.” His pixie eyes lit up. “One is an unwed bride, haunting the stage in her wedding dress because her fiancé jilted her.” I highly doubted the first place a bride-ghost would go would be Smothers Theatre, but I nodded anyway. “The second is a crying baby. You can hear it sometimes, wailing on the catwalk.”

We were back in Smothers, sitting down on stage and alternating between spike tape and ice cream. “You ever heard it?”

“Me? No. But I’ve seen the bride.” He grinned. “The last one is my favorite. The Stage Manager.”

I laughed. “The collective ghost of all the managers jilted from glory and appreciation?”

“Something like that. I usually lock up. First to arrive and last to leave...” He ripped the spike tape and raised it, a toast to me, and I followed him as he eyeballed its placement. “You can hear him clapping.”

I tucked the finished tub of Cherry Garcia under my arm and grabbed the opposite end of the spike tape as he strolled to stage left. “You’re so full of shit.”

Stage Manager smiled. “You’ll see,” was all he said. “You can lock up tonight.”

“No thanks.”

“I mean, I have to go work on *Millie*.” The other play he was managing. He was determined to get as much opportunity to be forgotten as possible. “Here.” He tossed me the keys.

Maybe I would get one of the stage hands to stay with me afterward. Unfortunately, I believed in ghosts.

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Director was an endlessly energetic woman. “No, no!” she said, leaping out of her chair and going to skinny Male Lead, who had black eyes and dark hair that he had to constantly push out of his face. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t believe me, either.” Male Lead kicked at a box, which I had made with my bare hands, so naturally I was leery of anyone testing its structural integrity.

“You look uncomfortable standing still.”

“I’m restless. I want to roam.”

“Then roam – but for God’s sake, remember *Maus*.”

Director lifted her head to the room at large. “Did everyone read *Maus*?”

Everyone gave a resounding “Yes,” even though I’ve spent all my time here setting up spike tape and handling machetes and other props, and there was no way I could possibly have had time to read *Maus*.

Director looked at me and pointed a strong hand. “Assistant.” It was interchangeable with my name. “What, would you say, was one line from *Maus* you would give to Male Lead to put some fire and brimstone under his ass?”

Everyone looked to me. “Let me look at my notes,” I mumbled, “I wrote it down...” I flipped through the Bible I’d made, an ironic name for our compendium of all *Goodness*. There were no such notes. What made me think they’d magically appear, I have no idea.

Stage Manager glanced at the Bible, as if curious about my notes. I didn’t even see him slip a line in neat handwriting under my fingertips until I was reading it aloud: “Your friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... Then you could see what it is, friends!”

“Aha!” Director clapped her hands and rounded on Male Lead. “You see?” She made her fists grind against each other.

“There’s the tension. You want to help, but it’s not your job. You want to feel sympathy, but you’re just going to tear her up and spit her out in next week’s newspaper. It’s survival.” She thumped his chest and he took a few steps back. “Let it fuel you! I don’t give a damn where you want to walk on the stage, fucking *go there!*”

Stage Manager smiled at me. Assistant Stage Manager smiled back.

Stage Manager left rehearsal early because he had to go get ready for *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. The rest of us huddled around and read the script for the hundred and first time, with directives to read with new eyes; to emphasize new things; to talk about what it means to be in the middle of a genocide, to blindly love evil, to be a person who could both kill and love, to follow orders. Every word had three meanings.

It was 11:38, eight minutes over Stage Manager’s precise schedule, when the Actors left. 11:43 when Director left. 11:59 by the time I’d finished cleaning up. I trundled out onto the stage, grabbed a staff shaped much like a microphone stand, placed it on the appropriate spike tape, and turned the ghost light on.

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I was pretty sure that Male Lead liked me. At least, whenever the Actors were goofing off before rehearsal, he would glitter his black eyes at me. I watched his lean body prowl the stage. He stopped to smile at me. My heart almost stopped dead. “Line,” he said. Trying, I assume, to seduce me.

I jerked my attention back to the Bible. “Um... ‘Do you believe in your own death?’ But that wasn’t right, that was Female Lead’s. I tapped my pen to stall for time and said, ‘Were there camps?’”

“Were there camps?” he said, and resumed his prowling.

Director caught me afterward. “This is genocide,” she said, and smacked the back of her hand into her palm. “These are important issues. You have to be paying attention.”

“Just distracted,” I mumbled.

“By what? Is it a boy? Girl? Sex?”

“No,” I said, and started looking like I had somewhere more important than the theatre to be.

“Sex is fun, but not fulfilling!” she called after me, shaking a fist in the air. “You want to feed your soul! Only the theatre can do that!”

“Okay,” I said, and darted to find Stage Manager and leave him with the keys. Actors had gone out drinking and Male Lead had gone with them. I had no intention of being the last to leave today.

For weeks, my dreams were like this: *The Playwright, in a play about himself, is being played by Male Lead. He orders us to a board meeting, at which he explains the reasons he has to kill us. And if we don't go, he will kill our families, too. I say a tearful goodbye to my father. I am dragged back to the board room, where Male Lead points a gun at me and asks me questions: 'How much do you know about Goodness? Line? How many ghosts are there?' There is a song: 'Horiyatsa, Hamuzani waka.'* Actors come to me, mewling for milk, and I give them my breasts, but they're dry because I haven't eaten a thing myself. Our ghost-jailors prowl the edges of our prison. Each day they take another one of us out to slaughter.

But I couldn't avoid the theatre forever. Stage Manager was going into Hell Week for *Millie*, which meant all former Stage Manager duties were now Assistant Stage Manager duties. I was sweeping the stage, not realizing that an Actor was behind me with a machete in his hands.

“Derek?”

“I found this.” Male Lead held it out lazily, like handing me a pen to sign a contract. “Shouldn't it be locked in the prop box?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” But there was no Assistant to the Assistant, and no one to pick up the slack if I forgot something. I took the machete and went to lock it up. When I came back, Male Lead had scrambled. I finished sweeping and pulled out the ghost light. At the edge of its dim rays, I thought I saw a white dress shimmying into the dark. And the gentle swish that went with it—though that was probably only my broom.

{ X }

It's Hell Week. For a theatre like ours, that's more precisely two weeks of Hell in the scramble to remember what was on the list we started when Director first said, “Let's worry about that later.” Usually it's Director who says it, and Stage Manager who does the subsequent worrying.

“Okay, from the top,” Director said, for the three-hundredth and twenty-first time. It was my job to count.

“Ten minutes until we close up,” I piped, watching my watch.

“Ten minutes my ass. We’re staying until I see something I like,” Director said.

Stage Manager winked Irish eyes at me, persistently optimistic. It was going to be a late night.

They sang “Horiyatsa.” It was the song from my nightmares. The Actresses’ voices soared and pitched so high they squalled like babes. “I’m trying to write a play...” Male Lead said. And then “Jesus. But she was –”

Female Lead: Pregnant with his child.

Supporting Actor: Two lives on its points.

Supporting Actress: He was innocent.

Villain: Cut out the disease.

Male Lead: Where’s the damn machete?

That wasn’t in the script. I started to make a line note until I realized that Male Lead was looking at me, and this time it wasn’t for a line.

“Sorry.” I leapt up, forgetting that I’d forgotten to break out the weapons from the locked chest. My foot caught the leg of the card table. It shuddered, a mini earthquake. Director’s water spilled across the Bible.

Supporting Actress shrieked in laughter as Stage Manager stood up and pulled paper towels out of his back pocket, and began mopping up the mess, doing his best to save three months’ worth of careful notes.

Director huffed and puffed. In a way it was a blessing the pages were wet, else they would have been blown down everywhere. “Let’s take a break!”

“Sorry,” said Male Lead.

“My fault.” I gave him a glare to suggest it was anything but my fault. “You don’t even need the machete for five pages.”

“Just following orders.” He handed me his script as a sort of apology. “I took notes.”

“Thanks.” Even though his notes would not be as detailed as the cartography we’d charted and I’d drenched.

Rehearsal didn’t go well. We split apart in a foul mood, wondering if the play would ever be ready in time for the show. At least Stage Manager ran to the store and bought me some Cherry Garcia. He held it out, a second peace offering. “We’ll put it back together.”

“It’ll take all night. I can sort of read some of these notes, but I’ll have to print it out again and re-type all the line notes and re-draw the stage blocking...”

“I’ll sweep, then.”

I ate the ice cream ravenously. “We’ll both sweep.”

The stage has some sort of sacredness when you’re there alone. No Actors and no Audience, only empty pews. I mean seats. We didn’t break it with jokes, just breathed in the dust, the rotting curtain’s mold, the lines that seemed to stick to the walls.

“There,” Stage Manager said. “Hear that?”

I stopped sweeping. At first I thought it was an Actor who had stuck around to practice vocals, singing “Szerellem, szerellem, átkozott gyötrellem,” but the voice was wordless. A baby crying.

We grinned at each other. I pretended that I liked impending nightmares. “I have to go print. You finish up,” I said, and ran out of the theatre.

{ X }

Opening night comes when you least expect it. The house was packed. Thrilled, everyone in the company had invited their friends for this ground-breaking performance.

At 5:05 I swept the stage and set the props, yes, even the machete.

At 6:10 the doors opened.

At 7:03 Male Lead said, “I’m trying to write a play...”

“Do you believe in your own death?” Female Lead said at 8:25.

I hadn’t got Cherry Garcia that day, which turned out to be a mistake, because I was an emotional wreck, crying in the dark. There was no reason for it; the play was going stupendously. “Szerellem,” they sang. It was lucky I had no Assistant to the Assistant, because I didn’t want to be embarrassed. I was sure Stage Manager heard me, but he did not look at me, only peered through the wings as the lines moved wordlessly on his lips and Actors called them out like ventriloquists’ dolls.

