

TIGERSHARK magazine



Issue Twenty-One – Spring 2019 – Love and Hate

Tigershark Magazine

Issue Twenty-One – Spring 2019

Love and Hate

Editorial

Love and Hate, flip-sides of the same coin, extremes of emotion, one perfect in its purity, the other dark and twisted. Who is loved and who is hated? Read on to learn...

Best, DS Davidson

© Tigershark Publishing 2019

All rights reserved.

Authors retain the rights to their individual work.

Editor and Layout: DS Davidson

Next Issue's Theme:

Fantasy

All kinds of fantasy fiction are welcome for the next issue.

<https://tigersharkpublishing.wordpress.com/tigersharkpublishing@hotmail.co.uk>

Heilige Blut

By Robert Beveridge

The fans send wind to caress you.
A camel's hair brush against your lips
paints them in scarlet.

Contents

Fiction

The Breakup	
George Aitch	6
The Grudge List	
Tina Koenig	8
Home Again, Home Again	
Christopher Woods	12
Whisper	
Claudine Peyre	17
Safe Flight	
DJ Tyrer	20
Don't Let Me Down	
Stephen Howard	24

Spirit of California	
Ken Weichel	29
Dusk Over Panama City	
Randolph S. Stewart	35
Seasons	
Laura Voigts	43
Headhunting for Hpkinson	
Neil K. Henderson	46
Richard's Burden	
John Ord	52
Hate-Love-Hate	
Lucy Stone	57
The Scarecrow, The Toad...	
Diane Arrelle	66
Life After Limbo	
Jenny Butler	68
Non-Fiction	
Review	
Neil K. Henderson	10
Prose Poetry	
The Big Question	
Jan McCarthy	5
Poetry	
Heilige Blut	
Robert Beveridge	2
Prelude to a First Kiss	
Skyler Jon Thayer	4
Just You and Me	
Neelam Shah	7
Down Among the Women	
Abigail Elizabeth Ottley	11
Left – Right – Hate	
DJ Tyrer	13
Facing Future	
Aeronwy Dafies	13
When Someone is Someone	
Jeffrey Zable	15

Best and Worst			Don't Wait For Me	
	Amelia Walker	15		Robert Beveridge 42
For Love			The Love That	
	DJ Tyrer	15		Jane Imrie 44
Requiem			Theme From An Imaginary SF Pulp	
	Valkyrie Kerry	19		Andrew Darlington 45
She			Untitled Tanka	
	Duncan Richardson	22		DJ Tyrer 51
Childhood			Dentist Office Douche Bag	
	Christina Patregnani	23		Mark Hudson 56
Untitled Scifaiku			The Most Dangerous Girlfriend I Ever Had	
	DJ Tyrer	23		Jeffrey Zable 63
Opposites Create Balance			Drawing Toward You	
	Amanda Hipkins	26		Joseph Murphy 64
Your Chalice			Dance Teacher	
	Joseph Murphy	27		Eliza Homan 65
Gloria			Us	
	Jeffrey Zable	27		Jeffrey Zable 67
give and take			The Last Words of Appolinox	
	Laura Theis	28		Neil K. Henderson 70
Pillow			Artwork	
	Robert Beveridge	32		Daniel de Culla
A Couple in their Late Thirties			Alma bendita	14
	John Grey	33	Calaveras de los hijos del Molinero	41
What Happens Sometimes			Calle en Tudanca de Ebro	69
	Lia Di Stefano	33		Emily Land
Badly Chosen Lover			Photographs	7, 10, 16, 26, 34
	Martin John	40		Cover and additional internal artwork courtesy of Pixabay.com



Prelude to a First Kiss

By Skyler Jon Thayer

My dear, what is a kiss?

Is it a conjoining action of passion
between those who are in love,
felt by the gentleness of lips?

Is it a carnal expression of emotion?

When eyes interlace,
when the heart of each sings proudly,
when intimacy is played from this song:
is this when they kiss?

Is there
sensation?
Is there
affection?

Does the mind clutter,
if the heart flutters?

How is it,
to be kissed,
my dear?

Do you succumb into
temptation and attraction?

Do you struggle with
enticement to wonder,
what if?

I simply don't know,
as I have yet to experience,
my dear.



The Big Question

By Jan McCarthy

You must have been having an off day. Or else you had come to detest what you had taken so long and so much care to make. It was fine as it was - great and glorious and wonderful. I'm told you looked and saw that it was good. What were you thinking of?

Were you offended by lack of worship from all creatures great and small that flew, swam, slithered, crawled and walked before we came? Is that it? Are you that vain, that egotistical? So hard to believe: that the One who put playful dolphins in the oceans and proud eagles in the sky, who set velvet bumblebees to roam the flowers and crafted the eye of the tiger could have so utterly blundered.

Surely you must have come to hate us, you white-bearded Ancient of Days, you Hallowed One?

Why are we here? Why were we ever born? We're fully awake now, to ourselves, in the cursed neo cortex whence come our tragically destructive choices. The cat is out of the bag. We know it now. We are not the pinnacle of Creation, loving Stewards of the Earth, created a little lower than angels, as those who cling to religion would have it, but an aberration, a blight, a plague on everything. *Homo sapiens*, the name we gave ourselves, is the new Great Lie: *dulce et decorum est pro homine mori*. We're an experiment gone wrong.

Your salt and sweet waters are polluted now, and all the fishing nets extract is plastic waste. Your air is filthy, your landscapes mined and spoiled. And still we ravage it, your beautiful blue planet. Meanwhile, your altars are crumbling, and those who once sang hymns, said prayers, fall weeping at the colossal collective evil that, though we feel remorse, cannot be undone.

Rant over, I turn my face away and fix my eyes on this one small thing: a single rose, blooming in too-warm January. I cannot look beyond. It is too heavy to bear. *Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. I do not ask for love, nor for mercy, but for obliteration.



The Break Up

By George Aitch

"Will's outside again," Rachel said.

"Tell him to go away."

"You're going to have to come down, he's thrown himself in front of a car."

"Oh God!"

"It's not that bad, it was parked. But he's making a scene."

I uncrossed my legs and got off my bed to look out the window. Will was lying in front of Rachel's red Ford Fiesta. He was rolling around hysterically as a small crowd looked on.

I sighed; it had been three weeks since I had ended it at a Costa coffee in town. He had screamed at me and walked out, which is just what I expected really. Since then he'd been pulling stunts like this left, right and centre. Triple digits worth of texts a day. When I'd blocked the number he'd bought a new phone. When I turned off my phone he called the house and drove my parents up the wall. They pulled out the cord. After that it was letters. We shredded them. Three weeks. And now he made scenes in public. But he had to get over it eventually, right?

I leant out the window.

"Will!" I yelled. He stopped thrashing around and looked up. He picked himself up into a dramatic begging pose and wiped his eyes. "Go away!" He flopped on the floor again and started to bawl. "I'm serious," I continued "if you don't leave me alone I'll call the police this time."

He wasn't going to stop any time soon. I was going to have to go down there and talk to him. Great. It was drizzling a bit so I pulled my hood over my head. The whole breakup/reconciliation in the almost rain was so theatrical I thought he might have planned that too. Just like Will, this rain was wet and mediocre. I walked down the garden path. The crowd of passers-by were still assembled.

"Is he going to be okay?" asked a middle-aged woman with a Jack Russell who was curiously sniffing at Will's hysterics. "I mean, he's not ill is he?" Bless her, she looked concerned almost.

"No, he's just an idiot." I replied. At the sound of my voice Will stood up and tried to take my hands. I stepped back to get away from him and he, trying to follow me, slipped over on a bouquet of flowers he'd brought and since thrown at the ground. It wasn't the first time he'd done that either. He picked himself back up and looked into my eyes. His were red and weepy obscured by the damp hair pressed to his forehead.

"Sarah, please let me explain-"

"Want do you want?" Silly question.

"I miss you. More than anything else. More than life itself."

"Just...just no Will. Now leave me alone. All of you, go away." I said to the group. Most of them started to move away, though some were sticking around to see what happened next as part of their emotional investment in the goings-on of complete strangers. This was beyond embarrassing now. As I turned away he grabbed my sleeve.

"Don't touch me!" I yelled. "I mean it, bugger off." Kept my eye on him and moved backwards towards the house, not breaking eye contact. When I reached the gate I slammed it shut behind me and walked back up to my house. Rachel was waiting at the door with a cup of tea, watching Will's amateur dramatics. But Will only had eyes for me, unfortunately.

"Sarah, please!" he called after me. I ignored him and walked away. Rachel waved at Will cheerfully.

"Hi Will!" she yelled at him. I stepped past her and into the kitchen. I could still hear Rachel at the front door. "I don't think she wants to talk to you right now. Perhaps it's a bad time. I'm going to close the door now. I think you should leave. Don't forget your flowers." she said merrily, unfazed by the stupid antics on my doorstep. He'd leave the trodden on flowers behind him. I found them the next day after Dad shoved them into the compost heap.

Rachel came into the kitchen clutching her mug, her slippers scuffing the floor tiles.

"I think he's taking it well, don't you?" she said as I put the kettle on again.

Ends

Just you and me

By Neelam Shah

The world is a cruel, heartless place.
There is no one else but,
just you and me.

Left out in the shivering cold,
You are there to bring light
and hope back into my soul.
Just you and me.

Life isn't complete without
someone to love and care for.
I have you to love and care for,
Just you and me.

We stick to the end, fighting through
obstacles and challenges. Whatever we may
Face together, we overcome them together.
Just you and me.

With you around, who needs the rest of
the world, you are my world.
You make my heart young again.
Just you and me.



The Grudge List

By Tina Koenig

My husband is a list maker. For example, he keeps a list of fish he likes to eat. He keeps a list of movies he wants to see. He keeps a list of the softest toilet paper with a rating score of one to five. And he keeps a grudge list of writers and entertainers who've turned their yarmulkes inside out on the Jewish people. The list is comprised of individuals who he believes are hostile toward Jews.

Having a spouse who keeps a mental list of anti-Semites is unsettling. It's also really awkward when it comes up in conversation.

Recently, I read Patti Smith's book, *Just Kids*. It was a beautiful account of her relationship with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and the New York art scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Michael had been a huge fan of Patti, so I started to tell him about the book.

"I don't want to hear about her," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "You love Patti Smith. Didn't you once say *Horses* was the best album of the decade?"

"I take it back. She made an anti-Semitic remark about Allen Ginsberg and wrote protest songs against Israel. I don't want to hear anything about her work. Throw that book away."

I didn't.

Patti Smith has been in impressive company throughout her career, and none is more impressive than to be on Michael's grudge list.

Michael started his list long before he met me. It began with Yusuf Islam, the artist formerly known as Cat Stevens, who converted from Judaism to the Muslim faith. Michael also has never forgiven Bob Dylan for becoming a born-again Christian, even though Bob's changed his tune on that.

I realized something wasn't quite kosher when my collection of *Guns N' Roses* CDs mysteriously disappeared following some racist remarks by Axl Rose. Each time I purchased a new *Appetite for Destruction* CD, it would turn up scratched or broken. Ironically demolished.

The only musical artist who I know for sure isn't on his list is U2's Bono. The only musical artist who I know for sure should be on the list is Kanye West because of all the douchebagary things he's said like, "But my greatest pain in life is that I will never be able to see myself perform live."

I can live without a discussion about Patti Smith. I can listen to *Appetite for Destruction* on my iPhone with my headphones. What I can't abide is criticism and interruption—sabotage—when I'm watching Netflix episodes of *The West Wing* on the seventy-two-inch screen.

On the show, Martin Sheen played President Josiah "Jed" Bartlet in a Democratic administration. The character was fair-minded and color-blind; his daughter dated his African American personal aide. The show, written by genius Jew, Aaron Sorkin, tackled complex political issues.

Whenever I'm feeling uninspired, I binge-watch *The West Wing*. One evening, Michael entered the family room during the sweeping title music.

"What are you watching?" he asked, knowing damn straight what it was.

"The left-leaning Wing," I said.

"Doesn't that star Martin Sheen?" he asked, knowing damn straight that it did.

"I'm not responsible for the casting. He may be a crackpot, but he's a darn good pretend president."

“Do you know he raises money against Israel?” Michael placed his computer on the table.

“And do you know he is a 9/11 truther and total kook?” I lowered the volume.

“Turn it off,” he said.

I didn’t. “Can’t disapproval be voiced without a boycott?”

“No. You have no willpower when it comes to anti-Semites.”

“That depends on your definition of anti-Semite. What did Cat Stevens ever do other than make namby-pamby folk music?”

“He changed his religion.”

“Yes, he did. And so did I. The Jew scale is balanced.”

* * *

In an interview about their book *Love & War*, political consultants James Carville (Democratic) and Mary Matalin (Republican) were asked how they managed to live together despite their polarizing political views. Mary answered: “We mostly fight about the air-conditioning in the house.”

They have their priorities straight.

Perhaps if you consider all the lists with Jewish people on them, it stands to reason Jewish folks would want to make a few lists of their own. Of course, Michael is not the only Jew with a grudge list. Aussie Dave on Israellycool.com has an extraordinary list of anti-Israel celebrities, including more than 750 entertainers.

Are Jewish people expected to read the entire IMDB (Internet Movie Database) before making a purchasing decision? Perhaps.

I was surprised Aussie Dave included Elvis Costello and other celebrities nobody cares about, such as Bianca Jagger and Gil Scott-Heron. I was confused to find Jeremy Irons and Emma Thompson, who, if they adhered to typecasting, should be too uppity and polite to say a nasty word about anyone. Patti Smith is on his list; Martin Sheen is not. Dead people are included for legacy – even though they can’t do any harm or receive any royalties.

Surprisingly absent from the list is someone who always voices an opinion about everything: Donald Trump. I’m sure he’s hanging by a hair plug.

All this list making has motivated me. But I have different priorities. My list includes alleged misogynists and paedophiles.

The other night Michael was watching *Annie Hall* directed by Woody Allen.

“What are you watching?” I said, knowing damn straight what it was.

“Would you mind turning it off,” I asked.

He didn’t. All is fair in love and war.

Ends

Inner Images: Poems Of Art, Science And Self

By John Light

ISBN 978-1-897968-51-2, 75 pp, Unpriced.

Photon Press, The Light House, 37 The Meadows, Berwick upon Tweed, Northumberland, TD15 1NY, British Isles.

Contact: john.light@photonpress.co.uk

Following a lifetime's train of accumulated thought that arranges the poems in naturally-occurring thematic groups, this sizeable collection (often several poems to the page), reveals the inner workings of John Light's mind over several years. Where John chooses to start is significant. In *The Bomb Room*, the chemical processes of a sinister contraption prove so colourful that the artist within the scientist is "...impelled to paint twilight/from the chemistry roof..." Indeed, it is largely this symbiosis of artist and scientist which makes John's work so interesting. The artist surprises and delights us with amazing visions, while the scientist explains them in prosaic, sometimes anticlimactic, terms. Conversely, arcane technicalities and starkly 'scientific' events are illumined by the wonder of his artistic vision. Whatever end of the kaleidoscope you're viewing from, the world is more intriguing through the lens of Light.

From personal memories and experiences, including the ultra-subjective *Migraine Space*, which turns perception inside-out ("I see the world from outside. /I know the secret of existence/but no words can tell/this Shaman's tale"), the thought train moves through personal memories, reactions to art, philosophical speculation (including the nature of time, as in *Symmetry Of Time* - reminiscent of John Locke), aging (*Old Age Is Another World* - "I'm just a visitor here,/with vague memories of where I came from") and inevitable death (ironically attractive in *Pursuit*: "Why rush/through life?/Death won't/elude your grasp"), astronomy, politics, poetry itself. In short, the preoccupations of an educated mind.

And John Light's is a broad mind, too – the product of maturity. His thinking is not hidebound to one particular stance, as might be expected from a conventional scientist. From "No pretence: death is the end" (*No Pretence*) to "This disturbing revelation/of derided occult power/challenged the laws by which I lived/and broke into my shuttered mind" (*Uncle Arthur And The Almoner*) is as far apart as it gets, while "Death is the door/to the house of many rooms" (*Opportunity*) can be taken as the reader chooses. At the end of the day, the poet concedes, "We all must live in our own minds/so we make them/comfortable/as best we can." (*Living In Ourselves*).

There are no pretentious 'poeticisms' in this volume. John Light puts his thoughts on show as lucidly as plain language makes them. As he says in *Wysiwyg*, "So what you see/is what you get,/I'd like to think/our minds have met." Get yourself a copy of this book, and you are guaranteed a direct mind-to-mind human interaction experience. (Quick, while thought-stocks last!)



Down Among The Women

*By Abigail Elizabeth Ottley
(in response to a post on social media)*

To the person who posts brazenly
I want to rape a TERF to death
then chop its body into pieces
I say only this.

Behind your teased and tousled hair
your unsmiling eyes and — let's face it —
your boyish braggadocio,
behind the fury of your flying thumbs
and the absurd affectation of your face mask
you are surely more Roy Rogers than urban guerrilla
more Andy and Woody than Castro and Che.

And I want to know who are you to feel free to threaten me
while all the while concealing your identity?
Is it possible perhaps you have no clear picture
of the horrors you speak with such carelessness
that you, a mere child, have never seen
the monster you conjure from the depths?

To *rape a TERF to death* would be no small thing.
Could you do it? Could anyone do it?
The act of penetration be it ever so
brutal may not of itself snuff out a life.

How then — exactly — would you slaughter
me — supposing me to be your victim?
You may be sure if I were able I would struggle against you.
Though I am old I would kick and I would bite.

Be specific. What might my ending be?
How would you choose to despatch me?
This is not America, not even London.
A gun would be difficult to get.

A knife, wielded wisely might silence my squawking.
A knife presents less of a problem.
You would need a knife later — and a saw, most likely.
And, I think, some implement for hacking.
You will need also some knowledge of human anatomy,
a strong stomach, stamina and strength.

Even in death I would offer resistance.
A woman's body is not easily dismembered.
To *chop it into pieces* would take many hours.
Have you adequately considered the mess?
In terms of the volume of the blood you will shed
expect in the region of five litres.
Better bring detergent, a bucket, a cloth.
We women work often on our knees.

Home Again, Home Again

By Christopher Woods

I was not thinking about how far I had walked. When I finally did look up, it surprised me, how little distance I had actually covered. There was the yellow house with white trim that stood on posts behind the dune.

I did not know the people who lived in the yellow house. I did know that the husband was often drunk, and that he yelled at his wife just as often. I have heard it late at night as I walk this stretch of beach.

Some nights the screams are louder than the wind off the water. I never mention any of this to my wife. Somehow I believe she is better off without this kind of knowledge.

It amazed me to see the yellow house. I assumed that I had walked beyond the familiar things, houses and beach bars, lifeguard stands and abandoned sand castles, everything somehow essential, within reach. I laughed aloud, and knew no one could hear me. I laughed because, this time, like so many times before, I had succeeded in fooling myself. I thought I had walked as swiftly as my thoughts. To be honest, I should tell you that I had been thinking feverishly.

I was so preoccupied that, while I heard the waves lapping, I chose not to look at them. Some things, I knew, continued quite well on their own, without my feeble help. Without stopping, with

a faith all their own. I had also ignored passers-by, those few remaining souls on the beach at this late hour. And this, too. I had not looked up at the sky even once.

It came to me that I had probably walked a good distance, perhaps several miles. But at some point, without thinking, I had turned back. After all, I was walking east now. When I began, I was going west. Now I was heading home, no doubt about it, like an old horse. And suddenly I found myself laughing again.

And another thing came to me as well. I was limping a bit. My arthritic bones were talking to me again, singing a bit, letting me know they had quite enough of this walk. Why, if anyone was watching me from inside one of the beach bungalows, they would not see me. They would see a shadow passing. A shadow that limped.

