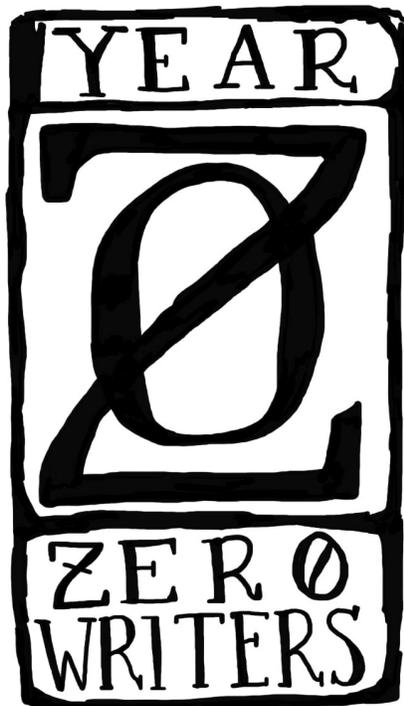
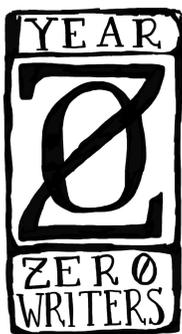




Thirteen Shadows Waiting for Sunrise



<http://www.yearzerowriters.wordpress.com>



Year Zero Writers is a collective of around 20 authors from 8 countries, formed in the Spring of 2009 and devoted to delivering the very highest quality contemporary literary fiction direct to readers. *Thirteen Shadows Waiting for Sunrise* is the collective's second anthology, following on from *Brief Objects of Beauty and Despair*.

The Year Zero Writers website features original fiction on a daily basis, along with articles to inform and provoke.

Thirteen Shadows Waiting for Sunrise arose out of a simple question, posed by Marc Nash in the article that ends this volume: is it possible for an author to write the reader's pain. All the stories, and the article, that follow, are in some ways attempts to answer that one simple question.

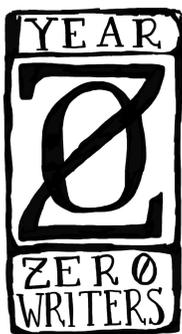
Many of the Year Zero Writers whose work appears in this volume will be taking part in the *Thirteen Shadows* tour, a series of readings, combined with video inspired by the anthology, along with music from great bands we've invited along. Check our website to see when we'll be performing near you, and for details of past gigs. The *Thirteen Shadows* tour T-shirt, designed by and copyright (2009), as is the amazing cover of this anthology, Sarah E Melville, will be available from February 1st through our website and the gigs.

Seven novels by Year Zero Writers are also available both as FREE downloads and to buy as paperbacks (online, at the gigs, and from selected bookshops) – see our website for full details, and to get to know our authors better. They are:

Babylon by Daisy Anne Gree
Glimpses of a Floating World by Larry Harrison
Songs from the Other Side of the Wall by Dan Holloway
Benny Platonov by Oli Johns
A, B & E by Marc Nash
Black Laces by Marcella O'Connor
29 Jobs and a Million Lies by Jenn Topper

All stories in this volume are © copyright 2009 the named author. Each author asserts the moral right to be named as author of their work. You may share this volume, but only as a complete work, and not for monetary gain.

<http://www.yearzerowriters.wordpress.com>



CONTENTS

Temporary Passport *Penny Goring*

Conversation in a Basement on 17th and Mission in 1998 *Daisy Anne Gree*

The Things They Let Into the Classroom *Oli Johns*

Bonecutter *Anne Lyken-Garner*

A Report on Clouds and their Disappearance from Earth *Sarah E Melville*

Twin Topiary Tales *Marc Nash*

Death Kiss Corsage *Penny Goring*

SKIN BOOK *Dan Holloway*

Candles *Simon Betterton*

Basking in Conformity: The Slave *Jenn Topper*

Hijabaholic *Marcella O'Connor*

A True and Faithful History of the Golem of Třebíč *Larry Harrison*

Billy *Daisy Anne Gree*

Carbon-based *Heikki Hietala*

House *Penny Goring*

Pain *Marc Nash*

Temporary Passport

Penny Goring

It is late in the twentieth century and I'm on my hands and knees for you. Down on the boards of this stationary freight train, it's dark and your coat is our tent. Toulon: too long ago to clearly remember your hands or the feel of your mouth.

On a speeding train I took off my knickers and the open window grabbed them from my hands. We were glugging red wine from plastic flagons, going to Nice to beg on the beach.

Those sand-blasted beggars were feral, stole your knife as we slept under sheets of damp chipboard. You forced me to shop-lift a tin of sardines, if it wasn't for you we would starve.

Busking in Brussels was futile, me screaming and you on the bongos, all you'd accept from your father, before he returned to New York. Plastic flowers bunched in my carrier bag, eyebrows unplucked, hair greasily grasping the wind.

Marseilles with a flimsy message propped at my feet, slumped against a wall trying to look hungry, my puppy fat making it hard. You always watching from a distance, making sure I was safe.

Poverty was too much for me. You said I was too much for you.

At Bettina's expecting a welcome, we weren't wanted at all, but she fed us and took us to the nightclub where her boyfriend was a DJ. Our contest to see who could pull first, you seemed gleeful when I won hands down. All I did was stick my head out, under the lights at the bar.

He was a good-looking Belgian, singer in a band he said, and he wanted to buy me a dress. He came round the next day so I had a shower and he took us all out for coffee and chocolates, then dined and seduced me alone. You were angry I didn't bring a doggy bag back, I was numb with cocaine.

Eating raw cabbage in Oxford watching lots of uppity yahs, we danced with exuberance at their party, heathens, wild for them all. You shagged some girl on the staircase, I nicked a tenner from her dressing-table drawer. It was then you knew I was yours.

I was relieved we lost her before Paris, even though the guards beat you up. I stood frozen, train jolting, as they took turns to punch you and called you 'roast beef', your teeth flashing broken and whiter against your open mouth slashed with red.

They threw us from their cells early morning, we walked silent streets swigging milk from the doorsteps and I loved you, your beauty coagulated in blood.

I drew you for three days in Calais, my pencil recording your fantastic face, I should have held onto those drawings, I'd have something left of you now.

You never answer my letters but you still come looking for me. You find me at night when I'm trying to sleep and tell me all about why you can't stay.

Conversation in a Basement on 17th and Mission in 1998

Daisy Anne Gree

When are we going to start sleeping together?

I don't know. When I feel like it, I guess.

(I can't feel anything. Never have, never will.)

Alright.

What are you doing? Are you taking my pulse again?

Yeah.

Why?

I like it. It's just all over the place.

It's always like that.

You're trembling.

Oh, that's just because of a vitamin deficiency.

A vitamin deficiency? You are a funny girl.

What? It really is due to a vitamin deficiency.

(I am all vitamin deficiencies and madness. But no feeling.)

If you say so.

Oh, hey, did that Canadian girl ever call you? Because I gave her your number after you left.

Yeah, she called me.

And?

Well, she came over.

Did you sleep with her?

No. She just wanted me to beat her all night.

And?

And so I beat her all night. And then she left.

Oh.

(Everything I say and do is insincere. I study other women and then mimick their emotions.)

Listen, starting at about 7 in the morning, the neighbours upstairs get really loud.

I'll probably still be awake.

Yeah, but don't be freaked out. They have about ten children and all ten of them run around in the morning making all kinds of noise. I banged on the ceiling once to complain, and never complained again.

Why?

Because the father came downstairs and knocked on my door with a huge knife in his hand.

(I won't sleep with anyone but I do let you strangle me until I pass out and I still feel nothing.)

That's a bit excessive.

Yeah, well, they're Mexican.

But you're Mexican too. You have three names and the Blessed Virgin Mary in your bathroom.

But I grew up in Tennessee.

You're still taking my pulse.

Yes.

(I freak out and have to sit in the other room. I only freak out because it seems like I should. Like this is the point when another woman would freak out.)

Thanks for putting up with me earlier.

Why are you so defensive around me?

I don't know. You sound tired. You should sleep.

You can put the light on if you want to read.

No, I'm fine like this.

Are you sure?

Yes, I'm sure.

(But I can be your best friend. I've studied how people do that. I can mimick that better.)

The Things They Let Into the Classroom

Oli Johns

Fifteen small box rooms, none of which I want to enter.

I wake up and remember the night before, 2am, standing outside smoking three cigarettes one after the other and looking up at the trees leading up to the park at the top of the hill where I saw a monkey once. I thought it was a dog at first, but, no, it was a monkey.

I stay on the bed, imagining it as a sticky pad keeping me down.

The cigarettes are still in my throat and on my tongue. I have no choice but to get up and brush my teeth. I look in the mirror while brushing and notice the rest of the bathroom around me and I think, which is really better, this or sleep?

I think some other things too, but mostly I come back to the cigarettes.

I don't even smoke...not really.

I go into the living room and sit down on the couch, but don't turn on the TV. I never watch TV before the evening, I can't. Instead, I think and think and worry.

The day ahead, one bad student I know of. 5pm, box room number thirteen, the little shit next to me with his pencil stuck in the tape recorder.

I told him last week I wanted to throw him out of the window. I think I'll tell him this week too.

...the elevator doors open and I walk in and behind me there's a kid and its helper rushing for the door and I put my hand over the 'doors open' button but they run harder and make it and press the number two button which is the same button I've already pressed. We're going to the same floor and the kid is staring at me but I don't want to talk to it, not until I'm in one of the box rooms and it's my job to talk to them...

...but then it shouldn't just be my job, I think, it should be my character, shouldn't it? Yes it should, so I look down and say something to the kid and it stares at me and says nothing back, which doesn't piss me off at all, but gives me a strange sense of power, that I can say whatever I like and the kid will do nothing, like talking to the elevator itself, so I laugh a little and tell the kid that if you press the button for the top floor you will go up and up and fly out of the top of the building like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and I mime the explosion of an elevator shooting out of concrete and glass with my hands and the kid says nothing again and edges behind its helper, who is smiling at me but also saying nothing...

'Hok Yiu, can I see your page one?'

The kid colours page one.

'Hok Yiu?'

Colours.

'Hey, you...Hok Yiu, can you show me your page one, please?'

'No, no, no...'

'Hok Yiu...'

He says nothing.

The three other kids look at me and then at Hok Yiu.

I stare at Hok Yiu's hair for a while. I imagine pulling it out one piece at a time, making the little shit scream.

'Hey, Hok Yiu...page one, come on.'

No answer.

You little punk, you think this is fucking playtime?

I imagine backhanding him across the room.

Yes, across the room and through the wall into the next box room. Could I get him through the wall?

Hok Yiu finishes his colouring and hands me his page one.

'No, it's too late,' I say and shove the paper back at him.

He hands it back.

'No...'

He hands it back.

'No...get it away...'

He hands it back.

'I don't want it...'

He hands it back.

'Hok Yiu...'

He hands it back and says 'tick.'

I stare at him.

'Look, five minutes ago I asked you for it.'

He pushes page one closer to me.

'No...five times I asked you for your page one. You didn't give it to me.'

He starts slapping the paper.

'No, you didn't give it to me. I asked you and you didn't give it.'

His eyes are watering.

I breathe out.

'Hok Yiu, you didn't listen to me. You never listen to me.'

He wipes at his eyes, but it's not enough.

'Tick', he says.

'No, I won't.'

'Tick, tick, tick...' he says louder.

'Hok Yiu...'

He picks up the paper and scrunches it up.

'What are you doing?'

He wipes his eyes again.

Yes, wipe them you little shit, you little baby. I know what you are. You're gonna grow up to be a little cunt, aren't you? Well, fuck you, I'm not ticking your page.

'I want to be monster,' he says, tears falling.

'What?'

'I want to be monster,' he says louder.

I stare at him.

'I want to go...I want to go away...you are naughty...you are monster.'

I keep staring at him. Punishment. Mercy. Tick his page or punch him through the wall.

'I want to be monster,' he screams.

'Hok Yiu, get a tissue.'

The staff woman comes to the door and looks through the window.

Hok Yiu wipes his eyes and doesn't apologise.

You little shit...

'Fine...'

I take his paper and tick it.

We don't speak to each other for the rest of the lesson.

A break, 2pm to 3pm.

Robert sits in box room fifteen reading the South China Morning Post.

I sit on the other side of the table, thinking of ways to meet better people than Robert.

Brett walks in and takes a seat.

He tells us he's just had his pipes cleaned.

Robert smirks.

I don't know what he means.

'Yeah, over on Dundas. Nice Thai girl. Lovely.'

Robert says he likes the Thai girls, but their tits are too small.

Brett nods. 'Tits aren't always great, it's true,' he says.

I get up and walk out.

Robert hears the bell at 7pm and leaves the box room before his students.

He heads to the bus stop round the corner and waits in line.

He thinks about going a little further and getting some action before heading back, but vetoes himself. The wife will do for tonight, he thinks.

The bus comes and he gets on.

On the way back to his wife he thinks back on the day and that student he had at 4pm. He remembers Brett and the talk they had about the whores, and he pairs it to his other thoughts, his thoughts of that thirteen year old student and the uniform she was wearing, the hairs on her arms and those few spots on her legs. God, she wasn't perfect, but she'd take it.

He looks around at the other passengers, sees no one looking his way then goes back to the window and the girl.

He plays it out in full, a whole scene.

There she is, her skirt shorter, her foot touching his leg, his hand moving up her calf and then her thigh...the box room window... a blind for the window that he can reach up and pull down...pulling her onto his lap and lifting that skirt right up and...thirteen years old...thirteen...it wasn't bad, it wasn't immoral, not really...was it? Only three years away from legal...was it that bad?

The scene plays on.

Brett goes back home and talks to his wife.

One of his two kids runs into the room and jumps at him. He lifts the little girl up and swings her around, both of them laughing.

Later, they all sit and watch TV.

The little girl starts on the sofa then moves onto Brett's lap.

He doesn't push her off.

Little Hoi Lam writes her sentences on page six, singing nonsense.

I sit on my chair, watching her sketch out 'This is a mouse' with no spaces, thinking about how many times I've seen that page.

'...mama mouse, mama mouse, drop you on a floor,' she sings.

I think of other things. The student I had before Hoi Lam. The teachers that came after me and left before. The routine of getting up and getting the bus and coming to the same street for three years, to do the same thing, the thing that I think is probably beneath me but I'm not sure.

'Bee-bee-bee, bee-bee-bee...ballo!' she shouts in my ear.

'Hoi Lam...not so loud.'

She laughs and tries to climb onto my lap.

I look at her. Those cute little eyes and nothing on her face, no marks or creases or anything.

‘Mr. Billy...I go to sleep now.’

She tries to climb up again.

I want to pick her up and swing her around and give her a big hug.

She touches my thigh.

I push her off.

The bell rings and I wait a while before leaving.

I don’t want to meet any of the others downstairs, not the ones who are in today.

I walk downstairs and outside and there is no one waiting.

I walk along Nathan Road seeing people walking alone and people walking in pairs. I’m alone, but it’s a normal day after work, it’s ok. A lot of people go home alone.

I wait for the bus, thinking of what to eat.

I don’t really want to eat anything, but I have to do it.

The bus comes and the line starts moving.

An old man tries to edge ahead of me.

I slow down a little and let him get in front then say to his back, ‘it’s not going anywhere, you old fuck.’

He doesn’t turn around.

I sit at home watching TV.

Las Vegas is on.

Tom Selleck is bowling in a penthouse suite and telling another tall guy to make sure he takes care of it.

Tom Selleck...what’s he doing now?

I mean, right now?

Is he sitting at home with nothing to do?

The programme continues but I lose interest and stare out the window. There are lights in most of the windows across the estate.

What are they all doing?

It's 2am again and I'm sitting in the dark.

I don't want to go to bed yet, but I have nothing to do.

I pick up my computer and type 'Tom Selleck' into the IMDB search.

What is he doing now?

Las Vegas only, it seems.

Poor guy.

I stare at the screen and wonder where all my friends have gone.

I remember a few faces, a few nights out, long ago.

Yes, I know where they've gone.

Outside, it's not 2am anymore, it's much later, but I don't care, I'm walking and I've got my music and who gives a shit if I go out and do this every night anyway?

I don't want to make any more friends.

I'm tired.

I want to be alone.

I recall a Joseph Conrad quote, but can't remember it exactly. Life is lived alone? We all live and die alone?

It won't come, not the full line.

Fuck it.

I wake up and look at the clock and think 'it's 11am and I'm the last one in Hong Kong to wake up today.'

I stay in bed for another hour wondering whether or not I should bother getting up. I've lived enough Wednesdays, do I need to live another?

I tell myself to get up.

I don't.

I lie there and think of words.

Liminal...I read it somewhere, recently...what does it mean?

Something to do with time?

Time and...subliminal...sub-liminal...it's connected, isn't it?

Subliminal means something appearing and disappearing suddenly, so liminal must mean...?

Fuck it.

I think of the word 'purpose'.

...I walk onto the ground floor and there are about a thousand kids sitting and standing and talking and dancing, and the helpers aren't controlling them, and the staff aren't controlling them, they're too busy fucking about on the computer, and I walk further down the corridor looking for a box room that's free where I can sit down and put my head in my hands for a few seconds before the bell goes, but these little shits have seen me and they're looking at me and they want me to do something funny, but I don't want to right now, I just want to sit down in an empty box room, but they're still looking and still expecting something from me, and fuck them, what do they want, what should I have to give them when I only get fourteen thousand, fifteen thousand a month, and I smile thinly and keep walking until I find box room three and disappear inside...

The bell rang a few minutes ago and Robert is in the box room waiting for me to leave.

I talk to him and ask him if he played with his kids on the beach before work.

He holds up a hand and stops me.

'Wait a sec...'

He looks out at the corridor and I look there too.

The new teacher walks past, the seventeen year old half English, half Thai girl, and she's wearing a tight vest top and her...

'God, those tits,' Robert says.

'Who, her?'

'The highlight of my day...' he mutters and leaves.

I don't want to stay in the classroom because I know the little shit is about to come in, but I have no reason to go outside so I stay.

He comes in, picks up a marker pen and throws it at my head.

Ian Ng.

I get him to sit and we talk about the first page, animals on the farm.

I ask him if we eat pigs.

'We eat Mr Billy stupid, la...' he says back.

I tell him to be quiet.

'No, you are Mr Stupid, you quiet...'

He laughs.

I tell him to shut up.

He picks up a pencil and puts it inside the tape recorder.

'You're ruining the tape, Ian. Stop it.'

He doesn't stop.

'Ian...'

'Mr Stupid...'

You little thug. You ugly little fucking midget.

I stop the tape.

'Listen, Ian. If you don't shut up I am going to open that window...' I point to the window two floors above the shitty little alley outside. 'I will open it and throw you out, you understand?'

'Stupid...' he says.

I fucking mean it, you little shit. I'll throw you out. I'll watch your little dumb head smash open...

'I mean it, Ian. Be quiet or...'

'Stupid Mr. Stupid...I throw you the window.'

I stare at him.

He picks up the pencil and pretends to stab me in the leg.

'You little motherfucker,' I mutter under my breath.