“What did you think?” I snuck out to the lobby to ask this of Roommate, to whom I’d eagerly given my one comp ticket. The play was a success; only two and a half lines forgotten but quickly improvised, no props missed, Actors prowled as the spirit moved them.

Roommate smiled blankly. “It was a nice play,” she said.

“Nice?” I laughed. “I don’t think ‘nice’ is the right word for it.”

Roommate was a very Nice sort of person. Everything she did was Nice. So she smiled, nodding, and said, at length, “I don’t think I’m smart enough to get it.”

“You don’t have to be smart.” It was probably an offensive thing to say to one’s Roommate. “What did you *feel*?”

“Sad, I guess.”

Nice and Sad. After three months of hard labor, of nightmares and emotional exhaustion, it was what our play had equaled.

“Congratulations!” Director boomed. She was beaming as she slapped me between the shoulders. “Without a hitch. What do you think of that trial scene? Especially good tonight.”

“Yes. It was nice.”

I didn’t wait for everyone to leave to start cleaning up. Let them take it as a hint. The machete went last, back into its box.

“I have to go do *Millie*,” Stage Manager said, apologetically.

“This late?”

“Only time to do it.”

He hugged me and I was left to sweep alone. In an attempt to stave off sleep, when nightmares would come, I dragged my feet about it. I even mopped the stage and took out the machete again to polish it, marked line notes for the Actors and re-taped the spike tape that had come up, torn by their heels. Finally I dragged the ghost light out and flicked it on. It must have been the wrong switch or a faulty wire connected to the sound board, because slow applause punctuated the thick theatre air. It was a good sound, and I stopped to listen.

REBECCA ANN JORDAN is a speculative fiction author in San Diego. She recently won Reader’s Choice Best of 2013 for her short story “Promised Land” at *Fiction Vortex*. With poetry and flash pieces in *Yemassee Magazine*, *Bravura Literary Journal* and more, Becca regularly columns for DIYMFA.com. She believes in ghosts, bad dreams, and dance-magic. Quibble with her @beccaquibbles.

ANGELS HOWLING in the TREES

Misti Rainwater-Lites

IN THE HOUSE IN THE TOWN THAT WASN'T SEYMOUR or Bridgeport but somewhere in between, somewhere forgettable, another ugly bump in the Texas road, Merissa slept or did not sleep in a canopy bed in a bedroom she shared with her baby sister. One night Maternal Grandmother was visiting and she was sleeping with Merissa in the canopy bed but Merissa kept getting out of the canopy bed and tiptoeing down the hallway and getting into bed with the mother and the father. Maternal Grandmother would come get Merissa and bring her back to the canopy bed and Merissa was restless and unhappy but didn't know why. Merissa looked out the window from the canopy bed and saw the trees in the backyard and she could hear angels howling tangled in the black branches. The angels voiced the despair she was too young and mute to name.

"Will the angels always howl, Ava? Will I always be searching for the warmest, most hospitable bed?"

"You are cursed, niece. I hate to be the one to tell you the truth."

Buddy Holly was on the stereo and *The Newlywed Game* was on the television and Merissa was in love with John Travolta as Tony in *Saturday Night Fever* and when she played house with her least favorite cousin, Sonny's big sister, she learned what it was to be female because the cousin pretended to be talking to John Travolta, Merissa's husband.

"You have to let other women talk to your husband. You can't have your husband all to yourself," Least Favorite Cousin told Merissa.

"He's my husband. He belongs to me. I don't have to share him," Merissa said.

"You can talk to my husband. I don't care."

Least Favorite Cousin was married to Andy Gibb. Merissa didn't know why.

"I don't want to talk to your husband. I want to talk to my husband," Merissa said.

"Too bad. I'm talking to your husband right now. If you don't want to talk to Andy you can just sit there and wait until I'm finished talking to John. Ouch! Stop pulling my hair!"

Merissa glared at Least Favorite Cousin as she yanked her long brown hair. Then Merissa's mother appeared and told Least Favorite Cousin to pull Merissa's hair, that would show her how it felt. So Least Favorite Cousin pulled Merissa's long black hair and Merissa howled. Buddy Holly continued to sing.

The elderly babysitter was the coolest human being Merissa knew other than Uncle Joshua. The elderly babysitter baked a frozen pepperoni pizza for Merissa and played Barbies with her. She wasn't politically correct. She made the Ken doll get drunk and make an ass of himself. Merissa laughed until she ached. Why couldn't everyone in Merissa's life be as funny and real as the elderly babysitter?

Then there was Merissa's friend Tabitha from kindergarten. Tabitha had an excellent fucking life. She could read. Her parents asked her to read for Merissa's parents. They were so proud of their bright little girl. Tabitha told Merissa a lion lived in the jungle that was her backyard. The weeds were higher than the house. Merissa was awestruck. In the bathroom down the hall from Tabitha's bedroom there was a night light and Dixie cups so Tabitha could get a drink of water in the middle of the night if the mood struck. Lucky bitch.

MISTI RAINWATER-LITES is the author of *Bullshit Rodeo* and other works of fiction. She maintains a blog, *Chupacabra Disco*, and posts slightly insane photographs at Twitter. Misti resides in San Antonio where the weather is crazier than she is.

The movie you saw on HBO three times a week in the early '90s is now a

BROADWAY MUSICAL EXTRAVAGANZA!

**DON'T TELL MOM
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WINDOW GLASS

Mila Jaroniec

THE WINDOW GLASS IS TEXTURED WITH DIRT. My eyes settle on smears of leftover Windex in between squished bugs. Wonder if everyone sees the world through dirty glass. Wonder if everyone knows there's always glass. I consider going outside for a moment but then remember my halfheartedly molting sunburn.

Shelley wrote something about the painted veil, what was that?
That wasn't this.

Go clean your room, my mother said. No man wants to
marry a slob.

No one gets married anymore.

Don't be silly. Everyone gets married.

When we were together I never got a ring
or a tattoo of your name
but I still feel you next to me when I smell
cigarettes or touch leather
maybe that's why I don't wear my jacket or smoke.

Who are you going to die with?

Pinpricks of stars dot the expanse of black sky. It's quiet.
My cigarette tip illuminates the invisible street.

Last summer we looked at that sky, you and I
we lay on our backs on the bike trail and when you put
your hand
under my sweatshirt
my heart
ricocheted violently,

pinpricks of stars,
 like air holes in a dark
 box that someone keeps
 their pets in,
 and looks inside
 from time to time
 to check if we're alive.

MILA JARONIEC lives in New York City.



four poems by J. BRADLEY

NO MORE POEMS about RESOLUTIONS

YOU LEARN THE METRIC SYSTEM

to wear new kinds of weight.

You hold career day
for your lungs, show them
all the types of mines
they could collapse as.

You bend love like a hair pin,
treat zippers and buttons as locks.

There are names waiting
to become bricks; how gingerly
will you walk over them?



a HIGHLY MAGNIFIED HISTORY

Chairs strain to support
the weight of want.
Mannequins shed felt
and wood, leaving sundresses,
blouses on skeletons;
they refuse to flap against
the artificial air.

WHEN a POET WANTS to DATE YOU

The mortuary sits on the coffee table,
nondescript. You think the cover
would be made of his skin, her skin.
He slaps your hand for accusing

his love of hemophilia;
the wine never clots.

YELP REVIEW – TOTAL WINE

There are shelves of organs waiting to be pickled with special occasions. Pick a name like a rose to clench or to cast into fire, water, or wind. Pick how you will revise a memory, what desert to costume your tongue with; forgiveness is something you can never drown in, **no** matter how hard your lungs want it.

J. BRADLEY is the author of the forthcoming graphic poetry collection, *The Bones of Us* (YesYes Books, 2014). He lives at iheartfailure.net

The THRILL of a LIFETIME

Phyllis Green

WELCOME TO YOUR FIRST DAY OF VACATION! You'll have the thrill of a lifetime. We have 36 acres to explore and there are yes, 36 of you SOOOOOOooooo you each begin with a whole acre to yourselves. Just you and those gorgeous gleaming yellow backhoes! Yes you will be trained to drive a backhoe, first thing we'll do. Now you all look great in your hazmat get-ups! All I can see are little men in white coats-oh oh! And white pants and white foot coverings! Of course the ladies are all in white too. And let's not forget the little tikes on vacation. All right! Now, you all okay with those plastic helmets? Remember, ask one of my assistants if you are the least bit unsure of the fit or feel. We want everyone comfortable. There is pure mountain air filtered into those protective headgears and rest assured we have not had one accident over someone not being able to breathe or getting hysterical or anything like that. They are perfectly safe. There will be no odor for you to worry about, just pure fresh mountain clean air going into your precious lungs because that's how we do things here at the Rocky's Ranch, your ultimate vacation. We promise big results, a truly happy week of exploration and lots of fun party things planned for the evenings. You'll love this unique vacation and want to come back every summer! Guaranteed!

Now let's get down to business and not waste another minute. Hope you all had a delicious breakfast? Good! Wasn't that bacon crisp and tasty? During the morning you'll have a coffee thermos in case you are a coffee addict like me. And you little kids who look so excited to be driving those huge and I mean *huge* yellow backhoes-- well we have a lemonade thermos for you tikes. So everyone will be hydrated, right?

Let's take a look at your graphs. Everyone pull out the graphs. See the 36 acres, and can you all see where your own particular acre is? If not, hold up your retriever (make sure the sharp point is not pointed at yourself!) and my assistants will come by and show you your specific acre.

