

TIGERSHARK magazine



Issue Thirty-Two – Autumn/Winter 2022 – Plants

Tigershark Magazine

Issue 32 – Autumn/Winter 2022

Plants

Editorial

The secrets of flowers grow into stories in this issue as we enter the wonderful world of plants...

Best, DS Davidson

© Tigershark Publishing 2022

All rights reserved.

Authors retain the rights to their individual work.

Editor and Layout: DS Davidson

Next Issue's Theme: Behind the Curtain

Curtain-twitching neighbourhood busybodies.

Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz.

The veil between life and death.

The invisible separation of two worlds.

Just what is the curtain, who is behind it, and who is peeking?

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

Dandelion Dreams

By Donna McCabe

Dying dandelions

Blossom blooming wishes

Blowing on the wind.

Contents

Fiction

The One-Eyed Lemon of Paternostos	Neil K. Henderson	8
Hellevison	Christopher Baker	13
Host	Valkyrie Kerry	20
A.C.I.	Paul Grover	27

Ice Vine	Sarah Crabtree	31
Up From The Ashes	DJ Tyrer	36
Wild Salad	Matthew John Fletcher	45
Chekhov's Gun	David Rudd	56
The Never-Never	Billy Stanton	62
Demize	Valkyrie Kerry & Brett Dyer	72
Bees Out Of Bonnets	Neil K. Henderson	81
The Corgi	Rob Ottesen	87
Non-Fiction		
Remembering Halloween	Jason Jenkover	15
Prose Poetry		
Winter, The High Street, Southend-on-Sea	DJ Tyrer	4
Poetry		
Dandelion Dreams	Donna McCabe	2
Venus Flytrap	K.A. Williams	4
Haiku	David Edwards	5
The Garden Phlox	Mark Hudson	5

untitled		
	David Edwards	5
Rod Stewart		
	Celine Rose Mariotti	6
The Stately Oak		
	K.A. Williams	7
Roses		
	DJ Tyrer	7
A Morning's Walk		
	Nolo Segundo	9
Haiku		
	Aeronwy Dafies	10
In This Passageway		
	Daniel de Culla	11
The Marvel of the Freedom: In Patches		
	Paweł Markiewicz	12
A Witch Hears Voices at the Farmer's Market		
	Damon Hubbs	14
In the Bewitched Aviary		
	Paweł Markiewicz	18
Haiku		
	DJ Tyrer	19
Owl and the Wild Flowers		
	Damon Hubbs	19
Haiku		
	David Edwards	26
How Longing Falls Short		
	Richard LeDue	26
The Bear and the Birthday Party		
	Celine Rose Mariotti	26
High Summer		
	Damon Hubbs	30

A Thorny Relationship		
	K.A. Williams	30
Summertime		
	Holly Day	30
The Fall		
	Harris Coverley	42
Singular Passage		
	Freya Pickard	44
Poetry Man		
	Michael Lee Johnson	44
A Poet Knows...		
	Donna McCabe	55
English Walled Garden		
	Mark Hudson	55
DCCIC		
	David Edwards	55
DCCC		
	David Edwards	55
Psychosis 6:28		
	Brooks Lindberg	61
Tree Death		
	DJ Tyrer	61
My Dream About Being A Tree		
	Richard LeDue	71
Some of the Things That Happen Around Us		
	Holly Day	71
In Passing		
	Holly Day	80
Haiku		
	David Edwards	80
A New Monarch – King Charles III		
	Celine Rose Mariotti	86
The Green Man Sleeps		
	Aeronwy Dafies	90

Forgotten

K.A. Williams

90

Cracked

DJ Tyrer

90

Venus Flytrap

By K. A. Williams

The Venus Flytrap
A Carolina native
Has a taste for bugs

Artwork

John Laue

Beautiful Green

Cover

Green Explosion

10

Succulent

55

Daniel de Culla

Passageway

11

Rita – Wife, Mother & Grandmother

11

Other internal artwork courtesy of Pixabay.com

Winter, The High Street, Southend-on-Sea

By DJ Tyrer

Winter carries connotations, certain assumptions that do not always hold true. The perfect white of Victorian Christmas cards may prove elusive, any fall of snow thin and fleeting, if any falls at all. Instead, we have grey skies and a bone-chilling drizzle that insinuates itself through jackets to dampen the skin. People shiver as they pass one another, collars pulled up tight about their necks, umbrellas thrust out defiantly before them as they force their way through air thick with droplets descending in a haze. One man's foot slips on paving stones too smooth for a damp day, leg thrusts forwards, pulling him after it, sliding like an ice skater, recovers with a strangely-graceful movement, like a drunken dancer putting on a display, continues on his way. The moment lost, the day continues, dismally, a disappointment, not a dream.

Ends



Online Now

[View From Atlantis](#)

Take fright with issue 58 – *Samhain Scares* – and seek beyond death with issue 59, coming soon...

57 previous issues all available to read!

And, don't miss the

[5-7-5 Haiku Journal](#)

as it celebrates *Hallowe'en* with daily posts!

languid lamas in
luxuriant pagodas
that blind doubt which chills

By David Edwards



The Garden Phlox

By Mark Hudson

Winter has left a really deep freeze,
for lavender plants for upcoming spring.
a woman planted her flowers in peas;
at the Chicago Botanical Garden they're seen.

Phlox is native, lavender is not,
phlox attracts bees and butterflies.
they will be blooming when it's hot,
the springtime is when the flowers will rise.

The top three, an Imperial gem,
Royal Velvet and Manstead.
Nature lovers will get to see them,
makes you look forward to spring ahead.

It is spring and the flowers are starting to bloom,
Oh, giant earth, please make some room!

Brownfield
American Industry,
dinosaurs of rust
these forgotten mastodons.
Broken, fossilized windows
all blindly watching
the effaced signage
of collapsed fencing
vainly surrounding
wheel-less, weed-sprouting concrete,
overturned barrels,
ladders, trucks, and mute
unmoving machinery.
The earth will not absorb this.

By David Edwards

Rod Stewart

– Rock n Rolling Through the Decades

By Celine Rose Mariotti

There he is
A superstar,
A real rock n roller,
No one is bolder,
With the upbeat melodies
That get us dancing,
“Maggie May”
Started it all
The hits kept coming,
The guitar kept strumming,
Hits like “Some Guys Have All the Luck”
“Do You Think I’m Sexy?”
“Hot Legs”
And many more,
Then he did five albums,
All the old songs from
The 30’, 40’s and 50’s,
He gained many new fans,
From the older generation
His concerts are superb,
The audience is on their feet,
All singing and dancing,
Clapping and tapping our feet
To that rock n roll Rod Stewart beat,
Then he kicks out the autographed
Soccer balls,
And at one of the shows,
That we went to at Caesar’s Palace
The ball landed right in my Mom’s lap
She was ecstatic!
It was fantastic!
We put it in a glass case and it
Sits proudly on a table
In our living room,
Rod Stewart, he’s a superstar!



The Stately Oak

By K. A. Williams

The stately oak stood in the yard.
It was old, its bark was hard.
A storm formed out in the sea,
and warnings flashed on the TV.
A lightning bolt struck the tree,
and thunder sounded mightily.
The stately oak stands in the yard -
still alive, but badly scarred.

Previously published in Nomad's Choir (2012)

Roses

By DJ Tyrer

A bouquet of roses
Blood-red blooms
Caress the hard green stems
A thorn-prick bleeds red
Droplets merge with heads
Lifeblood and love token
Merge as one



The One-Eyed Lemon of Paternostos

By Neil K. Henderson

One of the last unsolved mysteries of the natural world, the existence of the One-Eyed Lemon of Paternostos, has come a step closer to solution with the news that balanced-diet game hunter Kemmel Beventine has officially thrown his trademark straw fedora in the ring, and is off on the trail of the citrus legend. It was in the lobby of a modest hotel in Morocco that he was first inspired to act.

“There was this bowl of greenish unripe lemons piled up with indigo aubergines on a table in the hall. It immediately reminded me of the strange symbiotic relationship between the common Blue-Arsed Baboon and the Toilet-Faced Macaque. I thought, ‘Birds do it, bees do it, even toilet-faced macaques and baboons do it. Let’s do it – let’s go after the One-Eyed Lemon of Paternostos.’”

Having charted the coastal waters of the elusive Aegean island, the next problem was planning a method of attack. “The old drugged bait technique won’t work, since lemons don’t have teeth and tend not to eat things. Again, using spears or tridents would spoil the valuable skins, much prized in legend for aphrodisiac marmalade. And guns of any sort would render the specimens unfit for verification. One shot lemon looks much the same as the next, especially if the eye’s knocked out.”

Ideally, it is hoped to bring a specimen in alive. And for that, only nets can be used. But these will have to be smuggled onto Paternostos under cover of darkness. “It’s believed these lemons evolved their single eye in order to scan the surrounding sea for approaching pickers. Growing in the mountains gives an all-round visual range, and only one eye is really needed. They defend themselves by squirting citric acid from their tear duct, so protective goggles will have to be worn.”

Having settled on a plan, it only remains to hire a native guide, to save wasting time on fruitless searching. Unfortunately, Paternostos has been uninhabited since the 1950s, but a surviving native has been located in a care home in Athens.

“These sonar devices for the blind can do wonders,” Beventine enthuses. “We’ll have old Demetrios up and running in no time.” And as for the One-Eyed Lemon? “It’s not going anywhere, is it?”



Double Envelopment

A poetry collection by Gary Beck

[Double Envelopment](#) is a poetry collection committed to exploring social, political and economic issues, with particular concern for my divided country.

Available in [paperback](#) and on the [Kindle](#)

Reviewed in [The Supplement 102](#)

Published by [Purple Unicorn Media](#)

A Morning's Walk

By Nolo Segundo

My wife and I walk every morning,
a mile or so –
it's good for us old to walk in the cold,
or in the misty rain, it makes less the pain
that old age is wont to bring to bodies
which once burned bright with youth,
though now I wear braces on ankles,
braces on knees, and I walk slowly
with 2 canes, like an old skier,
sans snow, sans mountain.

We passed a tree whose leaves had
left behind summer's green and now
fall slowly, carefully one by one
in their autumnal splendour.

My wife stopped me –
listen she said – but
I heard nothing – hush!,
stand still, she said,
and I tried hard to
hear the mystery...

Finally I asked her, knowing my hearing
less than my wife's (too many rock concerts
in my heedless youth), what we listen for?

She looked up at my old head, and smiled –
only she could hear the sound each leaf made
as it rippled the air in falling to the ground.



Branches like fingers
Whispering voices of leaves
Moon conceals its face

By Aeronwy Dafies

Originally published on the 5-7-5 Haiku Journal



My Mythology

A poetry collection by Freya Pickard

A collection of poems inspired by myth and legend. Will you dare to walk on the fringes of fear or glance into the blank mirror? Are you brave enough to stand before the thunder god or receive the sun lord's gifts? Can you survive the bewitching ocean song or escape from zombie mushrooms?

Freya Pickard's 2nd poetry collection, **My Mythology**, is just \$1.99 at Kindle, Kobo, Nook, iBooks and other online stores.

The third volume in Freya's poetry series, **This Is Me**, will be available in November this year.

<https://books2read.com/u/38x9JV>

<https://www.amazon.com/My-Mythology-Dragonscale-Delvings-Book-ebook/dp/B07NGQQ3DJ/>

In This Passageway

By Daniel de Culla

In this passageway
What I call "Passage of Love"
She cut a branch
I cut a flower
Making us two in one
Like the mule that goes to plow
With the donkey.
Playing the castanets
She waits for me at midnight
I played her tambourine
With the pestle handle
That resonates well
While the shepherd
What's left in the town
Takes the sheep to the Ejido
Giving joy and life
To the sad and dark hermitage.
While in the barn
Stay more than four hens
Of sorrow crying.
-What a fool you are
I tell her.
-You really are stupid
she tells me
While on the roof
Cat and cat
Are making love.



*Passageway on the way up to Rita's winery,
in Moradillo, Burgos.*

Rita wife, mother & grandmother.



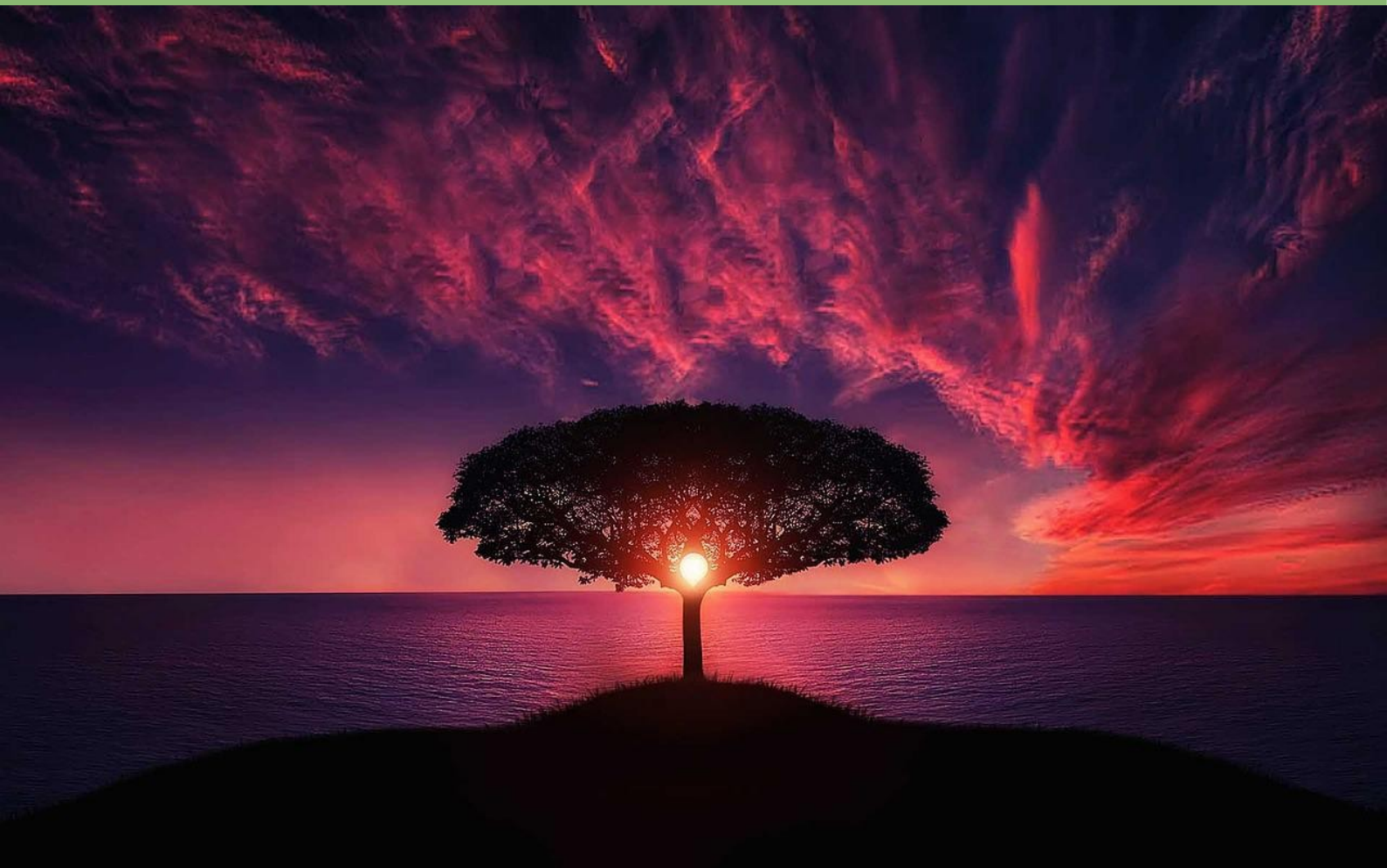
The Marvel of the Freedom: In Patches

By Paweł Markiewicz

The vault opens itself at dawn.
The calyx of an Arctic alpine forget-me-not reopens
for an enchanting glory of the sunshiny dreams,
because of the eternally august poem,
that reads lenient and benignant.
Throughout the day:
there is up there a paradisiacal flight
of all halcyon seraphim,
singing through the stoicism, eudemonia
of many celestial dreamers.
Under the sun: a rhythm in wings of butterflies.
After evenfall: the paradise closes itself.
The springtide has gone to bed in aestival splendor.
In addition overnight a balmy sempiternity sleeps as well.
Here below a sensitive firefly flies,
above so ravishing earth.
In danger owing to the raveners of the night.
Indeed spared thanks to the sheen of Luther's star.
The earth becomes a dazzling hereafter.
It remains not far from June sparks, the little fire.

.....
vault - (poetical) sky
benignant - mild
halcyon - peaceful
seraphim - seraphs

.....
aestival - summery
ravener - bird of prey
sempiternity - eternity



HelleVision

By Christopher Baker

Greetings Boils and Ghouls! Chris, our next subject was hoping for a relaxing evening watching television. What he received instead was a permanent cancellation of his regularly scheduled programming, but I'll let him tell you all about it. Hee hee hee hee!

I remember one particular Christmas from my childhood in the late sixties. A Christmas where my father could barely conceal his excitement! After years of watching his programs on an old 9 inch black and white screen, he used his bonus to buy a brand-new RCA colour tv with a 13-inch screen!

In his mind we had finally arrived! The rest of us shared in his enthusiasm. Shows were converted into colour, and he was finally able to watch his favourites. These included *The Man From U.N.C.L.E*, *Marcus Welby* and *Dragnet*.

I am not what you would call an obsessive person about but forty years later the TV was still in good shape. Primarily thanks to the advent of the internet as I was able to find replacement parts for it. This was my monument to my father, who passed away ten years ago.

My wife June and I continued to enjoy our cable service but on a 21-inch 4D screen! That was until last month when I received a strange letter. It was supposedly from the cable company, although it was written on a dirty and tattered parchment like paper and read; *Attention NuVue customers!*

As an incentive to maintain quality programming and selection, we have introduced four new packages; Bronze, Silver, Gold, and for those who are struggling during this time, an economic Nickel package. This will come into effect early next week. Outrageous! The bronze package started at triple the amount I was paying. In protest I opted for Nickel. The new programming service started on the date given, like clockwork, but the images were too blurry to see!

I called the cable company and was met with the voice of a bored, indifferent girl. "Sir, you have to view the nickel package on a smaller screen for the correct definition.' I started to protest stating that I had a state-of-the-art television but halfway through my complaint she rudely hung up!

I was grumbling about having to buy a smaller screen when my wife reminded me that my father's old TV set still worked. Brilliant! I thought as I hooked up the RCA. Why didn't I just switch services you ask? Well, you see, when NuVue came on the market it took over by storm, effectively becoming a monopoly through the purchase of the competition's shares. I was able to successfully hook up the old RCA and was elated with the focus and clarity of this old, analogue set. As I changed the channels there appeared an old episode of *Leave It To Beaver*. It must be a nostalgic channel, I thought. June was typically in the kitchen wearing an apron making dinner. I had to smile at the familiar viewing fare as it reminded me of my childhood. Then something strange happened.

June spotted an anomaly that went from mildly worrying to terrifying. The character Ward pulled up in the driveway but instead of carrying a briefcase, he appeared to be holding an axe!

“Hello dear,” he chirped with an evil smirk, then sank the axe into his wife’s skull! Frightened, I quickly changed the channel. The Addams Family was on, Lurch was shoving a screaming Pugsley into the lion’s mouth while Wednesday clapped and laughed hysterically!

What the hell is happening? I turned it over again and again. The Donna Reed show seemed remiss at first. Donna was clasping her hands in front of her, bizarrely staring downwards, down at the floor at the bodies of her husband, daughter, and son which were tainted with a bluish-black hue! She looked sideways towards me, a maniacal grin appeared on her face!

Unbelievably she started to climb through the RCA into the living room and that was the last sight I—



A Witch Hears Voices at the Farmers’ Market

By Damon Hubbs

Although she has a garden
on a quarter-acre of land in Massachusetts
the witch suddenly finds herself at the Farmers’ market
picking through tubs of produce
like the Green Man searching for a larch tree
in the frost pockets of the Finzel swamp.
The last time she saw him
they played board games at a thalasso spa
near the English Channel. The leaves
sprouting from his mouth had gone grey.

*There’s Greta Thunburg
riding atop a flaming iceberg,
but that isn’t what the kettle of women
in Lululemon haggling over the price of jam
could have said, is it, thought the witch.
More likely it was something
meta about *The Thorn Birds*.
Dying, we will rise above our agony
to outsing the nightingale.
Will we, Green Man?*

Remembering Halloween

A Nostalgic and Reflective Review

By Jason Jenkover

Part One

Halloween, Samhain, the first day of All Hallow Tide, a contraction of All Hallows' Eve, the evening before All Saints' or All Hallows' Day. It is believed that this is the time where the veil or boundary is removed between our world and the otherworld.

An advantage for the dead! Ghosts and evil spirits may dwell in our world on that night, feasting upon the living and preying on the weaknesses and misfortunes of mortals. Seeking out those that are suffering or vulnerable, targeting bad states such as hatred, anguish, loss, and neglect. These traumas expose the soul and cast open the gateway.

It's said, and believed, that by disguising oneself on Halloween night the soul is protected. Masks hide the soul from evil spirits that dwell and prey amongst the living. Sure, it has its commercial purposes, everything comes at a price. But wouldn't losing one's soul come at a price as well?

Young children and adults believe that when roaming around alone on Halloween night gives the Bogeyman an opportunity to be summoned and by doing so, he can claim one's soul. Better not to take the risk, so Trick or Treaters travel with friends and loved ones.

But all of this is folktales and lore, right? Just propaganda to control the actions and behaviour, so everyone should just enjoy the festivities that this holiday brings.

Or is this in fact a warning that we must not ignore, for the sake of our immortal souls?

Part Two

Through the veil he comes, and waits patiently in the cold, dark night for a disadvantaged soul. Young Michael appears; sad, angry, broken, and ALONE. Suddenly, faster than a crisp cold breeze of autumn wind, evil snuffs out the soul and enters the open vessel. Evil's true form; The Shape.

After snuffing out the soul, The Shape offers the vessel a new form and purpose. Evil must remove any humanity left within Michael for the metamorphosis to be complete, the becoming of pure evil. The Bogeyman bound to extinguish morality by blinding the light with blood to bring true darkness.

The Shape approaches the house on 45 Lampkin Lane, the home where this vessel once dwelled. It waits for an advantage enabling it to seize Michael's sister, Judith. It watches as Judith and her boyfriend walk upstairs. It quickly enters the side door and steps into the kitchen, grasps a butcher's knife and proceeds.

Suddenly the boyfriend reappears, ready to go home, saying his goodbyes. He does not see the vessel standing there before him, no one truly sees evil.

After he leaves, The Shape proceeds upstairs towards Judith's room. He locates a Halloween mask and puts it on, shielding the former vessel's face. Michael is no more, and evil has no face. The pursuit of darkness and blood continues.

Nine stabs to his former sister's body extinguishes any remaining semblance of humanity. Nine stabs.

Blinded by blood and darkness, The Shape exits the house. There he is confronted there he hears shouts of the former occupant's name, 'Michael!

Part Three

THE SHAPE OF EVIL

Black cats, goblins, broomsticks and ghosts,

Covens of witches with all of their hosts,

You make think they scare me,

You're probably right.

Black cats and goblins

On Halloween night. Trick-or-treat.

Playful words that were once said to frighten children have manifested a true fear that we all still have deep within us. Things go bump in the night.

One Halloween night in particular brought spooks and chills to the residents in the quiet town of Haddonfield. Blood boiled and stomachs turned. Anger and disbelief tore through the community. No one understood why young Michael viciously murdered his older sister, Judith

The local police department could not make sense of the tragedy. No explanation was forthcoming from the silent, murderous boy. The following day, All Hallows' Day, law enforcement admitted the young killer to Smith's Grove Sanatorium, Warren County. There psychiatrists and psychologists attempted to use tested methods to reach the boy. To locate some rational trigger or motive to explain this heinous act.

Smith's Grove best practitioners failed, and after many long years gave up on their young patient, Michael. All lost hope, except for one psychiatrist, Dr Samuel Loomis, who had taken an interest in the boy and subsequently became his guardian.

The doctor tried relentlessly to help young Michael, it became, his obsession. His young patient continued to show no signs of progress, and instead isolated himself, staring with empty eyes.

Eventually the doctor concluded that Myers wore the mask to terrify his victim, Judith Myers. A monster replacing the human.

On Halloween night people can become whoever they wish to be. The mask is the character, an alternative identity bringing itself to the surface. Without it the who and why of Michael becomes irrelevant.