This was not a pleasing thought to me, I tell you. My walk had begun proudly. My walk was one of defiance. In my mind, my walk seethed with a virility unscathed by the years.

The walk had begun after a fight with my wife. We are good, professional fighters, having quarreled for the better part of fifty years. Top that if you can. We are crusaders. The very meaning of a quarrel, over such a great deal of time, has become mythic, with a life of its own. It is a god we serve.

A horse of a habit is what we are. My walks, this walk included, are a kind of sacramental unction. Walks always follow a quarrel. A walk is always just a few steps away. With it comes redemption, but do not ask what kind, or which colour. This has always been true to me, but not to my wife.

My wife is not a walker, or at least not after a quarrel. Instead, she prefers to do housework. In particular, she finds dusting to be quite therapeutic. Tabletops, glassware, sea shells, those damned knickknacks she collects. Whatever is near, whatever seems fragile, whatever requires her attention. And, living as we do by the sea, everything acquires a second skin of salty grime.

Because we quarrel so often, our house shines. Our house is the essence of cleanliness, as visitors regularly point out. This has a down side for my wife, though. With everything so clean so much of the time, she is sometimes frustrated after a fresh quarrel. But she presses on, just as I do.

Now my walk is ending. Here, beneath a moon of murky directives, I see our white bungalow with blue trim. I cross the small wooden walkway that leads over the dune to the steps of the house. By now, I know, our house will sparkle. Life will begin again.

Once inside, I will say nothing to her about our quarrel, or my walk. She will refrain from any talk of dusting. She does not need to know about the thoughts I had while I was walking. She does not know how many times I killed her inside my head, and she does not need to know. A thousand deaths, during many

walks, over the long, circuitous path of years. This night too, of course. Bloody little murders, all of them, sensational private events, many of them worth a television movie. The thought of our lives, and deaths, portrayed on the screen makes me laugh again.

All things being fair, I am aware that I too have probably been murdered in my absence. She might have killed me while polishing a brass lion bookend. Or perhaps while she scrubbed the tub, trying to erase all trace of my bludgeoning.

But all these murders and motives disappear for the moment. I laugh and the wind carries my laughter across the marshes, toward the bay that glistens bone white with moonlight. I climb the wooden stairs to the house. I'm tired now, and my bones sing an audible dirge.

I can see the light in the bedroom. She has waited up, and the fact of this pleases me greatly. In spite of my seventy-four years, the light makes me feel suddenly young again. How can I explain such a thing? But it is what I truly feel. The pain in my legs begins to disappear. With half a sprint, I take the few remaining steps.

I open the door. The house smells fresh and new. Stepping inside, I wonder how I could have ever left.

Ends

Left – Right – Hate

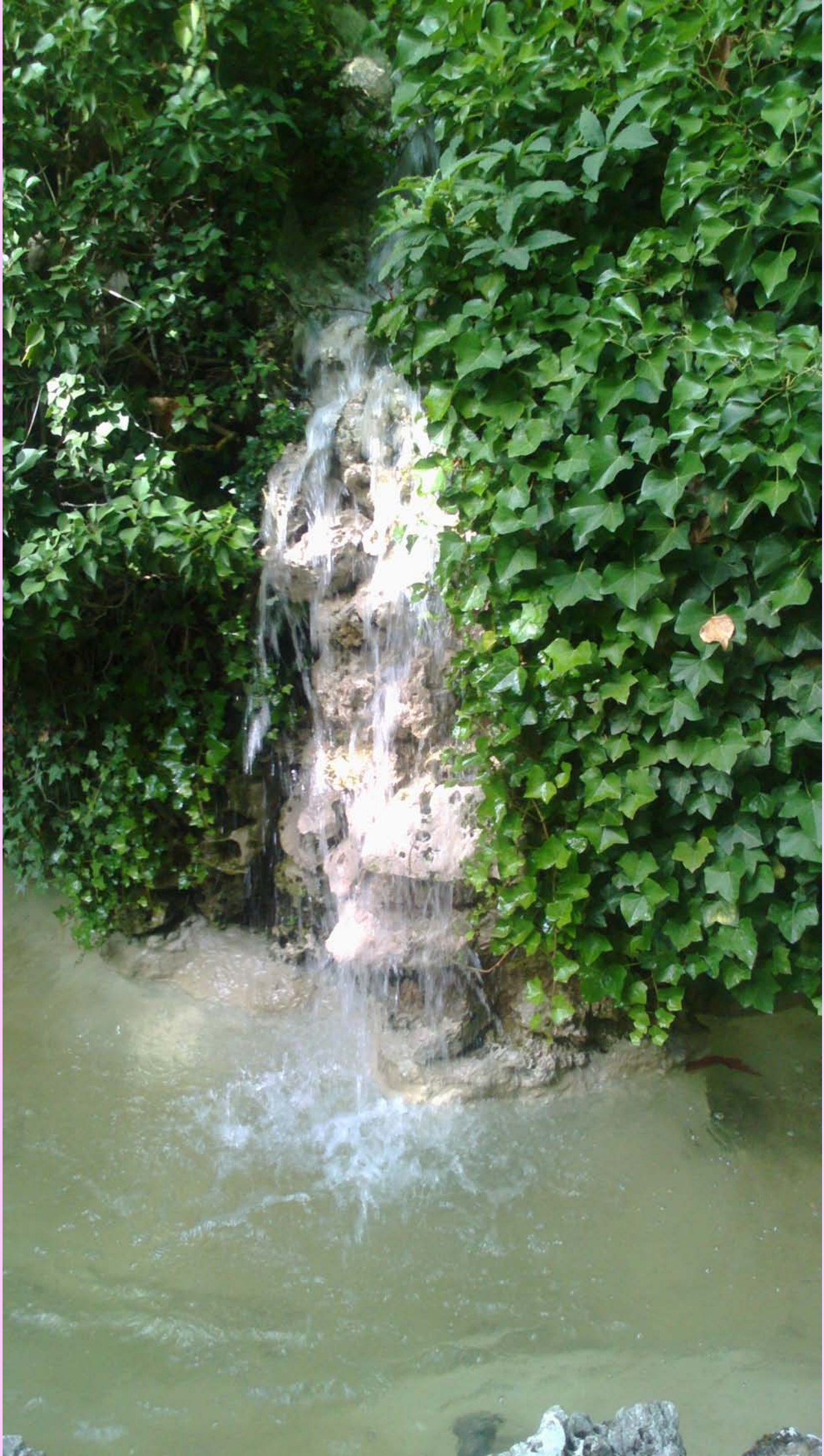
By DJ Tyrer

Left – right
More unites than separates
A near-homogeneous mass
Of hatred
Singing from the same
Hymn sheet
Yet each imagining
Itself special
Left good – right bad
Or vice versa
Utterly failing to grasp
The dull repetition
Left – Right – Hate

Facing Future

By Aeronwy Dafies

I turn away from my obsession with the past
Every day wondering how much longer it might last
Look to the future and what it might hold
Joy and love or emotions ice cold
Sealing soul-wound like a suture
A bandage of hope with mind facing future



When Someone Is Someone

By Jeffrey Zable

Talking with my cousin, we get onto the subject
of his divorce settlement and he informs me
that he gives his X-wife \$15,000 per month.
And seeing the expression on my face, he follows
with, "California divorce laws. They're merciless!"
And when I ask, "Why did you stay with her so long?"
he responds, "For the kid. I didn't want her to go through
what happened in my first marriage."
Sensing that he didn't want to talk any more about it
I change the subject to family members
most of whom are now gone, yet I'm wondering
what it must feel like to have to give that much money away
to someone who is someone you no longer love...

*First published in **Snapping Twig**, 2014*

Best and worst

By Amelia Walker

We speak of best friends
and worst enemies
But what of those friends
who bring out the worst?
Those enemies who drive us
to be better?
And what of the irony
in them being
so often
the same person
and that person
so often
ourselves?



For Love

By DJ Tyrer

Don't look in basement
Ev'ry person who hurt you
Killed them all for you



Whisper

By Claudine Peyre

She was standing in the queue ready for the theatre door to open. She didn't dare to look behind her, it would be too conspicuous standing on tiptoe just to have a good look at the long row of people behind her. Her short size had never been a problem, except in that kind of situation. Most of the time, she avoided crowds, they made her feel nervous with the limited view of the surroundings. So she refrained from giving in to curiosity. Let's play it cool, after all there hadn't been any promises.

The night before, she had sent yet another message to tell him that she was planning to go to the movies as they had more or less agreed a few days before. Well, *she* had agreed but when she reconsidered their written exchange on the subject, *he* had just suggested the possible dates when he could get away from his busy lifestyle, and then had not gone any further in their virtual exchange. That sudden disruption in their regular epistolary correspondence had left her slightly puzzled...

Their relationship had started three weeks earlier, after her rather insisting messages –she admitted it sheepishly- to get in touch with him. Enrolling on a dating website had been a difficult move for her after the breakup of her long-term relationship with the man who had broken her heart and taken with him all her fighting spirit and self-confidence. Very clichéd but distressingly real. She had nursed her pain for about a year and then, on an impulse, had decided to pull herself up and start looking again for a relationship, something easier said than done. She did not know where to start so she listened to her friends and went through all the dating sites she had heard of. However, after enrolling with a simple click, she found it difficult to click again and get involved in a virtual dialogue with total strangers. Her generation was not naturally familiar with the new tools of communication, a contemporary go-between linking isolated humans. In her opinion, dating sites felt like leafing through a catalogue, choosing men with either warm eyes, nice hair or a decent figure. Stalking. Peeping. She didn't particularly enjoy that night on unavoidable end-of-the-day activity but she kept returning every night to her quest for a possible happiness.

However, after nearly a couple of years of clicking in and clicking out, when she reviewed the few men she had met in the flesh, she felt slightly depressed. How could it be so hard to find someone with similar tastes or convictions? Not a clone of herself, just someone with manners and an open mind. Disappointedly the men she had been in contact with never seemed to quite match the details of their own profiles, the gap between fiction and reality bewildered her. On the whole, they were either looking for an immediate bed partner, or a silent companion for their non-existent activities, or else someone to take over their mother's/ex-wife's roles. Each encounter left her bitter and disillusioned, determined to put an end to these virtual relationships when her (far too expensive) membership would come to a close.

Her surprise was genuine when she got a positive response from her ultimate attempt on the website from a man whose delicate profile description reached her heart. She instantly experienced an intellectual connection. After so many months of disappointment, she felt over the moon. Writing a profile for a dating site can be a complicated matter. You have to find the right paragraph length, the right tone, no false modesty or bragging, a list of hobbies that will not deter anybody such as hiking, reading or travelling, the exercise had in fact proved rather difficult. Therefore, when reading the rather lengthy profile of this man, she found that his phrasing and choice of words could have been hers, she liked his writing style, and style was her thing, after all these years of research on literary writing, although she knew perfectly well that the use of subtle figures of speech did not necessarily guarantee truth and honesty from their author. She had experienced otherwise over months of virtual exchange with the few men she had been in touch with. There was this friendly man with a peculiar sense of humour to the extent of making his sister die twice in his messages, just to find an excuse to avoid a date with her. Or that one living in a boho hut in the woods, whose pastoral charm and endless gloating on the great country life came to a halt when, just after they had both met over a coffee and a chat, returned to his townie wife. Not to mention a string of inconclusive meetings with men who had nothing to say except criticism over their ex-partners, or aggressive words towards the “people of her kind”, people with an academic background. Her perseverance occasionally led her into uncomfortable situations.

Against all odds, she felt hope again after a few days of reading words full of sensitivity, cleverly sprinkled with metaphors. She enjoyed the somewhat obscure innuendoes that kept her going back through his past messages just in case she would miss something essential. The challenge was both pleasant and unnerving.... She liked communicating and his readiness to respond straight away to her messages even late at night delighted her.

Over the days a regular correspondence had built up on neutral subjects such as the joy of a prospective retirement or the excessive use of technologies in everyday life, with little reference to personal details. Their musical tastes seemed to match along with their respective literary references. Dickens was a favourite. Still they only knew little about each other's intimate life, a word here and there on the breakup of their respective marriages, or their common taste for red rose buds. These snippets of her own life story felt right and easy to tell although she had found it disturbing at the beginning, the impression of writing small fragments of a philosophical essay for some aloof examiner.

She often sat at night in her garden, letting her imagination flow and marveling at the easy accessibility into this man's thoughts. The dark night sky above led her to confide that she had once wanted to become an astronaut, a long-term childhood dream and one of her fondest travel memories decades later when she visited Cape Canaveral and Houston Space Center. In the messages following this light confession, he addressed her as *Dear astronaut*, it was both childish and sweet, and made her smile.

After a couple of weeks of regular virtual exchange, he had shyly asked for a photo and she had jokingly sent a long forgotten picture taken in Houston where she was standing at the foot of one of the giants of space exploration and one where she looked happy and tanned after her first summer break in the Caribbean as a single woman.

From the start, she had made the wise choice to be as inconspicuous as possible on the dating site and had kept her anonymity by using a neutral username and no picture. He, on the contrary, had posted several pictures and the mischievous look in his eyes gave way to pride on the pictures of him with his pretty daughters he had sent her. Surely, a proud father who posted pictures of his own children was to be trusted, and she felt grateful for this token of his own trust in her.

Gradually, he completed his messages with *a kiss and a smile* to wish her goodnight whereas she preferred the sound of a soft silent goodnight *whisper* in his virtual ear. Closeness with no intimacy. Just like a kind of mutual understanding between them.

Unlike her previous fleeting relationships, he had not made any suggestion about a potential meeting, writing late at night seemed to be a comfortable cruising habit. They often started their evening exchange with a *knock, knock, anybody there?*, neither of them wanting to be intrusive and keeping a respectable virtual distance. It was therefore with some surprise that she read one night that he was accepting her suggestion to meet her for a film...

The theatre was only half-full, she never picked up blockbusters when she went to the movies. The film was a pleasant historical story with a background romance and she felt it would have been nice to talk about it afterwards over a relaxed drink, or comfortably nestling in a sofa, leaning against a warm shoulder, but the seat next to her (that she had sagaciously kept free, just in case) was desperately empty. Damn! that familiar feeling was creeping in again, that sense of void she had felt over the years, long before her life as a single woman. Her ex-husband regular desertion of their home with various excuses, mostly pretty feminine figures, had unleashed moments of oversensitivity and distress in her otherwise calm and stable disposition.

Fooled again. The rapid self-confidence moment that had led her into this cinema was turning into bitterness. Her intrepid suggestion to meet him at the movies was turning into a ridiculous seduction flop. She refused to indulge in melancholy but disappointment was creeping in, somewhere, at the back of her mind. A familiar feeling.

She leant back in the cozy velvety armchair, relaxing a little while the long credits slowly rolled on the movie screen, the last notes of the romantic soundtrack echoed her mood. She felt like delaying the moment she would have to go home to an empty house, resuming her usual activities perhaps, to yet another browsing session on the dating site, just to cover up the bitter taste of failure.

She felt a light touch on her shoulder and a soft voice. "And what will you be whispering in my ear tonight?"

Ends

Requiem

By Valkyrie Kerry

I saw the long arm of death this week,
Stretching one step closer.
His wretched arm stretched out,
Taking my father away.

I saw the long arm of death this week,
Treading craftily on my toes,
No shadow he casts but lines on my skin,
Taking our youth away.

I saw the long arm of death this week,
As my kin sink deeper into age.
No colour or form, just a threat of mortality,
Taking our lives away.

I saw the long arm of death this week,
Morose in the fear of the void.
His cruel laugh echoes as we race and struggle,
Taking the hours away.

I saw the long arm of death this week,
Crusting over my aching frame.
No pity he shows, bones creak like old wood,
Taking our health away.

I saw the long arm of death this week,
Distant memories merge with today.
No reason he offers for our brief life dalliance,
Taking our hope away.

I saw the long arm of death this week,
His spirit moved closer to my heart.
No justification for a life riddled with death,
Taking our dreams away.

I saw the long arm of death this week,
As tears escaped my poor eyes.
His coldness engulfed me in a peaceful serenity,
Taking my soul away.

Safe Flight

By DJ Tyrer

The rain hammered down on the plastic sheeting like the tramp of the crowds who passed by each day denouncing some new injustice. The homeless who clustered beneath it shivered from the chill and the hunger in their guts.

A man paused at the edge of the deflated balloon and glanced at Ben and shook his head in pity. His suit, like the city, had clearly seen better days.

Ben sighed. Once, he'd been successful – now, he was a cautionary tale of how things could be worse, how the world could turn upside down in a moment and deposit you here.

The man hurried away and Ben looked up at the balloon's grinning baby face and wondered at the money squandered on it.

A cough returned him to the present. Or, rather, the nature of the cough caught his attention: He was used to the racking coughs of his fellow detritus, cast aside and left to suffer, but this was a polite 'can I have your attention' cough.

A man was standing at the edge of the deflated balloon. Unlike his predecessor, his blue business suit almost shone with newness. Ben was almost beyond caring, but it was like looking at an angel amidst the banality of the mortal world.

"Hello," said the man, curt, but not aggressive. "I'm looking for Mr Benjamin Goldberg. Are you Mr Benjamin Goldberg?"

Ben looked at him for a moment, first confirming in his own mind that that was who he was, then deciding whether to affirm or deny it. These days, the latter was frequently the wiser course, yet just existing was enough to condemn him in the eyes of the Republic...

The man had an American accent, so he decided to nod. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Crouching a little, the American slipped under the remains of the balloon that had been intended to mock his president and, now, served to keep the rain off the homeless.

"My name is Michael Teagarden." He didn't hold out a hand. "I'm from the US embassy." He noted Ben's sceptical look and added, "Yes, it's still there – but getting in and out is a hell of a chore.

"Anyway, your cousin has been petitioning on your behalf and arrangements have been made for you to leave the country."

"Really?"

"Really. I need you to come with me, now. You'll be taken to a safe-house and flown out the country first thing tomorrow." Teagarden glanced around, confirming none of Ben's fellow indigents were close enough to hear him. "Then, you'll be transferred onto a flight to your new home."

Ben nodded his understanding.

"First things first," said Teagarden, and he tugged the armband from Ben's sleeve.

Ben stared at him in shock. "But..."

"If they catch you without it, you'll be in a helluva lot of trouble. Except," he slipped a laminated identity card from his pocket, "you'll have this."

Looking at it, Ben shook his head. "He doesn't look like me..."

"Believe me, with that beard, you look close enough. Most of these 'People's Wardens' are lazy beggars who won't do more than glance at it; they're more likely to hassle me, anyway..."

While that was true, Ben still stared nervously at the armband where Teagarden had tossed it. It was strange that, as detestable a symbol as it was, he'd become used to it and felt almost naked without it on his arm. Vulnerable.

"Come on," the American said, "and try not to look too much like an 'enemy of the people'." He looked Ben over as he stood and gave a slight nod. "You'll do."

Ben supposed he should be thankful to the way the People's Republic had ground everyone down, so that, no matter how tatty his clothes, how weary his gait, and fearful his darting eyes, he was barely out-of-place amongst a broken-down population.

Rubbish trailed on the eddying rainwater to clog drains and send puddles expanding across streets forcing them to splash through, water soaking up via the cracks in Ben's soles.

Shop after shop was empty, despite the banning of internet sales, of the internet, the victims of soaring taxes, and the boards nailed over their windows were plastered with posters of the Great Comrade, the new Republican flag, and the flags of Britain's great allies – Russia, Europe, Venezuela, Iran, Syria and Hezbollah.

Twitching nervously, Ben glanced away, feeling something of what his great-grandparents had felt nearly a century before, a mouse amongst the cats.