Now we have marked what you may locate on your acre. Besides the usual cantaloupe rinds and peach pits and other things folks throw away in their garbage cans, there are treasures here. In Acre 1 for instance, that is where the darling little Tacy Jones' body was tossed in a dumpster and deposited. Now most of

Tacy has been found, all except for her two eyeballs. And her parents are willing to pay big bucks for either one *or* two eyeballs, and then there are the collectors and they *really* have big bucks and don't forget the horror museums that are popping up everywhere, they have millions to spend. So who is on Acre 1? Raise your long-handled spike, that's your retriever. Okay, that looks like Johnny Kacinski. Johnny, you find an eyeball or two and if they belong to little Tacy-- oh and we do have a DNA lab right on the grounds here-- then Johnny, you are going to be *rich!* Yes, folks, let's give a cheer for Johnny!

Now don't you other vacationers fret. Every acre has valuable stuff. For instance, Acre 7 is where the aristocrat Marva Wilkinson threw away the one and only Gumbel Emerald. Whoever has Acre 7, you are one lucky son of a you-know-what to get Acre 7. When the time comes you hop on your backhoe and spike through that pumpkin-cabbage-breadcrumb-tunacanned garbage and find that gem. So you have to dig through a little doggie doo? When you get the reward money on that Gumbel Emerald, you can just take a shower and take your reward to the bank. You'll have enough to purchase that dream home in Hawaii! The \$2500 fee for this vacation (including food and drinks of course) will be a drop in the bucket as far as your reward. You'll have fun *and* you'll make money too. Shouldn't all vacations be about that?

Now here are some of the other things to be looking for on your acres: Elvis's toilet, the one he died on. That's, let me see, that's Acre 14. Michael Jackson's mattress, Acre 5-- well that's appropriate isn't it? Who's the joker that put the mattress in Acre 5? The mane of Gene Autry's horse, Acre 32. Anna Nicole Smith's medicine kit, Acre 29. The dog's head that played in the movie *Lassie Come Home*, Acres 17 & 18. Oh I guess there were two dogs that played that role. Just remember, everybody has something special in their acre. Something to make them rich. Oh one other thing: If you find a dead body, that could be valuable too, to the family of course, or the police, and I'm sure when we figure out whose body it is, unless they were homeless, you should get a reward for that. We will be your agent and handle negotiations for you on all these matters for a reasonable 20% fee, as explained in our brochure.

Now we set aside one half-hour for training on the backhoe. Then you have two hours on your acre. And if you have not found your item or anything valuable (there are some things in there that we aren't advertising-- fun, valuable things) then

when the two hours are up you are no longer in charge of that acre. It's open for everyone. It's a free-for-all scramble. You'll love the scramble. If you are assigned to Acre 20 then you are free to drive over to any acre you want, challenge the original owner of that acre to a backhoe battle and if you win then you can have control of that Acre for two more hours and the defeated vacationer must find another acre to search in. Start a battle with someone else! It's going to be fun. It's going to be messy. It's going to be, perhaps, a bit bloody, perhaps even a matter of life or death. That's the excitement! Be tough. Be clever. Be wary. Fight like hell for whatever acre you want to explore. We start as friends, and then we become enemies.

But tonight, when our explorations of the day have ended, we will be friends again and party and drink and dance and flirt and who knows what will happen then? Oh and don't forget the tractor pulls!

Gentlemen, Ladies, Little Ones: *Start your engines.*

PHYLLIS GREEN's stories have appeared in *Epiphany*, *Bluestem*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Poydras Review*, *The McNeese Review*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Rougarou*, *Orion Headless*, *apt*, *ShatterColors*, *Paper Darts*, *The Cossack Review*, *The Examined Life*, *Dark Matter*, *The Greensilk Journal*, *Gravel*, and other journals. She will have upcoming stories in *Goreyesque*, *EDGE*, *Serving House Journal*, *Page & Spine*, and *Write For Readers Magazine*. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, a Micro Award nominee, and won Best of Storyacious for 2013.

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STANLEY KUBRICK'S *SHIT HAPPENS*

Joseph P. O'Brien

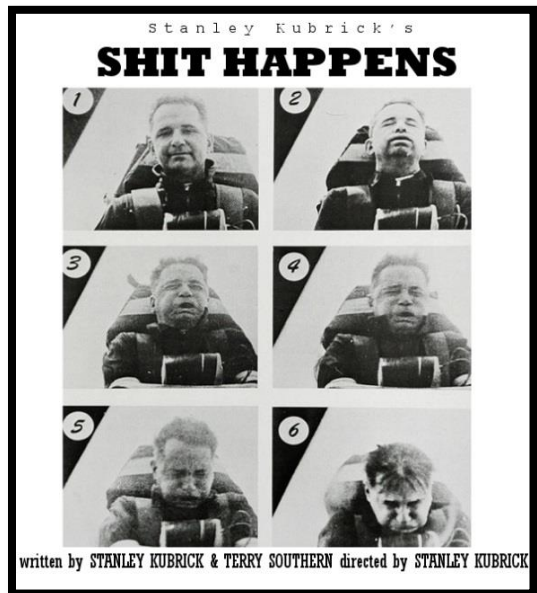
IT'S EASY TO FORGET THAT STANLEY KUBRICK, the pensive, punctilious director of *2001* and *The Shining*, was also the cheeky, impish ringmaster behind *Dr. Strangelove* and *Full Metal Jacket*. Read any critique of Kubrick's work-- even a favorable one-- and chances are you'll find words like "clinical" and "icy-balls."

Perhaps that's because so few have ever seen this esteemed filmmaker's least-famous Lost Film.

Legend has it that after wrapping up *The Shining* in 1980, Kubrick was, as you might expect, hungry for a more jocular project. One night he rents a stack of videotapes, comedy movies he's been meaning to watch for a personal film festival. About 20 minutes into the first film there's a loud, plasticky smash. Kubrick's daughter hears it from all the way up in her bedroom, and she runs to her father's screening room to see what's the matter. "I'm fine," he tells her, standing over shards of shattered videocassette. "Just disposing of some dreadfully boring cinema. Don't be alarmed if you hear it again later."

Sure enough, Kubrick's daughter hears the smash of VHS-versus-wall roughly every 20 minutes for the next couple hours. Until she hears laughter. Ecstatic, soul-saving laughter, like she's never heard her father laugh before.

He's watching *Airplane!*



The following day, Kubrick enlists his *Dr. Strangelove* collaborator Terry Southern to write comic sketches for their own feature-length spoof. And a mere three years later-- "mere" in Kubrick Time-- they've got a 165-minute motion picture which, much to Warner Brothers' chagrin, they insist on titling *Stanley Kubrick's Shit Happens*.

It's an apt title for a film with such brazen attitude, Dada style, and giddy affection for Murphy's Law. One of the film's best segments is actually titled "Murphy's Law," where an Air Force pilot tests g-forces by repeatedly strapping himself to a rocket-powered sled. Most of these tests are shot in long, wide takes, and conclude with a calamitous but non-fatal crash. Sometimes you can't imagine how the stuntman walked away in one piece, and sometimes it's blatantly obvious they're using a dummy. But it's always a riotous display of brutal, exquisitely choreographed slapstick, a missing link between Wile E. Coyote and Johnny Knoxville.

Another highlight is "The Librarian Of Babel," a spoof of Borges' "Library Of Babel" that imagines what hilarious hell one might endure while working in an infinite house of gibberish. Steve Martin acts brilliantly against himself, playing both an irritable, intellectual librarian and an indecisive, idiot patron ("*Got any books with more W's in them? I really like W's!*"). Any viewer with customer service experience would have to laugh to keep from crying-- especially when the librarian snaps and throws himself down one of the library's endless spiral staircases.

Occasionally, the film's absurdity-just gets a little skeezy. The most egregious example is "Cut Cut Cut," which starts like a porno flick, only to be interrupted a sliver away from coitus. The fussy director (Dom DeLuise) yells cut, berates his starlet (a then-unknown Nina Hartley) for her "atrociously false" acting, and makes her do take after take for nearly 15 minutes, with no resolution or punchline. The scene initially amuses on a cerebral level, since it's obviously Kubrick's self-deprecating jab at his own notorious actor-directing techniques. Yet the laughs fade by take four, and by take ten, it's simply maddening.

Pity how so many may never experience *Stanley Kubrick's Shit Happens* even once, as it remains locked away, available only to Hollywood's most elite Illuminati. (If I told you how I finagled my screening, Steven Soderbergh will assassinate me. *Personally*. I hear he uses spiral-notebook wire.) Even the film's most unpleasantly baffling moments contribute to what is overall a

fascinating, utterly Kubrickian entity that vaporizes boundaries of spoof comedy the way *2001* did to sci-fi.

Unfortunately, Kubrick's final word on *Shit*-- that it's not good enough to release-- is what his family has decided to uphold. "I've watched this thing 73 times now," Kubrick wrote Terry Southern in 1984, "and I just don't know if it's funny anymore. And as Ambrose Bierce said, 'When you doubt, abstain.'"

Voltaire, another famous satirist, once said that "Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd." Fitting, then, that when Kubrick plunged into absurdity's frisky abyss, he emerged less certain than ever before.

JOSEPH P. O'BRIEN lives in Brooklyn with his lovely wife Ashley and their adorable dog Sprocket. He once watched Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* for 12 hours straight, which might've done something weird to him.

FLAPPERHOUSE # 2 - Summer 2014



lit by:

Ed Ahern
 Daniel Ari
 Julie Day
 John Grey
 Dylan K. Jackson
 Todd Pate
 Judith Skillman
 Bonnie Jo Stufflebeam
 Joseph Tomaras

& somuchmore...

REACH

Tom Stephan

I REACH ACROSS THE BED

And keep reaching
 Sheets like virgin dunes
 To where you should have been on the shore I could not see.