It's just gone 9pm and the restaurant is about to close.

The young men in the dirty white uniforms walk by talking in Cantonese and laughing about something. About me maybe, I don't know.

I eat the same food I get every time.

The beef is dry and I think I don't want to eat it, but if I don't then I'll have to think about eating something later and I just want to get it done.

I remember another time I was in this place, when I stopped eating because I knew something bad was going to happen.

That was around the time I lost my friends.

I close my eyes and listen to the Cantonese I can't understand.

I try to think of ways to get new friends. There's a festival on the weekend, I can go to that. Meet some new faces, some new minds.

I play the festival scene and think of all the words I'll have to say and the words I'll have to listen to.

I start to sweat on my head.

I drink some of the iced coffee.

Those guys on the other table, they're still speaking, but something's not right. I don't know what, but it's not right.

I wipe my head.

No, something bad is going to happen.

I move the plate and the dry beef to the side and put my wrists against the cold, coffee glass.

It doesn't work. It's too hot...it's too hot in here...it's too hot and they're still talking and it's not clear or I'm not clear, something's not clear, or it's...it's outside of me, it's-...I shouldn't be here, it's too hot...something bad is going to-...

A woman in an apron and hat appears and tries to take my plate.

'No...' I mumble.

She nods and picks it up.

I put out a hand to stop her.

'No...not finished.'

She shakes her head and tries to take the plate away.

'For fucks sake...'

I grab the plate and bring it back.

'I haven't finished yet...come on.'

She walks away, mumbling in Cantonese.

Charlotte Tong tells me she went to church and learnt about Abraham.

I nod my head and listen.

'Abraham was tested, but he passed the test,' she said.

'Yes, but...'

I think about not saying anything, not arguing...

'Abraham was a true believer,' she said. 'No one else could do the thing he did.'

'Charlotte, Abraham tried to kill his kid.'

She shakes her head and says it was a test.

I shake my head back and tell her what I think about Abraham and God.

She says I'm wrong.

'I studied this, Charlotte. You should trust me, I know what I'm talking about.'

I've never studied it, but it doesn't matter. I know I'm right.

It's 3am again and I'm walking away from my estate.

I should be going to bed, but I don't want to.

What's the point, I won't be able to sleep.

I walk in the dark alongside the road that will take me to Kwun Tong.

I've seen this road a thousand times and I'll see it a thousand times more.

I light a cigarette even though I don't smoke.

Tomorrow's a Thursday and I hate Thursdays.

Not hate, no. It's something else. I'm tired of Thursdays?

A minibus goes past and a few faces look out at me.

Fuck you, I mouth back at them.

I smoke the cigarette and light another. I'm thinking about smoking the rest of the pack. Why not? It's better than thinking of Thursday.

I take a long drag and then another.

Thursday. Thursday. Thursday.

I step out into the road and walk with my back to the lane.

No cars come.

I knew they wouldn't come.

I step back onto the pavement, relieved, depressed.

God...isn't there any way out of Thursdays?

I sit at home with the financial news playing on the TV.

There's someone talking about slow recovery and a while before jobs become available again.

I'm not listening.

I stare at the wall and wonder if there's any possible way I can not only escape Thursday but the whole fucking thing.

The man on screen talks about jobs again and now I'm listening.

There are no jobs, you dumb cunt.

He keeps speaking, saying, 'yes, there will be jobs', but then he stops, unsure of something. He stumbles and looks down at his lap.

I start to sweat as I watch.

Something bad is going to happen. I know it.

Robert sits in box room five reading the newspaper.

He's thinking about the three lessons he has left to teach, and the time it will take to teach them, and how quickly that time will go.

After work, he's decided to go to Dundas Street.

I walk down the corridor between lessons and say hey to a lot of teachers, most of whom I don't want to talk to.

Andy stops me and says he really doesn't want to be there today.

I nod and say yeah.

'I don't know how much more of this I can take,' he says.

'Yeah.'

I walk to the toilet and close the door.

There's no one waiting.

I stand there and count down two minutes, but after a few seconds I get bored of counting and stop and just think instead.

I think of a few things, but all the thoughts are cut off.

I wash my hands and flush the toilet I haven't used.

As I walk back to box room twelve I look in box room fifteen and see Robert standing near that new teacher, the half-Thai in the vest.

I'm probably wrong, but it looks like he's backed her into the corner.

I wake up and tell myself to call in sick.

Just do it, who cares?

Then I realise it's my day off.

I check the clock then lie back on the bed.

There's a short list of people I know, but it's only short and I don't want to call any of them anyway.

And the festival, the one over in Pok Fu Lam.

No, too many people. No one I want to talk to.

I won't go.

I don't want to go.

Andy walks past me on the stairs as I'm heading up to the second floor.

He tells me he can't take much more of this, that he's going straight home and onto the job sites when the day's done.

I nod and say, 'yeah, job sites.'

The pencil flies through the air and hits me just under the eye.

I stand up and think about putting my hands around Ian's neck and crushing it.

He laughs and rocks back on the chair.

Little shit...

I pick up another pencil and throw it on the floor, a couple of inches to the side of him.

I walk over and slam his chair down onto four legs.

'Listen, you little...shit. When you grow up I am going to find you. Yes, I am going to find you and I am going to beat you. Understand?'

He stares at me, unsure.

'Do you understand me?' I say louder.

He laughs and goes back on his chair again.

I grab his collar and pull him back.

‘You little fucking shit...you think this is fucking playtime?’

He looks at me, afraid?

I let him go and return to my seat, stopping the tape, rewinding and recording over.

In box room four, I’m reading the South China Morning Post.

Robert is staring out the window as Andy sits next to him, telling him he can’t take much more of this shit-hole.

In the paper, a German goalkeeper has killed himself.

‘We thought we could get through it, with love,’ the wife said. ‘But it was too hard, you can’t.’

It’s a Thursday again and I’m in bed thinking.

Is it possible to just get up, pack everything and get out of here?

I think of Friday and Saturday and Sunday and next week and the other weeks after that and Christmas and...what’s the point?

Even in a different place, what then?

I picture a different place. Austin, San Francisco, New York, Tibet, Madagascar.

I shake my head and put my face in the pillow.

I remember a film. Jack Nicholson, a passenger, a quote.

‘Everywhere you go, you go within the prism of your own mind.’

In box room eight the students are laughing.

‘Ok, next question...’

I look at page five and see a picture of a box.

‘Casey, do you live in a box?’

They laugh.

Next to the box there's a picture of a chicken.

'Are you a chicken?'

They laugh.

'What would you do if you woke up and you were a chicken?'

We all laugh.

It's way past 2am and I'm walking along the highway on my way to fuck knows where.

Kwun Tong, Ngau Tau Kok, Pok Fu Lam, I don't care.

I feel tired. Really fucking tired, but...

Thursday, Thursday, Thursday.

Every time a car passes I know I'm going to throw myself in front of it.

Then when there are no cars I edge away from the road.

I keep walking, desperate to get away from the highway.

I think of the German goalkeeper, that line.

'It's impossible, you can't.'

I think of the next day of work and how this time it will be the one that breaks me.

Bonecutter

Anne Lyken-Garner

“So, what woke you up, Harry?”

Even though she was certain of his guilt, she couldn't help thinking that the jagged terror in his eyes simply *had* to have sliced through tender bits of his insides.

“It was the crunching, Inspector.” His pastry-thin lips quivered at the corners. He turned his face in an attempt to look away from the scene inside his head. “Like... someone was eating toast.”

For a moment she felt a horrible lurching inside her belly as though her stomach had been blown up, then deflated within a split second. She swallowed hard, looked up to the wire-covered light above her head, and pressed her palms down onto the cold table – the only one in the interrogating room. The lurching hiccupped – then undecidedly subsided.

“Toast,” she repeated, but the word ignited that sensation in her stomach again. This time she had to press her hand against it to calm it down.

What a strange way to describe a murder, she thought, then decided she was glad she didn't have toast that morning – not that she could face eating anything after the scene she'd seen last night.

“Yeah, toast.” His breathing became shorter and louder, prising his mouth open. His nostrils seemed unable to cope with pressure of air building up inside his lungs – stale air, quickly swelling, deflating, swelling, deflating. An unpleasant stench of rotting pizza – something meaty floated across the steel table to rally with her. She pulled back, turning her face sideways, almost retching. She imagined the scent hitting the grey stone wall behind her and bouncing off to travel its way to the security guard standing at the locked, wooden door.

“What happened after that, Harry?”

“I got up and threw my blanket off.” His left hand moved involuntarily, throwing an invisible blanket off his legs. She wondered what it was like reliving such an unbelievably hellish scene. Guilty or not, how could a human do it. His blue eyes seemed to turn black – deep, solid black for a moment. She did a double take and stared at his face, but it was gone. Maybe it was the sharp lighting playing tricks on her, either that or it was true that pregnancy makes your brain do funny things. She touched her belly again and left her hands there. She knew what was coming having visited the scene. She just knew that the baby she'd just this morning decided to call Aaran, was going to protest when Harry got to the part about the crunching toast.

“I thought that the cat had found something and was eating it outside the bedroom door,” Harry continued. He said *Ah* instead of ‘I’ and she took note of his mild, Glaswegian accent – kind of like Billy Connolly's – giving a nice, pleasant roll to the word, *door*. He stared

beyond her, placing his elbows on the table – tattooed arms extended, hands clasped. His long, unnaturally black hair fell around his shoulders and nestled on his skinny, scaffolding chest.

“What happened next?” she asked with half a smile painted on her face. She removed her hands from her tummy and placed them beside his on the hard table.

“Well, I got up. Had a look outside the door... nothing.” His breathing was coming even heavier now and Detective Jones thought she could hear his heart beating in his chest from where she sat. There was that putrid, meaty smell again.

Harry rubbed his eyelids. She would give him time to speak. Yes she would get every last bit of information he knew out of him. She didn't slave in the force for twenty years, sacrificed having a family – until now that is – to let sketch-covered, weirdoes like Harry mow up victims all around her.

“So I went to Kasey's room. I pushed the door . . .” Harry buried his face in his hands. His chest heaved steadily up and down, carrying his entire upper body with it. “Oh no! Oh no!” he cried. His body shook violently, and he stamped his foot repeatedly on the concrete floor.

Detective Jones rolled her eyes, but she couldn't help noticing the fingers of unease picking at the hairs on the back of her neck. She was convinced there was something Harry wasn't telling them. He'd killed his three month old baby. This was clear from the pools of blood on the bedroom floor and the amount of skin inside the baby-grow, that Kasey had been peeled from her tiny frame. *But what did he do with the body.*

“And what happened next?” Inspector Jones asked, not really wanting to know.

Harry calmed himself down just enough to look her in the face. He studied her eyes and the chiselled crow's feet around them. To him she looked too old to be pregnant, but lots of career women were into IVF these days. He'd seen them all around Clifton ever since his family moved to Bristol, modelling their latest acquisition – a live baby. For a brief moment this thought flitted across his mind without him even noticing. That happened to him a lot these days, especially after his wife's funeral. His mind told him things he didn't think he wanted to know.

“The door creaked, just a wee bit. I've been meaning to fix that for ages.” He wiped his clammy palms on the sides of his dark-blue jeans and went on – his voice barely audible. “It doesn't creak all the time, just at the moment you're trying to tiptoe out of the room after putting Kasey to sleep.”

“I know that this is hard for you, Harry, but can we please get back to what happened to Kasey?”

The name Kasey sounded familiar on her lips. It was one of the two names she'd picked for her baby, but she wouldn't – couldn't use it now. Admittedly, *Aaran Jones* sounded good. AJ was great as far as initials went. It was nothing like F.U.J, her own – Frances after her grandmother, and Ursula, after her Irish dad's favourite Saint. *Don't people check the initials before they name their kids?* She'd had to stay away from certain types of desserts all her school life. Still, this was probably what helped her keep her figure while her friends were

developing muffin tops over their low-cut jeans. But now she had to focus on Harry to keep him on track, even though she'd already guessed most of what had happened. She just needed the man opposite her to confess to what he'd done.

"Harry?"

Harry physically dragged himself back to a part in his mind where he'd rather not go. *Boy, he was good at this.*

"So, the door creaked a little when you pushed it to go into Kasey's room. What happened after that?"

"I told that other Inspector yesterday. Can't remember much. It's like I blacked out or..."

"Tell me what you remember. Just want to get this sorted before Dr. McKenna arrives."

"Dr. McKenna?"

"He's the hypnotist you signed the forms agreeing to see."

Harry's eyes narrowed, "That chap that hypnotises people on the telly?"

"Not *Paul* McKenna. This man's a *real* doctor – as in *Doctor* McKenna. He's worked with the Bristol police for a long time. Enough stalling now, let's get back to you entering your daughter's room."

Harry took a deep breath then emptied his lungs completely. He turned his head slowly and looked at Inspector Jones. For a moment she thought she saw that flash of black in his eyes again, but it passed – just like before.

"I pushed the door, it creaked. The person – the thing – standing over her cot looked up. Like... like I disturbed it or something.

"There was someone there?"

"Some *thing*," Harry whispered, leaning forward and glancing around him.

"This is bizarre. I don't understand what you mean." Inspector Jones tried to keep her eyes on Harry's but she feared the black flash would return again. It made her skin crawl and gave her a feeling of deep, deep dread.

"The devil. It was the devil, right."

"This... thing – he *told* you he was the devil?" Inspector Jones exaggerated the chuckle in her voice that wasn't really there.

"No, ma'am, he didn't have to say. I just know it was." Harry punctuated his last sentence by poking his forefinger twice on the table between them. The guard at the door coughed. Inspector Jones had no patience for murderers. But those who killed and blamed God or the devil were despicable. People who had such inflated egos as to steal the life of another human

didn't need the devil to draw them up the blue prints. Harry was evidence of that, just as she was evidence that a woman who desperately needed a child didn't need some half-wit man to give it to her.

"You've to do better than that." Inspector Jones said through her teeth.

"Look, the night my wife died I might've done something, right."

Inspector Jones kept quiet. She forgot that she wasn't breathing until she finally realised that her hand was cupped tightly over her mouth and nose. She'd learned that the best way to get into the heads of garbage like this one was to hide what was going on inside yours.

"Look, we're after the truth about your little girl. That's all. You're the only person who can help us, but you don't seem to want to." Inspector Jones pushed her chair back and got up from the table. "When you're ready to talk, let the guard know."

"No, please," Harry begged, "don't leave me alone. He's gonna come back for me." He grabbed her wrist as she went past and that black shadow pierced his eyes again. She was sure of it this time. She yanked her wrist away and glanced at the guard to see if he'd noticed too, but he merely looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"I haven't got all day, Harry. I've got other cases to solve." Inspector Jones left the room, and after a second her high heels could be heard pounding the empty, tiled corridor.

". . . And when I count to three, you'll go back to the night your wife died," Dr. McKenna said to the tattooed man in front of him. He looked as though he should be on a Harley raising hell somewhere instead of reclining on a single bed in the police lock-ups. "One, two, three."

It was raining that night. The nursery had long since been painted mild yellow. Harry's and his deceased twin brother's old double cot had been sanded and re-varnished. Everything was ready for the new arrivals. The pregnancy hadn't gone as smoothly as he and Anja had expected, and when she'd started suffering from chronic heartburns, they had put it down to all the spicy curries she'd recently craved for. When they were told that she had pre-eclampsia their world fell down around their ears. They'd done everything right. Harry had decided to stop smoking *and* shooting up as soon as he'd heard those double heartbeats. And he had stuck to it. It was hard, even hauntingly so at times, but he'd stayed clean for the twins – and for Anja, of course. That rainy night she'd collapsed, and after he'd raced her to the hospital he was told that he had to prepare to lose all three of them. The three people – two of whom he'd never even met – he would and did do anything on earth for. Anything.

He'd left the hospital and had gone out for a walk, nowhere in particular – just out. The tears had drowned the rain drops falling onto his face but he'd walked on, and on, and on. He'd found himself opposite Page Park, outside his mother, Martha's, house. He'd let himself in, and had gone into her basement. She was in Haiti on one of her 'conventions' but even if she *was* there, she was now stone deaf – not that she heard *nothing*. She claimed to hear better now because she no longer depended on the limitations of physical ears. Her spiritual guides

told her everything she needed to know. Or so she'd told Harry. It was difficult for him to take seriously, anyone who claimed to be able to connect with the paranormal world.

Nevertheless, he'd dug out her cards and had started surfing the world his mother knew so well, not even sure who or what he was looking for.

"Be sure," Martha had warned in her heavy Glaswegian accent when he was a teenager. "Be sure that you know *who* you want to connect with before you initiate contact. There are lots of restless, evil souls out there, always awake, always watching and waiting for the chance."

"A chance to what, Martha?" he'd joked, "a chance to pounce on me and gobble me up like the big, bad wolf?"

"Exactly, son. Exactly!" was all she'd said.

"Don't worry, *Mummy dearest*," he'd answered, cupping his left hand and tipping it towards his mouth repeatedly, making a 'glug' sound in his throat. "The only spirit I want to make contact with is light brown with a nice frothy head on the top."

Yet, in the dark basement on that rainy night, he dealt his hand with his mother's cards. He could've sworn he was transported back to the days – and nights – he spent chatting with Anja on MSN. There was a faint *Hello*, perhaps too quiet for others to hear, but for a desperate man grasping at straws the faintest sign of 'life' was loudly audible in his mind. Maybe that's *exactly* what his mum had talked about.

Can I help? were the words that came up in the screen of his mind. The big C then the *a*, followed the *n*. It was as if Anja herself was typing the words.

Can I help?

He didn't know who he was asking or even what he was going to ask for until the plea arose from his throat.

Please save one of them – just one – anyone. I'll do anything.

A voice came floating down to meet him, It was the voice of Paul McKenna from the telly, except it wasn't – not really. "Now take us to the night your daughter died, Harry." Paul McKenna said, holding his vastly distended tummy.

Someone was eating toast. At least it *sounded* like toast. He threw the covers off his legs and steadied himself off the bed. It had only been a week since he'd moved Kasey to her own room. She'd been discharged from hospital the same day her mother and twin sister were buried. Ever since that night, he'd laid her warm body on the side of his double bed – her cot forgotten. It was easier that way. It meant that when she woke at night he could sit up and rock them both back to sleep. When she cried, he would be near enough to cry with her. They would scream together, but they would feel safe as long as they were with each other.

They were the survivors, and like in *Lost*, survivors who stuck together stayed safe. The night she fell off the bed with a dull thud, he'd gotten up and raced around the entire house screaming for her, thinking somehow that she'd been stolen from him too, and that thud he'd heard was the door of her coffin being slammed in his face. He didn't know why, but she didn't cry. He'd gone back to his bedroom to get the noose he kept under his bed, but his little girl had saved him again. When he reached under the bed, instead of the rope he had felt her soft, warm body first. It was then he realised that it was time for her to sleep in her cot. A baby who can turn over on her own should not sleep in a bed made for adults.