Other shopfronts were decorated with crude graffiti depicting the nation's enemies – caricatures of people like him alongside bloated Trumps and priapic Johnsons.

Zionism enslaves us all.

Exterminate the Tory rats.

Build a better Britain free from prejudice.

He almost laughed at the juxtaposition, but the sight of a red-capped People's Warden at the next street corner kept him quiet. The great British sense of humour was as extinct as the Pound and stately homes – as dead as anyone who dared laugh out of turn.

The man appeared engrossed in searching a pram pushed by an Indian woman, for what contraband, Ben could only imagine. Many had already fled the country, having found themselves in almost as perilous a position as he did. *Inherently capitalist*, as the Great Comrade put it.

Ben looked away, wary of drawing attention, and said a silent prayer of thanks that the man's mind was elsewhere, hating himself, yet unable to feel otherwise.

With his world having contracted mainly to within the shadow of an ersatz Trump for months, Ben hadn't quite grasped how much London had changed in so short a time. It gave him an odd feeling to be walking along streets almost devoid of traffic. Not even bicycles – too closely associated with the former mayor, now in exile in the US, the last Ben had heard – they were considered symbols of capitalism. There was a joke that the city was to be filled with trams on the basis they could be called Sadiq-cars. But, in reality, the city was being allowed to slowly wither.

Gone too, and Ben couldn't quite bring himself to mourn their passing, were some of the great symbols of the city's one-time status as an economic powerhouse, reduced to rubble by gleeful demolition teams.

Teagarden shook his head as they passed one such pile of shattered concrete and twisted steel.

"They're pulling the country down, piece by piece," he murmured, softly so Ben could hardly hear him, "building nothing worthwhile in its place."

They walked on in silence through the empty streets, avoiding the roadblocks and anywhere people were gathered, soup kitchens and rallies, eventually halting outside a narrow house in a nondescript and grimy Edwardian terrace.

Teagarden knocked on the door and held up a card to the spyhole and, a moment later, the door opened and they were ushered inside by a woman who, for a moment, Ben thought must be old, but then realised was young and careworn.

"Go through, go through," she said, closing the door behind them. Ben was surprised to see what had seemed a perfectly normal door from outside was reinforced and multiply locked.

"You can have a bath," said Teagarden, as they stepped into the small kitchen. "I bet you're looking forward to one, and Mindy here will sort you out some fresh clothes, but don't shave – we need to keep you looking like 'your' ID."

"Can I get you anything to eat or drink?" Mindy asked.

"Tea, please. Man, I could do with a cup of tea. That's the one thing I've missed most being on the streets: Tea and biscuits."

Mindy gave a curt nod. "Sure thing."

"Well, I won't stay." Teagarden suddenly thrust out his hand and shook Ben's. "Good luck, son. Lots more people for me to track down, so you won't see me again. Someone will be by in the morning to take you to the airfield we use for these extractions. As I say, good luck."

"Thanks," said Ben, as he watched him leave.

"Here you go." Mindy handed him a steaming mug and a couple of Oreos; he supposed the embassy was still able to fly them in – they were probably easier for them to obtain than hobnobs or digestives.

"Thanks."

Another curt nod and she said, “Now, before you go have a bath, why don’t I introduce you to your fellow travellers, who’ll be making the same trip as you, tomorrow.”

He followed her into the house’s lounge, recognising one or two of the faces of those huddled there in the semi-darkness of the shuttered room, hoping to escape from the madness that had engulfed Britain. Ben just hoped that the madness halted at the Channel: Too many of the rumours said the madness had spread far and wide.

Of course, that assumed their flight made it out and they weren’t brought to earth like the deflated baby balloon had been.

He raised his mug of tea. “Here’s to a safe flight.”

How many of them, he wondered, would make it? And, what lay in store for them, if they did?

Ends



She

By Duncan Richardson

She wears her regrets beaded
in a necklace
or a corset of thorns

If she could be two years old again
knowing what she knows
all would be different

If she could've woken earlier that night
and stopped him tying the noose
everything would've been all right.

She follows a chain of word association
if we hadn't come here
if he hadn't got that job

no cracked record
she's a snow ball packed
with might've-beens.
a sparking amoeba
of gelignite.

She's the cat's mother
she's...

Childhood

By Cristina Patregnani

Unexpressed violence
lays in thousands of kitchens
Kingdoms of monogamy
Antonyms written
In columns
/shopping lists/

If mommy thinks A
then she says C
and daddy, who thinks A too
then he'll hit back B.

Broken dishes all around
the boiler hums silently.
A fish slowly turns into his bowl
/ the perfection of indifference.

Blankets of unexpressed violence
in the cold winter.
The alphabets muddles up
and then reorders itself
In columns
/upon the fridge door /



zombie lovers kiss
a little of each remains
love slowly decays

By DJ Tyrer

Don't Let Me Down

By Stephen Howard

Crimson carpets. Between my knees. Thin wooden support, minimal carving; thinner at the ends, bulging like the moonstruck seas in the middle.

I'd had to look down. The room had begun to spin. Often, a bad sign. The bar was close to empty, its rough-hewn wooden furniture, made from pallets, looked lonely, desolate. The people had escaped into the drizzly night. Not me. I could play whatever music I wanted on the retro jukebox. But I hadn't moved from my barstool when *Don't Let Me Down* by The Beatles had come on and, I don't know if it was the booze or whatever, but it was like being hit by a bus.

I had let him down.

And now he was gone.

His lips touched mine and everything was a different shade. A new order rose in that moment, one that hadn't seemed possible, one that promised *something*.

The barman held my gaze a split-second longer than was ordinary, no doubt assessing whether another pint of the Pilsner was a good idea. I smiled. No teeth showing. Probably goofy. He poured the drink so, clearly, it had been a charming smile. Lever slowly eased back. Glass tilted. An amber relief package.

"No one drinks this much alone without a good reason," the barman said expectantly. Light sparkled upon his shaven head like a halo, but his long, thick beard hinted at unholiness. He took my money, opened the till, and passed me my change.

Don't Let Me Down came to an end. I didn't know the song that followed it.

"Don't they?" I said, drinking deeply. "Perhaps not everyone. Some, maybe, sure. But they aren't celebrating lost love, are they?"

And there it is. The beer had broken me open. I'd dropped the L-Bomb and I could feel the words swelling within me, a tirade to be unleashed.

"He was up for a promotion at work. Management. Well, he was excited. But he's just not very... assertive, you know? I don't think he's suited to management. Well, I couldn't say that, could I? So, I tried to tell him he's too good at what he does, etc, etc. He saw through it. Asked me outright. I couldn't lie, could I? So, I told him I didn't think he'd be suited to it..."

"And he stormed out." The barman finished my sentence for me.

"Exactly," I near-cried. Worse still, there was more to tell. I looked round and saw I was the only person left. I offered the barman a drink on me, which he accepted.

Rain cried like tears upon the front-facing windows.

Our intimacy strengthened as he helped me through the inevitable conversations. Parents. Friends. Step by step, they were exposed to this new world of colours I now inhabited. Had always inhabited, really. But here I was sharing my awareness, my revelation. And he was there for each step and misstep.

"That's why you're drinking alone?" asked the barman. Scepticism as an undertone. Eyebrows raised. Forehead lines defined.

“Not entirely...” I said, mulling over how to say what happened. The words swelled within me once more. “He was mad. Real mad. And he went off the grid for two days. No contact or anything. I was worried sick, obviously. Calling and calling, but no answer. Then he appears at our apartment, looking worse for wear. Wearing a major hangover, more like. And I could tell there was something different about him, something else he was wearing, like he had a secret he was itching to tell but couldn’t find the words.”

Wordlessly, the barman poured us two whisky cokes. Big measures. I raised my eyebrows, but he raised his hand and dismissed any need for comment. I continued.

“I made us a cup of tea. He showered and changed. I started to feel sick. Not vomit-sick, just ‘there’s something wrong’ sick. And then he spilled everything out in a torrent. How he’d been angry. How he’d gone out to town. How he’d met some old friends, a crowd he’d wisely avoided for a long time. How they’d ended up back at one of the group’s apartments. There’d been sex. And he was sorry. So sorry. But the damage had been done. He just kept reminding me how angry he’d been when he stormed out. How I’d hurt him.”

These last words sat there on the bar-top, staring back at me. Everything would be going smoothly, as it had been, if only I’d been a little more supportive. I could feel nausea rising and couldn’t attribute it to the beer or the horrible knowledge I’d lost him. The pain of knowing where he’d been, what he’d been doing... it ate away at me like a cancer.

“It’s not your fault,” said the barman. Grey, serious eyes gazed at me intensely. I felt understanding in them, and a shared sense of pain. But then there was confusion.

“It’s not?”

“You can’t storm off at the first hint of an argument and disappear for two days, cheat, and be in the right. It’s not even a grey area,” the barman insisted.

I stood up from the barstool and wavered. I had let him down. I had let him down. I was sure.

Disbelief tinged my anger. How dare they? My so-called friends... and they had the temerity to say *he* was a bad influence?

Nobody could ever love me like he does. What we had been through, what they couldn’t understand... it made sense that an unbridgeable space would develop between my friends and I.

I’d outgrown them. It was that simple.

I took another step away from the bar.

“I don’t think you get it,” I said, sensing the volume of my voice rising, sensing its pitch inching higher.

The barman looked flustered, colour tinging his cheeks around the nest-like beard. His halo had fallen, as if the light around him had dimmed. Or perhaps it was my eyes, the light fading from them.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I didn’t mean to offend you. It’s just, from what you told me, it’s not your fault. It’s *his* toxic behaviour, you didn’t deserve that.”

I closed my eyes. Bunched up my fists. Placed them to my temples. I... I needed another drink. I opened my eyes and saw the strange sight of the barman on his tiptoes, looking over my shoulder. I turned and saw a face behind the tear-stained windows. In the darkness the face appeared as a spectre. And it hit me. The spectre was haunting me. Hovering over my shoulder and observing the destruction down the path it steered me along. The spectre drifted away into the opaque darkness, disappearing. I turned and stepped back towards the bar.

“I’m sorry,” I said, sitting back on the barstool. My hands steadied, fists unclenched. “Let me get us another drink. You know, I never gave you my name. I’m Thomas. Sorry, I’m a bit drunk, but it’s nice to meet you,” I added, extending a hand.

The barman smiled, nodded, and firmly grasped my hand. “I’m Carl, nice to make your acquaintance.” He poured us another drink.

The spectre of lost love disappeared into the night, floating away like a discarded balloon. Sometimes you'll be let down, sometimes you'll let others down. I didn't just heal in that one night, but I realised then that I would heal, and the scars would fade like trails of rain upon a window.

Ends



Opposites Create Balance

By Amanda Hipkins

Does darkness and evil exist only to balance out the good?
Darkness spreads like a wildfire over everything it touches
It swallows up everything yet it is unbiased, unprejudiced
It pulls even the pure of heart into it's bosom, it's clutches
Unless love is there to meet it, evil envelops everything
Lost souls find peace when love gives them new meaning
Love brings light and inspiration, keeps one forever dreaming
But love spreads slowly, taking it's sweet and divine time
Yet it heals tormented people until they become sublime
Suffering and pain can keep one down, make one blind
What once was lost now becomes realigned, redefined
Love's meaning is lost when darkness covers it
It must be cultivated until it shows, bit by bit
Constantly working, like a gym that you can't quit
You must be prepared to dive in, to fully commit.

Your Chalice

By Joseph Murphy

Stars speak to me
through a looking glass stolen from death.

So what will you give me? Flowers
only the blind can heal?

The wind is a stranger, glaring at my hands;
little known corners of the day ignite.

I descend into the waves and my bones glow:
all for you.

Take my secrets; my heart
is your chalice.

Gloria

By Jeffrey Zable

was in a few of my junior high school classes,
a goddess with big green eyes and long golden hair.
I always sat toward the back of the room,
so that I could study her from head to toe,
imagining what it would be like to touch
her magnificent skin,
put my cheek against hers
and tell her how much I loved her.
But being the shy kid that I was,
not once did I ever say a word to her
except in my dreams,
that filled those difficult years.



give and take

By Laura Theis

we might call you magpies for all
you've taken from us but for everything
you took you also left something behind
like those birds who trade gold rings
for forgotten feathers

you took away our anger and in its place
you left an incandescent rage you took
away our sleep but left red spots behind
our eyes you swapped our hope with terror
and you thought you were being smart then

but you left us so much loathing that one day
it will snake through your walls as the most delicate
vapour and choke you and your whole kind
in your sleep (so keep taking, your over-
lordships, keep taking)



Spirit Of California

By Ken Weichel

Tonight I am waiting for the arrival of the train that will take me home. It was three days ago that I flew into Los Angeles from San Francisco. That flight took a couple of hours and I could have taken a flight back home but I decided to take the train along the rocky shoreline and through those small towns still serviced by the railroad instead. With more than an hour before the train's arrival the few passengers who are also waiting, nap or read a newspaper. The silence, broken only by the squeaking wheels of baggage carts, fills this empty station and except for a few souls between destinations this station lobby is deserted.

The redwood panelled walls of this huge lobby rise from floor to ceiling, with the ceiling rising overhead as a distant canopy engulfing even the huge expanse of this lobby. The redwood adds a reddish haze to the beams of light streaming down from the windows high above the walls. Their rays attempting but failing to reach the floor which is covered in Spanish tiles that stretch in all directions from one far wall to the other, spotless from the tireless care applied by attendants with broom and mop. Seated amidst the unbroken silence and the vacancy of this station I reflect how it mirrors my state of mind(or is it a reflection of my state of mind)?

Several rows of huge mahogany and leather chairs cross the centre of the lobby. Each has an art nouveau polished mahogany frame with a soft red leather seat. It is their ten feet high back that surrounds and engulfs me in a feeling of inadequacy. Except for the one I am sitting in all the other chairs are unoccupied. Those facing me stand like some giant chess pawns arranged by a strategy I don't understand.

Occasionally an official, dressed in a midnight blue uniform, passes through the great hall and down one of the numerous galleries that radiate from the hub of the lobby. If two of them meet they greet one another with a slight tap of the bill of their hat, or they may stop to exchange words in a conspiring tete-a-tete. However, few pause on their transit of the great hall and invariably complete their journey without a change in cadence. Nothing about this place impresses them. Their deliberate steps alone are enough enforce all the regulations. Only an attendant, who is carefully polishing the wall, shows any concern about his duties. He applies a soft cloth to the redwood panelling after removing a picture to reach the wall behind.

Along each gallery a string of photographs hang in chronological sequence displaying each step taken in this station's accumulated history. As I slowly walk the length of the gallery, my eyes pause briefly on each photograph. I feel like I am reading inscriptions on headstones. Each photo evoking an aura of grandeur and circumstance. Decades of history revealed in every step. Each subsequent photograph hung along the gallery wall is like a window through time. I stand looking through these windows into history and find faces looking back at me.

The photographs show this same lobby on memorable occasions filled with hundreds of people. Men, attired in long dark overcoats and top hats; women, in elegant gowns with diamond necklaces. They gathered to greet President Roosevelt, or William Randolph Hearst, or Marlene Dietrich. The Royalty of Europe once walked these tiles; stepped onto these same platforms as they emerged from their private Pullman coaches. Their presence filled this hall from floor to ceiling, overflowing into the surrounding city streets. This lobby crowded with people, their excitement filling the entire building with cheers and salutes.

Each photograph, dated and labelled, preserves these grand events behind spotless glass held in a gilded frame – a frame of time captured in the camera's eye.

High above the wall's panelling loud speakers announce arrivals and departures. Within this vast interior, only the redwood ceiling and the Spanish tile on the floor answer, and they repeat the words like a chorus. From the beams crossing overhead hang immense wheels of light that glow day and night, but within this great hall the illumination never exceeds a perpetual twilight.

A large black board displays a list of the destinations, the cities and towns, serviced by the railway and their departure gate. The train assigned to each gate and its boarding time are displayed. *The Spirit of California* departs from gate D – *The Coastline Flyer* at port E – *The Sierra Unlimited* is arriving at gate G.

The names given the trains call to mind the era when the railroad was part of America's Manifest Destiny. The railroads pulled the East Coast and the West Coast of this nation together. They had a mythic quality in their power and their influence. It was during this Heroic era when this station was built. It's colossal proportion still amaze and although this station's architectural beauty is worn and dated, it still surpasses modern featureless buildings. At this hour its deserted expanse echoes to a solitary passenger's aimless pacing. Except for the few of us between trains, this magnificent hall is silent and empty.

It was three weeks ago that I answered the phone and found myself talking to Matora. Matora, my exwife, whom I had not seen or talked to since our divorce thirteen years ago.

The call that night sent me into a state of shock. Not only was it a surprise to hear from her, but more surprising that she called because she was concerned about me. Hearing her voice left me speechless.

I heard her voice pronounce each word, slowly forming every syllable. Her words streamed into sentences. She paused occasionally for my response, but I gave none. I was not following the conversation. I was immersed in the sound of her voice. The tone and pitch of her voice, the cadence of her words, the fading quiet of her pauses; the sound of her voice engulfed me.

Her voice at the far end of the line sounded like it traveled thirteen years to reach me.

A series of memories begin to play in my mind.

They begin with a rainy night parked in a car on a deserted country road. Matora and I spent hours curled together in the front seat listening to the gusting sheets of rain pelt the hood. Our heated breath formed sweat on the black windows.

Approaching headlights did not interrupt our urgent passions. We shared moments of total and complete fulfillment, in each other, and for each other. No boundaries separated us. We were part of each other and everything was for the first time.

The next six years unravel before me like previews at a movie theatre.

I left home after high school, I moved to a very small, two room apartment. It was in a garage behind a large Victorian house. I lived there with my girlfriend, Matora, who I met in my first semester of college.

Matora moved in first, her grandparents helped us with the money and household items. We both worked at part time jobs, I worked at a butcher shop at night cleaning up, and she worked at the college as an assistant to a professor. We did not have much, but we were very determined to find our own way. Both of us wanted to escape our parents' home and their way of life.

This was a time, in the mid-sixties, when things were just beginning to happen. JFK had been shot. MLK killed, and the civil rights movement was gathering force. The first news of an alternative way of life began filtering in. Being in college had exposed us to all the ideas afloat then. Music, rock and roll, and bands were becoming popular, the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and QuickSilver Messenger Service leading the way.

We were questioning everything. We had made plans to live our lives together and live them according to this new way of life.

The large Victorian house in front of us had become a place where students and drifters lived. We became friends with these people. Soon we heard all sorts of stories of free-love, free speech, drugs and ideas. They overwhelmed us.

We stayed up all night talking and listening to the people in the Victorian in front. It did not take long before some of the people that moved into the house brought marijuana and speed. We tried it all. Speed became a big thing, and one of the guys that lived in the Victorian starting selling it. Pretty soon everyone around the neighbourhood knew the house, and came there to buy speed.

But speed was not the only drug. Marijuana was always around and soon LSD began to be sold there too. Matora and I began to experiment. We would take some Sunshine wafers and spend the rest of the night walking around town, amazed at the things we felt and saw. For days we would stay awake and talk about the ideas and the feelings we felt. Everything was new and so different from anything we had learned in school.

Nothing we learned in school or from our parents made any sense in this new way of life. And LSD served as the final ingredient to break completely with our old way of life. Things began changing, nothing stayed the same.

The Crystal Palace, as the Victorian, became known, brought more and more strange and new people into our lives. Beatniks, Buddhists and motorcycle philosophers, new ideas in psychology like Jung and Erich Fromm, Marshall McLuhan, popular culture and subcultures, all manner of ideas flooded our minds.