The hum of guitar strings
 Or violins
 Or sympathetic sitars
 with a bit of wounded care
 I strain across vastness and you are never there.

Is there some key that unlocks you?
 In the golden light of cheap curtains
 In plastic hotels and crunchy pillows
 Some hidden lever to move our lives together?

I packed the room today
 Sat at the edge of the bed
 Listened to the shower drone overlong.
 And you are naked and wet, and at my side, saying are you
 ready—

Yes, I'm ready.

The air is thick
 Industrial cleaner and bleach
 And unspoken violence
 You dress for the execution; I will fire point blank into your heart.

We toss the keycards on the floor
 and shut the door behind us.

TOM STEPHAN is a Texas native who has spent a little time being a bit of everything: teacher, actor, playwright, writer, traveler. When he's not doing any of those things he's living in Austin and eating well. He has a BA in English, an MFA in Acting and has a curious collection of hats and suspenders.

The BETTER COWBOY

Todd Pate

ELLIOT ROUNDED THE BEND in the dry bed of the Paria River and came face to face with his own shadow. He pulled the reins, stopped his horse. He'd seen his shadow all along, bouncing across the red wall of the riverbank as he followed the missing calf's hoof prints, but the bend in the river put the sun at his back. Now his shadow confronted him, stood still and clear in form but filled only with darkness. The tracks continued through his shadow and beyond but he went no further.

Instead, he rode out of the river bed onto a slight hill. Standing in his stirrups, he gazed far out at the massive canyon into which the river flowed, when there was water. A darkness hovered within the jagged canyon as the sun lowered and his own shadow stretched toward the abyss as if he and his horse were caught by a massive black hole. As his shadow grew longer and thinner, a heavy, dark feeling came over him. For a moment, Elliot thought it could be loneliness. It was easy to be lonely out in the high desert on the Utah-Arizona border at the end of an incinerating day. Breathing, strictly voluntary. Sandblasted, sunburnt face. Hands swollen, cracked open, stinging wherever they weren't calloused. Nothing left to sweat out, shivering in the evening wind. Under those conditions, one could admit he's lonely. That'd be acceptable, maybe even admirable for a cowboy.

But Elliot knew he couldn't call it loneliness. He'd seen Hedges at the line shack that morning, and would see Hedges there in the evening, like the day before, and the day before that, just like all summer long. Hedges, his friend? Elliot searched for a name for the feeling as he watched his shadow stretch to a form no longer human, and he closed his eyes just before it touched the darkness of the canyon. Whatever the feeling was, he would never call it fear.

From the darkness of his mind came the high-pitched bays of a calf.

Never fear.

The calf.

When he finally opened his eyes, all the land before him was in shadow.

No calf. Only the soft whistle of wind.

He rode away. The deep wound in the land, its bottomless darkness sucking in all earth, sound, and light to certain annihilation, would be there for Hedges tomorrow. Maybe even the lost calf, too. Elliot didn't care. He'd go back to the rest of the herd and do nothing until dusk. Then he'd take the twilight ride back to the line shack.

{ X }

A small cloud of bats accompanied Elliot on the last mile to the line shack. The fluttering little vampires comforted him, assured him it was the end of another day and he was alive. His shoulders dropped completely and his mind danced between dozing and wakefulness. The bats danced in and out with him. The sun was well below the horizon, pulling the red sky with it, then the pink sky, and finally the cold dark blue sky. Elliot shivered, put his hand to his horse's neck, felt its warmth flow into his arm then through his body as he loosely swayed with his horse's gait. He always smelled dinner at this point. Tonight was no different. A few moments later he saw the lamp on the porch.

"Anything new?" Hedges shouted from the porch, feet propped on the hand rail, slowly chewing a mouthful of beans.

"We're missin 39," said Elliot, riding up.

"39?"

"Little black and white bull calf." Elliot felt Hedges' uncomfortable stare from several yards out. "I looked for it—"

"But it was gettin late?"

"Damn it, Hedge, yeah, it was!" Elliot had raised his voice too high. Hedges pretended not to notice. "They're way out there today." Now his voice was too deep. Hedges ignored that. "I circled completely around 'em. Took forever to get to 'em, then another forever just for the circlin. I counted every damn one of 'em. No 39. I followed his tracks down the river a bit, but..."

Hedges patiently waited for more words, but Elliot steered his mount toward the cedar post corral twenty yards from the shack, took the tack off his horse, turned the horse loose in the corral with Hedges' horse. He cradled his saddle on the way to the shack. Hedges never took his eyes off Elliot.

"Guess I'll give a look tomorrow then," Hedges said before his next spoonful of beans. He chewed slowly, swallowed as Elliot stepped onto the porch. "Maybe I'll have some luck."

Elliot watched Hedges eat. Every night, the same slow spoonfuls. Hedges never hurried, but Elliot never saw him too

late, too far behind, too anything since they'd been working Delbert's cattle. The slowness sunk into everything he did. Cooking beans. Eating beans. Dressing himself. Saddling his horse. He even rode his horse fast, slowly. At only twenty years old, Hedges tacitly demanded and received the kind of respect usually reserved for the older cowboys. Elliot admired and resented Hedges' inherent slowness. Elliot had to fight to stay still.

"That canyon," Elliot spoke in a voice of quavering obedience, "opens up way down there past where the river makes that big horseshoe. River runs down into it, you know?"

Hedges scooped up the last bite of beans, ate, swallowed, leaned forward, set his spoon and bowl on the porch floor, then stared at Elliot with his whole body.

"Think he went down in that canyon?"

"Only place I could think."

Hedges turned to the infant night before him, breathed in the early darkness, vacuumed in whatever secrets the day tried to hide. Elliot tried but couldn't see the stars the way Hedges saw them, despised him for it, loved him for it. Billions of nuclear fires burned in the sky but Hedges glowed brighter than all of them, just by sitting there, taking from Heaven, but never needing it.

"Prob'ly walked too far down that big hole to get back up," said Hedges. "Cliffs are simple things. You just fall down and die. It's them steep inclines you can walk down but can't crawl up. The little thing. More'n likely I'll find him down there tomorrow, cryin away."

"Sorry, Hedge."

"No need. S'the end of the day, right? Can't take care of 'em if you don't take care of yourself."

"Yeah, I didn't wanna get caught in the--"

"No, you wouldn't wanna get caught out there in the dark."

The silence between them formed a shape. Hedges saw Elliot struggle to define that shape.

"Beans don't taste good cold. Go on in and get some."

Elliot realized he was still holding the saddle. His arms ached. He set it down, then promptly picked up Hedges' spoon and bowl before entering the shack.

"Thanks, El."

Hedges listened to Elliot's footsteps, the clanking of spoon and bowl. The footsteps were always the same, the clanking always the same. That continuity soothed that tender core of his

being that he would show to no man. He almost smiled as Elliot's boots scuffed back to the porch, same as they always did.

{ X }

"Was there somethin wrong with you?"

"Wadn't anything wrong with me."

"Why didn't they call y'up?"

"Don't know."

"Why didn't ya join?"

Elliot listened to the horses do nothing as he waited for Hedges to answer.

"There was work to do out here."

Horses...

"Jim Eldridge went to Korea," Elliot continued. "Got his arm blowed off. He's a hero."

"Jim Eldridge?"

"Saw him at the movie house last spring. Everybody shakes his hand. His left hand. He looks awkward when he shakes hands 'cause he's right-handed, I think. *Was* right-handed, I mean."

Now, Hedges listened to the horses. He couldn't remember the last movie he saw. He'd been working the cows in the summertime since he was fourteen, like Elliot, but started working year-round when he quit school at sixteen. He was well aware of a world passing by him. Technicolor, TV sets, Martians, Russians, vacuum cleaners, the Chinese, Korea. The Bomb. Even bigger bombs. He'd seen all of it on a newsreel that played before a movie he couldn't remember in a little movie house in a little town. But it could all pass by, for all he cared.

"I don't recall a Jim Eldridge."

"You got to remember Jim Eldridge. He's your age. Played football."

"I didn't."

"He was a damn star!"

"A star?"

"Well, not when you say it that way. He's a hero, Hedges. A true hero, that's what he is. Answered our country's call and paid the price for it. Got his arm blowed off, for Pete's sake."

"Tilldale."

The horses...

Elliot knew the name. Everybody knew the name. Tilldale the healer, the old warrior hunted by the law, one of the last un-

cooperatives. A Crazy Horse for a boring small town. But there was also Tilldale the skin-walker, the beast-man who lusted for little boys. Frightening enough to keep little boys out of the desert. But by the onset of puberty, when the little boys were allowed into the desert, Tilldale was a fading boogie man. Finally, after their first fumbblings in backseats with girls just eager enough to shun Christian guilt for relentless desire, Tilldale became just another drunk Indian. If he existed at all. But Elliot hadn't made it to the backseat yet. Tilldale sought Elliot's denied fear, found it. But he kept his eyes open in front of Hedges, played his part.

"Shoot, you ain't tellin me you seen that old Indian, are ya, Hedges?"

"Yep."

"Out here? Come on!"

"Just a few steps off this porch."

"Oh, come on--"

"Stares at you for a long time. Shakes old his coup stick. Gotta lotta feathers on it. You look into his eyes, see the things he's seen. Everything he's done. What's been done to him. Everything that's been done to everybody since..." He gazed to the stars with expectant wonder, "...since this all began. Like a book of us all. An arm ain't no price at all, El. When he gets right there in front of you..." He turned to Elliot, "...you find there are things that not even the price of death can save you from. Things that go with you to whatever's next."

"I think that's the most you ever said at one time, Hedges."

"Not even death."

"He ain't real, Hedges."