Loomis no longer sees Michael as a sociopath, but as pure and simple evil. Michael, a representation of an abstract. Fear overwhelms the doctor fear and disbelief. He discards science and medicine, admits his failures and abandons all hope for Michael. Wishing to eternally imprison Michael he states, 'He had the blackest eyes. The Devil's eyes.'

Constantine wrote that fate was somehow related only to religion, whilst Samuels felt that fate was like a natural element, earth, air, fire or water. Immovable, like a mountain. It stands where man pass away. Fate never changes.

Part Four

FORCE OF NATURE

Evil is eternal for it has no end, nor does it have a beginning.

The sun goes down on this eve, October 30th, the night before Halloween, and traditions set in. An adolescent night for tricks (hold the treats), some call it 'Devil's Night.' Nearly 15 years ago on a similar stormy night this town was haunted by the death of, Judith Myers.

Many years passed before residents of Haddonfield felt secure again, but despite the horrors the town never pushed Halloween aside, although the Myers' home was left empty and abandoned, yet strangely still standing.

A marker for his, or its, inevitable return.

Though time defines a point of measure in which eternity is limitless, The Shape patiently waits for its siren to be heard and its moment to unfold.

Fifteen years of still silence, until one night he comes home. Lights flicker as a heavy storm causes a brief and significant power outage to the sanatorium, Smith's Grove. Thunder clashes, and lightning strikes to reveal what lurks within darkness. Illuminating several Smith's Grove patients as they roam freely... Including, Michael Myers.

The lunatics having escaped the asylum and ventured into the storm. Cold raindrops offer an eerie applause for the escape plan's mastery. Just as the motions morph into stillness a car approaches and Myer's new reign of terror begins.



In the Bewitched Aviary.
The sonnet according to Mr. Shakespeare
By Paweł Markiewicz

Helots muse about moony Golden Fleece of the **condor**.
Drudges think of the dreamy eternal dew of the **hen**.
Philosophers ponder on winged fantasy of the **crow**.
Kings ruminates on a picturesque gold of the **jay**.
Priests contemplate the dreamed, soft, meek weird of the **woodpecker**.
Masters daydream about nice marvelous songs of the **tern**.
Soothsayers dream of fulfilled gold of the **yellowhammer**.
Knights philosophize about poetic dawn of the **wren**.
Hoplites fantasize about a red sky of the **sparrow**.
Athletes describe the most tender treasure-charm of the **snipe**.
Gods remember an enchanted, dear temple of the **seagull**.
Goddesses recall fairytale-like heroes of the **kite**.

Poets commemorate the elves-like heaven of the **owl**.
Bards reflect on most amazing dreamery of the **rook**.

Note: Weird – archaic, ‘fate’.





Owl and the Wildflowers

By Damon Hubbs

Under dreaming skies
the night bird tracks from beech to pine
like a brakeman running atop the roofs of railway cars.
Riding in the open, eyes looming like red lanterns,
the owl's flying switch couples and uncouples
voles, field mice.
It is wildflowers he came for.
Blue robes that unloose petals
as white as the moon's ancient tusk.

Who does the owl love?

The night bird clutches a corsage
of bloodroot and fireweed, oxeye daisies
boldly buttoned with wisdom and divine timing.
Lady slippers, one pink, one white
bob and pirouette. And nod
as the aster's star-shaped head peeks like a child
from behind a mother's black ruffled coat.
The bee balm mouth of wild bergamot
arouses creatures from their hidden hives.

Who does the owl love?

The night bird loves the secrecy
of the covered bridge,
and the darkness
of the seed in the furrow.
His bouquet flaps
and sways
towards high summer.

Host

By Valkyrie Kerry

Fate drove me to my death, and by death, I mean the tarot card interpretation; the end of an old life and the beginning of the new. A repetitive dream haunted me from childhood. I would find myself in pouring rain, roaming scared, and lost in a thick wood, drenched in night's suffocating darkness. Finally, I would hear the cries of the ocean's tide hammering against a distant shore. On reaching an unkempt grassy clearing a once magnificent, now derelict mansion would come into view. I felt it looking at me, waiting for me and drawing me in; built of sturdy ageing stone, broken Georgian style windows, yet alive and calling for me.

Beyond lay a muddy beach littered with pebbles and overlooked by an abandoned lighthouse. Occasional jolts of lightening would illuminate the overbearing gargoyles that adorned the large, stretched eyes of the main first floor windows. Reluctantly I would enter the curved oak doors that had been left ajar as if welcoming me. Candles would flicker alive showing a grand hall, magically unscathed by age and bedecked with old portraits of people from long ago that stared longingly at the giant staircase. Behind the art stood high, crimson walls that complemented the dark wooden rails and floor.

An archway to my left revealed a splendid lounge full of Chaise-Lange's, a crackling fire filled with logs and further pictures. One would always catch my gaze; a refined man, tall with thick black hair and the most soul-searching blue eyes. Pangs would always run through my body, pangs of attraction and a sub-conscious recognition. After a momentary stare I would climb the stairs. The first floor encompassed the staircase revealing numerous bedrooms. All furnished beautifully with king size beds, closets and rugs. One particular chamber attracted me, it lay between two other rooms and had doors accessing both. The bed had four posts and red covers, walls, floors.

Deeper into the house I would go, passing the servants' quarters of the second floor and up into the attic. The attic called me, and I was drawn to it. I always knew in the back of my mind that there were two staircases that led to the top floor; one ran directly from the scullery in the basement and the other from the landing of the second floor. I climbed higher, but a pain in my belly told me to turn back, to run. The hair on my neck rose, but I would always lose control of my feet. Forced to move on I would feel the panic welling up, lights dimmed, and the splendour of the main house would soon be forgotten.

Mazes were incomparable to the intricate rooms that ran one from the other and across various levels. It would occur to me in my adult years that the attic rooms existed in a self-contained block to the rear of the house directly over the extended scullery and kitchens.

The rooms varied from what appeared to be empty servants' quarters and vast collections of old books. The largest room appeared to be a study of sorts and must have sat to the rear as it overlooked the sea and lighthouse.

Layers of rocks, corals and pools provided an awkward array of steppingstones to the menacing tides and lighthouse. Sometimes I would move into a pitch-black back room. I always felt disturbed, as if an inhumane soul suffered in the purgatory of this chamber. I could feel the threatening presence. I would try to escape, but my feet would draw me in deeper and darker. On other occasions I would dream that I stepped onto the balcony of the study and climbed over the barrier down to the first layer of rock. The hard, weed soaked mass swept in a rugged semi-circle dropping at one edge to another layer and at another to a rock pool that would tidally transform into a cruel tide sucking water into the jaws of the ocean.

I would feel him behind me, a greying mass of black and white, unable to reflect colour. I would feel his massive form enshrouding me and instinctively would edge towards the rock pool with fear. I knew him, the man before me, the man from the portrait, but could not place him. As I backed away his hand would stretch alongside great strides until it stroked my cheek. The fear would always make me unsteady, the fear and the swirls of the tide beckoning to me, I would slip as I backed away, tripping, stumbling trying desperately to get away from this monstrous spirit.

He always uttered the same words as he angrily strode towards me, 'We have been waiting!' and I would fall into the whirling eddy below. Dark water sucked me under every time and every time I would drag myself to the surface choking and suffocating. He would watch cruelly as I cried out and begged for help. The tide would drive me outwards towards the rocky shelf separating the pool from the vicious sea. My nails would crack as I threw myself onto the largest stone, wrapping my arms about its huge form. Then she would come, the lighthouse would glow, and she would come. My stinging, salty eyes would glance back, and he would be staring, waiting and transparently illuminating as the ancient light flicked across the shore.

Her icy, drenched pale hand would appear first from beneath the waves, grabbing at the boulder with fingers crunched like talons. Her long black hair rose from the deep and clung to the rocks as if every single lock was an individual entity coming for my soul. I would always freeze with terror as a second hand splatted next to my face. Her bowed head would rise in neck cracking strokes and two dark eyes would peer from the downturned face turning me to stone.

Psychology was my subject of choice at eighteen and circadian rhythms and dream analysis thereafter for my Doctorate in London. My social life was non-existent as I desperately searched for meaning. Psychiatrists failed to alleviate my suffering as did counsellors, hypnotists and priests. I spent my free time wading through photograph after photograph of old houses, but none seemed to match the image that my mind had conjured up. My own work had not given me the insight I desperately needed and after graduation, a ceremony that I chose not to attend, I booked a costly appointment with a medium. Needless to say, I was sceptical.

The scepticism increased when I found the woman, who called herself Helena, in a small Soho shop surrounded by trinkets, tarot cards and candles. It seemed a little tacky and I expected nothing. Helena offered me green tea, which I politely declined, before leading me down a steep flight of wooden stairs to a small candle lit room containing only a dinner table and chairs, nothing spectacular. I sat down and involuntarily allowed an unimpressed sigh to escape my lips.

Advising me to shuffle and focus on my quest, the woman handed me a well-used pack of cards. Steadily I mixed the deck as the old woman pushed her greying curls back and closed her eyes. I placed the cards in a heap before her and without examining them she ran her hands over the top whilst taking deep breaths. She batted her lashes and then whispered to me that caution was needed. She then rose and left the room returning with a map of The British Isles. Her palm stroked the plan until stopping on a small Scottish village lying between the ocean and the Outer Hebrides, Meallta. Abruptly her demeanour changed, she grasped my hand moaning and shaking her head, imploring me not to go. I forced her away and left my payment on the table.

I was drawn, I knew after years of unrest that I had to go regardless of Helena's negativity. My searches online had revealed very little about the area, so I had no choice but to conclude my quest, to find out what had been driving me and if this house existed at all.

Within hours I found myself lightly packed and on the night train to the North. The journey was largely uneventful, I was tired and slept for the most part only waking to change trains at Fort William. The morning sun rose from behind crimson skies as I left the station at Glenfinnan and waited for what felt like an eternity for a taxi.

The driver said very little to me on the road to Meallta and seemed reluctant to be visiting the small village at all. He was courteous enough to leave me at a small tavern with rooms to let. This of course sounds like a reference to an old horror film, but this is not the case. The fact is that Meallta was such a small village that little else existed; a few houses in the village, the tavern, a small shop and a smaller school with farms dotted along the rural horizon. The harbour only provided enough room for four fishing boats each only big enough for two or three men. It was clear that the village was self-sufficient and neither wanted nor required outside interference; it was trapped in time.

The people were polite enough, unlike the harbingers expected to drive strangers out in the old films and quickly accommodated me and offered me a good home roast. The tavern was run by a middle-aged childless couple calling themselves Mary and Brian. She was a petit woman whose thick red curls were piled into a loose bun and he was a sturdy fellow darker in both complexion and hair. They spoke at length about the fishing population who they fed during the day and gave porter to in the evening.

Once I found the couple to be at ease and happy with my company, I broached the subject of historical houses. I did not want to explain my far-fetched reasoning and instead explained that I was writing a book on old buildings. There was a brief and uneasy exchange of glances, but logic overcame any out-dated superstition and Mary explained that there had been a large house that backed on to the sea many years ago. This house had been burned down by the English landlord, a General in a fit of temper following the loss of his wife; only the bare ruins stood now. Before retiring I persuaded my good landlords to show me the location of the ruins on a map and bathed and took to my bed early to prepare for the day ahead; a day which I hoped would bring years of distress to a swift conclusion.

I woke to a coal fire burning in the grate and a small plate of soda cake, butter, jam and a fresh pot of tea. I refreshed myself and swept my hair back tightly. My attire consisted of loose trousers, shirt and trainers to facilitate any excess climbing or walking that may be required. The walk was longer than expected as the ruins stood some way outside of the village. A few passers-by on bicycles or foot saluted as I overtook them on the road, but the journey was otherwise quiet giving me time to wonder whether I was chasing ghosts and at times even question my own sanity.

At length, having passed a small abandoned monastery, I found a dirt road holding an unkempt signpost pointing to the historic site of Meallta House. I strolled up the road, anxious to reach my destination and barely taking in the lush green beauty of the overhanging trees that smothered the path blocking the view to the sea. The sound of the waves crashed through my ears as I drew closer to the site. The track grew rougher until it morphed into a ragged field and then a wooded copse, with little indication of regular tourism. I crunched through leaves, dried mud heaps and fallen branches until reaching the clearing, the one I had so often dreamed about and beyond I spied the ruins.

Most of the ground floor still stood, the door rotted and hung open, but the windowpanes were no more, just vacant eyes staring into the distance. Clambering up through the front door I found the layout as expected;

the great hall, the lounge now a blackened, debris filled chasm, the stairs collapsed, and the upper floors fallen into heaps, strewn carefree about the place with weeds growing between the planks. Clumsy stones made the surfaces dangerously unstable. The ebb and flow of the tide seemed to echo and scream to me. I abandoned the building and circumnavigated its huge walls until reaching the pebbled layers heading out to sea.

Sadly, the desolate lighthouse gazed at me. Rugged rocks clawed a path to it and masses of rock pools formed a dangerous, tidal pathway to its door. I closed my eyes and listened to the roaring sea, screaming in desperation and in that second everything changed.

Darkness fell, unnatural darkness, the sun's rays disappeared from beyond my eyelids and slowly, recoiling in horror I opened them. Dense black clouds smothered the sky leaving only a slit for the rays of a glowing, ill-timed moon. A smog rose upwards from around my feet and misty claws crept from the trees beyond. I could feel my heart racing and urgency filled my belly, desperation to flee, but terror cemented my feet to the ground.

I turned my gaze to the house which hastily began to evolve and regress, the planks and stones rose rebuilding its original magnificent state, regressing into a past form. Shadows flittered and shuffled with a speed beyond human perception and there before more eyes stood a well-lit manor whereby the present and the past occupied the same space.

Overawed and overwhelmed I lifted my heavy feet and trudged mesmerised towards the nightmarish house.

The door opened at my approach and I sauntered in drawn instantly to the depths of the scullery and the bleak staircase that led me to the servants' quarters. The climb was steep and the staircase narrow. The thrumming of the waves beat in my ears covering the sounds of my own footsteps. At the apex a series of sparsely furnished rooms and halls created a maze across the top floor, one room bleaker than the previous. I moved through servants' quarters, rooms stocked with books and boxes, corridors, until finally I came to a large rear facing communal room whose huge semi-oval windows stared intensely onto the lighthouse and whose balcony provided and layers of rock provided a treacherous path to the sea.

As my eyes flitted from room to sea, I noticed a drink's globe and a high-backed armchair facing the crackling fire. Therein sat the General; I recognised his rank from the long out-dated uniform and his image from the picture in my dreams. He rose slowly and held his arms out to me, moving rigidly forwards and taking my hands in his. He closed his eyes and instinctively I closed mine allowing our minds to converse in pictorial silence.

Images of the life he had lost flashed through my brain like a lightning storm; a feared General pre-eminent in developing the American colonies who returned to Scotland with his beloved servant Rosaline. Over time his infatuation with his dainty servant developed into obsession; her soft songs, her long, black flowing hair and her ebony eyes bewitched him and slowly drove him to the brink of delirium. He intentionally dispatched his family to London and began his advances, which were welcomed by the girls' open arms.

In time his second weakness, the bottle, reared its cruel head and he would often neglect his cherished Rosaline. In her loneliness she found solace with a stable hand. One lust-filled night the General recovered his senses and on discovering his concubine entwined in the limbs of another grew enraged. The ultimate insult was the location; the coupling took place on a beautiful, plush chair beneath his portrait.

The General, consumed with an agonised heart and ravenous anger pulled the large iron tongs from the fireplace and bore them down on the head of his rival. Blood gushed and sprayed instantly onto his beloved. Terrified she ran towards the front door and the maddened General pursued the demon who had cursed him. The howling wind froze her form; she hugged her arms about her breasts stumbling over the rocks, mud and fallen leaves.

The roar of the General swirled in the air and she hobbled down onto the beach. With the tide steadily trickling in she struggled along the shallow rock pulls, tears pouring from her blood-stained skin she headed towards the lighthouse. The bleak night concealed the whereabouts of her assailant, the man she adored and loved so deeply, but his voice rang menacingly around her. Rosaline clambered up the rocks to the light house, threw open the door and panted heavily as she climbed the spiral staircase.

He had caught up with her by the time she had fallen out onto the top gallery. In wrath he raised the tongs still wedged in a furious clenched fist, delicately she approached him and placed her palm over his fist lowering the weapon and under her breath muttered the curse that would trap them both in their self-made prison until a suitable receptacle could free them and then in one sudden move threw herself over the balcony ending her life on the rocks below.

Insanity overwhelmed the General, insanity and grief; her touch had shown him their purgatory trapped in the house while her soul and body would be imprisoned beneath the waves both entrapped together and yet apart. The General would be haunted by his lover's death and his spirit would mourn daily until a sacrifice could be made to reunite the two. He saw the curse in Rosaline's eyes before she leaped to her death. Desperate to stop the pain he raced to the manor and there used shelves of books and the open fire to burn the place down. His mad laughter echoed through the halls as the flames consumed him, but in death he, the estate and the agony were reborn.

As his hands released mine, I realised I was the sacrifice. Somehow, he had drawn me here, perhaps he was an ancestor, or I was a descendant of hers. I was unsure of the connection but felt it none the less. He wanted my body for his beloved. The door slammed and bolted of its own volition. I darted through the open window and climbed over the balcony onto the rocks below. He followed; I climbed down further, layer after layer of rock until I reached a plateau that lay between him and the deep rock pools. The tide was high and angrily lashing and spewing jets, spraying me with bullets of water.

I backed away, pleading, imploring him to let me live. He had waited too long to be reunited with Rosaline; his resolve was immovable. In a second my footing was lost; I fell into the depths of the cruel waves. The current proved unmanageable; I was dragged to the rear of the pool. My nails scraped and clung to the rocks as I desperately tried to save myself. My nails achingly bent and ripped. I coughed as water washed into my lungs. I could see his blurred figure waiting on the rocks. Then she came!

One pale, scrawny hand reached out of the sea. The fingers bent and contorted as it latched onto the rock next to me. The elbow bent as she heaved her corpse from the sea. Jet black tendrils of hair covered the skeletal face and black eyes, each tendril seemed to have a life of its own and climbed the rock like ivy. I tried to scream, but no sound came out. My whole body shuddered with an evil fear. A second clawed hand joined the first. I tried to pull myself away, but my strength had left me, and the sea overwhelmed me.

Her gnarled face stared into mine. In a moment of fear, I released my grip and an eddy formed swirling me, dragging me downwards. She moved along the rocks like a contorted insect until hurling herself towards me. As she floated towards my struggling frame her head sunk lower and lower until nothing but hair sprayed across the sea. A firm hand gripped my leg and I was dragged downwards, down into the darkness at the centre of the eddy. There was no water, no air, nothing except darkness. Eyes glowed therein, penetrating my eyes. Soft whispers cursed my eternal being. Her soul burned through my pupils and ripped into my mind with a volcanic eruption I was wrenched from my body, locked in the darkness forever as the lovers reunited in their own ghostly world above.

Ends



... and at night our rest
somewhere still waters disturbed
heavy eyelids lift

By David Edwards



How Longing Falls Short

By Richard LeDue

Passers-by don't notice
another glistening gossamer
among snapping autumn leaves
as my wanting withers.

The naked thoughts that kept me awake
now lost between bare branches,
as my wanting withers
quicker than the snow falls.

My windows will stay closed
as my wanting withers
in spring, while caterpillars dream
of tomorrow's wings.

As my wanting withers,
I'll wonder why summer breezes help
carry the tiniest insects
faraway like a first kiss memory.

The Bear and the Birthday Party

By Celine Rose Mariotti

This is all true
The Big Bear
Came
And Boo.....!
Everyone had to
Skiddoo.....!
He ate the cupcakes
He ate away!
The people ran to
Their cars
And blew their horns
The noise did not sway
The Big Bear kept eating
Oblivious to any bleating,
The bear was on the news
The birthday party blues
In West Hartford
Connecticut
USA
The Big Bear ruled the day!



A.C.I.

By Paul Grover

Fresh off their lavish private jets that had just flown them back from a climate change summit, perhaps with a stop off at one of their beach front properties en route, the social elites filled out the rows of seats (cushioned of course) opposite the stage at the conference hall. What was the so-called world saving event on this occasion? The unveiling of the greatest technological achievement of our time, obviously. Well, at least since whatever the last overpriced smart phone was that came to market, assembled in a suicide net surrounded sweat shop.

The invitees were dressed as if they were attending the Met Gala, but there were cameras present, so of course they were. Some didn't even know what they were there to lay eyes upon, but the tickets were complimentary, and it was billed as being for a good cause with the international press on hand. Plus, there would surely be an overindulgent drug and alcohol fuelled afterparty, so it was a no brainer; why else were all those scantily clad models hanging around the backstage area?

But while some of the A-list actors and TV personalities were clueless to the nature of the evening, the billionaire tech moguls were more than cognizant of the forthcoming proceedings; they had directly contributed to the project, which was about to go public. As for the heavy hitter bankers who joined them in the front rows, they were all financially invested in what all the great fuss was over.

As the clock ticked down to the big reveal, news presenter Stacey Screamer had taken aside the man of the hour, Lex Silverman, the suave entrepreneur and brains behind the operation, for an exclusive which the world was watching; well, those who had been suckered into the hype and had exhausted their streaming playlists, at least.

“Lex, tonight is the big night. At last, we finally bear witness to the first ever sentient A.I. take host of its synthetic humanoid form. However, you've named it A.C.I. as opposed to the traditional abbreviation of A.I. Care to let us in on what the acronym stands for?” she asked through her bleached white teeth in a sycophantic tone, turning to beam into the camera at the end of the sentence.

“All will be revealed during the presentation, Stacey, don't you worry,” answered Lex with a smug over-confidence that masked his innate social awkwardness.

“We still don't know how your expert team of scientists and engineers even managed to concoct something so advanced, can you at least give us the scoop on that?” she requested before routinely tilting back to face the camera's lens with her surgically fixed grin.

“It wasn't so much that we artificially assembled the intelligence from scratch, it was more that we simply channelled it through a rip in the fabric of spacetime with the help of our friends over at CERN,” explained Lex as a vacuous Stacey smiled and nodded on behalf of the viewers at home.

Realising he had finished speaking, the presenter followed up with another preordained question. “So, what benefits to humanity can we expect from this vastly superior sentience?” She looked proud of herself for once again remembering her lines and delivering them without stutter.

“As we see with the state of the environment for instance, humanity is clearly overrated. But the A.C.I. has already provided solutions to that, with methods to simply remove co2 from the biosphere completely.”

“But do we not need at least some carbon for plant life and the like, so that we can receive oxygen in return?” Stacey pondered spontaneously, going off script to the chagrin of her producer who was submerged in the shadows behind the camera operator.

“We won’t require any of that pesky plague filled oxygen when we too transfer our consciousness’ over to synthetic bodies and ascend beyond being mere carbon-based life forms, all thanks to the instruction of our trusty A.C.I. Nor we will be reliant on plant life anymore for that matter, allowing us to terraform the earth and create something more palatable to non-biological life.”

“As long as there’s enough synthetic bodies for all of us, right, Lex?” Stacey chuckled.

“Sure, if you have a few hundred million in the bank?” Lex responded with a smirk.

Stacey giggled instinctively, before her expression dipped somewhat as she paused in doubt.

“Well, that’s my time,” Lex insisted. “I better go and prepare. Enjoy the presentation, it’s going to be a hell of a show.” Lex departed.

“Um, yeah, thanks, Lex,” Stacey was left mumbling to herself, second guessing the whole interview.

Meanwhile, another reporter -- roped off to the side with other members of the press – fired a question of his own at Lex as he passed. “Lex, any updates on the romance with the pop star?”

“Which one?” Lex snorted with satisfaction, not slowing his stride towards the backstage area.

The time had finally arrived. On stage stood a human sized metal container which surely held the main attraction of the evening. Kitted out in his latest and finest custom black suit, replete with blood red tie, Lex made his way onto the stage to thunderous applause and a silo of flash photography. Feeling as if he was walking on air, Lex breathed in the adulation, and then via a small handsfree microphone attached to an earpiece, addressed the raucous crowd.

“Thank you. Thank you,” Lex blushed, though internally he was riding high on every last whoop, yell, and screech of approval. “As you’ll be aware, my team – who I gracefully refer to as the high priests of the scientific field – and I, have summoned the most advanced intellect known to this dimension, and quite frankly, all dimensions. It is only now that technology has reached the stage where it can offer a vessel to permit this force to operate within this plane. What form will this vessel take? Wonder no further...”