And this was only the beginning. Now that we rejected our parents way of life, we began trying a different way, as yet unformed and unfocused. We just knew what we did not want.

Living with each other we formed a bond that neither of us had experienced before. With our dog we went everywhere, seeking out people and events that we thought would help us find answers to the questions we constantly encountered. The sheer exhilaration and joy of our union completely blinded us to the actual circumstances of our poverty and inexperience. Nothing else mattered then. There were no boundaries between us.

The next memories of our wedding ceremony, and of a winter trip to Tahoe when I broke my hand, are brief and fragmentary. The fresh scent of “White Rain:” the salty taste of her skin: a record by Buffy Sainte-Marie warbling in the distance, all pass quickly anticipating the final scene.

At our last encounter 13 years ago, Motora came over to repossess her grandmother's table and pick up the silverware. We fought at the front door over forks and knives. She yelling at me from the sidewalk about how greedy I was while I stood on the front porch yelling back at her how she was not going to take the silverware. Not even the presence of our new companions, who stood by watching embarrassed, altered our vehemence. Our lives together ended that day as we stood there yelling over a bag of forks, spoons and knives.

Clearly Motora did not call for a social chat so after some catching up about people we had known, she got to talking about getting together for a meeting. She never came out and asked me to visit her, but taking the hint I volunteered to take several days off work and we could meet and get acquainted again. Motora accepted the proposal and we set the date.

Not only had my curiosity been aroused, but I had to meet her again to resolve all that pain and suffering face to face. I held the dim hope of seeing her again for so many years I had forgotten it, but her phone call, like a forgotten dream suddenly recalled by some familiar gesture, rekindled that hope. The hope that something still existed, maybe remarriage, the hope that we could recover that feeling we shared. So, with these hopes and memories, I flew to Los Angels to meet Motora.

I arrived an hour late because of a delay in departure, so I was not sure if Motora would still be waiting. Working my way past the crowds at the boarding gate I headed for the taxi stand. On my way to the pickup area I saw Motora. She had her seven-year-old daughter with her. They had just finished dinner, but I had not eaten so we went to a restaurant in the airport. I had a cheese burger, fries and a vanilla milkshake and bought Motora and Lisa apple pie a' la mode.

While we ate, my initial suspicions failed to materialize and we relaxed into a friendly banter with Lisa contributing a song she just made up. Feeling comfortable with each other now we spoke of ours years since we last saw each other. We had a hundred questions. “What do you do now?” “You are wearing contacts.” “Do you still have a dog? We have a cat.” “I heard you were almost killed in an accident.” By the time we finished eating we had developed a friendly exchange. The three of us walked to Motora’s car, Lisa pulling my bag along behind her. We drove to the motel where I checked in, I took my bag to the room and changed my shirt. Motora asked if I wanted to come over to her apartment. Lisa was given a bath and put to bed, so Motora and I spent the rest of the night talking. Over wine and grass we exchanged stories, filling in the thirteen years since we last spoke.

We sit in her small apartment exchanging stories deep into the early morning hours. She sits in a rocking chair with a bottle of Chardonnay on the table between us. Shortly, we abandon our chairs and sit on the floor, as was our habit when we lived together. Motora finds a couple of candles that we light and place on the coffee table. We play a half-hearted game of Scrabble while we talk about our lives and discover how we have both changed.

She speaks about being left by her alcoholic husband - several times, about her living in a car for several weeks before she got a job paying enough for her to afford an apartment. She speaks of her constant poverty and not being able to care for her daughter the way she wants. She deserves a better life. The tiles she uses to make words total more than then mine - she wins our Scrabble game. The evening ends with an agreement to meet the next day, and a good night kiss.

It rained the next day which I spent reading in my motel room. In the evening we met for dinner - my treat.

Though we talked openly, there was a hollowness in our voices. We kept a distance from each other. This void between us could not be bridged. Throughout the two days of my visit, this distance was maintained. We could not, or would not, regain any "lost love," too much had happened. By the time of my departure we had abandoned all illusions about getting together again. That was a thing of the past; of another time.

I came back to see her, to see the one that I lost, lost track of. I came back to find myself, find the self that she took with her. I came back to see her, her house, her daughter. I came back to listen to her and see her face, her eyes that had held mine for so long. I came to catch that sparkle in her eyes that was always there.

I came back to find a desolate dream, a dream burnt to its core, a core slowly devouring itself, a dream without light. Her stark features lost all ability to sparkle, a dead soul orbiting within a fading dream. We had lost all touch and our kiss, as dry as sand, fulfills nothing.

I do not know about Motora, but all the romantic memories that brought me to Los Angeles were replaced by the words of a woman abandoned by her alcoholic husband, desperately trying to survive. Everything was too much; her job, her daughter, her finances. Somewhere, between my memories and her current pleas, my search ended. All those memories orbiting a fading dream; a dream abandoned, as empty as this huge windy station where I await the arrival of the *Spirit of California*.

The romance of the rails that has me sitting here in this train station lobby is just as lost as the life that Motora and I shared. Neither can be relived. Neither will die. We pass through them on our way to somewhere else.

An announcement over the loud speakers brings me back to attention. My train, *Spirit of California*, will arrive in fifteen minutes. Boarding will be through Gate D.

This night of waiting will pass and so will this dream that brought me here. Just as the train passes through the night, this dream abandons me. The journey begun 13 years ago is completed and now I can finally, completely, leave this empty station.

Ends



Pillow

By Robert Beveridge

This morning
the sweat of your
lavender, tobacco,
musk on my pillow
as I drifted off
with a smile

A Couple In Their Late Thirties

By John Grey

It was a perfectly harmless get-together
between two people
who had been strangers
before they sat down together,
(except for an exchange of emails
of course.)

He seemed shy,
she gregarious,
entirely different types,
and yet their profiles
were drawn to one another.

They skimmed pleasantly,
over the smallest of small talk,
ordered drinks and food,
his wine versus her beer,
her rare steak to his Cobb salad.

She was loud but sincere
in her shallowness,
he thought.
He was quiet, boring even,
but with hidden depths,
she felt at once.

They both understood
that they could never have much in common
below agreeable surface relations.

Dreams did a double take.
But reality started making plans.

What Happens Sometimes

By Lia Di Stefano

We live in two centres.
The soul divides
with love's conception,
imagines more of itself,
joy even fear its multiplied.

There is no turning back,
no reassembling its parts
when the bliss of multiplicity dips—
unrecognized by its other.

Walk away.
I could imagine watching
the back of that once treasured head
without distraction.

Could imagine
retribution in a raw flash,
the need to strike dead.

Red is the colour of passion.
Blood red-soaked hair
washed pink in warm tears,
Fantasies are stilled.

Love and hate, it is said,
twins sprung from the same womb.





Dusk Over Panama City

By Randolph S. Stewart

Sgt. Gus Cooper thought about his nice, warm bunk on the Columbia and how little he had wanted to get out of it this morning.

‘Warm’ a relative term, if one has ever slept in a bunk on any type of watercraft in the middle of the ocean, even with company.

But his woman never just warmed his bunk.

She warmed his heart as well.

He stopped reflecting to focus on his situation. He really needed to concentrate on the Terries coming his way by the dozens as he provided escape for the last good citizens of Panama City, Florida. Three hours he’d been fighting. Blaze, that is, Corporal Gremdon, and Privates Domingo and Carratt, all had been evacuated with wounds.

He could still see what remained of Private Manuel Burmudez near the sea wall, where Manny had tried to make it to Cooper’s position. Pretty sure they lost Mario Vasquez, too. That left him, Troaz and Miller to guard the east flank of the evacuation.

War is hate.

You hate the people that kill the people you love. At least, you hate that people you care for are dead, or injured, or displaced, or hungry. Most soldiers figure the other guy is in the same boat you are, and that brings a measure of respect. But you blame the enemy for your dead loved ones anyway.

“Out of ammo, Sarge,” he heard Troaz’s husky voice growl over the headphones in his helmet.

Correction. That left him and Miller, facing about three dozen Terries slowly making their way against their position. Three dozen minus another one, as he carefully squeezed off another shot. He was running low on ammo, too.

And the last of their grenades were spent an hour ago. The enemy surely knew it, had surmised as much, else they’d still have used them.

“Copy, Troaz. Get your pretty butt back to the pier and pick up reloads. Then hustle back or send a replacement.”

“Affirmative, Sarge,” she said.

Another squeeze, another fallen Terry.

War is love. You don’t fight, at least most people don’t fight, because you enjoy it. You fight because you love the people you fight for.

Three shots made a thud over his head. A fourth grazed his helmet and he ducked behind his concrete barrier before a fifth planted in his face.

To his right, Troaz back crawled to egress in the barrier, while Miller was doing an adequate job of providing cover for her. She made it to the gap in the main wall that until now had provided protection to the last citizens of Panama City.

He bobbed up a few feet north of his previous position, took two shots.

One of these hit the mark, and a Terry trying to get to an old Ford, its’ pretty polymer body belying the reality of its rusted and worthless chassis, stopped, clutched his chest, fell backward.

Cooper did a mental calculation of his own ammo. He too was running low. He figured Miller was, as well. Time to report.

“Alpha, this is Gamma Leader. Two units, myself and Miller, and our ammo is insufficient to continue through to end of mission.”

No reply. Just crackling.

“Gamma Leader to Alpha.”

“Gamma, this is Alpha. Repeat?”

He repeated his plight.

And took down another Terry, but he used three shots to do so. Once enough Terries got to that old brick storefront, Gamma was done. Old structures closer to his location had long ago been razed as a perimeter, but the Terries engaged in this assault were better armed than they had been in the past. They weren’t just using half-century old scavenged small arms.

They were producing weapons again. And their weapons worked well. They had a factory cranked up somewhere.

And Panama City wasn't the only place Terries had retooled. Intel said the Terries were modernizing everywhere. The colony America had reintroduced to Chesapeake Bay five years ago fell last month, and while they held Wilmington, long term prospects for that colony were dim.

They weren't even trying to hold Panama City anymore. The civvies were evacuating.

America was losing its last remnants one by one.

It would be fortress Columbia, the floating capital of the United States of America, that would transport the evacuated colonists to St. Croix.

On a side note, Cooper was noticing most of these Terries weren't in too bad of shape. Their mutations weren't always as obvious anymore.

Mutations? They were technically mutations, but the alterations presented themselves as genetic deformities, the result of being born into a world irradiated when the bombs had fallen. The first generation of survivors tried to save and redeem as many Terries as possible, they weren't even called Terries back then.

But the Terries had resented the enforced sterilization that the last vestiges of American civilization required of those found to have genetic defects. Few were okay with that. Irresponsible.

Then there were waves of mass starvation, the anarchy, the attacks by desperate starving Terries on the remaining food supplies...and mass cannibalism. You get desperate enough, you do anything to survive.

Another well placed shot, getting a Terry running from cover of the abandoned hotel skeletons to the storefront, was only one more shot fired in the war civilization had fought against the savage Terries for nearly half a century.

"Sarge? I'm down to my last clip." Nobody called them magazines anymore, hadn't since before Cooper was born. The clips were technically the little strips used to make reloading quicker, but the popular usage changed a long time ago. One had a strip reload. Not that grammar was something Cooper concerned himself with, except when Troaz tried to correct it.

Miller reported having 30 bullets left. Cooper wasn't much better off.

"Make your way this way," Cooper said on Gamma's operating tac' channel. Explosions to the north, close enough to be seen, meant Terries were exploring their way through the minefields there, detonating the explosive obstacles. The last two defenders had mere minutes left before their positions were overrun, with or without their withdrawal.

"Alpha," he said over the same channel, "Gamma is done. You'll have east flank Terries within the half hour, maybe fifteen minutes, entering Panama City's perimeter."

"We'll leave a launch as long as possible, Gamma. All Units are being called in to evacuate. You did well. God be with you."

"Copy," Cooper said. "You get that, Miller?"

"About time," Miller said.

Miller started a crouching run behind the barrier, toward the gap Troaz had made her departure through into the encampment that had been Panama City.

"Damn," he added. "I'm hit."

"How bad?" Cooper asked, providing three shots cover that took down another Terry.

"Shoulder, Gus. My trigger finger arm."

"Get outta here," he said. "I'll follow in a sec."

Miller did as he was ordered, but Cooper couldn't provide much cover. The Terries, frugal as always with their shots, were nevertheless providing pretty good coverage of his own position. Another slug bounded into his helmet, knocking him a bit with blunt force.

Cooper shook his head.

Another explosion to the north, not fifty yards off. He could see the Terries there, perhaps some of the ones who had been attacking Gamma's position, perhaps others, but it didn't matter anymore. They were heaving rocks at the minefield. The fight was over.

And they were coming quick, no way he was following Miller through the gap.

Nice thing about a Mariner's protective gear? The armor was made from whipped carbon-based polymers. They were shock absorbent, they took a hit pretty good as evidenced by the two hits to his helmet...and they float.

He was literally running through a drizzle of small arms fire as he launched himself into the bay.

Which is when he realized another problem. His armour floats. What seemed a boon a second ago, under pressure of small arms fire, was now a problem in the water.

There was no way the Terries wouldn't see him, and they could pick him off at leisure. His protection wasn't impervious. They would reach the sea wall in a moment.

The sea wall was comprised of ancient cement blocks, huge constructions that joined together at recessed joints. They had been built before the War. And the sea wall had an overhang.

With as little splashing as possible, he swam to the closest of these concealments. And against hope, he pressed himself in as deeply as he could.

He could see the shadows of the Terries on the water as several came to look for him. Unable to see him but ready to fire, they were leaning out as far as possible. Cooper could even glance up and see one's hair as the Terry leaned over. Another inch and Cooper would be sunk.

Sunk. Even in his situation, Cooper could see the ironic humour. You can't sink in Mariner armour.

Damn. His rifle slipped out of his grip, even with his gloves. He reached for it but, being careful not to splash, to no avail. The salt water was like a lubricant.

Terries kept an eye out for him for quite some time. They figured he had to be there somewhere. He kept himself wedged in the recess. His hands were growing numb. His body was getting cold. But he waited until all sight and sound of the enemy passed, then waited a lot more.

He would not be able to scale the sea wall here even past the outer fringe of the encampment, let alone that part long ago reinforced and buttressed by security measures. The wall was sheer within the colony, and shock devices lined the perimeter. It had been half a century since this was a busy recreational port, hub of a vacation industry. He would find no small craft to take him to the last secure launch site.

In fact, if he had to bet, he'd guess the last launch was already on its way to Columbia.

Hugging the seawall, he started swimming away from the encampment rather than towards it. He was more likely to find a breach that direction.

Sun was falling. Dusk over Panama City. With gentle breaststrokes in the increasing darkness, he kept as quiet as possible.

At one point, he passed near what he assumed was a colony of Terries, set up in the ruins of this old American city. Thinking about his briefings, yes. It was a population of nearly a thousand and had likely provided many, maybe all of the gunmen who had overrun Panama City tonight.

They were celebrating.

Somehow, he thought the idea absurd. Terries whooping and hollering, and was that music he heard?

Yes. Drums, and strains of other instruments. Brass? Who would have thought? They were acting like...normal people.

Eventually, the sounds diminished with distance, and by morning he was past all the impenetrable sea walls. He found a decrepit old set of rungs up the wall, near what may have long ago been a pier, and climbed up.

He was deep in hostile territory.

To be caught would be to be eaten, no doubt. He was hungry but didn't savour being invited to dinner in this neck of the woods. You wouldn't let yourself get captured there.

So, he hugged the morning shadows as the sun rose. He wanted, he needed, to see Troaz again.

A few of the abandoned structures were in surprisingly good shape, likely benefiting from occasional maintenance. But most had suffered a fate common to abandonment. Their infrastructures were collapsing, roofs long sunken in, windows long shattered from storm and neglect.

Much of the damage likely had happened when millions of survivors roamed a desolate countryside looking for food and shelter, and fighting amongst each other daily for scraps, and survival.

And half a century of uncontrolled growth of the Gulf Coast flora hadn't helped.

Cooper found a spot he was certain was isolated from any Terry populations and radioed the Columbia. It took him several tries, his batteries were waning, but he finally managed to get through.

"GPS is functional, Sergeant. Keep a low profile, we'll have transport to you as soon as we can." GPS would hog remaining power, a chip conserving enough of the remaining charge. They'd find him.

“A time frame is too much to ask for,” Cooper stated matter-of-factly. But it wasn’t her fault. “Copy. Thanks,” he told her sincerely.

“It will not be before 0200 tomorrow morning.”

Nearly sixteen hours. Minimum.

“Got it. Out.”

Keep a low profile? That is something of a given for you unless you are a big fan of bullets in your head.

Easier said than done.

The fighting had taken place a couple miles or more away. Cooper had, of course, never been alone among the wildlands inhabited by the Terries before. If he lived long enough, he’d have a story to tell. If it wasn’t classified in debriefing.

There were many of them. They tended to travel in packs. Troaz had told him they were basically either in towns, like the ones celebrating last night. Or in clans, tribes roaming the wilds.

Larger groups like last night’s celebrants usually stayed in fortified villages, smaller bands roamed as not to provide a stationary target. Little armies of marauding, degenerated barbarians.

Troaz was also a school teacher on the Columbia, she had told him this. She should know.

And no matter the arrangement, you could be sure packs went to and fro around the perimeters of their own territory. So, while Cooper picked a small beachfront structure with only stunted walls for protection to hide in, and this hidden somewhat by the forest that had arisen in the past fifty years, he heard Terries nearby several times during the day.

Once he even heard a gunfight, no doubt between rival Terry groups.

Cooper was a soldier.

He was trained to be hard, had risked his life in combat many times.

But here, he was alone, he was unarmed save his knife, he was cold, he was hungry.

And he had no more had a mission, no purpose but to survive. He was where you get when circumstance boils you down to your basic elements.

He ate one of his remaining protein bars. Like most rations, they were based on seaweeds and oceanic animal proteins.

He saw two Terries real close-up, close enough to hit with a rock if he wanted to. His armour blended nicely into the background.

One was armed with a big knife, strapped to his leg. Like a machete. At first, Cooper thought he had only one arm, but then he saw the stub of a left arm poking from the shoulder.

The other seemed normal enough and carried a big metal bar as a weapon, and had a pistol strapped to his waist.

But Cooper knew that somewhere, there was likely an extra part of a limb under the shirt, or extra digits, parts of organs missing or extra. Something was wrong with all of these mutants, these Terries.

Yeah. The one he thought was normal had two noses.

Well, he had a separated cleft but that was like separate noses, right?

He kept still until they left.

Night fell. Cooper worried about roving Terries, but they were no more anxious to be out and about than he was. At 0312, Cooper heard his rescue come over in his radio. Equipped with earbuds, he heard them loud and clear without concern the transmission might alert nearby Terries.

They did hear the approaching craft, or it was seen by a watchman. Something.

An arrow dashed harmlessly off his armour as he ran for the sea wall. But if a bullet hit the joints of his armor, he could be done for.

Really, he thought, bows and arrows? He wasn’t complaining, just laughing.

But at least one of the Terries had a rifle or a pistol. Again, his armour protected him from the shot but it knocked the wind out of him. If he didn’t make the launch soon, he was in trouble.

But two Mariners, fully armed and armoured, rushed to the top of the wall to help him and provide cover. Using night vision, they were able to force the Terries to stay down till they were on the launch.

The launch also was armoured. If they were taking small arms fire on the way out, it was bouncing harmlessly off the shell and the sound of impact lost to the noise of the engines. You don’t sweat much at this stage in a rescue.

You are just glad you survived.

Nevertheless, Cooper was concerned until the small launch had him well into the Gulf, away from St. Andrew Bay. He ate his remaining protein bar, helped himself to a bottle of water.