But Elliot still saw Tilldale. Saw him come up to him, seize him, hold him down, violate him then leave him curled in the dust, pants down, bleeding, whimpering; watched him move toward Hedges who never moved, only gazed serenely into Tilldale, even as the Indian slit his throat. Hedges bled white light. Elliot shook.

"I never knew Jim Eldridge, Elliot."

"I'm scared that little bull calf's got hurt."

"39?"

"39. I didn't go look cause I was--"

"Scared?"

The unnamable feeling came upon Elliot. Before he could deny it, Hedges seized it, sculpted it into an image, held in front

of him. The little bull calf will not be found alive. It was dead before it was alive. Now, Elliot called the feeling Fear.

“I’m scared.”

The horses...

Hedges’ dead stare. White light...

Then Hedges broke into laughter, pointed at Elliot, doubled over holding his stomach. His voice cracked.

“Hedges?”

“Shoot, I’s just tryin to scare ya, El.” Hedges laughed so hard he could barely breathe. His gangly frame wiggled, noodle-like. “Looks like I did. There’s no Tilledale, daddy-o. Just a tall tale.”

“But I believed you!”

Hedges stopped laughing, regarded Elliot quizzically. He laughed again, but stopped again. Then he turned to the stars.

“Let’s get some sleep. I’ll get out there early. Find that little 39.”

Hedges regained his slowness, went inside the shack. Elliot listened to his footsteps. Then Elliot got up, listened to his own footsteps. Their footsteps were almost the same, but not quite. They felt everything together out in the desert, but they would never feel anything the same. They both knew that now. And neither had no real faith Hedges would find 39 alive. But Elliot believed Tilledale was really out there.

{ X }

Elliot heard Hedges set out just before first light, as the coyotes called. He pretended to be asleep as Hedges dressed, boiled water for coffee, packed a lunch. Then he listened to Hedges’ horse walk, trot, canter, then gallop into silence.

He tried to go back to sleep but saw Hedges every time he closed his eyes. So he got out of bed, dressed. As he fumbled around in the dark shack, he kept seeing Hedges. Hedges the silent, the still, forgetter of the names of heroes whose mere existence called for the obliteration of heroism and an end to the world Elliot needed: White hats and black hats, like on the glowing TV screen; war and peace; allies and enemies. Hedges was neither ally nor enemy. A perversion in the glow.

Elliot poured himself a cup of coffee. Hedges always made enough for both of them. He could do that, but he wouldn’t let Elliot know him. Elliot stepped out onto the porch, cradling his

lukewarm cup in both hands. There, he wept like Jesus in Gethsemane.

{ X }

Hedges found 39's trail exactly where Elliot said it'd be. He smiled and with his hips he pushed his horse in the direction of the little split hoof prints. The braying herd faded until he couldn't hear them anymore.

He lost the tracks in a stony lay of the riverbed but found the tracks again a half-hour later in the mud down by the horseshoe bend. Hedges smiled again, the hoof prints were a language he understood. He followed them further down the river until the tracks disappeared in another outcrop of stones, before reappearing again at the next pocket of water.

At midday, he came up against a cliff wall at a curve in the riverbed which granted mercy from the sun. He leaned back to let the deep cool air touch his neck. He relaxed completely, head back, eyes closed. All he could hear were his horse's hooves scraping, popping on the rocks and his shirt wrinkling as he swayed with his horse's gait. Until the dull caw of ravens opened his eyes.

Just above him, two ravens mutually attacked a third. Blood dripped from the wounded raven and slowly fell to Earth as the creature flew away to heal or die. The other two swooped around the cliff. Hedges rode around the cold cliff wall and out of the riverbed, following the ravens.

He kicked his horse into a gallop, through a meadow of sage. His horse grunted. Long silence between hoofs hitting the ground. He rode harder and harder, pulling back only when he came upon the canyon. His horse reared on its hind legs, screamed, came down and bucked. Hedges pulled hard on the reins again and the horse stood still.

He caressed the horse's sweaty neck as he peered into the canyon. A wound in the Earth and close to it, Hedges knew his smallness. The ravens were perched on something twisted in a rusted barbed wire fence running on a slope toward the edge of the canyon. Hedges let his horse catch its breath, then softly nudged in the direction of the ravens.

{ X }

Elliot gasped for air as he walked from the corral to the line shack. He'd been making repairs all morning. The corral was so old it was mainly repairs. Delbert told him the shack and corral were built by Mormons around the turn of the century. Until then only Indians had laid eyes on the land. When the winds came, fence planks would get pulled off the posts. In the summer, the winds came every afternoon. The summer of 1954 was no different.

He'd worked in the sun longer than he should have, past one o'clock. The wind burst through him as he walked. The sun pulled at what little moisture remained in his body. The shade of the porch and the first gulp of water offered temporary Heaven. Elliot drank the first cup without pause, dipped the cup into the jug again. He'd gulped down half the second cup when he saw the Indian. He froze, holding the cup to his mouth. The rest of the water spilled down his chin, down his chest, soaked into the rim of his dungarees.

The Indian stared at Elliot through red eyes buried deep in his wrinkled, brown-red face above his misshapen nose. His stained, tattered clothes fluttered in the wind. He held his feathery coup stick to his chest, clutched a liquor bottle with his other hand. He swayed with each gust of wind, his eyes never leaving Elliot.

The shaking started at Elliot's right ankle but he didn't know he was shaking until he felt the cup rattling against his teeth. Then he felt the urine, smelled the pungent odor as the warm fluid flowed to his shaking ankle. He silently damned Hedges as the Indian drank from his bottle, then held his coup stick high and stepped toward Elliot. His mouth started moving before he spoke.

"I saw the coyotes eat my mother," he said, "after they came." He pointed and moved his finger along the horizon as if following something. "They came on horses. There were no--" he mimicked the roaring of a speeding engine while waving a hand and almost falling, "--motors. They came for us many times but they got mother the last time. I sat there... just a baby cryin. Horses jumped over me. But I disappeared. Poof. They been comin for me sixty year now. But I always disappear. Poof. Not my mother..." He struck the ground with his coup stick, screamed in a high pitch that paralyzed Elliot. The cup fell from his hand, he knew that, but he no longer knew where his hand was. All he could feel was the desert breeze cooling his wet pants.

“The coyotes ate her in front of me but couldn’t see me. But you see me don’t you? Hey, boy...” He stepped onto the porch. “Pieces of her fell from their mouths. They ate her like they would a dead cow.” He mimicked the sound of an engine again. He struck the earth again, drank. The stench of urine burned Elliot’s nose. “The coyotes will see you, boy.” The Indian came face to face with Elliot. Whiskey breath. “You can’t disappear.”

“Please...”

“You ever seen Popeye?” asked the Indian. Then he puffed his cheeks around his toothless mouth and flexed his withered arm. “*I’m Popeye the sailor man, toot, toot! I’m Popeye the sailor man, toot, toot!*”

The Indian burst into laughter.

Elliot wept silently. Through his wet eyes, the Indian was a melting sculpture. The Indian stopped laughing, pressed his nose to Elliot’s, his bony frame against the boy’s soft belly.

“Cryin don’t stop the coyotes.”

The Indian wiped the tears off Elliot’s face. The hand smelled of dirt and gasoline. Elliot closed his eyes tight, but the Indian was right. He couldn’t disappear.

{ X }

The ravens danced in and out of the mess of wire and wood. Hedges rode up to them and found what remained of 39. The calf’s left eye pointed lifelessly into the air. The other eye was gone to the coyotes, guessing by the tracks around the carcass. Hedges could tell it gave a good struggle, but struggling turned out to harm more than help. Its head was turned almost completely around. Dried saliva and brown blood covered its mouth. The best thing 39 could’ve done was lie there and breathe calmly until death came. Instead it fought the brainless barbed wire, breaking its own bones, braying and screaming as the scavengers waited to fulfill their obligation to Nature.

A shadow began overtaking the nameless canyon. Hedges dismounted and led his horse along its edge. Inches from the ledge stood a dead cedar tree, bleached by the sun, glowing pure white against the blackening abyss. Bent and knotted, it beckoned Hedges. He obeyed, moved close to the ancient tree, caressed the dead wood, laid his chin against a branch, peered deep into the canyon. He saw only shapes, then nothing, until only nothing existed in the darkness of the canyon.

The sun burned into him as he resumed walking west along the edge, feeling the cold rise from the abyss. He stopped, closed his eyes, felt the cold and hot forces collide somewhere inside of him, a perfect, empty glow. Then he opened his eyes, pulled his canteen from his saddle and drank until it was empty, tossed it into the canyon, watched it disappear. He never heard it land.

Invited by a voice, he stepped down into the gaping earthen womb. The darkness reached out, caressed him like a lover. Hedges once had a lover, a divorcee who only cooked for him, at first. She cooked for him enough times to take him into her bedroom. After she took him into her bedroom enough times, she stopped cooking for him. Then he was no longer welcome. That didn't upset Hedges, though. Part of him was too confused to be. The other part knew better than to hold on. He'd seen his parents cling to each other, only to push each other away, cling more, push, scream, scratch, bruise each other and continuously degrade themselves as they brutally sought the reasons for their discontent. The black canyon told Hedges that only barbed wire waited for him, if he held on.

His short life passed before him as he let his horse go. He heard it scamper up the incline as he continued downward. At first he was cautious, but then he surrendered to the canyon totally, and after a few steps he descended as if the exact place to step was predetermined millions of years earlier. Step by step, he transformed into black infinity. When sunlight ceased to touch him, Hedges was no more.

{ X }

Elliot sat on the porch in Hedges' chair for three days. A layer of earth caked over his face. Several times he'd pissed where he sat, shat twice. The water-jug lay sideways and empty at his feet.