Someone was eating toast. Was it the cat? What had he found this time? Harry opened his bedroom door and looked around but there was nothing there. The sound was coming from Kasey's room. He tiptoed to her bedroom and pushed the door open. It creaked on its hinges – ever so faintly. Disturbed, the form standing there slowly turned its head around. It was shadowy and faceless, but when it looked directly at him he somehow saw into his own soul. It was hunched over Kasey's cot, clearly eating something which required two hands to take it to its mouth. At first Harry didn't know what it was, he couldn't see. Dark, shapeless hands came down into the cot and lifted something to its lips, it bit in and chewed – toast? It stretched out its hand – offering. '*Can I help?*' was what he saw in his mind. The big C, then the little a, followed by the n.

Martha had 'heard' all about what happened even before she hurriedly boarded the plane in Port-au-Prince. When she got to her own basement back home and took out the cards, she knew exactly who she was going to speak to.

Can I help?

"Why did you do it?"

To anyone casually viewing the scene in the dim basement, the old woman with the fiery red hair could be reciting poetry to herself. Her lips moved, but no sound escaped and no emotion coloured her pale face.

Oh, Mother, aren't you even going to say hello?

"He was getting his life back together. He'd already lost Anja and one of the wee ones. You had no right!"

Well, Mother, I don't have to tell you of all people that I had nothing to do with Anja's death.

"But you answered when he came surfing. Clueless he was. You know he knows nothing about our world."

I was always the clever one, wasn't I, dear Mother. The one with all the brains – and the looks come to think of it.

"But he had a life!"

A life that belonged to me! I owned him, woman! You allowed them to take my soul so that HE could have life!

“It wasn’t my choice! I had no choice in the matter. They did the choosing, alright. It was one or the other. I couldn’t have you both. *That* was the promise.”

Looks like it runs in the family, Mother dearest.

“Don’t be so callous. Kasey was the only thing keeping him alive – the only thing he lived for.”

He offered.

“*She* was not what he offered. I know that. I heard him.”

If you heard him, then you know he made his deal without time-sealing my half of the pact first.

“He didn’t know he had to! That doesn’t mean you could just . . . just barge in and take the wrong person at the wrong time. He was your brother, damn it!”

He didn’t state his time.

“He did his person. He did his *person!*”

Is this about the noose thing, Mother?

“Yes, the noose thing.”

Well, you know, I have no use for him. He’s way too old – too set in his ways. But fresh young blood – now that’s the best way to stay alive!

“When did you become so cold? How can you be my son?”

I’m not anymore, Martha. Not anymore. I’m something better now. More powerful. All thanks to you.

Laughter reverberated in the dark basement, but it was more shrieking and wailing than expressions of joy.

When Inspector Jones got to the house opposite Page Park, she was greeted by the maid. The owner had apparently only last night returned from Haiti.

“This way, Inspecteur. Suivez moi,” she directed, with a Caribbean twang to her voice. Her dark face was torn with pain, and maybe fear or something else. The way her colleague had described the blood and skin at the scene, Inspector Jones knew that both baby Kasey and this woman were killed by the same thing. *Person*, she reminded herself. This was not good news

for her because it meant that creepy, eye-flashing weirdo, Harry, in the lock-ups was innocent after all.

When she got to the bottom of the stairs and into the dim basement the first thing she noticed was the head – no sign of a body – just a head; a head and lots of skin. The black eyes in the head were open. Inspector Jones jerked her head to one side. *Toast* was all she could think of. This time she did retch.

Back at the station Harry was having some kind of fit. *Can I help, Can I help*, was what he kept repeating. The big C, then the ‘a,’ followed by the ‘n.’ His eyes were dark, very dark. But this time the blackness was there to stay.

A Report on Clouds and their Disappearance from Earth

Sarah E Melville

THE CLOUDS went away quite definitely then. Tree branches made sure to hold themselves at proper angles when the naturalists measured them. When they left the trees relaxed and laughed to cover up the fact that their leaves were still too frightened to fall. Branches sagged as if the wind was quicksand and the naturalists in their labs pounded on the table; what they saw were not numbers.

Computer screens held the clouds hostage and would not let them back in the sky. Nebulae trapped inside plastic boxes, they scrolled across from right to left when they were angry, and sank diagonally from the top left to bottom right when they couldn't keep the sadness in. The cat, who liked how he could see himself in the dark bits of the clouds, tried to continue the naturalist's work for him when he left to remeasure the trees. He succeeded in adding nineteen sequential semicolons to the spreadsheet of branch angles in relation to trunk circumference. These semicolons meant much more than the decimals, but the naturalist wouldn't have it and erased all of the cat's hard work.

The naked children hid their eyes from the sun. After three generations, primary grades no longer made construction paper rainbows, the coloured arcs of the sky no longer remembered by child or teacher. The cotton ball industry decreased dramatically from a 3 million per annum enterprise to 1.6 million per annum. Aristophanes' *The Clouds* was added to the bin of Odd Antiquations/Things We Cannot Relate To. In an act of cruel Antiquation by Relation, Aristotle, then the Greeks (en toto) and the image of the hypocrites were thrown away as well.

The naturalist observed how the trees now bent down. The branches of the old trees were confused, and they shrunk towards the ground. The young ones had free will; they did not have to seek the sun because it was always there. They grew in the shapes they felt like and laughed at the old ones that could not cope. The old ones were afraid and the young trees did not understand.

The old trees made the children sad and afraid of what the world used to be. Construction teams were hired to build scaffolds and hold the branches the proper free way, to give them the guise of free will. They held them and nailed boards at angles the naturalist would approve of. "This is good progress," the head contractor said in an article about the branches. "I really feel like we're doing something good here."

But the branches continued to ache. They sat on hospital beds and refused therapy while the will vanished within them. The owls still loved them, but the owls could not convince the trees that their life was worth living. The owls' wide eyes shed tears and they refused to turn their heads backwards in the zoos. They were euthanised, causing a great increase of the deer mouse population.

The people, sad though they pretended otherwise, got closer to not remembering the old world. Without rain, the lizards grew larger and turned into dinosaurs. This excited the naturalists. "Do you think rain is what killed the dinosaurs?" a reporter asked on the evening news. The plush microphone head hovered before the naturalist's saggy mouth as he spoke. "We're getting new data every day," he said, "so it's hard to give a definitive answer at this time."

Not everyone was happy about the dinosaurs. The farmers dressed up as bovines and shot the dinosaurs. Because their flesh was inedible, they buried them under the corn as fertiliser. The fertiliser companies were not happy about this and banded together with the other butt-hurt companies and made an organisation pretending to care about the rights of dinosaurs. Young people with free will and no idea what a rainbow felt like joined and tried to domesticate infant dinosaurs, which everyone erroneously called 'lizards'. "They're not lizards" a PSA stated during the eleven o'clock news. The phrase became a popular bumper sticker to sport, and the war was half won. The bumper stickers were green and attractive and made the drivers look sexy.

People for the Ethnic Treatment and Tolerance of Dinosaurs grew in numbers as the new generation gained sympathy for the dinosaurs. Hip parents and teachers joined and mentored student groups in high schools and universities. They ignored articles from the paper about the mauling of people in third world countries by the dinosaurs and continued their work in the greater urban lands.

The naturalist's cat had died some time ago, by now, but her children's children were the cats of the naturalist's children. They couldn't watch clouds and they couldn't watch them slide across a computer screen because the savers were actually wasters, so their green eyes blinked at open browsers and music players layered over each other in a computed interface. They played the music and twitched their tails at it. They played tracks the naturalist had heard in the coffee shop that morning and then they curled up on top of each other.

"This is good progress," the man on the television set had said some time ago. That sentence was tucked in a cupboard, recorded on a video cassette, and sometimes it eeked through the slatted doors of the closet where water stained encyclopaedias and mothers' bibles and books about the region's plants were kept. Tennis balls, too, and badminton birdies though no one played either sport. The words slipped out of the plantation shutter slats like the thin stems of speech bubbles in indie comics and the cats twitched their ears at this sound. "I feel like we're really doing something good here." A neighbour on an upper storey enjoyed a drink on the fire escape and when he got up he slipped and fell. And he fell on the pavement and two dinosaurs fought over him and the cats watched and they saw nothing of themselves in any of them, man or beast. They played the track again, enjoying jazz top notes, and waited for the naturalist to come home.

Twin Topiary Tales

Marc Nash

Deadheading

He depressed the rocker switch. The purring susurrations started up. The hair clippers weren't in his hand though. It was too soon for that.

Apprehension of the incipient throb always set his mind a throb. So he was customarily compelled to leave them on the floor, while he modulated his own quickening pulse.

Yet the welter of tension was perennially italicised for him.

The metal tines were palpating the slip-on plastic ones of the number 1 cut. Like a hummingbird's wings, the metal couldn't be seen moving. Only the clumsy lurches of the thicker prongs cresting them.

The electric cable was twitching with pent up flux.

The body of the clippers, where the electric motor was housed, was percussing the pile of the carpet like a bull pawing the ground before a charge. And in turn the carpet was revving up the undercarriage, bearing it atop the tips of its fibres, like worker ants.

The tipping point, when friction's stranglehold is overcome, sees the cable snake and flare like a cracked bullwhip and wrenches the clippers on to their side. The timbre of the tines changes, more like an angry hive now. He picks up the trimmed shears.

His breathing hastens. No matter how much he composes and prepares, he cannot override the electrical trigger in his brain. Something to do with the resonance of physical memory. It remembers amplitudes of current. Any electrical device serves for jump leads to accelerate his heart.

He crouches there, holding the clippers in the palm of his hand, unbuttressed by any curled over fingers. He has to stay as even as possible, until he brings down the stroke of his respiration once again. The clippers oscillating against the skin of his hand. Bench pressing his flesh. He's aligning for their periodicity, so he can fall in behind their metronomic beat. The problem being his touch centres are calibrating one frequency, while his ears are secondary reporting with a fractional lag.

Finally he takes the plunge and brings the snapping piranha teeth to the sheath of his head. He has no need for a mirror, since his free hand pats down for the braille glyphs beneath. The sunken foundations of Inca temples buried beneath hair vines and knotted canopy.

The clippers carry on the deforestation apace. Threshing a bristly stubble over the entirety of his furrowed brow. Harvesting secrets.

The hand runs over the contours of his cranium. Phrenology of the self. His fingers came away smeared with the follicle cull.

Phase one complete, he extinguishes the clippers and rips the plastic gradation accessory from its prow. He rubs the tips of his fingers over the bared steel serrations. He stares at the flesh as it puffs itself back up to reclaim the pressure indentations from the blades. He rubs his thumb against the callused pad of the index finger. The blistered vesicle there never once yielded before the press of the steel. He exhales.

Laying the clippers back on the floor, once again he summons their power by tripping the seesaw switch. The surge came anew. The coiled current crescendoing, plucking at the cable like a piano hammer.

His hand hovering above the vibrato as if conducting it, he was transported back to Summer memories on the streets. With thimblerriggers, professional beggars and suitcases full of somersaulting toy dogs. Those that yapped and yapped as they built up the momentum towards a forward roll. He had always imagined it was cats that were supposed to land on their feet. That damn yapping, reverberating in his ears. Building the pressure up, tightening his pulses like a garrote. A fluffy candyfloss white Son of Sam, but a devil dog all the same. Until he took a carving knife to it, silencing it for once and for all. Heartening to report dogs don't possess nine lives. At his hearing – now there's an apt word - they conceded his argument that all human creativity stems from using objects in new ways, ways that they were not intended for originally. But where he came a cropper, where they snagged him, was when he couldn't remember whether it was blood or hair stuffing that came out of the dog that he ran metal through. That was the bone of contention, how he couldn't quite place the interiority of another of God's creatures. So much so, apparently it made him a potential danger to all bodies.

He scooped up the clippers and began once again to range over his cropped head. With so little pappus to intercede between steel and flesh, the snarling blades bit time and again. He didn't flinch.

The livid veins were welted to the skin from their buffeting. Red and blue like a road map. But the terrain of his skull had been a scorched earth once before. Threaded with desiccated worm casts and that was the point.

The clippers had harrowed their acreage and he swiftly shut the current off to end phase two. His hand was still vibrating a full seventeen seconds after the power had died.

When his hands stopped shaking, he grabbed hold of the legs of the full-length mirror and dragged it through the pile of the carpet so as to face himself. He pressed his face right into the meniscus of the glass, and his bloodshot eyes started surveying the cuts and nicks. The scabs and the scars.

Some were freshly minted, most were older vestiges. The exterior of his skull resembled a brain scan signalling hot areas of neural activity. He was turned all inside out. Which *was* exactly the point.

He brought his fingers up to each of the clotted mounds. Distending the curdled skin at the foothills, trying to determine the precise aspect. The newer ones leached viscous blood onto his fingers. The older magma chambers threatened recrudescence under the seismic tremors of his manipulations.

But each blood red cameo was carved in relief. None offered the worm hole of intaglio, that which he was chasing after. Those nodes where they had affixed the electrodes. The inlets for the cabling, the electrical conduits, through which they had convulsed electric charge into his resistant brain. To drive away the stormy black clouds they claimed resided there, forecasting his gloomy outlook.

They had wanted to let the sunshine back in, even if it was an artificial source of illumination. A wan light which just leaves him numb and huddled around himself.

Of course, now they deny having ever done anything to him at all. No invasive treatment perpetrated. But he will keep sweeping the brush clear and he will pinpoint the evidence. Of the turned-in wound. Tell-tale concavity. The needle in the coagulated haystacks, pockmarking his barren head.

He *will* bring them to account. He knows – and they must come to know – every time he flicks a switch, his whole nervous system resonates to the flow it engenders.

He moves to pick up the can of shaving foam and the triple bladed razor. At least they didn't have a pulse other than that imparted by his hand. Commencing phase three.

Snowblind

i loathe mirrors. For mirrors mirror only solitude. Be it a compact, or floor length, it makes no odds. Gaze into somebody else's eyes and see the homunculus you reflected in them staring back into yours, staring back... Peer into a mirror and such endless reflectivity is shattered by the imperfections of the glass. You stand there in three dimensions, but your imago is betrayed by its sightless eyes. Only you can determine to break off the connection. So i do all in my power to avoid mirrors.

How about when shaving? Well it's true my face abuts a looking glass then. But we never consort with the i's, for the pair of us accord no mutual acknowledgement. i cant my gaze downwards, navigating only by the razor's plough trails through the white lather. The alluvial contour lines of my face gradually disinterred from beneath a deep drift of snow. My forehead and mane mere foggy peaks in the distance. Occasionally the snow stains red. Unsure footholds where i can't trace blackheaded gradients and pitted crevasses changing the hidden lie of my unscaled face.

But eventually i clamber back down from the summit. Another descent to smoother climbs negotiated. Snowblind. A woman friend of mine says she can't imagine what it is to shave for the rest of one's life. "Neither can i" i tell her.

Death Kiss Corsage

Penny Jane Goring

Amelia had death in her eyes. And she was focused on you.

In the dimly-lit kitchen she suddenly lunged, grasped your face with both hands and snogged you, long and hard. Accepting her advance with mouth hanging slack and bloodshot eyes wide open, your sozzled thoughts were sluggish – porridge stirred in the pan. Her rolling tongue slid inside your bra and her silver thumb-ring twinkled as she thoroughly worked you over.

From that night on she pursued you relentlessly – paying homage with bottles, showing her best side, eating your burnt pea risotto, until your hand slipped off the greasy knob of control and you let her move in with you. It was a disastrous mistake.

From the top of her head, befuddled with drugs, to the tips of her barnacled toes, she was deliberately dismantling your life. You made many attempts to get rid of her and I watched patiently as you played them all out. Your favourite plan was futile, but still you dragged it out for two years... when she wasn't smacked-up to her eyeballs you poured gallons of booze down her neck.

By the time she had those ballads blasting, hands clasped beseechingly, crooning at her reflection, I was peering in from the Other Side. I felt your mind lurch as she tottered for her drink and your lips framed their usual refrain –

'It's over Amelia, my girlfriend, my addict, my anathema, my love!'

That's when she would start screeching her cruel cornucopia of lies. Hurling pint-glass missiles, she called you a fish and you cried. She yanked a hank of your hair out. It came away with a chunk of your scalp. A square inch of bleeding raw flesh glistened on top of your head. She anointed the wound with a torrent of vomit. It burnt and you formed a small ball. The vile lumpen liquid dripped down your forehead into your screwed-up eyes. Her stomach acids stung as you blinked.

'You don't know how to love me, you clucker!' she bloodcurdled in your ears.

The neighbours banged on the ceiling, fearing for your child, but Prudence was inured to your racket, she was still fast asleep – I checked. She always awoke around midnight, when they were pounding their fists at your door. By then, Amelia had tired of using your face as a punch-bag, and taking a bit of a breather, she had you in a choke-hold embrace, pinned by your throat to the floor.

Letting go of her grip now, she whimpered, as you crawled to the thundering door.

Outraged faces swaddled in fleecy bedtime comforters swam before you, their sober mouths accusing you of crimes they couldn't pronounce.

'What have you done to her?'

‘Why is she crying?’

They could hear your aggressor dissolving in an acrid puddle of fear. None of them seemed to notice your tragically rearranged boat race.

‘This ain’t a soddin’ soap opera!’ you shrieked, slamming that sturdy door as hard as you could, against their narrowed eyes.

A waft of poo hung on the air.

I murmured an ancient lullaby in Prudence’s small bed.

Phase two of your plan – at six am you shuffled to the sacred fridge, a frozen monument to total excess, jam-packed with nothing to eat, just the essential cut-price alcohol and one swollen black banana, giving off a putrid pong. Retching, then gulping your hair of the dog, you got Prudence ready for nursery. Before you left the landlady rang and screamed her final warning.

When Amelia eventually stomped from the pit, she said she was bogging sick to freaking death of the uglified sight of your polloxing face reminding her of what you’d made her do. You felt compelled to apologise. That was phase three, I think.

Disgusted with you and, perhaps, with herself, by teatime she had moved out. You were left basking blindly in the peaceful days and hours of your release, but it never lasted for long. When the intercom buzzed and it was Amelia, you always let her back in – her washing machine eyes set on rinse and drain, her 1,000 rpm encore on hold.

Yeah, the pissed-up fight plot didn’t work, just meant you had to wear ginormous sunglasses every day and keep on moving house, dodging cold stares in the communal gardens and disapproving comments in Sainsbury’s, as you stacked Pru’s pushchair with booze. Trundling down the long, leafy roads, eyes fixed on the horizon, the unhindered skyscape told you how tiny and troubled you were, your life a PVC gimp mask shrink-wrapped to your skull.

I trailed in your wake through the ankle deep mulch, willing you to try other ways.

When you hatched the arty voodoo project, I admired your inventiveness and it was a wonderful way to distract Pru, truly cathartic, but it only served to show your grasp on the real was tenuous, constant drinking and the regular beatings gradually skew-whiffing your brain.

Perched on the worktop between the microwave and Amelia’s collection of needles, (more meticulously stashed as her priorities became ever blurred), I gasped softly, enthralled, as you fashioned a life-size curse doll out of bits and bobs and sticky tape and vinegar and brown paper.