As they neared the Columbia around daybreak, Cooper felt so much relief, he could almost have cried.

Ah, the sheer beauty of it!

Literally a floating fortress, Columbia was both a port and a walled city. It had once been what was called a Nimitz class aircraft carrier. America still had two of those in the fleet, one of the four left after the war. The George H. W. Bush had been scrapped a decade ago. The old Ronald Reagan had been rebuilt, added to, turned into the rectangular floating city Columbia, refuge for the essential personnel rescued from the radioactive wastelands that had been America.

From aft on the launch, comfortable on a bench, Cooper looked around, saw the comfortable ring of cruisers protecting Columbia, he saw one of the Ford-class carriers near, and supply ships and warships were entering and leaving the artificial harbour past the gates of Columbia.

He noticed no helicopters or jets were launched today. It was harder each year to provide spare parts and fuel. There were fewer aircraft in the air each year. A factory was being built (finally) to replace them, but that drew resources from places like Panama City and Wilmington.

And they got the worst end of the clash with the Brazilians two years back. That was happening more often in the past decade, losing wars the world's nations waged to steal each other's resources.

Today, as the little launch docked in the bay it berthed in, Columbia boasted a population of about forty thousand souls. Capitol of the American people, and command to the fleet of ships that protected and supplied it, and of the islands and ports that remained the shrinking American empire.

His home. You get choked up getting home when you thought you might not make it.

Cooper had been born and raised on Columbia, had been raised to protect her, serve her, die for her.

At debriefing, he was informed that Vasquez had been rescued by Foxtrot squad. He probably hadn't heard the chatter about it when he was in the drink. The rest of his team had evacuated, Miller still in surgery. Captain Belafonte reprimanded Cooper for referring to Troaz's pretty butt in radio traffic. And chuckled as he did so.

Cooper's reprimand wasn't official. Belafonte had even winked.

Cooper headed to quarters.

Yeah, figures. He was told the details of his foray into Terry-held land were classified. No stories to tell for all his risk and effort. Just the initial dip in the water. You live for such stories to tell when you and your friends get together.

But Command was sensitive about information regarding Terries.

Troaz finding him accompanied him. She had been evac'ed with the last civilians.

"Hey, I tried to get back. I was ordered to evacuate," she said, matching his stride.

"I understand, Curls," Cooper said, using her nickname. It referred to the two blond banana curls she sported hanging on either side of her pretty face. "I wasn't where you'd left me too long, anyway. I had to clear. Hmmm, did Miller make it okay?"

"He's out of surgery in the port sickbay. He's okay, too damn ornery to die. Vasquez out, too. Man, he looks bad, but there's no severe injuries. But if he looked like an ogre before, you should see him now."

"Yeah. Captain told me." They were close to their cabin. Like an old-fashioned gentleman from an ancient film record, he opened the hatch for her. "Glad he's okay. I'd miss his ugly mug."

"Thank you," she said, stepping inside.

He followed into the small cabin the two shared as a couple.

"You're hungry, right?"

"Uh, yeah." He had eaten yesterday morning. He never asked for rations on the launch.

"Let's shower and go to mess. There's nothing here, certainly." She was right. The little nook that served as a kitchenette had a bag of kelp crisps and some cans of tuna. Mess served food from the islands and colonies most days, but it was too expensive for them to stay stocked with on their salaries.

"Sounds great," he said. "Let's rush through dinner."

"Too bad," she said, shedding her uniform as she walked gracefully to the shower cubicle. "That you're in a rush to get dinner."

“Well, Troaz,” he said, fumbling with the seal of his trousers, “I am very hungry, but I’m not in that much of a hurry...”

Their lips were together, and arms entwined before he fumbled off his trousers and closed the glass of the shower behind them.

Love. You go the extra mile, put in the extra effort to survive, for love.

Troaz was his rock, his purpose for living.

Long as he had her, he hadn’t lost anything he couldn’t live without.

Ends

Badly Chosen Lover

By Martin John

Started with nothing but he soon worked out the system,
now he can have anything he wants, including me.

At the start I was a bit scared –
you hear these things, who he knows, who he’s hurt.
I forgot all that once we got together.

A great lover can do that. You should see his weird tattoos:
naked women, men without heads, and that smell,
cologne mixed with sweat, and something else –
almost chemical, but so sexy.

We’re very close now he’s moved in,
except when he’s off with his mates,
I don’t like them – dangerous looking.
Wouldn’t interest me anyway, politics and stuff.
But I can’t stop him going out,
it’s all dead serious with him.

They’re planning a big demo soon,
says he wants to make his mark
says we’ll hear about it on the news.
All kinds of weird stuff in the garage,
I don’t like to ask.





Don't Wait For Time

By Robert Beveridge

You've hitched again
I can tell by the dust
etched into your face

you're here, at least.
I can overlook
means and methods

You know I'll put you up
for as long as you
wish to stay

and when it's time
for you to move on
I won't beg you to stay

but each time you go
you scoop a little
more of me out

and you will
until I'm nothing
but a shell



Seasons

By Laura Voigts

Spring

He had taken it from her. Without a question, without a doubt. He had stolen her heart. Billy, that was his name. That was the thing about the human heart, once it was taken it couldn't be given back. Feelings, emotions, memories. All of them were connected to the person and one who seemed to be the only important one. No one else could mess with him, be like him, or feel like him. Maddison looked in the mirror.

For two months she had not seen her smile. She felt like a ghost since he was gone. Nothing could bring him back, or the feeling that she had inside whenever she saw him. No one else had read her mind as he did. She had never been an easy person to be around. He never cared. He took her in every colour, in every way and with every word that she had to offer. Nothing else mattered when he was around. She looked at the picture of him and her. A moment in summer, one where there was no worry about tomorrow.

Summer

“Billy, you are insane”, Maddison said and looked directly at him. He just smiled and made her look around. He had turned the garden into a little paradise. Sand, palm trees and he even finished building the pool. She had only been away with work for two weeks. Coming back to the house to see him doing this was overwhelming. No one ever cared that much. Maddison had seen hate all her life. Whether it was from her family, the classmates she had in high school or her co-workers. She also knew that she deserved a lot of hate. She wasn't someone who said thank you, or sorry. She had been a fighter all her life.

“You asked for a little paradise, that's why”, he said and he didn't even have to explain himself more. She loved him in every possible way. There was no one like him. No one that would fill her heart as he did. No one who could take on her ego. It was them against the world.

Autumn

“Hey Baby I am back”, Billy said and entered the living room. Maddison was just sitting there, staring and saying nothing. Without a question, he went over to her and took her hands. There was a high chance, that this would have happened but he still had hoped that it wouldn't. No hug, no warm hugs could fix this situation right now and yet he had to say something. “It's not your fault”, he whispered and both of them knew it was a lie. Maddison had never felt so much hate for herself like she felt in this moment.

“It's time for you to leave me”, she began, but Billy cut off her words.

“I would never leave you. You might not be able to have your own children, but there are other ways we can still create a family”, he cut off her words and looked her in the eyes. At this moment he knew that he would do anything for this woman. He could never leave her. He would love her even more in every possible way he could.

Winter

That's when they first had met each other. It was a stupid winter ball as Maddison had called it, but it was for a good cause. Who could say no? Especially when it came to helping others out. He had that charm, that charisma she simply couldn't say no too. For him it was the complete opposite, if not even hate, he had felt in the very first moment. That was the essence of their relationship in the first place. He had hated her for being rude and she had hated him for leaving a feeling inside her that she couldn't ignore.

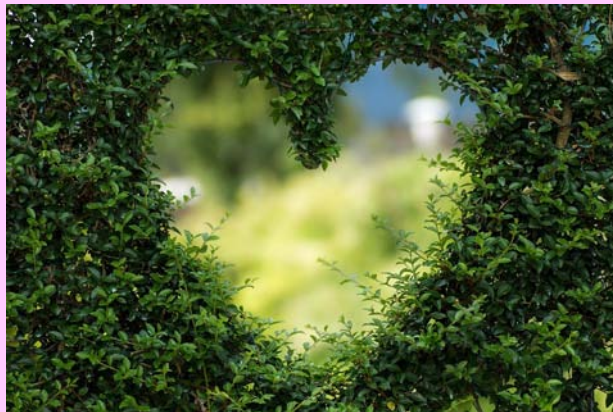
By now this was just a grey faded memory. What had once begun here had also ended here. It was another day when Maddison had just come home from work. Billy was supposed to be there already, but for the first time in their whole relationship, he was nowhere to be seen. No note, no message. The flat they shared together was just silent. Two hours later she got the call:

Billy had died in a car accident.

The Moment

Maddison looked at her work and took a deep breath. A little smile was seen on her face and she could feel two strong arms wrapping around her from behind. “Did you finish your short story?”, Billy asked. “I did”, she answered. “Your idea got me inspired so much, that I couldn't help myself, but write it down. I think it will give the reader an interesting perspective” she said. “So you want to give the readers a message they can remember?”, Billy asked. Madison nodded.

“Every story, poem, artwork or photograph tells a story. This is a story about love, hate and living the moment. There is a season for love, there is a season for hate. These are just two of the strongest emotions the humans can feel”, she said and sighed. “All together there is a season for everything and it is on us to decide, which we chose for love and which for hate.”



The Love That

By Jane Imrie

Hold me tight and crush my bones
The love that breaks
Light the fire in my belly
The love that burns

Bare your teeth and skin me
The love that flays
Pull me into your darkness
The love that blinds

Make me tremble and scream
The love that scares
Grip me as I slip away
The love that kills

Theme For An Imaginary Sci-Fi Pulp

By Andrew Darlington

long loop solar parabola off charts
vertigo up towards the crippled ship
impact into planetoid lost beyond Mars,
breaking sleek back across needle spines,
two stumbling suited crew thrown clear,
Jonathan Stone and Collear Marinetti
sheltering in darkness as reactors detonate,
this worldlet in vacuum the place we'll die,
circumnavigate in a day, spin between worlds
as reserves of air breathe away gasp by gasp,
too distant to signal home, or beacon Earth
yet the real horror begins in the crevasse
a billion spiders ripple in silver-black waves,
an arachnid inundation drowning us,
screams stilled in rictus terror spasms
inside the faceplates spinning cocoons
of freezing thread, spider-bite inoculations
numbing acid shimmers through veins
into a blackness deeper than nightmare...
yet it ends, in a web-density of waking bugs
blossoming all around us, snipping away
Stone and Marinetti's entombment, freed
to burn and destroy, to cleanse the crevasse
and stumble out beneath new constellations
the huge green orb of Earth close enough
to reach out and touch... realization comes,
a long looped uncharted solar parabola out
hibernating through freezing Oort Cloud
before spiraling back in, waking for the sun,
they saved us as they save their own
and we torch them into their own hades,
sleeping how long? calculate position of stars,
10,000-years, so who'll answer our signal?
who will now ascend from this strange
Earth in response to our beacon...?

Head-Hunting For Hopkinson

Or, The Devil Dines Out

By Neil K. Henderson

1. **HOPKINSON'S DIARY, April 1st.**

It seems like forever, but at last the winter is over. Now is the time, Hopkinson, to brace yourself to endure yet another awful spring. And even as you weather that damp, dreary season of despair, you know it only ends in the hell-baked misery of summer. And summer will eventually give up its ghost to the foetid corruption of a slow, well-rotted fall; which in turn must yield to the inevitable onset of a fresh new winter's mercy-killing ice. Oh, how you love Nature, Hopkinson – she's so full of little surprises.

On and on it goes. The persistence of existence through the cycle of the seasons. Waiting for your bus in the rain. Sweating for the bus in the blistering heat. Probing foggy darkness for remote signs of bus. Trudging through slush to that same dismal bus-stop to await transportation to the apotheosis of pointlessness, to hell on earth, to a place where time itself stands still – to the city centre Jobclub. Purgatory. Remorseless, soul-destroying torture.

On and on it goes: "I enclose a copy of my CV... I am available for interview at your convenience... I would die for a job with your firm... I relish the challenge of shovelling shit... I am willing to dig my own grave... I remain your grovelling inferior... your humble would-be slave... your constant potential yes-man. Yours faithfully, Victor Hugo Hopkinson MA."

2. **INFERNAL MEMO – STAN A. to GOD Z.**

Ah! Springtime in Hell! I love it. Watching my long-stay guests popping and crackling away, while all around in the world above are buds bursting and flowers blooming. O the wailing! O the gnashing of teeth! The cries of the damned, and lament of the gluttonous bean-eaters: "Farting! Farting! All the time, farting! Alackaday! How we suffer for our sins!" (Wait till they have their buttocks stitched together for Lent. *That'll* make their greedy little eyes pop out!) It gives me an appetite for life, so it does. A zest for spiritual nourishment. A hunger for souls.

So, after a light breakfast of bastards on toast, I was ready for the off. I was picking up useable despair from some self-pitying bod, Hopkinson, and decided I might manage to fit him in – between starting a cooking new famine in one of these hot places, and rekindling the spark of warfare in a once belligerent province mysteriously come over peaceable-like of late. I couldn't believe it when I'd been up there for the winter solstice. There were people wishing each other well, and smiling, and exhibiting good will to All Men. It certainly wasn't *my* idea of a seasonal pub bombing...

Yes, a nice little Hopkinson sandwich, thinly spread between layers of discord and want. A salty snack to keep Jehovah and his Witnesses from the door and satisfy the Demon Within. Unemployed wallah, this Hopkinson. In one of those 'jobby clubs' - prepared to do *anything*, and ripe for the picking. Total desperation stakes. Yes, there'd be tears before bus-ticket time, or my name's not Stan Abandonhope.

3. **PATIENT RECORD: SMUDGER**

A Smudger wakes up in his cave, one bedazzling spring morning, and – *hey presto* - is instantly overcome by the desire to boil some Hopkinsons. I can't explain it, Doctor. Up to now, I've always been a Big, Harmless Old Smudger. But there it is. Call it what you like – an imperative from the subconscious; bedevilment by unknown forces; or downright animal bloodlust – but boil some Hopkinsons was what I had to do. Even a single Hopkinson would suffice. I was *driven*.

So, out I flew from the mountain on a puff of hot air, letting my fancy direct me to a settlement. I hung on a thermal, higher than a kite above the town, and my telepathy did the walking – picked up thought waves from earthbound humanity. I wasn't long locating this centre of concentrated activity. Or rather, it located me.

"Getting a job is a job in itself," it said. "Get on your bike."

"Climb every mountain," it said. "One more river to cross."

"Fuck me, I'm knackered," it said. "Over the hill."

This sudden onslaught of bad vibes made me mentally jump – knocked my Smudger's serenity right off its perch, Doctor. But, almost immediately, the slow, steady drag of monotony drew me down from the clouds into a dull depression, which I later found was called the *Job Club*. During my descent, I accidentally intercepted a radio bulletin from the surrounding ether. "Vehicles have been brought to a standstill in the city centre," it crackled, "due to a broken-down old man sitting weeping by the road because even the traffic lights are a failure..." This was a real No Go area; a place of misery; of lost souls and suffering.

And as I neared ground level, I became tuned to the thoughts of one 'being' in particular. "Enclose CV... Available for interview... Shovel shit... Dig grave..." Over and over, the same thing: "Enclose CV... Available for interview... Shovel shit... Dig grave... Enclose CV... Available for interview..." Then it hit me. A squiggly message at the end. Something hardly bothering to make itself known. A decipherable mark. A signature. A name. A Hopkinson! Indeed, an eminently edible Hopkinson, suitably downcast and softened by grovelling. Ideal for boiling up and slowly sucking from the bone.

4. HOPKINSON'S DIARY

What's it all about? I ask you. That Belinda Ovenbottom's getting overfamiliar. Here I am, desperately knocking my pan in, applying for every post that's going, and *she* thinks it's a dating agency! Makes remarks about my past 'experiences', and how she prefers older men, and how you get really good value for your dole money at McTumphrey's Burger Bar. I know it's not politically correct, but I've *never* been attracted to fat women with beards. I like to think I've got an open mind, but *Belinda Ovenbottom* – the loathsome B.O.! That disgusting conglomeration of hideously inflated giblet bags! She's... grotesque. "Frankly, Belinda," I said, "I'd rather go out to dinner with a bucket of hens' membranes." I hope she takes the hint.

I wish I could get out of here. Organise an escape committee. I saw this gravedigger's job in the council list today. Well, you get so fed up, you'll apply for anything. (And me with a degree in Literary Finesse, offering to dig holes for planting stiffs.) They have to be planted down deep too. They don't just rot away overnight. I read an article – it can take maybe eight to twelve *years* for a body to decompose completely, depending how deep it's buried. That's longer than I've been out of work. Gravedigging is a skilled job... an *art*, really. And, of course, a service to the community. Might as well go for it. Fill up the Job Leads Log, if nothing else.

Lucky bastards, these dead people. Lucky fucking sods... No worries for them, lying up in the Necropolis. No more going through the motions like me. Wading through shit. It's just not fair. From the moment you're born, you're *stuck* here. You don't get a lot of choice – it's not that easy to die. Things tie you down; keep you anchored to the so-called 'material' dimension. I mean, take your skeleton. Fancy having *bones* right *inside* you... keeping all the meat together. How the hell can your spirit escape without a struggle, with all that stuff holding it in?

Looks like this is your life, Hopkinson. In the flesh. Mortified... What *is* this dump? What is this *animality* that we have to go through? So much to do to keep this body *alive*, so the spirit stays imprisoned here. Why? All the misery you experience, just to keep body and soul together. Writing for jobs. Taking rejection. Always at the beck and call of others... I feel like fading into a bottle of Indian ink on the shelf of some dusty, forgotten newsagent's on the corner of a bomb-site overlooked by developers; there to wait, unwanted and unused, till Eternity ends; outlasting the world, the universe, and eventually even God.

5. STAN A. to GOD Z.

I have a dream. The supreme post-apocalypse gourmet buffet for discerning palates. I mean, as it is now - and has been all these eons – the Infernal Kitchens are no better than a transport caff for lost souls. That cook is hopeless. In fact, it's all totally hopeless. I suppose that's the point: the ultimate significance of dregs. There's no variety at all. Take Tuesday. Tuesday is totalitarians. They taste the same, no matter what you do with them: boiled totalitarians, French fried totalitarians, roast totalitarians, baked totalitarians (jackets on or off). And dessert is just as dull: steamed string vests in a kind of treacle and mushroom sauce. Strewth, it's horrible – but you can't exactly complain to the management. In Hell, no-one can hear you munch your vest.

Oh, how I yearn for something truly spectacular. Something fit for a universally awesome appetite. A grand Armageddon aftermath banquet. I can see it now. Death itself frozen in Eternity. Laid out before me to feast upon forever. A jungle of vivid colours. A garish landscape of mutated vegetation and corrupted creation. Everywhere, the destroying Germ is master – its gaudy film smeared across the scene like a peepshow slide slipped out of place. Nature's majesty reduced to a freeze-dried offering on an unclean plate. An oasis of decay, preserved at the height of virulence.

In a stagnant pool, menaced by the emerald glare of giant razor weeds and poison algae, a dead tiger floats; expressionless, inert. A flame held in limbo, a King dethroned and thrown away, a permanently imperishable corpse, since even my bacteria must die to keep my trophy fresh within the dream.

Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright
In the forest of my spite,
What immortal hand or eye
Maintains thy freak sterility?

But wait. There's another figure in the picture: motionless and green, like a huge parrot perched on a branch, head cocked with an eye on something in the pool. It has big scaly claws. The eye blinks. (Why isn't this creature dead, like everything else here? I really *must* revise this dream.) Hang on... I follow the eye past the floating tiger, and there's a hint of something pink further off. The shape of a human body, drifting just below the surface slime.