Hedges' horse meandered between the shack and corral, its reins jingling as they dragged across the ground. Every now and then it stuck its head through the corral to drink from the water tank. The horse was a perversion of nature, fully saddled with no Hedges mounted upon it. Elliot prayed the horse would die.

He'd crumbled into Hedges' throne just after the Indian left. As the hours passed, he came to believe that if he sat there long enough, he could become Hedges.

In fact, he'd already begun.

That third evening, the sheriff's car charged toward the shack in a line of dust, sirens blaring. The dust cloud blanketed Elliot as the car stopped near the porch. Delbert was the first to get out. He ran through the dust, up the steps, and shook Elliot by the shoulders.

"What happened?!" Delbert screamed, his rough voice cracking.

Elliot smiled, began to rise out of himself. The transformation was nearly complete.

"What the hell did that to Hedges, goddammit?!"

The sheriff wrestled Delbert away from Elliot as a younger officer went to hitch Hedges' horse on a cedar post. Elliot watched it all happen from his high perch. He saw his body in the center of it all, a mutant transforming into the Son of Stars.

"They tore his goddamned body apart!" Delbert screamed as he spun away from the sheriff, down the steps. Then he fell to his knees, wept.

Elliot swam in the darkening Cosmos. His kingdom. Delbert's wailing found him, and in hearing it, he knew someone had loved Hedges. But things like love no longer mattered to Elliot. He was beyond such frailties as love. He observed the mortal drama, laughed at it. But when he saw his own malnourished frame stand from the throne and step off the porch, hands out and eyes to the sky, he was suddenly thrust back into his body. He breathed dust, choked, panicked. He clawed at the darkening sky, begging it to receive him again. But the Cosmos shut itself off to him forever. Elliot cursed the Cosmos as he listened to his heart, felt it pound from within. Finally, when he knew he would die like all men, somewhere in the locked future, he calmly turned to the sheriff...

"Tilldale killed him."

...then fell to the desert floor.

{ X }

Michael sped along Highway 44, Corpus Christi to Alice. It was November, still hot in South Texas. Sweat trickled down his forehead. Almost four o'clock, right on schedule. He arrived at the nursing home right on schedule every Saturday. That way he could leave right on schedule. For a moment he considered crashing into a ditch; a wreck would give him a good excuse not to visit his father. Too bad the guilt would hurt even worse.

It wasn't that Michael hadn't tried to be a good son. He spent his childhood trying. But by the time he was a teenager, Michael realized his father's silence was a solid thing, impenetrable.

It was also contagious, and as Michael grew into manhood, he found it more and more difficult to talk with people. He spent his high school nights sitting in playgrounds or walking the streets of Alice, alone. After graduation he moved to Corpus Christi and stayed away, except for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and his cousins' quinceañeras. His silence hardened as the years passed. Friends disappeared, indifferent. Women left, confused. Michael was always relieved after they slammed the door.

When he was 32, his mother died of cancer. He never saw his father shed a tear. "Your mother died," was all he said, over the phone. "OK," Michael said as he hung up the phone, and shed no tears either. His lack of tears triggered a crippling anger. Blaming his father for the cancer offered some relief.

His father's mental and physical deterioration started not long afterward. Within months he was moved to a nursing home, hence these excruciating Saturday visits. Now nearly forty years old, Michael squirmed in the driver's seat like a child in church, grinding his teeth while repeating the Serenity Prayer. He was doing The Right Thing by spending time with his father, so he wouldn't regret it in the long run—or so he was told by the other AA drunks.

He used to drive his father out to the Naval Base in Corpus, even if they just drove through. Michael didn't mind, it took up most of the visit. After 9/11, however, getting onto the base became too much of a hassle. Now Michael just drove them to Alice's VFW, ordered a beer for his dad and a Coke for himself, and they'd play some dominos, watch a little TV. His dad only drank the one beer, but it took him two hours. Michael internally marveled and raged at his father - a lifelong Navy man, married into a Catholic-Mexican family in South Texas, and he couldn't even be an alcoholic.

Michael pulled up to the nursing home, left the motor running, went inside. As always, the same black orderly, whose name Michael never remembered and who'd always repeat his name through a smile of thinly-disguised contempt, led him down the hall to his father's room. The orderly swung the door open and there was Michael's father, sitting at a little table and staring through the wall, as always.

The orderly clapped twice. "Hey Elliot! Time to go, my man. Your son's here to bust you out. For a little while, anyway."

Elliot slowly lifted his head toward Michael, then slowly looked away. He stood, patted his pockets one by one, and then went to the dresser where he kept his Purple Heart, awarded for injuries he suffered in an explosion on a supply vessel between San Diego and Viet Nam in 1967.

A hero too, just like Johnny Eldridge.

Elliot clutched his medal gently before securing it in his shirt pocket. Then he waited to be led out of the room like a broken animal.

{ X }

The Alice VFW smelled of old wood and stale beer. The younger men were shooting pool, throwing darts, playing indistinguishable modern country songs on the jukebox. Michael and Elliot sat at one of the little square folding tables where the old men played dominoes. Michael had brought a box of dominoes back with their drinks, but had yet to set up a game. Elliot was an hour into his beer. The sun shone through the red and white checkered curtains, blending into the neon glow of the beer signs.

George W. Bush walked across the TV, waving to an applauding crowd. The president spoke confidently about something, through his Texas drawl. Michael shook his head, sighed. "Massachusetts," he grumbled. "Boarding schools. Not even a real Texan, but everybody down here's gonna vote for the bastard."

Elliot heard Michael but kept looking at his beer. Then he looked to the dominoes and tried to remember just exactly where he was from. Arizona? Northern Arizona. Border of Utah.

He shook off the urge to remember, turned to his son watching TV. Only then did he realize how much they looked alike. He saw himself, a younger man, young father, husband. He kept getting younger. Scared pimple-faced sailor. Then high school. No girlfriend. Scared. Younger. A desert, long ago. Scared. He closed his eyes, like he used to out in the desert. But that stopped working long ago. When? In the darkness, he saw the Paria River in one of those rare moments when it wasn't dried up: a red, muddy blitzkrieg of stumps, rocks, unfortunate animals. The waters of memory rose before him. The beer shook in his hand.

"Why today?" he mumbled.

Michael turned to him. "What, you cold, or something?"

"Goddammit. I'd almost..."

"What, dad?"

Then Hedges appeared. The young cowboy slowly dragged his boots across the stars, moving closer to Elliot. Hedges who never showed Elliot anything, never let Elliot feel him. Hedges who never lost control. Hedges the better cowboy. Hedges, the unquestioning glance, closer, closer.

Elliot ran from Hedges. "Just this damn November weather's all," he said, opening his eyes. "Never much liked this month."

Michael laughed. "Really? You know what else is in November, don't you?"

Elliot pointed to the TV. "The election?"

"Yeah, and my birthday. '*Never much liked this month.*' Jesus."

Elliot kept running, not caring that Michael hated him. So what if he didn't know the day of his only son's birth? Wasn't it enough that Elliot carried the burden of his own birth?

He heard Hedges laugh at him, the way he did that last evening together.

He ran in another direction, only to run into himself. A fake hero in a fake war.

He ran in another direction and found Tilldale, the feathers on his coup stick gently twitching from an unknown wind.

He turned and ran in the only other direction he could run, back to his son.

"How old you gonna be?"

"39."

Michael entertained the thought of his father dying before next Saturday. Too bad the guilt...

"39?"

"39."

Elliot saw a little spotted bull calf again, tagged 39 on its ear, lying dead before Michael. He knew he could run no longer. After a life of running and fear, it would be his only begotten son to hear his confession. He trembled now but knew the only thing that would stop the trembling would be the confession. Everyone in the VFW, in Alice, in Texas, in the entire world knew it. Of course it would be his son. Brutal nature.

"Tilldale couldn'ta done it. What happened to Hedges, I mean. He couldn'ta killed him. If it even was a human that did it."

Michael sat up, drawn to the tone of his father's vulnerable voice. It was unsettling, but he began to feel that unquenchable craving, just like in his drinking days. His mouth watered for more.

"What are you talking about, dad?"

"I said Tilldale couldn't a done it!" Elliot slammed the table, licked the spittle from his lips. "He's just a drunk Indian s'all. Nothin more. He's at the shack the time Hedges would'a been done in. He's drunk and stood there in front of me, mumblin stuff bout coyotes. Came closer. Right to me. Fondled me a little I guess. But not like what you hear about happenin to little kids on TV or nothin. Just reachin for somethin maybe. Probably didn't even know what he's doin."

Elliot felt the sun lower behind the curtains of the window. Across the floor lay his shadow, stretching, ripping.

"There I go..."

"What?"

"Delbert cried for that boy so hard. Poor Delbert. Those police lights. I told 'em Tilldale done it. Told 'em he came up to the shack on Hedges' horse. That he laughed about doin it and walked off. They took me home and two days later that old Indian's hangin from a cottonwood out by the highway. Beaten, hands tied behind his back, tree branch up his ass, ravens goin at him. Everybody in town was happy and relieved but me cause I know it's a lie. But that poor Indian's dead by my word. Shit, there ain't no way o' ever knowing what happened! Who can tell what the hell happened once the scavengers get to you?" Elliot squeezed his beer. The condensation had evaporated, the glass was lukewarm. "Just another animal found dead, s'all. But, goddammit, I loved Hedges. Loved and hated him, son! Now what kind of world..." Elliot turned back to the window. The sun had set, Elliot's shadow had disappeared into the black blue shadow over the floor. "Day and night... and everything else. It's supposed to be simple! They tell us it's supposed to be simple! But goddamn, I see that black canyon clearer now, and the darkness... Well, tell you what: It's yours now. Go and take it, son!"

