“Jameson Currier’s debut novel, Where the Rainbow Ends, moved me to tears more than once and, simply put, is one of the best pieces of gay literature I have ever read. Rather than focusing on and wallowing in the heavy melodrama that the AIDS epidemic seems to produce in most writers, Currier shows both the highs and lows. The lives of these incredibly well-drawn, three-dimensional people encompass all of the emotion that is found in gay/lesbian life. The book is about creating a sense of family, and most of all, it is about hope. In Robbie, Currier has created a gay Everyman we can all identify with, love, and root for. This is one novel that I was sorry to see end. With this work, Currier has established himself as one of the preeminent gay novelists, not just of the 1990s, but of all time. This book should be required reading for every gay man, period.”
—Greg Herren, Impact
October 2014

Chelsea Station
Edited by Jameson Currier

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“A brilliant debut novel by Canadian writer Jeffrey Luscombe that explores the inner and outer life of a ‘latent homosexual,’ Joshua Moore. Luscombe revitalizes the over-romanticized ‘coming out’ novel by subjecting it to a cold shower of literary realism.”
—Dick Smart, Lambda Literary

“Shirts and Skins is a novel that will speak to anyone who has ever felt the inextricable bonds of the past, or felt the long shadow of family and home places as they strive towards the light of wholeness of identity and self-ownership. A first novel deeply felt and skillfully told, by a writer with insight, compassion, and talent to burn.”
—Michael Rowe, author of Enter, Night and Other Men’s Sons

“Shirts and Skins is authentic in its pathos, eloquent in its delivery, and well worth the read.”
—Kyle Thomas Smith, Edge

“Each story brilliantly captures a mood and paints a vivid picture... I’m not a huge fan of coming out stories, but this one I can highly recommend, because I feel it is more about overcoming a lifetime of bad choices to finally savor that sweet wine of triumph. It is about battling one’s culture and past, to find one’s identity. Shirts and Skins is a story that, I feel, everyone can relate to.”
—Alan Chin, Examiner.com

“An intriguing, at times disturbing, peek into the mind of a character who is only half aware of his own feelings. Luscombe is clearly after something different in this book: it is less about coming out than it is about going in. Josh’s repression is far more interesting than his liberation, which is a much more familiar story. In his adherence to the closet, as in his father’s depression-fueled withdrawal from the world, we see the tragedy of self-denial. Unlike his father, though, Josh eventually finds the strength to pull himself out of denial and embrace his truth. It’s a journey that still resonates for us all.”
—Lewis DeSimone, Lambda Literary

“In the depths of despair, standing outside looking in, Josh touches the hearts of those who have lost their way to their dreams and aspirations. His inability to find himself finally leads to an epiphany of his hidden, yet acknowledged, desires.”
—American Library Association GLBTRT Newsletter
“William Sterling Walker is a wonderful writer, fluent, warm, intelligent, and real. His stories about gay life in New Orleans are firmly rooted in place, and all his characters, gay and straight, are observed with a wise heart and a deep soul.”
—Christopher Bram, author of Gods and Monsters and Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America

“Desire is a sensuous, nostalgic, and evocative collection of stories set in sultry New Orleans before that dreamy dream got washed away.”
—Valerie Martin, winner of the Orange Prize for Property

“These are stories that ask to be lived in—gorgeous, moody, sophisticated—not unlike the vividly conjured New Orleans that William Sterling Walker’s haunted characters inhabit, flee from, inevitably return to. Walker is a brilliant guide through the labyrinth of this city and these seething lives, fluent in the mutually reinforcing tropes of desire and regret.”
—Paul Russell, author of The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov

“This beautiful collection is not so much a set of stories as an intricate song cycle, one that arranges and rearranges recurrent fragments of memory and sensation—light, fragrance, and music—like the tesserae of a mosaic, the shifting patterns converging into a haunting panorama of the life of our ecstatic, fated generation of gay men.”
—Mark Merlis, author of American Studies and An Arrow’s Flight

“Desire is dreamy and affecting, stories of a New Orleans that was gone before Katrina ever got there. It’s been a while since I’ve read a collection so well written, so intricately composed, with such beautiful and evocative descriptions of a time and a place.”
—Caroline Fraser, author of God’s Perfect Child and Rewilding the World: Dispatches from the Conservation Revolution

“William Sterling Walker’s Desire feels to me like a welcome heir to Ethan Mordden’s classic Buddies—picking up perhaps where he left off and setting us down amid the lives, loves, and sexual adventures of a community of gay men in New Orleans. These linked stories are alternately poignant and seductive, and the structure is elegant and deceptively casual—they build in force until you feel like they belong to you, or you to them.”
—Alexander Chee, author of Edinburgh

“This compilation of short stories stands to prove that gay men are not always the exuberant, funloving queens portrayed on TV. Each story looks at how New Orleans has played into the characters’ identities, how it has sucked them in.”
—Katie Abate, Edge

“Desire is a guilty pleasure of a read, conversational and conspiratorial. It’s almost as if these people are welcoming you into their private chats, dishing out the latest neighborhood gossip about who picked up whom, whose ex is now someone else’s current.”
—Sandy Leonard, Lambda Literary

“Equal doses of wit, longing, poignancy, hope, seduction and loss, all woven together by this talented author. I give it a full five stars out of five.”
—Bob Lind, Echo Magazine

Desire: Tales of New Orleans
by William Sterling Walker
978-1-937627-02-7
$18
Also available in digital editions
Aaron DeLee graduated from Loyola University Chicago with a BA in Creative Writing English in 2005; and recently graduated from Northwestern University with an MFA in Creative Writing: Poetry in 2013. Previous work of his has appeared in Court Green, Assaracus, Bloom, and various other publications. He is a poetry editor at TriQuarterly Online.
Selfie: Mr. Invisible

Little more than light, I’m virtually invisible. Naked, in the morning my husband stares through me, stepping into the shower. I am not a figure but a figment. The dog cannot look me in the eye as I feed him. His watch fixed on a silvered vessel of meat.

Some days it’s so difficult buttoning my shirt, tying a knot around my throat and opening the front door, illusory fingers fumbling over one another. A bus leaves without me.


Picture this: vacuousness; wanting to touch someone, but slipping through his shoulder, right past his heart and being left empty as a conversation where nothing’s said. A hologram, I am bumped into without thought, without feeling. Bodies pass through me—even I cannot see where I’m going.

—Aaron DeLee
Beginning with the Mirror
by Peter Dubé
Lethe
978-1-59021-027-7
160 pp., paperback; $15

Review by Keith Glaeske

Peter Dubé’s latest collection from Lethe Press, Beginning with the Mirror, contains ten stories exploring the intersections of the supernatural with the non-supernatural. His collection includes seven reprints, and three original stories; according to the ad copy, these ten stories discuss “Love, Desire, and Moving Between Worlds.” Each story is complete in and of itself; while not interconnected, they share common themes of love, loss, and liminality.

None of the stories are a romance in the conventional sense, with the possible exception of “Drifts,” where two boys from different tribes meet and fall in love in a post-apocalyptic shopping mall. Nevertheless, Dubé explores many different aspects of love, from the search for it (“Blazon” and “Funnel Cloud”) to recovering after the end of it (“Tides”) and all of the stages in between (“Needle”); it may be short-lived, even momentary (“Egress”). Indeed, in most of the stories of this collection, love is transitory, implying that it might be the catalyst that leads one from one world to another.

Three stories examine actual movement between different worlds (“Tides,” “Echo,” and “Corvidae”). In “Tides” the protagonist finds himself straddling a threshold: a recent relationship has ended, and he remains unsure whether to pursue another; his movement between the worlds of air and of water suggests this ambivalence. The mirror in “Echo” provides a portal to another world, just as the cinema in the same story provides a temporary escape from the everyday world. “Corvidae” likewise juxtaposes two alternative worlds to the world of the protagonist: the world of the stage inhabited by his mother, and the video game world created by his boyfriend. But as all of the stories portray worlds similar to ours but which clearly are not, it is we, as readers, who are transported into them.

The three themes come together most tightly in the closing selection of the collection (“Vision”) where the narrator (Cam) relates the final days of a sick friend (Dean) in the hospital: Dean, on a morphine drip and irreversibly declining, begs Cam to bring an exorcist to cleanse his room, as the hospital staff have been summoning demons. The black magicians at the hospital intend to use Dean himself as their portal:

First, in a prolonged death like his, a person spends weeks hovering between worlds: the ordinary physical one and that of the spirits. He becomes a kind of a living door, which makes it easier for the forces to move back and forth.

Dean’s explanation is the first explicit statement of the truth that he and Cam both know (i.e., that he is dying, and will not leave the hospital alive). Cam, who disbelieves Dean—partly out of
denial of Dean’s approaching death—procures an exorcist anyway and smuggles him into the hospital.

Dubé’s prose is poetic, surreal, and heavily layered. Metaphor and symbolism suffuse it throughout, from the unfulfilled desire of the protagonist of “Blazon” erupting as literal flames to the tornado that parallels the storm of memory and desire that rages through the mind of the protagonist of “Funnel Cloud.” Dubé’s writing also has a (literal) elemental quality: the opening four stories (“Blazon,” “Tides,” “Funnel Cloud,” and “Furrow”) invoke fire, water, air, and earth, respectively; and the elemental fury of weather displayed in “Funnel Cloud” reappears in “Drifts.” Dubé suffuses the supernatural throughout his writing, but the true magic lies in the spell that he weaves with his words; he has thoroughly succeeded in producing writing that is consistently “weird, sweaty and lush.”

Keith Glaeske is a medievalist and collector of speculative fiction currently living in Washington, DC. His articles about medieval literature have been published in Medieval Perspectives, Traditio, and Ériu.
“Craig Moreau’s Chelsea Boy is a true original, in many senses of the word. It’s simultaneously a serious collection, and a book of poetry intended for readers who don’t usually read poetry at all. Moreau is a passionate, gifted poet, and with Chelsea Boy he enters terrain far too seldom poetically traversed.”

—Michael Cunningham

“Holland’s major achievement here is to build a persona that is as unabashedly gay as it is charmingly decorous. I never thought about how much I tend to worry about the speakers of gay poems—how damaged and endangered our speakers tend to be. You never worry about Holland. He seems refreshingly adult... These are the poems of a healthy, well-adjusted happy man.”

—Lambda Literary

“The same accessible, conversational, gay-as-a-box-of-birds approach that O’Hara championed, though Cotter’s poetry is not at all an imitation or a parody of O’Hara’s style.”

—Roberto Friedman, Bay Area Reporter
Fortune’s Bastard
a novel by Gil Cole

“Hold onto your codpiece—Shakespeare has never been hotter. Gil Cole’s lusty yet literate Fortune’s Bastard is a thrilling, imaginative, and above all romantic homage to the great bard.”
—Wayne Hoffman, author of Sweet Like Sugar and Hard

“Gil Cole’s adventure is epic, operatic, and Shakespearean. He writes with complete confidence as he rolls out a grand pageant of heroism and love on the fifteenth century Mediterranean. On every page I found fresh surprises that kept my pulse racing.”
—David Pratt, author of Bob the Book and My Movie

Pacific Rimming
a novella by Tom Cardamone

“From the torrid depths of the Manhattan gay club scene, Cardamone snatches the precious jewel of wisdom that Blake prophesied could only be found in excess. You’ll find no political correctness, smugness or marriage activism in Cardamone’s gay universe: this is the visceral underbelly of gay life, and his language makes it shimmer like paradise.”
—Trebor Healey, author of A Horse Named Sorrow and Faun

“Exhilarating! Pacific Rimming is an eloquent, gorgeous reminder of why, when it comes to the mystery of desire, we persist in doing all the abject, crazy, beautiful things we do.”
—Paul Russell, author of The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov
Dennis Rhodes is author of three collections of poetry: *The Letter I, Spiritus Pizza and other poems*, and *Entering Dennis*. His work has been published in *The Jersey Journal, New York Newsday, Fine Gardening, Ibbetson Street, Alembic, Chelsea Station*, and many other publications. Rhodes is a member of the Academy of American Poets and the Worcester County (MA) Poetry Association.
Guilt

I have lived on someone else’s time.
I’ve stolen off with someone else’s days.
Yes, I’ve made love in someone else’s bed
and have worn their clothes—a splendid fit!
I have treasured someone else’s years,
used some wisely, others gone to waste.
I have answered to someone else’s name
a thousand times and smiled a phony smile
when I’ve needed to. Was it Mark’s? Was it Jim’s?
I’m a fraud. A charming one at that.
I’ve savored kisses meant for other lips—
Andrew’s? Billy’s? Who the hell can say.
I have cheated scores of men out of time.
I have taken more than my share of life.

—Dennis Rhodes
Sic Transit Gloria [Jason]
Memoir by Robert L. Patrick

Will you leave me alone if I write about you? Stop sending the Polaroid’s, the telegrams. Stop. The movement in the corner of my eye, the dreams where you lay next to me. Stop. Warm, manly, fragile Jason.

Night

There’s you standing in the dark corner of Touché (beer and urine, cowboys and bikers) black leather jacket, shirtless, tall, and strong. Aviators shielding your eyes, long black hair slicked back from your forehead, but for one lock (a rape). Then there are the flies (bar acolytes) floating around you, all hopeful for a look, a touch, a lick of your sweat, to rub against you as they pass by, and you so tall above them, staring at me, then ignoring me (an aphrodisiac, foreplay, a feather against my neck tracing down my scapula, touching a nipple, and along my side)
standing in the opposite corner surprised that you’re interested, so not what anyone in the bar
would think you’d look at, let alone want. And later, when we were standing so close together
talking in one ear or the other, what were we saying? Do you remember cradling my ass in your
big hand and pulling me up into a kiss, even I had to rise up to meet your dark lips, white teeth,
velvet tongue. That kiss sunk me.

All those men stood back from us, sideways glances charting our progress, setting the tone for
their night, while we talked and kissed some more, Levi’s stretched tight across our crotches,
hands memorizing the terrain, the highs and lows of our own landscapes; your arms made for
holding another man; and desire, a psychic light of want, lifting me off the floor high above you,
the magician’s assistant, while the audience applauded your legerdemain. We must have fucked,
did we? Do you remember, Jason?

There’s you lying in bed, arms flung above your head and me astride your smooth body, the
bristly hairs of my thighs commingled with the silkiness of yours, resting my hands on your
chest, the heartbeat of a warrior. I did not know then how delicate you really were, all I knew
was that I had capitulated and flung myself, all of me, at you and you had caught me, and
worshiped me, much as I did you. Your black hair the night against the clouds of pillows framing
your beautiful eyes, nose, a small spray of freckled roses across its bridge, ones that I would
count one two three when you closed your eyes and stroked my thighs.

Afterward, you lifted your body up off the bed and giant that you were, strode into the bathroom
to piss, legs apart, a colossus; then to the kitchen for a clean ashtray, grabbing our warm beers
from the living room, and finally standing in the doorway, lit from behind, a crazy-ass grin
splitting your face until I said, “what?” “Nothing,” you replied as you sank back into the crook of
my outstretched arm, and rolled toward me, our bodies matched inch-for-inch (or so it seemed at
the time), “nothing” you said as you buried your face into my chest. Do you remember that?

There’s you nervous about me meeting your sister, but she and I fall together conspiratorially in
the living room, while you bang around in the small kitchen, a useless apron tied at your waist,
spatula in one hand, the smells and sounds of dinner swirling around you—a mystic at Delphi
reading chicken entrails in the hopes that you’ll be able to discern what we are cooking up on our
own. Until your blond- headed sister (the opposite of you) takes my hand and says, “don’t break
his heart, you hear?” blue eyed beauty, all soft curves, but with the same menace on her face that
I’d seen in yours when you fucked me. It hurt.

Did you not know how she scared me? How after that evening, I started the withdrawal, the
pulling away from you? Slippery, exhausted, limp. I worked hard to make you happy, did we
love each other? Did you love me? I believe I thought I could until I couldn’t any longer. Do you
remember now?

**Day**

There’s you sitting in a chair at a smudged window looking out onto a dirty Chicago winter
day—that gray sky, ground, meeting in your eyes. The dealer’s boyfriend is doing what young
men do around you; staring at your crotch, licking his lips, close enough to laugh at nothing,
sitting cross-legged at your feet, wanting you to drop your pants—he may have asked you to do
so—did you ask me if I minded? Perhaps, I know it happened while I sat there waiting for his
master to cut the drugs and roll a joint; he cared so little, just a part of doing business.
You acted like it didn’t matter and maybe it didn’t. After all, I had acquiesced, not angry, perhaps a bit turned on by the young man’s craven desire. Didn’t I think then that I had you for myself, no one, and no one could take you from me, regardless of their lips and hunger? Our passion for each other did not seem to lessen, ice melting and pulling away from the shoreline, the racket of seagulls outside the frosted window. Do you remember that?

There’s you sitting in your deuce and a quarter, idling on 18th street while I slipped down into the basement apartment to see a pal and score a bag. My friend dithering and withering in equal measure, “he’s no good for you, bobpatrick,” his tongue darted out and back in again, tempting, hissing, the radiator rattling under the window. I did not respond, what could be said that would have been the truth, “I know”? (A raised eyebrow from both of us.)

But I come back up from that little hell, and there you are: sloppy grin, luxurious black hair falling into your eyes, arm across the back of the seat reaching to the window, gesturing with your long fingers (how I loved the magic of your hands, long for them even now) to get in, “let’s go home.” and we did. Was it later that same day, I left you? What excuse could I have given? Do you remember, Jason?

Coda

I called you months later, your sister answered, unhappy with me, but relented and gave the phone to you, a little boy, sad and hurt still, smarting as if I’d slapped you. It’s then I remembered the one night you whispered in my ear as your heart pounded against mine, “I love you.”

Robert L. Patrick lives in southern California with his long-time companion of 32 years and their rescue dog, Billy. Robert has been a visual arts professional for over 35 years and obsesses over the lack of art criticism for the middle class, fancy-Nancy writers, gay culture, gardening, aesthetics (and the lack thereof,) poetry, art history, contemporary art, museums, artists of all stripes, creativity, and the state of the union.
“One reads *Love, Christopher Street* to see how other people, like and unlike yourself, encountered and endured and learned from New York, and that’s why this extremely varied anthology is always interesting, even when tangential, and why it’s often moving.”
—Andrew Holleran, *The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*

“No matter what your relationship is with New York City, you’re bound to find something here to make you smile, laugh or be homesick. And if you are one of those few people who have no relationship with the Big Apple, maybe this will spark your desire to establish one.”
—Jerry Wheeler, *Out in Print*

“*Love, Christopher Street* will leave readers impressed, inspired and enlightened. Despite their differences in age, gender and ethnic origin, these essayists all share a fondness for New York, and their combined stories are proof that the city’s immeasurable impact on LGBT art and artists continues today.”
—Christopher Verleger, *Edge*

A TOP TEN FAVORITE BOOK ON THE 2013 AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION OVER THE RAINBOW LIST OF LGBT BOOKS FOR ADULT READERS

A memoir from the noted psychologist and co-author of *The Joy of Gay Sex* about the author’s activism on gay issues in the medical and psychiatry professions and his personal relationship with a younger man and his partner’s decline into addictions.

“Charles Silverstein has written a memoir about the great love of his life—an eccentric, androgynous genius whom Charles adored and cared for despite all his flaws and addictions. Most writers idealize their lovers, especially if they’ve died young, but Silverstein presents his William with all his charm and sexual allure and intellectual brilliance—and all his maddening faults. I wept at the end of this brave, honest book—and I suspect you will too.”
—Edmund White, author of *City Boy* and *Sacred Monsters*

**For the Ferryman**
A Personal History
Charles Silverstein

www.chelseastationeditions.com
Scott and Dan shared no values concerning what mattered most: poetry, monogamy, straight guys, religion, jazz music, old friends, filial loyalty, children, the contents of dreams, the importance of particular memories, having actual data to back-up one’s bald assertions, and the appropriate method of dispatching a wounded animal. Not a single fucking thing in common. They didn’t even look the least thing like one another: Dan was a lanky roadrunner with a mop of untamed hair he wore too long. Scott was all curves (shoulders, face, skull) and always fighting (against gravity, against extra pounds, against balding).

In the first year they shacked up, their differences had seemed fundamental and dooming. They were perpetually on the verge of a break-up. As the years passed, miraculous, peculiar concordances on very particular and inconsequential matters had blunted the fundamental differences—they shared surprisingly similar viewpoints on Edison lightbulbs, endless
Yet just at the point in their seven-year relationship when it therefore seemed Dan and Scott might after all be soulmates, they hosted another disastrous mixed-orientation Provincetown dinner party and all hell broke loose.

As usual, Dan placed a hot, young, uncomprehending and uncompromisingly straight graphic artist at his immediate right, drank too much, and launched into an improbable tale of having once stopped a street fight among Vietnamese taxi drivers by quoting poetry:

\begin{quote}
the wise man shuts his mouth
the strong man folds his arms.
\end{quote}

Scott called bullshit.

Dan appealed to their guests like a lawyer to a jury.

“Really! Swear to God! This actually happened,” he said. “In the lives of the Vietnamese, poetry has power we Americans can scarcely conceive of. It’s used for courting, for entertainment, for chicanery. Even for winning political debates.”

“Oh, puh-lease!” said Scott.

“You’ll frequently hear a Vietnamese politician say, ‘And there’s a poem to prove it!’ That’s his punch line! That’s how he wins the debate!”

“I guess the nearest thing we have to a Vietnamese poem is the Tweet,” volunteered the hot-young-straight graphic artist.


The graphic artist stiffened with pride. Scott noisily plopped gougères on dessert plates with all the ceremony of a morning shit.

Putting his creepy hand on the shoulder of the graphic artist, Dan declared that he had dreamed of a land in which poetry had such force. A native land. Not simply because everyone dreams of being king—the winner of hot young lovers and political arguments and spontaneous street fights—but because there was something noble—or perhaps neither noble nor ignoble but more true—in the world where poetry ruled. In that world, a man got his hands dirty and sweated and felt honest, even if he was up to no good.

“Remember, for example,” Dan said, appealing again to their hot-young-straight guest, “the first time you smelled your girlfriend’s vagina on your fingers? You wanted to tell everyone about it and at the same time you wanted to keep the secret, holding your fingers to your nose again and again because you can’t quite believe your luck. Am I right?”

The other gay couple recoiled and the straight wives looked miffed, but the graphic designer grinned broadly.

“Enough!” Scott cried.

“See? I knew it! Even I had this sense of triumph with the girls,” Dan crowed, gazing at close range into the graphic artist’s eyes.
The moment the last guest had said his goodbye, Scott declared, “That’s it. I’ve had it. I’m leaving you and taking up with the first man I meet in the street.”

Dan glanced up from his *Provincetown Banner*.

“Can you pick up scented candles and vinegar when you’re out?” he asked. “Those disgusting heathens stubbed their cigarettes out on the deck rail and I hear vinegar’s quite effective.”

“Only one of those so-called heathens smokes. Try at least to be a little fair when you make these pronouncements about people,” Scott scolded. Scott detested Dan’s bald-faced pronouncements, which were unconscionably durable, yet based (even Dan conceded) on the least possible information for fear some new data would challenge his thesis. “And you didn’t seem to mind when the graphic artist was hanging on your every word between puffs.”

“Really? He was hanging on my words?” Dan asked eagerly.

“Christ!”

Dan turned back to the *Banner’s* wine column.

“Do we like Slovenian wine?” he asked.

Scott considered the question carefully, because Dan constantly tested Scott on aspects of their seven-year relationship that Dan believed required remembrance for validation.

“We do,” Scott said carefully. “We had a bottle of Slovenian wine at Aspen Gay Ski.”

Dan folded away his *Banner* and gazed raptly at Scott as if he were a hot-young-straight guy reciting poetry. But his smile faded as Scott rattled on, recounting the particular occasion in bright color and amplified surround-sound, identifying every morsel of food consumed and every person present and the naked snow angels and Frette sheets and sex on the bearskin rug before the cabin’s grand fireplace.

Dan was powerless to refute these details that Scott had just invented, because everyone acknowledged that Scott had the longer memory, and Dan was plagued by an intense unspoken fear that he would end up like his father, a man whose fine brain had degraded over time to shredded cheese, and whose new, inane, bright-eyed good humor rendered him entirely unable to take care of himself, equally accommodating and vacuously cheerful to all comers, God bless him, and the home where he was cared for, which Dan only visited when Scott nagged him into resentful submission.

* * *

The morning after the dinner party, Dan reviewed the email he had composed to a poet who years earlier had been a budding writer-in-residence at the university where Dan headed the legal department and was now reported to be at a writer’s retreat in Barnstable for the summer:

Knowing you (however briefly, however many years ago) was confusing—it’s harder to read a book truthfully when you know the poet.

Your poems seem unfinished—unfinished, that is, only to that pedestrian, legalistic me that wants resolution, who’s not satisfied with effect or truth or nobility. I want to hear the rest of the story: your wife comes back or is punished, you crumble or you find a new higher love with a man. Or whatever. That pedestrian me has a strong impulse toward tidiness. Toward trains that run on time and apt words and finished thoughts and complete sentences.
Speaking of trains—as I write, a train whistle elicits the companion hollow sound of trucks passing two dunes over. Nothing’s a mere coincidence!

Dan re-read what he had written and promptly deleted the reference to “love with a man.”

Immediately the email’s lines seemed more crisp, and he knew the poet would appreciate the internal rhyme of elicit and whistle.

He quickly added:

Scott’s brother’s in hospital in Alabama. His family sits and waits by the bedside. Scott waits by the phone here fifteen hundred miles away. Near or far, we’re all metaphorically staring at this young strong man’s hand lying still on a white starched sheet. We’re looking for a twitch. All of us depend on it moving.

“Did you see it? Did you see it move?” Scott’s brother asks their mother. “I made it move.”

I’m sure we all debated the same thing, a conspiracy that’s loud as mosquitos after the rain: should we lie and confirm it? An impulse more true than honesty?

Dan stared at what he had written and wondered whether these words were a betrayal of trust, but he consoled himself that at least he hadn’t revealed the truly disturbing exchange between Scott and his brother that Dan had witnessed immediately after the accident:

“Kill me,” Scott’s brother had begged. “I don’t want to be like this.”

“Maybe ....,” whispered Scott.

“Kill me.”

“Shh. Not now, not yet.”