Of course! Hopkinson! His morbid despondency is the catalyst I need. All that negative energy can be converted into mass destruction. He is the key – the very Host Incarnate of my projected feast. I have *got* to have his soul! *Oh depraved new world, that has such Hopkinsons in it!* (Butter me another choirboy, Vicar, and lead me to the promised land!)

6. *PATIENT RECORD: SMUDGER*

Well, it had all seemed so straightforward, Doctor. All I had to do was turn up at this *Job Club* disguised as a Social Security inspector: they're *expected* to be green and scaly. I had my plan of action all worked out. I'd take the Team Leader aside and 'recommend' he nip out with the petty cash and acquire a big pot or cauldron for the premises. Suggest it would boost his career if *his* got known as the Job Club with everything – *including* the kitchen sink, er, pot. These Job Clubs are like the Holy Roman Empire, Doctor. They're neither jobs, nor clubs, nor... holes. So every little extra helps.

"Anyway," I told him, "at least the members will have something to boil their socks in, if they have an interview coming up."

That bit of the plan seemed to go OK. That nice Mr. Winbest was out of there before you could say *brawn*. So far, so good. Hopkinson himself, though, wasn't such an easy prospect. What a miserable sod, Doctor. I tried to engage him in casual conversation:

"Been looking for work long?"

"Eight to twelve years," he mutters.

"Ah, well. Maybe something'll turn up..."

Silence.

"Tried all the options, have you?"

More silence.

"Ever thought of *getting boiled*?"

Not even a flicker of interest. This guy Hopkinson was in a bad way. Totally withdrawn into himself. That's a definite danger sign. People like that turn funny. Either that, or they top themselves. Boiling him would be doing him a favour.

7. *HOPKINSON'S DIARY*

Things are getting worse. I went to the supermarket yesterday, to look for women. That's what they recommend in the *Kneejerker*. As usual, I forgot to take a list. So, by the time I was halfway round, I'd completely forgotten what I'd gone in for in the first place. I ended up with a load of fucking *groceries*! Pathetic. And just to rub salt in the wound

– on my way home, struggling with my poly bags, this wee boy poked his head through some railings and yelled, "Hey, Mister! How's yer love life?" Is it really *that* obvious?

And that's not all. Things have been getting thoroughly irritating at the Jobclub. First, this Smudger bloke keeps blethering about his boil. As if anyone cares. And the cheeky bastard's even started asking if I fancy a hot bath. Is he suggesting I have a *body odour* problem? Probably a pervert. Lot of them about. Then, if that's not bad enough, this Stan Abandonhope turns up with a tiger in his tank – all fired up and raring to go. Insurance salesman type. He's on at me to sign some Big Deal business scheme. A whole new way of life. Utterly alter my perceptions.

They seem to be vying for my attention. but I keep myself to myself. I suppose I've always been a loner. I get this feeling – like in some past life I'd been a sort of *Cosmic King*. Omnipotent in my own private universe. Always alone, but beleaguered by advisors. All the options laid before me. But when it came to the Crunch Decisions - alone. Always alone. *I want to be alone*. That's the effect of these newcomers on me, rampant grandiosity included. I daresay it's natural enough. After five minutes, *anyone* would feel superior to these pillocks. What a bloody life. I might as well be dead – it's finally coming to that.

8. *PATIENT RECORD: SMUDGER*

It all started to go horribly wrong, Doctor, the moment Stan Abandonhope appeared. I didn't like the look of him from the start. He had no face. That's always a bad sign. They say the Devil has no face. And he lost no time getting between me and Hopkinson: trying to head-hunt him for some get-rich-quick futures consortium, as far as I could make out. Never any ink in his fountain pen, though... odd, that.

Then, my disguise was wearing thin. Some of the Job Clubbers actually started staring open-mouthed. I don't know if Mr. Winbest suspected anything, but he *had* remarked on my continuing presence over these last few weeks, and sometimes asked if it was really necessary to keep the cauldron on the boil at all times. Still, he was such an obliging fellow. (The pills obviously helped him. *Pro-* something, they're called.) It's a real pity he wasn't a Hopkinson himself. And, to be fair, he went to great pains looking up his family tree for me, to see if there might be any Hopkinson blood in his veins at all. Oh, Doctor, Doctor – it was all such a waste. A pitiful, damnable, bureaucratic bloody waste! If only I could have got Hopkinson away from Stan the Man for five minutes...

9. *STAN A. to GOD Z.*

A Smudger! There's a bleeding Smudger at the jobby club – trying to boil *my* Hopkinson! What a diabolical liberty! But that explains the anomaly in my Apocalyptic Picnic vision. It wasn't a parrot on the branch, blinking inappropriately. I was picking up psychic interference from this green, scaly reprobate, intent on having Hopkinson for himself. He's even got a bubbling cauldron on the go in the front office. That Winbest doesn't care *what* goes on - so long as everyone sends a load of spec letters and CVs every day. Basically, this jobby club caper is like potty training for the unemployed. A lot of striving and straining, followed by a hearty round of applause if anyone has a breakthrough. (Reminds me a bit of my gluttonous bean-eaters... in reverse.)

I'm having to pretend to be a financial consultant, just to avoid undue attention from the 'holier-than-thou' brigade. Some of the people in here are damned intolerant. But Hopkinson is so self-absorbed. It's a hell of a job getting through to *him*. Still, if I want to get the most out of his soul, it has to be given *voluntarily*. Any day now...

10. *HOPKINSON'S DIARY*

What a night! I'm knackered. I was granted this interview with God... Well, I was *that* determined to commit suicide, He must've decided it was time we had a heart-to-heart. Boy, was He a tonic. (Big bloke, though... too big to see what He looked like, or anything.)

"It's all crap, you know," says the Divine One. "All this striving for achievement. All this *human endeavour*. A complete waste of time."

But what about the Human Spirit, I want to know? What about free will, the creative urge, art... *purpose*?

"What about love?" ays He. "You didn't mention that, I notice."

"Now that *is* a load of crap," I find myself answering.

The heavens seemed to sigh. "No wonder you want to top yourself."

"Okay," says I. "Where do I find this wonderful thing called *love*?"

"Maybe it's already found you. Maybe you just don't want to accept it."

A fleeting glimpse of the unlovely Belinda Ovenbottom walloped my consciousness. "No! Not the horrendous B.O.!"

"*Everybody* deserves to be loved, Victor. You're not the only one. And by the way," says God, "all that surface appearance stuff – that's crap too. You love the inner being. That unique particle of Me. The soul."

"I'll take Your word for it."

"No sweat. You're a free agent. But just remember – all that striving to make something: career, accomplishments, all that man-made art and music and books and stuff. *Civilisation*, I think you call it. Even all that praise and celebration the holy rollers do. It's all a displacement activity. A faint buzzing in the background of reality. Just distractions to keep folk happy till they get done learning what they need to make it to the *Real Life*."

A waste of time applying for jobs, then.

"Absolute total waste," He agrees.

Next morning, the gravedigger's job came up. Would you Adam 'n' Eve it? No more Jobclub for me. I'm going to prepare for the *Real Life*. By way of celebration, I went back to the supermarket. I asked the checkout girl if she could give me something to end wars, famines, and all the misery in the world... She gave me a kiss.

11. ***PATIENT RECORD: SMUDGER***

I had to do it, Doctor! I simply *had* to! I no longer had any choice in the matter. Hopkinson hadn't turned up by the end of the week, and Mr. Winbest said he was deemed to have left. Probably got a job. Imagine my Hopkinson all tough and stringy with manual labour! I was desperate. All that time wasted, and me so hungry now.

Then Mr. Winbest had uncovered a Hopkinson in his family. Only a relative by marriage – to a distant cousin several times removed – but *in the family*, none the less! The temptation was too much. He was leaving the office to hand out the bus-tickets for the week. He stopped beside the cauldron, confronting Abandonhope about some expenses discrepancy. I swear he didn't know what hit him. I had him in the cauldron and simmering away in the blink of an eye. And oh, he was sweet, Doctor. He was succulent. More meat on him than Hopkinson, you see. Less stress. Better diet.

I thought I was satisfied. OK, Stan Abandonhope wasn't happy. In fact, he went storming off in a huff. But no-one else seemed all that bothered. Sometimes you just have to make the most of what's available. I dumped the remains in a suitable hole miles from the Job Club, and returned to the mountain.

Then the dreams started. That's why I need your help, Doctor. The nightmares. The dead tiger floating in the swamp inside a frozen jungle. Everything covered in multi-coloured cobwebs, and still and dead. Like the mausoleum of an invisible empire. And there, just out of reach, all boiled up and ready to eat, is Hopkinson. Hopkinson! So near and yet so far! Night after night, the dream returns to haunt me. To *tantalise* me! *Hopkinson, Hopkinson, every night, nor any bite to eat!* It's hell on earth, Doctor. The punishment of the damned. I can't take any more! I'm a Big, Broken-Down Old Smudger...

12. ***STAN A. to GOD Z.***

Makes you want to weep, so it does. Hopkinson gone. Winbest eaten by a paltry Smudger. Poached at every turn! What's the world coming to? *Fill your mother with spam!!!* As for me, Stan Abandonhope, Prince of Darkness, Lord of Terror and Destruction – I'd waited a long time, and I wasn't going to sing for my supper. I'd be damned if I'd go back to Hell unfed! My dream – my Apocalypse – could wait. There would be other Hopkinsons. This one may have had some 'spiritual awakening' (*yuk!*), but there's plenty more where he came from. The cauldron was where the Smudger had left it – I hate to admit it, Godzilla, but I even had a look inside to see if there was anything left of Winbest. Nothing. Not even bones.

I wanted a soul. I needed to harness the power of personal desolation, but Hopkinson had eluded me. I know they call me King of Chaos, but even I occasionally allow a smattering of logic to bubble through. I was hungry. Nowadays, in the material plane, hungry humans head for *fast-food* – everyone's in such a hurry. So, I took myself to McTumphrey's Burger Bar. Maybe I'd get more than just a bite...

The waitress wasn't miserable enough. "*Cheeseburgers!*" I screamed at her, giving it the full Beast from the Black Abyss treatment. "Have you nothing more... *sapid*... like *scrotulatory Valdemars!!?*" She remained unperturbed, even when sulphurous smoke came out of my nostrils and ears and... so forth. This walnut would never crack. I was getting a McTumphrey's Special whether I wanted it or not. As I rolled my eyes in horror, I spotted the girl at the next table. Six buttocks, six chins, six bristles on each chin. What a beastly configuration! What a monstrosity! What a sight for sore eyes! Now *here* was despair.

I lost no time. My 'glamour' is irresistible, once I'm in the mood. "I've got a hot pie," I said. It was a lie, but it would do for openers. She was utterly powerless - I could tell by the way she breathed, "Please, thank you," with such accommodating vulnerability. The waitress returned with the cheesy shitburger. "Twenty Woodbine," I hissed, "and whatever else you've got." It was going to be one of those nights.

It turned out that she had the old relationship trouble. A case of unrequited love. A case of *making a deal*... Well, well, I thought. If I couldn't have your actual Hopkinson *per se*, here was the next best thing. Negotiations went smoothly, my sales pitch a formality. I whipped out my hypodermic stylograph and she signed on the line like a lamb, with her oh-so indelible blood. *Belinda Ovenbottom*. What a pretty name... especially the second part. So 'fire and brimstone', so Hellishly *basic*.

Success on a plate, Godzilla. And home at last to you... Pepper me some dustbins, dear. I want to make myself sick.

13. *HOPKINSON'S DIARY*

My first day at the graveyard was weird, but I daresay I'll get used to it... I had to clear one of the graves that had already been dug. Check for debris and subsidence after that thunderstorm last night. I couldn't believe it when I found those bones lying there, complete with human skull on top. Very clean and white, though. Didn't look like they'd ever been buried. At first the police thought it was the old hands trying it on with the raw recruit. But these weren't plastic joke shop bones – these were the genuine article. In the end, they reckoned it must have been medical students larking about.

Then, as if that isn't enough, here I am at home this evening. Totally worn out. Leafing through the pictorial section of the *Kneejerker*. I'm trying to be ecumenical with my underpants (but no takers, so far), when the phone rings. It's Belinda Ovenbottom from the Jobclub, inviting me round to consider her problem. I've always thought of myself as quite strong-minded, but she won't take No for an answer. I can feel my willpower start to drain away... as though my soul was no longer my own...

Ends

Chill arms enfold her
Lover returns from the grave
Love transcending death
Making love in the darkness
Light destroys the illusion

By DJ Tyrer

Richard's Burden

By John Ord

Richard's penis had become so large, he was no longer able to leave the house.

Previously, he'd been able to disguise himself such that, without arousing too much suspicion, a trip to the off licence or mini mart had been possible. By strapping it to his body or arranging it cunningly into a backpack, or stashing it into a wheeled shopping bag, he'd managed to conceal his appendage well enough to pass unnoticed through the streets. Now, however, it had simply become too big to hide.

Also, it was cumbersome and really heavy. OK, a set of wheels helped but, though he was not a weak man, the strength required just to get out and then get back was more than he could muster. Increasingly he'd had to stop to rest and recover but now he doubted his ability, should he try to pop out to the shops, to rest and recover sufficiently to return safely, and without discovery, to his home.

He sat on his sofa in the position currently most comfortable. Outside his window was a strip of plain grey sky. It wasn't warm but neither was it cold. He was, he reflected unhappily, housebound.

It had all started when, on a train ride, a stranger had upbraided him on the way he was sitting. The distance between his legs, he was told, was inappropriately excessive and therefore rude and antisocial. At first he didn't understand but, sure enough, illustrative notices on the carriage walls made it clear that his posture was not acceptable- he was 'manspreading.' On attempting to bring his knees together, though, he was suddenly aware that this was not possible to the degree it once was. Something had changed: he was bigger.

At first, it was amusing- fun even- and a source of pride: in all proportions he was increased and therefore most certainly, he thought, in so many other ways enhanced, so much more of a person, more special, more of a man. Of course, he got busy with the tape measure- comparing himself with fruits, vegetables, kitchen implements, items of furniture- and yes, he wondered if he'd be sharing his largeness with lots of lovely ladies like some new Casanova- illustrious, prodigious, famous.

So it went a little to his head, but it didn't last.

For one, he was alone and generally happiest, as are all men, when in his own company. There were acquaintances he'd made but few of them were particularly close and none, either male or female, could he imagine marvelling at his new excess. Did he really want to meet new people, or *date*? There'd be small talk, uncomfortable silences, dinners and so on. It probably wasn't worth it. So much for rampant promiscuity.

And the fame? Well, he didn't want to be special, or exceptional, or renowned. A pleasant breeze on a summer's day, a cool beer on a warm evening, a nice melody playing on the radio- these were the simple things that made him happy and not attention, and certainly not fame. No, a nice quiet life in which he kept himself to himself was what he had, and what he wanted.

Very quickly then, Richard came much to regret the increasing dimensions of the thing in his underpants. Sitting there on his sofa, scared for what his future might hold, a tear formed in his eye. Before it could well and drop to his cheek, however, he pushed it away with the heel of his hand and resolved that he would not fall victim to self-pity. He was smart, resourceful, and determined. Surely he could manage somehow until things- the thing- returned to normal? He would persevere, he promised himself, meet the thing head on, man up, and most certainly not be defeated by his own over swollen johnson.

The very next day, he set about making his house suitable for an extended confinement. Plans were drawn up, tradesmen consulted, and bookings made. His penis meant directing the construction work that followed wasn't easy, but visitors accepted his story about a malign and debilitating tumour and soon things were taking shape. A central den or nest was put together and the essentials- water, food preparation equipment, toileting facilities- brought to hand. Automated systems were built that could transfer deliveries from the front door to storage, and waste materials to the bin. Of course, a sophisticated computer terminal, with high end audio visual functions and hi-fi hardware, was fundamental and he spared no expense on getting the best kit installed. Within the month, he noted with some satisfaction, his plans were realised and he was, more or less, self-sufficient. It was just as well- by that time his knob was massive.

How big? Just big: longer and thicker than his legs and the glans bigger than a grapefruit, perhaps the size of a melon- a cantaloupe. It shrank to a more normal girth where it joined to his groin so it made no sense, really, but there it was- it wouldn't be argued with. And, as the weeks then months passed, the thing kept on growing. Soon it was broader than both legs combined, then longer than the sofa, then too thick to go under the coffee table, then nudging up against the fireplace, then so long that he had to start it circling his den, and then it was back around the other side, bumping up against itself. Remarkably, he was now surrounded by his own chap but still it continued its spiral, and sure enough there it was again- the bulbous head creeping towards the completion of a second circuit. Dismayed, and before he was twice lapped, Richard sent it towards the alcove in the corner of the room where eventually and inexorably, it scaled the skirting and began to inch up the wall.

It was then that he called a doctor. The receptionist at his local surgery put him through to the GP he'd seen last- Doctor Morag Thatch- and, holding back his emotions, he tried to explain his predicament.

It was odd: she remembered a quiet, calm man, with blue eyes and a minor gout problem, not someone she'd associate with such a bizarre story. He seemed coherent and sensible but, well, something clearly was wrong. She promised she would add a home visit to the diary, then sent a careful email to the practise lead requesting a meeting that day to discuss this unusual case.

'Really, Doctor Thatch, that big?'

She shrugged uncomfortably. Doctor Hackett leant back in his chair, frowned, and brought his forefinger to his lips.

'Well of course you must go and see him,' he said, 'and keep me posted.'

At the agreed hour two days later and with some trepidation, Doctor Thatch rang Richard's bell. The door opened, she stepped into his living room, and was astonished, amazed, aghast. She felt weak, she felt dizzy, she felt nauseous. She dropped her bag, sat on the sofa pushed back against the wall, and stared, her hand over her mouth, at the mammoth member lolling against the picture rail.

'My word,' she said.

The afternoon came and went. She listened to Richard's story and tried to understand. What was this? Was he well? Was he dying? What was going on? The poor man was overcome, undone, humiliated by the thing but still utterly determined to maintain his dignity. Such patience, such resilience and bravery- she couldn't remember meeting anyone so strong and so calm, so measured.

'I don't know what to say, I...'

Richard turned away from her, his eyes moist and his breathing shorter. Perhaps her bright Edinburgh accent, her youth, her optimism, her feeling, or all of these things had got to him. He was a fool.

'I'm sorry Doctor, I shouldn't have called, it was wrong of me.'

'No, no,' she said, stepping over into his den and kneeling, taking his hand, putting her arm around his shoulder.

'I will do what I can to help you, Mr...'

'Richard, please, Doctor.'

'Yes of course,' she said, choking back a tear herself, and trying not to look at his giant tool, 'I promise I will help you Richard.'

But how could she help? What help was there? Over the following days she scoured databases and textbooks but could find nothing of use. Reluctantly, she arranged another meeting with Doctor Hackett and soon was again sat in his office, suffering the condescension. She's expected derision and disbelief but, on the contrary, he was very interested, keen to know exactly the proportions in question and smiled with satisfaction when she sketched a passable likeness on a piece of A4. In the practise records, he'd found items perhaps of interest, but when she asked for the details, he was suddenly evasive and cautioned that it was probably nothing. The meeting was then ended; at the door he reminded her solemnly to care for her patient first, and tackle his malady second.

Hmm, well, sound advice but before she'd got to her car, she'd determined to end the sharing. From now on, she'd be handling Richard's problem on her own and, during the months following, she just about managed to keep Doctor Hackett at bay.

And over those months, the patient visits became daily. There were tests to run and records to maintain but, she soon realised, she just wanted to be with him. Her feelings were complicated and probably not ethical but Richard was generous, warm, sincere, funny in his way, and noble- yes the word was noble. Or maybe it was honourable. Well, one of the two. Whatever, she enjoyed his company and spent most evenings in their little nest listening to the

radio, chatting about life, and even sharing the odd beer. Sometimes she would open the patio doors and a pleasant summer breeze would swirl gently around them as daylight slowly faded. Their time together was good for her and, though he was apparently not unwell, she felt it was good for him too.