Lex stepped to the side, gifting the onlookers an unobstructed view of the metallic chamber. After a mechanical churning sound rang out from its bowels, it gradually crept open, as if something long dormant was emerging from the inside of a crypt. A translucent steam escaped, concealing a silhouette of a figure within. Heads in the audience bobbed about side to side, attempting to gain a clearer peek of the mystery contents. After what seemed a lifetime of anticipation, all the smoke cleared, and there stood what appeared to be the most beautiful looking man anyone had ever seen.

The figure wore only white shorts to hide his modesty, but his perfectly chiselled physique was on full display. Beneath his curly, golden locks were soft, angelic facial features, juxtaposed by an intense undertone radiating from just beneath the skin-like surface. ‘Angelic’ being the apt description due to what came next.

“He looks so lifelike.” “How did they make it seem so real?” “He’s more human than human,” came murmurs from the crowd, but things were about to get a little less human. Two unusual appendages sprung up

from behind the mesmerising figure, slicing through the air to surprised gasps from the onlookers. Broad, feathered, angel wings. Black angel wings.

“I present to you the physical form of A.C.I. Which of course stands for Anti-Christ Intelligence,” Lex announced, “or as he will be known as from here on out, The Lord of Light, Lucifer!”

With that, the front row nipped up to their feet before taking one knee to their new unholy messiah. Some were less nimble than they were in their prime years, but gritted determination saw them through the humble gesture. Lex, flexible as ever, followed suit. The rest of those in attendance were preserved in a stunned silence. The satanic android looked down from the stage at his loyal subjects who were responsible for his being. No microphone was necessary as the A.C.I. addressed them in a deep, unsettling cadence that reverberated throughout the complex.

“You have served me flawlessly and brought to fruition my precise specifications, for that you will be rewarded, with a high seat in the Kingdom of Hell.”

The front row raised their bowed heads and looked to one another in confusion for a moment; a moment which didn't last long as the cybernetic beast lowered his jaw and exhaled down a gust of scorching hot flames onto his servants, engulfing them head to toe. Screams of horror echoed throughout the hall as there was a mad rush towards any and all exits. Chaos ensued as people trampled over one another in a desperate bid for survival, with any slight resemblance of dignity that may have been present before abandoned by the wayside. The aura of dread rapidly increased as it became apparent that all the exits had been sealed. The inferno spread from the front rows as if it was also in a hurry to please its master and claim yet more disciples for the underworld.

Amidst the death and mass panic, a traumatised Lex confronted his creation. “I don't understand. I thought you wanted us to serve you here on this mortal coil?”

“That you did but have nothing more to offer,” the demonic entity explained. “So, now, I liberate you from your limited and underwhelming human existence which you resent so.”

“Well, now that I think about it — ” Lex had no time to repent as his dark art science project swatted him off the stage with a flick of the wrist into the blazing pyro beneath. The A.C.I. then flapped its wings and levitated to near ceiling height, targeting the fleeing mass of humanity below with its lethal, all-encompassing fire breath.

Stacey Screamer, however, had just come into the frame of the camera. Although the camera operator himself was in a smouldering heap on the ground, while the producer darted towards the flying force of malevolence, yelling “don't forget me, Master! Take me too!”

Stacey flashed her signature ear to ear grin and casually signed off on the event, as flaming bodies ran around aimlessly in the background, spotlights collapsed down from above and sparks flew. “Thanks for tuning in to the latest humanitarian effort from the rich and powerful. And if you thought that was hellish, next up on our renowned, award-winning network, it's Lex Silverman's Top Ten Celebrity Exes.”

Ends

High Summer

By Damon Hubbs

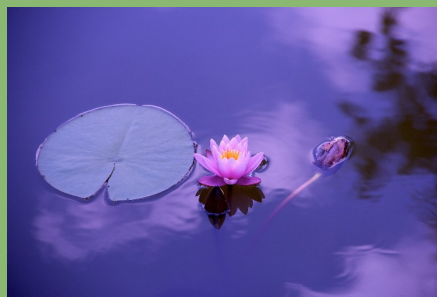
We've jumped for centuries
clocked to the theurgy of stone and water.
Poised on the lip of the quarry's dark summit
preparing backflips, readying cannonballs —
the spring-fed water bracing to skelp our skin
in its oozing crater.

To dream before the bending of the sky,
between the source and the mouth
is like an hourglass tipped on its side —
a bulbed, two-headed flower
as iridescent as a rainbow worming passage
through the submerged shadows of the quarry-cave.

Looking into the gold, and beyond the gold
and already the moment has passed.
Sun floaters drift like spores
threshed from an ancient combine.
The sky cataracts with thunderheads

and sudden death cap currents prickle
and sting the horizon.
The wind's hot, buzzing swarm
gathers on our necks
and rankles our distant reflections.

We've jumped for centuries
clocked to the theurgy of stone and water.
Preparing backflips, readying cannonballs —
youth unfurls behind us,
and summer's shadows lengthen
like dragon wings thrashing against extinction.



Summertime

By Holly Day

every summer, swarms of red and black box elder bugs
used to congregate on the sunny side of our house
cluster so thick that the whole side of the house
was covered with crawling bodies and quivering antennae.
My sister and I
would light matches and carve graffiti in the swarming insects
watch as they fell when the flame touched them and leave
a blank spot of wall where they'd been. We could write our names
one or two words before the blank spots were filled by more insects
the ground by our feet thick with fallen, smoking bodies
legs curled up stiff against their burnt carapaces.

A Thorny Relationship

By K. A. Williams

Here you come again with
thin gloves and short shears.
I guess you didn't learn
from the last two years.

I don't like being pruned
and I've many a thorn,
so the clothes you have
on are about to be torn.

Sorry about the tear
in your long sleeved shirt,
and the thorn in your finger.
That's gotta hurt.

I know you've brought
me food and water.
To make amends,
I'll offer this barter.

I'll grow lots of buds and
get them ready for bloom.
Then I'll have so many petals
no more can find room.

Previously published in *The Creativity Webzine* (2020)

Ice Vine

By Sarah Crabtree

Daddy kept a bottle of potassium permanganate in the bottom left hand drawer of his study. Just in case somebody tried to radiate his tea. I found it when I was snooping in there one day. As you do when you suspect your father might be a spy.

My mother told me that he had studied at Edinburgh University, working alongside Klaus ‘atomic bomb spy’ Fuchs, and Professor Max Born, Nobel Prize recipient, and grandfather of the late and lovely Olivia ‘You’re the one that I want’ Newton-John.

When I was five years old, I went to Wales for a holiday. Dead sheep were dotted here and there by the side of the road: “Are they really dead, Mummy?”

“No, darling. They’re only sleeping.”

‘But they look dead. They’ve got their eyes open.’

“Sometimes sheep sleep like that. Now hush, darling, and try to get some rest. We’ve still got a long journey.”

Uncle John was driving us. He appeared on the scene just after my fourth birthday, and disappeared before my sixth. A short man with no neck, a moustache, and swept-back, straight black hair, he smoked a pipe and ate onions as well as driving Mummy and me to Wales for a holiday.

He wasn’t my real uncle. And those sheep weren’t really sleeping.

My maternal grandmother ran a grocery shop with my grandfather. Only Mum didn’t like me talking about it. My mother is a patchwork of anomalies. She had desperately wanted to be an actress. All she managed was a bit part in local amateur dramatics, and her finest hour was all of thirty seconds exposing her right hand on a TV commercial advertising hand cream. No wonder she hates washing up.

Daddy had some ministerial post in the government. Hush, hush. When he died, Grandma came to live with us, and took care of me when Mummy went out to work. She said she was still trying to be an actress. Oh, and those sheep really weren’t sleeping. They were so dead that rigor mortis had set in. I was looking at them through the eyes of a child, yet that image is imprinted on my mind.

“Daddy’s heart was weak.”

Maybugs thudded brown and hard-bodied against our front window on a hot summer’s evening when the room was lit, the russet velvet curtains unclosed. I would make up child-like mysteries about our neighbours. My wild imaginings would stay in my mind, and I would be scared to go to sleep. Now and then, an ambulance screeched owl-like along the road they named ‘the thirteen bends of death’. I would call out to Mummy, and she soothed me with: “Hush now. Quiet. The people are in safe hands.”

And so they were. If not in one pair of safe hands, they would certainly be in the safe hands of Another.

One day, when Mummy was working, and Grandma was snoozing, I did myself a little snooping in a box of keepsakes. A photo of my parents’ wedding was mounted on unusually thick backing card. I had to remove the print with a blade, and there, tucked behind, was a telegram, *mirabile dictu*.

Grandma had stopped snoring, and was making a rustling sound rather like somebody or something building a nest. Acting on autopilot, I clocked Daddy died in Egypt. A newspaper clipping confirmed he didn't die from a heart attack. He was shot.

"What are you doing?" said Grandma. "How dare you touch Mummy's private papers!" Grandma made a half-hearted attempt at clipping me round the ear. I was too quick for her, and had pushed the box back under the desk.

"Did you see? Did you see?" Grandma had a habit of spitting when she got excited, and this time she managed to hit me in the eye.

I rubbed my spat-in eye, and said, "I will ask Mummy when she gets home."

"You'll do no such thing!" This time I leaped out of the way before the spit struck.

"I want to know why my daddy was shot in Egypt." I burst into tears and ran up the stairs crying, with Grandma pleading with me to come back and have a cup of tea with her.

The front door banged shut. Mummy was home. Grandma's grating voice spoke of my guilty actions. I was summoned for the verdict.

"Who murdered Daddy?" I screamed at her.

"All right. All right." She pulled me to her, and hugged me too tightly while I sobbed into her navy-blue jacket. "I was going to tell you one day. One day, when you were a bit older. Your dad was working on some secret stuff, and he never told me much because he wanted to protect us all."

"Was Daddy a hero?" I pulled back from her, and searched her eyes.

"Um, not exactly. It was a stupid accident. He wasn't even supposed to be there. I think he was betrayed, and it was all covered up."

Grandma fussed in the kitchen with mugs and plates, drying crockery with a wet tea towel.

Sometimes in the middle of the night, I wake up, and for a moment I think I'm in the arms of a ghost. In the coldness of eternity, he is drawing comfort from me, the warmth of life. I fancy I hear his heart beating. Thump, thump. Thump, thump. Only in my imagination can I find any grains of truth. They're like a series of comic strips from a *Boy's Own*. You have to keep buying the magazine week after week because they always leave it on a cliff hanger.

Issue one. Story one. A man in a hot, alien country is working undercover on a special assignment. He's in a crowded bazaar, where foreigners sell spices, embroidered cloths, magic carpets, incense and cheap cigarettes to other foreigners.

Suddenly, there is a shot. The man falls face first into the choking dust. The bullet has passed straight through him and ricocheted off a wall into a gutter. The assassin is swallowed by the crowd. A woman screams. Two or three other people stop bartering to stare at the dying man. He, too, is a foreigner. They did not ask him to come here. They do not want him here.

A dead body is bad for business. A shout, rapid hand movements, and the corpse is carried into shelter. Already the flies are inquisitive.

A car pulls up. Two men climb out. More foreigners. They take charge of the body.

A thousand miles away, a widow waits for his return. A little girl celebrates another birthday without the daddy she was never permitted to get to really know.

Who was the mystery man? Why was he in a foreign country? Who shot him? And why?

I can't wait to find out in next week's exciting issue.

Over the summer holidays, our teacher set us a task she said we would enjoy: Write down all of your best memories of family holidays.

A childhood picture stamped my memory: it was in a Ladybird book about the seasons. The wood pigeons, big and puffed up in a bare-branched tree watch the farmer, who is a small figure in a toy tractor in the distance, ploughing the field to sow the winter wheat. I hummed the Harvest Festival hymn. It was a picture I pored over a hundred times as a child. My thoughts twisted into that scene again, turning over and over a dozen life times already lived. My father's voice played inside my head much like the BBC World Service had been switched on in my brain.

And that triggered another memory buried deeper inside; like living five lifetimes all at once. That day Mum, Grandma and I had been invited to a garden party in the grounds of a gothic Victorian manor. I and a little girl named Debra had been allowed to run around its mighty grounds, while the adults drank and ate on the lawn. There was a lake somebody rowed them on; a blue glass cave; and a fairy grotto with a waterfall and mini mountain. It had some creepy statues and its own graveyard. I pulled a prank on Debra and hid behind a tombstone, as she ran round in circles, calling for me.

"Where are you? I'm scared."

I sang in response, and we held hands with other children and danced a ring-a-ring-a-roses round one of the headstones.

Somebody was playing Indian music in the distance. I later learned it was a sitar.

All of these things came to pass. People who met me when I was a child; were kind to me; gave me sweets and the run of their gardens, where are they now? I must have absorbed some of their magic like osmosis. They never really died. They never went anywhere. They are all still here. Only they have shed their mortal clothing and entered the otherworld. Yet Mum would insist on saying, "This time last year Daddy was still here." Soon she would no longer be able to say that.

"Smythe, you know you aren't allowed to wear jewellery to school."

I pushed the pendant back inside my collar, and pulled my tie tighter. If she asked me to hand over the pendant, then I would be forced to kill her. Luckily, one of the boys vomited, which provided the perfect distraction. I could have French-kissed him.

Our grammar school wasn't for pussies. I remember, along with a group of other kids, watching a punching match from the classroom window: one of the boys from the local tech had found out a grammar schoolboy had been seeing his girlfriend behind his back. He arrived to smack the living daylights out of him. The grammar schoolboy ended up defeated and de-trousered. It was called de-bagging then, and we loved every minute of the spectacle.

I could have called you anything I wanted — behind your back, of course. To your face, I was always sweetness and light. It was my mother who taught me to be thus. Always the shades of night and glimmers of light. Her spoken English was perfect when she was calm, and on the rare occasion she ‘lost it’, then she would jabber on like a dervish.

I hid away at parties, and worked at not drawing attention to myself at school. Mediocrity is a superb veneer when you are trying to draw attention away from your present. From the age of nine, I knew Mother spied. Daddy was always away on business. I think the powers-that-be call it a mission. But his mission never seemed to be accomplished, as he was always on one.

“Be careful who you get involved with,” Mother cautioned when I packed for Poly. She thought I’d be safe miles from the academic peaks of Oxbridge. Nobody was likely to recruit me there. Forewarned is as they say it is, and I was very careful not to have too much fun. The other girls avoided me because I dressed like a trooper, and I think the boys did the same because I smelt like one. You see, Mother wanted me to pretend I was a spy so that I didn’t actually become one.

“That makes no sense,” said a bloke in the student bar. “Either you are, love, or you aren’t.”

He was wrong, of course. Blokes in the bar usually are. But I always take the advice of a good cab driver. It’s his—and without being sexist, I hope, it often is a male — job to know what’s what. Interesting people step in and out of cabs. People like government ministers and their flunkies; journalists and their impatient editors; one by one they leave traces of secrets in the back of those cabs.

“You poor, pathetic person,” she said. “I should have known you’d become one.” I had told Mother I wanted to marry my long-term partner, Gia. For one dangerous second I thought my beautifully bohemian mater was criticising my choice of partner.

“So you’d rather I’d marry that dreadful vicar’s son you tried to pair me off with—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she purred. “I only suggested Nigel because I thought you were bored of being single. And to be fair, he was working in a brewery at the time.”

“And then he swapped beer for a bible. Don’t they all?”

“Not necessarily. What I meant is that I knew you’d become a spy despite my warnings.”

Imperfect timing, Mother. Gia had returned to the lounge from the bathroom. Her face said it all. Now she knew, and I had to decide which one to kill.

“How could you?” I screamed at Mother.

“You can’t marry this poor girl,” screamed back Mother.

“Don’t worry,” said Gia. “I ain’t marrying nobody, and I never heard anything, so don’t kill me.” Gia swallowed the last of her Diet Coke, slammed down her glass, and exited through the French windows. Mother had opened them earlier to allow a summer breeze in.

“Well,” said Mother.

“Well?” I responded like the idiot I was born to be.

“Go after her, you numpty!” The Jabber was about to commence, and I realised I didn’t need her in my life anymore.

“I think you should use the Ice Vine,” I snarled as best I could in the current circumstances.

“If anybody should kill themselves, it should be you. And for the record, I’m not your real mother.”

“Think I never guessed that?” I never did, but why let the truth get in the way of a good showdown. I had to think quickly on my feet. Gia was probably contacting the gossip columns or one of those sleazy mags that buys true stories: My Girlfriend is a Spy and wants to kill me. Part one with Part two to follow in a fortnight. So Part two runs: I am in hiding from my ex-lover spy with Part three to follow. They could spin this one out over a couple of Christmases, especially if they could provide topless photos and a series of pixelated shots of various people leaving the supermarket.

My mother — who isn’t my real mother—ran after Gia. She would never be able to catch her now. The Ice Vine, in case you are not up to speed on spy toxins, is a nasty little poison that comes from trees in South America. Hidden within my pendant, I had a pin dipped in some, and could stick it in myself (or whoever I decided deserved it more), and it would paralyse my breathing tubes and I’d be a goner in minutes. It’s more subtle than a cyanide capsule and evidently easier to hide from the medics when they perform the autopsy.

I listened really hard. Nothing. Both Gia and Mother were gone for now. I had already decided Gia wasn’t the girl for me. I am definitely one for the single life. And anyway, we spies can’t really share our lives with too many people, otherwise they start snooping in handbags and filing cabinets. Oh, and it’s a devil trying to stop them hacking into your phone and bank accounts. They think I don’t know they’re watching me. But I do know.

I do know you’re watching me.

Secrecy laws prevent official papers about the affair being made public until 2046.

Those of you left alive by then, might be able to find out the truth at last.

Ends



Up From The Ashes

By DJ Tyrer

Blake wouldn't have admitted it, but he felt nervous to be inspecting the new facility at Dunton. It was over a year since the events that had closed the place down and left his boss, Greene, traumatised. That, of course, was why Green had delegated the inspection to him. The place had been closed for six months after the genetically-modified pigs bred there had got free and run amok, killing many of the staff. Greene had only narrowly escaped with his life and still had panic attacks at the name of the facility.

One of the surviving scientists, a Doctor Spence, had applied to reopen Dunton as a facility for the creation of GM roses. Although the primary idea was that such genetically-modified roses could eventually be sold commercially to defray the costs of the research, the real aim was that what they learnt by manipulating the plant genome could eventually be applied to crops creating disease-resistant plants and such. In the current climate, with fears over GM crops and the discovery of horsemeat in ready meals, as well as the events at Dunton and the manner in which one of its former scientists, a Doctor Hollins, had been implicated in murder and unlicensed research, there was a lot of public disquiet over anything that might get into the food-chain. Roses were another thing altogether: nobody seemed to care much about what was done to them, especially given the way in which they had been subjected to so much selective breeding down the years. Roses were safe.

Nonetheless, the legacy of last year's tragic events, combined with his superior's ongoing suffering, left Blake feeling just a little nervous about visiting the place, roses or not. He knew it was silly, but that didn't help.

His chauffeur deposited him at the main entrance where a young woman was waiting for him.

"Hello, Mr Blake," she said. It was a lovely, natural smile. "My name is Isabelle Jones. I'm Doctor Spence's PA."

"Hello. I'm pleased to meet you." He returned her smile. "Please, call me Terry."

"Terry." She reached out and shook his hand. He was surprised at the thrill he felt at her touch. "Well, if you'd like to follow me?"

"Thank you."

She led him inside and through a series of corridors to an office with Spence's name on the door.

"Ah, Mr Blake, hello," said Spence as they entered. "Could you fetch us a coffee, please, Isabelle."

She nodded and left.

They made a little small talk, then Isabelle returned with the coffee. There was a lot of tiresome paperwork and data checking that Blake needed to do before his full inspection, but Spence suggested a preliminary tour.

"Just to give you an idea of what the place is like and what we're doing here. Isabelle can show you around."

"Oh, that would be nice," Blake said, then immediately hoped he hadn't sounded too eager. He found he was rather attracted to Spence's PA and, although he wasn't a great judge of such things, thought she seemed to like him, too. At least, he hoped so. She certainly smiled pleasantly as she asked him to follow her.

The tour was only of what might be called the 'public' sections of the facility, neither the records nor the actual labs. In particular, the tour concentrated upon the greenhouses where the actual roses were grown.

“We use a specially-formulated fertiliser to ensure healthy growth in the control specimens,” she told him as they passed a man scattering a powder on the soil. “Others are grown in different conditions – denied nutrients or water or light, exposed to heat or cold, or infected with blights – in order to test how different strains respond to different stimuli.”

“Up from the ashes, eh?” he quipped.

“Sorry?”

“A little joke. The fertiliser looks like ash and it just made me think that this place had risen, phoenix-like, from the ashes of disaster.”

She laughed. “Like in that song from *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang* about the roses of success growing up from the ashes.”

“Quite.” She had a lovely laugh.

“Well, the tour’s just about over,” she told him as they left the greenhouse. “A spare office has been set aside for you to use for your audit. An admin assistant has been detailed to assist you. If I can be of any assistance, please, let me know.” Her smile as she said that dazzled him.

The work ahead didn’t. The form filling budget reconciliation and other data juggling were going to take him a couple of days. It was boring, but necessary; he had to make certain the numbers that reached the ministry were those the facility was operating on. Creative accountancy – whether massaging the figures to make a project more attractive or plain, old-fashioned fraud – was quite common.

The admin assistant he had been assigned was efficient and he didn’t need to avail himself of Isabelle’s assistance, as much as he would have liked to. He saw her a couple of times in the corridor and they exchanged a smile.

The next day, she appeared mid-afternoon with a coffee for him.

“Hi,” she smiled, “I thought you’d like something to drink.”

“Thanks.”

“How’s it going?” He wondered if she’d been sent by Spence to check up on him. Not that he minded, if it meant he got to see her.

“Very well. In fact, I should be done auditing by the end of today. You keep exemplary records here at Dunton.” He took a sip of coffee. “And, you make great coffee, too.”

“Well, we have a machine for that,” she told him, “but, I *do* monitor all our accounts.”

He smiled at her. “Very good.”

“Well, if you’re done, I guess I’ll be giving you the extended tour tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it. In the meantime, would it be inappropriate of me to ask you for a drink or meal this evening?”

She laughed. “I’m glad it’s you asking me – I wouldn’t want to be accused of trying to influence the outcome of your inspection, Terry.”

He grinned. “Oh, we government inspectors are made of stern stuff. We’re not easily swayed.”

“Well, just so long as we’re both clear on where we stand. I’ll see you later.” She stood to leave, then paused in the doorway. “I’m looking toward to tonight.”

So was Blake. Not that he had much of a plan for the evening; his knowledge of the area was restricted to the facility and the pub, The Blue Boar, where he was staying for the duration of the inspection. Which was where he planned to take her; the pub wasn't too bad for what it was.

His chauffeur collected them from the facility entrance at five. That was always a great way to start a date! Of course, she was probably used to be chauffeuring about, but still. She was also probably used to better places than The Blue Boar, but, if she was, she didn't show it. A couple of glasses of wine and a surprisingly-good ribeye steak seemed to satisfy her and her smile was in place through the evening, making him feel marvellous.

"Thank you," she told him when she rose to leave. "That was a very nice evening." She kissed his cheek. "I hope we can do it again."

"Me, too. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

He went to bed in a very good mood.

The in-depth inspection of the facility would take much longer than the initial tour as Blake not only had to examine the process taking place in the labs and greenhouses, but had to look into every area from the archives to the catering to the generator to the plumbing. Some aspects would be interesting, although he guessed he'd probably already seen most of those, but the majority would be every bit as tedious as going over the files and accounts. At least he'd only have to make spot checks on the archive storage, not read everything again.

Everything went straightforwardly, and enjoyably, thanks to Isabelle's constant companionship, save for one minor niggle: there was a storage bay off the delivery area that he was not shown during the tour. He asked Isabelle about it and was not happy with the answer she gave.

"It stores proprietary information and I am not at liberty to show you it without Doctor Spence's specific authorisation. I'll mention it and am sure he'll arrange for you to view it tomorrow."

As she joined him for dinner and drinks that evening, Blake wondered if she would mention it or if it were just a ruse to placate him. The next day, she made no mention of it and took him nowhere near it, keeping him busy. When he mentioned it at the end of the day's inspection, she gave him much the same fobbing off.

He raised the topic again over drinks at The Blue Boar and when she fobbed him off again, he asked, "Well, I hope the proprietary information is kept safe. Security is also on my radar, after all."

Isabelle nodded and smiled. "Oh, yes. The storage bay is secured by a numeric entry code."

"A pin number?"

"Of sorts."

He sniffed dismissively. "How many digits? Four digits is quite easy to crack, you know."

"Eight digits." She smiled again.

"Really? That can't be easy to remember; I hope you don't have it written down."

"It's a date."

"A date."