She had novelty slippers, comedy hair and peculiar Pick ‘n’ Mix lips, her bulging belly a sniffy cushion, Loopy Loo legs just a pair of old tights. Armless, charmless, a coathanger shoved down her throat (to keep her head on straight), she glared at you both with her chewing gum eyes. You had created a monster.

You slithered Amelia's pubes from the scummings round the bath and arranged them between the limp thighs. You kneaded the buttocks of white sliced bread and spat cider in the crevasse. Prudence dribbled rice pudding over Amelia's big best bra – you stuffed the cups with sopping dishcloths and fastened it to the bucket of her body.

There she sprawled: Amelia Anathema! Your home-made Millie Muck!

A desperate, wonky effigy in those rented rooms of despair.

'Now for the best bit!' you chortled, and chanting farewell ditties with some ferocious joy, you stuck, stuck, stuck her loo roll heart with forty four malevolent pins. You let Pru jab in a special six and that made fifty pricks.

Pushing the window open wide to the dark, you hoisted her up and out.

'Goodbye, rubbish lady!' you yelled with relish, cackling like a loon.

'Later, Millie, later...' Prudence chirped along with your wild refrain.

Amelia Anathema made a spectacular squiffy starfish shape in the black belly of the sky, before falling to pieces, scattering all her shoddy bits over the frosty grass below. I could see the half century of hate pins winking from her taped-on ticker and fifty years of dregs contaminating your thirsty soul.

Later that night, when she came home unscathed, still rattling her heavy, cold baggage, you were defeated, deflated, struck dumb...even I was disappointed, and Prudence seemed resigned – an awful thing to witness in one so very young.

The 'phone trilled in the unusual silence. It was yet another landlord giving you one month's notice to move out.

Frozen days set in – a bed-sit Christmas loomed. Ice lay down hard and dogged your moves but you never gave up scheming. It was a giant stride forwards when you took the 'S' from curse and decided to call it a cure.

Convincing Amelia she was sicker than you was easier than you'd imagined. With ardent promises of a clean, serene future, you got her into a rehab. You made sure it was a six-month, Twelve Step, regimented type in Weston-super-Nightmare, which meant Prudence could ride a donkey on the beach if you ever risked a visit.

Missing Amelia's shaggy, feral presence, you took Prudence to the pet shop and bought a hairy dog. He was loving and licky and better behaved – you didn't care when he gnawed the furniture – and at last, Prudence had a best friend.

Finding money for drink was easier now you were only buying for one. The fridge wobbled with bottles of bulk buy white wine, litres of vodka lay snug in the freezer and there were mixers left over for Pru. Cutting out the dirt cheap booze stopped your liver kicking so hard but the blackouts came out of the blue. Prudence became your oblivion detective, helping you suss out what went on. How did you knock out your front teeth? Who came round last night? I never dropped any clues.

Meanwhile, Amelia survived her ten-day detox, and the drudgery of Steps 1, 2 and 3, but after thirteen clean weeks they chucked her out. She got caught smooching with some crack head bird behind the tea urn at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. She had broken the 'No Fraternizing' rule, which was, of all the very many brutally enforced rules (always sit your coffee cup on a coaster, don't wear your slippers in the dining-room, never cry out in your sleep), written on high in gilded Gothic and polished daily by shaky, recovering hands.

The counsellors called an emergency group where grim warnings were issued to all. Then they hand-picked a dry-drunk delegation who gleefully marched Amelia straight to the station. Tucking a photocopy of the Serenity Prayer in her hastily packed bag, they shoved her on the first fast train back to London, back to the gloom of their constantly invoked: chaos, depravity and doom. Out There.

She rang you from the train. She rang you from Piccadilly. When she rang from your dodgiest local, slurring about scoring a ten bag, you told her to get herself home. Putting the 'phone down, it dawned on you... Clean for three long months? Rat-arsed? On her way round for a fix? The mutant peach of your sour love was about to fly face first into the killing hammer of an OD. The cure was about to implode. You lost your bottle, grabbed Pru by the soft of her hand and bolted for the street. Dumping her at your mum's, you went on a six-day bender, avoiding the flat at all costs.

Nowadays, you stand alone in cold playgrounds. You are a totem of grief. I shift restlessly at your numbed feet and Amelia hovers at your shoulder. You will never forget what was waiting for you when you plucked up the guts to return.

She lay stiff and still on the sepulchral sofa – a waxwork junkie at rest, but as you crept closer the horror bit hard – she didn't have a face.

Amelia's head was a gruesome chew toy, clogged with the remains of her ruined features, veiled by her slimy hair, lolling at an impossible angle. She had no lips or a tongue, not even her two dead eyes. All that was left was a gory maw with a lopsided leer on a pedestal of gristle.

The dog you'd never bothered to name, slobbered your fingers and thrust his wet nose, probing your nether regions, tail thwacking, barking madly, as you slipped on the slops of his best ever meal, and crashed to your boney knees, demented and howling beside her.

They won't let you have Prudence back – you're completely off the rails. And no matter how much you drink, where you go, who you talk to, what you try not to think, Amelia is with you for as long as you live.

Her shadow is roving your walls, her fiery soles are scorching the carpet, neon flashing from her eye sockets slices the gloomy bedroom. She's parting your musty curtains, brushing against your damp blankets, she's entwined in your gusset, has her hand in your pocket, her knee between your thighs, she's lispng the old porky-pies in your shell-like – now she's getting frisky.

She's nibbling your lobes, fingering your globes, tweaking your nips, grazing your hips, asking if you fancy a role-play. What's she doing with her hands? She's itching, twitching, stroking, scratching, praying, marking time – rubbing the days on your slick old bean, inching

you to the clincher. You cry leaden pellets and there is no relief and no such thing as respite. Her doggy-mauled head bleeds on your breasts every night, and her needle pokes deep in your petrified hole, as you sweat buckets of booze on the sheets.

This morning you faced me for the first time and begged me to help you escape. Clutching me to your heart like a death kiss corsage, together we made our pact.

There will be no flowers, you shall have butterflies, in all those colours you wore – bruised blue, blooded red, bright jaundiced yellow and tender, aching green... a rainbow of butterflies.

They'll flutter their way down the apples and pears, in The Nag's Head, out The White Swan, up the roiling river in a pulsating host, all the way to Greenwich – the home of time – where you will be lounging on methadone clouds, eating valium and strawberries, wearing black wings three feet high with so many feathers and ribbons.

I can hear canned laughter and scattered applause, a piano plinking from posh, plushy rooms, ice chinking in polite crystal glasses – they've all turned up for your wake.

SKIN BOOK

Dan Holloway

Tonight I felt your eyes

on my skin

like they're wet lips sucking the sweat off me. I sat at the bar with a mojito, thinking it's winter and there's still the hot nylon scratch of cheap clothing

on my skin.

I felt the drink go sour in my throat; I pissed it down the shitpan, and scrubbed away the stench but the soap smelled worse

on my skin

so I stuffed garlic butter chicken down my throat that fucked with the mojito in my belly and squeezed out rancid pustules that sat like oily islands

on my skin

and walked out, pushing my shoe against the crease of your trouser leg as I passed you at the table by the door. I sat in the car and replayed the sound of the cloth and thought the mucus in my mother's gut was the last time I felt another person

on my skin

and I saw Jon leaning still against the sideboard, and the lilt of his words, the gentle patter, the casual way he told me what he wanted, and how cold the metal, and how hot the liquid, and how the mucus in my mother's gut was the last time I felt another living person

on my skin.

Driving home I wondered, is it wrong to want your snot-piss-shit-come-vomit

on my skin?

The cotton sheets stroke, suck, soothe and I lie down and count, 32 years, 32 marks in the front of my SKIN BOOK, and maybe when I'm 80, a life and a half from now, maybe when I'm 80 I'll lose my mind and take off the sweat-fuck plastic scratch pants and see what it's like to have the sun

on my skin

but now I'd like to take your snot-piss-shit-come-vomit, filtered through the nylon mesh, and spread it

on my skin

and tell my SKIN BOOK how you feel.

*

You said

“When I was a child I prayed to God for cancer every night, for the doctor to tell my parents ‘your son’s dying’ and them to notice they had a son. But I turned 18 and I’d never even had the flu so God and I went our separate ways.”

I said

“How does it feel to be invisible? I bet the freedom makes you kinda drunk.”

And you said

“Sometimes I ride the subway all day and no one sees me; I’ll walk the carriage and see a pair of tits and hang them in the tit gallery in my head. I look through the cloth and between the buttons and where the edge of the fabric comes loose from the skin and I trace the curve of the tits, and the pert, plump fullness of the tits and the sleek pointed skin tapering the tits to the nipples; and I go home and walk all night through the rooms of my tit gallery and I come and the voice says come on my tits and fingers touch and we come together in the tit gallery in my head.”

And I said

“Do YOU ever touch?”

You said

“I’m not some kind of fucking pervert”

And I said

“You’re exactly some kind of fucking pervert”

And you said

“So why do you hang out with me?”

I said

“You’re my fuck crush”

And you said

“I don’t wanna fuck”

And I said

“I can’t fuck”

And spent the night taking pictures on my cell phone and the day pasting them into my SKIN BOOK.

*

I was

12

and he said I want to touch, just once, that’s all, my skin on yours, and I said I don’t want you to touch and he said I want to touch and I said you’re not listening. He said I want to touch there and I want to touch there where the skin feels different, and carry the memory on my fingers and put it where my skin feels different and I said I don’t want you to touch.

12

times the eyelids opened in my head and bile and lust and fear pushed the eyelids open on my face and sent me to my desk to open my SKIN BOOK and make the choice: I will not die today. I will not die before this page is full. I’m 37 and there are

12

full pages in my SKIN BOOK. I carry their memory in my fingers, and I put my fingers on my skin and touch and it feels different from my SKIN BOOK. I think how he felt, and how he feels, and close my eyes and stop my ears and know the difference between them is the breath and the heartbeat and the stench of pheromone that makes one of them alive. It’s

12

O’clock and I open my eyes and think, I will not die today.

I was

12

when he said fuck me and I said yes fuck you, and wrote on the first page of my SKIN BOOK, tomorrow I’ll be

13.

*

I open the page and the chat bar’s

blank.

The greyed-out dot fuzzes in my greyed-out head. Are you there? I type and my finger hovers over send. The pressure of the splinter on my shin, the sour blood, the throb throb pulse remind me not to ask. Are you there? Tracing, tracking, trapping her in your head, pinning and pressing her for later. Her

blank

eyes fail to notice yours spreading her shirt. Her dumb passive fuck-yeah-that's-right-there-harder-harder-yes skin hangs from her body, sits, limp, waits for another morning and another till the last, and sweaty stenching takes the toecaps and the fists, the fingers, come and piss, the eyes, the tongues, the whispers, the leering, beer and bliss, the

blank

stare of a stranger at the table by the door. Are you there? I know the sound exactly, its pitch its timbre, its tone. I know the sound rubber, scuffed and broken, the gravel stuck between two treads, the click-clank-echo of your shoes in each room of the tit gallery in your head. I know the height, the depth, the doorways, the spacing of each portrait, each length of pace, each length of stare. I know the moment your skin slips on your skin, slides, pummels, fights, rips and sighs, the angle of your head as you turn to go, fixing on the

blank

spaces between each portrait. You suck the skin from my flesh as you leave, to cloak you in the ice-stab-sting of your mind. Are you there? My slashed leg screams and I drive my knuckles on the broken wood, slam, slam slam, till they scream back and slam the keys and the letters scab the screen one by one through the pain, and fibres peeling, pus sluicing, bone fighting wood fighting bone, letters sicked up from the scream, and my finger presses down and the screen goes

blank.

*

My whole body's cold on the cotton save the 6 inch towelling band binding the gash in my leg. I pull my SKIN BOOK close, press my fingers on the warm blank page, let it breathe into me, and write, Imagine a house with

2

people.

2

faces lit through one window

2

cups with coffee the same luke warm

2

sets of fingerprints on the handle of the bedroom door

2

fobs of identical keys

2

skins losing heat in every room

2

greasy plates left on the sideboard overnight

2

sets of footprints in January snow

2

voices breaking the stillness

2

mouths breathing the first cigarette smoke of the day

2

pairs of eyes exploring the darkness in the night

2

knives on the table

2

razor blades on the bathroom sink

2

pairs of hands

2

sighs

2

screams

2

cuts

2

bloods

2

screams

2

hands

2

hands

2

touch-scabs

2.

I close my SKIN BOOK and the pages fall back open. My SKIN BOOK breathes through my fingers, through my sourblood to my head, whispers a membrane-throb, a house with

2

people.

*

Are you there? The chat bar pings and I

echo

I'm here. I was there you say. I

echo

so was I. You were at the bar you say. Your black skirt scratched your thighs. The nylon made your skin hot and through your top I followed the sweat-carved valleys in the fine hair on the small of your back. I say I felt your eyes. You see but never touch. You see across the room, through clothes, I wonder if you see through skin. You

echo

yeah, I see. I see the ice withdrawn, the skin left warm, almost alive, almost breathing, bereft of the absolute zero inside. I say you can talk and you

echo

yeah, I can talk. I say have you always been like this and you say like what and I say like this semi-human tundra watching hunter and you say oh like that and I

echo

yeah, like that. The silence-shrug fucks my head and I say well have you and you say I guess, have you? And I say yeah. Always. I say I had a twin. I had a twin you

echo

I say he died and you

echo

yeah, she died. I say I have to go and you say so do I, and the screen goes black and I open my SKIN BOOK and I write I had a twin, he died, and my fingers feel the

echo

*

We met in a forum. Some trashbitch squealed I like to

feel

it ram hard, long, fist sharp thick, ah, and some chintz-dress slut-fuck sighed no I like to

feel

hands on the pores of my skin like summer sky meadows, breeze on my breasts, soft, ah, slide, gliding hands. I said how does it

feel?

and trashbitch said like fuckin' A and chintz-slut said like heaven and I said no I don't mean that and you said I don't know. I said to be touched, to

feel

another person's skin on yours and you said I don't know. I said not ever and you said once. There was one once and it was warm and tight like plastic stretched and pushed against my fingers and it pressed and squirmed and forced the blood back from my skin, stuffed it up my throat, and blood and bile and sweat-piss-come and I could

feel

myself empty and it was flat flaccid cold and I couldn't

feel

the tits on my fingers. Trashbitch said I

feel

like I'm gonna retch and chintz-slut said I

feel

your pain and I said I want to

feel

you on my skin and you said you never will and I said I know I never will and ran my fingers
on my SKIN BOOK and thought would it

feel

different if my SKIN BOOK was alive?

*

You say I want to wear you like the skin stretched on my cheekbones. I say no you don't, you
want to hang me

in your head

and drape me in mourning-cloth like some fucking icon or a dead pet or any other pair of tits
you hide to excite-guilt-dare-fear-make your slave. You say those are goldfish delusions
swimming

in your head

so I say why don't you and you say I can't touch and I say you won't touch and you say I
can't and down the ether, quantum, fibreoptic forearm fire lines I hear the endless loop I
can't and type you won't and hit return and hit and hit to fight fist fuck the echo

in your head.

you caps GET OUT and I caps back I'M NOT IN, and you say I want to wrap my tongue on
the rancid memories

in your head

to lick the mucus pain, the sicked-on synapse rage, to grasp, claw, seize, suck the stenching gouting gash until you have no past at all, and I say I have no past. My past is just the white trash torture porn poster girl

in your head.

*

Can we

forget

yesterday, the cloth brushing cloth, the putrid glabrous disappointment, the nearly skin, the images and visions, the dreams, the nightmares, the nothing? Can we

forget

the anticipation, the masturbating messaging, the playing and positioning, the wheeling wheedling insinuating, the worming squirming words, the finger falls on type pads, on tight recalcitrant plastic flesh, the indeterminate intermediate semi-something since we met? Can we

forget

the syntax and the sentences, unravel them one by one, peel them from our memory, peel them from my SKIN BOOK, letters unglued unanchored on the floor? Can we breathe backwards, suck in the recycled breath, swallow, digest, and shit it out? Can we

forget

the cold, the sharp, the tight metal feel, the warmth gone cold, the anger and exhilaration and the days, the weeks, the years of skinless grey; the tit galleries, the splinter-fuck dark wet decades? Can we

forget

the sounds, the rip, the wrench, the moans and screams, the night-breath whimpered sobs, the fact that we were born? My finger hovers, moves, slides across my SKIN BOOK, touches, smooths, caresses the folds like fuck-letter Braille, presses, hard, plastic, returns, slides, tightens, clenches, forms the letters in the air, can we

forget?

*

You stand in the porch with a bag on your shoulder and I say come in and you do. I say follow me upstairs and you do. You follow me down the darkness, through the doors, and sit on the cold cotton untouched sheets. I sit and say your voice sounds how I thought it would and you say so does yours, and I say look, and you say at what and you hold your eyes level with mine and make yourself not look, and I reach beneath the pillow and pull out my

SKIN BOOK

and you say, show me and I take your sleeve and place your hand on my

SKIN BOOK

and say I want you to touch there. Your eyes close and I say look and you say I'm looking
and through the cloth I place your hand on the photographs in my

SKIN BOOK

and say look and your eyes are closed and I feel your footsteps in the sweep-vault hallways of
the tit gallery in my head and your gaze scrapes the inside of my skull. Your eyes stay closed
and I close mine too and there's something in my hand, skin cold on the cold skin of my
fingers and I say what's that and you say it's my

SKIN BOOK

Candles

Simon Betterton

As he fired into life the little nightlight looked up to the two candles standing tall on either side of him. He instinctively knew that they were his parents.

His father – broad, angular, strong. A steady flame, softly illuminating all around him, revealing his calm, proud nature. A gentle giant, thought the young nightlight, immediately admiring him.

His mother – tall, sleek, elegant. Her own flame, more susceptible to the capricious whims of the breeze, casting flickering shadows on the walls, reflecting a more sensitive and excitable character.

The nightlight suddenly felt a strong surge of love for these two fiery guardians and his flame burnt just that little bit brighter for it.

As all children, deep down he also knew that one day he would grow up to be like his parents, but who would he more closely resemble? Would he be big, strong and robust as his father was? With his four right angled shoulders imposing themselves on the glow around. Or would he be tall and slim and unpredictably fiery like his mum? Provoking energetic shadows to dance on the nearby surfaces. Either way he would be happy, he decided. He was proud of them both and he hoped that they were proud of him.

Then in a moment things changed and it was the tear that did it. He had been gazing up at his parents for what seemed like a lifetime (in fact it was his lifetime) when he saw a solitary waxen tear slowly roll down his mother's side. His mother was sad! But why? Life had seemed so calm and positive until that moment but now a first doubt invaded his existence.

He looked across to his dad for assurance but did not find it. His father seemed to have lost strength between those square shoulders, as if he was starting to fade, no, more like melt, away. It was not a concept that the little nightlight could deal with. The only two beings in his life had suddenly both shown their vulnerability and the young candle's first fears began to grow.

He looked back to his mum to see her shedding more tears that slid slowly down her body and settled at her foot. She, like his father, seemed to be losing the qualities that he had admired just a short while earlier. He was sure that she was less tall and elegant than when he had first looked up to her.