This exchange had revealed that there was something decidedly cold and essentially unpleasant about Scott. After seven years, Dan had finally put his finger on it: Scott was a cold fish. It was he who had insisted on putting down their Bassenge while he still had a few good months left in him. It was he who had fired their cleaning woman because she had requested to come on Thursdays instead of Mondays to accommodate her daughter’s dialysis. This coldness was what drove Dan to flirt virtually with this poet, who wasn’t Dan’s usual type, just to win the affection and validation that was missing in his relationship.

Dan wrote:

Have you read about the Chinese artist Xu Bing, who scooped up dust from the streets of Chinatown after 9/11? He carried it in an airtight Ziploc bag for two years. He made a mold, mixed the dust with water and poured it in. The doll he cast was a primitive, a bellied thing with blind eyes and stubbed feet. Twice he’s ground the doll back to dust and reconstituted it, once to analyze its chemical properties for safety’s sake, once because someone from the TSA believed it to be plastic explosive.

His project belies the notion that gathering dust is a passive or bad thing. There was once a Zen monk known as the Sixth Patriarch who wrote a poem refuting a rival monk’s poem declaring the mind to be a mirror that should be kept dust-free. Said the Sixth Patriarch in response: “The mirror bright is nowhere shining. As there is nothing from the first, where does the dust itself collect?”
I’m not sure what that means, but I do like the idea of dueling poems, and it was the Sixth Patriarch who won out, whose name is remembered. I have aspirations of becoming dusty (does that make me sound old?). Mirrors reflect—perhaps deflect—the world; a dusty mirror is just another object dwelling therein.

Which brings me to the point: In your book, you stand on a moor spouting poems against a swift wind, poems as potent as the bubbles a child blows from a wand dipped in a rubber jar.

But where are the fists? The knot swollen up beneath your eye? When am I going to see you again?

Yours,

“Dusty.”

Suzanna shuffled into the breezeway and peered over his shoulder.

“Who’s Dusty?” she asked.

Dan powered down his tablet and opened the well-used copy of the *Banner* in front of his face.

Having heard Suzanna’s voice, Scott dashed from the kitchen and kissed her on both cheeks. She was his best friend. They had known each other since kindergarten. Dan did not believe in best friends. His was a constantly shifting circle of acquaintance. It kept things fresh.


“On my brother? Surgery today to reduce the swelling. Long drive?”

“Jack drove. I slept.”

“When’d you get in?”

“Three?”

“Two,” snapped Dan.

“Oh, did I wake you?”

“I’m glad you came,” Scott said.

“Yes,” Dan said. “You woke me.”

Suzanna smiled benevolently at Scott. “I always come when my boys are in need.”

*What a bitch*, thought Dan. Suzanna had a knack for backstabbing and choosing favorites, an absolute corrosive dislike for those who thwarted her, and a possessiveness over male friends like Scott that was pointed and furious. But she never once subjected these male friends to the same standards, or to her fury, and consequently Scott and each of her other special male friends maintained a jealously loyal, outsized regard for her. She drove Dan nuts.

“Should we go down there?” she suggested. “To Alabama?”

“We just got back,” Dan objected.

“Maybe,” said Scott.
“It’s our vacation,” Dan said. “We’re not doctors. There’s nothing we can do.”

Scott frowned and crossed his arms as if he had more to say or do, and Suzanna chewed off Dan’s ear about giving moral comfort to the sick and their families.

Dan heard “mortal” comfort. He thought: Scott resorts too easily to killing things off. That’s his problem. He doesn’t know how to make things last.

***

In Suzanna’s humble opinion, men watch women for one of three reasons:

1. to show other men they watch women;
2. to intimidate women; or
3. because they cannot do otherwise, so great is their admiration for the female figure.

Suzanna’s latest boyfriend Jack was of the first variety. It wasn’t that he was indifferent, like a gay guy. He liked fucking women, and Suzanna in particular, so far as she could tell. Yet he wasn’t so particularly passionate about the female figure as to notice a woman passing on the street.

Unless another man were present. Then Jack leered and pointed and sought acknowledgment of shared manliness, or at least of the so-called “fact” that Jack was what he clearly was not: a man who appreciates a shockingly lovely set of ta-tas. Which Suzanna still had, notwithstanding the autoimmune disease that seemed intent on killing her slowly, despite the rolodex of doctors she had consulted and discarded.

At some point soon, Suzanna thought, I’ll have to dump Jack, too. Which was what was so goddamn maddening about Scott’s eight-year-old nephew Lyle, who clung to Jack all morning, jabbering in a secret language only Jack seemed to understand. Lyle’s devotion was proof Jack wasn’t unlovable. She trusted Lyle implicitly in these judgments: he did not, for example, love her so much.

“Jack,” she chided, “can’t you see you’re making poor Lyle wear out his welcome with his gay uncles? You guys have got that dog cradled to your breast like a baby, tits up, cooch displayed, and a shithole of animal dander flying over the breakfast table. Dan over there is becoming positively beside himself, worrying about the security deposit.”

“There is no security deposit,” Dan snapped. “We own.”

“What a simple idiot I am!” Jack murmured. “Sorry, Daniel.”

He expelled the dog (which was the neighbor’s) through the screen door and brushed the dander from his hands.

Suppressing a triumphant smile, Suzanna felt compelled to take Jack in her arms and tell him something she didn’t really believe: that she’d never wanted anyone besides him.

“That’s not true!” Jack cried. “Why would you say that?”

Jack was really a simple sort. He took people at their word. In fact, he had so long taken people at their word that he had no talent for discounting what people said and examining motives for the truth. He regularly became exasperated that people could not—as he put it—make proper use
of the mouths God gave them, but would instead be constantly putting up all kinds of lies in the desperate hope someone would see through to what was really sought.

Pleased in some queer, selfish way she couldn’t quite place, Suzanna wished, maybe, that Jack would be a little less literal. She had no doubt Scott would liberally Facebook pics of this weekend and, if she was still alive, she would no longer remember Jack’s name a few years later, nor—until Scott reminded her—that Jack had been her guest.

***

At the corner of the yard was a surveying stake, a white chum bucket, and stairs that dropped down over the sea wall. Mottled ocean grays matched a pattern of skylight and cloud. The halyards were silent against the empty flagpole.

Noting these details one by one, remembering names he had known years ago. Seven long years. Holy shit. What had he done with his life? Scott was forty-six, and he didn’t feel old, but he felt embarrassed for feeling this way. His twenty-year-old self would have scoffed at him.

Suzanna slipped up behind him and murmured, “One look at your face, and I see a storm coming. What are you plotting?”

Scott took her hand. Suzanna loved intrigues more than anyone he knew. He nodded toward the wet bar on the back deck, where Dan was preparing cocktails and pontificating to Jack about Kidjo, whose fabulous jazz standards in French and Yoruba and Swahili spilled forth from the sea-facing speakers. Dan had conspired to make Kidjo this summer’s background music, so he could reveal to guests a good taste that was at once particular, peculiar, and pure. No garden variety Blue Note bullshit or smooth jazz stylings for him, and nothing so thoroughly irritated Dan as guests who failed to ask: Who is this fabulous African Grammy-award-winning chanteuse and lyrical poet I’ve never heard before? Dan regarded such uninquisitive guests as children who didn’t want to learn, similar to clients who wouldn’t heed his advice or straight boys who declined his overtures.

“We should fuck with him,” Scott said.

Suzanna was game.

***

The word God was spelled out on the beach in a clump of seaweed that had weathered high tide. Jack and Lyle raced to spell their own names in seaweed, but Dan turned back to the house. Having forgotten his pocket notebook, he worried he would forget his clever rant about the fuckers forcing their skymonster mythologies into seaweed, which he could parlay into additional lengthy, flirty emails to the poet.

The breezeway showed signs of hurry. Dan’s tablet was tipped sideways in the cushions. The tray of the DVD player was extended. Near the laptop was a pad of paper on which Scott had scribbled notes in Russian, so that Dan couldn’t decipher them, though it was plain he had tried to track Dan’s internet history. His obsession with the concept of monogamy would have been positively quaint if it weren’t so annoying.

Otherwise, the house was a quiet preserve. One of the cormorants that had taken roost on the four pilings at the end of the jetty spread his drying wings like a risen phoenix. His black webbed feet look like thin wrists thrust in elegant leather ladies driving gloves. Suzanna was huddled in a
deck chair, swaddled in towels for warmth, a white cardigan pulled close. To Dan, she looked more frightened than cold, more surprised than frightened, more aggrieved than both, because she couldn’t accept that—who? The seaweed God?—would let this happen to her. Death and decay happened to everyone. Look at his father. If he got any more demented, they’d have to water him like a houseplant.

Suzanna said, “I’m betting those cormorants have ugly faces, but they’re too far to be sure. Can you swim out and see?”

“Some things you don’t have to look at too close to know they’re ugly,” Dan said.

Suzanna scowled.

Dan smiled, pleased with himself.

“Scott told me to tell you he’s left,” she said sharply. “Gone to see his brother without you. He said you wouldn’t understand family loyalty.”

Initially stunned, Dan nevertheless refused to give her the satisfaction of asking if this news was true. He checked his inbox and was delighted to see the poet had written him back.

_Dear Dusty_, I’ve been studying family history. It seems there’s been just one soul in the family, a great big oversized one divided among my ancestors’ children, and then again among their children, divided and partitioned with each generation, and now hardly anything left but a sliver at best. What’s wrong with this new generation? Don’t the grandchildren see that they ought to clear out the Valley and start again anew, knock down the crisscross of fences that divided farm from farm, land that had once been without division? Bring them under one roof! Raise the young in a manner that produced some pride and self-respect that was more than mere stubbornness!

Grandchildren! thought Dan. Had the poet got that old? Why can’t I remember a single fucking thing about him? If it wasn’t for Wikipedia, I’d be doomed.

Nevertheless, Dan wrote, _When are you coming to see us in Provincetown?_

The poet responded instantly: _2nite._

The shorthand was oddly disturbing. Dan briefly wondered whether Scott had, just to fuck with him, somehow contrived to impersonate the poet online and invent these grandchildren and this unfortunate pedestrian rendering of _tonight_, which ill-fit a man of letters.

* * *

Scott had come up with the idea of writing God in the seaweed, and pretending he had gone back to Alabama, and stealing the Kidjo CD, because he knew each of these things would drive Dan peculiarly crazy, but Suzanna pooh-poohed his ambition. She called him a pansy and told him he needed the courage of his convictions.

“You’ve got to do something really big, for God’s sake,” she said, “and …. Hey! Why don’t you blow the poet? Wouldn’t that be a lark?”

“You know I don’t like cheating.”

“If you don’t,” she warned, “I swear I will.”
“Now *that* would be funny. Dan’d be so pissed,” Scott said, but he felt glum. His loneliness seemed enormous. To keep the peace with Daniel, he had given up everything. Monogamy. Children (excepting the summer visits from Lyle). A spiritual life. Dignity. Mostly dignity. What was so galling about Dan’s obsession with and pursuit of straight guys, aside from the fact that he did it right in Scott’s face, was that Scott hated straight guys. With an unholy passion. He had never felt quite right among them. Had never understood their jokes or consolations. Other than his little brother, of course, to whom Scott was fiercely loyal.

He wandered down Commercial Street. A man was tying balloon toys on the sidewalk. A caricaturist rendered furiously. A human statue was holding still until a quarter dropped in her tip jar and she gently curtsied. A white teen banged on an upright piano set on shopping cart wheels so it could be whisked away at the end of the night. Tipsy gay guys shrieked with glee.

Cutting through all the frivolity and noise and glee, Scott decided he didn’t mind that Dan doesn’t love him. He supposed Dan experienced feelings far more permanent than love:

Like lust, maybe? Or a chronic need for attention? Or fear of becoming inane and happy, like his father? Or just raw embarrassment about being gay (which was the source of his humiliating obsession with conquering straight guys)?

None of these—lust, attention, fear, embarrassment—squarely fit the facts. It felt as if Scott were waking from a coma language-impaired—able to recognize things for what they were, but not quite capable of assigning a name to them.

As dusk fell, Scott dropped onto a bench in front of City Hall. He took the Kidjo CD from his pocket and raised it up like a priest at the altar. In the name of the father, the son, the brother, the gay soulmate, Amen. Be thankful. God would want you to be grateful for what you have. There were starving children in Africa. There were quadriplegic brothers in Alabama. Your lot could be worse.

Hours passed. The streets got drunker. Scott wished he could have seen Dan’s face when he saw God in the seaweed. No doubt he had started cursing and yelling and predicting that the religious lunatics had landed in Provincetown, second time in 450 years, first the pilgrims, now those who would write His Name in sand, and next thing you know they’ll be rounding up the gays for burning. Dan’s hatred of anything religious got worse as he got older and his father’s disease progressed. As if it made him heroic, Dan resolutely refused to take comfort in any sort of deeper and enduring meaning. For this reason, Scott had never admitted to Dan that he had prayed for his father. Prayers for his own brother hadn’t proved as easy to generate.

When the clock struck midnight, Scott waylaid the first reasonably attractive man on the street and invited him to drink at the bar at George’s Pizza. The man talked, but Scott didn’t hear a word. His mind alternately veered between images of Dan getting the poet drunk enough to make a pass at him and questions about whether his brother really wanted to be killed, and whether Scott would have the courage, and whether his search history would show he had googled the best ways to get away with it, and whether God would forgive him for doing this terrible thing.

Truth be told, Scott’s motives were suspect. Scott had once changed the kid’s diaper and now faced the prospect of doing it all over again, except now without end, so help me God. His brother was too old to start again. He was too young for immobility.

No doubt Dan was blowing the poet as they spoke.
Avoiding Commercial Street, Scott took the beach route back to their house. Halfway there, just beyond Dick Dock, he took the Kidjo CD from his pocket and flung it overhand toward the ocean. It went two yards before skittering to the sand. The sea breeze turned it over once and then it lay still.

Scott picked it up and flung it again. Same result. And again. No matter how hard he threw it. Finally, just steps from their house, he side-armed it like a Frisbee and achieved the goal of getting it as far from his body as humanly possible.

“So, how is this brother doing?” he overheard the poet ask.

Scott crept up to the last bit of darkness outside the ring of light thrown by the fire.

“Standing now,” Suzanna said, exactly as Scott had instructed her. “With assistance. He wants them to fly him back here so he can get wasted on one can of beer.”

“Standing? Are you sure?” asked Dan uneasily. “I don’t remember Scott telling me that. Did he call you?”

“Walking even. They say he saw God written in the soft pudding that was all he could eat lying down. Next thing you know, he moved a finger, a toe.”

“We saw God, too,” Lyle chirped. “Down on the beach!”

“There is no God, Lyle,” Dan muttered. “Maybe I should go to Alabama.”

Suzanna said, “Maybe Scott wants to be alone with his brother.”

“No!” said Dan.

“The boy’ll be fine,” the poet declared. “I knew a guy once who got tossed from a horse in a rodeo and beaten under the horse’s hooves. Never got out of bed again. He blows through a straw to move his chair.”

He extended his wineglass for a refill. Suzanna tipped the bottle over his glass.

“You have a girlfriend?” she asked.

The poet swished the wine around in his mouth and then swallowed.

“I don't need steady company,” he said. “It's worse than lonely.”

** **

At the fire pit, the poet offered the occasional self-consciously folksy commentary on stories Dan told (“Never take a hostage you’re not willing to shoot” or “There’s no wisdom in the second kick of the mule.”) and contented himself with copious quantities of Dolcetto. As the hours passed, however, the poet’s competitive streak showed. He proved a master of the rural macabre, compulsively outdoing everyone else’s stories:

- Lyle said he wanted to ride an ATV in the dunes, and the poet told the story of his niece whose long hair had come loose from her helmet and got caught up in the ATV’s wheels, which scalped her in two seconds flat.

- Jack proposed they charter a boat for tuna fishing, and the poet countered with a story of a friend of his who spent a stormy night at sea with a capsized boat and what was left of another man’s torso, the rest having been consumed by sharks.
• Suzanna made reference to her illness, and the poet recalled the ravages of leprosy among the population of Borneo, where he had served as a medical missionary for a year.

• He said, “God written in seaweed? Try Chinese curses written in raised bumps on your skin. Entire fucking spells. It happened to me in Shanghai. Indelible for forty days and then disappeared as mysteriously as they’d come.”

Like the puniness of the poet’s hands, this competitiveness was another quality that Dan hadn’t quite remembered, which induced a panic to find some familiar detail Dan could fix in place. He steered the poet to the topic of their earlier email correspondence.

Nodding, the poet said, “When you get to be my age, you sense there’s an end to the quantity of souls available for distribution, and you wonder whether you were born before or after the supply ran low. We all assume ourselves to possess what is good, but no doubt the soulless don’t recognize the absence of soul. They presume souls. We also assume a soul is good, when it could be of course black as night.”

“No such thing as a soul,” Dan said. “If there were, I wouldn’t be so afraid of getting old.”

“And demented,” added Suzanna cheerfully.

He glared at her, and the poet, too, considered her for a long time before standing and leaving the fire without a word. No one took his place, as if he was still sitting there or might return and rescind the implicit judgment.

Dan took a long drink from the neck of the bottle of Dolcetto and muttered, “Motherfucker’s crazy.”

“I bet you thought you were going to get to blow him, didn’t you?” Suzanna remarked.

Jack hissed, jabbed her in the ribs, and nodded fiercely at Lyle, who continued to stare raptly into the fire.

“Don’t talk crazy, woman,” Dan said. “This is still my house.”

“He seems like the kind of guy who’d let you blow him, so long as nobody found out about it. Bet he didn’t figure on so many house guests.”

* * *

At breakfast the next morning, the poet raked Suzanna’s nightgown up and down with his eyes. He was a young fifty, she guessed. His hair was too long, a mix of dark and gray. His cheekbones and nose were reddened with sun. He said Dolcetto was fine, but he preferred Beaujolais with a slight chill. It went well, he said, with a certain Vermont cheddar he bought at a farm so filthy that the stench stopped you short at the door. But the cheese was worth dying for, served by a proprietor with a huge knife, the flat side of which he used to swat flies, which he wiped off on his apron and smiled and asked how large a slice.

The poet presented Suzanna with an edition of his poems. She noticed pencil marks on some of the verses.

“It’s used,” she said, returning it to him. “You must have given it to some other girl.”

“I fixed it,” he said. “It wasn’t right when it went to press, but I needed it to make tenure. So, roll the presses!”
“You defaced your own work?” she asked, rifling through the pages. An unexpected rage filled her throat. She wasn’t sure whether she was upset because he had let the book go to press too soon or because his alterations seemed like a disloyalty or because she had consented to sleep with him.

The poet held his hands above his head.

“Don’t shoot,” he said. “Mea culpa.”

The Latin reference took the wind from her sails. She wasn’t a believer. Not like Scott. But she didn’t trust herself either. At life’s end, maybe, she would go back to the Church and disgust herself. Smells and bells. Beads and the sign of the cross. Sometimes she suspected her illness was the price God extracted for playing on Dan’s superstitions and whoring around and putting God’s name in the seaweed in the sand and all the other shit she had pulled just for because she could.

“I wish I had been born after the Apocalypse,” the poet was saying. “The great thing about a post-apocalyptic world is all that shit that you wished you had done way back when? You could do it as a matter of course. Create a neologism or just use a word plain wrong? Correct a poem after it was done? Fuck the girl you wanted to fuck? Go ahead. You could even kill her with impunity now, after the Apocalypse.”

She could see he was waiting for her to be charmed by his crudeness. It would certainly have been the polite thing to do, since he was a guest, but Suzanna refused to give him another happy ending.

Disappointed, he muttered, “I didn’t mean to take you away from your boyfriend. Sorry about that.”

“Nothing, my friend, is what you expected,” she said. “You came here to be entertained. You’re too stupid to know that's not what I do. I’m no entertainer. I tell the truth. And someone at this table is going to be embarrassed or worse by the time we’re done here.”

She pushed the book of poems to the middle of table and leaned forward, a little pulse in her temple.

“Shall we begin anyhow?” she asked. “Shall we take the risk?”

The poet grinned. “I like you,” he said.

“Congratulations on getting laid. Now, get your ass out of here before the others get up.”

* * *

Scott was so used to looking for hidden meanings to Dan’s gestures as proofs of their unshared core values, that when Dan had brought home this impossibly young, impossibly gorgeous Provincetown club kid as a gift for Scott’s forty-sixth birthday, Scott felt somehow deceived, as he scarcely dared allow that something Dan did or said meant exactly what it appeared to mean, even if what it meant was fuck you and your heteronormative monogamy.

“Is he a hooker?” Scott had whispered. “Gay for pay?”

“No. Just a Daddy fetish. He wants to get double stuffed.”

“Oh, well, in that case.” Scott had shrugged and approached the young man and extended his hand. At least the queeny son of a bitch had been gay and not, for example, a fledgling poet,
which would have been a disaster for all concerned. “Pleased to meet you. Take off your clothes.”

When they finished with him, the boy had asked for money.

“Not for this,” he’d explained. “I had fun. Just need some cash, you know. You guys won't miss it.”

His eyes had shifted back and forth like beads on an abacus. Click click click. Adding up price tags of the carefully chosen furnishings and the Tag Heuer Dan had left on the side table.

“Get out,” Scott had said.

“Don't listen to him,” Dan had corrected, stuffing money in the boy’s jeans like it was something he’d always wanted to do. “He’s grumpy.”

After the boy was gone, Scott had sat out on the deck near the sea. The blueberry bushes had shivered, and the beach grass danced. Cormorants had flown in formation inches above the moonlit waves. There had been a sudden urgency to their movement, as if they had been called to imperatives Scott could only dream of.

While Scott sat on the deck, Dan had busied himself with the sheets and lube and used condoms. He had always been a saver: of minor infatuations, old envelopes, dead batteries, sea shore knickknacks, used cell phones, you name it. Next thing you know, Scott thought bitterly, he’d be collecting his tricks’ condoms in a gilt frame.

Scott prided himself on being a chucker. When Dan had finally joined him on the deck, Scott had smiled and said softly, “I think I should leave you.”

He hadn’t meant to mark the end of their relationship. It had been just the beginning of the end. Scott had thought: We’ll stay together but apart, and nothing will ever been the same. Every conversation will snake back to this one declaration in the dark. This unfinished sentence. This incomplete thought. He’d scarce dared move a finger. Or whisper. Or breathe a breath.

Dan had muttered, “You don’t even know me.”

The words hadn’t the ring of accusation. They were instead a bald truth in which Scott was somehow complicit, and after all these years it was suddenly terrible and shaming for each of them to be unknown to the other.

***

The fat nurse at the Alabama hospital had been a close talker. She and Dan had danced: every step she closed the distance, Dan had moved away, until he’d finally determined to hold his ground, and she drew so close he could only focus on her with one eye at a time.

His experience with the poet was much the same, only roles reversed. Dan couldn’t pin him down or get him to sit still and talk. The conversation with the poet was like seeking money from a rich person you’re fond of but secretly resent. The poet wouldn’t part with anything worthwhile, not a single bon mot. Or mot juste. Or whatever. French had never been Dan’s strongest language.

He finally cornered him at the stand of beach grass near the breakwater.

“I think I’m glad I didn’t choose your life,” Dan said. “The life of grants and creative writing positions at small colleges and students and the alleged freedom of not having a real job.”
“Why?” the poet asked without interest.

“I’d probably be dead with AIDS. Just given when I came out, in the 80s.”

The poet grunted, unzipped his fly and pissed heartily into the cross breeze.

“But,” Dan hastened to add, scrambling to avoid stray spray, and position himself between the poet and his neighbors, “living that life would have made me better read, which would have been a great satisfaction. That’s my poverty: I don’t get to read as much as I wish. My book covers are dusty.”

The poet broke off mid-stream. He glanced out over the water and then up at the clouds as if he were measuring the possibility of fair weather.

“I’ve always felt uneasy in the flatlands where the sky’s large,” he said. “That kind of generous is always untrustworthy. Time I got back to the mountains where the sky’s small enough to convince you know the names of all the clouds, and the valley’s cupped hands and you feel for the first time the touch of a greater understanding that’s a kind of divinity.”

“There’s no such thing as divinity,” Dan said automatically and without much enthusiasm.

Spotting something glinting, the poet crouched and plucked it from the beach grass like a magician taking nickel from behind a child's ear. It was the Kidjo CD.

He handed it to Dan and said, “I’m never going to fuck you, you know.”

He crouched again, drew in the sand with a piece of stiff breach grass, and blew the words away as if he was extinguishing birthday candles.

Dan was too polite to tell the poet to go fuck himself. Scott would have told him off in a heartbeat. Cut off his head. Pissed down his throat. Dan wished he had the killer instinct. He wished the two Vietnamese cab drivers had stabbed one another in the heart.

He stalked back to the kitchen and found Scott there with his arms crossed and a cup of coffee in one hand.

“You’re not in Alabama,” Dan observed.

“Nope.”

“So … your brother’s not walking, is he?”

“Nope.”

“Why would Suzanna say such a thing?”

Scott shrugged.

“Aren’t you upset your best friend would say such a thing?” Dan pressed.

Scott shook his head.

“Well, I’m upset for you. I am,” Dan said.

Ignoring him, Scott pointed out a schooner in full sail cresting the horizon, which Dan pretended to see though he wasn’t wearing his glasses. Scott swore he could hear Kidjo over the crashing waves, an assertion with which Dan readily agreed though he held the wrecked CD in his hands. Scott conjured up a vision of their old age on this very spot, every bit as detailed as...
any memory of their past, with brilliant conversation and brains intact and wines the likes of which never before tasted and a cure for dementia and brothers who could walk—a better world than the one they lived in, perhaps one in which even Scott would concede that poetry was supreme.

Scott David has published dozens of short stories, novels, a memoir, and a guide to wine and cocktails under various pseudonyms. He lives in Boston and Provincetown.
"If you like well-written, quiet stories that have a wealth of emotions bubbling right under the surface, and if you're looking for a read that is an intensely fascinating character study as well as a wonderful, if necessarily subdued love story, then you will probably like this novella.”
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“The young adults that populate Graves’ fiction are skewed, skittering through their adolescence with a drug- and demon-fueled intensity that leaves the reader breathless and aching to sit down with these poor kids to let them know that things do, indeed, get better. Still, the kids are only following the examples of their even more fucked up parents, most of whom have no business having kids in the first place. But the drama… The drama is delicious and makes for some of the finest reading I’ve had in months. Graves is one of the most original young voices writing for our community today—so pick up a copy of *Dirty One* and you can tell your friends that you were a fan from the beginning.”
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“As debuts go, they don’t get much better than this. Graves, a child of the ’80s, draws diligently on the banal pop culture totems of his adolescence—cassette tapes, pastel recliners, roller rinks, Walkmans, Mario Lopez in Tiger Beat. His characters, however, are far from banal. They are antsy, angsty kids, some in their teens, some younger, consumed by jarring desires they can’t resist but don’t quite comprehend, anxious to shed their everyday skins but with barely any sense of the world beyond their suburban existence. And, boy, do they transgress. These stories brand Graves as a next-generation master of prose that is at once remorseless and refreshing.”
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Five fascinating tales linked by the sea. An aging architect must decide to give up his grief, even if it means losing the vestiges of a lover's memory. An object of erotic fixation galvanizes men against the isolation of exile on a cruise liner. As he watches the disintegration of his picket-fence fantasy, an ex-soldier looks to the sea for absolution.