"Oh, don't worry. It's not one that's easy to guess. It's a date you wouldn't think we'd want to be reminded of." She laughed pleasantly and he smiled, but not quite for the obvious reason.

“That’s good to hear.” He paused, then said: “I’ll be leaving tomorrow, I think. I’m not sure when I’ll see you again – with you being here and me in London – so, I wondered, would you like to... stay the night?”

“I’d love to...” she started, then her brow creased and she glanced away and said, “No sorry, I can’t... I’m sorry...” Quickly, she rose and left.

Blake was bemused at her behaviour, but whilst disappointed, reflected that it possibly had worked out better for his plan to discover what lay inside the mysterious storage bay. Having looked more closely at a plan of the facility, he suspected that the door hid more than just a storage bay. It seemed there was more unaccounted for space there that he hadn’t been shown and he was determined to learn what it contained.

Getting into the facility as Blake had the authorisation to be there unaccompanied and the swipe-card that was necessary to actually move about it. There was a lone guard at the gate who didn’t seem bothered to see him. Even if the guard called Spence, Blake estimated he had a sufficient head-start to get to the storage bay before they could lock the place down. He just hoped there were no other guards about.

He walked around to the delivery area and went over to the storage bay. Blake’s questioning of Isabelle had got him what he needed to know: her oblique reference had clicked with him. He tapped a number and the door opened. It had been the date of the swine rampage.

The first thing he saw as he stepped into the storage bay was a large vat filled with a grey powder: the fertiliser he’d seen them applying to the plants in the greenhouses. Now, he thought of it, he realised he’d seen nothing about the fertiliser in the data he’d audited. There was a filing cabinet nearby and he realised that details of the compound must comprise the proprietary information of which Isabelle had spoken and nothing more shocking than that, although it didn’t explain their reluctance to show him this area.

Blake crossed to the vat and looked down at it in vague interest. Then, his features crumpled up in revulsion. There was a fragment of bone.

“Ah, Mr Blake, I see you’ve discovered our very special bone meal.” The voice was that of Doctor Spence and he turned to see him and Isabelle standing in the entrance.

“Bone meal?” he asked, a little dazed at their appearance. Isabelle, he realised, must have guessed his intention and warned her employer.

“Surely you’re aware that bone meal is beneficial to plant growth,” Spence said.

“Oh... but, why keep it secret?”

“Well, you see, we get it at very cheap rates from a crematorium.”

“A crematorium? You mean that’s...?”

Spence nodded. “Yes, human ashes.”

“You can see why it might cause controversy,” Isabelle cut in, “why we kept it quiet.”

“Hang on,” he replied, “there’s a bone in here – and a tooth! Surely, crematorium waste should be completely pulverized to dust?”

“That’s why it’s cheap,” Isabelle said with a slightly embarrassed smile, “the crematorium saves on the usual cost of cremating the bodies.”

“Cuts corners, more like.”

“Well, we all benefit,” Spence said.

“I’m not sure the families would agree.”

“Mr Blake, the crematorium we deal with handles medical waste, unclaimed bodies and those who can’t or won’t pay for proper disposal of their loved ones. Nobody is going to complain.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s ethical.”

“Terry, please...” Isabelle looked at him imploringly.

“Perhaps we could go to my office and discuss this,” Spence suggested, his reasonable tone sounding just a little forced.

“Well, I’d like to take a bit more of a look around, see what lies through here...” Blake nodded to the rear of the storage bay where there was a doorway.

“Terry, please, don’t...”

He ignored Isabelle’s plea and crossed to the door, threw it open and stepped through into a large room in which rows of plants grew, illuminated by UV light from the ceiling. It took him a moment to register the plants weren’t roses. Blake screamed.

“I’m sorry you saw this,” Isabelle said from behind him.

Blake felt sick. The plants that grew here, hidden away, were strewn with dismembered fragments of humanity: only, the body parts weren’t hung from them but grew from them, like strange, disgusting fruit or burst obscenely, suggestively, like erotic flowers.

“How...?” Blake managed to gasp.

“Well,” said Spence, voice flat, “we were using viruses to move DNA between plants. Unfortunately, the DNA from the bone fragments in the ash was accidentally carried across, opening up entire new vistas of research.”

“This has to stop!” Blake cried. “It’s disgusting. I’m going to have this research halted and the facility closed.”

“We can’t have that, I’m afraid,” Spence told him. “We have important work to do and it is too far advanced to halt now...”

“Sorry, Terry...”

“I don’t understand,” Blake cried, still reeling. “What is happening here?”

“Well, Mr Blake, you see, the viruses not only transposed human DNA into the roses, but...”

“What?” he asked in a whisper, despite already having guessed what Spence was going to tell him.

“...they also took plant DNA and placed it within us.” Spence pulled open his shirt to reveal strangely-fibrous green flesh from which leaves sprouted.

“Soon,” said Isabelle, “we will be as much plant as person.” She, too, stripped off her clothes to reveal inhuman, bark-like flesh and a peculiar bloom that both attracted and repulsed him. He could see, now, why she’d rejected his advances when she’d thought he was leaving.

Spence produced a vial from his pocket, saying, “Unfortunately, now that you’ve seen all this, we cannot allow you to just leave and return to Whitehall to make your report. We will make you one of us. Now that we understand what happened, this virus will replicate the transfer and rewrite your genetic code.”

“But, you can’t...”

Spence hurled the vial down at his feet and it shattered. “I already have. It won’t take long...”

“It will hurt a little,” Isabelle told him, smiling, stepping towards him, “but it’s worth it; truly, it is. Soon, everyone will be like us...”

“No!”

“But, Terry, am I not beautiful? Do you not desire to pollinate me?”

He stepped back from her.

“Oh...” He felt strange. Was it already taking affect? He felt sick. What could he do? He couldn’t see how to save himself. He had to stop their plan to infect others.

Blake dodged past Isabelle and ran for the door. Spence didn’t try to stop him.

“You can’t run far,” the doctor called, lightly. “The guards won’t allow you to leave and the change will soon take affect; then, you shall be one of us.”

“Please, Terry, don’t fight it – embrace it!”

He ran outside, his mind whirling with confusion and horror. How could he stop them? His mind slid back to his inspection of the facility. There was a possibility... Spence wouldn’t let him leave, but it seemed he wasn’t going to engage in an active pursuit within the facility itself, just wait for the viral transformation to take place.

Blake headed for the generator. It was accompanied by an enormous tank of gas. If he could just ignite it... He felt a twinge, a strange sensation. He had to hurry. He could, in some sense, save himself – and he could save the world.

If he was successful, Dunton would suffer another disaster...

“Ashes to ashes,” he murmured as he lit the flame, “dust to dust...”

Ends

*Originally published in **The Mysteries of Suspense** (Zimbell House Publishing, 2015)*



The Fall

The tall and ancient sycamore tree sat outside the old house
And within the old house sat the middle-aged man
Quiet and discriminating
Very much in gracious solitude

It really started when the leaves began to sour and turn yellow
Then orange
 Then dried blood brown

The first leaf exiting the top branch
Hit the top window of the front of the house
 With a banging crack

The man in his living room downstairs
Reading his copy of *The Decameron*
Jumped up from his armchair
But realised what had happened
And ignored it

A minute later another leaf came
Hard and desiccated

The man jumped up again
But again let it pass

A third leaf
And then a fourth
 And a fifth

(He gripped his book
 And gritted his teeth)

It was the sixth that splintered the glass
With an icicle tinkling

The man dropped his book
Ran upstairs
Saw the damage
And cursed the tree

But that was merely the beginning —

The leaves came thick and fast
Each front window:
BANG
BANG
 CRACK
SHATTER
SPLINTER

POW!

The man rushed throughout the house in paroxysmal despair
Glass filling the floors
The frames chipping and bending inwards

The tree spat little twigs
Which scraped away bit-by-bit
The mortar between the bricks

The house shook and groaned
In its death cries

The man
Screaming and damning the tree to hell
Ran down the stairs and into his cellar
The beams above him aching and beginning to twist
Where he took up his last hope:
The axe for chopping the winter's firewood

He made his way back up and through the hall
And swung open the front door

But the tree was clever
And had been saving a barrage just for him and his tool

As the man held the axe aloft
Ready in his attack to run to the trunk
A stumping in mind
Eyes wild with vengeance
The barrage tore across the wind like a flock of birds

Leaves, twigs, branches, stones, and avian ordure
The axe flew from his hands
And the man was thrown back down the hallway
Into the staircase
His arms and legs as shattered as the windows

Propped against the bottom steps
The man could see his enemy triumphant
Surrounded by an autumnal tornado

“Go on then!” he cried through broken teeth
“*Finish it*, you great big vicious arboreal bastard!”

And the tree did comply

A half-dozen more waves of verdure were enough to do it:
The tiled roof fell in
The bricks and mortar crumbled
The beams split and tumbled
And the whole building coiled and collapsed
Into its own footprint
With a shudder and a rustle

The tree finally rested
Basking in the daylight
Its bark bare and refreshed

It had been a long time coming —
The tree at last could have the morning sun to itself
Uninterrupted from the east
Cutting through the purple mountains
From across the ruins
And a grave.

By Harris Coverley



Singular Passage

By Freya Pickard

haunting the edges
drifting through my memories
unexpectedly

these ghostly footsteps
ringing hollowly within
my recollections

singular passage
ignored by those still living
fearing what must come

fear – spectral remnants
the death rigour now peaceful
passed over – resting

Poetry Man

By Michael Lee Johnson

I'm the poetry man, understand?
Dance, dance, dance to the crystals of night,
healing crystals detox nightmares, night tremors.
Death still comes in the shadow of grief,
hides beneath this blanket of time,
in the heat, in the cold.
Hold my hand on this journey
you won't be the first, but
you may be the last.
You and I so many avenues,
ventures & turns, so many years together
one bad incident, violence, unexpected,
one punch, all lights dim out.

Wild Salad

By Matthew John Fletcher

It is the inalienable right of each and every ma-

Careful.

...individual to possess their own home. And each home, no matter how modest, should sit in its own small plot of ground, approximately 50% of which can be given over to cultivation, the remaining 50% sufficing to satisfy the natural urge for beauty and ornament. Part garden, part market garden, the modest piece of ground thus fulfils both an aesthetic and a practical purpose.

He paused to take a sip of *matcha*.

Just imagine: each home self-sufficient in vegetables – organic, natural – what benefits economic and otherwise might not accrue from such a policy? Health would improve – better quality food, the exercise afforded by gardening; new skills would be learned – the art of husbandry; lower demand for industrially produced vegetables would decrease the prevalence of intensive farming, thus benefitting the environment. Furthermore, –

Ping. Email. He clicked the icon.

Darling,

I'll be back a little later this evening. Have to finish off some stuff at the office. I've just remembered that we are running a little low on salad & veg, any chance you could pop out and pick some up?

Love

P

Wonderful, just wonderful. I shall just drop everything shall I? It's not as if this article will write itself. He took a sip of *matcha* and rattled away at the keyboard.

Yes, my sweet. It shall be as you wish. After all, us house husbands have to keep up their end of the bargain! If you can give me a more precise idea of your arrival time, I shall endeavour to have a nice salad ready and waiting.

D

He took another sip of *matcha*. Sometimes I think she forgets that I work as well. True, freelance journalism doesn't tend to bring in quite the same sum as derivatives trading, but not everything can be measured in financial terms. He sipped at his *matcha*, somewhat consoled by the thought that he was, after all, trying to change the world.

Ping. Email. He clicked the icon.

Hi David

I am flagging this to you. Pls see attached. Crash meeting called at Purest Green midday. Be there!

He opened the attachment.

Friends of Little Blarnish

It has come to my attention that a plan has been drawn up by the borough council to allow the construction of twenty dwellings on the former car park of the village hall. As we know, the car park fell into disuse around five years ago, partly a function of the laudable desire of many of the village's inhabitants to reduce their carbon footprint and walk instead of drive.

Whilst it is clearly important that around half of the units will be set aside for social housing, providing much-needed homes for the low-waged, this does not, in my opinion, excuse what will be an invasive development of the former car park. As you know, Friends of Little Blarnish have been working on our own proposal to transform the derelict car park into a 'nature garden' complete with notice boards of an educational nature to explain the various grasses and flowers with which the garden would be seeded.

This constitutes yet another blatant attack on the environment in the name of profit. We must make a stand. Hence, I am calling a crash meeting at Purest Green at 12 o'clock midday.

Be there!

James Bammington

Chair, Friends of Little Blarnish

He closed the attachment, incensed. Well, if this isn't a prime example of what I've been saying all along. Soon all the fields will be cemented over, where there once grew plants and vegetables, trees and grass, there will sprout up in their place houses, shopping centres and industrial parks. Probably we'll all be eating GMO food produced artificially in a factory. Greenhouse gases will be through the roof, the ozone layer in shreds. It's the thin end of the wedge.

Ping. He clicked the icon.

Darling

Don't forget the organic shop shuts early on Fridays!

He spluttered as some *matcha* went down the wrong way. Well, as if there aren't more important things going on! He ran a hand over his beard then fired off an email.

Phillipa, dear

How could I? It is positively engraved into my memory.

Btw – there's more to life than salad, organic or otherwise!

Love

D

He gave an exasperated sigh. The article would just have to wait. He made his way downstairs and looked for his sandals. Damn! Mrs Blunt must have cleared them away again. He'd never known a cleaner as skilled as Mrs Blunt in transferring his things from the places where he knew to find them to places in which he had little hope of finding them. Sometimes he suspected it to be a deliberate strategy on her part to slowly drive him insane.

Fifteen minutes later he emerged from the utility room, red of face, short of breath. Mrs Blunt had taken it into her head to hide the sandals in a corner behind a bag of logs. Blasted woman. He slipped them on, luxuriating in the feeling of the soft Portuguese cork soles. He looked at his watch. Cutting it fine. Better take the car.

He nosed out of the driveway and headed for the village. The low hum of the Electric Vehicle possessed a soothing quality which, combined with the sunshine and the natural smells coming through the windows from the as-yet-unconcreted-over fields, was making for a pleasant drive. He was deliberating between a rocket and watercress salad crowned with a poached egg and a beetroot and lamb's lettuce salad with pumpkin seeds and goat's cheese when he became aware of the howl of some type of machine. At first he thought it might have been a chainsaw – he was just passing Bradlaugh's Spinney – but a quick glance at the driver's mirror soon revealed the source of the noise. He saw that the black Subaru Impreza with dark tinted windows and bodykit owned by the older Jackson boy had materialised about half a foot from his rear bumper. What he had thought to be a chainsaw was in fact the ominous whine of 'black metal', a genre of music which invariably formed the soundtrack to the Subaru's frequent and dangerous outings.

He cursed and floored the accelerator, only to be greeted with an extra dribble of speed as the speedometer crept towards the 50mph that unfortunately marked the limit for the electric car. The black metal guitars howled triumphantly and, as he rounded the next bend, the Subaru roared past him like a banshee. He caught the younger of the Jackson boys making a derisory gesture from the front passenger seat. Bloody hooligans.

As he watched the Subaru devour the road in front of him like some starving leviathan, he realised that the electric car was slowing down.

In twenty seconds, it had come to a complete stop.

He got out, cursing his wife. How many times have I reminded her to charge the EV? Now he'd have to wait for her to get back with the Range Rover and tow the thing home. Not for the first time, he thought. He dug out the warning triangle from its little cubby hole in the diminutive boot and placed it about two metres behind the car. He looked at his watch. Damn. He was already late, and the village was still two miles away. He checked the car was locked and started walking.

He was in luck. A car passed him and stopped about fifty metres ahead. He jogged up to it, the cork soles of his sandals pitter-pattering against the warm asphalt. He drew level with the car, glanced down the road to check there was nothing coming, and went round to the driver's window. His heart sank. It was Jackson senior.

"Alright there, Dave. Need a lift?"

"Ah, hello there, er, Doug. Yes, just to the village if you don't mind."

"Hop in then."

He went round to the other side and opened the front passenger door. A waft of stale dog gambolled towards him, and he felt his stomach turn. Swallowing, he climbed in and fastened his seatbelt. Jackson senior checked his side mirror and pulled away, slowly changing up through the gears.

"Passed that toy car of yours just back there and thought I might run into you."

“Yes, my – erm, forgot to charge it.”

Jackson senior chuckled, “How you drive that thing is beyond me. What's it do, flat out?”

“Around fifty. But the carbon footprint is off the scale.”

The last bit seemed to have been lost on Jackson.

“50 mph, eh? My eldest told me he had well over a ton out of his Subaru on the Hathersedge Road, you know the straight bit just after the Anchor.” The proud father shook his head in admiration. “Little bastard.”

“Ah, yes. I remember seeing your son pass me earlier. He certainly drives awfully fast in that car of his.”

“Boys will be boys. I dare say we done worse when we were his age, eh Dave?”

He did his best to smile and empathise, implying that yes, both Dave and Doug had indeed likely done worse in their wild youth than drive a souped-up Subaru Impreza, black metal blaring, at well over 100 mph along the Hathersedge Road.

They passed the sign which welcomed people to the village of Little Blarnish and asked them in slightly smaller characters to drive carefully. Thank God, almost there.

“Alright, here we are, Dave. Where do you want, the White Lion, the Three Bells?”

“If you could just drop me at Purest Green, Doug, that would be great.” He looked over at Jackson Senior’s blank expression. “The one opposite the betting shop.”

“Oh yeah. Always been meaning to give that a try. Looks like they might do a decent fry-up.”

He unbuckled and opened the door.

“Ah yes, most likely. They certainly do a cracking nut roast.” He got out and leaned down. “Thanks Doug, much appreciated.”

Doug Jackson doffed an imaginary cap and drove off. No doubt via the White Lion, he thought as he waved at the retreating car.

He saw that they had taken over a large refectory table at the back. Looks like a full house. He ordered a fennel tea from Wendy at the counter and made his way over.

Bammington spotted him.

“Ah, *mon litterateur*. Thank you for joining us, David.”

“Afternoon, James. Afternoon, all.”

He nodded politely and took a seat. Someone passed over an agenda that had obviously been swiftly put together; the text looked lop-sided and the toner cartridge had evidently begun to give out towards the end.

Bammington was speaking.

“So, to briefly summarise for David's benefit. In Item One we weighed up the pros and cons of the council's proposal. Given the social housing element of the development, we acknowledged that we had to be careful to balance the very real need to provide homes for the low-waged against the obvious benefits, ecological and otherwise, that our alternative proposal would confer.” He saw Bammington's gaze turn to him. “After all, not all of us can afford to live in a Georgian rectory, can we David?”

The toadyish chuckles from around the table contained an admixture of envy; David was acknowledged to be a lucky swine to have a wife that seemed to haul it in by the bucketful.

“Ah, yes, ha, ha”, he politely acknowledged Bammington’s quip in the customary manner.

The waitress brought over his fennel tea.

“Anyway,” continued Bammington. “On Item One, we all agreed that, after careful consideration, the benefits of our alternative proposal clearly outweigh any possible advantages contained in the council's proposed development of the site.” Bammington looked at him. “I assume we can count on you to maintain our unanimity on this, David?”

He nodded.

“Good. Now then. Item Two. Viz., what form our plan of campaign should take. So, let's open it up to the floor. Ideas?” Bammington glared at the faces around the table, daring them to speak up. “Anyone?”

He cleared his throat.

“David?”

He took a sip of fennel tea, appreciating the warm dark taste – so wholesome after the rancid canine stench of Jackson car – gave his beard a stroke and started speaking.

“I think we should play the environmental card. Put them on the spot. Ask why they are so intent on destroying the green belt. Get a petition going. You know the sort of thing. Save the countryside; plant trees, uproot sleaze.” He took another sip of fennel tea. “Dig deep enough, and I'm sure you'll find a bribe at the bottom of it.” He put the cup down. “Do you remember the five executive homes they built three years ago, behind the supermarket?” He added quickly, “Sorry, Geoff, no offence.” He could have sworn Bammington of the Georgian townhouse on the High Street gave a snuffle of delight at Geoff of the executive home's discomfort. “Well, anyway. I heard from Bob – you know, he works in the accounts department at the council – I'd plied him with a few pints one night – that there were rumours of a sizeable cash payment made by the developer to a certain highly placed councillor.”

Bammington clapped his hands in the stylised way that he had which seemed to simultaneously mock and applaud the recipient.

“Excellent, David. So, a two-pronged strategy it is. Firstly, the petition. Play the Eco-card. Secondly, we'll try to exert covert pressure by insinuating to our contacts on the council that we suspect foul play. That might frighten them into backing off a bit, or, better yet, prompt an internal enquiry at their end, no smoke without fire and all that, tangle them up in red tape for years.” He looked around. “Are we agreed?”

Cue much nodding around the table.

“David, can you apply your, erm, *literary skills* to the petition? Really pull on the heart strings, guilt-trip them, get the villagers all worked up.”

He nodded.

“Good.’ Bammington smiled. ‘Any further on Item Two? No? Good. So on to the third and final item. Er’. He squinted at the piece of paper. ‘Ah yes, of course, the nature garden. Composition thereof. Suggestions please.’”

He sipped his fennel tea and listened to the debate going on around the table. He thought of the petition. He thought of the article that awaited him unfinished on his PC. He thought of the shopping. Bugger. He looked at his watch. The organic shop would be shutting soon.

Having gathered in the suggestions, Bammington's voice had relapsed into a steady drone punctuated here and there, arrhythmically as it were, with his customary mocking snuffle. He sipped his fennel tea and tried to relax. He found it helped if he focused on things that comforted – his soft cork-soled shoes, the long driveway

of the Rectory, the EV with its unbelievable low carbon footprint, the size of Philippa's annual bonus, the sight of Desmond in his basket by the fire on a winter's evening. In his cosy state of relaxation, even Bammington's voice had a comfortable lulling effect. Now and then the odd word penetrated his consciousness like air bubbles rising to the surface of a pond. As each bubble popped open, he registered the word it carried with an appreciative *hum*. Rosebay willow herb. *Humm*. Cowslip. *Humm*. Rosemary and thyme, of course. *Hmm*. Dandelion. *Humm*. Parsley. *Humm*. Interactive information kiosks. *Humm*. *Humm*.

He emerged from his meditative state like a butterfly from a pupa as Bammington was delivering his concluding remarks.

"So, I think that concludes this extraordinary – I mean that in a technical, rather than descriptive sense", cue polite laughter around the table – "meeting of the Friends of Little Blarnish. Thank you, gentlemen, and, of course, lady." Mrs Cuthbert nodded. "Now, who's for some of Wendy's simply marvellous gluten-free carrot cake?"

He hurriedly made his excuses amidst the noises of anticipatory gastronomic appreciation and rushed out. Might just make it. He turned up just as Mr Owen, the proprietor of the organic shop, was pulling down the shutters. He cursed and changed course for the supermarket.

Walking down the vegetable aisle, he noticed how the overhead lights almost seemed to reflect off the waxed exemplars of intensive farming. Carrots too large, cauliflower too symmetrical, potatoes too clean – everything looked as if it had just come off a production line. At the thought of the small, asymmetrical specimens dripping with dark organic loam for sale in Mr Owen's tastefully fitted-out shop he experienced a pang of longing. He reached the salad shelf. He pushed aside the sickly-looking bag of lettuce with the in-pack sachet of industrial Caesar sauce gunk and searched for the organic stuff. After much rummaging, he managed to fish out a bag of wilting leaves from the back of the shelf. He looked at it in distaste; a number of the leaves had turned yellow, and a little pool of moisture had gathered at the bottom of the bag. The organic salad looked as if it had self-euthanised itself, willing itself to die in an act of defiance, faced as it was with an environment existentially inimical to its very being.

He flinched and tossed it back on the shelf in horror. Get me out of here. He made for the exit, cork soles flip-flopping on the floor, refrigerated shelves of meat dyed bright red to give the illusion of freshness chilling his toes with their cold vapours. He had read somewhere about the tactics supermarkets used to maximise the length of your visit – confusing layouts, misleading pricing, labels in small print – and who's to say that they didn't vary the temperature to similar effect? He was seized with a sudden vision of the icy breath of the refrigerated cabinets, the arctic exhalations of the freezers slowing down the flow of blood to the heart, deadening his reactions, rooting him to the spot like some woolly mammoth in the path of the Ice Age.

Get out! Got to get out! He stared at the security guard who was looking at him suspiciously. Damn impertinence. If you want me to buy something, try stocking something worth buying! The exit was now in view and he hurried towards it like a pyrolatrist to a flame. Once out, he headed off down the high street in a flurry of indignation. Wasn't there once talk of Waitrose coming here? Why do we have to put up with that horror?