Slowly but inexorably, the happiness of his newborn existence was overwhelmed by the sombre realities of a candle's life, and he now knew that his first dream, to be like his parents, would be fulfilled in the most desperate of situations. He would not grow up to be like them. Rather they would grow ever weaker and smaller, maintaining less and less of those admirable attributes that he had seen in them on flaming into life, until they joined him in his lowly insignificance.

Now he knew why his mother wept.

Basking in Conformity: The Slave

Jenn Topper

They paraded through the breakfast room one after the next, like automatons with their uniforms on, but with a slight swagger in their steps. Harrumphing through their eggs and freshly squeezed Florida orange juice, back-slapping and guzzling away at what appeared to be their last meal ever, they all looked, sounded, and acted like they were auditioning for the same role. They sped out to the golf course together in their speeding carts, the piss-bottles hanging from a nifty rack across the back. Men basking in conformity and oh-so-pleased with themselves for fitting in so perfectly well.

I see you every morning in this room and you are all the same. You make no eye contact. Our interaction is as personal as if you entered your breakfast order into a machine. I am not a machine.

You elevate your voice when you speak to me, as if my accented English indicates I am hard of hearing. That you do not even look at me to bark your orders doesn't help clarify the communication. I can understand what you are saying even when you whisper to your buddies at the table. I can hear you when you quietly comment about my ass. And I can also hear you when you not-so-quietly comment about my tits.

That you don't say thank-you when I fill your coffee cup doesn't phase me. That you can't look at me when I'm pouring it makes interacting with you enormously difficult. You only look at me when you or your friends make a joke out of pronouncing my name, when you finally decide collectively that it is ok to mark me as your target. It is not a hard name to pronounce in English, so it's woefully insulting when you deliberately mispronounce it in a sorry attempt at denigration. You are actually proud that your names are all monosyllabic. Mike, Tom, Bill, Bob, Ted, Phil, Jon, Rich, Jim, and Steve. What a phenomenon, that you masters of the golf club feign ignorance in the name of group laughter. I am not hurt; you embarrass yourselves more than you know.

I sweep the golf cart path as you whiz by. I manicure the landscaping so it's easy on your eyes. You don't speak to me even when I stop the hose so you can walk by unencumbered by the sprinkle.

I watch you cheat all throughout your golf game. You cheat with each other, you cheat behind each other's backs. You lie. You get frustrated and angry and behave like impetuous children. You laugh, you joke, you back-slap and clap. You compete fiercely. You look at one another for approval after making a joke, nasty comment or brutal attack. You are shameless in your treatment of one another. You complain about your wives, not uncommon or terribly mean. But then you use it as an excuse to gloat about your affairs, and the adulation you received at the strip club last night...as if you didn't pay for it.

You return to the hotel from your steak dinners, after multiple mojitos or whiskeys, and you don't even tip me for helping you out of the car and into your room. You don't say thank you or come seek me out the next day to apologize for slobbering all over me. You throw up all over your room. I clean your puke while you are still passed out on the bed, naked, bloated, and stinking. You see me the next morning and give no nod of acknowledgement; you don't even hang your head in shame. You are shamless, when you are with your pack. You are arrogant and frightened, like an animal cornered by shotguns, when you are alone.

It's another day of pouring coffee, cleaning half-eaten buffet plates into the trash. It's another glorious, beautiful, palm-strewn day with you clamoring for attention from your client or boss, hoping you don't stand out too much, safely suited in your uniforms. You are afraid of being different. You are terrified of thinking differently or saying something unexpected, so you don't converse with me even when we make eye contact inadvertently.

You will not look at me. So I stare at you, steering my gaze to penetrate your false armor. I lean over you and reach to deliver your egg white omelet and touch your shoulder with my chest. My perfume lingers on you for hours. You want to fuck me. You excuse yourself to the men's room to ejaculate. You imagine me, voluptuous, sensual, brown-skinned Latina with thick lips and dark eyes, on my hands and knees looking back at you. You have me positioned like you've never had your wife. You own me.

I am on my hands and knees to scrub your floor.

Sunlight spangled off windows. As far as the eye could see, cars stretched out toward the skyline, nestled between strings of traffic lights like a tessellation. Chloe squinted toward the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building trying to figure out which was which. Then the signal changed. She crossed Northern Boulevard and walked up Broadway.

When she found Steinway, she felt accomplished. As she walked, the smell of roasting nuts converged with the more uncomfortable smells cooking on the pavement. Chloe turned into a shop for the sake of air conditioning, browsed through bins of discount high heels, and thought of her roommates. It was only a week until classes began and she still hadn't met them. She knew only that their names were Bisma and Naina. In all her years in Missouri, she had never met a Bisma or a Naina.

On the way home, she passed a bar with a shamrock over the door. She almost went in, but decided against it. She didn't trust herself to find her apartment while drunk.

The humidity of the day gathered itself into clouds. The evening light filtering through them had turned slightly pink. Bricks and blocks seemed to be glowing. Distant thunder crumbled in the sky. The Long Island train rasped across the tracks overhead. The sound of it rinsed through the Punjab hip-hop that was playing in Discount Dollar Mania.

The first drops of rain stumbled down Chloe's hair just as she was punching in the code outside her building. The door beeped. She pushed it open. But she lingered for just a few seconds. She tilted her head up toward the raindrops and let them shimmer down her face.

Going up the stairs, she could smell the lives around her. Something spicy was cooking on the first floor. The fire door wafted shut behind her. The second floor smelled of beer and bicycle tires. Then she came to the third floor. Every time she entered, she indulged a fantasy where this was her apartment.

In her head, her friends were dropping by for dinner or drinks, they were arriving early on Sunday mornings for hangover breakfasts. They were coming in for study time and gossip. In this fantasy, the place was always clean and there was always good music playing. People were surreptitiously impressed by her tastes and comforted by the bookshelves. She saw herself sitting at that kitchen table by the window, latte by her side, typing up important papers to a soundtrack of Bach and traffic. Like a convent, but with boys and alcohol.

She made a cup of coffee and played a CD of Bach's cello suites, but she didn't read. She placed her sketchpad in front of her, but she didn't draw either. She just sat near the window and absorbed the mood of the rain. The city sighed outside.

A sound like laughing or arguing could be heard germinating in the stairwell. Voices rose under the stampede of shoe soles on stairs. Then there was a thud in the hallway, the sound of a key jiggling in the latch. Chloe sat up.

The door pushed open, unleashing that voice in the room. “Yeah thanks,” it was saying. “I’ll just get the heavy stuff. Why don’t you guys just relax here?”

“Are you sure, Bisma? I mean, if you insist,” a male voice answered.

Then they stepped over the threshold, one guy in a baseball cap, and two girls, one of whom was pushing a box through the door. The girl pushing the box was dressed normally enough in jeans and a red t-shirt, but the other girl was braving the heat with a long-sleeved dress over her jeans and a bright green scarf covering her hair. Chloe experienced a second delay at registering this scarf. This girl had it pinned under her chin like a babushka doll. Then the connection clicked. The Middle East. Of course. Religion.

This girl under the scarf clocked Chloe just then and said, “Hi.” She very generously gave the word two syllables.

“Hi. I’m Chloe.”

Chloe jumped to her feet.

“Oh,” said the girl, putting down the box she was carrying, wiping her hands on her dress and coming over to shake Chloe’s hand. “I’m Naina. That’s Bisma.”

“Hi.”

“And that’s Bisma’s brother, Aziz.”

“Yo.”

Aziz winked and gestured toward her when he said it. His skinny body seemed to dangle from under his Met’s baseball cap. Evidently, he was trying to compensate with baggy clothes and sparse tufts of facial hair.

“Do you guys have a lot of stuff? I’ll help carry it up,” said Chloe.

“Perfect,” said Aziz, throwing himself down on the couch and folding his arms behind his head.

“Get up, lazy,” said Bisma.

#

Walking toward Steinway with Bisma and Naina one day, Chloe came upon a huge mural on the side of a building. A kind of writing she couldn’t read floated over a spray painted image of what looked like a disco-colored Taj Mahal.

“What is that?” she asked.

Bisma said, “It’s an ad for the car repair place.”

“Oh.”

On Steinway, the girls tried on clothes and sprayed each other with perfume testers in the various shops. Then they came to the bar with shamrock over the door. Bisma looked at Chloe and they both nodded.

“No!” shrieked Naina.

Bisma and Chloe burst into giggles and dragged her in.

Bisma knew everyone in the place. She ordered a pitcher of beer for herself and Chloe and a Coke for Naina. Halfway through the pitcher, Chloe could feel the beer and ordered another one.

“I’m so glad I’m out of Missouri,” said Chloe aside to Bisma.

“Yeah, what’s it like there?”

“My friends, I love them, but I have to act a certain way around them. Like if I told them I was worried about global warming, they would think I was a total communist. People in my town wear cowboy boots out to nice restaurants.”

“Seriously? That’s rough.”

“Yeah. I totally just lie and tell them I vote republican because it makes my life easier,” said Chloe, fighting not to spill as she poured the last of the pitcher into her plastic cup.

“Ha. I don’t think I could cope living in the middle of nowhere. Although, I get what you’re saying because I have to do a whole song and dance for my family. You see what I’m wearing now? I couldn’t wear this if my aunties and uncles were coming over.”

“Really? What’s wrong with it? You’re not even showing any skin.”

“But I am.”

“She is,” said Naina, motioning over Bisma’s bare arms. “And even though my boots go up to my knees and my skirt falls below them, this would be too much for them to handle.”

“That’s crazy!” said Chloe.

#

Chloe stepped off the 7. The doors gasped shut behind her. She stepped down to street level.

She had been taking note of the graffiti around the city. Manhattan produced photo quality pictures. Brooklyn favored stenciling, which Chloe thought was graffiti with pretensions to art. Or maybe it was art with pretensions to graffiti.

Queens had a more old school style. The sidewalk was glazed with foot traffic, the murals deepening in the afternoon sun. On days like this, Chloe could be a mop, soaking up impressions and slopping them against canvas. She could feel the mood on her. Go home. Paint.

As she climbed up the stairs to the apartment, she readied her key, but she didn't need it. The door was resting on the latch. Voices were coming from inside.

"Ahhh!" said Bisma as Chloe crossed the threshold, "I got the part!"

Naina was at the stove, stirring some food. She was wearing an electric blue hijab today. Two boys sat on the couch next to Aziz. Another girl in a gray hijab sat at the kitchen table with her back straight and her hands folded in her lap.

"What part?" said Chloe, throwing her backpack through the door of her room before returning to the living room. "In The Vagina Monologues. I got one of the monologues."

"Oh god," said Aziz, gripping his nose between two fingers.

"Cool," said Chloe.

"Bisma, you are such a slut!" said another boy.

At this Bisma, stepped forward with a stream of Urdu and whacked him with a plastic spatula.

"Seriously, I am so embarrassed," said Aziz.

"What's The Vagina Monologues?" said Chloe, sitting down at the table.

She recognized the two boys from other visits to the apartment, but couldn't come up with their names. She hadn't yet met the girl sitting across from her, though.

"It's a play. It's just like this whole feminist thing about loving your vagina and empowering women," said Bisma.

The other girl in the hijab flinched when the word "vagina" was used.

"Don't think we have that back in Missouri."

"No. We don't have that in Egypt either," said the girl.

Chloe noticed that this girl's hijab was of a different style than Naina's. While Naina's hijab was pinned under her chin and fell over her shoulders, this new girl had one that covered her neck, but was somehow folded so it didn't flare out like a tent.

"So you're friends with them?"

"Yes. We're all in the Muslim Student Association. You're the new roommate?" replied the girl.

Whatever she had said about Egypt, her accent betrayed none of it. "

You guys are so square," said Bisma.

“No, Bisma, you are just insane.”

This came from Naina at the stove.

“I can’t believe you’re going to get up and talk about your who-knows-what in front of everybody.”

“I’m not going to be talking about my vagina, I’m going to be a character, speaking to everyone’s vaginas.”

“Chloe,” said Chloe, forking her hand across the table.

“Aisha.”

She reached timidly for Chloe’s hand. Chloe drew comparisons between Aisha and Naina. Naina always wore loose fitting pants with a long shirt or dress, while Aisha’s clothes were fitted and looked expensive. Yet even though they were fitted, they somehow seemed more modest than Naina’s, perhaps because they were plainer and less colorful or something. Chloe wondered if these were distinctions of sect or nationality or just personal taste.

“Uh huh,” said Naina.

“You just don’t get it,” said Bisma.

“Whatever,” said Aziz, “Can we please stop talking about your who-ha now?”

“Shut up,” said Bisma.

“Who’s hungry?” said Naina, shoveling food from the pan onto a plate.

“It smells lovely,” said Aisha.

“Just bring it all over here,” said one of Aziz’s friends.

Chloe wrung her memory for his name. Was it Saif or something? And the other friend, the quiet one in the button-up shirt, she couldn’t remember his name either though she had met both of them over the weekend when they had come to watch a movie. What the hell was his name?

“Rashid gets the first plate because it’s his birthday,” said Naina.

Bisma handed him the food.

Aziz went to the counter and started setting out plastic cups.

“Do you have any Coke?” he asked, examining the bottle of Pepsi before him.

“Coke supports Israel,” said Aisha.

“No Pepsi supports Israel,” said Aziz.

“I believe Coke has ties to Israel,” said Rashid.

“No, it’s Pepsi,” said Saif.

“Ok guys, whatever. I’ll get Sam’s Club next time. Just drink the damn Pepsi for now,” said Bisma, distributing more plates of food around.

Aziz took a sip of the Pepsi then said, “Ahhh. The refreshing taste of genocide against the Palestinians.”

“Oh shut up,” said Bisma, “Always so dramatic.”

She handed Chloe a plate. Chloe looked at it and had no idea what it was, but resolved to eat it. She watched Aisha delicately gathering the food with some naan and tried to follow her lead, despite lacking Aisha’s grace. It didn’t matter much. Aziz was shoveling it down. Inspired, Chloe took a nice big bite. Her mouth burned. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe.

Bisma laughed. She poured a glass of milk for Chloe and set it in front of her.

“Thanks,” croaked Chloe, “It’s good.”

“Don’t worry, country girl. We’ll make a Desi out of you yet.”

Country girl. That would never do.

“Oh, speaking of which,” said Saif through a mouthful of curry. He rummaged around his backpack and held up a movie. “I found American Desi.”

“Just for you, Bisma. Because you are like a Muslim Kal Penn,” said Rashid, making a rare stab at humor.

“Uh oh!” said Aziz.

“Put it on now,” said Naina.

Saif got down on his knees and slipped the movie into the VCR. Chloe had some idea what to expect as they had watched two Bollywood movies over the weekend. At first she had been confused. “How did they get to Egypt?” she had asked.

“They’re not in Egypt,” Saif had said.

“That’s definitely Egypt,” replied Chloe.

“Egypt is like a metaphor for their love,” said Bisma.

“They’re dancing around the pyramids because it’s a metaphor? So they’re really doing the grown up in this scene?”

“No. They’re looking into each other’s eyes and seeing the possibilities of love. Egypt is symbolic of their love,” said Bisma.

“Weird,” was all Chloe could say to that.

My love for you is like Egypt. No. It didn't work. It really was just weird. Weird verging on camp.

By the second movie, Chloe had been more prepared.

“Who is the guy on the motorcycle and why is he wearing a pink shirt?” Chloe had asked.

“It's salmon,” said Aziz.

Naina said, “He's the heart throb.”

“So when do they realize he's gay?” said Chloe.

“Yo don't be hating on him because he's wearing a pink shirt,” said Saif, “He's secure in his masculinity.”

“Nothing says manly like a pink tank top,” added Aziz, “I have a lots of them in my closet.”

“You'll have to rock one for us next time you come over,” said Bisma.

“I will,” said Aziz, “Next time you see me, I'll be wearing one. Maybe the sparkly one with the spaghetti straps?”

“Oh I love that one,” said Saif with a fake lisp.

“Yeah. You do that,” said Naina.

“I will,” Aziz had said.

Now Chloe decided to watch this movie without asking any stupid questions.

“Purva's not married yet, Aziz. Maybe you should get in there,” said Saif.

“Yo, if Purva was pork, I would eat her,” Aziz informed them.

“You're both so sad,” said Naina.

Chloe turned in the direction of the television as American Desi started. She had vague thoughts about doing homework, getting ahead on the reading or sketching, but she quenched them. She was learning something here.

#

There was a knock at the door. Chloe rolled over. The knock came again.

“Chloe?” said Naina, opening the door a crack and peeking in.

Chloe sat up and tried to think.

“I think you should come out here.”

There was edge to Naina’s voice that told Chloe not to argue. She walked into the living room where Bisma was staring at the television.

“Oh my god. What’s going on?” said Chloe.

“A plane hit the World Trade Center,” said Bisma.

“Was it an accident?”

“No.”

They were still standing there when the second tower was hit. Panic emanated out from the television, licking their faces with its flickering glow and all three girls stood before it like fish fighting for breath. The South tower collapsed. Naina gasped. Bisma bit her fist.

“Oh my god,” said Chloe.

“Allah,” said Bisma, “Please tell me that Muslims didn’t do this. Please.”

The news anchor said that the city’s bridges and tunnels were closed down because they could be targets, but streams of people were walking over the Brooklyn Bridge or walking uptown or just walking out of the city. Subways were evacuated through the tunnels. Planes were being stopped from taking off from or landing in the country.

“Are we at war?” asked Bisma.

“Oh my god,” said Chloe.

“Please, I hope not,” said Naina.

Chloe picked up the phone, but there was nothing but static in place of the dial tone. Bisma rang her mother on her cell phone and then handed it off to Chloe and Naina in turn. As Naina rang her family and Bisma stood staring through the television, Chloe paced the floor.

When Chloe could take it no more, she and Bisma went for a walk. They walked up to Northern Boulevard to the parking lot on the roof of the shopping center. There was already a crowd when they got there just staring across the river where pillars of smoke rose up from the gap in the skyline.

“When I was kid, these people tried to bomb one of those buildings by driving a truck full of explosives into the garage in the basement. We were driving through the city to my uncle’s, and because the power was out in the building and the sky was so black, it looked like the building had disappeared.”

Chloe looked at Bisma.

“It’s so weird that I remember that so vividly. It was like a sign or something,” said Bisma.

Or foreshadowing, thought Chloe.

Everything shut down. The first night, nobody slept. They stayed up in front of the television. The television showed the planes flying into the towers over and over again. They waited for news, but mostly they waited for an explanation. The next night, Chloe woke up with jolt. The Long Island train was clattering away outside the window. She went to the living room and found Naina and Bisma, the TV glow washing over them, making them look like mermaids beached on the couch.

“Can’t sleep?” asked Chloe.

She slipped onto the couch next to Bisma, who loosened some blanket and covered her with it.

On the third day it rained. People clutched photos of the missing to their chests. Nobody could tell them that there would be no more survivors. Outside the Armory, the missing looked out from posters. The city had ordered so many body bags that they were piled up outside the hospitals. They hadn’t realized that they wouldn’t be finding bodies. Just pieces.