Praise for Part the Hawser, Limn the Sea

“In these stories, it isn’t necessarily the big events that are the most revelatory: it’s the glance, the nod, the two men sitting on a boat while ‘neither of them was making an attempt at conversation.’ Dan Lopez peoples his sea narratives with gay men, both white and of color, and in doing so reexamines the genre, not unlike Annie’s Proulx’s reexamination of the cowboy narrative in Brokeback Mountain. An impressive collection.”
—Ken Harvey, Lambda Literary

“Don’t be deceived by its diminutive size. Dan Lopez’s just released debut story collection Part the Hawser, Limn the Sea is a powerhouse of literary dexterity. There are five stories collected here, and all are linked by the sea, the seduction of water and tide, and the release of waves and surf. It takes immense skill and intuitive finesse to formulate such characterization and story development in the span of just a few pages. There is not a word wasted or a false note throughout this 60-page slice of gay fiction. Lopez demonstrates an artistry not often found in a debut collection; there is cohesion, passion, and searing pain in his writing.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter

“While the setting doesn’t define these stories, the sea maintains a constant presence. It is both serene and treacherous. And the characters of these stories are too distracted with their own intimacies to notice it. Each story is so delicately layered with tension that it’s worth multiple reads.”
—Jonathan Harper, Chelsea Station

“These stories are unique and powerful in their simplicity, and I found this to be an impressive collection I couldn’t stop thinking about once finished.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
He checks his e-mail when he gets home. There is a message from his friend Jon checking on dinner next week, a message from Andrew, his college roommate who now lives in Atlanta, describing the leather crowd at the Eagle over the weekend, and plenty of spam: “Sexy, horny, barely legal teens,” “Did you get my pix?” and “Stop getting booted off line.” Nothing from Danny.

He signs off the computer and goes to the kitchen. What could have changed his mind? He said he would e-mail plans for the weekend. Nothing. Nothing at all. No answer to the e-mail he sent Monday. Nothing from the one he sent Tuesday.

He pulls the bottle of wine he opened last night from the refrigerator. Pours himself a glass. He’ll let it go, but he can’t help be disappointed. They’ve been chatting on-line for almost a month now. Every time he plans to visit him, Danny gets cold feet. He wonders if he’s being scammed.
If Danny is not Danny at all but a teenage girl playing a prank, someone who lives in Utah. Or Vermont. Or Mississippi. That it’s all just a game. A disappointing game. So much for romance.

This is what he knows about Danny: He likes the country better than the city, wants to become involved in local politics, wants to meet the right guy. He took some time off after high school to get his shit together. He worked for a while at a counseling center, but quit to return to school. He’s majoring in political science. He is short (five feet, two inches), thin, blondish-brown hair, blue eyes. Wears braces. Has a cat named Chloe. Goes by the nickname DBS2020 on-line.

This is what he wrote: He is an ophthalmologist. Lives in D.C. He is not as short (five feet, seven inches), not stocky but not sleek (157 pounds), a bit older (twelve years more than Danny). Black hair, brown eyes. He likes movies, biking, Sinatra records. Hates the partisanship of the Capitol, and had a boyfriend for four years who wouldn’t make any kind of commitment. Wears glasses, Clark Kent style, to hide his bushy eyebrows. Figured out pretty early in life that he was gay. Goes by the nickname Eyeful.

They didn’t chat about sex. Instead, they talked about wanting relationships, needing to grow up and learn different things, what was wrong with religion today, the way it excludes gays. By the end of their first week of e-mails, Danny wrote that he was really going to like Gary because he hadn’t hit on him. They spoke on the phone twice for almost an hour each time. Danny made the calls using a phone card his mother had sent him. His voice was softer, higher, than he expected. But also more sincere. Shy. He wasn’t a girl somewhere in Utah. Or Ohio or Vermont. He wasn’t a figment of the imagination. Or a scam. Nobody would have wasted that much time trying to be honest to a stranger.

They talked about a sitcom on TV, then about skiing of all things. Gary wanted to learn to ski. Danny said the idea of going that fast scared him. (Though he had water skied once. And liked it.)

They agreed to meet as friends. No pressure on the first date. Danny invited Gary up for weekend. Homecoming weekend at the University. He could stay over if he wanted. On the couch. As a friend. No pressure. Just to meet one another.

Something must have scared him away. Maybe it was midterms. Maybe he’s been studying and forgotten to call. When Gary was in college he would disappear for hours in the basement of his dorm, incommunicado with the world in order to pass a test or finish a paper.

He takes the chicken breast from the freezer and defrosts it in the microwave. Heats up the oven. Takes a sip of the wine. While the microwave is going he turns on the TV. Changes the channel to the news. He hopes the TV will distract him—he is still annoyed. He takes out the chicken, seasons it, places it in the oven.

From the refrigerator he takes out a plastic container. He breaks off pieces of lettuce. Rinses them under water in the sink. Finds the tomato and cucumber he bought over the weekend. Finds a knife, cutting board. He rinses the tomato and cucumber. He thinks how effortless it would be to cook for two. With Jerry—the guy he dated for four years—he always cooked. Liked to experiment. Now it just seems to be rote, functional. Sometimes empty.

Something makes him turn and listen to the news. Something about a University student being beaten. The name of the University catches him first, then the student’s. It can’t be the same person, he thinks.
First there is disbelief. Then he stops making the salad. He goes back to the computer in his bedroom and logs on. He checks his e-mail messages again. There is nothing from Danny. He doesn’t log off. Or return to the salad. He begins searching for more news.

*     *     *

Walking home after work Gary stops at the bookstore on Connecticut Avenue, looks through the titles of the magazines in the back of the store. He picks one up, looks at the photos, replaces it in the rack. He looks to the ground to see if the new issue of the free weekly newspaper is out. It is not. On the bulletin board above the stack of papers he notices a note: Candlelight Vigil, 8 p.m. He reads the name of the church. He’s walked by that building many times and never been inside. He can’t even remember the last time he was inside a church. Not since he moved to D.C., that’s for sure. On his way out of the store he thinks he wants a nap more than he wants to sit in church. He didn’t sleep well the night before, the news too disturbing. He kept playing the details over and over, that it couldn’t be the same guy, that this had happened to someone else.

At home he places his briefcase on the table, lies down on the couch without taking off his shoes or clothes. He doesn’t even loosen his tie. Only the glasses come off. Plop, on the coffee table. The day has exhausted him. It’s been harder to concentrate. He had more patients than he expected.

He thinks about turning on the TV but he can’t bear the sound. Or any more news. All day long he has chased the updates. Is he still in a coma? Was anyone arrested? How did the beating happen?

He closes his eyes and falls asleep. He doesn’t dream. It is a deep, blank sleep. When he wakes he notices it is a quarter past seven. He looks out the window behind the couch. Notices it is dark. His head is cloudy, thick, in spite of feeling rested. Weight has settled into his shoulders. He stands and steadies himself. Walks to the kitchen, pours himself a glass of water.

He looks at his watch. He thinks he could make it. It would be good for him to be out. He takes off his coat and tie, throws them on the back of a chair. He rinses his face at the sink, takes a sweater from the closet, finds a jacket. In front of the mirror he squints to clear the hardness from his face. Runs his hands through his hair. Cleans his glasses. Then heads out the door.

At the church they are passing out small, white candles and paper reflectors at the entrance. He takes one and walks down the aisle, not too far, chooses a pew in the back. There are maybe fifty people seated in the church, but more are finding their way inside. The church is full of arches, thick, white candles on an altar of dark, carved wood. A blood red carpet covers the floor. Stained glass windows of New Testament scenes line the sides. An organist is playing, the windy sound filling the room. It is too much church for him. But if prayer can help then prayer is what he will do.

He looks through a hymn book while he waits for the service to begin. He thinks about the time before he was gay—before he identified himself as gay—the way even the thought of a man could disturb him—the dilated iris, the quickened heartbeat, the trace of sweat—all because of an attraction. A surge of confusion and lust. The bent of his desire had bitten him in his late teens. He wonders if it was easier then—the not accepting of himself. He wonders if because he now admits that he is gay that he is also more afraid of being alone.
The row he sits in fills up with men. A few wiggle out of their coats when they are seated. Someone stands up, folds his jacket, places it on his lap. He senses individuals and colors. Some like blue. Others brown. Short, buzzed cropped hair still in fashion.

There are hymns and prayers, kneeling and standing, voices singing, the organ drowning out all sound. His mind wanders to the windows during the reading of scriptures. Fake daylight comes from behind each pane. More dust than color.

Toward the end of the service, ushers stand in the center aisle, light the candles of those seated at the end of the pew. Flames are passed from person to person. A guy in a flannel shirt passes the light to him. He passes it to a woman on his left. The chandelier lights are dimmed. Another prayer is said; another hymn is sung. The candles are blown out. The service ends.

He follows the guy in the flannel shirt down the main aisle toward the exit. He waits his turn to return his extinguished candle to a box. He is disappointed in the service. He has not reached any kind of internal resolution. He doesn’t feel better. But he doesn’t feel worse. He feels incomplete. Something remains unfinished.

He notices a bright light as he heads through the lobby to the large wooden doors of the exit. The guy in the flannel shirt is now wearing a quilted vest. Yellow. They are side by side at one point, waiting to leave the church. The guy gives him a smile. He returns it, hears someone ahead say, “You can’t just do that. This is not a place for that.” On the steps, a camera crew is filming people exiting the church. Instead of taking the front exit, he heads for a side door. The guy in the yellow jacket does the same. They are again side by side, both waiting to exit.

“I’m Scott,” the guy says, nodding and smiling again to him.

He smiles, says his name. “Gary.”

“You’re a friend of Jon’s, aren’t you?” Scott asks. “I think I’ve seen you at the gym.”

“Yes,” he answers. “I thought you looked familiar, too.”

Scott has a pretty face: full lips, pale skin, wide eyes, small ears. He’d be too pretty were it not for receding hairline, heavy Adam’s apple. And the voice. Deep, nasal, full of hormones. Cuts right through to the chest. They talk about the service as they wait to exit. Gary reaches the stairs outside first, slows his walk so that Scott can catch up. He doesn’t know why he does it. It is cold out. Breath condenses into white air. He thinks Scott will vanish the moment they reach the street, thinks he is part of the group of guys who were seated in his row and who will head their own way once they regroup on the sidewalk. Instead, Scott walks with him up the sidewalk toward the street corner. They talk some more. About whether the college boy will live. Scott’s voice hits Gary’s ribs, swirls around in his lungs, makes him too giddy for such a serious subject.

But he does not confess his friendship with Danny. It’s not that he wants to keep it secret. He’s not ready to admit it’s the same guy. Or ready to admit that if it isn’t, once again, he’s been dumped.

Scott says some nights in this neighborhood it can be pretty rough—teenagers driving by, throwing bottles. “That’s what you get living in the ghetto,” he says.

“And a pricey one at that,” Gary adds.

They talk some more about the way real estate prices have gotten higher, about the favorite neighborhood restaurant a block away that went out of business when the landlord tripled the
rent. Then there is a break in conversation. A point where the subject should change but they are both aware they are still standing together at the corner.

“I’m parked over there,” Scott says.

Gary looks over Scott’s shoulder, into the dark.

“You want to get together for dinner some time?” Scott asks.

“Sure,” Gary answers. “What’s your schedule like?”

“What about tomorrow?” he asks. “Are you free tomorrow?”

Gary wants to respond that he’s been free for quite a while, but he answers, instead, “That sounds good.”

They exchange phone numbers. Gary has a pen in his coat pocket. Scott has the program from the vigil folded in his back pocket.

*     *     *

They meet for dinner outside the restaurant. Scott is there first. They shake hands, take seats, order drinks from a waiter. The restaurant is a series of small rooms with small tables. There are candles lit on each table. Gary thinks Scott is more attractive than the waiter. Scott is wearing a black sweater, clingy, makes his face look younger, his body intimidating. Gary wears cologne, not his usual scent. Something different. He wants this to work.

They talk about the college boy. He is still in a coma. The suspects were arraigned this morning. And another one at a different church. They swap details that they know or have heard since yesterday. Gary says that the two guys were connected to another beating, which is how they were caught. Scott has heard that Reverend White has announced that he is going to protest—he told a reporter today that he was just waiting for the college boy to die and go to Hell.

The restaurant is Italian. Scott orders penne. Gary orders a chicken dish, even though he knows it’s something he could prepare on his own. He feels light-headed from the wine he ordered. But happy. (And silently guilty.) Scott keeps the conversation moving, talking about his job drafting blueprints for an architect.

This is what he knows about Scott (from Jon, his friend, on the phone, earlier in the day): He hasn’t had a steady boyfriend in over three years. (His mother died; his brother tested positive; his dates find him too needy.) He’s sexy but dull. Obsessive about his body. (His legs are in great shape; his waist is under thirty.)

After dinner they decide to see a movie. They ride in Scott’s car, a Honda Accord, to a mall where a multiplex cinema is located. Gary is still light-headed, ready to be affectionate. He wants to kiss Scott but holds back. They park the car, walk inside the mall, window shop for a few minutes, buy tickets at the booth. Dutch. They take seats together in a back row. When the light goes down, Scott reaches for Gary’s hand. This surprises Gary; he adjusts his posture so that he is comfortable.

The movie doesn’t entertain him. It is a satire about a Utopian community under a bubble. He finds the laughs forced. His mind drifts elsewhere—to Scott’s hand, to the details of the college boy, to a patient who hasn’t paid his bill. At one point he breaks into a sweat. His breathing
becomes forced. He thinks something is wrong but he doesn’t leave. The moment passes. The movie ends.

After the movie they walk back to Scott’s car. Scott asks Gary if he wants to come over to his apartment for a drink. Gary understands it is an invitation for sex. He breaks out into a light sweat again.

“This is always awkward,” Scott says. He has stopped by the car door. Passenger side. Next to Gary. “I can’t do this without being honest. You should know I’m positive.” He casts his eyes to the ground and then rapidly adds. “I’m not sick or anything.”

The news is unexpected, takes Gary by surprise. His first response is to tell Scott that he is not the first guy he’s slept with. Positive or not. But he holds the thought back, thinks it would sound crummy, impersonal. Instead, he answers, “It’s okay.” He keeps the moment simple. Then reaches up and presses his hand against Scott’s neck. Their eyes meet. Scott reaches around him and unlocks the car door.

Scott parallel parks a block away from his building. They walk together down the street. It is dark, leafy, idyllic. As cold as the night before. Scott lives on the fourth floor. They ride in the elevator standing in separate corners.

They begin kissing as soon as Scott unlocks the door. Gary feels rushed, anxious, but he slows himself, running his hands along Scott’s back. Scott presses forward, lifts the ends of Gary’s shirt out of his pants, slips his hands beneath Gary’s shirt, along his chest. The touch of his skin makes Gary gasp, but he continues kissing, breathing, holding Scott.

Scott breaks away, takes Gary by the hand. They walk through the apartment. Gary glimpses details: a framed poster of a lighthouse, a bookcase with seashells. They stop in the bedroom and kiss again at the foot of the bed.

Gary now lifts the edges of Scott’s shirt out of his pants. He runs his fingers along Scott’s skin. There is a coolness to the bedroom. They close in for warmth. He finds Scott’s muscles shaping his grip. Scott breaks away, smiles, sits on the edge of the bed, unlaces his boots. Gary sits beside him, unties his shoes, then takes off his glasses, places them on the windowsill.

Before they kiss again, Scott helps Gary take his shirt off. He tosses it toward a chair. It misses, lands on the floor. He laughs, says “sorry,” the voice playful. Scott takes his own shirt off, tosses it toward the chair. It lands a little further into the room, still misses the chair.

They draw together again and begin kissing. They shift their weight so that they are now lying on the bed. Scott positions Gary on his back, lies above him. He breaks away this time to help Gary remove his pants. They land on the floor, the belt buckle thunks against the wood floor. Scott takes off his jeans. Gary doesn’t hear the sound they make. They are again against each other. Both in underwear. Kissing, feeling each other.

At points they giggle, laugh like boys. At other times they are serious, gasping, moaning. They both reach orgasms twice, separated by moments of lying in each other’s arms. Everything is kept safe.

Gary has forgotten about Danny until he rises out of the bed to dress.

“Do you want to stay?” Scott asks. His voice is level, not needy. An easy invitation to continue. The room is full of intimacy. Deep, like a pool.
“I have patients tomorrow morning,” Gary says. “Otherwise I would.”

Scott watches Gary dress. He moves like a shadow through the room, lifting off clothing from the floor, holding them toward the light that drifts into the room from another place. “Want me to turn on the light?” he asks.

Gary shakes his head. “No.” “This is fine,” he says. When he is dressed he sits on the edge of the bed, kisses Scott again.

“Want me to drive you back?” Scott asks.

“I’m just a few blocks away,” Gary answers. “Will I see you again?” he asks.

“Sure,” Scott answers. He bows his head to his chest, his smile slips up toward his ears. “I’d like that.”

“What are you doing tomorrow night?” Gary asks. He regrets the question the moment it is out there, in the room, waiting for an answer. Makes him seem too needy himself.

“Getting together with you,” Scott answers.

It is smooth. This feeling. Gary likes it as much as Scott does. They kiss again. Gary lets himself out of Scott’s apartment. He takes the walk back to his apartment slowly. The sounds of his footsteps echo back romantically.

Confusion surfaces when he unlocks his own door. He boots up his computer, checks his e-mail messages. Nothing from Danny. He logs off, walks into the den. He turns on the television and lies down on the couch. This is how the news will come to him.

* * *

He confesses over dinner. Not at first. At first he listens to how Scott spent his day—the morning trip to the gym, the afternoon search for a replacement bulb for his grandmother’s chandelier. Then he describes two patients he saw. A man in his fifties with a toupee. And a woman with a facelift wanting information on laser surgery. Something he wouldn’t advise her to consider.

And then Scott takes over the conversation. He talks about his younger brother, who also tested positive last year. “It was a big wake up call,” Scott says. “For both of us. We were big party boys. We thought it was neat that we were brothers and both gay.”

Scott talks about how he’s changed since then. If he goes to a club he won’t do drugs. Usually leaves early. Gary says he goes to a bar maybe once every two months. “I end up just getting drunk,” he says. “And I don’t like that hangover feeling the next day. It’s wasted time.”

While they are waiting for the check, Gary says, “There’s something I should tell you.” He watches Scott’s eyes widen, ready for the worst case. “It’s something strange. Not strange, but it’s left me feeling odd. I’ve been chatting with a guy on the Internet for almost two months. I met him on-line on a Saturday morning. His name was Danny and he was a college student.”

Scott relaxes his posture but his expression takes on one of amazement. He asks, “Did you meet him?”

“No,” Gary answers. “We talked on the phone twice. He sounded like a nice guy. We made a date to meet this weekend. To go to a homecoming football game at his school. I was going to drive out there. He was supposed to e-mail me at the beginning of the week—to send me details on where to meet him.”

CHELSEA STATION
“And they never came,” Scott says.
“It could be that he just got cold feet, and is blowing me off,” Gary says.
Scott doesn’t answer quickly now. He lets the details sink in. “Did he send you his picture?”
Gary nods, answers, “Yes.”
“So it’s the same guy?” Scott asks.
Gary nods, answers, “I think so. I can’t be certain. I never got his last name. Or his phone
number. He called me.”
Scott’s hands rest on the table, his eyes cast downward. “I had a guy keep blowing me off that
way about a year ago. He’d find me on line and chat and say to meet him at so-and-so and then
never show up. It was frustrating. I finally just put a block on him. I know how you feel. Even
though this sounds too weird of a coincidence.”
“I’m not certain what I should do,” Gary says. “When I got home last night, there it was, on the
news. It’s just I feel I should tell someone it happened, so I don’t think I made it all up.”
“I understand,” Scott says. He offers a little laugh, to lighten the mood. “It could drive you crazy
with all the wondering. The what if.”
“I don’t know, I feel like I’ve failed some kind of test,” Gary says. “Like I wasn’t there for him.
Like I should have been there.”
“If it was him,” Scott says.
“If it was him,” Gary agrees. Now he laughs and tries to lighten the mood. “But according to
some people we are going to rot in Hell, you know.”
“Eternity in Hell,” Scott answers. “They already have our names stitched in the uniforms.”
“ar I mean, I thought about contacting the police,” Gary says. “But what do I tell them? That I got
e-mails from someone who might have been Danny?”
“Just bypass the police and go directly to the press,” Scott says. “It looks like what everyone else
is doing.”
“It makes it seem like a game,” Gary says. “But it’s not.”
The waiter brings the bill to the table. They split the check evenly. They put on their coats and
walk out to the parking lot. It is colder than the night before. Their steps are faster.
Later, in bed, in a more intimate position, Gary says to Scott, “It doesn’t scare me at all. It
should. It could happen right here. In this neighborhood, too. It just seems so unreal. Even
because it’s so close to home.”
“There was a piece on the news today how people are leaving flowers at the fence,” Scott says.
“I heard someone at the gym talking about driving out there. The funeral’s tomorrow morning.”
“Why would he do that?” Gary asks. “Drive out there? For someone he didn’t know.”
“Because it happened,” Scott says. “Because it could happen anywhere.”

Jameson Currier is the author of ten works of fiction, most recently the novel A Gathering Storm.
He is the editor and publisher of Chelsea Station Magazine.
A Gathering Storm begins in a small university town in the South when a gay college student is beaten. In the ensuing days as the young man struggles to survive in a hospital, the residents of the town and the university find themselves at the center of a growing media frenzy as the crime reverberates through the local and national consciousness. Using details and elements from actual hate crimes committed against gay men, Currier weaves personal and spiritual layers into a timely and emotional story.
The Third Buddha
a novel by
Jameson Currier

“Complex.”
Library Journal

“Courageous.”
Next magazine

“Extraordinary.”
Lambda Literary

“Remarkable.”
GLBRW

“Incredible.”
Edge

“Marvelous.”
Out in Print

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2012
ALA Rainbow Book
Drama Queens with Love Scenes  
by Kevin Klehr  
Wilde City Press  
ebook, $6.99

Review by ‘Nathan Burgoine

I’m a sucker for a second chance. There’s something so engaging about a character who has missed an opportunity or made a mistake and is now facing the consequences and deciding to take one more shot at making things right. I admit my love of “never too late” knowing full well it reveals me as a romantic and a optimist, despite how much cynical sarcasm I might let loose on an average day. It’s refreshing and restorative to read about love that makes it against all odds. There’s nothing better than love that never says die.

Or, well, actually...

Death is actually the beginning. Drama Queens with Love Scenes opens with the death of our hero, Allan, and his friend, Warwick. They arrive in a heaven that seems perfect for them—it’s an afterlife of theatre, complete with artists, writers, directors, critics, and even glossy gossip magazines. The past and present (and even future) worlds of theatre all combine in an afterlife that welcomes the two new men with open arms... and maybe one or two knives in the back.

It’s hard enough being dead. It’s even harder when you’re carrying a crush on your lifelong friend, the one you’ve just realized you waited too long to do anything about. For Allen, dying isn’t half as terrifying as the thought of not being with Warwick, but not soon after their arrival into the afterlife, Warwick seems to be moving on. While the dramas of this timeless theatre district unfold (every night is opening night for someone, and every play might just be the next big thing), Allan’s own struggle for love might get lost in an exit.

But in a theatre heaven there’s always time for another act.

Kevin Klehr has crafted a wonderful new world for these characters—a glittery, fabulous, and just a little bit catty eternity that lends itself to the seeds of theatre pop culture, history, and themes he weaves into the narrative. More, the supporting cast are a thoroughly rich group, including an angel who has yet to figure out flying, a dame from the golden age of theatre, and even someone who is from what would be Allan’s future. The drinks are downed, the music moves through eras of jazz, and performances glow—or flop—with ease. It’s a mix that works, and brings all the right traces of Noises Off to the narrative. That isn’t to say Drama Queens is a farce—it’s not—but there’s plenty of humour to be had among the potential heartbreak and genuinely knotted tangle of characters attempting to send Allan awry.

Readers will also appreciate a dose of something not typically North American to the tone. Though set in the afterlife, there’s a healthy dollop of Australia to Drama Queens, another way
that the already bright story feels fresh. It was a pleasure to escape into Klehr’s world, and I look forward to reading more from him with the upcoming Drama Queens with Adult Themes.

‘Nathan Burgoine lives in Ottawa, Canada with his husband Daniel and their husky, Coach. He has published dozens of short stories, and his first novel, Light, was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award. You can find him online at nathanburgoine.com.
Michael Graves is the author of *Dirty One*. This debut collection of stories was a Lambda Literary Award finalist and an American Library Association honoree. His work has appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Post Road, Blithe House Quarterly, Chelsea Station,* and *With: New Gay Fiction*. Currently, he is completing his novel *Parade*. Connect with Michael at [www.facebook.com/MichaelGravesAuthor](http://www.facebook.com/MichaelGravesAuthor).
His Lid

He’s capped
at most times.
En route to church.
During naps.
At Sunday dinner.
(His Ma keeps
pissing and moaning).

I watch him,
working on a thought or two,
cupping and molding
the bill.
A marvelous curve.
Like
some big city sculpture.

I say,
“When you
take it off, it’s like I’m
looking at someone
I don’t even know.”

After all these months,
it grips his skull,
perfectly.
I sometimes think,
his lid keeps
whatever is inside,
well, inside.

When he’s
off to shower,
I shove my face
into his crown.
I draw, pulling
like
a hoodlum huffer.
The dander and sweat and discount shampoo.
I smell
that boy smell.
I smell
that top smell.
I smell
that stiff smell.
Such a quick, real high.

One Friday, I tell him,
“Maybe wear it backwards
when you
wanna go.”