Also of benefit to him was her makeshift catheter. Of the several interventions she'd made this was probably the most beneficial and appreciated. Previously, he'd had to get out a sponge, bucket, and telescopic stick when urinating, but after a small incision at the base of his shaft and the application of a suitable flange and duct, the process was now much more straightforward.

'I don't know what I'd do without you, Morag. Thank you,' he'd said after she'd fitted the device.

It had been an intimate and uncomfortable procedure, but he'd not complained. Struggling to maintain his bearing and humility, instead he'd tried to ease *her* stress and anxiety: his chief concern was *her* wellbeing.

'No, no,' she barely managed to answer, turning away, her hand over her heart, 'just helping out.'

As the summer lengthened, their feelings for each other continued to bloom. Richard's phallus also continued to swell but together, they just about coped. Then, when she was getting into her car one evening six months after her first visit, Morag was stopped by Dr Hackett.

'How's our most burdened patient then?'

It was October, the long sunny evenings were over, and she shivered in the chill autumn air. Unable to think of a smart response, she mumbled something pathetic and was talked into his large executive saloon, in which he explained they were both going to visit Richard. Could he see on her face her feelings, her love? Yes, it must have been obvious. Miserably she stared out of the passenger window, failing to imagine ways in which she might prevent what was about to happen from happening.

'Are you listening, Doctor Thatch?'

He'd been talking and no, she hadn't listened.

'Sorry, I, well... What were you saying?'

Where were they? Gosh, pulling up outside Richard's house already. Actually, she had heard something, but, no- he couldn't have said that, could he? The engine was off, and he was turned toward her. Now she was listening, listening very intently, staring at him. What had he been saying? No. She shook her head. What had he been saying?

His mouth opened and closed, and these words came out: 'I said, we're going to chop off that penis, and sell it to the Chinese.'

Some more words came out, but Morag wasn't properly responsive. Had she become frozen, shut down? She blinked, her nostrils flared, she blinked some more. Her heart was beating, she really was in his car, he really was talking. What was going on?

'No. What did you say? Say that again. What did you say?'

For the third time he repeated his intention- 'we're going to chop off that penis and sell it to the Chinese'- then added with some relish, 'I've got the equipment in the boot.'

Her head was shaking, she couldn't stop her head from shaking.

'No. No you're not. You're not going to do that. My God that's, that's, well it's racist. For a start it's racist.'

Doctor Hackett looked confused.

'Eh?'

'Well, I presume it's that stereotype...'

Doctor Hackett looked more confused.

'You know, that *they'll eat anything* stereotype. Ugh you terrible, abominable, racist, racist man.'

'What?' he replied, now incredulous himself, 'Sell it for meat? To eat? Are you mad, woman? Dear God, no! I mean for medicinal purposes- no doubt they'll grind it down for some aphrodisiac ointment or libido boosting powder. To eat? Saints alive.'

For a moment or two he looked genuinely ill, but soon regained his composure and explained, as she calmed down, his plan. Practise records hinted at similar cases- perhaps the expression of some local genetic abnormality- in which positive outcomes had been achieved through minor surgery. Once separated from the patient, arrangements had been made for these outsize organs to be reduced locally by certain oriental specialists, then transferred as innocuous raw materials through the usual channels of trade to the far east. Not only did this prevent the disquiet and unrest that such great manhood would inevitably cause if news of it spread, it also meant, so valuable overseas were these extremely rare specimens, that all concerned had become very, very rich.

‘How rich?’ Morag asked, still outraged.

‘Very,’ replied Doctor Hackett.

Eventually, having found every objection already considered and dismissed, she was persuaded to discuss it with Richard. Perhaps there were no other options; at least he would no longer be stuck indoors.

‘I started out in military medicine, my dear, this will be a snip!’, said Doctor Hackett as they approached the door. Hating herself, she rang the bell.

Once inside, things happened quickly. Within the preceding fortnight, they’d completed a difficult change to Richard’s position and his penis now wound several times around his den then headed out the living room door, down the hall, and was making its way up the stairs to the first floor. Hackett gasped, smiled but was then to business, helping his junior to explain just what the options were, and underlining certain points where he felt it necessary. Morag heard herself speaking and understood the reasons for the discussion, but she soon had to send her colleague out to the kitchen.

‘Look, Richard, I don’t see what else to do. You know I have such feelings for you and part of me thinks you’re healthy, you’re fine, it’s just this, this thing. It’s not me, I can live with it, I understand and can cope with it, but, but out there... out there they think it’s...’

‘Monstrous?’ replied Richard.

She sighed deeply.

‘Maybe some function will remain, I mean your testicles will still be there and something of the... something of the...’

It had been so difficult, and now she could no longer hold back the tears.

‘Oh Morag, Morag please,’ he said and hugged her tight, or as tight as he could.

‘I trust you, Morag, with my heart I trust you. Let’s do it, let’s get rid of it, I’ll be a better man without it.’

‘Forgive me, Richard, I love you so,’ she said, through her sobbing, ‘and he says we’ll sell it to the Chinese- but not in a racist way- to make love potions, and you’ll be very, very rich.’

‘Well,’ he answered calmly, his eyes focussed on something far, far away, ‘that’s quite something.’

In no time, a rudimentary surgery had been assembled and a team of further specialists, positioned in a couple of unmarked vans on the street, put on high alert. Doctor Thatch was persuaded, with the assurance that it was for the best, to wield the knife. She composed herself as best she could.

Looking into her eyes, Richard knew that she loved him. He also loved her. For the first time in his life, he was in love- real love. He felt such warmth, such happiness, such completeness as the anaesthetic slowly settled his thoughts.

‘You’re a brave man, Richard, and I admire you immensely,’ said Doctor Hackett, indicating that it was time for the procedure to begin, ‘but the world really don’t need this kinda dick.’

Ends



Dentist Office Douche bag

By Mark Hudson

I had to go to the dentist at ten,
I got there at nine, a little bit early.
I drew art from magazines with a pen,
till a woman arrived-a little bit surly.
I was an hour early, patient as can be,
but then I found out the dentist was late.
The traffic was bad, too bad for me,
but I still didn't use it as an excuse to hate.
Then in walks a woman with three kids,
and the fools scheduled us all at ten.
The lady with kids flips her lid,
and says she'll never go there again.
Then she complains that it smells,
and she says the smell will cause her pain.
I want to tell the lady to go to hell,
she is the cause of her own migraine.
She complains that it is stinking horrible,
and then her kid says, "it smells like a skunk."
The example she set for her kids was deplorable,
and she must think I'm the one with the funk.
Then a nurse brings in a patient in a wheelchair,
and she too, puts her scarf over her nose.
Is there really something smelly in the air?
Do women want everything to smell like a rose?
Now I'm starting to wonder, "Is it me?"
Do I really have the aroma of death?
I just had a shower, and had clean laundry,
could it have been my caffeinated breath?
Douche bag in the dentist office, you can die,
you are no trophy wife to say the least.
If I were her kid, I'd want to cry,
I'd make a plan to kill the beast.
I got to go first, because I was their first,
when the dentist walked in late.
That dentist office must be cursed,
with people who you can't help but hate.
On TV. ,Michael J .Fox was discussed,
about overcoming Parkinson's disease.
A positive attitude gave him trust,
and he was able to live long and please.
He started an organization for others,
and helped fund people with that illness.
But here you got a neurotic mother,
can you calm down, and show stillness?
I don't stink, bitch, for one last time,
but if I bust your head open, blood will wreak.
In Chicago, we're notorious for crime,
I'll put your body bag in the creak.

Hate-Love-Hate

By Lucy Stone

It was very sudden. With the violence of all teenage emotions, love reared up and lashed out and struck him across the face. He must have staggered, because he felt Montcrieff's limp, languorous hand on his shoulder, and heard him say:

"What is it, old boy? Did you have too much champagne at breakfast? Did you see a creditor?"

Robin shrugged him off, and hurried after the girl before she could disappear into the crowd of Camden High Street. He knew Montcrieff wouldn't follow, because Montcrieff never broke into a run for anything, not even opium.

He didn't know how he had picked her out from all the other shawls and bonnets filing sedately along the street. Perhaps it was her energy. The girl walked as though she had springs under her feet, as though the dreary winter clothing could barely contain her. He could almost *hear* the straining of corsetry in her wake, and it made his mouth water.

She exchanged a few words with this stallholder or that tavern-keeper, so she lived locally, but her smile didn't sparkle with them, and her steps were heavier when she left them, as though they oppressed her. Still, her natural exuberance reasserted itself after a moment alone. She liked to be alone, he thought.

Her eyes were so dark they almost had a metallic sheen. Gun-metal, he thought. Nothing as polished as silver. When she stepped into the shadow of a church doorway, he saw them sparkle in the dark, and almost swooned with longing. What was she thinking about – smiling about? How could he make those eyes sparkle on *him*?

It was, he saw as she went in, a Catholic church. He could tell from the statue of Christ on the cross, wracked with pain, above the door.

And suddenly a sense of foreboding stole over him. He didn't follow her inside.

Robin had no early memories of love to be stirred up by this encounter. What she awakened in him was unbearably sad instead. It was what might have been, if it hadn't been for his patroness, or Father Volpone, or all the little swipes of viciousness he had suffered since. She made him think of a girl at the orphanage he hadn't bullied, or a teacher whose school he had left before he'd had a chance to get unwholesomely obsessed with her and introduce her to Gram.

He didn't approve, Robin could tell. And that was odd, because Gram had practically become one of his appendages by now. Whenever he saw a pretty girl in the street, he could feel the tingling in Gram as much as he could feel it in his own loins.

Not this time, though. As Robin reeled from the sight of the dark girl, Gram was silent. Robin was conscious of him – when was he *not*? – but only as a cold, immovable presence in his sheath.

The sheath was an inner pocket in his jacket. Robin had had a sort of leather scabbard artfully stitched into the lining, so that only the tip of the handle peeped out. Only he had to keep returning to the tailor to have a new scabbard put in, because Gram kept *growing*.

Gram never spoke to him, but he *was* alive. As time went on, Robin grew quite adept at recognizing his moods – approval, disapproval, glee, hunger, belligerence. They all had to do with the way he whispered through the air, the way the light glinted off his blade, the way he felt in Robin's palm.

He tried to get back the poignant sense of might-have-been, and not think about Father Volpone, as he went to re-join Montcrieff in the High Street. But it was no good. He would need another glimpse of her. And then another, and then another. She couldn't work her magic from a distance, it seemed.

Montcrieff had gravitated towards the coffee-vendor's stall, which was topped with two large, five-gallon cans containing the tea and coffee – tea which had been stewing all night, and which was dark enough to tan leather. The coffee-vendor was chatting to a woman in an apron, who was holding a baby in a business-like way, as if it was a basket of laundry.

"What was that about, old boy?" said Montcrieff, as Robin re-joined him.

"I thought I saw somebody I knew."

"In *this* neighbourhood?"

"Well, I was mistaken," said Robin testily. "But fashionable people do have legs, Montcrieff, and could easily wander into Camden, if only by accident."

“They’d have to be blind-folded as well as lost,” said Montcrieff, with a sniff.

“*We’re* here, aren’t we?”

“Oh yes. But we’re fashionable *and* desperate.”

“Speak for yourself,” Robin muttered. He did not like the idea of being desperate. Especially in the neighbourhood of a catholic church. “Anyway, you’re not desperate enough to go to the dens in Bluegate Fields.”

“Oh, it’s too early in the day,” said Montcrieff, toying idly with his gloves. “These places have to warm up first. I tell you, I know a house on the other side of Regent’s Park where we can smoke in cleanliness and comfort.”

They walked on, Montcrieff swinging his gloves and cane jauntily, as if he were just taking the air, and not hunting the poppy.

Montcrieff: sallow and oblivious. Was he another lesson? Was the patroness trying to teach him something by giving him Montcrieff as a companion? They had become friends quite organically – just by being in the same year and lodging in the same halls at Cambridge – but there was no element of Robin’s life that his patroness didn’t control, no influence she hadn’t thought about, so he supposed she had picked out Montcrieff as carefully as she had picked out Gram.

He was bearable – very rich, very well-bred, addicted to opium, which made him languorous enough to be easily led, but too used to getting his own way to be a sycophant. Robin liked him, as much as he was able to like anyone.

He knew how to ruin him, of course. In case it should ever become necessary. But ruining him – or, indeed, stabbing him – would never be any fun, because he was mostly too drug-addled to notice. He might start to complain when the money ran out, and he was no longer able to frequent the best opium dens, but the transition to cheap opium – and then to begging – would be a gentle one for Montcrieff. Life was always gentle with him. Robin envied him that serenity. *He* had tried opium a few times, but it had been like the nightmares. Blades and teeth and prickling eyes had loomed out at him through the smoke. The only oblivion Robin ever knew was the black-outs – where he resigned all will and Gram took control – and they were hard to enjoy because they always ruined his clothes.

Montcrieff didn’t know about Robin’s patroness – or the curriculum of terror she had devised for him – he was reasonably sure of that. Madam Myrrha tested him a lot. She wanted him to be always on his guard, which meant enemies leaping out at him on street-corners, or black-clad assassins bursting into the Senior Common Room at King’s College, disrupting the after-dinner port and cigars.

After the fifth or sixth time this happened – when Robin had dispatched a group of snarling men with cutlasses who’d broken up a game of croquet in the quad – Montcrieff, being the only one who hadn’t run away, said:

“I’m beginning to think you must have done something ghastly in a previous life, old boy.”

“I think I must have,” said Robin, using one of the dead men’s jackets to wipe the blood off his knife.

“It must have been a past life,” mused Montcrieff. “You’re too young to have done anything much in this one.”

Robin stood up, and slid Gram back into his jacket. “You don’t have to have attained years of discretion to be a scoundrel.”

“You do if you’re hoping to do it *well*,” said Montcrieff. “There’s no scoundrel like an old scoundrel, you know. My uncle Podger said he’d been practising for his entire life, and only really got it right on his death-bed. He said it was extremely vexing.”

“I wish I’d met your uncle Podger on his death-bed,” said Robin. “I think I would have been a heartening sight. He would have seen that it *is* possible to get it right before the age of twenty, and then he would have died happy.”

“I rather think he would have died cursing you, dear boy.”

Robin shrugged. Lots of people had died cursing him. The funny thing was, he’d been cursed before he’d ever met them. He wondered if the curse of a dying man was able to reach backwards in time.

“Do you think the game’s over?” he said, making a half-hearted effort to stand up one of the hoops that had been knocked over in the brawl.

“Oh yes, I should think so. When the barbarian hordes invade the pitch, that’s generally the signal to adjourn.”

“Then let’s go and get a drink.”

“But what about these fellows?” said Montcrieff, prodding the nearest corpse with the toe of his boot. “What are we to do with them?”

“Just leave them here,” said Robin. “They get taken away eventually.”

“By whom? The resurrection men?”

"I don't know. My part in the process ends with the killing, I think."

"You say it as though it's been organized!" Montcrieff protested.

Robin stopped, and looked back at him. He was suspicious of Montcrieff's ignorance – or feigned ignorance, if that was what it was – but he enjoyed it all the same.

"It has been," he said mildly. "It's part of my education."

"You mean to say you can read Classics with a module of murder on the side?"

"I can," said Robin, with another shrug. "Your parents were probably too respectable to have it suggested to them."

"And are there others?" said Montcrieff. "Pursuing the same-" he waved a hand uncomfortably "-course of studies?"

Robin smiled. "Oh yes, there are others. Pray you never meet them, Montcrieff."

It wasn't hard to bump into the girl again and make it look as though *she'd* done the bumping. She walked around with a glorious, half-focused look, clearly making up stories in her head.

Robin chose the steps of the church as the best place to collide with her: the first place he had seen her glitter to herself. She went in every morning to do chores for the nuns in the adjoining convent. Her mother watched her like a hawk – restricted her movements as though having a beautiful daughter was the same as having a savage dog, and it would be antisocial behaviour to let her out – but she had a bit of a blind-spot for the church, so he decided that the only way to get to know the girl would be by masquerading as a priest. He would seem safe that way – she might open up to him. And there was a poignant, doomed-love quality to a handsome priest which he thought would appeal to her romantic imagination. He might even get to hear her make confession – god, the thought of hearing her whisper her secrets in a dark room made him tingle!

He knocked into her on the church steps, three sweaty, agitated days after he'd first seen her. She was carrying an armful of folded clothes, and they tumbled down the steps as he collided with her.

There was a strange thrill in that, although perhaps anything would have been thrilling in that moment: all that pristine white linen, fresh from a church, falling into the puddles and soot of a London street.

Robin kept his eyes on the scattered linen, drawing out the anticipation before he looked at her, and saw the corner of some shirt or shift or petticoat being lifted and toyed with by the breeze.

"Beg your pardon, si- Father," she said. She had been about to dive after the clothes, but now she looked at him, flushed and puzzled. What had she seen first, he wondered? His handsome face or his dog-collar?

"No matter, child – run along with you."

He was rather pleased with that: dismissing her as if he wasn't dying to detain her. He wondered how bold she was.

"Excuse me, Father," she said, twiddling her fingers, "but are you here to see Father Brent? He's just this minute gone out in the landau to the Bishop's Palace. I think he won't be back until evensong."

"Thank you, child," said Robin, smiling at this unsolicited information. He decided to unbend a little and help her gather up the scattered clothes.

"And how do you find Father Brent?" he added. "Does he take good care of you?"

"Yes, Father," said the girl. But she didn't elaborate, which meant she was just being polite. Probably an older cleric, then.

"He has a reputation for being quite a scholar," said Robin. "We trained at the same seminary, though obviously not at the same time."

He was pleased with that too – the 'obviously', the slight motion of his arm as he said it, as though he was inviting her to contemplate his young, vigorous frame.

"Do you have a parish nearby, Father?" she said. What a bold little girl she was.

"I'm – between parishes right now," he said, giving her a subtle, tactful smile. "In fact, I just got off the boat from Rome this morning."

He made sure she knew that there was extra information there, and that he was not going to give it to her.

"Good day to you, child," he said, to underline the point. "I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again."

“Yes,” she said, as if suddenly remembering herself. “Good day to *you*, Father. Thank you, Father.”

Robin was ecstatic with that first meeting – with the way he had intrigued her. When he met the others – Father Brent, and the Mother Superior of the convent – he drip-fed them information in exactly the same way. Within a week of his arrival, everyone was convinced he was an inspector from Rome, with orders to root out corruption.

Strangely, they opened up to him after that – or rather, were breathily confidential, while still starting and shivering at the sight of him. The parishioners complained about Father Brent, Father Brent complained about the Mother Superior, and the Mother Superior just wanted to hear about Rome, with its exquisite art and architecture, its sober church-government and swishing red robes.

He got to know Ellini Syal – for that was the girl’s name – in excruciatingly brief instalments. There was always someone nearby to call her away, and if it wasn’t her wretchedly numerous family, it was those nuns. Everyone else could see them together without batting an eyelid, but the nuns seemed to feel that a priest’s celibacy had to be guarded, rather than taken for granted. It probably came of their having a better acquaintance with priests.

He took a house, furnished but long-disused, opposite the girl’s cottage, and paced through its rooms, not so much inhabiting the place as haunting it. He stole from window to window in search of a glimpse of her. He never unpacked. The furniture remained under its dust sheets, like ghostly icebergs. He never lit any fires, because he was sweltering with love and impatience as it was.