Chloe lived on a pendulum, swinging from the television where she waited for an answer to her room where she painted a fury. In her paintings, faces looked out from subway tunnels. She knew even as she painted these things that these pictures had no value. They were reactions. She had to get them out of her system. When they were finished, she would put them in a black bag and slide them under her bed.

On the fourth day, Rashid answered a knock on his door and found himself facing two masked men wearing matching “Bin Laden Sucks” t-shirts.

“Please,” he said, holding out his hands and stepping back.

A baseball bat smashed into his face.

#

Classes started again, but they didn’t quite resume. In each class, people talked about what had happened.

“I mean, is this a war? What is this?” asked a girl in Chloe’s history class.

Chloe spotted Naina walking toward the subway and ran to catch up with her.

“Done for the day?”

“Yeah. You?”

“My last class was canceled,” lied Chloe.

When they walked into the apartment, it was packed. Bisma, Rashid, Aziz, Saif and various members of the Muslim Student Association were strewn about the living room.

“Oh,” said Naina, a note of surprise quivering on the one syllable, and then “Hi!”

All eyes turned toward them. A rainbow of faces fanned out, some of them with eyes that looked almost Chinese, others with the golden brown skin tones of India, or the fair skin and hooked noses of Arabia. There was even one black member of the MSA and a two Europeans seated on the floor.

“Naina,” said Bisma from the kitchen. “We have to talk.”

Bisma was pouring something out of the blender and into plastic cups.

“OK?”

Rashid stood and offered his place on the couch. His arm was in a sling and his nose seemed taped to his face. Both his eyes were black. But he was standing. Naina accepted his seat. Chloe went into the kitchen and hopped up on the empty space on the counter. Bisma handed her a plastic cup and then began handing out cups to other people.

“OK. We’re all here. We all know what we have to talk about. What happened on September 11th happened to all of us. And it’s still happening to us. It’s not going to go away,” Rashid began.

The formality was startling.

“There’s going to be tension between Muslims and non-Muslims. I really wish that it didn’t have to be this way, but that’s the way it is. I just want all of you here to remember that when something is being said to you by an angry white person, those hijackers did it. They did this to us when they decided to attack this country and claim that it was in the name of Islam. Look at my face.” His voice cracked. He paused to swallow back some spit. “Those hijackers did this.”

Nobody spoke. Chloe squeezed the plastic cup.

“Until these tensions settle, we’re all going to have to keep our heads down.”

“It wasn’t right that those guys went after you,” someone said.

Rashid felled this comment with, “That doesn’t matter. Do you think fighting back is going to help anything? This is the situation. Until things settle down, I don’t want to hear about any trouble from MSA people. Don’t be out fighting in the streets. Don’t be out drinking and partying.”

Bisma looked at the ground.

“Don’t be arguing with people about Palestine and Israel. Not now. Now is not the time for these things. We all just need to keep our heads down.”

“Well, I don’t think anyone in this room is going to be doing any of those things, but what if people still come after us?”

“We just have to be careful. We have to go to classes. I mean, we can’t just go into hiding, but I think we should avoid drawing attention to ourselves. For the girls, I think if you are going to class, make sure you aren’t walking around alone. One of us will walk you to class and walk you home. Also, I don’t think any of you should wear the hijab for now.”

He glanced quickly at Naina and then back at the floor as he said this.

“Naina, he’s being serious,” said Bisma. “I don’t think I should have to take it off,” said Naina.

Suddenly, all of the faces in the room were turned toward Naina. This was when the meeting descended in chaos. All at once, people told her to take off her hijab. Bisma started getting emotional.

“Naina, please, look at what they did to Rashid. It’s not safe to wear the hijab right now.”

“I’ve worn the hijab for the last four years. I feel naked without it.”

Then Bisma brought out the secret weapon. She hit the speakerphone button on her cell phone and the wringing voice of Naina’s mother filled the room. She admonished Naina in a voice that was high pitched and rapid.

Naina shouted toward the direction of the phone.

“Ammi! Jee nahin—“

“Naina, bara-e-meherbani—“

Words screeched between them. Bisma was on the verge of tears.

Chloe couldn’t believe it. This wasn’t a meeting; it was an intervention. She hopped off the counter and slipped out the door unnoticed.

Out in the street, a van drove by with a name and two dates painted on the side door in giant bubble writing. The second date was September 11th 2001. “Rest in Peace,” was scrawled below it.

Chloe went into the shop, made her purchase then went back to the apartment. Rashid was still reasoning and the whining voice on the speakerphone wove in and out his points.

“OK,” said Chloe. “I have an idea.”

She pulled out a Rasta hat from the plastic bag and held it up. Bisma laughed. Naina smiled and reached out for it. There was a snorting sound from the speakerphone like an elephant blowing its nose. Then the whining resumed and Bisma turned off the speakerphone and started explaining to Naina’s mother.

“Now you see,” said Rashid, you can still cover your hair without wearing the hijab.”

Naina disappeared into her bedroom for a moment. When she returned, she had her hair tucked into the hat. The members of the MSA clapped and whistled.

“Holy shit. You look like Jennifer Lopez,” said Aziz.

#

Bisma knocked. Chloe could see her big eyes peeking around the door and into her bedroom.

“Are you busy?”

“No. Come in,” said Chloe, setting down her sketchbook.

“What are you drawing?”

“I’m just trying to work out some ideas.”

“Wow. Is that the Taj Mahal?”

“Yeah. I’m just practicing making stencils.”

“That’s hot. Listen, do you want to go out for a walk?”

“Yeah. I need a break,” said Chloe, rising from her bed and looking around the floor for her shoes.

Bisma chatted nervously as they made their way down the street. They cut through the section of factories under signs with Chinese lettering. They came to Northern Boulevard and waited to cross. Chloe wondered absently if they were going to Steinway, but Bisma led her down 32nd Avenue and then down an alley. She looked up at the railway bridge and the filthy little hill that led up to it.

“Alright, I want to show you something, but we have to be quick,” said Bisma.

“Are we going up there?”

“Yeah.”

“What?”

“I’ve been up here lots of times. Don’t worry about it,” said Bisma.

“You’re insane,” said Chloe, but her inner voice told her to follow.

Bisma crouched in the brush. She consulted her wristwatch. For a moment, it could have been Missouri as Chloe watched the wind play the grass. Then the smell of garbage and urine crept in and the ever present wall of traffic sound and it was New York again. After two minutes, a freight train came along the tracks.

“You have to be quick,” said Bisma.

The train has its own impending rhythm and Chloe's heart rehashed this rhythm in her chest. Bisma rose out of the brush and poised herself like a hunter in flared jeans. She trotted beside the train, reached for a ladder and pulled herself up.

Chloe ran behind. She saw her hands in front of the ladder and almost couldn't reach out and grasp it. Adrenaline surged. She pushed herself and grabbed it, then scrambled up. Chloe looped her arm around the ladder and gripped the rung so hard rust ingrained itself in her hand. The vibrations of the freight car were her vibrations.

"Just hold on until we cross the river," Bisma called back to her.

"The river? You crazy bitch!"

"You'll be fine. Just hang on."

"Oh my god!" yelled Chloe as the train ran over the Hell Gate Bridge and the river flowed what seemed like miles and miles below them. Her feet shook on the lowest rung.

"Woo hoo!" yelled Bisma.

She arched back and threw an arm in the air. The train cleared the bridge and then slowed as it approached a lot. Bisma jumped down and tumbled into the grass. Chloe took a deep breath, turned herself halfway around and sprang away from the train. She reached for the grass. The ground hit her knees and then the palms of her hand before she rolled onto her back.

"Alright, we're almost there."

"What do you mean almost?" said Chloe as she dusted herself off, but she followed.

She followed as Bisma walked back toward the bridge and didn't even complain as Bisma started climbing the spiral staircase in the tower.

"This is amazing," said Chloe at the top.

Below them, the sunlight flowed over Astoria Park, shards of evening light beaten into the river. The city splayed out from the mess of rooftops that was Queens to where the sleek silhouette of Manhattan struck the horizon. Bisma pulled a joint from her pocket and lit it up. She took a drag of it.

"I used to come up here as a kid," said Bisma.

"Seriously? How old were you?"

"We started coming up here when I was like ten. A big gang of us from the neighborhood would come up here and just hang out and smoke, you know?"

She paused to draw another token before handing the joint off to Chloe.

“We had some good times, but it got to be too much. Aziz like never went to school and he was always getting in fights. That’s why my mom told my dad that we had to move out to New Hyde Park.”

“Were they Muslim kids you were hanging out with?”

“No. Me and Aziz were the only Muslims.”

“Yeah, I was just thinking, Rashid and Aisha seem pretty conservative to me.”

“I don’t think Rashid would be smoking up on the Hell Gate Bridge,” said Bisma.

“No, but that would be funny,” said Chloe.

“I feel like I have two lives sometimes. Like Rashid and them only hang out with Muslims, but I’ve always had other friends.”

Bisma was looking out toward Manhattan as she spoke. The gap in the skyline seemed to draw their eyes back to it. Chloe inhaled the smoke and let it settle before she breathed it out. To her, Bisma looked like a goddess as she sat on top of the world, the pink light parsing out her features between shadows. Her hawk eyebrows. Her wide face. The dark etching of eyeliner. Her robusta-colored skin. Her fig-colored lipstick. Bisma was the goddess of Hell Gate. Later Chloe would paint this.

“Man this sucks so much, I can’t even begin to tell you,” said Bisma.

“I know,” said Chloe, returning the joint to her.

“No. You don’t. Muslims did this. That really really screws everything up for the Muslims that don’t want any violence against America. And now everything is going to suck between Muslims and Christians. And I don’t mean just like Rashid getting beat up. It’s just like, I know people are going to look at me differently now and there’s going to be something between us before I even open my mouth.”

#

As midterms approached, Chloe spent more and more time holed up in one of the studios on campus. In history class, the professor had put up a slide. The image was of a woman in a leather jacket who had scaled a building and was unfurling a Hungarian flag with the communist symbol cut out of it. For her sculpture midterm project, Chloe had decided to make a tree topper out of this woman. She had made mold after mold for the face, trying to perfect the woman’s Eastern European features and to capture the look in the woman’s eyes. Now that the head was done, she had to catch up on the other details. After that, she had to get started on her midterm papers and other projects. Yet she didn’t move. She held her mold and looked into the face of her sculpture and compared it to the slide she had borrowed from her history professor.

She thought of Aisha in her modest clothes and pinned back hijab. Aisha had features that could be described as regal. Her high forehead and cheekbones brought to a point of focus by the sickle of her nose.

She was beautiful, but something about her bothered Chloe. Why wasn't Aisha there when the other members of the MSA told Naina to take off her hijab?

Chloe thought back to a conversation she had overheard between Aziz and Bisma the night after they had gone to the bar on Steinway. Aziz had told Bisma that Naina had no business wearing the hijab if she was going to be hanging out in bars.

"She drank a coke!" said Bisma.

"It doesn't matter," said Aziz, "When she wears the hijab, she's representing Islam. You can't wear the hijab into a bar."

"Listen to you. You're such an expert on Islam. Drinking beer and smoking weed."

"Yeah, but I'm not wearing a hijab, am I?"

"Whatever. It's not your decision," said Bisma.

Did the MSA tell Aisha to take off her hijab? Chloe suspected they had not.

Aisha was beautiful, but she was passive. She would never have the kind of fire that was in this Hungarian woman. Or in Bisma for that matter. Chloe found herself resenting Aisha, but then stopped herself. Suddenly she knew what her final project was going to be about.

#

All in one day, Chloe accomplished many things. She had turned in midterm papers and handed her tree topper into her sculpture professor. He had been reading when she came in with it and looked up in surprise as she handed him the text and set the piece on his desk.

"Just want to turn in my midterm project."

He held it up and squinted into the Hungarian woman's tiny, determined face. "You have been busy."

Chloe was quite proud of her effort. Her sculpture wore the flared angelic dress of a traditional tree topper. She had chosen fabric in the Hungarian national colors, which were also Christmas colors, but her top half wore a leather jacket just like the woman in the photo. Chloe had tried to make her hair to suggest motion. It arched out as if blown in the wind and was mirrored by the angle of the woman's arms as she thrust the Hungarian flag into the air. Her professor was still examining it when she left. Chloe took this as a good sign.

Then she managed to find the right subway out to Williamsburg. Actually, this was quite easy as every person on the J platform wore a fedora. When she arrived at the apartment where the other people in her sculpture class were gathering to celebrate, many of them were wearing fedoras as well. They were impressed with the potency of her curry.

"Holy Shitcakes. Where did you learn to make a curry?" asked a guy from her sculpture class named Moses.

“Queens.”

After the party, she had only one more thing to accomplish. She found a clean spot of wall. Then she held the stencil to wall, held the spray paint can and pushed the nozzle until spray paint sizzled out over her work. Perhaps it was the alcohol, or perhaps it was because this was the done thing in Williamsburg, but she didn't even try to hide what she was doing. If any cop stopped her, she would plant a finger in his chest and inform him that stenciling in Brooklyn was a rite of passage.

She pulled away the stencil. Where seconds before there had been empty space, now there was an image of a girl with deep kohl eyes poised above a broken cityscape. The goddess of Hell Gate. She paused for a moment to admire it then slipped off into the subway.

Alcohol bandied her legs down the stairs and through the turnstile. The doors of a subway car whispered open. It was empty. She sat down and pressed her face to the window so she could look out. The train shot through the tunnels. Images flickered by. There was so much graffiti in the tunnels. There was a whole world deep in the belly of the city with its own culture and its own rules.

The train bleated out. The pulse of wheels slapping metal slowed. There were voices. Faces ticked slowly by the windows. A song flew from their lips. Chloe examined the track workers with fascination. She thought of the paintings that lived in the plastic bag under her bed of people fleeing through tunnels. She thought vaguely that these track workers had faces like foreshadowing. Then one face met her eye and winked. It's owner whistled. Laughter cascaded through the tunnel and collapsed into echo. The train pulled away from the repairs and fluttered against the rails at top speed.

When she finally slumped into the apartment, it was too quiet. The fridge purred from the kitchen. A note perched on the table.

“Chloe, Bisma's dad passed away this morning. We are taking the train out to Long Island. See you in a few days. –Naina.”

#

Once again Chloe used the stencil of Bisma, but this time it was on canvas over a bricked up cityscape. Then she turned her attention to the box. She drilled each hole in the back with painstaking deliberateness. Then she worked at cutting out her Taj Mahal. The canvas resisted. It threatened to fray. It was a slow atonement to press the blade of the box cutter around the slope of each breast-shaped window.

Naina returned after a few days without Bisma. There were no more Bollywood movie nights or MSA gatherings held in the apartment. Without Bisma, Chloe realized, she and Naina were just two people living together.

Chloe started spending more time in Brooklyn. Everyone in her sculpture class lived out there and on the weekends, they would converge to drink, watch movies and talk shit. Chloe wondered at how everyone in the class could be so sure of themselves. Yet she appreciated the other artists; brashness, shit talking and all. Every time she went out to Brooklyn, their

ideas would smack around her head, loosen her own ideas and send her back to Queens to do some work.

She even went out to Williamsburg for a Thanksgiving potluck dinner. She brought a turkey curry to the apartment Jason and Moses shared. Other people brought tofurkey or mashed potatoes, but most people brought alcohol.

Chloe worked furiously on her sculpture. She painted the inside of the box black. She inserted a white Christmas light through each carefully placed hole. It was now like a diorama from her grade school days. She plugged in the Christmas lights and looked into the box. It worked.

The inside of the box was now the skyline of an unknowable city skyline blending into a night sky. Next, she fitted her model of the Taj Mahal on the bottom of the box. She had spray painted it electric blue. The intricate flower designs that framed the window were done in neon pink. Each window had been cut out and backed in colored plastic to make it look like stained glass. She attached fishing line to the top of the box and suspended crumpled bits of paper and debris. She had shaped the bits of paper with starch and set them to look like they were falling through the air. Finally she attached the painting to the top of the box. She cut away the quarter-sized pupils of the face.

To see the inside of the diorama, people would have to stand nose to nose with this woman and look into her eyes.

When she looked into the eyes of the woman poised above the broken city, she saw an electric Mughal city, things spilling out of it against the backdrop of night. It was like a secret underground world existed in this woman's head. It was too much. She would probably be slaughtered for it in class. But she didn't care. Standing back from the woman, her eyes glowed a different color depending on what angle you looked from.

#

Bisma returned after Thanksgiving break. Chloe was shocked to find her sitting on the couch watching TV. Her hair was covered with a hijab. Naina had gone back to wearing hers a few weeks ago, but Chloe had never seen Bisma wearing one.

“Hey.”

“Hey. How are you?”

“All right. I have a lot of reading to catch up on, but I don't really feel like doing it now. I'd rather procrastinate,” said Bisma.

“You'll get it done,” said Chloe.

“The only final I'm really dreading is public speaking.”

“But you're an actress. You love that stuff.”

“Yeah, but I just don’t feel up to it. Especially because it really is public. I have to do it in Washington Square Park, so I don’t know how I’ll cope with all the crazies shouting me down.”

“How long do you have to prepare?”

“Two weeks. It’s on the last Friday of finals.”

“That’s plenty of time. You’ll get it done.”

“Yeah. So did you finish your painting of the Taj Mahal?” asked Bisma.

“Do you want to see what I did with it?”

“Let’s have a look. You know some guy built that whole thing for his dead wife? He must have really loved her.”

Chloe flicked on the light in her room as Bisma followed her in. She bent to plug in Christmas lights. Bisma looked the painting up and down.

“Is that me?”

“Well, it was inspired by you,” said Chloe. “You have to go right up to her eyes to look in.”

Bisma stepped up to the painting. Her face curdled in surprise.

“I don’t believe it,” she said stepping away. “I can’t believe you used me to make this thing.”

“What?”

“That’s what you think is it? I’m like some kind of terrorist blowing up the Taj Mahal?”

“No,” said Chloe. Then she understood the line of reasoning. “Oh no! That Taj Mahal isn’t supposed to be blowing up...it’s like ideas are coming out of it. It’s the feminine city under the masculine city.”

“Yeah, well, you know what it looks like to me? It’s looks like I’m the bad Muslim terrorist. It’s so racist. And I’m not even Indian, so I don’t know where you get off putting the Taj Mahal in.”

“Wait,” said Chloe. “You’re totally not getting what I mean.”

Bisma was already walking to the door.

“I think I get exactly what you mean. You’re the one who doesn’t get it.”

She drew a corner of her hijab across her face and pinned it there. It was then that Chloe realized that it wasn’t a hijab at all, but some kind of more complex garment that covered the face and draped around the shoulders like a cloak. Later she would learn that it was called a niqab, but as Bisma passed out the door, Chloe only stared at the unnamed thing in horror.

#

Chloe wanted to smash up the sculpture, but it was too late. She dropped it off in her professor's office, thankful that he wasn't there to comment on it to her face. Instead a teaching assistant checked her name off a list and placed the box on the floor of the office.