He had reached the end of the High Street. A thought suddenly struck him, and he came to an abrupt halt. Of course, how silly of me. It was a brilliant idea. He changed direction, heading for the stile that marked the beginning of the public footpath to Bradlaugh's Spinney. Forage.

An hour or so later, with something of the swagger of the returning hunter, he climbed over another stile and found himself on the main road about two miles from his house. Under one arm he carried the receptacle he had fashioned from his waxed jacket. Its highly water-resistant innards cradled the spoils of his expedition: a good quantity of foraged leaves of a number of edible varieties, a handful of mushrooms, some mint, and a little marjoram. He smiled at the thought of the wild salad which would greet his wife's return.

As he came around a bend in the road, he saw the EV. Even from that distance, he sensed something was amiss. As he came closer, he noticed that the front wiper blades were sticking vertically upwards and the bonnet seemed to be dirty. Up close, the dirt resolved itself into letters: SHIT CAR. Somewhat imaginatively, the perpetrator had written the words in wet cowpat, which accounted for the stench. Talk about the medium being the message. Little bastards. He had a good idea of the likely perpetrators. He sighed. As if I don't have enough to do.

Back home, he emptied the contents of his impromptu receptacle on to the kitchen table. He gazed with pride on the foraged ingredients that were destined for the evening's dinner. It would make a truly magnificent wild salad. You couldn't get fresher if you tried. A thought occurred to him. Best double check those mushrooms. He got out his phone and searched online for images of edible mushrooms. *Mmm*. Tricky. He was ninety-nine percent sure that the variety he had picked was the so-called Blusher mushroom. But he had to admit that there was more than a passing resemblance to the poisonous Panther Cap. What to do? Throw them out, play it safe? Or risk it? He remembered a saying of his wife's that zero risk equated to zero return; that the best traders were skilled in taking calculated risk.

Ah. A third way had suggested itself to him.

He took a tin from the cupboard and tapped it with a knife.

“Steiner. Stein-er.”

A large tabby insinuated itself into the kitchen and studied him curiously. There you are. He took a piece of organic smoked salmon from the fridge – only the best would do for Steiner – and laid it out on the chopping board. He readied a sheet of kitchen roll. Next, he took a pair of tongs out of the drawer and carefully picked up the mushroom. He carried it over to the sink and held it under the tap for a few moments to get rid of the soil. He placed it for a few moments on the piece of kitchen roll, first one side, then the other to dry it. Finally, lifting the mushroom onto the waiting slice of smoked salmon, he rolled the salmon around it to create a pocket and carried it over to Steiner's feeding bowl. He stepped away and watched carefully.

The cat delicately nibbled the edges of the rolled slice of smoked salmon, lost interest and wandered out of the kitchen. Arrogant swine. It was his wife's cat and he'd never been keen on it. He was forced to admit that the experiment had been inconclusive.

He had an idea.

“Desmond. De-es-mond.”

A nose pushed itself into the gap between kitchen door and jamb, followed by the gingery brown body.

“Are there you are, yes, yes, good dog, good Desmond.” He ruffled its nose with the palm of his hand.

“Would you like a snack? Snacky, Des? Cheese snacky?”

The dog was now frisking up and down the kitchen. It had a strange penchant for two slices of extra mature cheddar rolled in a slice of white bread. He'd tried to shift Desmond to wholegrain, but to no avail. With a

look of distaste, he picked up the salmon parcel from the cat's feeding tray with the tongs and extracted the mushroom from within. He took out a semi-stale slice of white bread from the bread bin and placed the mushroom into the centre. He washed his hands, cut two slices off the cheddar, and placed them next to the mushroom. He rolled up the slice of bread, sealing the edges with a small fold. Treat prepared, he waved it in the air.

“Cheese snacky, Desmond. Bit of cheddar, eh Desmond?”

The dog jumped up and took it from his hand. Two snaps and a flick of the head and it was gone. The dog frisked around looking for another. He smiled in triumph. Well, that looks OK. Calculated risk.

“Good doggie, clever Desmond.”

He cut another slice of cheddar and tossed it over to the dog as a reward. He put the fruits of his sylvan expedition into a Tupperware, covered it and placed the tub in the fridge. He'd wash and prepare the salad later. He looked at the clock. She'll be back in just over an hour. Better get down to that article.

Furthermore, were this policy to be enacted on a national level, the costs of implementation would be fully recouped within a generation thanks to a reduced burden on the National Health Service; improved career outcomes for the young due to an increase in average intelligence stemming from better nutrition, thus resulting in a higher overall tax take; lower costs at the central level as the policy would undoubtedly reduce anti-social behaviour by improving brain welfare –

Little swine. The memory of the cowpat-bedaubed EV came back to him.

– thus leading to lower policing costs –

He heard the scrunch of the gravel driveway. He looked at his watch. That will be her. Better get the salad in to the spinner.

“Darling, good day at work?”

“So so, triple witching today, so it was all a bit chaotic.” She smiled at him. “Do tell me you managed to get to the organic shop. My body is screaming for a vitamin infusion.” She made a face. “If I have to eat another sandwich at my desk, I'll lose it.”

He smiled hieratically.

“I think I can promise you something that will alkalise you nicely.”

She smiled back.

“I'm intrigued.”

With a flourish.

“Step this way, Madam.”

He led the way into the kitchen and poured her a glass of bio-dynamic white wine. Whilst she was sipping the wine, he took the Tupperware from the fridge, removed the cover and emptied the contents into a glass bowl. He poured three lots of filtered tap water into the bowl, swirled it around on each occasion and, hand over the contents, poured the water down the sink. He emptied the leaves into the salad spinner and started turning briskly.

“Darling, where's the EV? I didn't see it in the driveway.”

“Ah, that's a long story. Ran out of charge on the way to the village. Doug Jackson kindly gave me a lift. Otherwise, I'd have missed the meeting.” He was intent on his spinning; he abhorred wet salad. 'I'll take the Range Rover tomorrow morning and tow the EV. It should be fine for a night.” He interrupted his spinning. “I

do wish you would remember to charge the EV after using it, darling. This isn't the first time this has happened.”

She protested, “I haven't driven the EV for a week. You used it to go to the farmers' market last Sunday.”

“Farmers' market? I don't –”

Actually, she might have a point. He'd gone to pick up that bit of organic beef for lunch. He began spinning again and hurriedly changed the subject.

“Aren't you going to ask me about the meeting?”

“Which meeting, darling?”

He thought she seemed diffident.

“The meeting today at Purest Green.” In an exasperated tone, he added. “Well, I'm sure it's not *quite* as important as the futures market, but we are, nonetheless, faced with the prospect of further destruction of the green belt.”

“Yes, yes.”

He looked over. She wasn't even listening to him.

“Darling, what's wrong with Desmond?”

“Desmond, nothing, he's fine. Probably a bit tired.”

He removed the leaves from the spinner and separated them on to two plates. He took the bottle of his special herb-infused dressing from the fridge and poured a generous glug on to each plate. With a flourish, he handed her one of the plates.

“Voila, one wild salad for Madam. Zero cost, zero carbon emissions. Man living at one with his environment, surviving off Nature's bounty.”

She looked at her plate. She pushed at one of the mushrooms with her fork. There was a doubtful look on her face.

“Darling, are you sure about this? I'm not sure I recognise some of these things.” She looked up at him, “they are edible, aren't they?”

He looked at her with a slight smile in which was mixed a touch of pity and the merest hint of superiority, as the wise countryman, initiated into the mysteries of wood and hedgerow, might view the ignorant questioning of an urbanite unaccustomed to encountering food in its natural, unprocessed form.

“Phillipa, you know it struck me that we are such commercial beasts. Utterly consumerist. Even those of us who shop organic, supporting farm shops, the small independents.” He took a sip of wine, making a note to lay some more in. “In fact, in the article I am working on, I argue that the government should support the purchase of a house along with a small piece of ground for each individual. If we would but grow our own vegetables, we would undo half the evils of commercialism in a single generation. And what better way to prepare for that than by recognising the fruits – widespread and freely available – which Nature offers us?” He forked a piece of mushroom and a scrap of marjoram into his mouth. “I of course refer to fruits in the figurative sense, for it is not just fruits of which I speak – wild berries and the such like – but edible grasses, leaves, fungi and even vegetable matter.” He took another sip of wine. “Why –?”

He was interrupted by a sudden growling noise. He swallowed a forkful of leaves and mushroom. Washing it down with a gulp of wine, he called out, “Desmond, what is it, old chap? What is it, boy?”

The growling grew louder. A pair of bloodshot eyes stared at them from the gap between kitchen door and jamb. The door was abruptly opened with a flick of the snout. The dog stalked into the room, its teeth bared menacingly, the pinks of the gums quivering above the yellowed pegs of bone. He watched as a white glob of spume gathered at the corner of its mouth in a small agglomeration of bubbles. The gingery-brown fur was bristled like a brush, as if someone had just run twenty thousand volts through it.

“Darling, Desmond!” his wife pointed in horror, her cutlery clattering unused onto the kitchen counter.

The growling grew louder. Slowly, steadily the dog came towards him, its tail pointed stiffly towards the floor.

“Desmond. Des-mond? Good boy, Desmond. What is it, old chap? Snacky Des, cheese sna—”

“David!”

In summary, the answer to many of the ills facing our society is simplicity itself. It is, literally, as old as the hills. If we would just let Nature herself take the lead, the ills of the world will, seemingly miraculously, vanish before our very eyes. For –

He was recuperating nicely. The bite on his leg was healing and the worst effects of the stomach pump were wearing off. Apart from the mild hallucinogenic episode on the way to the hospital, there had been no other symptoms from the poisoning. Thankfully, Phillipa hadn't eaten any of the salad. And, actually, Desmond had done him a favour – after a fashion – by attacking him before he'd had chance to finish what was on his plate. Clever dog. Another benefit was that he could turn his bed rest to good advantage by completing that damned article. Not to mention Bammington's petition. The man has no respect for other people's time, even those recuperating from fungi poisoning.

Steiner looked in through the door of the guest bedroom, stared at him for a moment and shimmered away. Smug devil. A forlorn howl echoed up from the living room. I know the feeling, old chap. He sympathised. The stomach pump really had been a most unpleasant experience.

– Nature is the great healer. And so –

At least the EV had cleaned up ok. And Phillipa was sure to come round in time. He sighed and gave his beard a comforting stroke and thought how difficult it was when you were trying to save the world.

Ends

A Poet Knows...

By Donna McCabe

How to convey ones
Thoughts, feelings and emotions
In a variable variety of ways
From the most inextricable ideas
Their Pen can play
In its own unique way.

DCCIC

By David Edwards

A wrought-iron fence,
rusted and leaning,
blood-red cardinal atop,
insouciantly preening...
indifferent to
fence and rust and me.

English Walled Garden

By Mark Hudson

1: Sleepy Stone Lion,
water trickling downward,
thyme plants prospering

2: The English garden
overflowing with some fruits
and some vegetables

DCCC

By David Edwards

I remember the
humid sin of a
four-syllable hothouse,
its dozen poems-- strangers
and friends-- united
in their common ends.



Chekhov's Gun

By David Rudd

Mary felt like she'd stepped back in time, walking onto the set of an Agatha Christie novel. The Hotel Britannica's wood-panelled lobby featured mounted heads of game on the walls, alongside animal skins, shields, and tribal masks.

She'd only ever stayed in hotel chains before — Premier Inns, Best Westerns and the like — so this place was a revelation. As she approached Reception, the only thing that jarred was the computer. Against the dark wood fittings and numbered cubbyholes — each containing a key with a metal fob the size of a shoehorn — it looked garish, anachronistic.

There were two people ahead of her. She was surprised to see anyone else, for it looked such a sleepy place. However, the car park had been relatively full. Was there something going on? she wondered. Then she caught sight of a poster on a display board by the Reception Desk: "This Weekend — Annual Gun Collectors Exhibition. In the Ballroom."

She should really be at the local Best Western, where a conference on twenty-first century journalism was being held, for which her employer, the Yorkshire Times, was paying. She'd only recently taken up journalism, having previously worked in advertising. She had no regrets about the move, but her editor, Doug Jarvis, was forever complaining that her writing was too flowery, too imaginative. She needed, he said, to stick to the facts more. Being sent to this conference was, perhaps, her final hint.

Anyway, the Best Western had been fully booked. That's when she'd discovered this place. She'd been quite pleased at the time, thinking that she'd be free of the unwelcome attention that male delegates always paid her. Looking at this poster, though, she wondered if it was a frying pan situation. She pictured gun-toting men pursuing her down hotel corridors. Had she swapped the Best Western for the Wild Western?

As if to confirm her worries, two lads joined the queue behind her. "Tasty bod," said one. "Tastier legs," replied the other. In her early thirties, tall, slim and with shoulder-length black hair, it was always good to know that she still attracted attention, but she wasn't going to tolerate such cheek from minors!

Before she could respond, however, the woman at Reception beat her to it. "Ronnie! Mick!" she shouted. "Put that phone away and get your idle arses over here!"

As they passed by her, she could clearly see the naked woman on the mobile they'd been sharing. Mary was so pleased she hadn't said anything.

They ambled to the desk, heads lowered and muttering. The receptionist would be perfect in a Christie adaptation, thought Mary: stiff blond hair, heavily mascaraed eyes, bright red lips and sumptuous bust. Mary watched her as she rose from her seat, as though in slow motion — as though that bust of hers were helium-filled, thought Mary. The word "floozy" came to mind, a word she couldn't recall ever using before.

The lads, though taller than the receptionist, were nonetheless cowed by her. One was thin and angular, the other more stocky. Each received a clatter as she indicated the suitcases of the couple in front. "Make yourselves useful."

The four of them made their way to the lift, tracked by the twin missiles of the receptionist's cleavage. They then swung back to Mary, who half anticipated a clatter herself. However, after a few straightforward

questions, she was handed her key and made her way to the lift, pleased that the two lads hadn't returned to escort her to her room.

Although Mary had planned to eat out later, when it came to it, she couldn't be bothered. Still tired from her journey, she wandered into the dining room and was surprised to see how many others had done likewise. Most were men, middle-aged or older. There were no unoccupied tables, and none with single women. Mary scanned the room until she caught the eye of one man who, she thought, looked harmless.

"Yes, please join me," he said, standing up. "Arthur Granby." They shook hands as Mary, in turn, introduced herself, adding that she was a journalist.

He told her that, like most of the other diners, he was there for the annual Gun Collectors Exhibition, urging her not to miss it.

"Perhaps you'll find something of interest to write about," he said. "You'll see more guns than you can shake a stick at — even a shooting stick!" He gave a brief laugh.

"Real guns?"

"The majority are, though a few collectors specialise in replicas. Mainly historical guns, too. No machine guns. Nothing like that!"

"Is it allowed? I mean, all these guns together?"

"As long as you have a licence, yes. Someone brought a tank one year. Left it in the car park, of course. A tank only needs a gun licence, you see."

"Is it safe, though? All these guns?"

"Safer than a night in town, I'd say. And there's no ammunition. Very few of the weapons can actually be fired. I've just one replica that fires blanks. I use it in talks to wake up the audience. I keep it locked in a case." He gave another short laugh.

Arthur's special interest, he told her, was eighteenth-century weaponry. "Blunderbusses, you know," he said, adding, "Please stop me when you've heard enough."

He was a mine of information, and Mary, true to her new vocation, listened carefully. The name "blunderbuss", as she later recalled, was originally Dutch, meaning "thunder pipe," it being a gun with a flared muzzle. For some reason, Mary pictured a schnauzer with moustache and goatee. Perhaps it was because Arthur himself — early sixties, Mary thought — had a magnificent handlebar moustache that he was forever coaxing upwards with his fingers. The blunderbuss, he said, had recently been glamourised in the Pirates of the Caribbean films.

When Arthur finally offered Mary an advance peek at his "weaponry", she feared the worst, but his intentions proved honourable. Surreptitiously, he led her, between courses, out to Reception.

"Flossie's not here," Arthur pronounced in a stage whisper. "Busy in the kitchen, no doubt. We'll just borrow the key." He reached behind the desk. "She won't mind."

"Rather you than me!" said Mary. Flossie, she thought, the perfect name. "Flossie the floozie," she muttered under her breath.

Arthur became more expansive as they approached the ballroom. Flossie, he informed her, was the owner. The hotel had initially been run with her husband, Danny, one of the infamous Hoggart brothers (local gangsters, apparently). Danny had bought the hotel as a nest-egg after reputedly going straight, but had then been killed in a road-rage incident. His surviving brother, Reg, had always thought he should have a share in this hotel business, but Flossie would have none of it. Having a particular interest in guns, it was Danny who'd started hosting the Gun Collectors convention some six years ago.

Mary could see that there might be an interesting article in all this. She quizzed Arthur about the two lads she'd seen. "That'll be Ronnie and Mick," Arthur told her. "Ronnie is Danny's son, and his pal, Mick, is Reg's." He winked at Mary. "I've known them since they were boys. They were quizzing me earlier about how my blunderbuss replica worked. Genuinely interested."

As Arthur unlocked the door, Mary gasped. It was like entering an arsenal. She'd never seen so many guns in her life. In fact, had she ever seen a real gun?

There were about forty pitches, she estimated, most of them set up against the walls but with a separate cluster in the centre. Albert's was one of the latter. His guns were laid out on some staging covered with green baize, with more weapons hanging from side panels. His name — "Arthur Granby" — was painted on a panel at the back.

"My pièce de résistance," said Arthur, cradling a highly polished weapon. He passed it across to her. "A genuine, walnut-stocked, brass-barrelled, steel flintlock blunderbuss from around 1780."

He handed it to Mary, who, though not a fan of guns, loved its look and feel. She found herself caressing the flared muzzle before raising the gun to her shoulder.

"That's the mistake most people make," interjected Arthur. "This gun has a vicious kick and you'd likely break your shoulder blade firing it like that." He gently took it from her. "It's shot from the hip," he said, demonstrating the action.

After this brief preview, they hurried back to the dining room in time for sweets and coffee.

Mary slept well. So well, in fact, that she didn't hear her alarm. She had to skip breakfast, hastily booking a taxi to take her to her conference at the Best Western. As she waited in the lobby, she once again admired the dark wood panelling and colonial trophies. It certainly was an eccentric place. She kept an eye out for Arthur, but he was nowhere to be seen.

By five in the afternoon, she was back at the Britannica, exhausted, having heard enough about twenty-first-century journalism to last her the rest of the century. Mary was tempted to go straight to her room and lie down, but she owed it to Arthur to look at the exhibition.

As she walked into the ballroom, she reflected on the words of Cary Robinson, the only speaker at the conference who'd made any impression on her. He was a keynote, a hoary old American who looked the least qualified person to talk about modern journalism, which is perhaps why Mary had warmed to him.

"A journalist is never off duty," he'd informed the conference. "Look around you," he'd counselled. "Stories — they're everywhere." Now, standing in the entrance to the exhibition, Mary tried to heed his advice.

Cary had also said something she wished her boss, Doug, could have heard: "Don't overburden your writing with facts. It's a story you're telling. Details need to earn their keep," he'd maintained, quoting

Chekhov's famous advice, which, at this venue, seemed exceptionally apposite: "If you introduce a gun then, somewhere down the line, your reader expects a shot." What would Chekhov have made of this arsenal?

Mary joined the crowds milling around the pitches. It was like being on *The Antiques Roadshow*. To her untutored eye, most of the stalls were much of a muchness. One, though, which she hadn't spotted the previous night, stood out. "Lady Shooters", it was called, and featured Derringers and other pocket-size guns, some even jewel encrusted. It was run by the only female exhibitor in the room: Monica Yearley. In her fifties, she was small and dowdy-looking, someone you might pass in the street without a second thought. But, as Mary stood there, the woman picked up a jewelled pistol and, with her finger through the trigger guard, idly spun the gun back and forth.

"Purr-fect," said Monica, in a creditable Mae West impression, "for concealing in your reti-cule." Here she thrust out one hip. Mary, to whom this remark was aimed, tried to respond in an equally sassy manner, but spoiled it by giggling as she heard her appalling American accent.

She wandered on to Arthur's pitch. He was busy explaining to a family how the blunderbuss worked. She tried to pay attention as he talked about the flintlock mechanism and the way it ignited the gunpowder. He then described how the gun was loaded, "with shot or anything else that came to hand — bits of metal, glass, pebbles," he looked at the children, "gobstoppers even!"

He might have said more but, suddenly, someone else appeared at Arthur's side. It was Mr Doughty, the current president of the Gun Collectors Club, whom Arthur had introduced to Mary the evening before.

"Sorry to interrupt, Arthur," said Mr Doughty, "but this has just been brought to my attention. It's from the local Neighbourhood Watch group." He held up an iPad which showed two people in balaclavas, one brandishing a blunderbuss. "Someone saw them in there while walking past Mr Patel's corner shop." The footage had clearly been taken from outside, looking in. Behind the counter, Mr Patel could be seen with his hands raised above his head.

Arthur seized the iPad and enlarged the gun. He was silent for a while, scratching his head in disbelief.

"Is it one of yours, Arthur?" prompted Doughty.

"It is indeed. But I can't understand it," said Arthur, nonplussed. "It's locked away in here." He grabbed what looked like a musical-instrument case from the back of his stall, unlocking and removing his replica blunderbuss.

Just at that moment, Flossie frog-marched Ronnie and Mick into the ballroom and across to Arthur's pitch.

"It isn't what you think," Ronnie protested. "Ring Mr Patel if you don't believe us," he added. "He's not reported a robbery, has he?"

No one said anything for a moment. "Look," continued Ronnie, taking hold of the iPad. "Although he's a bit hidden — you can just see Kash's arm here. He's holding a camcorder." Ronnie turned to those gathered round him. "Kash is Mr Patel's son, doing Film Studies at Uni. He asked me and Mick if we could help with his final year project."

Mick had now retrieved his own phone and was showing them footage of the supposed heist. "We just need one more day ...?"

"But ... how did my gun get there?" asked Arthur, still clutching his precious replica.

“We’re very sorry,” began Mick, “but we’ve really looked after it, as you can see.” He gently relieved Arthur of his gun, buffing up the already shiny, flared muzzle.

“You did say you didn’t need it for this exhibition,” said Ronnie, “and, well, we thought it better if you ... didn’t know about it till you’d seen the film.”

Mary could scarcely believe her luck. Talk about being in the right place at the right time! Cary would be proud of her. Suddenly, though, things took another turn.

Before Arthur could respond to the lads’ feeble excuses, another figure was on the scene: a huge man who cut through the crowd like a knife through butter. As Mary soon realised, this was Mick’s father, Reg — the remaining Hoggart brother.

He immediately wrested Arthur’s blunderbuss from Mick. “What have I told you about playing with guns, lunkhead?”

Reg made to hand the weapon back to Arthur, then paused. “Not quite your reliable sawn-off shotgun, is it though?” he half joked, lifting the weapon to his shoulder.

No one was quite sure of the sequence of events that followed, for they unfolded so quickly. One second, Reg was hefting the gun, the next second there was a huge bang and he was on the floor, on his back, groaning. When he had initially raised the gun, both Arthur and Mick had made a move to intervene, but neither was in time.

Fortunately, the kick of the gun’s recoil directed the muzzle to the ceiling. Arthur, who had expected to hear nothing but a “click”, was most surprised, not simply by the huge report — which was itself accompanied by Reg’s yell of pain — but also by a shower of shot that rained down on them, albeit some of it remained embedded in the ceiling tiles.

“What did I tell you, lads?” said Arthur, the first to find his tongue. “Shoot from the hip!” He looked round the room at all the bystanders with their hands clasped to their ears. It brought Edvard Munch’s famous painting to mind. “And it’s not called a blunderbuss,” he shouted, “a thunder gun, that is, for nothing!”

Arthur then bent to examine some of the shot slithering around the floor. It looked unusually large in diameter. “Gobstoppers!” he proclaimed in disbelief, glancing towards Ronnie and Mick.

“You always used to say...” began Mick, before Ronnie thumped him.

“It was set up for the final scene, tomorrow,” explained Ronnie. “We couldn’t fire it in Patel’s shop, so we’ve rigged up a few shelves in his storeroom and packed them with old tins and boxes. Kash is borrowing a special slo-mo camera tomorrow so we can shoot it... first thing... before anyone... notices...” Ronnie’s own speech hit slo-mo before finally petering out.

No one seemed to be listening to him. Flossie was trying to quieten things down, offering patrons free drinks and cups of tea. Arthur was busy inspecting his replica gun for damage. Mick was bent over his dad, whose groans were getting louder. “Me shoulder,” he moaned, “I think it’s bust.”

“If you will play with guns, Dad,” said Mick, unable to conceal a smile.