And he knew that the steaming of his breath in the cold rooms made him look like Father Volpone – standing and smoking and watching his prey – but it didn’t bother him as much as he’d thought it would. He had known for almost ten years now that he was being groomed to become another Father Volpone. There were worse things to be – and he would have said so even as a ten-year-old, if he’d known how to put it into words. The very worst thing to be was the sort of creature who was preyed-upon by the Father Volpones of this world.

Do what you must, his ten-year-old self would have said. *Do anything you like – only for God’s sake, avoid going back there.*

He kept up his debauched life with Montrieff in the evenings. It was better than trying to sleep, and it gave him some measure of control to charm bar-maids and tavern-girls, even though he could no longer make love to them. He could barely *see* them, his attention was so taken up with Ellini. But Gram made sure they swam into focus, because Gram had his own needs, and – for some reason that Robin didn’t understand but was quite relieved about – Ellini left Gram cold.

He went back to Camden in the mornings – mostly with a dreadful hangover – and burned.

In a way, he was enjoying himself. He was quite taken with the pining, because it felt important. He couldn’t be just another thug – just another soldier – if he could feel this way about a woman. But, in another way, he was smarting with impatience. He kept having to *share* her. He realized he had only ever preyed on women who’d been outcasts – or at least unprotected, for one reason or another. He had never really understood the conspiracy of having neighbours, a family, a social circle – how they all banded together to keep young women away from young men. Ellini Syal was deeply embedded in a community, and he longed to take his knife and prise her out of it.

Why didn’t he? That was a difficult question to answer, but he thought it had something to do with the dark glitter he had seen in her eyes when she had stepped into the doorway of the church. It came back occasionally, but not for him. Oh, she liked him, he knew that. She would always roll her eyes when her family called her away, and give him a lovely, philosophical smile, as if the prospect of talking to him uninterrupted had been too much to hope for anyway.

But it wasn’t the same. That glitter had been passion, and the smile was just partiality.

He wanted her to glitter for him – he wanted to be everything to her – but he didn’t know how. Carving a bloody pathway through her friends and family seemed too crude – cutting her with Gram seemed unthinkable – but being patiently present, wooing her over a period of months – or even years – was equally unthinkable. He wanted to own her, but own her quickly. He was going to explode if he didn’t get her whole heart and soul delivered freely into his hands in a matter of seconds.

And this strange paradox – of choosy impatience – made him miserable. He couldn’t eat; he couldn’t turn to other women for comfort; his nightmares were even more full of teeth and prickles than usual. Sometimes he would black out in a bar in Bluegate Fields, and wake up on the floor, sticky with blood and booze, and be terrified – beyond terrified – that he had yielded to his impatience and taken her.

She reminded him of higher things, and he knew you couldn’t get at higher things with a knife; he just had no idea how you *did* get to them.

It was Christmas Eve. They had been to midnight mass, and Robin had escorted the two Syal girls home, which everyone said was a special distinction, for they were poor as church mice, and everyone knew that their father was a heathen.

Robin hadn't met the father yet, although sometimes he fancied he saw a pair of dark eyes at one of the upper windows when he was pacing about his frozen rooms, sweltering with love.

He let himself into the frozen rooms now, navigating between the icebergs of sheet-draped furniture. They seemed lumpier than usual, but perhaps that was just because he was impatient to get to the window, and see the Syal family taking off their shawls and bonnets by candlelight before anybody thought to draw the curtains.

He reached the window, put his hand on the ledge to steady his eagerness, and felt the intrusion before he saw it. Gram sang in his sheath, and Robin spun round, drawing him out, pinning the shadow up against the wall behind him.

Then he felt a chill spreading down his arm. Gram had been starved, and wanted blood, but he knew – even before Robin knew – that this throat was not for cutting.

“Well,” said Madam Myrrha. “I’m pleased you haven’t forgotten *everything* I taught you, anyway.”

That moment of recognition – the way his muscles screeched into reverse – was worse than the first shock. With anyone else, he would have sailed through the motions of killing them as though it were a dance, but now he stopped jerkily and felt his own weight. It was all concentrated in the pit of his stomach, in a hot, cramped block of fear. For a moment, he thought he was going to pass out, but Gram kept him on his feet.

“It’s been a long time, Robin,” she said, gently taking his wrist and lowering his arm, because he wasn’t capable of doing it himself.

He couldn’t tell what she was wearing. In the gaslight pouring in through the windows, it seemed like a rust-coloured gown. Brazen.

It was incredible, the physical effect she had on him – the way she made his palms sweat and his heart race and his head swim with nausea. For a while, he had thought he was in love with her. At various points in his life, he would think he was in love with her, but it was always inseparable from the terror she inspired in him. There was a smell of rotten sweetness about her, like dying flowers, but you never smelled it unless she wanted you to. When she crept up on you, she was as scentless as she was soundless, but once she had engaged you in conversation, she seemed to relax a little, and let the tendrils of that scent creep around the room. They unfurled for him now, and wrapped themselves around his throat. He took a deep breath, but that just made his head swim even more.

It was not because he loved her – at least, not at the moment – but because he *belonged* with her. Because she’d created him. Perhaps that was even stronger than love.

“I’ve had things to do, and haven’t been very attentive,” she went on, smiling sweetly. “I know it’s my fault, but I had thought you were capable of using your head just a *little* bit more than you have done. I took my eyes off you for two minutes, it seems, and you had to go and fall in love.”

Robin did not believe she had taken her eyes off him for two minutes, but he was still paralysed, and couldn’t say so. It occurred to him for the first time that she might be jealous of Ellini. Somewhere in the course of his terrifying education, he had picked up the idea that he was being trained to be her husband, but this had never been borne out by her behaviour. She had either treated him like a fond, crooning parent, or an exasperated aunt. And, when he’d been fifteen, she had turned up at his lodgings in Sicily with two prostitutes in tow, saying: “It is time for you to know women, and know how to please them. I would expect nothing less of you.”

Eventually, Robin regained control of his voice and muscles. He put Gram back in his sheath – he seemed treacherously glad to be out of the picture – and said:

“How did you-?”

“Oh, Montcrieff told me,” she interrupted merrily.

“But Montcrieff doesn’t-” He stopped. Suddenly, his eyes were drawn back to the lumpy, sheet-covered chair by the door. It occurred to him that it was too lumpy to be an unoccupied chair.

“He knew more than he thought he did,” said Myrrha.

Robin had been under this woman’s tutelage for too long to be shocked. He only felt a mild, petulant kind of annoyance that his companion was gone, and he was now going to have to trawl the bars and brothels of Bluegate Fields on his own.

“Did you – torture him?”

Myrrha gave a crooked smile. “How would I do that? By hiding his opium pipe? It’s far easier to interrogate the dead than the living. The living tell you what they’ve consciously observed, but the dead tell you what they’ve *seen*. And they never lie. What could they hope to gain by it?”

Robin thought that, if he ever died, and was called upon to answer Myrrha’s questions, *he* would lie just for the hell of it.

“So you are in love, are you?” she said. It seemed half-way between a question and a taunt.

“Perhaps,” he said.

“And you haven’t done anything about it?”

Robin sensed the danger there. She hated him to be indecisive, just as much as she hated him to apologize.

“I’ve been waiting to consult with you,” he said, in a lie that was so brazen, it brought a smile to her lips.

“Have you? Well, that was clever of you, Robin, because I have a number of ideas.”

He shook his head, not quite understanding. He assumed she wanted him to kill Ellini – or, at best, abduct and *then* kill Ellini – in order to get her out of his system. But he didn’t want her out of his system. Would it be suicidal to say so?

“I mean to keep her,” he said – much braver than he felt. “I want –” his lips tried to clamp down on the sentence before he could utter it, but Myrrha helped him. She always knew what he was thinking.

“You want her to love you,” she said.

To his surprise, she didn’t laugh. She gave him a look of pouting, maternal sympathy.

“Oh, my little boy. *Can* she love you? A woman like that? Being a killer is like being a ghost, you know. You can walk beside the normal people every day of your life, and never really touch them.”

Robin stared at her. This was not the first time she had voiced his innermost fears, almost word-for-word. He was starting to realize that dread whispered to him in Myrrha’s voice now. Despair smelled of rotting flowers.

“But it isn’t hopeless,” she said, giving him a brave smile, and smoothing down his hair. “I can help you. I can show you my greatest secret,” she whispered. “The way I won *your* love. Do you want to have this woman in a boring, everyday way, or do you want to command her? Do you want to own her, the way I own you?”

He breathed out slowly, as understanding began to take hold. Gram – who was always quicker than his own brain – glowed in his sheath, as if with approval.

Myrrha was still talking:

“– want to impress her?” she said. “Do you want her to feel your influence the way the tides feel the moon?”

She went on pressing her point home, but there was no need. She’d already won. Robin knew better than anyone the kind of devotion that terror could inspire. He knew, too, that he’d never have anything else. A girl like that couldn’t love him, however much he tried – however long he waited. And he *couldn’t* wait, because he was dying for her.

“We’ll educate her the way we educated you. Train her, even, to be one of us. She’ll be yours far more than if she’d just fallen in love with you,” said Myrrha. “She’ll be yours because you will have *created* her.”

He wondered, when he was a little older, whether Myrrha had ever read *Frankenstein* – whether she realized that you could resent your creator, and nurse a rebellion against them that swept you both away. When he was older still, and discovered more about her, he learned that she *must* have realized this, because she had done exactly the same thing herself.

But it was funny, wasn’t it, how the resentful creature always *did* try to visit its wrongs on other people? Frankenstein’s monster had wanted to make a female, who would have been just as shunned, cursed, and tormented as *he* had.

It would always happen. It would keep going round and round: hate-love-hate, until someone had the strength to break the cycle. And Robin had always known – long before he’d read the book or had the realization – that it was not going to be him.

Ends

The Most Dangerous Girlfriend I Ever Had

By Jeffrey Zable

was one I had in 1973 while a student at U.C. Santa Cruz.

I met her in one of my Psychology classes
as she too was majoring in Psychology.

I was sleeping with her for a few weeks before she told me
that she had shot her last boyfriend because he shoved her
during an argument.

Turned out that the bullet just took out a piece of flesh from his side,
so healing back up wasn't too difficult.

Also turned out that he didn't press charges, so she got off Scott free,
but the relationship didn't last much longer after that.

When I heard all this, it put things into perspective
because I could tell early on that she was an angry and volatile person.

I knew that I was putting up with a lot more than I would have otherwise
because I was lonely and enjoyed having sex with her.

Then one day we got into an argument,
and her eyes took on an evil look that made me realize
she could truly do me harm.

Fortunately she broke off our relationship, telling me
she was seeing someone else and that he was a better fit.

Not wanting to part with hard feelings
that potentially could come back to me,

I wished her well, thinking that a second time around
she'd have a much better aim...

*Originally published in **Third Wednesday**, 2018*



Drawing Toward You

By Joseph Murphy

I cherish the green leaves you offered me.

Like the twin wakes a ghost dissolves
from the liquid of well-remembered nights,
I want to be the silk and stone
that guides your compass north; a kite
resting on the star of your choice.

When all the symbols have been forgotten,
all the roadmaps erased, the fingers of your smile
will still light the seaside
where I remain a pensive child.

The hillsides would rather know trembling,
than for us to be separated
from the planets we love.

Stones have spoken to me. I have walked
where the roots of the world
are an echo: you are singular; a wave
breaking time from its cusp.

The days of my life
spread like flag on the horizon,
each one drawing me
to you.



The Dance Teacher

By Eliza Homan

I hated my dance teacher,
she had a stiff leg,
was strict
charged five shillings per term.

I hated dancing
though I wanted to be a ballerina,
had two left feet,
she said that.

I hated the reel
the jig
the walls of limerick
hated my dance teacher

“right foot out, like this”
she instructed;
“left foot back
and move to the right”
she dragged her stiff leg,
“and same with the left foot
now, you have the first two steps
of the reel”

I hated my dance teacher
hated the scratch of the wooden floor
as I stumbled and tripped
over the reel.

I hadn't paid the five shillings
she banged her stick on the floor
shouted at me,
put me outside the door

I told my mammy,
as she scrubbed the kitchen floor
told her that I had said;
my mammy couldn't afford five shillings.

I hated my dance teacher
cause, my mammy nearly fell into
the bucket of water with embarrassment,
she gave out to me

she gave me the five shillings.
now, I hated my mammy

The Scarecrow, The Toad, And The Knight In Shining Armor

By Diane Arrelle

Jane adjusted her bifocals, opened her notebook and smiled at the couple seated across from her. “Now where’s my pen?” she mumbled. “Ah, here it is, in my hand. I swear I forget almost everything.”

But not completely, she thought eying the couple with loathing. *Some things I’ll remember forever*. “Memory’s such a peculiar thing, don’t you agree? By the way, I think it’s just wonderful, Mr. and Mrs. Witzeer that you’re celebrating your 50th wedding anniversary. I’d like interview you for the article I am writing for the community newsletter.”

Mrs. Witzeer gushed, “An article... about us? Well, I was just on my way to the clubhouse, but if you walk with me, I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

Jane nodded and thought, *I’ll just bet you will*. She followed the bony, orange-haired woman outside and wished she had remembered the camera; she was amazed the woman didn’t realize that her hair clashed violently with her red velour jogging suit and the bright pink blush covering her sun leathered cheeks. “OK, Mrs. Witzeer, describe your courtship with Mr. Witzeer?”

“Call me Grace. Our courtship...” She screwed up her face as she thought, then smiled. “Jerry was so handsome. He just swept me off my feet. He’d been dating someone else, but when he saw me, well, it was love at first sight. We had walks in the woods and romantic candlelight dinners. He adored me, begged me to marry him. We have the perfect marriage. So in love, even today.”

“I see,” Jane said scribbling in her notepad. “And what about that other girl?”

The carrot haired woman shrugged. “She stopped talking to us. You know, some people are poor losers.”

“Well, thank you,” Jane said. “I love a good love story and I’m sure my readers will too.”

She returned to the Witzeer’s apartment and looked in on the seated, squat, toad-like man dwarfed by the huge recliner. “And what is your take on your courtship and marriage?”

Mr. Witzeer grimaced, creasing the middle of his big, rubbery face. “Whatever Grace told you is garbage. Always painting some great romance. I was a swinger back then, but there was something about her... I think it was the promise of her virginity. Lord, was she a nag. Always wanting to take walks, go out to expensive restaurants. Anyway, she nagged me into a stupor, and then into a comatose state, then somehow got me to marry her. I think that just I figured a set of tits like hers was worth the till death do us part. I was wrong. Sometimes the death part looks damned good.”

Jane hid a grin behind her notepad. “Yes, I see,” she said “Well, thank you...for everything...Jer.”

Mr. Witzeer looked up sharply. “Jer? Do I know you?”

Saying nothing, Jane left the small condo. As she walked home, she thought back fifty-one years to when she had been plain, mousy Jane, a girl thrilled to be dating Jerry Witzeer right after high school. She also remembered how he had been far from a swinger, in fact, he’d been a toady, rich, young man. Oh, how shy she had been and how grateful to finally have a boyfriend. He had been her first real love.

Then her best friend, Grace, the slut who slept with just about anyone, stole him away. Grace closed her legs for once and dangled the promise of sex in front of him like some great prize. Jane hadn’t stood a chance in the game of love.

And she hadn’t seen them ever again, not until she moved into this over 55 community last month.

Of course, neither of them recognized her.

Although she never forgave them, as she thought about her ex-best friend and her ex-boy friend, she realized what she always really knew. That life had dealt her the better hand.

Back at her condo, she reread her notes and shrugged. “I guess it’s true,” she decided, “Love and hate are really subjective.”

“What?” her husband asked from the chair next to her.

She put down her article, went over to her husband and taking his face in her hands kissed him like a teenager.

“Thank you.” She said and ignored his puzzled expression.

Ends

Us

By Jeffrey Zable

Blue beneath the electric current.
Too many words and not enough love
to protect the innocent.
Do you know me?
I'm the one with the zig-zag bones
who is climbing your ladder.
I'll see you again...
if I get to the top.



Life After Limbo

By Jenny Butler

Enclosed in the warm fluid, I listened to the gurgling of her body and to the noises outside, the resonance that reaches me in here. In comfortable calm, sucking my thumb, I imagined the source of those external sounds. I drifted to sleep and dreamed of black swirls and amorphous figures, reflections of my waking imaginings of what I could hear. It was a strange feeling then, a sudden shuddering downward and a detachment. This was my first – and last – experience of touch. I was falling through the flesh, the red liquid all around. I looked through a film of red, until my world turned black.

I found myself in the cold, black expanse, so much darker than before. There was no sound, just emptiness and nothing touching. I felt lonely and so sad. I remained in the stillness, for what seemed like an endless time: a tiny self, in desolation.

Then, I could see something approaching. My emotions surged – It was almost too much to feel at once! A sparkle was moving, and another, and more approaching and they formed a line in front of me. I felt exhilarated! They stayed in formation for a few moments and then began to move away, on into the void. Why were they leaving me? I wanted to reach out, to touch them somehow. I wanted so desperately for them to return! They had moved further away, now tiny glints. They bobbed up and down and glimmered brighter, as if beckoning me to follow. I lunged forward and, to my astonishment I was a sparkle too! I could feel myself flickering and was aware of emitting light.

I followed them along until the absolute blackness gave way to a dark cloud. We passed through this haze and entered a room. I saw her then, my mother! She was in bed and it was night-time, but no way as dark as from where I had emerged. I found that by thinking of moving, I could indeed move. I floated toward her bed and I went close to shine into her eyes. I wanted her to wake up. It was so strange to see her face, to not be on the inside, to not be a part of her! She opened her eyes and looked at me. I moved as fast as I could, up and down, over and back. Would she know it was me? She had tears in her eyes as they followed my radiance, but then she smiled. She *knew*! She knew it was me! I swirled in the air, making a spiral of light. The other sparkles were moving chaotically, trying to get my attention, anxious to be off. I didn't want them to leave me behind! I followed them out the open window into the crisp air. The stars were so bright and I could feel the moonlight and I felt wonderful, shining on things in the night sky.

Some of the other lights were bigger and very fast and it was sometimes hard to keep up with them, but I learned how to move swiftly. They showed me many different moves and taught me how to go into a sunbeam and move along it so I could go right inside a flower. Oh, I loved the flowers and all the different colours! We would play there with the butterflies and the bees and we would go in the trees. It was very exciting in the trees because we could vibrate and make the blossoms fall. In the gardens, we sparkled on the grass so the cats would chase us. We chased each other too, zipping and zooming.

When it rained, we would go down by the side of a rock for shelter while we merged. We would blend our lights and it was a most peculiar sensation as we attempted this! It felt tingly and I could feel the warmth and the hum of the others. We would join together as one big light. The ones on the outside would push down to keep the orb together and we would be off, moving slowly and glowing in the dim light. We did this out of concern that the new lights might lose their way in the rain shower. I always went in the middle of the orb and although it felt unusual, I made sure I was right inside before I pressed my light-tendrils down to stay put. I didn't want to lose my way! I didn't want to be on my own again with no one to play with!

Ends

*A version of this story was first published as part of **The Amulet Project** about infant loss <http://amulets.ie/> on 21st August 2014 (under the title **Glimmer**).*

TUDANCA
PE EBR



The Last Words Of Appollinox

By Neil K. Henderson

Come live with me and suck my socks -
you're nearly as much fun as an aubergine.
My string vest lies upon the rocks,
my pants are nowhere to be seen.

Away with tiresome decadence,
away with boring dreams!
With gusto give me recompense
for bland emotions made of steam.

Come live with me and suck my socks -
you're nearly as much fun as an aubergine.
If you hadn't been hanging around the docks,
I wouldn't have had to write this thing.