Chloe spotted Moses's project on the floor as well. It was a clear resin cube with what looked like paint caught in the act of splattering against canvas, but there was no canvas and the paint exploded in all different directions. Chloe felt even more out of her league than usual. She felt ashamed of her project with its naked literalism. She walked out the door into the certainty of winter, almost hoping she would fail.

She arranged her scarf around her neck and found herself walking toward the park where a crowd was gathering around a speaker. A voice almost sang from the crowd. It was a female voice, and it was telling a compelling story. Chloe moved into the crowd and looked between shoulders and necks. The speaker was a black shape. It was Bisma. On a soapbox. Her theatre voice was ringing out in the cold.

"When you wear the niqab, people look at you with respect. Modesty is the key to feminism. When you cover your face, men have to judge you on your character."

Chloe's voice leapt out of her mouth before she could staunch it. "People don't respect you. You're invisible. You're not a threat to them anymore because you've given up by putting that thing on your head."

"Excuse me. This thing is a symbol of Islam—"

"That's a symbol of woman-hating—"

"Clearly you have no respect for my culture."

"Your culture? You're from Long Island, Bisma! You've never even been to the Middle East!"

With each volley, their voices rose in pitch. People stepped back from Chloe and looked between her and Bisma with increasing alarm. A professor made notes on a clipboard.

"People respect me now and you can't stand it. Women who cover themselves get respect."

"Women who cover themselves get stoned to death in public."

Chloe marched right up to the crate and Bisma hopped off to face her.

They were now screaming and pointing at each other.

"Don't you ever get tired of constantly advertising that you're sexually available?"

"It takes a lot of brainwashing to think like that."

The professor stood between the two girls.

“Whoa. Whoa. Hey. Guys. Guys! Calm down.”

Bisma reached around her to shout at Chloe, “That’s what you think of Islam is it? Brainwashing? I didn’t realize you were so racist.”

“And I never realized what a faker you were. Attention-seeking bitch.”

Finally two members of the class dragged Chloe and Bisma away from each other. Chloe yanked her arm free and swung around, sucking in the cold air like a drowning woman. She walked uptown. She started running. She didn’t know where she was going. She felt like she had just been in a fistfight.

#

Chloe drove out of the city. Her papers were turned in. Her sculpture was being graded. She got through the last hills of Pennsylvania then the relentless flat country unraveled from her tires to where the far horizon lisped beyond her windshield.

She knew that New York wasn’t done with her yet, but maybe Queens was. Jason was moving out of the apartment in Williamsburg and Moses had asked her to move in. Chloe had accepted. It was ridiculously small and absurdly expensive after living in Queens, but it would be worth it. She would get a job and manage it for the sake of art.

The first flurries smattered themselves against the windshield. She would drive for two days. Then she could sleep in her old bed. She could have a few beers with her old friends. They could talk to each other and there would be no explaining to do. It would be easy.

She didn’t want to feel this way, but she did.

A True and Faithful History of the Golem of Třebíč

Larry Harrison

Most of you are familiar with Dan Holloway's story *The Man Who Painted Agnieszka's Shoes*, with its reclusive character Shuji Nomoto. Not many know that there was actually a real-life Shuji Nomoto, a theoretical physicist known as Haru Suzuki. He was a recluse who lived with his mother in a small house in one of the poorer districts of Kyoto.

As a youth, Suzuki had been outgoing and athletic, and a notable martial artist. He was actually a *Kendoka*, having reached the eighth dan in ancient Japanese art of swordsmanship, *kendo*. When he was 28, however, Haru Suzuki barricaded himself in his bedroom and began a sort of monastic retreat, in which he devoted himself to the problem of reconciling Einstein's theories of relativity and quantum physics. Suzuki believed he could build on the standard method of modelling time in physics, to give time an ontology similar to space. This would mean that time was just another dimension, that future events already existed, and that there was no objective, uni-directional flow of time.

In the West, many physicists were unhappy with Suzuki's theory, because of its implications for free will; they believed he was proposing that future events were fixed and pre-determined. I had the privilege of studying the personal papers that Suzuki left to the University of Kyoto, and it is clear that he took a radically different position. In one paper, he imagined, with Augustine of Hippo, that God, being eternal, was outside of time. When God looked down upon the created world, He saw space-time as a 'block universe', in which time exists as a fourth dimension, alongside the three of space. (The block universe was equivalent to the *Dharmadhatu*, in Buddhist thought, the 'total field of events and meanings'.)

The 'block universe' included all actual and potential events, and when individuals made a decision involving free will, their lives followed a different trajectory through it. At the same time, an alternative trajectory existed, in which the individual had made a different decision. These alternative trajectories form a branching tree, symbolising all possible outcomes of any interaction. Rather than refer to parallel universes, Suzuki preferred to think of a life history as being a trajectory or path through the infinite number of potential events. As a Buddhist, he believed this related to the doctrine of Karma, and the way actions shaped consciousness, although the passage of time was essentially illusory and subjective, being created by the mind.

It was here that Suzuki lost his Western followers, because he gave quantum theory a distinctively Japanese twist. As a *Kendoka*, Suzuki aspired to the state of *muslin*, or 'empty mind', which relates to the Buddhist concept of *shunyata*, or voidness. Suzuki believed that, if the mind-consciousness was in a state of *muslin*, it could move outside of the confines of space-time. Through meditation, he argued, it would be possible to be liberated from the illusion of time's arrow, and access knowledge of the past and future, and of different worlds. Suzuki called this the *Urashima Taro Conjecture*, after an ancient Japanese tale about a young fisherman who visits an undersea palace and stays there for three days. When *Urashima Taro* returns home, he finds himself three hundred years in the future, his house in ruins, and his family long dead.

For the last two years of his life, while Suzuki struggled to resolve this problem, he received all his meals on a tray, and only emerged from his bedroom when his mother was asleep, to empty his antique, Edo-period chamber pot. And then, one fresh Spring morning, when the cherry blossom was just about to flower, Haru Suzuki disappeared. When several meals were left untouched, his mother persuaded a neighbour to force an entry to his locked bedroom, and they found it empty. The bed had been slept in—there was still the indent of his head on the pillow, and the bed was warm—and the chamber pot had been used but not emptied, yet there was no sign of Suzuki. He could not have left the house without passing through the room in which his mother slept, and she was convinced she'd have woken. She believed he was still there. She felt his presence, and carried on leaving food for him as though he was invisible, or had become an ancestral spirit, needing nourishment from sacrificial offerings.

Suzuki was listed as a missing person by the Japanese police, and he appeared to have vanished without trace. To understand his fate, it is necessary to go back in history to the strange events of 1680, when there was a pogrom in Moravia, a region of Eastern Europe that is now in the Czech Republic. In that momentous year, the inhabitants of the Jewish ghetto in Třebíč discovered a wild, naked creature roaming the streets, terrorising the townspeople who were trying to attack their neighbourhood. The creature, which was seven foot tall, tore a long pole from the scaffolding outside a derelict property and charged at the mob, using the pole as both a lance and a flail. Three people were killed before the mob fled in panic. Taken before the Rabbi Bezalel, it was confirmed that the creature had been created from the riverside clay by the famous Kabbalist, Abraham Zacchi, who had recently died.

The Rabbi announced that the monster was a Golem, an incomplete or demonic Adam, kneaded from the earth like the first Adam, but lacking a divine soul. The Golem could only speak a barbaric tongue, and was bereft of reason, so the Rabbi wrote the divine name, Adonai ha-Aretz, upon its brow, to bind it to service. It was imprisoned in a room above the Neuschul synagogue, from which it was only released to perform errands, or to defend the ghetto in times of peril. When unchained, the Golem fought with a ferocity that became legendary. It could only be subdued by the Rabbi reciting the Ineffable Names of God.

Later that year, the Spanish Inquisition tried 72 people for being Judaizers, the descendants of forcibly converted Jews who secretly practiced the Jewish religion. Over 60 were burned at the stake in Madrid, the King of Spain lighting the fires personally. This sparked anti-semitic riots across Europe. Hundreds of Jews were killed in Bohemia and Moravia, but not one person was harmed in Třebíč. When the mob surged down an empty Blahoslavova Street, they were confronted by the hideous figure of the Golem. It stood silently in the middle of the highway, a wooden stave held aloft, and waited until the crowd was almost level, before springing forward and attacking all within reach. Sixteen men were clubbed to death, and three more died subsequently from abdominal injuries.

Eventually, the Golem was destroyed by the terrified citizens of Třebíč. A pack of hounds, followed by a gang of apprentices carrying lighted torches, chased the creature for several hundred yards down Blahoslavova Street, before cornering it in a courtyard, like a wild beast. Despite the monster's piteous howling, the apprentice boys succeeded in tying it in a sack and dropping its body into the River Jilava, where it dissolved before their eyes, and returned to the mud from whence it came.

After the Golem's destruction, the Rabbi inspected the room in which it had been confined and found the walls to be covered in mathematical formulae, and strange writing. The writing

seemed related to Enochian, the Angelic language discovered by Dr John Dee, astrologer to the English Queen Elizabeth, and visiting alchemist at the court of Emperor Rudolph II in Prague. Rabbi Bezalel made a careful transcription of the writing, ordered that it should be preserved for posterity, and recorded the whole story in a Hebrew manuscript, held at the Charles University in Prague. A copy of the manuscript, together with an English translation, *A True and Faithful History of the Golem of Třebíč*, is available in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

There the story might have ended, had not a group of Japanese Communist Party delegates visited the synagogue in 1965, when it formed part of the Museum of Atheism of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. Not only could they decipher the sixteenth century writing, they claimed it was in Gyousho, the Japanese semi-cursive script. It said, "Pity me, poor Haru, who demonstrated the truth of the Urashima Taro Conjecture, who went to sleep in his room in Kyoto in 2009, and awoke in this land of ghosts."

Footnote: Some say that the learned Rabbi controlled the Golem through the God Name Adonai ha-Aretz, which is Lord of Earth, who governs the clay from which it was made. Others, however, say the Rabbi wrote the word Emet, or Truth, upon its forehead, and that he could disable the creature by rubbing out the first letter (aleph) leaving the word Met, or death, upon its brow.

Billy

Daisy Anne Gree

The last time I killed myself, I was successful. I was dead for a few minutes, and then the paramedics revived me. Why? the emergency room doctor kept asking me. I thought it was a stupid question, and I didn't have an answer for him.

A couple of weeks later, I met my friend Billy online. Without any reason for it, as soon as I met Billy, I decided that I would be his friend no matter what. I'd never had a really good friend before, so I was only going on what I thought a really good friend should do, and implementing those things. It was strangely determined and baseless, but it was ferocious.

After I'd known Billy for a while, I found out that he was a heroin addict and a crack addict. He lived in West Hollywood, was divorcing his wife, had two kids and a picture of himself in a clown costume.

We would stay up all night together online. Sometimes we would talk, and sometimes we wouldn't talk at all — just leave the chat window open and know that the other person was there at the other end, watching TV, reading a book, or climbing the walls. This was part of my implemented plan to be his best friend. I wasn't going anywhere as long he wanted to leave that chat window open.

billy: sold all my existential novels for 50 cents a pop

billy: they werent feeding me

billy: oh i forgot to tell you i started taking some antibiotics just for fun

billy: and my mouth tumor went away

billy: i didnt even put 2 and 2 together

billy: probably just severe gingivitis

He moved into his own place, and promptly lost his job as a vet tech for stealing drugs. He sold his car to his smack dealer. His apartment became infested with cockroaches. He veered wildly between being in love with his ex-wife and lusting after his friend Tracy. Neither of them wanted much to do with him.

billy: there is a ridge right before the entry to the vagina, seperating it from the papilla

billy: that i always wondered what it was

billy: its called the urethral ridge or something

billy: most people try to use a vaginal speculum to visualize it

billy: very painful

billy: i can do it by feel now

billy: so when we want to get very lazy i can place catheters in both of us, we wont have to get up to pee

billy: i could also set us up to iv fluids we wouldnt even need to eat or drink water for like a week

One night, he OD'd on diazepam and started to call his ex-wife. He called her at her boyfriend's house 200 times. Then he went over there and tried to kick the door down. Kicking the door down only works in movies.

He went back home and was met by the ambulance that his ex-wife had called. They searched his house and then they left. We talked all night until he passed out.

I cried and told him that he had to get clean. I told him that I'd been clean since two weeks before we met, and if I could do it, he could to. He entered a 12 step program and hated it. I sat up all night with him, we talked about being clean and we talked about starting a literary movement. I was planning to move to LA soon after that, so we talked about that too.

billy: you have to check out skidrow

billy: its awe inspiring

billy: i was in total disbelieve

billy: i did a walking toiur

billy: i was scared when ever i drove through there

billy: i ended up having to walk through it to get to a meeting

billy: my sponsor made me

billy: he didnt realize where i was going

billy: i was like dude

billy: you know where that meeting is, right?

billy: he thought it was somewhere else

billy: people peing in the middle of street, fires, tents, moaning, crying

billy: no one even asked me for money, believe it or not

billy: i think they thought i was one of them

billy: theres nothing like that in san francisco even

billy: 16th has too much hope

billy: the portero hill projects at least have a cool prison style buildings with 1, 2 and 3 painted from top to bottom...and billy: they can afford pitbulls and 40's

billy: people starve to death in skidrow

billy: i was thinking we should set up and have a picnic

billy: wine and cheese

billy: its like those scenes in a movie

billy: the first time you make a wrong turn and end up driving through it

billy: you go holy shit this isnt fiction

billy: i was going to go live there but i chickened out

billy: thats kind of what i was aiming to do

Billy was lonely and poor. There in his roach filled apartment, he yearned for his friend Tracy but she didn't want him. He told me that he wanted to die again. I couldn't let that happen. I was, after all, his best friend. I cried and begged him to be fine. To stay alive. Why? he kept asking me. I didn't think it was a stupid question and I didn't have an answer for him. The only thing I could say was, "Because I don't want you to die."

"Because I don't want you to die, you should stay alive."

It was probably the most inconsiderate thing I had ever said.

billy: i never experienced poverty like this before

billy: if i cant get the advance

billy: cuz if im not gonna be a junky

billy: im not gonna endure this bullshit clean

billy: well when the fuck are you coming?
billy: it seems like i need to become an alcoholic for this to be authentic
billy: heroin addict was too easy

billy: this has been sobering as all hell
billy: once i got clean and could see no way out for months into the future
billy: i was like holy fucking shit
billy: when i stepped on the scale yesterday
billy: i cried
billy: then i write about it, and people tell me i need to cheer up
billy: i couldnt help it when i saw 130 pounds
billy: i havent been this thin since i was 15!
billy: i love crying
billy: its hard to accomplish
billy: so when im able to
billy: i feel like a king
billy: so i was like holy shit
billy: and i looked in the mirror and saw a fucking ghost
billy: it was fucking crazy

By implementing my idea of what a best friend would do in these circumstances, I decided that he needed a girlfriend to quell the loneliness. I sat up all night with that chat window open, telling him step by step how to win his friend Tracy's heart. It worked. They're still together.

Billy is still alive. I still have never laid eyes on him in real life. But, Billy is still alive.

billy: i wasnt joking that the only reason i got the internet back up was for you
billy: why the hell else do i need it?

billy: ok buddy
billy: ok hurry up and get here
billy: talk to you soon

billy: love you too, night

"Because I don't want you to die," isn't good enough at all. But it was good enough for just long enough, I guess.

billy: isnt that sad ive tried to be a derelict ever since i was 22
billy: ive crossed the line a little too deep at times
billy: somethings i can never have back
billy: and when people tell me i need to cheer up
billy: i want to hit them in the face
billy: it is weird, too, i knew on a level that bukowski has already done this
billy: but i didnt really connect the dots
billy: until i kept hearing it over and over and over
billy: and i didnt really realize i was doing it on purpose
billy: until i realized i could step off whenever i really wanted to

Carbon-based

Heikki Hietala

I never thought, until late, that there was anything odd about Robbie's little imaginary friend. I mean, everyone has them at some point. I myself had one, a boy my age, who lived behind the glass greenhouse and liked to eat tomatoes. He also liked to throw rocks at the greenhouse, and when my father came to see what happened, my chicken of a friend scrambled and left me to take the heat.

So when Robbie was almost six, and asked me to add an extra plate for his friend, I thought nothing of it. "Would you like him to sit next to you?" I asked, and set another rabbit plate beside Robbie's when he nodded. He'd eat his oatmeal in solemn silence, every once in a while glancing over to his little friend's empty plate. I guess he imagined oatmeal on it too.

"What's his name?" I asked to make conversation. Robbie answered with a strange set of phonemes – I thought it started with a K, and it had an x and some r's and many vowels. The pitch also varied a lot, and he sounded shrill when he said it.

"That's a funny name," I said, and looked out of the window, past the farm, and into the endless wheat fields beyond. Robbie had always been odd in a way, precocious, born old as my father said when Robbie finally started to speak. It was late for him to do that, his cousins were younger than he was, and yakked away already at two.

So, both me and Rick felt elated when he began to talk at four and a half. He bypassed the one word stage and went for carefully crafted sentences right off the bat. It amused my father no end. "We'll see someone get away from this farm yet," he said just before he died.

I knew Rick was out on the fields, beyond my sight, but I missed him nevertheless. Running the household alone was a chore, even if the older boys were already independent and sometimes even able to help. Having Robbie's imaginary friend on my back all the time was no help either. He'd ask a million things before lunch, and another three million by nightfall.

Robbie never slept more than four hours. That, added to the loss of sleep caused by running a farm, drove our marriage to the edge. When he turned seven, I didn't fret over it anymore, since he could read. But when he was five and began his endless quest for information, I could have strangled him, so help me God.

At first it was just regular kid stuff. "Mommy, how can a cow make milk out of hay?", or "Mommy, why does beef turn brown in the oven?", or "Daddy, what makes a car run?" We answered as best we could, at a rate of a question a minute. I remember being very tired, especially when he began to ask the astronomical questions. "Mommy? Is the Moon like the Sun, but only in the night? Then why don't it make me sweat?" or "Daddy, how much time does it take to drive to Venus with our car?"

When I asked him instead, where did he get the questions, he just said, Kyxrxy made him ask. We'd taken to calling his little friend Kyxrxy. It wasn't really like his name, but we couldn't figure out what it was. And when Robbie learned to write, I asked him to write

Kyxrryy's name; he picked up the pen and made thirteen strange marks on the page. Not one of them was a letter of the alphabet.

"What's that? Why don't you use normal letters," his father asked.

"These are normal letters there in Kyxrryy's language," Robbie said and looked at me. I could see he was not lying. "He has taught me how to write his name."

Rick and I exchanged one of those 'here we go again' glances. Rick took his jacket and cap and left. When the tractor started and zoomed down the field road, I sat down with Robbie. "Honey, I'm a bit worried about you and Kyxrryy. It seems you think he is real, like Dad and me and you, and little cousin Dupree. But you should understand that there's a difference between him and the rest of us. We're real, and he's not."

Robbie pulled himself away from me. "Kyxrryy is real, just like you and me. You just can't see him." He began to sulk.