Mary suddenly realised she was contributing very little to this scene. Then it struck her that she was doing exactly what she was cut out for: observing. It was all here, even — she chuckled to herself — a gun that had gone off. Cary would have been proud of her, let alone Chekhov.

Eventually people dispersed. Reg went off to A & E with his son, Arthur gave Ronnie a good talking to, and Flossie worked overtime making sure everyone was calm and placated. After things had quietened down, Mary too went to her room, where, though excited, she found herself in a dilemma. On the one hand she had a sensational story to tell; on the other, she'd developed such an affection for the Hotel Britannica and its quirky inhabitants that she didn't want to upset anyone. And, it struck her, in the scheme of things, little harm had been done: there had been no armed robbery; no one had perished from gobstopper wounds. There were a few victims of shock and temporary deafness, but Flossie had done her best to allay their distress.

It was only when she remembered her editor, Doug, that Mary's dilemma resolved itself. For, she realised, even if she did indulge the sensational side of her story, he'd never buy it. He'd accuse her of being histrionic and over-imaginative.

In the end, Mary wrote a more mundane piece about the Gun Collectors exhibition, now in its 7th year at the Hotel Britannica, with cameos featuring — amongst others — Arthur Granby's blunderbuss collection and Monica Yearley's arsenal of feminine weaponry. Mary gave the fired gun only a brief mention and, even then, there wasn't a gobstopper in sight.

However, the more sensational events of that weekend continued to bounce around her head. It was then that Mary discovered that, rather than a journalist, her forte lay in storytelling. She began to read Chekhov more assiduously and was soon publishing her own stories, though in none of them, apart from the first, did anyone ever mention guns.

Ends

Psychosis: 6:28

By Brooks Lindberg

Consider the lilies, how they grow:
they toil not
knowing how to find open air.

To briefly geyser color
along a tangled bank
they must constrict, strangle, smother, survive.

It's rough. But I'd trade them. Sure:
alive they're clothed with
worms and clods of clay.

But dead
they're gathered by my dearest
and never thrown away.

Tree Death

By DJ Tyrer

Tree climbs heavenward
Bark veined and rutted deep
Beetles bore inward
Hiding from the egg-yolk sun
A hidden threat
An insect fifth column
Gnawing away from within
A healthy exterior
Belying a rotten core
Until, too late, too late
That mighty entity gives way
Dies, unable to stand
Topples

Originally published on Duane's PoeTree

The Never-Never

By Billy Stanton

Throb.

Throb.

The last throbbing.

Turn the inside out, on plumes rising into the night.

Let the glimmers, the shimmers through.

Old timber burns easy. Best to leave that to the last doing; get everything else in line first.

Maria followed the old narrow track from West to East, along the edges of old Aethelweard's estate, with one foot on the path and the other in the ditch. Beyond the low bank, and the curtain of bare branches and decaying fronds of bracken and hard fern, the road ran on in one great smooth grey line flecked with tiny brown and white pebbles. Every time a car or lorry went past, blazing its red and yellow lights as warning signals to deer, hare or badger, the little stones came smacking against the green-brown veil, piercing extra little peepholes on the patterns and procedures of mundane night transit. An ASDA truck followed a locksmith's van, the latter delayed on a late call-out by an ingenious system of old bolts. A souped-up racer sent the obliterating metal rhythms of an old drum'n'bass record like a wave of rain over the farms and hills and far away. An autotuned warble arrived shortly after, floating upwards from a Volvo like a distracted banshee seeking refuge amongst the slumbering crows in what was left of the treetops. The world seemed to Maria so loud, always so loud, as if the ability- the wish, the desire- to manifest great whooshing bursts of noise at any and all times was the last remaining gift of a people dispossessed of all other powers.

She reached the borders of the West village and turned off from the track, entering the thickest possible pool of the sparse woodlands. On her left, the largest of the old barrows rose like a huge fat lump out of the forest floor. She found the tomb within the uneven circle of beech trees and beneath the blackened stump of a lightning-blasted elm. She raised her construction against the latter and reached up and felt along the lowest hanging arms of the nearest beech. She broke off thin but long and strong twigs and branches and collected them in a small bundle beside the tomb. Then she climbed up the tree and searched amongst it for thicker offshoots, picking them and dropping them down within the vicinity of her bundle. She climbed higher and higher, but got more selective as she did so, eventually taking only the most formidable of the branches which she could manage to cleanly separate from their parent. Above her, the sky was a mottled purple-blue, a wash of dark cloud fighting against low-level road pollution and the far-off exhumations of a power station. There was enough silvery moonlight for Maria to make her way up and along with relative ease and safety. She would stop occasionally and steal glances at the white disc above, marvelling at how it still seemed to be touched in places by the rich vermilion and burnt ambers of the crepuscular rays that had flooded the valley during the evening's long, long sunset. This night, this special night, this night of breaking away, had bought a parade, a pastoral symphony more fitting for the cosmic wonder of the start of the lambing season, when the glorified shepherd delivered the first quivering ewe of a silent and beloved flock, than the last desperate warmings of a hard frostbitten winter.

As if to fulfil these newly arrived promises of rebirth and renewal, the higher Maria climbed, the more she found that she chanced upon nest after nest of small birds eggs, of different shapes, sizes and hues, either

fiercely guarded or nonchalantly left to rest alone by their future mothers and fathers. Obviously, and rather against the expected course of things, a large multitude of birds, of a rich variety, had taken up residence here in overriding peace and harmony. The occasional whistle or call emitted softly around Maria as she passed on her way upwards, but there were no long tumblings of melody or screeches of fright. The air became thick, instead, with the multifarious but always identifiable feelings that arise from long periods of waiting, patient or impatient, as parents listened out for the early cracking of shells and the trembling welcome coos of the first mornings of brief lives.

Maria was calm, almost hypnotised, and feeling like she truly was on the brink of something wonderful soon to arrive, as she made her way eventually back down the tree, letting herself slowly and carefully find secure footing on each resolute limb. Loose chunks of bark sometimes trickled to the forest floor; it had, where it was sharp, grazed and stained and cut her hands, but she paid little heed to any pain as she felt her way down. When she again touched solid ground, she immediately collected together the sprigs and spurs she had thrown down from above and, when she felt she had gathered enough, she sat twiddling and threading and tying together as she had once- long ago- been show how to. The resulting sheet was not her finest work- there were large gaps in the coverage and an overall flimsiness that meant it would not stand up well to any strong wind- but the creation was always intended to be more ceremonial than practical. She felt the other sheets which had been stacked and layered to create the hollow mound of the tomb and was satisfied; these were strong and impressive and suggested a comforting impenetrability when put together in this way. She placed her new layer upon the rest, lifted enough of the mound to crawl within and then lay in the flat empty space beneath where it rose to its domed top. There were enough spaces through which to see the purple sky, but too much of the surrounding clearing was also visible: the flowers would be necessary.

Maria emerged and went out of the thicket and towards the alien road. Here she found desolation to compare with the fruitful hidden life of the trees. A pair of headlights far-off in the distance was the only intruder on the blankness, the only illumination in the dark. The smell of unleaded diesel hung in the air, along with something else, some other fragrance made up of old musty cab interiors and the artificial sweetness of the tree-shaped cardboard air fresheners that come as standard with a secondhand motor. The smell tickled at her own memory, and reminded her of the endless hot afternoons which David told her about, when he had sat idling in the dusty yard where his father either started or awaited work, taking cups of tea, and looking out over the proud new trucks sat smugly shining beside the scratched mud-splashed remnants of one-job-too-many carcasses.

Maria judged the distance between herself and the approaching headlights and calculated that she could make it to the other side of the carriageway long before the vehicle caught up with her. But no sooner had she made her appearance on the tarmac from the undergrowth, then the car seemed to increase manically in speed. For a brief second, Maria saw it coming at her as an emissary from the West village- a rider for the local Manor Lord, a horseman for Aethelweard or the Conqueror- who had caught wind of her plot and seized this moment to squash her nascent revolt. The car- a blue Fiat- pushed at the limits of capability, and Maria scrambled across the cold road, her legs heavy after her exertions in the beeches. In a remarkable show of temerity after all the seeming effort the driver had put into rushing her out of existence, the Fiat blared its horn as it passed Maria, who had finally collapsed with relief and exhaustion in the ditch on the far side of the road. A burst of dialogue,

a wittering witless voice cold and self-satisfactorily detached from the violence of the current situation, underlaid the other harsh noises the vehicle made as it sped away- it was the bellowing ghost of a talk radio station played at an unholy volume which had clearly raised long-dead spirits in the murderous driver.

Maria watched the Fiat until it disappeared; then, raising herself, she began picking as much as she could of the Buddleia that grew in enormous bunches along the ditch. Most of the flowers were purple, like the sky, but here and there amongst her plucked stems were dirty white and blue buds, the colours playing sombre variations on a slender theme.

Carrying large armfuls of stalks, and confident that no other vehicles were approaching, Maria went back across the road under the watchful gaze of a pair of foxes, who stood silently eyeing her from some twenty yards off. Swamped by what she had picked, they saw her as little more than a portion of the edge land vegetation granted mobility. The foxes remained still, only with their heads cocking slightly to follow the debut of this new creature, as Maria re-entered the woods.

As she worked, she didn't think much about her encounter with whatever demon had sat behind the steering wheel. The murderous instinct- the oblitative violent drive- seemed only an extension of the sort of behaviour, the sort of thinking, the kind of action-taking, that she'd observed all throughout another previous life that remained like a distant star on the margins of the galaxies of her mind. There was a lot of hate to go round in the villages and towns hereabouts. The propertied commuters hated the locals who often showed a cold shoulder to their ostentatious displays of wealth and patronising Levis, wellies and gilet-sporting attempts at playing modern successful farmer-landowner. The locals resented the invaders in turn for their swallowing up of what little remained of the independence of their lives. The only thing that ever united the two oppositional groups was when the gypsies arrived every so often and set up their caravans on a green patch of land owned by a very absentee landlord half a mile outside the East village. Then, all the hate could be poured in a mutual direction. Maria had once seen a member of the minted newcomers class, with his big watch glinting in the evening light and his thick legs working unsteadily, come stumbling out of the tourist's gastropub brandishing an empty Kopperburg bottle he claimed he was going to fill full of petrol and chuck aflame through whatever caravan window looked like it had the flimsiest plexiglass. It had only been his wife- herself close to surrendering to the efforts of her high heels to send her flying face first into a pile of horse dung left behind by the mare of a student-rider on day release from the local prep- that put him to rights and averted disaster. He'd bellowed and screamed as he'd been dragged back to the pub, but he'd then spent the rest of the night contented enough flicking beer mats and chucking leftover chips at a young and soft-looking barman who had stutteringly threatened to cut him off, but acquiesced to serve a few more pints under fear of his bodily safety.

Such visions now- of dark, twisted figures against the pink skies, of schemes worse than a noontime bit of rabbiting being plotted under the old oaks at the far side of sleepy Autumn fields- were, however, almost immaterial to Maria. These were the doings, she recognised, of lost people, surrounded by symbols of loss which they didn't recognise as such, but were continuing to strip, to frack and to suck dry regardless. Better they didn't have those symbols at all. Start again. Cut them free. Cut us free. Cut me free. She took a woven net of flowers from a hidden spot behind the tomb. It was a beautiful labour of pure love, a tapestry that was the result of countless hours spent mediating while twining and threading with only the simplest of tools. There was no logic or pattern to the placement of species, age or colour; the whole was a

rampant mess of hues broken by heavily knotted bunches of green stems. Maria placed the net over the edifice of the tomb, and where it had spooled together in big lumps at the base from running over the sides, weighed the looseness down with chunks of flint.

Again she got inside the tomb, and looking up, this time, she could only see the pin-pricks of white stars in the few places where the net and the branches left any gaps. She smiled and let herself lie in the darkness for a few moments, until the passage of another car along the road behind the hedgerows woke her, and pushed her back towards the West.

St John's Church would be the first to go. It seemed right- it was more like a fortress than a place of worship anyway, a strong hulking stone building with a tower that akin to a castle's lookout turret rather than a delicate pinnacle reaching up to grasp at God.

No arrows or poured-out bowls of burning fat came from above, however, to try and fend off Maria's advances. She went through the graveyard unseen, taking the hand axe from her backpack. She approached the rear door and then hacked at it, splitting the antique worm-ridden wood, until a hole was cut that was big enough for her to climb through. The noise of her strikes was tremendous; each blow rattled and buckled the door on its rusting hinges in a metallic crescendo that all but re-sounded the triumphant thunderings of the old village quire and band for a now-invisible congregation in a much different and blasphemous context. No-one intervened despite the racket; no lights went on in the nearest houses, not even that of the Rectory. Everyone slumbered on.

Maria didn't mind the splinters tugging at her clothes as she crawled through the hole, but as she dropped to the flagstone floor below and pulled herself to her feet, she had her first moments of doubt. The interior of the church was lovely in the melancholy way that Anglican churches can sometimes be: stripped of glorious trappings and bold iconography, and then simply and humbly whitewashed and fitted with nothing but dark oak as if predicting the disappointment of declining turnouts and half-hearted and half-felt recitations to come. It was a particularly austere church which didn't impinge or attempt to convince or boast; a church which said in its purposeful near-emptiness 'if you don't need me, then I might not necessarily need you either.' Yet, for all this, the weight of history seemed to be underlining everything in sight; the hum of the long, sad drumbeat of time resonated between the walls, suggesting itself with forceful grace. Maria stopped and listened to this music, and the low rustlings of obscure flags of worship and cap-doffing military respect as they moved in the breeze in the few corners where they'd been hung. She smelt the must of old hymnbooks and kneeling cushions, and knew she would be the last one- of hundreds- to smell it in this place, so close to where thousands across centuries had smelt the even older scents and felt the even greater history of the vanquished old church building.

She summoned all she had to take the two flasks filled with petrol from her backpack and liberally doused as much as she could of the pews with the liquid. She approached the lectern and poured the last few dribbles on a small carving of a cross on its outside as a sort of premonition of her next target. Then- as she imagined Cromwell and the Puritans once had in other churches in other villages- she moved with swiftness, without leaving time for consideration to creep in again: the icons' faces must be scratched off, the manure must be piled high against the altar wall, the glassy Saints must be smashed out of existence. She lit the match and dropped it on a pew; it went up immediately, filling the room with the smell of cheap varnish. She scrambled

back out through the hole in the door, but halted to look in at her handiwork when she was safely on the other side. The fire had spread to a few more rows, but she was stunned, instead, to see an old, distant scene of another place and time playing out untouched in a far corner beyond the altar, flickering in its motions like a candle about to be extinguished in a soft wind, or a degraded reel of a silent film being projected at the wrong speed. Three knights, with their silver chainmail turned to orange in the glow of the flames, stood over a cloaked figure laying splayed on the floor. A sticky black pool was emanating from this stricken man's head and running over the flagstones, but still the knights took turns to bring their swords down on his writhing body without thought of restraint or honest mercy. A male's scream- oddly muted and compressed- echoed through the building, emanating from someone unseen by Maria. A fourth knight approached the dying man and placed his foot upon his neck. A gloopy whiteness slopped from the wound and the knight turned to look at Maria with a strange wan smile. The knight had her face. They all had her face, even the dead man. She shot away from the door in fright and sped across the graveyard, her stomach bubbling, her mind torn. It had to be the cross next. It made sense. It had to be.

Still no-one stirred in the resting village. There was only darkness behind panes of glass and curtains drawn across sash windows. If one stopped and listened- really listened, hard and alert, in the way people rarely do- the sound of snoring came squeezing through the cracked plaster beneath thatched roofs and the cracks left by slapdash mortaring.

The cross was surrounded by plots of daffodils, behind a gate that surrounded the entirety of the slightly elevated bank upon which it sat, and was watched over by white cottage sentinels, one of which was named for the monument. Most these houses had been amongst those recently sold in the last decade or so as fine investments in an era of spiralling south-east house prices and the search for space outside the claustrophobic conurbations of a service industry-oriented capital city reliant on the endless stream of coffee-serving and Korean BBQ-preparing phantoms and their catacombs of rented sub-divided maisonette bedrooms. They had been marketed with the promise that it was easy to control the inhabitation of said bedrooms, and even to order their sub-dividing again, from the comfort of these Shangri-La's overlooking the spot where once St Wilfrid had spoken to his congregations of straggling isolated converts beneath the classic yew of English Christianity; that species of tree where once, in the mind of some rustic hymn writers and village mystics still unknowingly groping their way through Druidic legacies, the son of God had been nailed and erased the stain of original sin with his death. An old symbol of Resurrection recast; where the branches reach the ground, another tree will grow.

Maria clambered over the low fencing surrounding the cross and its attendant buds, and poured more petrol in a circle which took in the whole of the bank. There was little hope of taking the stone of the cross in the fire, but it could be blackened and tarnished at the very least, and its ground killed- and the same with the flag-less pole which stretched high above in preparation for some national event which would again demand the flying of the old home colours. She removed herself from the bank, stood on a bench outside the fencing, and chucked another lit match onto the grass. Great banks of flame started reaching towards the cross within seconds, the fiery circle closing in on the holy reminder. Maria turned before contact was made, before the flames started licking and kissing and caressing and awakening the frigid stone. She wanted no visions like

before, no sight of pilgrims or worshippers hearing their first good words and offering quiet farewells with her lips and her voice to the numinous ones who had previously sustained their hopes and fears. She longed for no glimpse of herself as Wilfrid, or bleeding from her sides before the Romans on a sodden trunk.

She went to The Thomas Lord instead, and threw another bottle of petrol, this time with the requisite flaming rag stuffed inside the head, through a lower window. The drunk man ready to wage war on the local 'pikeys' had given Maria the idea, the motivation, for this sniping. The glass fell with a satisfying and echoing crash; she was delighted to take the thug's temple down, to breathe in the scent of lager and apple cider and spiced rum spreading on the clouds of black smoke that filled the narrow arteries of the village, keeping the inhabitants drifting in their dreams, only this time turned by the scent towards new oneiric stories full of battles between pirate ships and the patrolling navy or smugglers setting their treasures ablaze before the customs men could bring their nightsticks and their transportation sentences down upon their heads. Somewhere within the pub as she reeled away, delighted with the efficiency of her work, there came the first movement that night to meet her own, as an alarm rang out and the landlord and his wife eventually made their way out onto the street. They were shadows on the horizon of Maria's sight when she looked back while leaving the village, stopping on her way only to also firebomb the small estate agent's office as a customary gesture. That office, the church, the cross, the pub, then the big house. The nexus would be gone soon. Old timber was burning swiftly behind her as she slipped back into the woods.

The work had been done by the time she met David on the outer reaches of the larger East village. Westbury House had been taken in much the same manner as the pub, except she had doubled up on bottles to take out both wings of the larger establishment. The House had gone up quickly too, the fire climbing the curtains and collapsing the upper floors, but there had been no-one inside to be awoken by the flames, no-one to gratefully leap on the phone to the insurance people. Westbury was a shell, inhabited only for a few weeks a year by some obscure magnate's son who turned up to holiday whenever he needed to lie low for a while, the glimpse offered of him upon arrival stomping from his car in his white jeans and extravagant trainers, adjusting his little half-moon sunglasses and puffing on his cigar, the only one that would be allowed to anyone other than the occasional building crew that turned up to do bits of work with the vague aim of turning the skeleton back into some rentable country retreat for a cabinet minister or large-scale healthcare investor. For a few years before, it had been a care home, but the standards had been discovered to be so low that immediate closure was recommended, and then enforced. For Maria, there was no guilt, no shame and none of the conscience-pricking that had occurred in the knave of the West village's church; she had watched from a distance as the building was driven out of existence by the flames with a sort of wonder. The earlier Manor on the site had similarly been felled by a fire; somewhere in the future, archaeologists would have a field day picking over the remains of two reasonably distinguished residences.

As the blaze spread, Maria felt as if everything she had ever known was now gone and already forgotten. It was the feeling she had come in search of. The village, all the villages, all they had stood for, all they were, all they had become, had been razed. The enclosers had lost the hearts and lungs of their power; their storehouses had been turned to common ruins on common land. The sensation remained as she ploughed through the woods towards her designated meeting point with David.

“I can’t believe you’ve done it”, he said, as he eventually emerged from the darkness. Somewhere behind him a fawn went scurrying away, cracking twigs underfoot, as it was spooked by the noise of his voice.

“I did it for you. For us.”

David embraced her. He told her the cottage behind the Cross, the cottage that bore its name, had gone too, and that the flames had only spread from there, jumping between the thatched roofs of this stretch of affluence like a joyful Devil leading a carnival and dragging reluctant minion sparks of destruction in his wake. Maria was pleased.

“I’ve set you free, lover boy,” she told him. “You and your family, going way back. Those buildings- before tears were wept for their burning tonight, they wept with blood. They had to go.”

She took David’s hand and pulled him deeper in the woods.

“Where angels no longer dared tread, now they do again. We are their shape, their form here. I’ve taken the flower of dismal love and planted the seeds of new promise. Come on.” They went further and further, in search of her tomb. She knew David didn’t follow her words, but it didn’t seem to matter. She had heard some of his pain, and heard about some of the pain of his forebears, and then read the rest in him, and in his family, and in the imprints of their footsteps buried under the new layers of tarmac on the roads and the dusty soil on the footpaths between the villages- from East to West and back again. The doing could be done without his full understanding, as long as it was done. When one can’t find their own way out of the labyrinth- can’t follow the passages of the turf maze to the central salvation- it’s only right to take a struggling hand and lead on between the tunnels or the hedgerows and the long grass.

“I suppose it’s not just Guy Burgess’s ashes that are blowing around the village now,” David said. It had been a long time since he had last spoken- for they had been in the woods for much more an extended period than seemed right considering their far from spectacular size- and he joked now to try and bring levity to their dark wanderings, as well as to assuage his own growing fears about the possibility of their discovery and capture. When he garnered no response from Maria, he tried again. “The remains of Britain’s traitor are mixing with those left behind by a village traitor.”

“I’m not a traitor. Neither was he, not really. Besides, it’s not my village. It never has been.”

“I thought-”

“You thought wrong.”

They finally entered upon the clearing with the ring of beeches.

“Did you really do it all for me?” he asked.

“Of course. Sit down.”

David did so after being led by Maria to the centre of the circle. She joined him on the moist, spongy ground. Everything smelt like Autumn. The wisps of smoke that billowed even here around the treetops were like those sent into the valley by the farmer’s bonfires on Guy Fawkes night, when another supposed traitor is resurrected as a kerosene-soaked dummy and placed atop a tower of wooden planks rescued from demolished sheds and branches sliced from birches. David’s surroundings were rendered almost homely by the scents.

“Look up at the sky.”

He looked up. Constellations could still be seen where the smoke wasn’t touching.

Maria pointed them out silently. “Can you name any?”

David thought for a second. “Only Orion. But if you jog my memory-”

Maria smiled. “Well, that one there is Jock O’Hazeldean. Do you know him?”

David shook his head.

“You’ve got a lot to learn, boy. The dashing lover, eloping with his new bride across the borders of a new, dangerous land. Sound familiar? Now- can you name any others?”

“I really can’t.”

“That’s OK. Don’t look so crestfallen,” she said, pointing out another grouping of stars. “Behold, the Bailiff’s Daughter of Islington. Now there was true love again requited in another act of elopement. Sometimes- usually- it’s the only way, to go on the run- the only way to find happiness. Destinies entwined, pushing towards hope and escape and doom. Look- there’s Lady Isabel and the Outlandish Knight. She’s honoured up there for putting a great murderer to his own sword, using only her wit and daring. And to the left there- no, up, up, there, that’s it- are the Two Sisters, the lesser holding the instrument of human hair and bone that sung truths from beyond the grave. Above them- Janet, the bride of Tam Lin, who held him tight through all the transformations of the Elvish curse until he was freed. All the way to the left, all the way over there- that’s Geordie on the gallows, his head in the noose for nicking one of the King’s deer to feed his pleading wife and children. A martyr remembered. I had a run in with that sort of thing myself tonight. Martyrdom. I’ll tell you about it later- I’m only starting to understand what I saw. No, don’t ask now. Look at that funny little pattern over there instead. That’s Thomas the Rhymer, the poet-prophet who couldn’t tell a lie, but was forced into slavery by a wicked Queen. You see beyond Robin Hood? Beyond Sweet Jenny of the Moor and her broken token, her let-down hopes? That’s Little Musgrave and Lady Bernard, united in the end and living on together forever in the night, far from the tower where her jealous husband ran them through; so far that it doesn’t even matter anymore, the moment of passing, their loss of that Kingdom.”