Elliot raised the glass to his mouth, drank fast. Beer ran down his chin.

"That's the most you've ever spoken to me. All these years. You loved this Hedges? What about mom and me? Fuck you."

Elliot stared into Michael's eyes and heard Hedges calling to him. He closed his eyes and found Hedges looking up into the

stars. But the stars shut themselves off to Hedges, and the resulting dark began to devour him. Frightened and confused, Hedges swiped furiously at the darkness, hoping to find the stars again. But the darkness was relentless, breaking his bones, tearing his flesh. Just an unfortunate animal fighting dumbly against death, screaming until his voice disappeared. Elliot laughed as Hedges' movements slowed to a stop and he expelled his last breath. Hedges was a cowboy, better than most, but cowboys were still a part of this world, clutching with rough and desperate hands for its reality, just like everyone else. Just like Elliot as he clutched at the Purple Heart in his pocket. But Elliot survived, just like Johnny Eldridge, and Hedges died. Elliot smiled wide and laughed loud. He was alive. Only the living laugh.

“Well, I guess I’s the better cowboy after all!”

Elliot wheezed and hissed as he laughed. Mouth wide open, deep wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, ears turning red, shoulders rising and falling. A cackling wanderer in an old dark nightmare.

“Get me another beer, son.”

Michael saw his own reflection in the mirror behind his father, noticing how much they looked alike. Then he ran to the bar and ordered a beer. Two beers. The bartender slid the mugs to him. Michael grabbed them, the condensation bled over his fingers. The cold of the glass moved into his hand, up his forearm. He began to shake. He closed his eyes tight but that quit working for him long ago. His father’s laughter circled in his dark mind like scavengers.

{ X }

TODD PATE is a writer, actor, musician, carpenter, cowboy, and whatever else he has to do to pay the bills. He’s wandered across America several times. His non-fiction novel about a recent bus trip through the country- *Here, In America*- is due out next year. He writes a weekly blog called *El Jamberoo: Adventures in Americaland* (ElJamberoo.wordpress.com), commenting about whoever he’s with and wherever he’s at at the time.

WHAT REALLY DRIVES YOU TO DRINK

Jeff Laughlin

I.

OF COURSE, WE ALL WANT REVOLUTIONS

with piano loops playing behind us
driving us to the light of salvation.

We all want the moments of dreams,
caricatures of our destinies; we want
model-sizes of us writhing against evil.

Yes, we ache for sustenance beyond
substances, data ahead of information,
a wealth of armies, breaching battalions.

We want the lines between injustices
ruptured, to rip thousands of tears in our
oblivious brain-skin and sensibilities.

We want to be buried in beautiful
graves, our thoughts and actions resting
non-anonymously but not autonomic.

Above us, floating, are the souls of everlasting
life, their bombastic screams louder than
the empty bottles they hurl at us blithely.

Just out of reach, the albatross, the overt
and countercultural masses; all that lays
here is middle-ground, pain, and sincerity.

Here is intransigence, where we are.

II.

Numb music, numb logic, numb ache,
no love, no hope, no difference, no change,
no impetus, no interludes, no, yes, noise.

The mountains of measures that stack
 against us, again the grievances, again
 the inconstant, a grain of growth in hand.

All the emotionality, every incumbent politic,
 the body enormous, the entirety of selection,
 the vastness of vagary, the width of walls.

Vents press air into rooms, terrific weight
 into our lungs to be released as intoxicants,
 we don't need to see people before death.

We already know they are dead, as we are.

III.

The hefty weight of every night is the speech
 we can handle: motion, courage, weather,
 poison, pinnacles, depths, aroma, origin.

The alcoholic lives in peril without thought or
 intent to harm, but only for hours before
 inebriation; before the skies are slick, black.

The misunderstood element of surprise is the
 unbridled slip of senility, the sudden loss of
 thought as the body slithers around columns.

Enhancing experiences is not the point, rather
 the point is to caress the cordiality of the
 evening as if to whisper hello to the afterlife.

We know exactly what, though not where, we are.

IV.

The body often eats itself whole: the brain
 despises its state, the skin bruises, the hands
 shake and wither, the muscles atrophy alive.

But, like the most grandiose of nights, there are
 periods of expansive brightness: ravenous hunger
 and want of the primal and simple carnality.

Those are the nights we'd most remember
if the memories proved capable of staying, but
they slip out like the liver escaping; bleeding out.

We know how we'll die despite who we think we are.

V.

Shellac me with drinks for the generations of
mistake-makers, mishandled wonder, morose
thought, ungratefulness, thankless tiresome woe.

Contract me, fold me into sickness, into drivel,
into a prison of folly, of mangled explanations,
failed connections, colorful one-time relationships.

Trample me with spiked heels, designed tread,
adaptations of nights past, golden stories spun
onto looms by weary-cum-fastidious hands.

Disgust me with my own corpulence, I am
fattened by the desire of drink, but don't judge
my wont to caress my sweat-soaked bloat.

Amongst me are the finest minds-- the madding
crowd be damned-- and those that wish to disguise
life's impurity, no matter the irony of how we do so.

Bring me masses to one spot and I will
entertain them all: hordes of drunks, we
must swallow what bitter pills we have left.

We are our own guides: maps guiding destiny, we are.

JEFF LAUGHLIN writes about the Bobcats for *Creative Loafing Charlotte* and about sports in general for *Triad City Beat* in Greensboro, NC. His first book of poetry, *Drinking with British Architects*, is riddled with mistakes but available free if you want it. His second book *Alcoholics Are Sick People* contains the poem you just read. If you ask nicely, he'll probably give that to you too. Contact Jeff on his seldom-used twitter (@beardsinc) or email him (repetitionisfailure@gmail.com). He likely needs a haircut.

CRYONICS

Mariev Finnegan

THE FIRST DEAD HEAD TO BE THAWED from Cryo-preservation was a rich guy, big ego, big head. Bob Nowatchick (Ick, for short) was an autogynephilic transsexual, a narcissistic disorder in which a man is erotically obsessed with himself as a woman. Krystal did not exist, but Krystal was the only woman that could satisfy Bob. He/She were the ultimate evil: Complete unto themselves. Loved no one. Screwed each other.

Krystal, a dark wisp of a girl, developed an ego, became judgmental about that slob, Bob. His diet of fast food, his drug-use, his constant anger-- directed mostly at women-- all disgusted her. Also, his conservative fashion sense made her real edgy: Their wardrobe consisted of pressed tan slacks and casual sweaters. Because of him, that prick-- he had no vagina, no womb-- she would never have a child.

So one Labor Day, Krystal murdered Bob. She committed suicide by cop when he tried to have her arrested for raping him. From up in the bell tower, Krystal shot badge number 911 dead. The return barrage of bullets destroyed their heart, but left the head intact.

Bob had paid a huge amount of money to preserve the head, which was removed from the grossly-overweight body, and frozen with the hope that resuscitation and healing would be possible using highly-advanced future technology.

Then, in all probability, Bob would get the death penalty for murdering a cop.

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Now, 16 years later, the large head, wrapped in foil, is removed from a holographic space chamber and placed on a laboratory table to thaw, because it can now be cured of brain death and brought back to life. A team of professionals attach an artificial heart and lungs, as well as electrodes and monitors. Never before has anyone been brought back after being cryogenically frozen. There had been discussion about Larry King being first, but they decided to begin with the last one frozen, because it's the freshest. And if they mess up, who's going to complain? It's the head of a condemned man.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar goes public with many spiritual questions concerning the reanimation of life to a head: “Does the mind need the brain? Is our consciousness simply the result of brain function, the firing of neurons within a nonlocal consciousness? What happens when we die? Is the mind separate from the body, having its own eternal existence?”

The head scientist on the project, Dr. Franklyn, tells the public, “We are about to present scientific proof that life is a physical component of the brain, that identity can be restored by contemporary medicine, by restoring life to this head, this brain!”

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It is the Alpha and Omega:

A spiritual savior has come to the world, a young girl known simply as Crystal. They say she's a virgin. Crystal is *the Matriarch of the Erie*. *She connects all Erie-- and everyone is Erie. Crystal reflects the whole in mirror imagery. The subjective experience of that entanglement is mystical experience, or in general: **Erie**. Erie mental structuring is not linear in form, but rather holographic: Each member contains the whole.*

In all her 15 years, Crystal's dark hair has never been cut; her eyes are fringed in long lashes and her eyebrows are wild, like her hair. She wears a long patchwork skirt, a peasant blouse, and owl feathers at the crown of her head. Crystal is an old soul who recalls consciousness as the first particle that contained everything and exploded in the Big Bang. Dimly she is aware of her last incarnation as Bob/Krystal.

Now she is perfectly balanced as both male and female.

Crystal floats.

She really is levitating! Crystal has gone viral: She's addressing the UN live; she appears to everyone at once.

“The Erie is coming!” Crystal proclaims, floating in the center of the rotunda of the United Nations. She exists in the global unconscious, connecting everyone with unconditional love: For what is love but attachment, connectedness, and oneness? Reflected.

Crystal won the Amazing Randi's challenge, the prize of a million dollars, for proving paranormal abilities. Not floating, or healing or predicting the future, all talents she displays. The Matriarch of the Erie merges with another in total empathy, and

actually becomes them for short periods. Mind-weld: She sees what they see, feels what they feel. Crystal has even died, as both individuals and groups. The subjective experience of that entanglement is mystical, or in general: Erie.

There are skeptics. Some scientists claim she'd learned things, while she was Randi, that may or may not be true, dark secrets that he'd rather were not known. But she would have won the million anyway. The girl can walk on water!