"Robbie, there'll be the day when Kyxrryy doesn't come to visit anymore. I know, I had a friend just like him when I was a little girl. His name was Adam. He lived behind the greenhouse, and I played with him every day. Then one day I waited for him all day, and he didn't show up. Nor the next day, or the next. That was when I knew that I was just a bit bigger again, on my way to becoming a big girl."

Robbie stood up. "That's not how it goes with Kyxrryy. First of all, he only comes in at night, and he doesn't play with me. We talk about things, and have conversations. So there." He went to the window and peered into the descending darkness.

I was at loss what to do so I thought, let time run its course. Kyxrryy will eventually evaporate, as all of the imaginary friends do.

With time it became evident that Kyxrryy was not going away. Instead, he made Robbie ask all the more questions, and all the harder too. One morning, while I was making breakfast for him, he had another go. "Mommy," he said, "what is a solar system? Are there other solar systems in the world?" Now, I flunked out of high school, and never was any good in science, but this was one question I did have an answer for.

"Yes, dear, there are many millions of solar systems. Basically it means a sun and its planets, and out there in the universe, there's many more solar systems, but the only one that has life is this little system we live in." I smiled at him.

"That's not true. Kyxrryy is from a different system so there must be at least one more star that has planets that have life."

So this little imaginary friend wasn't from behind the glass greenhouse. It had to be from a different planet even. I sat down with him and put my arm around him. "Robbie, sweetheart, you need to start letting go of Kyxrryy. You're growing up fast, and you just can't keep imagining things."

Robbie threw down his napkin and pushed his half-eaten breakfast plate to the center of the table. "I'm not imagining. He's real, just like you and me."

“Then why can’t I see him?” I asked.

“Because you’re asleep at four in the morning when he comes to see me. Besides, he doesn’t want to show himself to you because he’s mad at you. He’s heard what you think of him.” I didn’t want to make Robbie mad at me before going to school, so I tried anew.

“Okay, okay – I believe you. But we’d like to see Kyxrryy, so next time he comes around, wake me up, okay?” I smiled and he smiled.

“Okay. Now I’ve got to go to school. See you!” And he was off with his backpack and favorite cap and the red jacket that was too small for him already, but he would not consider throwing away.

Three nights later I woke up in the dead of the night. Robbie was standing next to me and gave me a royal fright, just standing there and looking at me and not saying a word. “Robbie? What is it? Jesus, what time is it?” I shouted, waking Rick up too. He was belligerent from the start.

“What’s this noise? Can’t we just sleep, for God’s sake! Robbie, get to your bed already and let us sleep,” he shouted, then buried his head under the pillow.

“But Mom, you said I should get you when Kyxrryy comes around next time,” Robbie said. I got out of bed, put on my slippers and grabbed my robe. Robbie led me to his room. The window was slightly open, and Robbie’s toys had been cleared from the center of the room. There was an odd scent in the room; I could not really make out what it was, it was so faint. Short circuits smell like that.

“Why have you pushed all your stuff to the edges of the room?” I asked him. Robbie climbed on his bed and put his arms on the footboard.

“This is how we talk. I sit here and Kyxrryy tells me stuff, and he needs lots of space so he doesn’t knock things over when he moves around. Tonight he was telling me of galaxies, and he needed extra space, and then I thought I’d go and get you so you’d learn something too.”

“So where is he?”

“He must have left while I was getting you. Next time, I’ll make sure he stays until you get here.”

“Thanks,” I said and hauled my sorry self to my bed upon which I collapsed and slept immediately.

In the morning Rick told me to go see a doctor with Robbie. “It’s not normal anymore. This Kicks character – “Kyxrryy,” I put in – “is not normal. I mean, these little friends are supposed to do practical jokes and little mischief here and there and take the blame for breaking things, but talking about galaxies in the middle of the freaking night? Sheesh!” He went to the door to go and bale the hay.

I had to agree. “I’ll see Doctor Weiss about this. As soon as possible. See you for lunch,” I said, and he was gone. I called Dr Weiss’s office right away and got an appointment for the coming Friday, after school.

Dr Weiss, our family doctor since the stone age, was more than happy to discuss Kyxrry with Robbie. While they were in his office, I had to choose between an ancient *Readers’ Digest* and a surprisingly recent *Sky and Telescope*, from July 1979. I went for the one I could understand, and then paced around the waiting room and bit my fingernails to the bone. Dr Weiss spoke with him for an hour and a quarter, then came out to greet me. “Robbie, have a seat here while I have a word with Mommy, okay? Good seeing you,” he said, and guided me into his office.

I did not know what to expect. “Rosemary, I think you’re just worrying too much. Robbie is clearly a very intelligent boy, and if he gets a good science teacher, he will go places. He knows an awful lot of many things, and astronomy especially. I mean, I’m an amateur astronomer myself, and could not explain the difference between a true binary star and an optical binary star better than Robbie. You must have bought him tons of astronomy books, but consider that an investment in the future,” he said and smiled the perennial family doctor smile.

I did not tell him we had not bought a single book. The only thing was, we let him watch *Nova* on PBS. That was also the only thing on TV that ever interested him.

Back in the waiting room, Dr Weiss stopped by the table. “If I were you, I’d get him one of these telescope kits,” Dr Weiss said and picked up the magazine. He scanned through it and found the ad he wanted at the back. “I believe Robbie would benefit from having a telescope like this, and it also might help pull him away from this Kicks character that’s following him around. Mind you – I think a little father and son activity would work in that sense too.” Dr Weiss gave the magazine to me, and took his leave. Robbie and I drove home in silence.

That night, as we were going to bed, I took it up with Rick. “199 dollars? We can’t afford that,” he said. “The combine works now, but when we go into harvest for real, I’m sure the main drive belts will snap and they alone cost that much. Besides, the ball bearings in the thresher sounded mighty bad already last year, and they may freeze any day now, and that’s a thousand bucks.”

I put up the spaniel smile I know he can’t resist. “Honey, we need to think of Robbie. Dr Weiss said it’d get his attention of Kyxrry and help him focus on the real world. I’m sure he would benefit from having your attention too. You know, he needs his father. You don’t spend any time with him, but if you had this project, you’d see just what a wonderful kid he is.”

Rick thought it over for a while, then turned away from me and turned his light off. “Okay... but if the belts snap, you go to your parents for money, not me to mine.”

I smiled in the dark.

The telescope kit arrived two weeks later. I did not tell Robbie I had ordered it, because I wanted to see his face when it was delivered. When Rick pulled the box off the flatbed, and

Robbie saw the StarTracker Telescope Company logo on it, he smiled, for the first time in months.

Rick and Robbie put the telescope together in a couple of hectic evenings. When darkness fell and they hauled it out to the far corner of the yard, I looked at them with a glimmer of hope; maybe this'd all work out and Robbie would become a normal kid with a burning interest in science. I watched them carry the telescope out to the far corner of the yard, and align it to the North Star. For two hours they pointed at the sky and swiveled the telescope and talked and peeked in the eyepiece. I felt happy.

But just a couple of days later, Rick came in from the dark night and said, "That kid drives me nuts. All he wants to look at is this one star, Sirius. And it's just a goddamn star, I mean, if you look in the eyepiece, it's a little pinprick of light, and he keeps claiming it is a binary star. Well, I don't see no second star there, just a bright blue one. Sheesh... 200 bucks down the drain." And he was off to bed. I looked out of the window and there Robbie was, standing on a box to reach the eyepiece, peering out into the universe. My heart sank.

It must have been a couple weeks after that when Robbie came to me. "Mommy? What is an admimi... amidni... administerative error?"

I put the casserole in the oven and looked at him. "Administrative error? What do you mean, dear?"

"Kyxrryy says I am an administrative error."

I stood up and went to him and hugged him. "No, dear, Kyxrryy has it all wrong now. You're not an error. You're our son and we deliberately wanted to have you, and administration has nothing to do with it."

"Are you sure?"

I felt a chill all over me, when I looked in his eyes. There was a mixture of emotions there; part of him wanted so hard to believe me, and part of him was sure Kyxrryy had it right, and he was not supposed to be here at all.

And then he put the weirdest question of all to me. "What does carbon-based mean, Mommy? Kyxrryy says I am carbon-based, but I should be silicon-based like he is."

I had absolutely no answer to this question. I had never heard of anything being carbon-based or silicon-based. "Honey, I need to find it out for you. I'll call Dr Weiss and see if he has an answer."

When Robbie went to school, I called Dr Weiss, and broke down completely on the phone. I wailed and wept and let it all hang out about Robbie's weird questions and his astronomy quest, and his studies of the star Sirius. Dr Weiss listened patiently and then told me to come see him again with Robbie.

This session lasted only half an hour. When they came out of his office, I could see the worry in his face. When Robbie was out of hearing range, he said, "I'm not going to beat about the bush. I think Robbie is one very smart young man, but he's also a troubled one. I believe he's

in need of a psychiatric assessment. I've never seen anyone get schizophrenia at that early age, but I know it has happened, and I want you to go to the University Hospital for a thorough neurological check-up. I can't do more than this here, but they'll know what to do. I'll refer you to a friend of mine."

I had to tell him we could not afford anything like that. He said he was going to take us to Denver himself, and that we need not worry about the costs. Two days later we were in his car, driven to the University Hospital Juvenile Psychiatric Ward, where Dr Weiss introduced us to his old friend, one Dr Mason. Together they entered the ward with Robbie, and I was left in the lobby. With a heavy heart I went and got a room at a motel close to the hospital, and waited.

Dr Weiss and Dr Mason would not tell me anything until four days later. Dr Mason bought me coffee and we sat down in the lobby. "Robbie is unlike anything I've seen," he started. "He's clearly very intelligent, and his concentration and attention span are superior to any other child I've seen. His knowledge of astronomy is beyond my understanding. But this imaginary character of his is also something I've never seen; I asked him to draw a picture of this creature, and this is what he gave me."

Dr Mason pulled out a picture and showed it to me. It was definitely not a person, and it looked like no animal I knew. If I had to describe it, I'd say it was a glass turtle with porcupine spikes along a ridge on his back. "What's this?" I asked.

"We have no idea. But he insists it is some other life form, not from Earth. Which is why we do think he's in need of extensive therapy."

When we were driving back home in the night, Robbie sleeping snug under my arm, I wondered about the future. We could not pay for his therapy, and Dr Weiss was not capable of providing it in any case. And if Kyxrry stayed on, and did not leave Robbie, what would happen then? I fell asleep myself but had no rest at all, and then Dr Weiss woke us up at our farm.

Rick signed off completely when he heard of Robbie's need of therapy. He barely talked to me anymore, and Robbie, sensing his irritation, stayed out of sight; he went to school and did well, but spent all his time in his room, or if it was clear, at the telescope. He'd taken to packing sandwiches with him so he could stay there longer, but he always came in by midnight.

That Monday evening he packed more than usual. Besides six sandwiches, he took three apples and a bar of chocolate. "Staying out long tonight?" I asked.

He looked at me and said, "Yes, I plan to observe Sirius with Kyxrry. He tells me there's something new to see tonight, something that will move in the sky."

I said, "That's nice, but be home before midnight," even if I wanted to scream out, 'Kick that character out of our lives!'

Robbie grabbed his lunch box and the apple bag, put the chocolate bar in his jacket pocket, and put on his cap. "Goodbye, Mommy. Say hi to Daddy for me." Then he went out and I

could see his red flashlight shining by the telescope. I sat on the sofa, and checked up on him every now and again, but then I fell asleep in front of the TV.

The morning came, cloudy and dull and windy and just like any morning in my dreary life. I woke up, surprised about having slept all night on the sofa. Then I made breakfast and called for Robbie, but he didn't answer me. I went to his room. His bed had not been slept in. I ran downstairs, grabbed the car keys, and drove like mad to Rick who was fixing a fence on the north side. "Robbie's gone!" I yelled from the moving car, then stopped in a cloud of red dust. "Robbie's not home! He hasn't come in last night. I have no idea where he is!"

Rick got in the tractor. "You go home and call the sheriff! I'll go and get the guys for a search party. Meet you home!" And he sped off. I drove home as fast as I could, then called the sheriff.

He was at our farm in half an hour and left the blue lights of the patrol car blinking in the bleak morning. He listened to my story, nodding, taking notes, asking questions, and calming me down. "I've already sent for Stan Peters, he has the best bloodhound in the whole state. We will find him. Do you have any idea where he might have gone?" he asked.

"No... he's always home, never goes far. He has been using his telescope lately but he always came in by midnight." The situation was grinding me to a pulp inside my head.

The sheriff's radio crackled to life. "Boss, we got another problem for you," the inharmonious voice said in inside brackets of static. "We just got a call from old McMahon. Seems someone tried to torch his field last night."

The sheriff looked annoyed. "You take care of him. I got a runaway kid to find now. Out."

"No can do, Boss. You know McMahon, he won't talk to us, he wants you on the site pronto. It's kinda weird he tells us, there's like black charred areas on the ground. Big'uns, like forty-fifty feet in diameter. You gotta come and see, over," and the voice turned into that vicious hiss again.

"Where is it? Over," the sheriff said, making faces at me.

"Ah, it's... sort of in the southwest corner of his farm."

The sheriff turned to me. "Isn't your farm to the south of old McMahon's?"

I said yes. At the same time another police car came in and out of it came a man and a droopy-eared bloodhound. The dog took in the smellscape by putting his nose as high as he could, then sneezed.

The sheriff looked pleased. "Tell you what Gary, Stan's here with the dog. Lemme start the search here an I'll get back to you in ten okay? Over!"

"Ten-four."

We went to the yard, and I handed Robbie's favorite sweater to the sheriff. He shoved it in the dog's face, and the dog let out a yelp. Then he started turning like a compass needle, and

stuck his nose in the ground. A few seconds later, another yelp. Then he started pulling like mad towards the northeast.

“Atta boy!” said Stan. “He’s got the scent! Don’t you worry, Rosemary, we’ll have him in a few minutes. Go, Mohawk! Go!” he egged the dog on. With his nose on the ground, and the antenna-like tail pointing up, the dog made a beeline towards the trees in the northeast. We ran after him, jumping over ditches and fallen trees and brambles.

“Oh Mary, Mother of God, please don’t it let it be what I fear it is,” I thought as I ran.

Our farm is on a slight rise from McMahon’s, so after we’d covered the half mile or so from our house, we came to the edge of the wood and saw out to the lower plain of McMahon’s. The dog started down the hill, but turned back and sat down behind Stan, whimpering.

Out there, just a hundred yards away from us, we saw three circles on the ground, burned black. They were like at the ends of a triangle; the circles had smaller circles in them, concentric, and alternately light and dark. The three big circles were connected by straight lines, maybe a foot wide, also burned to cinders.

There, in the center of the entire triangle-circle system, were the molten remains of Robbie’s lunch box.

House

Penny Jane Goring

House, you're just as I left you: crouching on your haunches, lit by a scabrous moon, sheltering the child who squats in your basement amongst the skittering rats, seagulls swooping at your unflinching eyes, the rose gardens splaying before you, flanked by Queen Victoria, cast stolidly in iron, footprints leading from her plinth across to the bellowing sea. It heaves in indigo and molten silvers along the beach made of beer cans, syringes and shifting mounds of pebbles – all serenading you.

I'm walking through your front door. Its unhinged as ever, swinging from its rotted frame. I know where your traps and dead-ends are lurking, my feet find their way in the hissing darkness, up the narrow staircase – a twisted, throbbing space. Your walls squeeze my hips, keeping me upright, propelling me forwards: I'm a bolus stuck in your windpipe.

You regurgitate me into your uppermost chambers, where I once existed at such a shrill pitch, clutching thin air astride a storm-tossing merman, on the surge and swell of these small rooms, beneath your groaning rafters.

Three steps to the mouldering cupboard that hoards my vital part. It's still hanging in there where I stashed it, but you've been pumping it hard. It's warped and blistered now, the cords I criss-crossed and knotted willy-nilly are blackened and deeply embedded. Gripping my sharpened scissors, I snip the ties that bind me, carefully, one by one. Livid scars are revealed and suppurating ruts – I'll lick these wounds and wear them, they'll form a carapace: battle honed armour. I sever the last remaining thread and my treasure thuds into my palms.

House, you're crashing towards me, flooding from your doorways: a deluge of broken things. But I've got what I came for, now let me out.

Pain

Marc Nash

Pain is personal. Despite what the therapeutic wisdom decrees, no one else can share your pain. They can't get inside your pain receptors and know exactly where the distress signals hurt(l)ing down the nerves originate from. They are only armed with one of those emotional maps, equivalent of the first ever cartographers; suspiciously smooth scalloped coastlines with nothing known of the dark interior, so they drafted gargoyles and behemoths to represent the unknown monsters. At best they can give you some coping strategies, some bargains for you to make with your own psyche. All anyone can do is hold the line back at 'reality' for when you are ready to emerge back from your pain. For when you are able to 'function' once again. They can't reach in to drag you back across that line. Their touch would sting like a Taser gun.

But writers love to write about pain. Their flawed and broken characters are usually riddled with pain. Pain probably forms a significant part of their backstory and underscores how they come to be here at the beginning of the novel. The novel itself a process of peeling back the scabs and knitted clots, as a cathartic process of healing. But does the reader really require (demand?) catharsis through vicarious reading of somebody else's pain? Twitter's 'GritLit' debate on #litchat filled me with grievous pain (alright, more of a nagging itch really). This subgenre seems to be about 'realistic' portraying of violence and pain as an unheightened, bromidic part of human interaction (Cormac McCarthy the poster boy of the genre). But in order to raise it above the merely voyeuristic, it seems it has to be clothed in some sort of Virtue versus Sin, Redemption versus Damnation Old Testament moral garb I thought we'd just about got shot of in these godless times in the West. Such homicidal homilies do not speak to me (and not just because I'm British, our streets are ratcheting up the pain and death quotient in line with the US quite nicely thank you very much).

Of course you can write about pain in an achingly beautiful way. Dan does it in his debut novel "Songs From The Other Side Of The Wall", in this case the deep pain of loss. But I'm wondering whether the writer can write about pain, not to produce catharsis (that kind of lets the reader off at the end of any novel, they've followed the journey, job done), but to try and produce pain inside the reader that they actually do feel for themselves, drawn from their own experiences. Of course, you don't want to make the experience of reading your book too unpleasant for someone to want to pick it up in the first place. I am just asking whether it is possible not to externalise whatever emotions you deal in your writing, embodied in the form of your protagonist, but to drive the reader into themselves based on what you offer them. That the book is more like a conversation, in which you draw out the reader's personal and subjective feelings (and pain?) That you inspire/incite/precipitate the reader not to stay on the outside reading about your character, but that your character gains ingress into their private intimacy (which is what the process of reading a book in silence is doing on a physical level anyway).

I yearn for my characters to burrow into the psyche of my reader, not the other way round. I want to turn the mirror back on them and make it a two-way window way again.

Is this possible within literature? To make the reader feel their own pain rather than yours? Seems a bit self-indulgent otherwise. There is so much pain at large in the world, why request a reader to sign on for a second hand account of somebody else's, without making them confront their own?