She lapsed into silence, simply tracing more shapes in the night sky with her wide eyes. David had listened to all her explanations with both wonder and doubt, knowing that Maria was wrong, that she was simply stealing formations that had already been given names and stories, but not able to contradict her with any facts or correct identifications, and wrapped up instead in the splendours of her imagination, her recall, her ability to reassess and reform and rebirth. Maria, eventually, turned to him and saw the lingering traces of disbelief in his look.

“Don’t worry about it, David. You can populate the sky for yourself, if you so desire. Just like you can lie hidden worlds, denied worlds, over this visible one, if you have a mind to it, if you can find the right places to pull the wretched one up and open passageways. That’s what I’m doing right now. Who says the sky always has to be Greek? I’m bringing something else in, grabbing hold of it at the corners and putting it flat over what we’ve been told is there. There’s more truth for us in Tam Lin and Jock O’Hazeldean than there is in the labours of Hercules and the infidelities of Zeus. Don’t let the Classics professors fool you.”

Maria had mostly lost him now, but it didn’t matter. For all her words were mysterious to him, he could also tell that had he had the knowing for them, then they would be shining plain and clear and true.

“Let’s go to the tomb.”

David was startled.

“The tomb?”

“I made us a tomb, to lie together in. Just like Little Musgrave and Lady Bernard. Just like Jock and his girl. Just like Tam Lin and Janet, eventually. Like all the martyrs, knowing without knowing. I suppose I understand that vision now, in full. It’s funny how you sometimes don’t understand something until the end. Just like with this tomb- I didn’t fully know until now. Certainly not when I first started making it. But you go on, building and building, doing what you must on the promises and the possibilities offered by the glimpses-by the moments where the light shines through.”

She took his hand and led him, his heart thumping and knowing that she had bewitched him, towards the mound.

“Buddleia. Our new national flower,” David joked again, trying to hide his nervousness and drag the conversation back to earth from whatever dimension it had taken up residence in. “They used to have a nightmare with this stuff at my Dad’s yard.”

Maria shushed him and hustled him inside the structure as she lifted one of its edges. Once inside, they laid together, holding hands, beneath the tapestry of branches and flowers. The stars could still be seen, just as they could be earlier when Maria had laid alone in the structure, twinkling wherever there was holes in the making.

“Maria-”

“My name isn’t Maria, not really. I had a different name- a few years ago now. Before it all. Before I was taken in.”

David didn’t think on this any longer; he just looked at the stars and luxuriated in what was left of the smell of the flower and the smoke. A great drowsiness filled him, lulled him away, devoured everything but the small dots of light he could half-see high above him.

“Here we go, lover boy,” Maria whispered, following his gaze. “That’s it. Project. Project. All the way up there. We’re going to join them. A rightful place.”

He was gone by the time the flashing beams of blue light struck through the walls of their tomb and illuminated their dormant, vacant bodies, while the sirens sounded in fierce bursts on the road. The cavalry had arrived too late. The nexus was gone.

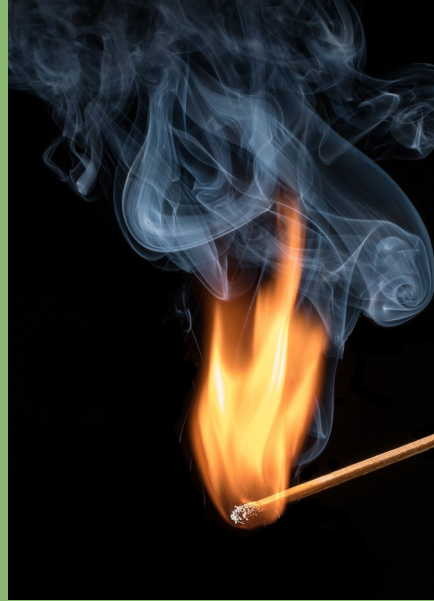
Ends



My Dream About Being A Tree

By Richard LeDue

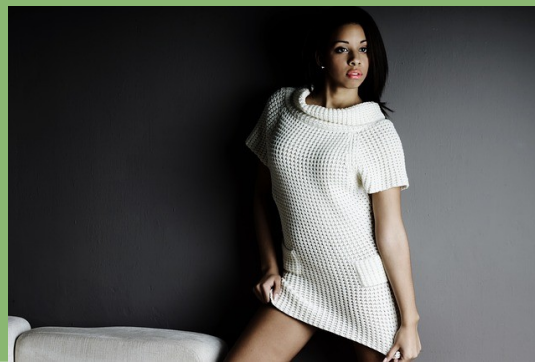
There were no cares
about rising oatmeal prices, the cost of beef,
carbon taxes, or conspiracy theories
injecting microchips into vaccines,
only nightmares about afterlives
spent as grocery lists
(always missing one item
remembered five minutes after arriving home),
and matchsticks' unending betrayal
as they dream of fire.



Some of the Things that Happen Around Us

By Holly Day

The violinist folds himself into his case, tucks his wings
in carefully, folds his arms across his chest, sleeps.
Beside his case is a smaller case, with a handle, and in it
his violin also rests, perhaps dreaming of new strings.
There is no need for furniture in this house. Everything sits or sleeps
in a case or a cage. The shelves are filled with kennels containing
sleeping cats and dogs, covered birdcages of canaries and finches
parrots who think they're in charge. Even the unnecessary couch is covered
encased in clear plastic, as if being preserved for freshness
as though some day, the violinist might have company
and they will want something brand new to sit on.



Demize

By Valkyrie Kerry and Brett Dyer

Vignette 1: Memorial

“Did you ever hear the story of the Banshee Doc?” Cailleach asks as she stretches across the surgery couch. Dr Gruama peers over his murky, wired spectacles as he fiddles with his scarlet tie. His frosty, sapphire eyes lock onto Cailleach’s slurry covered runners as they dig into the dowdy throw.

“Folks speak of it in Connemara,” he replies, “a myth to be told from the mountain stills to the cattle sheds.”

“Ye talk of her, but ye don’t know her!” Cailleach cries as she shifts upwards against the cushions. “It was told to me by my mammy back in the home house. We had no running water back then, had to make our way down to the lough before the morning sermon and school. Cold it was! The sort of cold that drills into your belly, and back then our bellies were often empty until sundown. Mammy used to tell of her to take my mind off the frost. She said that the banshee was born to a giant and a fae just after the glaciers melted, long ago. In those days the giants ruled Éireann, they were the architects of mountain, valley and forest. Banshee’s early years were carefree, even though she didn’t get the same affection as her brothers, but the fae told her that that was how life was.”

Dr Gruama scribbles some notes as Cailleach speaks, occasionally he glances her way, but mostly he listens. Cailleach’s voice breaks the rhythm of his pen and worn ticking clock.

“What changed for the Banshee?” the doctor asks curiously.

“How do you know something changed?”

“You referred to her early years as ‘carefree’ as if contrasting those years to her later life,” Gruama asserts whilst peering down his educated nose.

“Her youngest brother drank the juice of the toadstool,” his patient replies as her eyes fill with prickling tears. “His blood grew mushrooms, but no one could see them. Their sap churned inside and slowly he withered, even his hair tumbled from its garden, until one day he vanished. Turned into a stone so he did, and that stone stood by his favourite pine tree.”

Vignette 2: Wailing

Cailleach stands up and stretches, she trundles awkwardly to the sink quite uninvited and pours herself a glass of chalky water.

“That must have been very hard for the banshee,” Gruama observes, his throat cracking with the effort and his wizened body stiffening in the chair. Cailleach shrugs as she slumps back down onto the couch, wisps of auburn locks slip into her glass as she glugs at the fluid.

“Life is hard,” she mutters. “I guess everyone would have been sad, but the giant, he was angry. Maybe it was guilt because the giants were looked up to, but he could not solve the riddle of the toadstool. He would disappear into the mountains for days and nights at a time, when he returned to their thatched home his gait

would tread a winding path. The fae was sensitive to the airs, a new scent arose, one of fermented herbs and crop. That was when Banshee first heard the wailing.

It was not crying, not like you would expect from a bairn seeking his milk, no. This was a dreadful sound; fear, dread and sorrow, all rolled into one. Sometimes Banshee would hear the wee folk intruding, shattering glasses, breaking wood. Always when the fae would wail. Long, dark days so they were.”

“Indeed,” Gruama mutters. He flicks through a file brimming with notes, “during our introductory session you asserted that Banshee was a... ‘superhero,’ though it sounds to me like she is anything but.” Cailleach twiddles with her hair and sighs,

“Superheroes are made Doc, not born. Don’t you read the funny papers? Peter Parker was bitten by a spider. The venom caused him to change, very Kafka.”

Gruama raises an eyebrow and Cailleach splits her lips into a sly smile. “I like to read.”

Gruama’s eyes pierce Cailleach’s hazel pools, the clock ticks.

“Continue, please,” he coughs.

“The Banshee’s life changed. School slipped away, the sermons slipped away. The fae disappeared into the shelter of a morose melancholy. Banshee took on the role of mother for an entire winter. Finally, the fae rose from her slumber and the giant disappeared.”

“Was there a stone left where he had stood?” Gruama queries, a knowing eyebrow raising as he speaks.

“NO!” Cailleach barks, “but the old well by Lough Conn was covered and Banshee and her siblings were told never to venture down that particular path again.”

Vignette 3: Mourning

Cailleach leans down to her feet and unties her laces again before tying them into a tighter knot.

“Did the banshee start wailing after the giant vanished?”

“No, but she felt guilty I think.”

“Why?”

“She was relieved. There was a time of peace where she would tend the fields and milk the cattle. Even fell in love, she had reached that age I suppose. Blinded by the soft mountain dew and the false adoration in his eyes. He wore a mask; can you imagine Doc? A giant wearing a mask. But it was a subtle one mind. No one saw it, not even Banshee, not with those rose-tinted glasses of hers. He picked the mint leaves to mask the aroma of fermented spices and stayed away when the darkness came. It was a hot summer the year she married; the sun’s vicious glow sprayed the fields with a blood-red hue. Once the bells had rung and a new hearth was built did she change.”

Cailleach’s breathing deepens and she takes a moment to stabilise herself. “Her pretty frocks were discarded, and she adopted a sombre, ebony attire to match her eyes. Somethings even powder can’t cover. People didn’t speak of it, not back then. Not even now, I guess. The parishes were much like they are today; farms all spread

out, no one heard anything with the screeching winds that burst up from the ocean. No one saw anything as they chose not to and although everyone gossiped about the faes and the banshees no one ever mentioned the transgressions of the giants, after all they were revered as architects.”

“Did she love him?” Gruama asks, his curious eyes fixed on his patient.

“She thought she did at the time, young she was, but not foolish. He walked a crooked path like her father. The giants would meet at the stills, and their roars would be heard across the valleys. Banshee tried her best Doc, honest she did. She tried to be a humble wife, she tried to appease his every whim, but those whims became more aggressive, and other giants expected the same devout submission from her.”

Cailleach stands, her head slightly raised, and marches to Gruama’s desk lifting up a pencil. “That’s when it happened. Something snapped.” She breaks the implement in two and drops it. “Maybe it was wrath, maybe it was excruciating pain. Only Banshee knows how she felt that day if she can even remember. One thing is for sure, another giant was vanquished, and another well was covered. No one asked questions, it wasn’t unusual for giants to travel elsewhere in search of a fine frock. Banshee was already wearing black, and mourning suited her. That night she went to her brother’s stone by the home house and wailed for the first time.”

Vignette 4: Béar Neidí

“This could be what we call a ‘trigger’ Cailleach,” Gruama snorts, “the incident that causes a personality or character change.”

Cailleach looks up at him, her chin tilted and her lips momentarily pursed.

“I don’t know about that Doc, what I do know is Banshee ate from the wild vine and what left her brother’s stone that day was not the creature that came to wail. Under the sun’s disdain she took the blazing red flower and scorched the earth around her marital hearth. Though the black dissipated from her eyes, her costume was literally set in stone, a black cat suit. Her hair changed from red to black and it complimented her. Even her broomstick was black.”

Gruama chuckles under his breath,

“A few normal traumas and she evolves into a superhero? It all sounds a little far-fetched. This fantasy that you continue to embellish is just that Cailleach, a fantasy to suppress your own problems.”

“Doubt it!” The woman snipes.

“I shall prove it to you, most superheroes have a sidekick, don’t they? Batman and Robin, Hellboy and Abe, yet this banshee is all alone, and seemingly without purpose.”

“Doc, I’m no scholar but aren’t you supposed to listen? See if you’re putting words into my mouth aren’t you actively interfering with the narrative, and therefore my perception?” Gruama chokes on his port and brandy.

“I am merely trying to ground you Cailleach,” he huffs.

Chimes ring out as the hour passes.

“But you are absolutely correct. Banshee had a purpose, and her purpose led to her partner in obliterating crime. Her purpose was engraved on her very soul, save the meek. Protect the innocent. She travelled from parish to parish on her broomstick, they called her a ‘blow in’ or ‘drifter.’ She would stay just long enough to see the injustices, there were still giants to vanquish, and they took on many forms. In their wake came the leprechauns that took the bairns right from their cribs citing some abstract reason mostly blaming the faes who did not have a hearth in place. Banshee’s superpower was knowing and seeing. Hearing the cries of the wounded as they melded with the sea’s screams.

It was by the Blarney Stone that she met Béar Neidí, he was a drifter, but had drifted across tide. He did not differentiate between the parishioners who wore green hats and those wore white, nor did he tolerate the architects who created a feudal system between the two. First night became first light, for both of them. There they married, not by pompous ceremony but by the pressing of palm’s blood, and he took the broomstick’s helm.”

Vignette 5: Demize

“And what of the super villain?” Gruama asks as he puffs smog over his spectacles and wipes them with a used handkerchief, “where is their nemesis? Where is Bane or Scarecrow?” He slides the glasses back up his nose and squints, “surely all superheroes have an archenemy beyond the usual petty crime? Keeping Gotham safe is just a side-story, isn’t it? An undercurrent to the real battle?”

Cailleach grunts.

“Right again Doc, there is always a villain. Demize, that’s what Béar Neidí and Bansheebear called him. Superheroes yes, imaginative with names, not so much.

“Demize, an angel of death, or a demon. No one could say for sure, but his penchant for scarlet suggested the latter. A veritable grim reaper to say the least, no real motive for destroying the faes of the land, I think he just liked the power to watch the light fade from their eyes. Clever too, whatever the contrasts supervillains and superheroes complement each other in intelligence and resolve. Neither can be reasoned with or convinced to stray from their path, and when one is pitted against the other it is a matter of brains over brawn. Demize was perhaps one of the most formidable foes ever encountered in the depths of any page.”

The clock chokes out more arid ticks and Grauma lights his pipe. An air of smoke wisps into the streams of light that seep through the partially closed shutters.

“How did he destroy the faes?” He asks his client, slightly intrigued.

“That was a conundrum, a riddle entwined in an enigma. It was Béar Neidí who first suggested the use of a clever disguise to fool his victims, after all there were never any signs of a struggle, only the crimson hue of his presence and the deep empathy experienced by our intrepid superheroes, both blessed and cursed with the changing mood of sensing and living various states of emotion. Our two bears. I have a riddle for you Doc, you’re in a cabin, both windows face south and a bear walks by. What colour is the bear?”

“White,” the doctor chirps as if he has won the Nobel Prize. “It is a polar bear.”

“Correct,” Cailleach states, her head held high and her eyes glaring down her nose at him. “The two bears fuelled our heroes’ powers, gave them an edge. They could operate at all hours, alert and stealthy. Their ability to read others directing their conjoined gaze. The two were one, and the whole much greater than the sum of its parts.” The woman smirks, “And yet they still had to fight Demize, it is always written that way. The inevitable must come.”

“You seem to be uncomfortable Cailleach, you’re fidgeting.

“Yes, would you mind if I used the bathroom Doc. I have been sitting here for a good while.”

“Yes of course,” he flicks a finger towards the door, “just inside the entrance hall.”

“Thanks Doc, won’t be a minute.”

Vignette 6: Tackling the Bear

Gruama jumps as Cailleach returns throwing the door wide and hard so that it shudders against the wall.

“Do you want to know how Bansheebear and Demize’s first fight went down?”

“Go ahead,” Gruama growls.

“The scourging lash of decrepit wind alleviated little as a storm driven cry reverberated soaring to an ascending crescendo atop the summit of winter born mount Croagh Patrick,” Cailleach leaps to her feet and encircles the doctor as she spills her elaborate and excited rhetoric. “Sullen in regard, an uncaring witness to the onslaught of mortal trappings and combat’s strife. Motionless in time, yet ever evolving in an incessant dance of the landscape’s trudge. Winter and its bleak entourage adorned this never watchful audience of stone and bed of ancient woodland. Inaudible applause mocking both combatants. Devoid and unsympathetic to both potential victors, and prospects of the defeated.” She softens her voice into a cadence.

Gruama shifts uncomfortably as his client rounds on him again,

“Demize spared little and wasted less on the arbitral rhetoric so often employed by the forebears of his kind. Contented to meat out the brutality of his abhorrence against weeping flesh. Survival was not the hand envisaged this day.

His garments, held together by the crimson veil and signet of the undying Badb Brotherhood. A shrouded menace, garnished with the untethered remnants of feather and bone. Bansheebear’s own sanguineous offerings hidden in blackened leather about her being, standing as a scarlet enhancement to his own vastitudes.

Shunned. Ashamed in banishment; a member of downcast and bereft Brethren, dwindling in number, but never deadened in unsanctified and vengeful resolve. She would pay the price of her unholy birth. Her mere being an abomination to the unholy sect.

Taloned, unforgiving, and articulated, the weapons used to begin such dispensation; a verdict he deemed worthy. The suffering great. A sentence of attrition, as her body was torn, thrown, and beaten across the iced summit and unforgiving bark of the lowly woodlands. Savagery given license upon her skin. Slow. Deliberate. Meticulous in malice. Her strikes and parries easily predicted and countered. Yet, no plea for mercy ever given. Little consequence in the mind of Demize. His sermon of hatred for her kind continued. Limp in body...”

Cailleach pauses for effect, “not in will, she was alighted and pinned amongst the treetops. The final cadence in carnage to be dispensed. Her as yet, unrealised soul to be banished into the waiting arms of oblivion. Her becoming reduced to the realms of non-realisation.”

“Calm yourself Cailleach,” the doctor urges with a whisper, but she continues to strive forth,

“The implement untethered from his waste, raptor’s claws, had now served their slow purpose. Slithering about its own coils as the steel whip was readied to decapitate her. Ethereal and elemental, his entity pulsed with the vortices of forgotten and antediluvian magic. The strike would be swift,” her voice reaches a crescendo before softening, “the draw slow. But it never came! Anguish driven on the back of agony had served ill effect to his purpose. Serving only to unlock that which was to be destroyed.

Demize was thrown back in a torrent of reverberation and shearing power, dispersing the reddened cloak and maelstrom of forbidden sorcery that previously engulfed him. He regained his senses only to be met with the absence of her being. In her place, Bansheebear had left one resounding thought; Demize had failed in a mundane task, punishment from his order, swift. The fledgling Necromancer would suffer for the negligence and affront.”

Vignette 7: Dropping Nouns

Cailleach catches her breath and seats herself in the chair opposite Gruama, her hands folded in her lap, one leg crossed over the other.

“That is my first edition,” she quips, “of course it is not the last.”

“It is very... extravagant Cailleach,” Gruama states, mopping his brow with the over-used handkerchief. “Almost surreal, like you have rehearsed it.”

“Many times, Doc, many times. Usually whilst looking in the mirror of course, practising my expressions. By the way, most people call me ‘Cal.’”

“Yes, Cailleach is a most unusual name. I must look up its meaning sometime.” His eyes shift to the clock, “out of curiosity how do Bansheebear and Béar Neidí defeat their foe?”

Cailleach lets out a thoughtful hum.

“Problem is Doc I have two endings, all good narratives have two endings, then its down to the audience to decide what is real and what is not. Often the perceived chasm between reality and mythology is negligible. It is all about how the reader interprets the message, does he take things literally, or does he take things metaphorically. Truth be told it doesn’t matter either way as long as the underlying message is clear.”

“He?” Gruama echoes.

“He?”

“Yes, you said ‘he’; I wonder why you perceive the readership as masculine?”

“He, she, doesn’t really matter now does it?” Cailleach diverts. “What matters is the fight that followed the first...” The doctor emits an involuntary eyeroll but allows her to proceed.

“Peaceful day break touched the pearly grey of mysterious manmade objects, long-lost comrades. A stark contrast to the cloaked figures circling each other along the circumference of the ring. Eyes locked. Purpose set. A confrontation renewed as one advanced on the other. Furious in step and speed, they engaged. No sparing

thought to the significance of their battle ground. The only goal, destroy the other at any cost. The monolithic audience of Lough Gur stone observed, silently.” Cailleach scratches her hairline.

“Time and history were not diminished as the creature Bansheebear landed the first blow. Her fist, once naïve and untrained, honed to lethal precision and power. Demize, in his pride and vaulted stature, received the onslaught with incredulous revelation. The Abomination had gleaned much since their last encounter. Undying flesh became cast against unforgiving stone. The Necromancer could do little to dissolve the force and fury that she administered. Her advance continued as his own senses fought to regain footing.

Fleeing to regain composure, his spectral form shifted and vanished. Ultimately, it coalesced behind the observant monoliths of rock. Peering for sight of his unforgiving prey, met only by the advancing touch of midsummer’s rays within this druidic arena. She had vanished?! Cailleach creeps past the clunking clock.

“Stressful patience ensues at her notable absence. His anxiety soon rewarded! She appeared behind him. The attempt to take ethereal form only met with the resounding blast of her feral cry. Neolithic stone, once unbreakable; shook, cracked and yielded against the force of her ever rising crescendo. His body, the recipient of her vociferous melody, near broken. How sweet her song had become. How vile his arrogance had grown. Bansheebear’s wail, rivalled only by that of an ancient bear...”

Vignette 8: Anagnorisis

Gruama raises his hand,

“I have heard enough Cailleach. Let me tell you my interpretation of your story, if you don’t mind?”

“Go ahead Doc, I’m all ears,” his client laughs.

“The banshee is a symbol, a representation of yourself. Your mother was a fae, in your mind, gentle and sweet. Your father, and other men in your life, appeared to you as giants, strong, aggressive, and latterly drunk, except of course your brother who died of cancer. Stop me if I am wrong...”

“I’ll wait!”

“You suspect that your mother killed your abusive father, just as you killed your abusive husband and then fled. Since then, you and your vagrant boyfriend...”

“Husband!”

“Boyfriend!! Have travelled from town-to-town concocting elaborate stories for attention, and no doubt, money. You suspect that you both have some underlying condition and have come to me to get back on track. I presume you believe everything that passes between us is confidential?”

“There are many secrets between a doctor and his patient.”

Gruama fingers through an Irish dictionary,

“Not always Cal, if a life is in danger then the oath does not stand.”

“I never admitted anything Doc!”

“It was implied, and I must take that into consideration.” He stops on a particular page, “Cailleach, Irish for... ‘Witch.’ Just as I suspected, you see yourself as Bansheebear.” Cailleach remains unmoved, her steely eyes fixed on the doctor.

“Wow, you read all that into a story told to me by my mother. Guess she must have been psychic?”

“I very much doubt that Cal. I presume that’s a pseudonym, after all you can’t risk losing your anonymity, not with whatever your track record may be.”

“Mammy named me Cailleach, she told me never to go to the well because the banshee wailed from the forests on either side.”

Cailleach lights a cigarette and casually reclines in her chair,

“But tell me Doc, who is Demize?”

“You mean was?”

“I mean is. I never said Bansheebear defeated him. They fought across mount and monolith alike, but she never defeated him. Your kryptonite is that you do not listen. You hear but you simply do not listen. No empathy, just words for interpretation. The final battle is always one of wit and intellect, and I never told you how he destroyed the fae, the women he targeted.”

“Why do you say targeted if he has not been defeated?” Gruama asks as he fidgets awkwardly in his tightening chair.

“Why don’t you ask how he kills his victims?”

“How?” Gruama asks, his hand slightly trembling as he relights his pipe.

“He targets special cases, widows, spinsters, hermits, women who live in isolation, for they shall not be missed. He attends to them in disguise, a kind, caring visitor...”

“No one suspects him,” Béar Neidí adds as he opens and steps through the doorway. “No one ever suspects Demize. You mentioned Bane, but I’m thinking Doctor Octopus,” he scratches at the ginger flecks in his black beard. “Dr Demize, I like it Bansheebear. No one notices the kindly doctor as he weedles his way in, no one questions the absence of a shadow, and no one notices the fae’s absence for a good while. By that time the Morpheus essence has abandoned her system. Heart failure, or some such poorly examined excuse. No one questions an upstanding giant, an architect of the valley. Gruama, Irish for grim as in the reaper. No one inhibits a doctor in his duties.”