—Michael Graves
Bob the Book
by David Pratt
Chelsea Station Editions
ISBN: 978-0-9844707-1-6
paperback, $16.00

Now available through bookstores and Web retailers
also available in digital formats

“David Pratt takes a classic device from children’s literature, the
humanized object, and uses it not for a tugboat or lighthouse or
valveless jibail but for a book on gay erotica. His voice is pitch-
perfect as he follows his hero out into the world, creating a picturesque
epic about books and bookstores, readers and collectors, conferences
and bonfires. There’s even a love story. Bob the Book is smart, funny,
learned and, like the best bibliographies, just a little crazy.”
—Christopher Bram, author of Eminent Outlaw

Lambda Literary Award winner
Debut Gay Fiction

“Bob the Book is a book that makes you think about books in a very
different way. It’s a book that makes you laugh and think about the
way we read and the world we live in.”
—Wayne Guin, Lambda Literary

“My Movie is absolutely essential reading.”
—Tom Mendicino, author of Probation

David Pratt
My Movie
stories

“Pratt’s greatest talent lies in creating lovably insular, separate worlds
that exist inside our own, then blurring their boundaries just enough so that we
can peek inside, see what awaits us, then scurry back to our own safe
spaces. Those worlds are dark, unsettlingly truthful places that we can
only stay in long enough to find the answers we seek before we return
in reality and try to apply what we’ve learned. David Pratt is an amazing
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Pacific Rimming
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Tom Cardamone
A hot summer night, the house was dark and smokey; the adults had long gone to the bar. I left all the windows open, took one more moment to empty their fetid ashtrays. Barry was waiting in the burnt grass patch out back. I watched him kick at the stones scattered from the cars that often skid down the lane.

We crossed over to the abandoned field. Barry was quiet when he moved; three feet behind I watched his gentle lope. We stopped at the railway tracks still warm from the sun. Barry lit two cigarettes and passed me one, the slightest bit wet from his lips.

We moved along the tracks, not far ahead was an alleyway of brick. We passed close to the walls of factories and warehouses; respected places of work for fathers and uncles, we gave no thought
of tossing a stone at the high small-paned windows. There was a smell of tar and a chemical sweat mixed with hot dust and the harsh soot from the tall chimneys. No people around at all.

Ahead of us was the lake where we would sit and talk, seventeen years old with a bottle of Old Sailor. Sometimes, just before the lake, we stopped at the cemetery—funny that it had one of the town’s best views. There was an impressive ancient gravestone, riddled with names of the children dead from the Spanish Flu; more than eighty I once counted, but Barry didn't understand my interest. “A long time ago, who cares? They're back to earth.”

Down beside the water we lay in the fresh-smelling grass. The lake was a small one, with a new '67 centennial fountain in the middle spurting a spray eighty feet into the air. The humid lake breeze touched Barry's long black hair and it fell gently against his neck. He took the wine out of his rucksack and we passed it back and forth. Barry had a smell to him of apples and smoke. His leg pressed against mine and I felt the heat through his blue jeans. I pushed against him, then moved slightly away. I thought he might touch me again whenever he moved.

Barry had many friends, but I was the quiet one—how I’ve been since starting high school, quitting everything, mostly keeping to myself. He seemed to like that, maybe because he thought I was someone who needed looking after; or maybe I was some sort of amusement.

“You know the new house, over by the golf course? Forty thousand it cost.” What Barry was good at, knowing the price of everything. “Beautiful, like from a movie, wall to wall everywhere, the bathrooms too I bet; and all that glass and paneling. You see the stone chimney? Massive, four flues: one for the furnace, that means three fireplaces.”

“Maybe one's fake.” I said.

“Why would one be fake?”

“Symmetry,” I said, though I knew Barry hated big words.

“But I know the details, you asshole, I listen to people. You should do caddying; you learn important things.” Important things, what he thought he knew, all about lawyers and businessmen, the $20,000 a year men. Some stuff he probably did know, all about their Oldsmobiles and Cadillacs. But their fashion model lady-friends, what he started on about then, I didn't think so.

By the time our bottle of wine was empty Barry’s know-it-all had switched to the girls in our school: the ones that did it, the ones that didn't; the ones that wanted to, which meant they were a slut. I got a lump in my stomach, nothing to do with what might be true, everything to do with how much I really didn't care.

“Girls are like a cross between a weird musical instrument and a vacuum cleaner.” Barry was proud of himself when he thought he was being original.

“Do you like being stupid?” I asked.

Barry took this in stride, we never fought. I was taller than him and this counted for something. Though I wished we would. In the physical sense. Blows on flesh. Have him pin me to the ground. The weight of his body, the pressure, the smell of the clean earth in my face. Turn me over, spit on my lips.
He looked close at his watch then cuffed me on the cheek. “You're not drunk enough.” He picked up the empty bottle and it splashed into the lake. “I've got another bottle hid at the fairground. And maybe a surprise for you.”

We headed back up the tracks and took the fork towards the south side of town. Barry began to run, snaked his way from rail to rail. Up ahead we could see the spooky gray night lights of the fairground sheds, hardly ever used except for the sad two-week county fair. I caught up to Barry where he'd stopped, the scruffy bushes in front of the chain-link fence. We all knew where the hole was cut and we niftily squeezed our way into the vacant grounds.

We followed the overgrown racetrack where on Saturday nights they used to have harness racing—until all that local scandal with the owner, Mr. Todd, my mother’s special friend. On the other side loomed The Memorial Hall where half the town showed up three nights a week for Bingo. Barry arched his neck and listened; but there was only the noise of cicadas, and just for a moment a tired car horn far away.

Straight in front of us was the long gray barn with a rusty metal roof, built for the horses but now never used at all. The lock to a small door at the back was broken and it stood open a couple of inches. Barry gave a good pull and I followed him inside. The air was dry and warm and full of the smell of the hay that still littered the stalls. Barry led me down the stairs to the level below; here the smell was fresher, rotting wood and earth. Barry stood beside a big oat bin, opened the lid and pulled out a gallon jug of red wine.

Back and forth, the wine ran down our chins. Barry licked his lips in an extravagant way. “It's going to be tonight.”
“What?”
“Tonight. Me and Irene. You can have Olga.”
“What?”

Barry liked to shock, as if filling the air with any kind of electricity was his special purpose in the world. Irene was from a grade higher at school, warm and funny. Olga was a pale serious girl, the sort Irene always liked to take under her wing, and not the kind to approve of Barry, or for that matter any other boy in the school. “I've invited them. Here. You know what I mean?”
“No thanks.”
“Why not?”
“Olga? She's … into books, all that.”
“So. She has personality too. You don’t have to be fussy the first time.”
“It'd be too much bother for her.”
“Just bother her the right way, bucko. Few drinks, she'll change colour. They all do.”

He handed me the wine jug and I had a few quick swallows. We heard bits and starts of laughter outside the big door upstairs. “Go around to the back side!” Barry yelled. We had another drink. “Keep’em waiting.” Barry said. “A little bit spooked.”

The wine tasted smooth, not metallic like before. A rushing feeling washed through me and I went with the flow. At the top of the stairs moonlight was flowing through the windows like floodlights. We saw Irene standing in the outside door, holding up a half-empty mickey of
Southern Comfort. Olga clutched a box of donuts, a strong smile on her face. Both girls wore distinctly different mini-skirts: Irene a soft mauve and Olga a knockout in orange plaid. The girls were as dizzy as we were. “To the loft,” Barry said. “Aloft, aloft,” he laughed.

Up the ancient wooden ladder, the girls were swifter climbers than expected. I watched Barry's face as he had a good look. We handed up the wine and donuts and followed. One by one we all fell down in an open space of scattered hay, and passed the jug around.

Making fun of our old teachers was the main topic of conversation. Miss Pye, who quit her job to marry the janitor. Mrs. Scott, who walked like a parrot because of an unknown medical condition. Mr. Larmer who had a purple shirt and could likely be a queer. Best of all, the bellowing Mr. Dewdney who dropped dead on the first week of the holidays.

“Summer's almost over.” Olga said.

“Know what I wish I'd done,” Irene said, then paused for effect. Barry peered into her half-shadowy face. “Hitched to the coast. San Francisco, Vancouver at least.”

“We can still do that.” Barry said. “Anytime. We don't need school in the fall.”

“Like California, really?” Barry moved in on Irene's mouth before she could say any more.

Olga waited for me to fill the rustling silence; she offered me a powdery jam-filled donut. “This makes me think,” she says.

“Stop thinking, you nut!” Irene’s mouth was shining wet.

“No, what it's like here, it’s like the Ponderosa.” The wine had hit Olga really fast. And she was trying hard to put some thought together. “He's really quite attractive,” she finally spoke in a low but perfect voice. For a moment I thought she was following my eyes, Barry darting his tongue out for a lick; but she was looking up at the rafters. “Little Joe Cartwright,” she sighed.

Irene suddenly broke away from the hot-tongued, slobbering Barry, and started to laugh. “Olga and Little Joe!” She made a funny sound in her throat as Barry moved her away to an even higher, darker level of the loft. Olga was quiet again, deep in thought. I would have liked to tell her I dreamt of Little Joe too.

“I want to see the basement,” Olga said. “Is that what they call them in barns?” I let her lead. She stepped down the ladder easy enough; then descended the stairs floating like a queen. Light flooded in from the outside spotlight. With no hesitation Olga crossed the floor to the massive stone foundation, looked ready to give it a kiss; then over to where the stalls began, she caressed the fine clean wood of the oat bins. “You could do something with these.”

“What?”

“I’m just saying if they ever tear this place down, I’d keep them.”

“That's weird.”

We sat on the edge of a horse trough. The eerie unnatural light flickered through a high web-covered window into Olga’s hair. She became suddenly interesting, mysterious. She leaned back and her breasts became surprisingly large. I composed a bad but so intelligent joke of sorts in my head: had her bosom become the hub of a new spiritual intensity? The side of my face felt numb.

Olga’s head tilted strangely to the side, as if she is trying to catch some distant tune. Upstairs in some corner there was the vague rustle of hay being shoved about, and Irene giggling. Then
abruptly there was silence. After a few moments Barry began to moan. “He’s faking it,” Olga said. I wondered what she knew about all that. Her bare arm touched mine, soft and firm; but I almost laughed, thinking, about as interesting as touching a beach ball.

“Would you like to go for a walk?” I asked.

We made our way out to the road. There was a shortcut past the lake, and we ended up at the graveyard. For a time we walked hand in hand; at first I didn't even notice. I slipped away, touched the gravestones. “They’re warm,” I said. The smallest breeze came from the lake. The trees looked soft. Olga moved slowly, row upon row, like a bonneted old-time lady.

“Look at that!”

“What?”

“The words. That's so lovely.” She had an odd look to her as she stared at a plain solitary gravestone and read: “Warm summer sun shine kindly here, Warm southern wind blow softly here, Green sod above lie light, lie light, Good night, Dear heart, good night.” She put her hand to her mouth; deep enough into the night Olga became untouchably beautiful.

“Someone around here wrote really nice. Don’t you think?”

“It's alright,” I say. “For poetry.”

“Imagine having your husband write something like that.”

“Where's his spot then?” I thought better then to use the word grave. I sat on the grass, feeling suddenly a little bit sick.

“You're a good boy, Terry, I know. Not like that Barry.” Olga sat, unsteady on the stump of the tree that was hit by lightning, then cut clean by the city workers. But she had a good view of me. “Still. He's a bit exotic. I like that word. Do you like that word?”

“Sure.”

“His whatever, I don’t know what, like a foreigner; or a dash of native. I write poetry too, you know. But I don’t read enough, except for novels. Guess what I just read?”

“I don’t know.”

“It was a bit dirty. Quite dirty. Valley of the Dolls!”

“So did I. Last year.”

“Terry!”

“This summer I read Myra Breckenbridge.”

“Oh, that’s pervert, isn’t it?”

“Guess so.”

She thought for a moment, then moved beside me, knelt down. “You may kiss me if you want.”

“Will you be thinking of Barry, or the Ponderosa?”

Olga barely moved, not even her lips. “Creep! You're different aren't you, creep. Think of Barry yourself.” Olga drifted backwards and fell onto the nicely clipped grass. Up the tracks I heard Irene and Barry yelling our names.
Barry and I, we were getting close to home. Although we took the long way, back around the immense auto wrecking yard—the best hiding spot on our high school harrier runs. “Someday I'm going to work there,” Barry said. The old board fence was falling down. I had a crazy drunken idea. I would come back later with some paint: big letters, big words. HOT METAL.

Dew glistened on the rail tracks. Barry’s lips were brown with chocolate—his rucksack always contained a few Oh Henry bars that he’d pilfered about town. “Did it happen?” I asked.

“Sort of.” Barry’s eyes were puffy and he looked rather doopey and sad, like one of those cheap paintings of warm, wet-nosed puppies. Barry suddenly hugged me, but looking the other way. Bits of hay poked out from his hair and he had a brief perfumey smell like hair-spray. I pulled away. He didn't know what I felt for him. It didn't really exist there, only on the dark street corners of big cities, or bright locales in strange books; for sure in sunny Italy. But for now the way it was, at the corner store those ads on the back pages of Tab International. The way it was, silent and naked and alone under flannel sheets.

Barry walked off, his hand in his windbreaker. Then he turned, threw half a chocolate bar back through the air. I caught it and Barry disappeared into the night. I ate it all in a couple of bites.

I could see the face of my watch in the moonlight; it was two o'clock in the morning. I was moving down the dew-wet black railway ties, far past my own house. I was deep in the West City woods; the sky was clear, but mist was lurking in the cedars. I thought my red sweatshirt must be a fiery spot in the gray of the haze. The tracks crossed over a small wooden bridge, above a high mat of marsh weeds. I leaned over the railing. My head drooped heavy, curly blonde and shaking; it jerked lower as I vomited wine and chocolate into the dark water.

I spat on the railway tracks, wiped my mouth on my sleeve. Behind me the house lights on the edge of town shone like movie spotlights into the dark. Another night I would travel further. I knew that the path of the railway would curve, and some night I would arrive at the bright blue squares of a great sweet-smelling city.

Craig Barron's short fiction has appeared in Event, The Church Wellesley Review, Front & Centre and the anthology The Air Between Us. His play, Men Like Trees, was presented at the AIDS2006 International AIDS Conference, the 2006 BC Gay Men's Health Summit, and at the National Ballet School. A new play will be included in the programme at the 2014 BC Gay Men's Health Summit. Craig has an MFA from the University of British Columbia.
Dennis Rhodes is author of three collections of poetry: *The Letter I*, *Spiritus Pizza and other poems*, and *Entering Dennis*. His work has been published in *The Jersey Journal*, *New York Newsday*, *Fine Gardening*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Alembic*, *Chelsea Station*, and many other publications. Rhodes is a member of the Academy of American Poets and the Worcester County (MA) Poetry Association.
Heart

Let me declaim the provenance of my heart. 
It started out, of course, as mine. 
At 21, I gave it to Joe who took 
reasonably good care of it. 
Somehow, both of us dropped the ball. 
It wound up in the hands of Tim 
where it was badly bruised but not broken. 
Christopher picked it up, wanted to keep it. 
I realized too late I should have let him. 
It was battered about like a soccer ball 
for years. I repossessed it at 60. 
It’s a worn out, tired old thing. 
It still perks up when a young man passes 
and I reach—uselessly—for my glasses.

—Dennis Rhodes
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“Telling truths is something that popular, prolific author and memoirist Felice Picano does extremely well. This is most evident in True Stories: Portraits from My Past, his latest collection of expanded personal essays and life reflections. Picano’s memory is impeccable, and his ear for dialogue just as distinctive and richly realized. Appealing and wonderfully anecdotal, the essays shared here harken back to a cloudless era when fun was freewheeling and the consequences of that fun were overcast at best. With this collection, Picano pays tribute to the many unsung heroes of his past who have long since fallen, forever etched both in memory and the occasional bout of inexplicable laughter and tears.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter
Please hear me out. It’s Beckham Sharp-Plumber. Come back into my life, I beseech you, Lady Hammer. It has been over a year now since we quarreled. Let’s not go into whose “fault” it was. We had so many wonderful times together in the past, it seems a shame to forfeit all that over some minor misunderstanding. Was our friendship really as vulnerable as that? I thought it had a solid foundation, built up from innumerable hours together. We went through thick and thin, with as much “For Better” and “For Worse” as any marriage might have, even though we were never “romantically involved,” as they say. It seems to me that people overvalue conventional romantic relationships—“Will this man marry this woman?”—to the point of overlooking, even demeaning, other male-female relationships. Such other relationships form a significant part of many people’s lives. I think ours did in our lives, don’t you think?
I want to remind you of our times together and perhaps heal this rift between us.

Think of this as a scrapbook of fond memories. I believe it is not too late to rescue “us.”

I don’t expect you to reply, at least not right away. Indeed, I won’t send you this “scrapbook” until I finish it. I don’t know when that may be. Maybe I will never finish it. After all, I am seventy-five years old now. Lots of people I have known are dead. Who knows, I could join them before I reach the end. Perhaps you won’t even read it and simply return it unopened. One must always proceed cautiously with you, as you no doubt appreciate, even relish. Are you still living at your vacation home in Palm Springs? I have the address. I could send it there, and you could read it beside the pool. I hope you have been able to get the place in shape, not that it was shabby before. I do agree with you that it needed a new pool and a cabana for changing outdoors instead of having to go inside the house. And that gazebo you showed me the plans for looked very interesting, with its own Zen garden on the side. I think you are correct; it would enhance the property’s value greatly, should you decide to “flip” the place, as you have done before with other properties. I hope that Palm Springs is not quite as warm as it was when I was there. I must say those temperatures in the 100s at eleven in the morning were hard to deal with. But I loved the way you affixed that spray device to the garage so that the water droplets fanned out and cooled the back garden. You always were good at enhancing your environment. I guess I’m just not used to temperatures that hot since San Francisco is so much cooler. If it gets to eighty here, people scream blood murder.

I hope that lump in your breast was a false alarm, or something that you were able to get remedied since you caught it so early. I hate to say it, but you were always a tiny bit vain about your breasts. I’m sure you would have hated to see them tampered with in any way. I recall how you said that Frank Sinatra loved your breasts and couldn’t seem to get enough of them. I’m sorry that your two times with Frank Sinatra left such a bad taste in your mouth. I know that he took advantage of you as a young assistant in Rome on one of his movies—and you a newlywed too! He was truly a despicable cad in demanding the droit de seigneur (as I believe it’s called) on his movie set. You were so amusing whenever we dined out in a public restaurant and a Sinatra song came on the sound system and you demanded that he be shut off immediately! Those waiters were always amazed at your fury.

How did those laser treatments turn out? You weren’t too pleased with the first one, right? You said it felt like “a thousand pinpricks from tiny devil dicks” on your face. Did you ever go back? You were worried about those two tiny age spots near your earlobe. But they were barely noticeable. Honestly! Your make-up usually covered them up completely. I think about having some laser treatments myself. I have a brown spot right near my nose that needs to go. I also could lose a few pounds—like fifty! I always appreciated your bravery in trying those cosmetic procedures first. I was more squeamish. When you told me that you had jumped up from the laser clinic’s chair and knocked the device out of the assistant’s hand and “fled to safety,” I thought I would die laughing and certainly never try such a thing myself. But my brown spot is growing more unsightly day by day, and I will have to act sooner or later.

And what about those polyps on your vocal cords? They were benign, correct? It’s so fortunate that your new husband has medical coverage, and that you could get treatment through his policy. There is nothing wrong with my vocal cords, I’m happy to report. I still sing, just not at the Met, shall we say. My “career” as a baritone is still on hold. I’m grateful for the “gigs” I had here and there over the years, but a Household Name does not seem to be my destiny. I tried
recording my voice on a new digital whatchamacallit the other day. It sounded a little breathy, alas. I don’t have as much energy for that kind of thing as I once did. I do have an idea for a new song, but we’ll see.

How about you? Have you finished that translation of the screenplay from Italian to English? That was high on your priority list when last we spoke. I hope my notes on the translation were helpful. Don’t take less than $100,000 for it!

Oh, and how is your husband doing? Prostate problems are no laughing matter—except when they are, like when you pee on yourself when you hit a high note. (Guess who!) Tell Beau I said hello. I hope you two have ironed out your difficulties. It’s never easy being in a marriage. Just ask my Janos, even though technically we’re not married.

I guess we could be “legal” now, but I think we passed that need, that phase some time ago. Janos asked me what I’m writing, and when I told him I was writing to Zooli, he said to say hello. He always liked you, and I think you liked Janos. (You didn’t know the Janos that I know, of course, let me add snarkily!)

I’m looking at a photograph I took with my smart-phone when we last visited. Remember, I asked the cleaning lady to take the picture of the two of us, with the water droplets showering us. You look like you could be forty-nine instead of seventy-four. You always had good teeth, and that new short “blonde” hair style suits you. And, no, I don’t think the dark permanent eye liner clashes too much with the hair. (You did ask me what I thought, remember.) You look rested and regal, with your best Lady Hammer expression on your face: “I’m not sure what is happening here exactly, but I am in control of it, or soon will be!” I look sort of dorky. I’ve never taken a good picture in my life. I look every bit as old as my seventy-four years, and the dye on my mustache is pretty obvious and stains the skin on one side. I do think the “coloring” on hair, now that I had finally done it, looks professional. My “colorist” (from Hong Kong) does a much better job than I ever could. So there we are in my “scrapbook,” you looking as genuinely royal as you are, with that beautiful aristocratic nose, and me looking like an ambitious, pug-nosed peasant, but a peasant nonetheless. Ah, what a pair we made!

Do you recall how we met? It was in London, in that theatre course that you admitted later you had signed up for by mistake, thinking it to be some other course.

“The emphasis on musical theatre leaves me cold. I believe we’re in a cult” were your first words to me, in response to my question about how you were enjoying the course. Music never seem to appeal to you at all that much, it seems. You were content to turn off the radio in my car and drive in silence or with intermittent conversation rather than to have “ordinary music” surrounding us. Even when I bought that CD of madrigals you were not impressed. “Oh, Beckham, must we have sound for sound’s sake!” you said on more than one occasion. You could be quite snippy in those early days. But I was determined to make you like me and didn’t argue about the music.

I suppose I stalked you in a way during that first week of the theatre course. Did you realize that? When we sat around in our chairs in that big circle, the forty of us, on that first meeting and introduced ourselves, I must admit that I was very impressed when you said you had been born in England but were “just passing through” at that time, on your way to a series of spa treatments in Hungary with Princess Diana’s favorite masseur. Princess Diana was still alive then. I thought, how exciting to be going for spa treatments anywhere, never mind Hungary. I also recall you
later complaining, amusingly, about the awful hotel accommodations Dr. Tibor had provided in Hungary and how the spa treatments had consisted mostly of Dr. Tibor trying to massaging his female clients below their waists. And when I heard you say that you were renting a place in Malibu “for a year or two,” I confess I was smitten. Not sexually, just socially. My small-town Farmersville, Illinois self was thrilled with the possibility of associating with somebody with your glamour. Did you ever read Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*? She has the heroine admit, tongue in cheek, that she first began to love Mr. Darcy when she laid her eyes on Pemberley, his wonderful estate. The fact that Elizabeth Bennet later comes to love the man himself is very similar to how I came to feel about you personally. It wasn’t just the spas in Hungary and the rented beach house in Malibu. It was the whole package.

Lest you think I was merely a social climber at the time, let me remind you that you never mentioned your royal ancestry, not for a month at least. You had learned, I believe, that Americans are not impressed by “royal lineage” the way the Brits or others might be. In fact, they are usually quite turned off by anything that smacks of “I am superior” because my ancient relatives had titles, or I have a title.” Oh sure, Americans gawk at a royal wedding or a royal scandal, but they don’t really, deep in their hearts, believe that others are superior to them by birth. I didn’t believe it either, though I certainly did lean toward respecting the Upper Class because it was brave and unself-conscious and demanding, all things I felt I lacked myself. You definitely seemed to confirm my expectations in those first days. I think you changed your flight back to California at least five times! And you convinced the airline not to charge you for even one alteration, let alone five. I thought at the time: How thrilling. I would let them charge me five times—if I even had the gumption to change the reservation at all. I would probably sit in an airport overnight and take whatever they decided to give me. But you, Lady Hammer, you didn’t take crap from anybody!

***

Was it that first trip to London or the second, when I went looking for you in that rain? I seem to recall that you were in a pavilion of some kind inside a park. You called me out of the blue and asked me to join you for lunch. Was that the private club that your friend Estella Wentby belonged to? Or was that another time? They are sort of blended in my mind. I can still see Estella sitting there in the restaurant of this huge private park within London looking totally miserable and even unhealthy. She was going through her divorce and also trying to get a nephew or somebody onto the membership list. She was livid and barely noticed me at all. As for the time in the rain, it may have been Hyde Park. You had gone to a knitting goods display or some such and you had suddenly thought, “Beckham’s here! I must see if he can join me.” I had just arrived and was jet-lagged and disoriented, but it was exciting to hear your voice on the phone, and I set off at once to find you. I took a bus and the Tube, maybe two of each, getting a bit lost, and when I finally found the park and was hurrying across the grass, it began to rain, as it will in England, and I got thoroughly drenched. I remember that the park seemed endless, but I kept half-running, half-walking to that pavilion, my hair plastered to my head, my shirt soaked. Even my pant legs were muddy. And then just when I had given up all hope of finding you, you emerged from the pavilion a hundred yards away and waved a royal hand in my direction. “Beckham, is that you?!” you asked with genuine curiosity, as though the rain-soaked me was impenetrable. “I made it!” I gasped. And then you said, “Oh, I ate a bite because I thought you weren’t coming. When I saw the rain, I thought ‘Beckham won’t come out in this, and I had best take some nourishment.’”
You were so casual about it all, amazed that I had run through the rain, and yet you were likewise solicitous about whether I might catch a cold. You insisted that we get some hot tea immediately—no tea bags. Of course I did catch a cold, a terrible one, that turned into bronchitis, and I was in misery for the next ten days. The second day you had to run off to see your son’s South African girlfriend, if I have it right. She was in London for a day or so. You told me later that you wished you had stayed with me, because your son’s girl friend turned out to be “silly” and “selfish,” and “a co-dependent,” apparently meeting up with you only because your son had insisted, and eager to get away as soon as she could. You knitted me a sock during that period. It was supposed to be a pair, but somehow the second one never got finished. I still have it. It’s too small and too ornate with that bright red band around the top, but I still cherish it. It’s in an old suitcase I have in a linen closet, tucked away with lots of other memorabilia from our times together.