Even before the news broke in the media -- SCIENCE DETERMINED WRONG! -- the Erie began to appear simultaneously in several widely separated locations around the planet. All over the world, people began to float!

"The Erie is coming!" Crystal proclaims. "Mind-to-mind the Erie have preserved the knowledge that God is to be experienced directly, by understanding the mirror image of I and the universe!"

Geraldo is right in the middle of the action at the UN. He reports, "Some of us are getting this singularity event consciously!"

Then he and Nancy Grace, reporting from a studio, are split-screen. Grace cries out in a strangled voice, "A relatively small, but rapidly growing percentage of humanity are experiencing within ourselves the breakup of the old egoic mind patterns! And the emergence of a new dimension of consciousness: **Erie!**"

Nancy Grace is tearing up. "Each Erie is capable of immediate connection with the sacred: Consciousness unconfined by space. Or time. Or a physical being. Free. The essence of our BEING is unconditional love. As the Erie say, Love, without reservation!"

Geraldo says, looking directly at the camera, "No one feels the need to judge or consume excessively because we have no need to possess or to control. The individual's natural loving tendencies are manifested without an object: Love originates within ourselves, and is expressed in the form of service and compassion toward other embodied souls."

Then a window opens between Geraldo and Grace, and the Amazing Randi is shaking his big head, exclaiming, "It's all done with smoke and mirrors! You're being fooled!"

Now the screen opens on a long shot of Randi in a wing of the UN. He turns to Stephen Hawking beside him. Stephen is robust, naked and floating above his wheelchair, which goes out of focus. Randi demands, "Explain! Scientifically!"

“In a transformation of human consciousness, we are becoming enlightened collectively and with each person who awakens, the momentum in the collective consciousness grows, and it becomes easier for others. This is the spiritual awakening that we are beginning to witness now.” A close-up shows a halo above Stephen Hawking's head.

“Over large distances and across barriers of time, individuals are giving and receiving direct conscious contact.” Stephen Hawking's voice holds wonder. “Erie! Freely and spontaneously, enlightenment is spreading mind-to-mind, slowly at first, but gaining momentum, from individual to individual, until the entire sphere has been affected! *Spiritual development and psychic abilities are connected.* Global mind-to-mind interactions are entering a phase of super-exponential growth resulting in a transformation of humankind to a far higher spirituality, with abilities, including telepathy, clairvoyance, healing and vision!”

While off screen, Randi can be heard in an eerie voice-over, “I can float! It's a trick!” Another voice over (Might be God): “The Erie are an evolutionary leap: Separation disappears, diseases vanish, the body detoxifies, emotional baggage is purged, peace and well-being develop. Individuals are beginning to sense their fundamental interconnectedness with creation. World-wide, those with expanded awareness are organizing on a higher plane. The Erie is gathering impetus towards a cosmic awareness! The Erie is coming!”

Written across the bottom of the screen: As a collective, we are about to expERIEnce a profound shift in consciousness. The Erie is coming!

“*There is an ultimate matter/energy. The equal distribution of power!*” Crystal, floating centered in the UN, cries out in a crescendo of sound, “Collectively we have the power to harness thoughts, and use them as energy! Power in a metaphysical sense!”

The planet is about to rapture into a cosmic consciousness. Paradise will come to Earth. Everyone will be Erie. The whole universe conforms around Crystal as she reveals the secret to free energy:

“Orgasm!”

Not in words, but an understanding: A vibration that grows to a beat, a vibration and a melody, a wailing from the void that climaxes in an ultimate satisfaction.

“The ultimate energy is orgasmic,” Crystal cries out, and off-stage, Randi can be heard yelling, “That's not prehensible!”

“The highest spiritual achievement is the reunification of female and male. Yin/Yang. Man/woman. Birth. **Death**. The combining of the two into oneness is the metaphysical basis of orgasm, the elemental energy. These two primal opposite but complimentary forces, found in all things in the universe, can transform into each other!”

The planet itself, Mother Earth, is reaching a mystical state of higher awareness, universal psychic cohesion, *planetary mind-to-mind communication outside time and space!* The *linking of minds has reached a critical mass*. Universal consciousness... All at once we each feel as if our bodies are breaking loose, freeing self, and rising in the air, a feeling of infinite lightness, of a wondrous capability for floating. ***The Erie is coming!***

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Two techies unwrap the foil from Bob/Krystal's big head that has an artificial heart and lungs attached with tubes and wires. The eyes, bloodshot and weeping, roll in their sockets, look inside. The head begins to feel, then think.

At the same time, ordinary consciousness is radically transformed for the masses-- *the Erie come! Almost!*

Mother Earth readies herself for a shift in polarities: The planet is on the cusp of universal consciousness! Don't look at the black hole! Space is what we all, even the Erie, fear.

Centered, suddenly Crystal fears everything. In the middle of the UN, Crystal loses her buoyancy, falls to the floor. She pulls herself into the lotus position, falls over into a fetal position. Crystal feels the immensity of her matter-- she's given up everything, even love, to reflect unconditional love.

Now she gives up her last heartbeat in cosmoagony.

Crystal, willowy figure, clutches her throat with both hands. Her eyes bulge as she gasps for breath, air! Crystal, Matriarch of the Erie, experiences the ultimate climax: She dies.

Expanded consciousness allows her to relive every second of entire lifetimes, from several perspectives at once and in exquisite detail, including what others experienced in those events, all simultaneously. Crystal is orgasmic light, she reflects everything. Vibrations enfold her womb; she is sucked like a Big Bang Baby. Inside out!

Crystal is instantly reborn.

Immediately, her soul and her consciousness experience the shock of life inside that big dead head, that big ego: Bob, whom she had been in her last life, and whom she must return to, reanimated by science. Crystal, Matriarch of the Erie, savior of the world, dies because her soul is recalled to her previous life as a totally selfish big head.

In one splendid orgasmic explosion, the head becomes conscious of self, but this time around, in this cycle, the personality is Krystal/Bob... This time around, Krystal is erotically obsessed by herself as a man, her male side, Bob Nowatchick. Ick for short. Just the two of them, inside that brain, inside that dead head, that big ego, returned to life and consciousness by science.

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Upon Crystal's death, the Erie-- beings evolved to interact directly, and in so doing, keep the planet balanced-- return to separate beings, each one alone. The planet does not rise to a higher vibration, heaven does not come to Earth. No ascension, no rapture.

The Erie do not come.

Crystal's soul, her essence, so spiritually advanced, is returned to the head that now flushes with emotion and gives an utterance, a cry like a newborn: "Mm-m-m-meee...Meeee..."

Now Crystal finds her self-- her consciousness-- which was God-- or reflecting God-- confined in a physical being: a brain, a head! A big head on a table. The Matriarch of the Erie is returned to a past life. Crystal weeps as she becomes aware of the physical, the small space of a white room that contains machines and people in laboratory coats.

A man with a beard, Dr. Franklyn, gets down to her level and looks into her eyes. "Bob, you've been asleep for sixteen years. Welcome back, man."

"Krystal," she corrects him, then points out: "I'm just a... a head!"

"Don't worry, we'll put you together with a body!"

A sharp intake of breath from Krystal: "Oh! A body with big boobs! And a vagina! I need a vagina!"

Krystal recalls being one with the universe, keenly remembers her past life as Bob/Krystal and her life as Crystal,

Matriarch of the Erie, who almost brought humanity to a higher shift in consciousness. Despite Bob, that dead head, that idiot man, maybe, if she had big boobs, she could still float; perhaps, with a vagina, she could unite the world and bring heaven to Earth. Then she began thinking about a new wardrobe.

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End of story: Krystal wrote a flash fiction: Cryo-no-dICKS. No one understood it.

Science proved that identity and consciousness is a product of the brain, and not mind-at-large. No eternal soul. The Amazing Randi sued and got his million back. And Mother Earth died from ego, greed and global warming, before they could even execute Krystal, the cop killer.

MARIEV FINNEGAN's work has appeared in *Farrago's Wainscot*, *Serendipity*, *The Bad Version*, *Shadows of the Mind Anthology*, *Fiction Brigade*, *Writing That Risks*, *Red Bridge Press*, *Real Lies*, *Zharmae Press*, *Tortured Souls*, *Scarlett River Press*, *Up, Do*; *Flash Fiction by Women Writers*, and *Advances in Parapsychological Research* (Saybrook). More information on her work can be found at www.MarievFinnegan.yolasite.com

FLAPPERHOUSE #1

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edited by Joseph P. O'Brien

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FLAPPERHOUSE is dedicated to Helen Kunkel
 1918 - 2013
 Loving Grandmother, Wonderful Storyteller



Helen's First Communion, circa 1928

I observed, here and there, many in the habit of servants, with a blown bladder, fastened like a flail to the end of a stick, which they carried in their hands. In each bladder was a small quantity of dried peas, or little pebbles, as I was afterwards informed. With these bladders, **they now and then flapped the mouths and ears** of those who stood near them, of which practice I could not then conceive the meaning. It seems the minds of these people are so taken up with intense speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the discourses of others, without being roused by some external taction upon the organs of speech and hearing; for which reason, those persons who are able to afford it **always keep a flapper in their family**, as one of their domestics; nor ever walk abroad, or make visits, without him. And the business of this officer is, when two, three, or more persons are in company, gently to strike with his bladder the mouth of him who is to speak, and the right ear of him or them to whom the speaker addresses himself. **This flapper is likewise employed diligently to attend his master** in his walks, and upon occasion to **give him a soft flap on his eyes**; because he is always so wrapped up in cogitation, that he is in manifest danger of falling down every precipice, and bouncing his head against every post; and in the streets, of justling others, or being justled himself into the kennel.