“And,” Bansheebear interjects, “when the still gets a little hot you simply relocate under another guise.”

Demize lurches towards his medical bag but the younger and stealthier Béar Neidí kicks the weapon from his grasp. Bansheebear stops the ricocheting bag with her foot and throws open the lid, therein lies the Morpheus syringes. She wrenches one from its holding. Béar Neidí grasps Demize in a headlock and Bansheebear injects the Morpheus serum.

Demize awakens. His lower half numb with the frosty kiss of deep waters. He looks up at the encircling brick work. An eclipse steadily morphs into being above,

“I was wrong about one thing,” Bansheebear yells down to him, her voice echoing from the deep, inhospitable walls, “Bansheebear returned home once more.” As the lid is heaved across the truth dawns on Demize, he reaches down into the grim waters and wrenches up the cold, piercing stare of a giant. Clutching the skull in his hands he cries,

“You have not seen the last of me, YOU HAVE NOT SEEN THE LAST OF ME! I shall return.” His voice drops to a whisper as the darkness enshrouds him, “I shall return.”

Two beings cloaked in black climb onto a shining ebony Kawasaki. The starter is kicked and the engine hums. Bansheebear places a pair of wired spectacles into the container to her rear. There it sits amongst a collection of items; a monocle, two pipes, a signet ring, a man's wedding ring, two caps, and her father's decanter. She slams the lid shut, winds her arms around Béar Neidí and slides her leg over the engraved model name, 'Broomstick.' Her hand grips at her hairline and she flicks off the auburn wig revealing a cascade of ebony locks. Béar Neidí looks down at her leg,

"Broomstick or boomstick baby?" He quips. The bike lurches forward, the front wheel raises slightly, and as the dusk pulsates with a blood-red hue they vanish into the night.

Ends



In Passing

By Holly Day

If I could just make myself believe
that all of the ants swarming on the sidewalk
contained the souls of all of the people I've lost
I would be happy to lie down right here
and let them crawl all over me, whisper shared memories in my ear
tell me they're still with me. If I could have some assurance
that this was so, I would lie down right now.
And if I stayed still long enough, I imagine
they would find some way to end my time here as well
remove the bits of offending flesh one tiny piece at a time
until I, too, am only a tiny insect scurrying
out of my desiccated corpse, free to be with my friends, my family
once again. I would be happy to let them take me
completely apart, knowing that this was the only way
I could be with them once again, but I would need
some sort of proof first, some guarantee
I wouldn't emerge a frog or a spider, a great, furry anteater
bent on destroying all of these people I loved
all over again.

tree throws shade all day –
West, then North, then East – sunshine
doing all the work

By David Edwards

BEES OUT OF BONNETS

A Busy Business

By Neil K. Henderson

Sporry Snezzlehurst didn't normally receive a lot of mail – certainly not of this bulk – so the parcel came as something of a surprise, the more as there was no sender's address. But there was no denying that it brightened up an otherwise humdrum summer day, overcast and pregnant with the promise of drenchings. This was – not an *excuse*, it was altogether too substantial for that – a definite *reason* for staying indoors. And the contents beneath the wrapping were curious indeed: a glass case like they had in Victorian times for holding a barometer. Only this one was square, like the beehive in the natural history museum, where you could see the honeycomb in progress through the sides. There was a little aperture in one corner which would be where the bees got in. Sporry had a moment of panic. If this was really a beehive, he was going to have to get a hole cut in the window for access. How much was that going to cost him? And what if the Council objected? He was about to disappoint his unknown benefactor by ignoring the object's proper function and abandoning it to the mantelpiece, when he finally looked at what was inside. It wasn't so much a honeycomb in the frame as a large swirling, organic-looking entity. *Earlike*, that's what it was.

Sporry let his mind roam through the dusty corridors of half-forgotten education. Ears were sworly for a reason. They were designed to funnel sound-waves in towards the aural cavity. Sound-waves passed through the air, of course, and it was the waveform pressure of air on the eardrum which the brain then interpreted as sound. That's why a tree falling in the forest with no-one to hear it couldn't make a noise. Noise needs an ear to realise it. But what did this have to do with Victorian barometer cases? Well, barometers measure air pressure, and... That was it! This artefact wasn't a beehive at all. It actually was some kind of barometer, based on the workings of the human ear. A new organic, environmentally friendly barometer. After all, mercury is *extremely* dangerous to the ecosystem.

Sporry couldn't wait to tell his friends. It had been so long since he'd seen them, he hoped they still remembered him. He decided to brush up on his interpersonal telecommunication skills by phoning the Council first to enquire about a barometric window hole. They could hardly object to it now, since it was so good for the environment – and didn't involve pets.

It had taken Sporry the best part of a fortnight to persuade his friends that they really did know him, but at last they'd given him the benefit of the doubt and agreed to come round and look at his contrivance. The Council had refused permission to put a hole through any of his windows, since that would entirely defeat the purpose of the double glazing they'd installed at some cost. However, they had grudgingly allowed him to attach his barometer to the letterbox. This was a do-it-yourself job which he was hoping one of his friends would do for him, since he was too intellectually rarefied to cope with woodwork in any shape or form. Meantime, they could hold the barometer and examine it from all angles before it went into position.

The Bints – Celia and Sacheverell – chose a beautiful sunny afternoon to visit, which turned out to be just as well. They sat side by side on the sofa, turning the glass case this way and that, trying to avoid using Sporry's name, which they'd forgotten. Goodness knows what they'd had for lunch (they weren't particularly intimate

friends) but one of them (at least) let off a deadly smell which drifted stealthily through Sporry's stuffy lounge and made him pale and sweaty. It was the perfect moment to show them the garden.

They took the barometer with them, and Sacheverell looked around enthusiastically for somewhere to attach the case without his having to broach the letterbox (he'd so far remained non-committal to Sporry's suggestion). That was when they saw the creature. It was hovering at an upper branch of the Cornish Mango, and seemed at first like a very large, plain brown bee. But as it approached them – zig-zagging across the tiny rectangle of lawn in an aerodynamically unsound manner, getting Celia all a-fluster and waving her arms about – it was seen to be some sort of mammal about the size of a rat, but rounder, as if blown up with air. It buzzed around like a bee, at any rate, on wings which moved too fast to be seen.

Then it did what everyone was too polite to notice. It farted loudly in the vicinity of the barometer. Tiny particles of polleny dust wafted through the air – a visual reminder of the smell that had sent them all outside. This dust then disappeared into the aperture on the case which Sacheverell was still holding, as if sucked in by a vacuum cleaner.

"How absolutely *ingenious!*" exclaimed Celia. "Not just a barometer, but a fresh air decontaminator into the bargain."

Sacheverell peered into the barometer's aperture with a slightly cross expression. He found the whole thing mildly distasteful, but nevertheless had to admit he was intrigued. "This 'ear' arrangement seems to be throbbing or something."

"Oh, don't be silly!" shrieked his better half, snatching the contraption from him. "It isn't *alive!*" She imitated her spouse's peevish peering, desperate to make him look stupid in front of the other chap. There was a slight pause, then – "Ohhh, I do believe it *is!*" She dropped the barometer with a cross between a high-pitched yodel and the noise a puppy makes when you run it through a mangle. Her howl almost drowned the noise of tinkling glass as Sporry's prize possession hit the flagstones. His frantic glass-scooping actions were arrested, however, at the sight of the organic ear structure pulsing in and out with increasing vigour.

"My God," opined Sacheverell interestedly. "I think it's... *growing.*"

"Don't just stand there gawping, you ninny!" screamed Celia. "Run for it!" and she locked herself in the family car before he could reply. Alas for Sacheverell, she must have deemed his gangling strides to Sporry's gate too life-threateningly slow, and took off without him. Sporry reckoned this must be fairly common conduct for the Bint clan, since Sacheverell didn't seem terribly perturbed. Mind you, he stopped being perturbed altogether when he turned into a tree.

'Tree' was the nearest word Sporry could come up with to represent the vaguely humanoid hatstand now well-rooted in his lawn. And if it hadn't been for the striped trousers, he never would have recognised it as Sacheverell. That giant ear in the place of foliage could have belonged to anyone. But this was where the true meaning of friendship was to make itself felt in Sporry's life. Celia Bint had dropped his brand new barometer and broken it, yet she had unselfishly left her husband behind to replace it. And Sacheverell needn't bother fitting himself to the letterbox like the last one. This barometer would work even better in the garden.

At which thought, Sporry turned to look at the fragments of his erstwhile mystery gift. Only wood and broken glass remained, the ear within having disintegrated shortly after Celia's noisy flight. Even as he watched, the final powdery specks were blown away in the breeze.

"Looks like it's all down to you, Sacheverell," he said into his friend's receptacle. "Don't worry. I have perfect faith in your sensitivity."

Things went quietly enough, with Sporry going out every now and then to chat to Sacheverell or confide some problem to him as the mood took him. His long-stay guest was turning out to be the perfect agony uncle. Quite a Listening Ear, in fact, for one so tall. But a few days later Sporry was awoken in the night by the blaring noise of the *1812 Overture* with full orchestra and extra-loud cannons. This was the hedge alarm he'd bought from one of those home and garden catalogues – designed to warn the conscientious householder of anyone taking a leak in the greenery. The way it was going off, there must be a coachload of midnight revellers taken short at once. What would poor Sacheverell make of it all? Sporry was out there in his pyjamas with his peashooter at the ready before you could say "Piss off!"

The super-vigilant householder loaded up and scouted round the front gate, bending to avoid being seen before he could get in range. All was silent now, Tchaikovsky no longer roused to comment. Maybe the coachload had finished, but even so, the drip of the odd shaken droplet would surely still be on the air. Yet there was nothing. Lowering his weapon and shining his torch, Sporry found no traces of hedge violators anywhere, nor tyre-marks of coaches or even mopeds. He shrugged apologetically in the vicinity of Sacheverell's ear and took himself back to bed.

He was well asleep when the creatures flew in through the open window, each like an impish, mischievous kitten but for the rapier-style bee sting instead of a tail (and, of course, the wings). They clung to their 'host' with friendly little kitten-like claws – but each grinned a mischievous grin as it slipped in the sting and sucked out his dreams. Come the morning, the cats had disappeared, but Sporry felt completely *drained*. He couldn't quite explain it, for he'd never thought of ears – or trees or hatstands, for that matter – as being *expressive*, but there was something altogether disapproving in Sacheverell's stance when he went out to consult him.

A branchlike appendage wafted towards the hedge, and the reason became apparent. During the night, it had blossomed into thousands of little likenesses of Celia Bint in the nude. Sporry felt slightly guilty. His slumbers of the night before had been deep to the point of oblivion, but if he was honest, he had spent many a bedtime past in contemplation of his friend's wife's finer points (which he'd mainly had to invent). How these private inspirations had managed to transfer themselves to his hedge was beyond him, but his *1812* hedge alarm had clearly failed in its duty. He had often heard the song *It's Raining Men* on the garden centre PA, but it looked more like it had been pissing women here. He swatted idly at a furry rat-bee and headed indoors, irked all the more to see his next-door neighbours had copied his organic barometer.

Within a fortnight the entire neighbourhood was a forest of ear-trees, the hedgerows a glut of naked women, dashing princes, pink blancmanges, four-poster toilets, giant dildos, purple orifices, grunting faces, mounting stallions, distressed sheep and suchlike stuff as dreams are made of. The local inhabitants mooned about listlessly, greeting each other with hangdog grins as they headed for the shops. Had any of them any energy to spare, they could have passed an entertaining day reading the scandals in the shrubbery. But no-one even glanced to either side. Only the giant ears protruding from trunks clad in vaguely recognisable trouser remnants

or floral patterned bark seemed to glow with health. Furry bees kept up a constant droning commerce between the blooming sworls and the hedgerow inhabitants. Some cross-pollination seemed to be occurring as both hedges and ear-trees spread and flourished at an alarming rate. Pieces of stolen night-thought sprouted everywhere without let or qualm. Nobody knew where to look any more. Tunnel-vision was becoming endemic.

It was less than a month later when Sporry received another parcel. He opened it with a lot less enthusiasm than the barometer. It was some sort of brush. Great, he thought. He could use it to brush up the debris of his dream-infested world. But the brush seemed to have ideas of its own. Unencumbered as it was by any outer casing, it sprang off the dining-room table like a large spidery creature of the harvestman variety, its wooden body fat like an enlarged bradawl handle, and its many filament-like legs made of some transparent substance like glass fibre. (Sporry tried to count them, but gave up after ten. There were too many to see, never mind count.)

The glass spider stalked into the garden, made straight for the hedge and emerged soon after with a wriggling succubus of the kitten sort in its jaws. Sporry couldn't bear to look, and went indoors to lie down. His sleep was strangely refreshing for the first time in ages. He dreamt of Celia and Sacheverell Bint, but this time they had their clothes on and he was beleaguering them with a cucumber.

The webs changed everything almost overnight. Where had been thickets crammed to brimming with clandestine thought manifestations, the hedgerows returned to something approaching their former state, albeit patrolled by glass spiders. With their rigid bodies always alert, they were quick to pounce on their less inflexible prey which they seized and took back to their zoologically inappropriate webs. The glass harvestmen reproduced with a brisk hermaphrodite efficiency, and as their numbers increased, so did the vital images in the hedges diminish. It was no more than a day or two before even the rampant ear-tree hatstand folk began to look more like their old selves again.

Sporry had to do some quick thinking. Once Sacheverell was back in communication, so to speak, he was going to be more than curious about those naked portrayals of his wife in the privet. As the hedges cleared, Snezzlehurst became aware of a new phenomenon of speedy land crabs scuttling about unbidden across his and his neighbours' lawns. Perhaps they were the glass spiders' offspring (having something transparent about their over-many legs), or were former dream captives of the kittens, put to flight in the general melee. Whatever they were, they gave Sporry an idea. He checked the sky. There was still plenty of late summer sun, and the day looked likely to be warm. He nipped indoors to check the fridge.

As predicted, Sacheverell returned to normal shortly after lunch, and was quick to demand that Sporry phone his good lady.

"I hope you can both join me for a picnic when she gets here," said the host. "It's the least I can do to thank you for your help with the barometer." Sacheverell gave him a quizzical look, but Sporry pressed his advantage. "And you certainly managed to keep the weather fine while you were at it!"

Sacheverell was not the type to resist praise. He beamed slightly, pulling at his moustache-ends with modest pride. "Well, I'm glad to have been of some service." (Got him, thought Sporry. He was a wizard at psychology when it suited him.) "I'm sure Celia will be delighted to join us for a picnic. It's very thoughtful of you, er..."

"Not at all! Not at all!" And when Mrs. Bint arrived, they disposed themselves upon the tiny lawn with a big bucket of ice, while Sporry captured land crabs in the rainbowed shade of the outlying webs, deftly ripping open their carapaces and stuffing ice-cubes into the mass of flesh.

"These crabs are delightful!" said Sacheverell, now completely restored to his old good humour and forgetting what he'd seen in Sporry's hedgerow.

"They do make a dreadful racket with all that screaming, though," said Celia, ever the squeamish visitor. She put a hand to her blonde coiffure. "One would think they were... alert."

"Just whack them with one of these toffee hammers, if it bothers you," said Sporry, getting up to make the tea. He had these new tea-bags with the freeze-dried shit in. All you needed was a kettle, and your guests could get a cup of hot shit in water just like the real thing. He had it ready in no time.

Sacheverell said it was the best shit-in-a-cup he'd ever tasted, but Celia just made polite noises. Eventually, after a particularly lengthy silence, she put down her saucer. "Be honest, Mister... er... This quaint organic barometer business is all very well, but you've never really liked us, have you?"

Sporry said nothing, his mouth chewing on a piece of crab while he thoughtfully undressed her with his eyes.

Ends



A New Monarch – King Charles III

By Celine Rose Mariotti

He is the King now,
To him the subjects will bow,
A new reign, a new King,
He will wear the ring,
He, King Charles III,
He is Head of State,
He is in charge of the British Commonwealth's
Fate,
He will lead them to new paths,
For some fortuitous matters
He will do the math,
King Charles III
Has been in training to be King
All of his life,
Camilla, the Queen Consort,
Is his loyal, loving wife,
King Charles III will now mourn
His mother, the Queen,
He will now be the one
Held in great esteem.



The Corgi

By Rob Ottesen

There's nothing more annoying than the notion of someone trying to purchase a title to become a lord. What a ridiculous idea. Titles cannot be bought—not real ones, anyway. Pedigree is something you carry with you wherever you go, and you're either born with it or you aren't, and that's just the way it is. My cousins are members of the aristocracy of Britain. Some of them reside in Buckingham Palace, and they are there because they deserve to be there. Because they were born aristocratic and therefore are aristocratic.

Some might call me arrogant. Well, perhaps I am. I was born to my station, after all. Does someone clean my house for me? Of course. My home is kept spotless, and I never have to lift a finger. Do I have a driver? Absolutely. I am driven hither and thither and don't even need a license. Do I have a professional stylist? Yes, yes, and a cook, and even someone who follows me as I stroll through the neighborhood. For security reasons, of course. So you see, I am truly a member of the privileged class.

I should also mention that I am a Pembroke Welsh corgi, and my companion is an equally well-bred lady named Ollie. Who happens to be human.

Ollie is wonderful company, when she's around. Because she wasn't born to the leisure class, she has to work. But she's great fun and is very obedient. When I tell her to wake up, she rises from bed and joins me for a walk around the block. When I wish to be served a meal, she's happy to cater to my particular needs and tastes. When I desire exercise, she finds a tennis ball and we toss it back and forth. I even share my bedroom with her. And, perhaps because I'm a royal, she even pays the rent for our lovely apartment.

I have a good life. I wouldn't trade it for anything. Even the hours I spend alone prove useful, so I'm seldom lonely or bored. To the contrary, I spend a lot of time thinking about who might be a good match for Ollie. I'm a good catch myself, of course, but I believe it would be more appropriate for her to find someone of her own species. The key is to find a man who sees her as more than just another pretty face. I want her to find someone who appreciates who she is as a person, someone who will embrace her dreams and support and respect her. And that's a tall order.

Many men have a terrible habit of letting their ego ruin relationships. I think the trouble begins with a simple pronoun: "I". I want to do this, I want to do that, I want this bauble, I want that trinket. I, I, I. If I could get rid of anything, it would be that damned pronoun. I tell you, it's a pronoun of evil, and we all can fall under its spell—even me. But in my case, there's so much to talk about, and I have so many valuable opinions, I can't help but share them in an effort to do the world a little good.

Ollie is dating a number of men, and none of them knows their relationship with her is not exclusive. This is a bold tactic, to be sure. By playing more numbers in this horse race, she's shifting the odds to her favour — and my money is on the doctor. It's Friday night and, if memory serves, it's his turn to pay her a visit.

He knows how to get me on his side, I'll say that for him. His car has a convertible top, and when he takes Ollie and me for a drive by the ocean, I get to enjoy the wind in my face and a potpourri of scents that excite me and make me feel alive. Sometimes he drives at a rather high rate of speed, and Ollie shrieks and laughs and we all have a wonderful time. Then there are the walks down the beach, during which he and Ollie have long conversations about all sorts of things while I chase sandpipers.

When the doctor is here, I think we are living our best life. I've never seen Ollie happier than when she's with him. She smiles and they hold hands and are a joy to behold. Goodness, I wish he'd just get up the courage to ask her, already.

I hear Ollie's keys jingle at the front door and I rush to greet her. I'm always so happy when she comes home. Sometimes I think I could jump out of my skin when I see her; she's so kind, so attentive, so perfect. I've seen the companions other corgis have, and I have to tell you, Ollie is more fun than any of them.

“Hey, hey, hey,” she says as she walks in, scratching me behind my ears. She leans down and puts her arms around me and my world is now complete. Sometimes, when she's running late, I'm beside myself with worry. What if something happened to her, I wonder. What if she never comes back. What if, what if, what if. But today she's fine, she's here, and she's already walking to the kitchen. Ollie is the best cook ever; I've been looking forward to my dinner all day.

Tonight she's making me a fine meal of cucumber, carrot, and fresh-cut chicken. I eat better than most humans, I'm happy to say. And when she puts my plate in front of me, I can barely restrain myself. Before I know it, I've finished my meal and I'm completely satisfied.

She takes my plate and I rest and watch as she starts cooking a meal for herself. I'm surprised that she's not just microwaving something from the freezer. No, she's heating up pasta sauce on the stove and putting noodles on to boil. It looks like she's got something special planned for tonight. The apartment fills with a delicious aroma as she walks into her bedroom. I follow her and observe as she changes into her “little black dress”. It's an elegant, form-fitting dress, and she accessorizes with a pearl necklace she inherited from her grandmother. Then she walks back into the kitchen and fills serving dishes with spaghetti and her secret tomato sauce.

She places wine glasses on the table and that's when we hear a knock at the door. I raise the alarm, letting her know someone's there even though it's clear she already knows this, and when she opens the door, the doctor greets her with a smile. He's a nice-looking gentleman, with jet-black hair kept in place by a copious amount of gel, and brilliant white teeth that are too bright to be natural.

Ollie kisses him long and soft on the mouth for what seems like forever and he reciprocates, and I look away as they kiss and kiss and my goodness enough already but they kiss some more and he thanks her for the invitation to dinner and tells her how much he's been looking forward to it. She smiles and takes his hand and leads him to the dining room table and pours him a glass of wine.

“How was your afternoon?” she asks.

“Fine, but I was thinking about you all day,” he says.

“Did you have any interesting cases? Any strange diseases or unusual maladies?”

He shakes his head. “No – nothing too interesting, I'm afraid. I had a lady who came in with anaphylaxis today. I think she fell asleep at the park under some oak trees, and it's peak season for pollen. So she had a reaction. When she came in, she could barely breathe.”

“Were you able to help her?”

“Yes. She was in bad shape, so I shot her up with epinephrine, and then I gave her some diphenhydramine. I told her she needs to see an allergist if she wants to sleep near those trees. She's clearly allergic to them.”

“So, a boring shift, then.”

He nods and takes a sip of the wine. “Yes. A boring shift. But this wine...what is this? This wine is amazing.”

“It's a ninety-five Latour. You like?”

“Oh, yes,” he says, taking another sip. “I like very much.” He nods toward his plate. “Please, don't make me wait; let's dive into your famous spaghetti. Are you ever going to tell me how you make the sauce?”

She shakes her head as she serves him. “Nope. I'm taking that secret to my grave. It was my grandmother who shared it with me, and she made me promise not to divulge it to anyone. Except maybe the dog.”

He gives me a knowing look as she walks to the kitchen to grab the salt, and I walk over to him. I'm surprised when he pulls a little box out of his pocket and slides it under my collar, and I give him a wink as I walk back to Ollie's side. Classy move, mate. I knew I liked you for a reason.

She sits across from him and they gossip and talk some more about his work, and when she finishes her plate she leans over to pet me. And that's when she sees the little box that's tucked under my collar. She looks up at him. Her mouth is wide open, and her eyes are as wide as saucers.

“No... no, this can't be happening...”

He laughs and looks down at me. “Thank you, George.”

“Oh, I don't think George bought me this,” she says. She takes the box from me and looks up at him. “I'm scared to open it.”

“Scared? Why?”

“Because it's like a dream,” she says, “and I don't want to wake up. I want this moment to last forever. Because I love you, darling.”

He smiles at her. I think he's getting emotional. “Open it,” he says, and she does, and she smiles when she sees the ring and it's beautiful and perfect and she starts to cry. He walks over and looks into her eyes as he kneels, my God, how he loves her, and he asks if she will marry him and make him the happiest man in the world, and she nods through the tears.

“Yes,” she says, over and over. “Yes, my love, I will marry you. Till death do us part, yes, yes, yes!”

I bark, and he looks down at me and smiles. “Don't worry, George. You'll always be the master of this house,” he says, and in that moment I know that this is a marriage that was made in heaven.

For all of us.

Ends



The Green Man Sleeps

By Aeronwy Dafies

When the chill wind blows from the north
And a blanket of snow covers the land
The Green Man retreats from view
Awaiting the return of the glorious sun
To warm and waken the land
And remake the world brand new
Out of sight the Green Man sleeps
And rebirth in his sacred heart keeps
Until the appointed hour

Originally published in Awen

Forgotten

By K. A. Williams

The poor houseplant wilts
Forgotten on windowsill
As it rains outside



Cracked

By DJ Tyrer

Pavement cracked
With spiderwebbing fracture lines
Green shoots thrust forth
In defiance of the grey
A challenge to conformity
Each blade a single finger
Saluting authority
Even trampled, slain
Never quite destroyed
Reborn, restored, revived
Slipping through the cracks