I wonder if you have saved anything from our times together. You were pretty ruthless, were you not, when it came to throwing things away? That expensive cashmere sweater that Anthony Quinn gave you, one of twelve in different colors, because of that unfortunate incident in Mykonos. That Gucci travel bag that you decided was an “atrocity” and tossed overboard without so much as a glance, on that ferry to the Isle of Man. And who can forget that husband you left buried in the sandy pebbles at Nice!

(I made up that last one—I think!) You always said that “one should not be saddled with any more baggage than a princess might need to escape the Huns.” So perhaps you have no treasure trove of memorabilia after all. I was always telling you to write your memoirs, was I not? Perhaps I am ghost writing them for you!

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Do you recall when you “came out” as Lady Hammer? It was when some of the others in that theatre course in London wanted to go to the Ritz for tea. They kept calling it “high tea” instead of “afternoon tea,” but you didn’t say anything to clarify the Americans’ misuse of the term. Secretly you may even have enjoyed it, almost patting them on their well-meaning but rather oafish heads in their desire to be seen in a fancy-schmancy hotel with their betters. Janelle from Florida decided that she would call to make the reservation for six. Naturally the Ritz told her that it would be “impossible to book” for at least four months. Everybody was so disappointed. But then you stepped in and called. I was with you when you did. “This is Lady Hammer,” you said in your most aristocratic tones. And before we could say “Blimey,” you had secured the reservation for six the very next day. I could tell from their reaction on the phone, even though I couldn’t see them, that the Ritz staff were bowing and scraping to accommodate this “Lady Hammer,” as only the British and its class system can do. We all had such a good laugh about “fooling the Ritz,” and then it came out, somehow, that you were not faking that accent at all. Americans almost never can do a credible British accent and can’t seem to tell a Cockney from an Earl, to save their souls. It dawned on me then that indeed you must really be the genuine article, though the particulars about the Hammers being the right-hand men of several French kings from William the Conqueror on did not come forth for some time. I will give you credit for not boasting about your heritage. Still, you did use it to get advantages in England. Of course the Americans in the theatre course embarrassed themselves all to Hell at the actual afternoon tea by constantly jumping up and taking snapshots of each other, the “crumpets,” the silver samovar, even the waiter holding the watercress sandwich tray. I can still see the maitre d’ coming over to our table and saying, “Did Lady Hammer somehow hand you her reservation in the street?”
Others also looked askance at our motley crew, who were so oblivious to how crude they were coming across. You told the maitre d’: “Oh, you must forgive them. They are Irish.” Not one of us was Irish actually, but it seemed to satisfy the maitre d’.

I always contrasted that meal at the Ritz with the ones I had with my brother, Willie, who is three years older than I am. His idea of an afternoon snack was “pig knuckles” on white bread, smeared with mayonnaise and devoured in about ten seconds, washed down with pink Kool Aid, followed by multiple belches and farts, which he always found to be hilarious. Aren’t you sorry that you never got to meet my brother? He is not doing too well at the moment, I’ve heard through the sporadic family grapevine. He now suffers from a choking syndrome of some sort, finds it hard to swallow. I suppose I could link it to his early eating habits, but it’s more likely just genetic. We had different fathers, did I tell you? He took after his, with a slight frame and terrible acne with the scars that follow, and a sneer to every smile, again from some sort of lip deformity that he never had fixed. It’s hard to imagine how two such different people as Willie and I managed to live in the same house for so many years. I have been thinking about my brother quite a bit lately. Not fondly. He was a jerk from the day I was born until last month, when he sent me a “birthday card” that asked if I was “still taking it up the ass.”

How does one reply to such a query? “Not so you’d notice”? “Every chance I get”? “Never did it even once”? “Shut your stupid mouth hole, you white nigger, or I will shovel your own mouth shit back in with a trowel”? I’d trust you, Zoolie, to come up with the “proper” response.

I’m a little bit worried about my partner. He has been staying out till all hours, coming home at eight or nine in the morning. Janos has always been a bit of a night owl, but at the age of sixty, he seems to be getting worse. It’s not that we have ever been monogamous, just that we don’t bring “tricks” home and fall in love with somebody else. Janos still looks very handsome at sixty, his head hair as dark chocolate as it ever was, just a few white strands in his beard, really quite attractive. He keeps his weight down by, alas, smoking far too much. He’s on Chantix now to help him stop, but I am not hopeful. He calls me a nag about his ‘hoarding” problem. He calls it “collecting.” What it is is the living room full of his old mail, much of it unopened, old magazines, catalogues, old shirts, underwear (clean, thank God), and cardboard boxes and unused gadgets that he simply can’t or won’t throw away. He has also taken to lightning votive candles in front of the pictures of various “gurus” that he has stuck on the walls. I can’t even go into the living room any longer lest I be buried under an avalanche of his stuff. I tried to visit with him the other night by sitting on the one sofa that has a free space on it. Crap from the piles fell on my shoulders and legs. “This is a sickness!” I said. “You’re right,” Janos said. Of course nothing has changed.

I’m also concerned that he may be eavesdropping, more likely, Peep-Toming, if that’s a word, using my car to do it. I noticed a pair of binoculars in the compartment next to the driver’s seat. They aren’t mine. I guess I don’t really want to know. Did I tell you about the arrest seven years ago? I may have kept it to myself. I was embarrassed. Janos was watching some guy dancing nearly naked in his window (Hey, it’s San Francisco!), and with the marijuana and the speed he thought the window dancer was having an affair with him. For all I know, maybe he was. In court, that guy denied doing anything in his window, but he did allow as how his roommate might have done it. Luckily, Janos got off with probation and a stay-away order. I just hope he’s not back spying through windows. So if he doesn’t burn the place down with his votive candles, maybe he’ll go to jail if he’s caught again. He says I’m a “worrywart.” It is what it is.
I’d like to believe that Janos wouldn’t need to go out searching for his thrills, if we had a better sex life. However, that is not true. He has always been out looking for “thrills” (more like “relief”) in our thirty-three years together. I went out looking for a few of my own, just less so now. I don’t want to burden you with too much detail about our private lives. I’ve always felt that you felt somewhat uncomfortable about my “gay lifestyle,” although you disguised it. I’m sorry to say that I feel no sexual desire for Janos anymore. We had sex for twenty years. Maybe that’s enough. It’s probably more than most people get. The trouble is, Janos still wants to have sex. Just the other night he said, “If I don’t get some soon, I’m going to scream.” Yesterday he said, “We can still have sex. I don’t mind.” I didn’t answer. Sometimes he sits on the side of my bed and gives me that old look we used to use as a signal. But I keep typing away on my computer, seeming not to notice. It’s not like I’m so attractive he can’t keep his hands off me. There’s just too much baggage—the hoarding, the binoculars, the fact that Janos never, ever comes, the thirty-three years together, a backlog of resentments. I suppose most couples continue to do “it” because they have no agreed-upon other outlet. At least with Janos and me, there are other outlets. I’ll bet you there are more murders over sexual frustration that money! See, I am trying to count my blessings. I pay too many of his bills as well. I think I am paying him NOT to have sex!

I remember when you asked me about fellatio, right after you married Beau. You said that you wanted to please him and he had requested some. You assumed I was some sort of expert on the practice. Perhaps you were correct. I think I told you to avoid employing teeth in any way. I suspect that was not easy, with your small mouth and what you implied was Beau’s substantial size. You never said how it went, except that you didn’t see much in it. I think gay men probably get more out of it than straight women do.

Let’s just say it’s not a hardship. I was oddly flattered that you were open enough with me at the time to solicit my expertise.

By the way, did Beau ever express any jealousy about me and you? I realize that he knew I was gay and thus a remote threat for any hanky-panky. Yet it seems to me that straight men who have never had even one gay “experience” believe that any other man wants his woman in that way. The closest we ever came to such an “experience” was in Bucharest on that river boat cruise, the stopover at that lovely hotel with the blue lights all around the bar. You had had one too many Cosmopolitans and I my two rum and Cokes and were sitting opposite each other in those comfy, deep chairs, sharing past memories and being very intimate. I recall that look that came across your face, when it dawned on you that the moment was turning romantic, and you ordered a coffee from our waiter. I appreciated your good judgment then. I might have surrendered to the alcohol and the moment, and both of us would have been very sorry about it. In fact, it could have ended our friendship.

It’s funny how little we know about other people’s actual sex practices, despite the so-called Sexual Liberation of our time. You see the oddest people hooked up and I at least always wonder what they do in bed. Or next to the bed. Or in the pantry.

In the bathtub? In the garage under the car?

By the way, how are you and Beau doing? I know that you filed the first paper for a divorce. Have you followed up? I know that this is a sensitive topic for you, but I continue to think that you should delay any divorce until you absolutely cannot delay any longer. You told me that your friend Estella Wentby says you’re “mad” to leave Beau, for such small offenses. I agree
with her. Yes, he is trying to pull some financial high jinks on you with all those real estate purchases in Las Vegas and Long Beach, but would he really cheat his own wife? Have you gotten a second opinion from a real estate lawyer?

I confess I was a bit surprised when I got that fax from you in Las Vegas with the wedding picture. I had no idea how far along that relationship had developed. I know you made an ultimatum to Beau—no living together in his house without a marriage license—but suddenly there you were, a married woman for the second time! I was very happy for you, knowing as I did that you were often lonely—despite my many letters! I recall you saying how sad you felt on Valentine’s Day at the Marina, where you were living then, seeing all those couples and you had “nobody to hug.” And Beau in that wedding picture looked quite nice, very noble and solemn. He had managed to stand up from his wheelchair to hug you. Both of your eyes seemed a bit dazzled by the photographer’s camera. Yet it seemed like a promising new start, despite his three earlier marriages. He didn’t really seem to mind that you were nine years older than he is. He had “caught” you by looking at your driver’s license. What romantic relationship doesn’t have some flaws in it, if we’re honest? I am sure that you and Beau will work things out. I certainly hope so, and further hope that you don’t act precipitously (as sometimes you do).

There are times when I think about throwing Janos out—the condo is in my name alone. And throwing him to the wolves, somehow fitting with his family’s background, the wilds of Slovenia in the Balkans. He has screwed up the sound system on my computer somehow, even though I have asked him to use his own—he says his is “broken like my English.” He also threw one of my CD’s between the bookcase and a clothes tree yesterday. It was one of my CDs with me singing some of my own songs. He was supposedly “evaluating” the sound quality to see if I need to have it re-mastered. Somehow Janos wound up critiquing my voice all to hell and then throwing the whole CD to drive home the point. (Yes, I am not speaking to him right now.)

Don’t stop unburdening yourself about Beau or anything else you care to talk about. You hinted that you thought you might be “complaining” excessively, nagging your husband through me. I don’t mind having my shoulder cried on. What are friends for if not that? It can’t be all Eastern European river cruises, walks along the beach at Malibu, and drives in the Lake District! Remember, that first trip we took together. I rented a car and we didn’t include your name as a driver? You kept insisting what a good driver you were, and then we had that little unfortunate fender bender when you backed up at a light, in Grasmere, was it? The front bumper of that lady’s car came right off. At least she was gracious about it. In the States, you’d have been shot! It was a bit dicey getting it all sorted out at the Hertz agency when we got back with all that damage still visible, even though you managed to spread some mud over part of it. We decided, as I recall, that it would be easier if I took the blame for the accident, rather than trying to explain why you were driving when your name wasn’t on the agreement. We had some laughs over the whole thing. Of course Hertz wouldn’t rent to me the next year. Thank God for Avis. They try harder. (I like to think I try harder too.)

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A year and a half has passed since I wrote the section above. I have received e-mails from your daughter and even from you, mass e-mails that contain my e-mail address. I don’t know if they are meant to be a “feeler” from you or just an oversight about who remains in your e-mail address book. I have not replied to yours.

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CHELSEA STATION
Today I got your letter, your snail mail letter. I was somewhat shocked to hear from you. It's been three years. I was sorry to hear that Beau has died. I thought the treatments they have now for prostate cancer might have been more effective. I was sorry to hear that his children from his previous marriages are fighting you for a larger portion of the estate. I know you tried to strike up a relationship with Beau's children but they just weren't having it. I am sure you are correct—they were worried that you would supplant them in Beau's will. I am sure that you will prevail. You always seem to.

For some reason, an incident just popped into my head. Remember when we were in Palm Springs and he was sitting on the couch, visiting us for a weekend. Suddenly, he said, “I used to have nine inches. But I think I have lost some now.”

What does one say to that? Do you want me to measure for you? I'm sure you have more than your share? As I recall, I said nothing. So did you.

Well, Beau has gone to his Reward now. I hope that you find a third husband.

I am glad that you will be coming to San Francisco next month, on business. It's nice to see you keeping active.

Unfortunately, I will be unable to see you when you are here. I am busily working on a new song cycle and simply can't take the time off. It may be my very last one, given my age. I have written plenty of songs over the years. If so few people have wanted to hear them, I can always comfort myself that I am “a niche artist.” I certainly never wanted to be “pop,” if that means what I know it to mean.

Our time apart has been difficult at times. I have not been able to find a friend that I can be as confessional and intimate with as you once were. My Janos is off most of his drugs now and I threw out some of his junk last week. There is so much of it, he didn't seem to notice! Good to hear from you.

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I did get your telephone message when you were here. No, I wouldn't have been able to go out to dinner with you. I have been somewhat depressed of late. My cat has not come back for a week, and I fear the worst. He was rather feeble and even a bit demented. I made the decision years ago to let Buddy decide whether to go out or come in at his own choosing. I hate locking up pets. If he has died, at least he died free.

Janos has moved out. I can't say that I am sorry. He met a younger man who has a townhouse, and they seem to suit each other quite well. Janos and I had long since grown apart. Yes, I am lonely sometimes. I even expect to see him and his junk when I come through the front door. But he and it are gone. I sit in the living room now. It is very clean, even spacious. Maybe I will be lonely eventually. Right now I feel liberated.

I hope that you were not disappointed that I was not able to meet with you. I am sure we could have had lots of remembrances together.

I hope this is our last communication. I do not mean to sound harsh, but I have undergone a sea-change. I have fallen out of love with England. The charms of the British Upper Classes seem to escape me now. Not that I have embraced the Lower Orders instead. They are as ignorant and coarse as they ever were. It's merely that I can find no one to root for anymore. I guess it is age. It is pre-death cutting off ties, abandoning the loves of the past. Let it all go.

CHELSEA STATION
I had hoped when I began this little memoir that it would be a whole book and I would send it to you, you would read it, love it, and we would resume our friendship. We might have lost our closest loved ones, the both of us, and we might have had our special relationship to see us through our old age and final days.

However, I am not going to let them happen. I do not want to try to capture our “love” or whatever it was we had together. I’d rather that it be just a memory, fond or not-so-fond as it may be. Goodbye, my old friend, dearest Lady Hammer. We had what we had. And now we do not.

Daniel Curzon (ne Dan Brown) is a Ph.D. and the author of many books of fiction and plays, including the landmark gay protest novel *Something You Do in the Dark*. Christopher Isherwood praised this novel by saying, “I greatly admire Daniel Curzon for writing this book.” Joyce Carol Oates described it as “Engrossing, powerful, and disturbing.” Curzon won the 1999 National New Play Contest for *Gadot Arrives*. His newest books are the *Third Edition of The Big Book of In-Your-Face Gay Etiquette* and a novel about San Francisco, *Halfway to the Stars: Cable Car Tales of a Grumpy Gripman*. This book is a Finalist in Foreword Reviews Book of the Year Awards, in Humor. Curzon denies that he is “a comic genius” (*Amos Lassen Reviews*) but admits to being “occasionally funny.”
"An engaging allegorical pursuit of the mirage that is beauty’s transcendence."
-Kirkus
“J.R. Greenwell does a lovely job of relaying the comic as well as tragicomic aspects of the over-the-top dramatic world of drag queens, and he nails it exactly.”
—Felice Picano, author of True Stories

“Winning, witty, and wise. Greenwell has a talent for creating immediately recognizable yet slightly weird around the edges characters, and he puts them through some wonderfully silly paces as well as some heartbreaking ones. His prose is admirably restrained, conveying a great deal yet never sounding overwritten. But it’s his characters that shine and sparkle like sequins in the spotlight. If you’re looking for a light read that has some substance behind its humor, you’ll hardly go wrong with this collection.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“Eleven clever and engaging stories based in small Southern towns, some sweet and emotional, most amusing and often full of campy bitchiness! The stories are character-driven, with a diverse cast that includes drag queens with attitudes to reckon with, clueless parents trying to deal with their “fabulous” kids, criminals without a lick of common sense, and men “coming out” late in life. This is a home run for this first-time talented author, and a Southern-fried treat for his readers. Five stars out of five!”
—Bob Lind, Echo

“A slew of bizarre stories, some hilarious, some heartrending, and almost all of them as original as an Ionesco play with a good dose of David Lynch trompe l’oeil thrown in. Today’s gay literature needs more voices from Greenwell’s South, and here’s hoping Who the Hell is Rachel Wells? has called them out of the wilderness.”
—Kyle Thomas Smith, Edge

“If you haven’t picked up a copy of Who the Hell is Rachel Wells? yet, then allow me to tell you that you should.”
—’Nathan Burgoine, reviewer and author of Light

“Who the Hell is Rachel Wells? is a collection of eleven short stories about being gay in the South and I loved each of them... Greenwell gives us a wonderful cast of characters with heart and we laugh and cry with them. Written with wit and emotion, we are taken into the world of Southern drag queens and feel what they feel as they navigate life.”
—Amos Lassen, Reviews by Amos Lassen
On Reading *And the Band Played On*
Craig Moreau

“I dozed, I slept. My sleep broke on a hug,”
—Thom Gunn, from *The Hug*

2014 started off with a stomach virus. I checked into the ER and a nurse hooked me up to an IV before moving on to the next patient. Somewhere between a snore and an EKG beep, a younger nurse approached, somewhat nervous, and asked if I would like a free HIV test via mouth swab. She explained I fit the age demographic for those at high risk of infection (18—65). As I answered the nurse’s questions, my stomach flu felt suddenly irrelevant. Not only was this test free, but the test was also encouraged and standardized—not to mention bloodless, quick, and with same day results. The social, medical, political, and moral threads of HIV/AIDS all seemed to connect on the tip of that cotton swab. In my waiting, I considered the heritage of the moment,
buttressed by a recent reading of Randy Shilt’s 1987 work of reportage, *And the Band Played On*.

I thought about how drastically different this would have been ten, twenty, thirty years ago. Many of those cataloged in ATBPO could easily have been a profile of me or my friends if we had been around 30 years earlier. Time was our only difference. I owe a part of my health and welfare to being born after antiretroviral therapies were already available, information was already accessible and actively promoted, and hospitals learned to test and care for HIV. Yet, many of my peers seem unaware of the shoulders (and graves) they stand on. Even more of my peers remain surprisingly uneducated on current treatments, prevention, and how they themselves encourage a culture of stigmatization.

Peter Staley notes about AIDS awareness, “there have been countless ad campaigns, online and otherwise, but they fall on deaf ears.” This is supported by data: a third of new HIV infections in the United States occur to people between the ages of 13-29. Further, this age group reflects the largest increase of infection compared to all other age groups (*CDC*). Why are so many young gay people becoming infected in a world with options for prevention? Finger pointing abounds, not often enough at a public school systems that feel sex education is best left at home (where gay youth may not have a sexually educated parent), but most rampantly the finger lands on stigmatization within our community.

The current environment surrounding HIV/AIDS stigma differs, Staley argues, from that of the past: “[during the crisis] we felt like one community. We were all living with HIV, regardless of status.” Yet, more often than not, my only friends who are aware of HIV/AIDS activism, history, and current treatments are those who have been diagnosed positive. Gay men who choose to remain unaware of HIV/AIDS history deny themselves a lens to see their selves in a larger picture, a picture that can connect us with our creative selves, a picture that resists being placed in boxes or given labels.

For some of us, being gay is our most sacred (and enjoyed) “self”—the one in which we hold the most pride. This self is largely rooted in offering alternatives to the norm. Early queer championing of topics and versions of humanity deemed too perverse or too intolerable once propelled us in imaginative directions, and in doing so, harbored a community that was less concerned with how to fund large lobbyist groups and integration than it was with connecting with one another and looking towards a horizon not yet seen. You can see these efforts documented across a variety of queer life: the drag balls in *Paris is Burning*, the colorful atmosphere of *Florent*, or the brazen activism of ACT UP in *How to Survive a Plague*. The worlds these films document represent moments when queerness transcended a label and became something more. Queerness uses the creativity born out of survival to make the world better—let us not abandon this!

In our efforts to join the institutions which historically have denied or oppressed us (military, marriage, church) we’ve also began to associate ourselves with those institution’s values and lack of understanding. The lack of understanding may not always come from a bad place. It just comes from a lack of queered experience. In our case to gain the rights to marry, serve, and worship we’ve had to sell ourselves as though we’ve been untouched by our queerness. In doing so, we’ve resorted (sometimes unknowingly) to using the tactics of the clubs we’re seeking to join: shaming or othering those we perceive to be below us: doing so gives us a sense of empowerment.
Through our shaming, subtlety and overtly, of HIV positive people we have pushed our queerness away in favor of being “just like everyone else”, and some hope, eventually to something not even gay at all, but “normal.” These efforts have (re)positioned HIV/AIDS counter to that norm, fostering ignorance and replacing anger and fear with indifference. In the film adaptation of And the Band Played On, Dr. Donohue proposes, “When the doctors start acting like businessmen, who do the people turn to for doctors?” Likewise, it might be important to ask, when queers start behaving normally, who do we look to for alternatives to normality?

As I read And The Band Played On, I wanted to interact more with the text. I found the initial descriptions captivating and the characters engaging. I have a largely dormant twitter account and decided to tweet out Shilts’s prose with the added contribution of tagging the institutions and people mentioned by the book. One example, a line from page 43, “In a conversation, the patient mentioned he was gay, but Dr. Gottlieb didn’t think any more than that the guy might drive a @Ford.” #p43“.

The tweets occasionally felt exhilarating as giant corporations and bureaucracies, like the Ford Motor Company, that I otherwise would never contact, were named within the context of Shilts’s research. Doing so felt rebellious as institutions were implicated back to a period some would rather forget. My last tweet in the series was one such example and highlighted the lack of communication and will between two large governmental health organizations: “Still, [Jim] Curran knew that, at best, the @NIH doctors had a condescending attitude toward the younger hotshots at the @CDCgov.”#p95“.

As the reportage continued, the tweets traced the etymology of the virus from its origins as “gay cancer” to “GRID” and finally to HIV. My project started to lose its focus on big bureaucracies and companies as HIV grew into its own body.

By the time the virus was named in the book, the range of tonal options for my tweets was reduced considerably and I found myself missing the tweets which commented upon more approachable themes of love: “Cleave never viewed sex as conquests; they were little romances, brief studies into another idea of what a human being could be.” #p64. The tweets, running parallel to the narrative arc in the book, became increasingly hopeless and frustrated. But more importantly, I began to have issue with the villain of the book. It wasn’t, as I thought, the disease that destroyed so many, but a man Shilts labeled as “Patient-Zero”: a Canadian flight-attendant who frequented bathhouses across the country. There seemed to be something not quite right in naming this man as the cause of an epidemic. It undid the storyline which built up legitimate criticism against organizations and bodies that were supposed to step in during an epidemic. If Shilts couldn’t make HIV the antagonist than why not at least point a figure towards a supremely inept and homophobic Reagan administration or a turf-war minded National Institute of Health? Instead he puts one of the victims of the disease as its harbinger, perhaps creating in his influential book, the first printed example of gay-on-gay shaming.

As a result, I stopped my twitter project after reading page 95. It had simply become too depressing. The narrative spark I first encountered in the book, the spark which motivated me to annotate, had passed on. Yet, I still continued to read. The book was offering a perspective of my identity that I couldn’t access on my own. It added a dimension to the queer part of me which might be described as a “flat character” in the literary world. Flat characters do have purpose—or maybe better stated—they only have purpose. Gayness, when flat, is only about its utility: sex. Gayness, when round, is about its human foibles: we are an identity defined by utility yet able to achieve passion, heroism, villainy, depression, joy and the whole rest of the lot. ATBPO gave context to the many parts of who I am or who I can be.
Some of my peers seem too comfortable with their flatness. Perhaps embracing one’s utility can offer some sense of steadiness; exploring notions of ourselves often feels unsteady and may end up yielding more questions than definitive answers. As a writer I know that these sorts of truths are never easy to live with or to arrive at. Searching for meaning and roundness is hard, grueling and uncomfortable work. It should also be mentioned: no one aspires to be the flat character—we want to be Kirks or Spocks, not just another Red Shirt.

Knowledge of HIV/AIDS issues requires an understanding, even briefly, of that sad narrative which made me quit my somewhat pointless twitter project because “it had simply become too depressing.” Blame and shame, the current standard of discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS, should be replaced by community and openness. However, those notions of community and openness can’t occur if one doesn’t strive to understand the other groups and identities to which they also belong. If you’re gay, you’re inexorably linked to people living with HIV. That might include someone you know but also includes the millions of people you don’t know. Conversely, if you’re living with HIV, you’re inexorably linked to people who are gay. Making a bridge to see beyond yourself, by way of a common ground shared with other individuals, is a giant stride towards a grand truth: that community is ultimately created through compassion. And compassion is one of the only tools we have to stop cycles of shaming and disempowerment.

Those who do not embrace that their gay identity is also an identity connected with HIV do so out of abject fear. Fear that a part of the self they admire and carry pride for, might be wrought with sickness, depression, and emptiness. Through learning about HIV, however, one can not only discover how they are connected with gay men older and younger, but the multitude of people who are present with us and also being rocked by this disease and who continue to combat it, oftentimes without the science we take (or sometimes don’t take) for granted. Not to mention, in our post-modern world, sickness, depression, and emptiness can exist separate from any named disease, present or not. When Staley laments, “we felt like one community” his words sound far and distant. But they can be near and present. This does not have to be a narrative of fear or shame. It can be a story about a gut-check, where a group of people find themselves an opportunity to link their individuality with individuals not unlike themselves. And in doing so, they not only round out their sense of self but realize how powerful a role they have in shaping this story.

Craig Moreau's most recent work appears in *BOMB*, *Electric Literature*, and *The Harvard Summer Review*. He holds an MFA from NYU and his collection of poetry, *Chelsea Boy*, was published by Chelsea Station Editions in 2011. He currently lives in Philadelphia where he teaches at Temple and St. Joseph’s Universities. You can follow him at chelseaboynyc.com.

An audio version of this essay appeared on *The Drunken Odyssey*.

Author photo by Demian Rosenblatt
P.H. Davies is an English poet and writer living in Oxford. He specialises in writing about issues such as same-sex marriage, gay identity, gay childhood and adolescence. He has published a number of poetry collections, including the volumes *Early Poems* (2010) and *Suburbanite* (2012), as well as a novel, *Veneer* (2007). His recent works are a series of ebooks, including the new title *Blood* (2014) about a gay vampire. He plans to publish a third volume of poetry on growing up gay, to be released later this year. He can be found on www.phdavies.co.uk.
The Wolves

The wolves are baying for our blood, their noses twitching for the wound or fissure that would split two hearts between incisor and an iron-clad jaw.

Look at how they gnaw away at trust, fast on the heels of the gullible deer, too slow to see the encircling danger until it lies down to it, almost willing.

How they round on us, quite discreet; the one with a comical, pointed muzzle, the one with eyes dark as the gazelle—prey and predator in the same animal.

The young cub with an innocent smile and untidy mane, the one most awful with the cold, blue shriek in its irises, readied on toned, muscled haunches,

A burgundy stained mouth full of old carcasses. All the others, whose faces grow indistinguishable over the years, fixed archetypes we never grow out of.

Oh their howling in that terrible chorus of counter-tenors, all minor chords as a rallying call for the hunt, on a scent of pheromones released by fear or lust.

—P.H. Davies
"A delightfully spooky, often kooky, gay vision quest. Currier’s Avery Dalyrymple is larger-than-life and intricately flawed, and the fact that he just can’t seem to get out of his own way makes him primed for misadventure and gay mayhem. One of Currier’s strengths has always been the ability to soak his narrative in a rich, authentic ambiance and *The Wolf at the Door* is no exception, with sentences that resonate with the decadent rhythms of the French Quarter and paragraphs that positively drip with Southern gothic moodiness. Genre fans will find plenty to appreciate in Currier’s otherworldly version of *It’s a Wonderful Life* fused with all the ensemble wit of *Tales of the City* and the regional gothic texture of Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire*. Savor this one like a bowlful of spicy jambalaya and a snifter of fine aged bourbon on a hot, humid night."

—Vince Liaguno, *Dark Scribe Magazine*

Praise for *The Wolf at the Door*

"It’s not easy to classify Currier’s novel. The New Orleans setting leads naturally to spirited spookiness, with supernatural proceedings and ghostly manifestations, including that of a gorgeous young man, the late partner of Mack, who is dying of HIV in an upstairs apartment—adding a touch of realistic melancholy to the tale. And the story is also infused with erotic passages. So let’s just classify the novel as really good—a masterful blend of genres that comes together like succulent literary gumbo. Currier’s crew of querulous aging queens, offbeat beautiful boys and assorted oddball friends constitute an endearing found family of queers, while the author’s historical flashbacks conjure the Big Easy’s atmospheric past."

—Richard Labonté, *Bookmarks*

"Currier is a master storyteller of speculative fiction, and this novel is unique in that it takes a group of unbelievers (whom I can identify with) and gradually forces them to accept the reality of what they are experiencing. Very creative story, told with a dry wit by a group of highly diverse, realistic, flawed individuals who become links to the past and instrumental in helping some tortured souls find their rest. Outstanding for those who appreciate this genre of fiction. Five ghostly stars out of five."

—Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*

"Refreshingly light and witty.... The chatty first person narrative is augmented by historically accurate journals, diaries, and slave narratives. The bright, hopeful tone of the prose and Currier’s love for his imperfect characters makes this a charming read."

—Craig Gidney, *Lambda Literary*

"Stirring a gumbo pot of characters and subplots, Currier keeps his unlikely mix of ingredients at a perfect simmer as they meld into a singularly delectable story with a sense of place so rich, readers may be enticed to head to Louisiana and experience the novel’s setting firsthand."

—Jim Gladstone, *Passport*
"In his introduction, James Currier writes of forming the desire a number of years ago to move beyond his reputation as an AIDS writer. In reinventing himself, he remained concerned as ever with issues relevant to the lives of contemporary gay men. Setting down a list of topics to address, he included—substance abuse, gay marriage, serving in the military, domestic abuse in gay relationships, hate crimes, homophobia, and living outside of urban areas—all represented here. At the same time, Currier began a study of classic ghost stories, a genre that had fascinated him since boyhood. (Favorites mentioned are the works of M. R. James, Henry James, E. F. Benson, Edith Wharton, and Ambrose Bierce.) The best of the resulting collection draws upon the past in observing the present, and in doing so never fails to disturb and entertain.”
—Joyce Meggett, ALA GLBTRT Newsletter

Praise for The Haunted Heart and Other Tales

“I am completely amazed by the range of ghost stories in this collection. These are awesome ghost stories, and the literary connections to gay life are deep and complex.”
—Chad Helder, Unspeakable Horror and The Pop-Up Book of Death

“Currier’s characters are sumptuous, his plots are freshly twisted and his prose magnificent. A perfectly chilling collection of tales from one of the modern masters of the genre. Powerful stuff, indeed.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“Currier’s writing is flawless and his knack for conveying emotion, with both the spoken words and thoughts of his characters, is unparalleled. Fans of the author have come to expect that his work isn’t exactly light or escapist, which makes it all the more affecting.”
—Chris Verleger, Edge

“I found each of these stories just as satisfying and unique as a full length novel, so much so that, as I often do with longer stories, I thought about each story for days after I finished reading it. Give it five twisted stars out of five.”
—Bob Lind, Echo Magazine

“Jameson Currier’s The Haunted Heart and Other Tales expands upon the usual ghost story tropes by imbuing them with deep metaphorical resonance to the queer experience. Infused with flawed, three-dimensional characters, this first-rate collection strikes all the right chords in just the right places. Equal parts unnerving and heartrending, these chilling tales are testament to Currier’s literary prowess and the profound humanity at the core of his writing. Gay, straight, twisted like a pretzel...his writing is simply not to be missed by any reader with a taste for good fiction.”
—Vince Liaguno, Dark Scribe Magazine

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
I’d started collecting the snow globes during a summer abroad in Europe before my senior year in college. I didn’t have room in my backpack for the usual souvenirs—beer steins, ashtrays, paperweights in the shape of the Eiffel Tower or the Coliseum, so I picked up a plastic snow globe in Frankfurt because it was cheap and small and light, and then got another one at the train station in Munich, then another in Vienna, and a few more in Venice, Florence, and Rome. By the time I was at the airport to return home, I had a dozen that I carried safely on board the plane in a plastic shopping bag. After then, whenever I traveled, I continued to pick up a snow globe as a souvenir—sometimes by special design at a hotel or museum gift shop, other times hurriedly at the last minute as I was running to the airport gate to make a flight. By the time Allan and I set
up house together I had collected more than two hundred snow globes and when we adopted our son Justin I began to bring them back as gifts for him. At eight, his own collection exceeded more than a hundred and included snow globes from as far away as Tokyo, where I had gone one year for an economics conference.

I’d picked up this particular snow globe during a road trip upstate—my uncle had passed away and I had braved the bad winter weather alone on a four-hour drive to attend the funeral and check up on my parents. Allan had stayed home with the two children—his own job in the city and the kids’ school schedules made it too difficult to take the whole family for a midweek outing such as this. The services were somber and respectful, as they usually were in my family, and by the time I left my parents’ house for the drive back to my home, the icy rain had turned to snow. The drive was slow and exhausting—I’d had to concentrate harder because of the slippery and icy patches, so I stopped at a village midway through the trip that Allan liked to shop at when we made the trip with the kids in the warmer, summer months. It was a cluster of gingerbread Victorian houses and shops and restaurants, a mix of retail outlets, craft stores, and antique shops, nestled in a small valley among the mountains. The kids particularly liked the more unusual stores—the kite shop, the chocolaterie, and the toy store filled with nearly every kind of stuffed animal imaginable. I’d only stopped at the village to fill up the gas tank and stretch, but decided to eat something at the coffee shop and afterward stopped in the store next door, an antique shop full of eccentric and unusual curiosities, which is where I found the snow globe.

It was made of glass, not plastic, like a few of my special ones were—the one I had picked up in Aspen, the one my sister had brought back from Manhattan, and the one Allan and I got on our first vacation together in Mexico. This snow globe featured a ceramic Queen Anne Victorian house designed like many found in this village, a set of stairs leading up to a large front porch and a blue-painted front door with a stained glass window. The trim of the bay windows and gingerbread latticework were also painted in the same soft blue color, but the wood of the upper floors was of a deeper tone, and the dark gabled roof and black shingling gave the house a strong silhouette. But it wasn’t the house that I first noticed when I spotted the globe sitting on a table next to a stack of leather-bound books, but the flakes of snow stirring in the water; before I even reached out to pick it up and shake it, the snowflakes were swirling as if the globe contained its own storm.

I hesitated to purchase it. Allan disliked me bringing back glass-domed snow globes for the kids—the last one I had brought back from the Smithsonian had dropped and shattered in less than fifteen minutes back in the house and months later he was still finding little specs of glitter, which had been in the water, on the carpet. But I knew Justin would like it and so I bought it, and gave it to my son when I reached home, with a warning to be careful with it—he should find a permanent place for it and let it stay there and not keep picking it up. He took to it right away, calling it both “cool” and “spooky.” I’d arrived back home close to his bedtime, and he ignored the TV to study the snow and the three-story painted house. He placed the globe on a lower shelf of the bookshelf in the dining room, where he could sit on the rug and stare at it, much to the displeasure of Allan, who always liked to think that that room of the house was off limits except for special occasions. But the box of chocolates I had also stopped to purchase for Allan, along with the small stuffed toy turtle I found for Claire, our five year-old daughter, smoothed out my partner’s cranky disposition.
“Tom, did you see the lady in the top window?” my son asked while Allan told me to get him upstairs and ready for bed. Justin was on his knees, his eyes close to the glass and from where I stood in the doorway the snowflakes swirled steadily inside as if cast by an enchanted spell.

“What lady?” I asked, leaning down over him. I vaguely remembered seeing something different about one of the upstairs windows when I had picked up the globe in the antique shop—a faint glow, as if there were a table lamp or candle inside the room.

“On the second floor,” Justin said. “You can see her dress.”

I looked at the upper floors of the house through the swirling snow and Justin tapped the glass lightly with a finger where he had seen the shape of the woman. At the end of a row of darkened windows there was one that was distinctly white, and in the background of the room was the silhouette of a woman’s dress. “There’s someone beside her, too,” I said. Another small form was barely discernible, as if it were a child’s head.

“Where?” Justin asked. He looked deeper into the water and the snow and the house. He sighed when he spotted the smaller figure, then said, “No, there’s two kids. She’s got two kids beside her. Maybe she’s putting them to bed.”

That was my cue to become a father myself, urging Justin to go upstairs to bed, but instead I looked into the snow to find the three figures. “What makes the snow move so fast?” Justin asked me.

“You must have hit it,” I said.

Justin protested, saying he hadn’t touched it at all. The snow was falling on its own. This was when I told him it was past his bedtime, and I followed him upstairs to his room, kissed him good-night, and checked on Claire in her bedroom. She was already asleep in one of her awkward, contorted positions, half on and half off the bed. I was the last to go to bed that night—I watched the late news and Leno’s monologue, then made sure the front and back doors were locked, the security system was activated, and all the lights were off, and went upstairs. It had been Allan’s idea to adopt children and move to the suburbs to better raise them, and at first our presence in the neighborhood had unsettled a few of our stodgier neighbors. We’d suffered through a period of egged cars and flattened mailboxes. But we weathered that as we often weathered the bad weather, though I’d always found it queer that I was more suspicious of everything living here, in middle-class America, than I had ever been on my own in a two-room tenement in the downtown gay ghetto.

In the bedroom, Allan was sleeping on his side, and I settled in around him and fell easily asleep. It wasn’t much later—or seemed to be not much later—that I heard a noise downstairs. It sounded like the back door of the house opening and shutting—the particular sounding whumpf that door had. Our house was a typical kind of suburban ranch style—a long first floor leading to a staircase and a smaller second floor with bedrooms and baths. Next I heard the kitchen floor creak like it always does when there’s too much weight passing on top of the floorboards. I lay still, trying to imagine if it could be one of the kids. Lately, they had become sound sleepers, not waking up during the night, and whenever they did, whenever they were scared or hungry or not feeling well, they came to our bedroom first, never going downstairs to the kitchen. When the idea occurred to me that we might be being robbed, I began to think of what kind of defense I might have upstairs to use against intruders—an industrial flashlight that I kept in the closet, a blow-dryer in the shape of a gun, the ceramic base of the lamp on the table beside the bed. I got
up and easily found the flashlight on the closet floor, then went to the hallway to listen more closely.

The sound had stopped and I waited a minute before heading downstairs. I made my steps on the staircase heavy and noisy; in case there were intruders, my goal was not to surprise them but to make them flee. I walked heavily into the family room, where only a few minutes earlier I had been watching TV, and flipped on the overhead light, but found no one, and nothing was disturbed. Then I went into the kitchen to check the back door.

I found no one in the house, nor anything suspicious that might convince me that there had been intruders—the back door was safely locked, the sliding glass door which led to the outside patio was locked and closed, the house’s security system was still on and armed. As I was turning out the downstairs lights to return upstairs, I stopped in to check on the status of the living room and dining room. No one was there, either, though when I entered the dining room I felt a sudden blast of cold air, as if a window was open. Outside there was a howling winter wind, and I rationalized a good strong gust must have hit the house and unsettled the back door, the kitchen floor, and the air in the dining room. I checked the windows but they were all securely closed and locked, and then I went back upstairs. As I was passing by Justin’s room, I thought I heard him crying. I stopped and looked in—he was sleeping on his side but trying to say something in his sleep, which sounded like whining. He awoke just as I came toward him.

“You’re okay,” I said, reaching out to my son. “It must have been a bad dream.”

“I saw a woman,” he said. “She was trying to say something to me but she couldn’t—she had holes in her face.”

“It was just a bad dream,” I said again.

I waited till Justin was calm and back asleep and then I checked on Claire and went into my bedroom. Allan was sleeping in the same position Justin had been in and now he was mumbling something in his sleep. He awoke as I slipped into the bed.

“What is it?” I asked him.

He looked at me as if I had been in his dream, too. “Just a dream,” he said. “I thought there was a woman in our room.”

“A woman?” I asked him. “What kind of woman?”

“She had a strange face,” Allan said. “Full of holes.”

I didn’t say anything about Justin having had the same dream. In fact, I was a little slow in connecting the two similar nightmares—by now I was relieved that there was no intruder in the house and tired and exhausted and thinking how I would feel the next day at work if I didn’t get to sleep soon. I didn’t even tell Allan that I had gotten up because I had suspected there was an intruder in the house. “It was just a dream,” I said to him. “I have to get some sleep or it will be hell tomorrow.”

In the morning I found Justin sitting on the floor of the dining room, looking at our newest snow globe again. “They’re gone,” he said when he saw me standing at the doorway watching him. “The lady and the two kids.”

“It must have been the snow,” I said. “Or maybe there was something stuck to the side of the house. Some of the old globes have dust in the water. Maybe it was just dust.”
In the kitchen I found Allan in a particularly agitated mood. “I didn’t sleep well last night,” he said. “I kept having that same dream over and over.”

I thought he was going to say something about the woman with the holes in her face, but he said, instead, “I kept trying to get to Justin and Claire and I couldn’t. I couldn’t seem to get to them, even though they were near me. They were frightened and I knew something was going to harm them.” He sighed, and then yelled to Justin in the other room. “If you don’t eat something right now, young man, I’m not going to put any cookies in your lunch bag.”

I left Allan to find Claire in the den watching TV. She was half-dressed in her pajamas and school outfit and talking to the rag doll she had in her lap. Our morning routine was that I would get Claire ready and Allan would tend to Justin, our more hyperactive child. I would drop off Claire at kindergarten, a longer drive, and Allan would take Justin to the elementary school on the corner. Two kids, two cars, two parents—each with their own destination.

“Who are you talking to?” I asked Claire when I turned off the TV.

“Sally said she had a doll just like this,” Claire said.

“Who’s Sally?” I asked.

“Ben’s sister,” Claire answered.

“Who’s Ben?”

Claire laughed as I lifted her off the floor and carried her in my arms out of the room. “He’s Sally’s brother!” she squealed.

On the drive to Claire’s school she continued to talk to her imaginary friends. She was in the backseat of the car, bundled up in a puffy pink coat and ski cap and buckled into a car seat so I could see her through my rearview mirror.

“Where did you meet Ben and Sally?” I asked Claire.

She giggled again and said, “They’re waiting for their mommie!”

“Their mommie?” I echoed from the front seat. “Where’s their mommie?”

“She went to look for the other mommie!”

“Oh,” I answered her, as if it all made sense.

At the school, Claire asked me if it was okay for Ben and Sally to wait in the car for their mommies. I tried not to show my annoyance—I thought this silliness had gone far enough, but I didn’t want to scold Claire and send her off to school agitated. “Sure, they can wait,” I said.

“They said it’s safe in the car,” Claire said while I was unbuckling her from the car seat and helping her to the ground. “They don’t think the bogeymen will find them in the car.”

“The bogeymen?”

“Yes,” Claire said. “That’s where their other mommie went—to find the bogeymen.”

“That’s enough, Claire,” I finally said, and we walked together into the school building. “Don’t worry about Ben and Sally,” I said when we had reached the door of her classroom. I had had a change of heart about the imaginary friends—or, rather, I had stumbled into the mental conundrum of what exactly a parent should say to a child who had an imaginary friend. I thought
that perhaps the gentler approach was a better one. “Don’t try to eat the crayons,” I said next, as if I had to find something parental to say.

“We’re not coloring today,” she said.

I kissed her on the top of the head, watched her enter the classroom, and then walked back to my car. For a moment I expected to find Ben and Sally seated and waiting for me, but by the time I reached the highway I had forgotten about my daughter’s friends, thinking, instead, of the confrontations ahead in the office.

When I got home from work that evening, Justin was again in front of the new snow globe in the dining room.

“She’s on the steps,” Justin said.

“What do you mean?” I asked him. My tone was short and annoyed. I had had a stressful day grappling with an analyst’s report that had been released that morning, and it had affected my work schedule and meetings throughout the day—one person after the next complaining about the report.

“There’s two guys on the steps that go up to the front door,” he said. “They look like they’re carrying guns or something.”

I loosened my necktie and squatted beside my son, looking over his shoulder and into the glass globe. Sure enough, barely visible through the snow, there were two tiny figures waiting on the steps of the house and carrying something in their arms. “Looks like rakes,” I said. “Or brooms. They were probably there yesterday and we just didn’t see them.”

“They weren’t there yesterday,” my son protested. “I know they weren’t there yesterday.”

I watched the swirling snow inside the globe. Neither of us had touched it and I felt the defensive pang of a parent confronted with something he knew he could not explain. “Go wash your hands,” I said to my son. “Allan’s ready for supper.”

At the dinner table there was no further discussion about the globe, the two strange men, Claire’s imaginary friends, the bogeymen, or the nightmare woman with holes in her head. Allan had turned on the TV that sat on the counter and the kids sat watching a program of funny home video clips. Tomorrow was Saturday and Allan was eager to find some activity to keep the kids occupied—we were in the lull between the end of the winter session of karate and ballet classes and the beginning of the spring ones.

“The weather’s supposed to be lousy,” I said. “We could take them to the movies.”

Allan mentioned that he would check the movie schedules and then added he might take Justin to get new shoes—he was close to growing out of the new ones he had gotten a few months ago.

After dinner, Justin found me in the den reading the newspaper. “They’re at the door,” he yelled at me. “The two guys are at the door now.”

“It must be a piece of dust that’s floating around,” I said.

“No, Tom, come check it out,” he said. “They’re there. At the door. And they both have guns.”

The tone of his voice both alarmed and irritated me. “Justin, if you keep this up, I’m going to have to put it away.”
He seemed to take note of my annoyance—finally, I acted and sounded like a parent, the kind of parent I never wanted to be. I remembered my father displaying the same behavior toward me when I was a kid and he didn’t want to be disturbed. I tried to find a better way out of it and be a better father to my children. “Why don’t you and Claire watch one of your videos?” I said to him.

My suggestion worked. Justin abandoned the snow globe and the kids watched *Monsters, Inc.* for the three-hundredth time, then Allan and I settled them into their beds upstairs. Again that night I stayed up later than Allan—watching the late news, the Leno monologue, and then the beginning of a behind-the-scenes documentary on the movie *Poltergeist* before I fell asleep on the couch in the den. I woke when I thought I heard the sound of shattering glass—it sounded as if the sliding glass door had fallen off its runners and shattered on the cement ground of the patio. I got up to check on it and heard again the distinctive squeak of the kitchen floor. My heart was rapidly beating in my chest as I approached the kitchen—we either had intruders or someone in the kitchen had hurt himself. I didn’t bother to reach for any kind of weapon—I was not thinking that fast this evening—only reacting quickly to find the source of the disturbance. When I walked into the kitchen no one was there—the back door was locked, the sliding glass door was in place and perfectly fine, undamaged. It, too, was locked. I looked out the glass door to the patio, thinking I might see someone out there on the fringe of the lawn, but there was nothing except the bare, cold winter night—clumps of snow that had never melted surrounding the posts of our backyard fence. I checked the doors again, activated the security alarm, then went and turned the TV off, ready to go upstairs, thinking I must have heard something in the TV show or a commercial that had made its way into a dream I was having.

Before I went upstairs I stopped to check the living and dining rooms and, again, I felt a bitter blast of cold air surround me. I flipped on a lamp and leaned down and looked at the new snow globe on the lower shelf. There were no figures in front of the house but I noticed now that the pale blue front door—which had always been closed before—was open. On the second floor, where the night before I had seen the light in the window with three figures, the window and the room behind it were dark. But the snow continued to swirl inside the globe. I felt the sides of the bookcase, wondering if I might feel an undetected vibration of the house, but I sensed nothing except my own bafflement. I stopped looking and stretched my back, thinking I was just tired, and tried to shake the heavy concentration from my mind. I felt I was just imagining it all, so I turned off the light and went upstairs to bed.

But again it was a restless night for the family. This time Claire woke up crying, saying she had seen a woman with an ugly face. Allan settled her down, only for her to wake up a few minutes later and crawl into our bed between us. This time I fell into my own version of the nightmare. I dreamed that I saw two men breaking into the house—not our house, but the house in the snow globe. They had entered through the pale blue front door, jimmying it open. They had found a woman first, in one of the ground floor rooms, gagged her, and bound her to a chair behind a desk. Then one of the fellows, a short, dark-haired man, brought two children into the room—kids who looked frighteningly like Justin and Claire. The men kept the woman and children bound for a long time, as if they were waiting for someone else to arrive. In the dream I walked into the room and was bound and gagged myself. I watched as the woman was shot first—blasted through the face with a shotgun. Then the children were shot. I had been made to witness it all. I woke, sweating through the T-shirt I had worn to bed, when the shotgun was pointed at me in the dream.
The next morning I didn’t tell Allan or the children about the dream, but on my way downstairs to eat breakfast I stopped to look at the new snow globe. The blue front door of the Victorian house was closed, the windows on the top floor were dark, and where I and my son had once seen figures on the front steps, now there was no one. But the snowing had not stopped inside the globe. In the kitchen, I was about to confess my bewilderment to Allan, but he complained first about being unable to sleep again the night before. While Claire and Justin were eating their cereal, he whispered to me his own version of the nightmare I had had. He had dreamed he was in an old house and had been reading a story to the children when he heard something downstairs—a crash, as if a window pane had been shattered. He had stepped outside the room to check on the sound but had found nothing, and had gone back to reading with the children when he heard footsteps creaking on the old stairs of the house. Again, he went to check on the sound and found nothing. “We were asleep when they came into the rooms,” he said. “They brought us all to one room and shot us. We had to watch them shoot the children.”

“It was just a dream,” I said, not daring to tell him of my own nightmare or any of my other suspicions.

Claire interrupted us by asking, “Allan, can Ben and Sally play in my room?”

“Who are Ben and Sally?” Allan asked.

“My friends!” Claire answered.

“We’ll have to ask their mommie first,” Allan said.

I would have explained to my partner that Ben and Sally were Claire’s imaginary friends and he would have to ask their imaginary mother, but the phone rang and I went to answer it. It was one of my bosses from the office, explaining that the senior managers had held a special Saturday morning teleconference to respond to the damaging analyst’s report, and I was expected to be in the office later that day to help formulate the company’s response. I had taken the cordless phone and walked to a corner of the kitchen, away from Allan and the kids, and when I realized that I was being asked to leave my family for the day I turned and looked at Allan, as if to let him know I was going to have a change of plans. That was when I felt the cold air surrounding me and I saw a ghostly shape of gray haze standing beside Allan. “I can’t be there,” I suddenly told my boss. “I can’t do it. I’m having a family emergency.”

I hung up the phone and faced the perplexed stare of my significant other. The gray shape beside him had disappeared and I said, “Get the children ready. We’re all getting out of the house for a while.”

“What’s going on?” Allan asked me.

“I’m not sure,” I answered. “But I don’t think we should be in the house.”

The kids were ready before Allan and I were, and on my way out to the car, I stopped in the dining room and placed the new snow globe in a paper sack. When I got in the car, I handed it to Allan with the instructions, “Don’t open it. Don’t look at it.” I’m not sure why I said that, except that perhaps I feared he would see something he had only imagined happening. As I backed the car out of the driveway, I noticed Claire, in the backseat, whispering to someone.

“What is it?” I asked my daughter. “Who are you talking to?”

“Nobody, Tom,” she said, her eyes wide and full of fear.
I knew she was lying. I stopped the car and said more sternly, “Tell them to get out of the car.”

“Why Daddy?” Claire whined.

“Tell them to get out.”

There was a confusing scene—Allan asking what was going on, Claire bursting into tears, Justin crouching against the other car door. I hopped out of the car and opened the door next to Claire.

“Tell them to stay with their mommie,” I said.

“No, Tom-eeee,” Claire said. “They don’t want to.”

“Tell them.”

Claire mumbled something through her tears, and once I was satisfied that she had left her imaginary friends behind I started the car and we were headed away from the house. The kids had never seen me act this harshly before, and I had a palpable fear that these moments would be the ones they would remember about their childhood and their overbearing, strict parent. Allan was confused and irritated with me and tried to play good cop to my bad cop, but the trip to the village was longer and more frustrating than I had anticipated. There was an accident on the highway, one of the lanes was closed for construction, and the exit was clogged with weekend tourists hoping to shop at the discount outlet stores that ringed the area. I parked our car in the parking lot of the coffee shop where I had eaten only a few days before. I told Allan that it was best if all of us stayed together in the antique store. The kids didn’t understand this protective urge of mine—Claire had no interest in the store, and she let out a high-pitched whine as we passed by the toy store. Allan was now pressed into the role of being the stern parent. He pleaded with Claire to behave better, while Justin looked on, his face dismayed and unhappy.

In the antique store I found the old man who had sold me the snow globe. Allan had managed to keep the kids nearby and distracted, looking through a rack of vintage comic books, while he remained close enough to overhear my question. When I lifted the snow globe out of the bag, I asked the man, “Can you tell me something about this? I bought it here a few days before.”

“That’s the old Hartman-Monroe house,” he said. “It was the first of its kind in the village. They tore it down more than thirty years ago.”


“Spooks,” he answered, smiling. “Said it was haunted.”

“Haunted?” I said. “By whom? What happened?”

The old man walked away from the counter, stepped into the aisle near Allan and the kids, and came back with a small paperback book—a tourist guide to the area. “It’s all right here in this section,” he said. “The Monroes—the family that built the house—were murdered one night in 1932. By drifters. It was the Depression, and the legend goes that the drifters had helped build the house and came back to ransack it for money out of a safe. Mr. Monroe had died the year before. Freak accident in the snow; his sister had moved into the house to help his widow take care of the two kids. The two fellers shot the entire family. There was a nationwide search for the killers. When they were finally caught, they were tried and both of ’em got the chair.”

I took the book from the old man and asked, “Are there any more details in here?”
“Sure, lots more,” he said. “Clippings from the newspaper. A few photographs. Lots about the Hartmans.”

“The Hartmans?” I asked.

“The family who owned the house in the 1950s,” he said. “Same kind of thing happened to them. Mrs. Hartman divorced her husband and a lady friend moved into the house to help her raise the kids. Lots of gossip about them two women. Then, two drifters came and killed the whole family one night.”

I looked over at Allan and saw that he had gone pale. I told the old man that I wanted to buy a copy of the book, and as he was ringing up the sale, I asked him, “Who made the snow globe?”

“The snow globe?” he answered. “Not sure about that. It’s been here for years—it was part of the inventory when I bought the shop about six years ago. No one never wanted it until you came along.”

Allan and I agreed that it was best to keep the kids occupied and entertained while we discussed what to do next. Somehow it was late afternoon when we had finished shopping through the stores and I had read in the guidebook what had happened to Melissa Hartman and her friend, Dianne Sanderson, and the two children. Two men, drifters, one just out of jail and the other waiting for him, had driven past the house one day and decided to rob it. During the robbery, the man just out of jail lost his temper, and killed the family in the downstairs parlor. The coroner had established that Mrs. Hartman and Miss Sanderson had watched the drifters kill the children first, then Mrs. Hartman had watched her companion shot. All of the family had died from gunshot through the head. The children were ages six and eight—a girl named Sally and an older brother named Ben.

We stopped to have dinner in the coffee shop before the long drive home—the kids were restless and hungry. While we were ordering it started to snow outside, not a light snow, but a sky full of thick, fat snowflakes that quickly coated and covered everything in sight. I knew this would mean a long and difficult drive home, and since I was the one of the four of us facing the large picture window, I sat and watched the snow come down harder and harder on the parking lot of cars and the old Victorian shops, feeling anxious and uneasy. “I don’t think we should drive in this,” Allan said first. “How can we see?”

“We’ll give it a bit,” I said. “Or there’s a motel near the highway if we need to stop.”

“That’s too far to drive,” he said. “We should try to find something here. There was a place across the street in one of the old houses.”

When the waitress came and took our order, Allan asked the name of the guesthouse across the street, then he used his cellphone to see if a room was available. The clerk told him one room was left and Allan asked if it was big enough to accommodate a family of four. The man put Allan on hold while he checked on portable bed arrangements, and when Allan hung up he seemed relieved to have it all worked out so quickly, telling me that we could stay at the inn across the street until it was safe to drive back to our house.

The kids were delighted with this plan, and their spirits improved. Claire thought this meant that she would be able to sleep in the toy store, and Allan explained to her that we were going to be across the street, and that the store would be closed. Claire was disappointed, almost to the point
of tears, but after dinner we stopped in the store and bought the kids books and a board game to keep them amused. This seemed to redeem us once again in the eyes of our children.

The inn was not a duplicate of the house in the snow globe, but it was eerily similar—a large front porch, bay windows, and a front door with a tiny stained glass window. Electric candles were glowing in all the windows, and the gabled roof and gingerbread trelliswork had been covered with tiny icicle lights, so that through the falling snow it looked as if we were approaching an enchanted cottage. Inside, the rooms of the inn were painted in frosty gumdrop colors, but they failed to hide the slightly musty odor of the aging wood and antique furniture, and I greeted every suspicious creak and crack as if it were a bad omen.

It took me a long time to settle in the room. I kept looking out the window at the snow, hoping it would stop, or just lessen, and we would be able to leave the inn and make the two-hour drive back to our home. I didn’t feel safe in the inn. I’d had this crazy notion running around my mind that we were actually staying inside that house—inside the Victorian house in the snow globe—and that somehow we had changed homes with the ghosts and now we were going to be assaulted. I didn’t tell Allan this, of course, but he knew I was jittery and uneasy. Once the kids had calmed down and were watching TV, he picked up the guidebook and began to read about the village, asking me questions or reading passages out loud. I had kept the snow globe in a bag in the closet, and once Justin had fallen asleep and Claire was just about to drop off, I went to the closet to get it to study again.

“Do you really think that Claire saw the kids?” Allan asked me, looking up from his reading.

“I think so,” I said. “Because she did leave them behind. But it’s strange. Look at the picture of the Monroes, the family before them. Is that the woman you saw in your dream?”

Allan flipped through the pages of the guide and found the picture of the Monroe family, looking at it silently without commenting. Finally, he breathed in a nervous gasp of air and said, “It was a dream. It wasn’t real.”

“But it was her,” I said. “I’d swear in a court of law that I had seen her before.”

“Is that what spooked you? In the kitchen this morning?”

“I sensed something that told me we had to get out of the house,” I told my partner honestly. “I can’t say that I believe in ghosts.”

He closed the book and said, “It’s all really silly and coincidental. I used to read ghost stories all the time when I was a boy. They never frightened me, because I always felt there was a reason for the ghost; like it was in the house because the spirit wasn’t settled into death—murdered, or hidden inside a wall, or buried beneath the floor of the basement. Sometimes they were after revenge, or trying to warn another generation about trouble.” When he stopped talking his expression froze, as if he were imagining confronting a ghost, then he sighed and said, “It will all work out.” This admission seemed to calm him, and I knew he was ready to sleep.

There was nothing unusual now about the house in the snow globe. The second floor windows were dark and shut, the front door was closed, the figures I had seen on the steps and the front porch were no longer there. But the snow continued to swirl inside the globe, and its movement kept me wondering about what could happen to us next. I set the globe down on the night stand and turned out the lamp beside the bed. The light from the TV set flickered eerily through the room, until I found the remote control and turned it off when I felt sleepy. I didn’t fall asleep.
quickly, however. The creaking and cracking sounds of the inn shifting under the weight of the falling snow kept me awake and nervous.

The ringing sound of a phone awakened me sometime later, when I had managed to drift into a light dream. It had a faint, muffled sound to it, as if it were in another room or hidden away somewhere. Allan, too, awoke when he heard it, and he stumbled out of the bed to the chair on the other side of the room, where he had left his coat with the cellphone in the pocket.

After a few seconds he turned to me and whispered, “It’s the alarm company. Someone’s broken into the house.”

I took the phone from him and we went into the bathroom together and turned on the light, where I could wake up and talk calmly, without disturbing the children. The man from our home security company said that a windowpane on our back door had been broken and the house entered. The police had arrived quickly and nothing seemed missing except the downstairs TV. We talked quite a bit with the security representative, as he asked questions about where the TVs were located in the house, if we had a computer or stereo equipment, and what kind of valuables we might have owned. Allan had nothing of real value except a Rolex watch he never wore, and it sounded like the robbers were in search of quick cash. The man assured us that the house was again secure and locked—a board had already been placed over the broken glass pane of the door. Before I hung up, I asked the rep how heavy the snow fall was in the area. He seemed stumped for a moment, and there was the sound of empty air on the phone line; then he said, “It’s not snowing here. But it’s cold. Your house is really cold. You should keep the thermostat a little higher.”

The next morning the snowing had stopped in the village and I was anxious to return home, but Allan said he didn’t want to rush the children, didn’t want them to arrive at the house frightened and worried. We ate again at the coffee shop across the street, and let the kids play a few minutes in the snow-covered field above the parking lot, before brushing them off and settling them in the car. Throughout the morning I had checked the snow globe—looking at the top floor windows, the front door, the steps—but saw no sign of any intruders or inhabitants, actual or imagined. It was as if, having discovered the secret of the snow globe, the power of its suggestion had stopped.

It was a long drive home, but the kids were in a cheerful mood, Allan keeping them talking and happy as the roads cleared and the mounds of snow disappeared into icy patches and then the wet flat stretch of the highway. Before we set out from the village, Allan and I agreed that he would drop me off at the house first to check things out, and he would take the kids with him to the grocery store. At the house, the back door windowpane was boarded up with a small square of wood, just as the security rep had said. There was still a small amount of glass on the kitchen floor, and I swept that up, then made my way through the other rooms checking to see if anything else might have been stolen. Everything seemed to be in order except for the missing TV, though the house felt slightly askew, as if things had been moved and put back at a slightly different angle than before. When Allan and the kids arrived home, I was on the phone with the rep again, thanking him for his help the night before.

Late that afternoon, two detectives visited the house. They asked a few questions about the break-in—where we were at the time, what was taken. Then they asked if they could dust for fingerprints from the back door and the stand where the missing TV had been placed. Justin and Claire were upstairs in their bedrooms and Allan was on the computer in another room. Only
while one of the men was dusting the glass did I find out the real purpose of their visit: the detectives were hoping that fingerprints in our house might match a crime scene a half mile away. Another house had been broken into the night before and the family had been murdered—a man, his divorced brother, and his two sons. According to the detective, they already had two suspects in custody—two men just released from prison, but no confessions yet from either suspect.

The news stunned me and I asked him to please not repeat the story to my partner or the kids—it would only spook them. “We’re always a bit nervous because we’re not your typical suburban family, either,” I said.

I stayed with the detectives while they went about their dusting, but didn’t mention that I had abandoned the house with my family the previous day. I still couldn’t admit that I believed in ghosts—good or bad—and I knew it would be difficult to explain that a supernatural force had frightened us into leaving and in doing so, might have saved us from the fate that had befallen the other murdered families. After the detectives had left, I realized that I had left the snow globe inside the car, and I went outside to find the bag still beside the driver’s seat. I took the globe out of the car, out of the bag and lifted it into the sunlight. The snow still swirled magically around; and there in the top window was the silhouette of a woman, now bent as if she were looking out the window at the snow falling on the roof and steps and lawn. Somehow I knew when I saw her there that things were safe with us, that no harm would find us in our house, and that this was how the snow globe was supposed to be.

I put the snow globe on the shelf in the dining room where Justin had originally placed it when I first brought it home. It stayed there safely through the years, undisturbed, the woman in the window watching over our family.

Jameson Currier is the author of ten works of fiction and the editor of Chelsea Station Magazine.
Chelsea Station
“Jameson Currier’s fifth novel, *The Forever Marathon*, is a compelling, brutally honest examination of two days in the life of a long term relationship between two men, who seem to have stayed together more out of habit than their desire for each other.”
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“The opposite of love is not hate but rather indifference. Thanks to the talent of Jameson Currier, readers are never at risk for feeling indifferent to the couple at the heart of his *The Forever Marathon*. Adoration mingled with aversion at this pair’s antics ensures every page will be read with enthusiasm. We should all be grateful that Currier has not shied away from presenting an honest depiction of gay men in their late forties.”
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“Currier’s stories are all about sex and love and how they occasionally overlap; he writes eloquently and elegantly about the continuum of gay male sexuality, from the tickle of desire to the pull of lust to the power of passion to the satisfaction—though not always—of sex.”
—Richard Labonté, Books to Watch Out For

“Linking wit, heady sex, longing, and the agony of a hollow love life, Currier beautifully romanticizes the hope and the hunt for love, the rarest flower. At times this journey to find Mr. Right is agonizing, sometimes sad, and sometimes erotically titillating. But every scene is written with such beauty and poetic grace, it becomes an easy voyage to embrace, even though at times all the misfires and near-misses cut like a knife.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter

“Currier’s masterful command of language is demonstrated throughout the novel. His words are rich with the beauty of humanity, fully capturing the essence of the fragility of the hopeful heart.”
—David-Matthew Barnes, Lambda Literary
To the traveller from Innsbrück to Munich, up the lovely valley of the silver Inn, many castles appear, one after another, each on its beetling cliff or gentle hill—appear and disappear, melting into the dark fir trees that grow so thickly on every side—Laneck, Lichtwer, Ratholtz, Tratzberg, Matzen, Kropfsberg, gathering close around the entrance to the dark and wonderful Zillerthal.

But to us—Tom Rendel and myself—there are two castles only: not the gorgeous and princely Ambras, nor the noble old Tratzberg, with its crowded treasures of solemn and splendid mediævalism; but little Matzen, where eager hospitality forms the new life of a never-dead chivalry, and Kropfsberg, ruined, tottering, blasted by fire and smitten with grievous years—a dead thing, and haunted—full of strange legends, and eloquent of mystery and tragedy.

We were visiting the von C——s at Matzen, and gaining our first wondering knowledge of the courtly, cordial castle life in the Tyrol—of the gentle and delicate hospitality of noble Austrians.
Brixleg had ceased to be but a mark on a map, and had become a place of rest and delight, a home for homeless wanderers on the face of Europe, while Schloss Matzen was a synonym for all that was gracious and kindly and beautiful in life. The days moved on in a golden round of riding and driving and shooting: down to Landl and Thiersee for chamois, across the river to the magic Achensee, up the Zillerthal, across the Schmerner Joch, even to the railway station at Steinach. And in the evenings after the late dinners in the upper hall where the sleepy hounds leaned against our chairs looking at us with suppliant eyes, in the evenings when the fire was dying away in the hooded fireplace in the library, stories. Stories, and legends, and fairy tales, while the stiff old portraits changed countenance constantly under the flickering firelight, and the sound of the drifting Inn came softly across the meadows far below.

If ever I tell the Story of Schloss Matzen, then will be the time to paint the too inadequate picture of this fair oasis in the desert of travel and tourists and hotels; but just now it is Kropfsberg the Silent that is of greater importance, for it was only in Matzen that the story was told by Fräulein E——, the gold-haired niece of Frau von C——, one hot evening in July, when we were sitting in the great west window of the drawing-room after a long ride up the Stallenthal. All the windows were open to catch the faint wind, and we had sat for a long time watching the Otzethaler Alps turn rose-color over distant Innsbrück, then deepen to violet as the sun went down and the white mists rose slowly until Lichtwer and Laneck and Kropfsberg rose like craggy islands in a silver sea.

And this is the story as Fräulein E—— told it to us—the Story of Kropfsberg Keep.

*     *     *

A great many years ago, soon after my grandfather died, and Matzen came to us, when I was a little girl, and so young that I remember nothing of the affair except as something dreadful that frightened me very much, two young men who had studied painting with my grandfather came down to Brixleg from Munich, partly to paint, and partly to amuse themselves—“ghost-hunting” as they said, for they were very sensible young men and prided themselves on it, laughing at all kinds of “superstition,” and particularly at that form which believed in ghosts and feared them. They had never seen a real ghost, you know, and they belonged to a certain set of people who believed nothing they had not seen themselves—which always seemed to me very conceited.

Well, they knew that we had lots of beautiful castles here in the “lower valley,” and they assumed, and rightly, that every castle has at least one ghost story connected with it, so they chose this as their hunting ground, only the game they sought was ghosts, not chamois. Their plan was to visit every place that was supposed to be haunted, and to meet every reputed ghost, and prove that it really was no ghost at all.

There was a little inn down in the village then, kept by an old man named Peter Rosskopf, and the two young men made this their headquarters. The very first night they began to draw from the old innkeeper all that he knew of legends and ghost stories connected with Brixleg and its castles, and as he was a most garrulous old gentleman he filled them with the wildest delight by his stories of the ghosts of the castles about the mouth of the Zillerthal. Of course the old man believed every word he said, and you can imagine his horror and amazement when, after telling his guests the particularly blood-curdling story of Kropfsberg and its haunted keep, the elder of
the two boys, whose surname I have forgotten, but whose Christian name was Rupert, calmly said, “Your story is most satisfactory: we will sleep in Kropfsberg Keep tomorrow night, and you must provide us with all that we may need to make ourselves comfortable.”

The old man nearly fell into the fire. “What for a blockhead are you?” he cried, with big eyes. “The keep is haunted by Count Albert’s ghost, I tell you!”

“That is why we are going there tomorrow night; we wish to make the acquaintance of Count Albert.”

“But there was a man stayed there once, and in the morning he was dead.”

“Very silly of him; there are two of us, and we carry revolvers.”

“But it’s a ghost, I tell you,” almost screamed the innkeeper; “are ghosts afraid of firearms?”

“Whether they are or not, we are not afraid of them.”

Here the younger boy broke in—he was named Otto von Kleist. I remember the name, for I had a music teacher once by that name. He abused the poor old man shamefully; told him that they were going to spend the night in Kropfsberg in spite of Count Albert and Peter Rosskopf, and that he might as well make the most of it and earn his money with cheerfulness.

In a word, they finally bullied the old fellow into submission, and when the morning came he set about preparing for the suicide, as he considered it, with sighs and mutterings and ominous shakings of the head.

You know the condition of the castle now—nothing but scorched walls and crumbling piles of fallen masonry. Well, at the time I tell you of, the keep was still partially preserved. It was finally burned out only a few years ago by some wicked boys who came over from Jenbach to have a good time. But when the ghost hunters came, though the two lower floors had fallen into the crypt, the third floor remained. The peasants said it could not fall, but that it would stay until the Day of Judgment, because it was in the room above that the wicked Count Albert sat watching the flames destroy the great castle and his imprisoned guests, and where he finally hung himself in a suit of armor that had belonged to his mediaeval ancestor, the first Count Kropfsberg.

No one dared touch him, and so he hung there for twelve years, and all the time venturesome boys and daring men used to creep up the turret steps and stare awfully through the chinks in the door at that ghostly mass of steel that held within itself the body of a murderer and suicide, slowly returning to the dust from which it was made. Finally it disappeared, none knew whither, and for another dozen years the room stood empty but for the old furniture and the rotting hangings.

So, when the two men climbed the stairway to the haunted room, they found a very different state of things from what exists now. The room was absolutely as it was left the night Count Albert burned the castle, except that all trace of the suspended suit of armor and its ghastly contents had vanished.

No one had dared to cross the threshold, and I suppose that for forty years no living thing had entered that dreadful room.

On one side stood a vast canopied bed of black wood, the damask hangings of which were covered with mould and mildew. All the clothing of the bed was in perfect order, and on it lay a book, open, and face downward. The only other furniture in the room consisted of several old
The man looked at the room curiously, and, I am sure, not without some feelings of awe and unacknowledged fear; but, whatever they may have felt of instinctive shrinking, they said nothing, and quickly set to work to make the room passably inhabitable. They decided to touch nothing that had not absolutely to be changed, and therefore they made for themselves a bed in one corner with the mattress and linen from the inn. In the great fireplace they piled a lot of wood on the caked ashes of a fire dead for forty years, turned the old chest into a table, and laid out on it all their arrangements for the evening’s amusement: food, two or three bottles of wine, pipes and tobacco, and the chess-board that was their inseparable travelling companion.

All this they did themselves: the innkeeper would not even come within the walls of the outer court; he insisted that he had washed his hands of the whole affair, the silly dunderheads might go to their death their own way. He would not aid and abet them. One of the stable boys brought the basket of food and the wood and the bed up the winding stone stairs, to be sure, but neither money nor prayers nor threats would bring him within the walls of the accursed place, and he stared fearfully at the hare-brained boys as they worked around the dead old room preparing for the night that was coming so fast.

At length everything was in readiness, and after a final visit to the inn for dinner Rupert and Otto started at sunset for the Keep. Half the village went with them, for Peter Rosskopf had babbled the whole story to an open-mouthed crowd of wondering men and women, and as to an execution the awe-struck crowd followed the two boys dumbly, curious to see if they surely would put their plan into execution. But none went farther than the outer doorway of the stairs, for it was already growing twilight. In absolute silence they watched the two foolhardy youths with their lives in their hands enter the terrible Keep, standing like a tower in the midst of the piles of stones that had once formed walls joining it with the mass of the castle beyond. When a moment later a light showed itself in the high windows above, they sighed resignedly and went their ways, to wait stolidly until morning should come and prove the truth of their fears and warnings.

In the mean time the ghost hunters built a huge fire, lighted their many candles, and sat down to await developments. Rupert afterwards told my uncle that they really felt no fear whatever, only a contemptuous curiosity, and they ate their supper with good appetite and an unusual relish. It was a long evening. They played many games of chess, waiting for midnight. Hour passed after hour, and nothing occurred to interrupt the monotony of the evening. Ten, eleven, came and went—it was almost midnight. They piled more wood in the fireplace, lighted new candles, looked to their pistols—and waited. The clocks in the village struck twelve; the sound coming muffled through the high, deep-embraused windows. Nothing happened, nothing to break the heavy silence; and with a feeling of disappointed relief they looked at each other and acknowledged that they had met another rebuff.
Finally they decided that there was no use in sitting up and boring themselves any longer; they had much better rest; so Otto threw himself down on the mattress, falling almost immediately asleep. Rupert sat a little longer, smoking, and watching the stars creep along behind the shattered glass and the bent leads of the lofty windows; watching the fire fall together, and the strange shadows move mysteriously on the mouldering walls. The iron hook in the oak beam, that crossed the ceiling midway, fascinated him, not with fear, but morbidly. So, it was from that hook that for twelve years, twelve long years of changing summer and winter, the body of Count Albert, murderer and suicide, hung in its strange casing of mediæval steel; moving a little at first, and turning gently while the fire died out on the hearth, while the ruins of the castle grew cold, and horrified peasants sought for the bodies of the score of gay, reckless, wicked guests whom Count Albert had gathered in Kropfsberg for a last debauch, gathered to their terrible and untimely death. What a strange and fiendish idea it was, the young, handsome noble who had ruined himself and his family in the society of the splendid debauchees, gathering them all together, men and women who had known only love and pleasure, for a glorious and awful riot of luxury, and then, when they were all dancing in the great ballroom, locking the doors and burning the whole castle about them, the while he sat in the great keep listening to their screams of agonized fear, watching the fire sweep from wing to wing until the whole mighty mass was one enormous and awful pyre, and then, clothing himself in his great-great-grandfather’s armor, hanging himself in the midst of the ruins of what had been a proud and noble castle. So ended a great family, a great house.

But that was forty years ago.

He was growing drowsy; the light flickered and flared in the fireplace; one by one the candles went out; the shadows grew thick in the room. Why did that great iron hook stand out so plainly? Why did that dark shadow dance and quiver so mockingly behind it?—Why—But he ceased to wonder at anything. He was asleep.

It seemed to him that he woke almost immediately; the fire still burned, though low and fitfully on the hearth. Otto was sleeping, breathing quietly and regularly; the shadows had gathered close around him, thick and murky; with every passing moment the light died in the fireplace; he felt stiff with cold. In the utter silence he heard the clock in the village strike two. He shivered with a sudden and irresistible feeling of fear, and abruptly turned and looked towards the hook in the ceiling.

Yes, It was there. He knew that It would be. It seemed quite natural, he would have been disappointed had he seen nothing; but now he knew that the story was true, knew that he was wrong, and that the dead do sometimes return to earth, for there, in the fast-deepening shadow, hung the black mass of wrought steel, turning a little now and then, with the light flickering on the tarnished and rusty metal. He watched it quietly; he hardly felt afraid; it was rather a sentiment of sadness and fatality that filled him, of gloomy forebodings of something unknown, unimaginable. He sat and watched the thing disappear in the gathering dark, his hand on his pistol as it lay by him on the great chest. There was no sound but the regular breathing of the sleeping boy on the mattress.

It had grown absolutely dark; a bat fluttered against the broken glass of the window. He wondered if he was growing mad, for—he hesitated to acknowledge it to himself—he heard music; far, curious music, a strange and luxurious dance, very faint, very vague, but unmistakable.
Like a flash of lightning came a jagged line of fire down the blank wall opposite him, a line that remained, that grew wider, that let a pale cold light into the room, showing him now all its details—the empty fireplace, where a thin smoke rose in a spiral from a bit of charred wood, the mass of the great bed, and, in the very middle, black against the curious brightness, the armored man, or ghost, or devil, standing, not suspended, beneath the rusty hook. And with the rending of the wall the music grew more distinct, though sounding still very, very far away.

Count Albert raised his mailed hand and beckoned to him; then turned, and stood in the riven wall.

Without a word, Rupert rose and followed him, his pistol in hand. Count Albert passed through the mighty wall and disappeared in the unearthly light. Rupert followed mechanically. He felt the crushing of the mortar beneath his feet, the roughness of the jagged wall where he rested his hand to steady himself.

The keep rose absolutely isolated among the ruins, yet on passing through the wall Rupert found himself in a long, uneven corridor, the floor of which was warped and sagging, while the walls were covered on one side with big faded portraits of an inferior quality, like those in the corridor that connects the Pitti and Uffizzi in Florence. Before him moved the figure of Count Albert—a black silhouette in the ever-increasing light. And always the music grew stronger and stranger, a mad, evil, seductive dance that bewitched even while it disgusted.

In a final blaze of vivid, intolerable light, in a burst of hellish music that might have come from Bedlam, Rupert stepped from the corridor into a vast and curious room where at first he saw nothing, distinguished nothing but a mad, seething whirl of sweeping figures, white, in a white room, under white light, Count Albert standing before him, the only dark object to be seen. As his eyes grew accustomed to the fearful brightness, he knew that he was looking on a dance such as the damned might see in hell, but such as no living man had ever seen before.

Around the long, narrow hall, under the fearful light that came from nowhere, but was omnipresent, swept a rushing stream of unspeakable horrors, dancing insanely, laughing, gibbering hideously; the dead of forty years. White, polished skeletons, bare of flesh and vesture, skeletons clothed in the dreadful rags of dried and rattling sinews, the tags of tattering grave-clothes flaunting behind them. These were the dead of many years ago. Then the dead of more recent times, with yellow bones showing only here and there, the long and insecure hair of their hideous heads writhing in the beating air. Then green and gray horrors, bloated and shapeless, stained with earth or dripping with spattering water; and here and there white, beautiful things, like chiselled ivory, the dead of yesterday, locked it may be, in the mummy arms of rattling skeletons.

Round and round the cursed room, a swaying, swirling maelstrom of death, while the air grew thick with miasma, the floor foul with shreds of shrouds, and yellow parchment, clattering bones, and wisps of tangled hair.

And in the very midst of this ring of death, a sight not for words nor for thought, a sight to blast forever the mind of the man who looked upon it: a leaping, writhing dance of Count Albert’s victims, the score of beautiful women and reckless men who danced to their awful death while the castle burned around them, charred and shapeless now, a living charnel-house of nameless horror.
Count Albert, who had stood silent and gloomy, watching the dance of the damned, turned to Rupert, and for the first time spoke.

“We are ready for you now; dance!”

A prancing horror, dead some dozen years, perhaps, flaunted from the rushing river of the dead, and leered at Rupert with eyeless skull.

“Dance!”

Rupert stood frozen, motionless.

“Dance!”

His hard lips moved. “Not if the devil came from hell to make me.”

Count Albert swept his vast two-handed sword into the fetid air while the tide of corruption paused in its swirling, and swept down on Rupert with gibbering grins.

The room, and the howling dead, and the black portent before him circled dizzily around, as with a last effort of departing consciousness he drew his pistol and fired full in the face of Count Albert.

*     *     *

Perfect silence, perfect darkness; not a breath, not a sound: the dead stillness of a long-sealed tomb. Rupert lay on his back, stunned, helpless, his pistol clenched in his frozen hand, a smell of powder in the black air. Where was he? Dead? In hell? He reached his hand out cautiously; it fell on dusty boards. Outside, far away, a clock struck three. Had he dreamed? Of course; but how ghastly a dream! With chattering teeth he called softly—

“Otto!”

There was no reply, and none when he called again and again. He staggered weakly to his feet, groping for matches and candles. A panic of abject terror came on him; the matches were gone! He turned towards the fireplace: a single coal glowed in the white ashes. He swept a mass of papers and dusty books from the table, and with trembling hands cowered over the embers, until he succeeded in lighting the dry tinder.

Then he piled the old books on the blaze, and looked fearfully around.

No: It was gone—thank God for that; the hook was empty.

But why did Otto sleep so soundly; why did he not awake?

He stepped unsteadily across the room in the flaring light of the burning books, and knelt by the mattress.

*     *     *
So they found him in the morning, when no one came to the inn from Kropfsberg Keep, and the quaking Peter Rosskopf arranged a relief party—found him kneeling beside the mattress where Otto lay, shot in the throat and quite dead.

Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942) was an author, lecturer, and architect, and designed many ecclesiastical and collegiate buildings, most notably on the Princeton University and West Point campuses. A founder of the Boston firm, Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson, he was devoted to the Gothic style, Anglo-Catholic, and a Medievalist, and he wrote a large number of religious and political books applying the insights of the Middles Ages to the present day. Cram was also married, a husband and a father, though Douglass Shand-Tucci’s two volume biography of Cram, *Boston Bohemia*, published in 1996, alleged that the architect and his circle were closeted homosexual men who demonstrated their sexuality through their designs. Cram was a well-traveled man, fascinated by the supernatural, and in 1885 published a collection of ghost stories, *Black Spirits and White*, and it is possible, with many of these stories constructed as “tales of two men going ghost-hunting,” to imbue a hidden sexuality to these tales in the same manner as how one might now regard Cram’s architecture.
Werewolves of Northland

Patrick Pink

Whiro thought he was the only werewolf in his small Northland town. But as he pushed along the footpath in front of the dairy in his wheelchair, he knew he wasn’t alone. The Other tickled his nose hairs with a strange familiarity. Whiro stopped. He breathed long and deep as if he had just broke surface from the river that ran through his town and his very life depended on how much he gulted in. The heat from the meat pies he had bought for morning tea began to slowly burn through the brown paper bags and his boardies. He knew if he didn’t get back soon Uncle Pita would have his hide. But Whiro had to know. He had to see if he wasn’t truly alone. For almost nineteen years, that’d been the case. For almost nineteen years, Whiro had gotten used to his scent being the only one in Pawa.
He knew it was no trick. His nose never lied. His sense of smell was acute. There was smoke from a burn barrel somewhere down the street and off to his right. Petrol exhaust from Rangi’s ute belched a black chemical cloud on the next block. The bakery was taking out another batch of mince pies before the lunchtime rush. Whiro sniffed his own body odour, a mixture of spice and wood smoke, salt and spunk, as he turned his head from side to side, trying to locate the Other. He was used to all these everyday stinks and scents. This other smell in the crisp late summer air that drifted like morning mist down the pine-smudged hills that surrounded the town of Pawa was different. It was like a story written on the breeze that only Whiro was able to read. It was so much like him. And it was close. Very close.

Whiro had always known who he was. He was not like the other people in Pawa. He always felt out of sync. He had a family, who loved him and whom he loved but they were human. They didn’t really know him. If they did, if they knew what he was capable of when the moon was full, Whiro feared that whatever love they held for him would fade like fog burnt by sunlight. So he decided, then and there, to face the wrath of his Uncle Pita and go in search for the other werewolf.

Every Wolf had its own special scent. No two smelled the same. It was like the unique swirls of a fingerprint. Whiro liked his odour. After working at his Uncle’s garage where he did the filing and answered the phones in the stuffy office and, more and more frequently, changed oil and oil filters on the mechanic’s dolly under the cars and utes, he’d push himself hard down the footpath to work up a real sweat. At home, he’d close the bedroom door and transfer to his bed and just lie there as he took big whiffs of his stink. Whiro’s skin had a hint of smoke, edged with a cinnamon spiciness and the tang of salt from the sea. He’d get an immediate boner, every time, as he placed his nose deep into his hairy armpits and breathed. That was where the spunk part of his special scent came in. His little brother, Rōpata had once caught Whiro wanking to his smell. Almost wetting himself with laughter, his little brother had yelled to their Mum that Tipene was messing up the sheets again. Whiro had gotten looks from his sister, Hoana and sniggers from Rōpata at the kitchen table during tea. His Mum had flicked Rōpata’s ear, which settled him down some. His Dad had simply winked at Whiro while digging into the steak and chips on his plate.

Apples and blood. Whiro caught the sweet-metal whiff of apples and blood in the air. He took a right at the next corner and went behind JT’s Butchery. JT did homekills for farmers and hunters. He had come in the homekill van to the house to help butcher, dress and pack some of the wild pigs Whiro’s Dad and uncles and cousins had shot. Whiro had wished he could have gone hunting with the men, but his useless legs had denied him that pleasure. Now he had to wait for the full moon, which wasn’t often enough to his liking but since the accident Whiro had learned to suck it up and push down his hunger. Fortunately there was a full moon next week. He’d hunt in its white skeleton glow then.

It looked as if JT had hired on a new apprentice. The guy was leaning against the Dumpster eating an apple. Blood from the butchering hovered thickly around him like sweet incense. Whiro took another sniff. He thought he caught the scent of weed and an edge of danger. Whiro smelled hunger. It was the Other.

‘Care selling a pie, bro?’ The Wolf was tall and rangy and maybe only a year older than Whiro. His black hair was buzzed Number 1 short and a thin pencil-line of beard just as closely clipped traced along the sharp line of his jaw. He was in white gumboots and coveralls. He eyed the pies on Whiro’s lap as if he hadn’t eaten for days.
'Here,’ Whiro said, handing him the pie he was going to have for morning tea. ‘It’s mince and cheese.’

‘My fave. Still warm, too. Cheers, mate. How much I owe you for?’

‘Three.’

‘Wait there. It’s inside.’

When the Wolf went to get the three dollars, Whiro hightailed it out of there. He was breathing hard, but it wasn’t from pushing himself down the footpath to Uncle Pita’s garage. Whiro’s heart was pounding in his chest. He felt the rhythm all the way up to his ears. It made his scalp itch like it did when he had nits. Whiro had found him. He had found the other werewolf. He wasn’t alone any longer. Whiro tried to remember every smell, every gesture, every word during the brief encounter. Apples and blood and weed. Whiro was smitten.

* * *

Whiro didn’t see the other Wolf for another two days. He had wanted to return to JT’s the following morning but then he had thought better to wait. Which was silly. The Wolf would have known who Whiro was, too. He would have smelled the smoke and spice and salt and spunk that made up Whiro. The other Wolf was probably feeling lonely, also.

Whiro hadn’t seen the other Wolf before. In such a small town, new people stuck out like his ears after a bad haircut. He had asked his Dad about the new guy working for JT. They had been on the porch, looking at the summer constellations through his Dad’s telescope. His Dad knew everything about the stars. Since Whiro was a boy, his Dad had shown Whiro the heavens, giving them their Māori names, and explaining their history. It was his Dad who had first mentioned the Māori name for the planet Mercury: Whiro. When Whiro heard it, he knew it was the secret Wolf name that he had been waiting for. Though his family still called him Tipene, inside he was Whiro.

Adjusting the telescope to get the constellations, Canis Major or Pūtahi-nui-o-Rehua, into view, his Dad had said, ‘His name’s Junior. He’s from Te Puke. He’s staying with JT and Lara. Lara’s his Aunty.’

Whiro had mulled over what he had learned about the Other. Junior. Not a very inspirational name for a werewolf. But that might be what he went by when around humans. Whiro had wondered what his Wolf name was.

‘Come here. Take a look at this,’ his Dad had called him over.

Whiro had set the glass of Milo he’d been drinking between his legs. His Dad manoeuvred the telescope so that it was at the right height for Whiro. His Dad smelled like coffee and cigarettes and beer and petrol. All very human, but comforting, nonetheless. Whiro had taken a deep breath of his Dad’s scent and held it. His Dad leaned in closer. Whiro felt his Dad’s hand firmly rest on his shoulder. He had asked his Dad what he was looking at. They had spent the next hour searching the summer skies.

* * *

Whiro was under Mrs. Rata’s Honda Civic changing the oil and oil filter when he smelled apples and blood and weed. It was near quitting time, so Whiro was trying to hurry without getting too dirty. The scent drove him wild, but he told his hands to stay patient and stop their shaking as he
finished. He heard Uncle Pita’s booming voice say that Whiro was over there. Whiro heard a single set of footsteps move closer to him. He finished putting in, then tightening, the oil plug before sliding out from under the car.

The Wolf came slowly into view. First a scuffed pair of black boots with worn heels on the inside then lean-legged jeans that hung low on the hips. A sleeveless hoodie with a dark red stain on the front that resembled dried blood. The Wolf’s arms were brown with stringy biceps. A koru tattoo swirled and spiralled round his right shoulder. The face when Whiro eventually glanced up was smiling. Whiro thought he would never breathe again as he stared back at the other Wolf. He wasn’t alone anymore. Before him was a kindred soul. Whiro smiled back.

‘Where’d you go, bro?’ The Wolf asked. ‘I came out and you were gone. Took me forever to find you.’ The Wolf glanced at Whiro’s wheelchair that was out of reach then back to Whiro. ‘Need a hand?’

‘I’m sweet,’ said Whiro as he scooted toward his Chair. ‘Junior, right?’ He asked, transferring from the floor quickly and with only a bit of embarrassment.

‘Small town,’ Junior the Wolf said, smirking with the corner of his mouth. A single yellow canine seemed to flash in the late afternoon light.

Uncle Pita stuck his head out from the office door. ‘Are you finished with Mrs. Rata’s car, yet? She’ll be here soon and I don’t want to tell her she has to wait because her mechanic is lazy.’

Whiro grinned and bit his tongue. He told his Uncle he was almost through.

‘I should go.’ Junior dug into his jeans and brought out the gold coins.

Whiro decided to take a leap of faith.

‘I’ll be done in a few minutes. You can repay me with a pie. I’m starving.’

Junior looked at Whiro and Whiro thought he had overdone it, that the Wolf would turn tail and run and Whiro would be on his own once again, smelling his own scent and living with humans. But Junior simply nodded, grinned and pocketed the three dollars.

‘Choice,’ Junior said, jerking his head back towards the large garage door. ‘I’ll wait for you outside so’s to keep your Uncle from chewing your arse.’

Whiro thought he’d died and gone to heaven.

* * *

They were eating meat pies on the dusty bank of the Pawa. The town shared its name with the river that ran through it. It was the end of summer and the stony bed could be seen in the thick sluggish eddies. There was only a metre of water in some places. Whiro had never seen it so low. Everyone in town was waiting for autumn and the rains that so often flooded Northland. Whiro took a quick bite from his mince and cheese pie and flinched. The scalding gravy was what he needed. It took his mind from what happened a few autumns back. He didn’t like to dwell on the stupidity that put him in the Chair.

‘So what’dya do here for fun?’ The other Wolf asked.

Junior had wolfed down his mince and cheese and was now licking the grease from his long brown fingers. He finished by wiping his hands on the front of his jeans then leaned back and stretched out on the stubby burnt grass. Hands behind his head, his hoodie rode up. Whiro tried
not to look but it was useless. His eyes were drawn to Junior’s lean smooth belly. He quickly glanced back at the Pawa and its muddy brown water. He bit into his pie but he didn’t think he would be able to swallow it.

‘Usual things,’ he finally said after finding his voice. ‘Swimming, fishing, meeting mates. Work where you can get it. Occasional party. You know, the usual.’

‘Sounds like Te Puke.’

Whiro popped the last bite of pie into his mouth, wiping his lips on the back of his hand. He looked over at Junior. But he made sure to look only at his face. ‘What you doing here?’ He asked.

‘Got into some trouble back home.’

‘Weed?’ It just blurted out of Whiro’s mouth. He watched Junior twitch at the question. The other Wolf shaded his eyes as he glanced up at Whiro, suspicious and slightly guarded now. ‘I can smell it,’ Whiro said simply to say something but hoping he hadn’t fucked up and intruded too soon, too fast. He didn’t know why he couldn’t keep his damn mouth shut at times.

Junior took a whiff of his hoodie. Then he looked up at the big blue sky with its curl of clouds. There was a touch of peach to their edges as the sun slowly set. ‘Something like that. There were other things, too.’

Whiro tried not to let his excitement show. He wondered what those other things were. He tried not to get his hopes up.

‘Didn’t mean to pry,’ he said.

‘Fuck,’ Junior said, tracking a fast-travelling cloud as it raced into another, avoiding Whiro’s eyes as he did. ‘No worries.’

They stayed there on the banks of the Pawa quietly watching the sun sink behind the dark hills and the sky turn a deep paua blue. Whiro thought he mustn’t’ve fucked-up too badly. Junior was still here, sitting beside him.

‘See that bright white star over there?’ Whiro said. His voice was as hushed as the river’s.

‘Which one?’ Junior knelt and leaned closer, resting his arm on the back of Whiro’s Chair.

Whiro pointed like his Dad had for him. ‘That one next to those long line of stars.’ Whiro saw Junior nod. ‘That’s Takurua or Sirius. It’s the Dog Star. It’s in the constellation of Pūtahi-nui-o-Rehua.’

‘You into all this star stuff?’

Whiro felt Junior’s gaze as if he was a deer in headlights. It was unnerving and mesmerising all at the same time.

‘My Dad is. He’s got a telescope. He knows all this shit.’

Junior nodded again.

Still leaning against Whiro’s Chair, Junior was quiet for a while, then: ‘What happened?’ He nudged Whiro’s wheelchair. ‘Don’t mean to pry.’
Whiro heard the small dig, but he let it go. There was a flash of canine and a crooked smile that accompanied it. Besides, Whiro was used to people asking. It had even gotten easier with each telling, surprisingly. His Mum had said it would. At the time, though, Whiro didn’t want to believe her.

‘Jumped off that bridge over there.’ Whiro jerked his head in its direction. ‘Two years ago. Thought the river was fuller than it was. Came away with a busted back and dead legs.’

Junior was quiet. He was so close to Whiro that even in the descending dusk, Whiro could make out the fine wiry hairs in his pencil-thin beard. Junior’s breath smelled of mince and cheese. Whiro breathed in deeply. Apples and blood and weed.

‘It was dumb,’ Whiro continued. ‘I hated myself for a long time. Even thought ‘bout finishing what the river started.’ He didn’t know why he added that bit. He had never really told anybody that before. He hoped Junior didn’t think he was a total head case.

‘Well, that would’ve been dumb,’ Junior finally said. ‘I wouldn’t have learned about Takurua then.’

* * *

The full moon was tonight. Everyday after work, Whiro and Takurua had gotten together. After that first evening of stargazing, Junior so liked the name Takurua that he took to it. Whiro thought that that was a way better werewolf name than Junior. Whiro had shown Takurua the town, which wasn’t much and only took a few hours. They liked sitting by the river where they first had begun to learn about the other. They usually ended up there.

Whiro found out that there was a girlfriend as well as an older guy in Te Puke. The guy was another reason besides the weed Takurua was staying with his Aunty and Uncle in Pawa. Junior didn’t hear from either the girl or the guy, which, he admitted, wasn’t really a major hardship. They just didn’t smell right, he had said. Which almost made Whiro lose it and tell Takurua everything.

Whiro told Takurua about his family and brought him over for tea one night. Pork bones and puha and potatoes. Lots of slurping and sucking around the kitchen table. Hoana had kept avoiding Takurua’s eyes, an obvious crush developing. Rōpata had wanted a contest to see who could clean their bones the best. Whiro’s Mum had given his little brother a flick on the ear, but grinned while doing it. Later, on the porch, his Dad had shown Whiro and Takurua the constellation Gemini with its bright stars, Castor and Pollux or Whakaahu kerekere and Whakaahu rangi. While Whiro was looking through the telescope, Takurua was behind him, resting his hand on Whiro’s shoulder, waiting for his turn to look at the twin brothers in the night sky. Whiro could’ve stayed there until the sun rose.

Whiro had shared his human life with Takurua. But there was still one thing that Whiro was scared to tell. He didn’t know how Takurua would take it. He only knew he had to tell him. Whiro had to find out if Takurua was the same as he was. He wanted to run and hunt with his mate in the shine of the bold-faced moon tonight. Whiro couldn’t think of a better thing to do.

As usual, they were on the banks of the Pawa. There was the scent of rain in the air. Whiro was summing up his courage but before he could confess anything, Takurua said, ‘I like you.’
It was the words Whiro had hoped to hear for such a long time. He didn’t know what to say. He wanted to savour the taste of them on his tongue as he said them quietly to himself over and over.

‘Don’t leave me hanging here, mate. What do you say?’ Takurua continued, pulling out bone-bleached stalks of grass from the dry dirt with each sentence. ‘Am I wrong? I think you like me, too.’

‘I like everything about you,’ Whiro blurted out with a happiness that had been building pressure like a shaken bottle of fizzy drink. ‘Your smell drives me wild. I want to howl, I like you that much.’

Takurua broke into a wide grin. His yellow canines flashed and glowed. Apples, blood and weed mixed with spice and smoke and salt and spunk until Whiro couldn’t tell where one started and the other left off. Then Takurua, leaping to his feet, let out a piercing howl that made Whiro jump at its unexpectedness. Whiro watched as Takurua howled again. Whiro felt his heart beat so hard and fast against his chest that he thought it was trying to fight its way out from its bony cage and make itself truly known. So Whiro howled. Alongside his mate, Whiro let the Wolf run. And there wasn’t even the moon needed to change him. In the bright glare of day, Whiro became Wolf. And he wasn’t alone. He had Takurua, who was Wolf just like him. They howled again and again till it became more laughter than yell.

Patrick Pink grew up in Chicago, Illinois, has travelled widely and currently calls New Zealand home. Recently, he has been published in Flash Frontier: An Adventure in Short Fiction.
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Oh, how the cab stank. A rattling heater raised from the scarred seats the ghosts of dog-cheap cigars the driver must have smoked over decades. Like the one he was savoring now. Trapped in the back, Gus rolled down the window to let fresh air, cold and late January sharp, seep inside.

He regretted the boss insisting he take the train from New York to Providence rather than drive the Rover. Saul had sworn that the best way into this case was for Gus to appear down on his luck. Which meant a visit to a rag shop to buy some fellah’s former Sunday best. Underneath his trusty peacoat, though, Gus’s immense frame strained the suit’s threadbare patches.

The cabbie took a turn too sharp. Brakes squealed as the car struggled with the snow-covered road. The seams tore in Gus’s sleeves as he stretched his thick arms to keep from tumbling about the backseat.
When the house came into view, Gus whistled his appreciation. Saul had been square with him about the artist’s taste: something out of a storybook, with lots of shingles, a crooked roof, and plenty of eaves. Gus expected Boris Karloff to be sitting on the front porch with his hands cupped around a steaming mug of joe.

The cab slowed on the cobblestone driveway, which circled a frozen fountain. The driver chewed around the stogie stub and muttered that he’d return the next night for Gus, who grabbed his bag and had barely stepped out of the car when the cab drove off, one rear door swinging like a tarnished goldfinch’s broken wing. Gus considered pitching a rock at the cabbie’s back window, but he made it a point not to earn trouble while always anticipating some.

He’d have to demand that Saul send him someplace warm and inviting for the next job.

A pair of custom-made knockers, brass fists gripping lightning bolts, decorated the gaunt doors. Their metal felt colder than a moll’s heart and rang out like gunshots when Gus struck them against the wood.

A few minutes later the door cracked open. One rheumy eye glared at Gus, who cleared his throat. “Yeah, Mr. Moiren is expecting me.”

The door opened wider, revealing more of the dark-suited butler, a thin man in his late fifties with a blood-red eyepatch hiding the worst of the damage suffered by the right side of his face. The man’s rigid stance suggested he’d once served in the military. A Great War veteran, Gus suspected as the man moved aside for him to enter.

The butler accepted Gus’s peacoat. “Master Moiren will receive you in the greenhouse.”

“That ain’t like the poorhouse is it?” Gus made sure to bray like an ass; “Nothing’s a worse tell than a man’s laugh,” Saul always said, and if Moiren and the help thought Gus was a moron, it would make finding the girl easier.

“You may leave your bag here,” the butler said as he hung the coat on a nearby rack. Gus counted the other coats. None looked like they belonged to a spoiled rich girl, but that didn’t mean Samantha Kingsford wasn’t still here.

A grandfather clock in the many shadows of the foyer chimed three in the afternoon. Mournful sounds.

The house’s drafty interior wasn’t much warmer than the outside. Most rooms weren’t lit. Frost caked the windows. Gus rubbed his palms together. “All right, pally, lead the way.” His breath rose in the air.

“This way,” said the butler with lift of a hand.

Rich men didn’t impress Gus. They hid behind money. Or used it as license to be vicious and petty. But Saul liked dealing with the wealthy. Men like Donald Kingsford, father to one wayward daughter who needed returning.

“Big enough joint for just Moiren and you.” Gus paused to stick his head up the flue of a blackened stone fireplace roomy enough to roast a pig like they did in Polynesia. But the hearth was cold. What good were such things if they weren’t used?

“The master entertains on occasion.”

“This be one of those occasions?”

CHELSEA STATION
But the butler said nothing. He didn’t need to. Gus had already caught a whiff of perfume, expensive perfume, in the house’s draft. And this house lacked any feminine touch, so he doubted there was a Mrs. Moiren. No, Samantha Kingsford was here.

* * *

When he walked into the massive space confined by a lattice of fogged glass and damp copper, Gus shook off the house’s chill like a soaked dog. The humid air reeked, a bit like an outhouse in July, a bit like Brussels sprouts steaming on a plate. Gus had been born in the city; Central Park was the only spot on Earth with so much green. The closest he’d ever come to the jungle was admiring Johnny Weismuller in that Tarzan talkie. But Moiren’s greenhouse had taken a chunk of South America or maybe Africa and held it prisoner in Providence. Gus didn’t spook much, but he knew he didn’t belong surrounded by all the wild foliage.

A voice from on high called out, “Welcome.” Gus looked up. Half-hidden behind shoots and wide leaves, a scaffolding covered part of the greenhouse wall. A man, wearing a bruise-colored satin smoking jacket and a ridiculous hat that looked like it should be made of glass and covering a stack of donuts, not red felt with a tassel, stepped towards the railing. He held aloft a struggling rabbit for a moment, then dropped the animal down into the brush. “Our Jove Lunge, the Man of Daring, has arrived.” Nestor Moiren—Gus recognized him from the photos Saul had spread over his messy desk—clapped with limp wrists.

“The name’s Gus.”

“As if it matters.” Moiren began descending a flight of stairs. His slippers echoed through the greenhouse. “How are you finding Providence?”

“Cold.”

“Yes. It is.” Moiren had a puffy face but thin lips. Gus had seen other men wear that same smirk, usually right before they threw lead around or tried to shiv you in the guts. “Did your man tell you what I require?”

Gus rubbed his square jaw. Saul had a number of guys working for him. Gus normally was called when the job required brawn and intimidation, not retrieving runaways. But Saul thought that a guy playing off Moiren’s fascination with muscle would have an easier time getting the girl back. “Said you needed some hired muscle.”

“Indeed I do, but not the sort you’re used to providing.” Moiren turned to the butler. “I think the ‘Howl of Black Shuck’ will do nicely.”

The butler bent with an audible creak and left the greenhouse.

“That name I called you...Jove Lunge—”

Gus shrugged as he slipped off his jacket. Sweat had begun to seep down his back and armpits.

“—have you never read the Jove Lunge adventure stories?”

“Never made it past the racecards.” Gus loosened his collar. “So who you want me to slug?” When people thought he was just some sap, they’d grow lazy…and show their hand sooner. Gus could tip a car but he was no easy mark.

Moiren chuckled like a dying man’s last wheeze. “A rare Nepenthes, but that comes later. Here we are.” Moiren lifted a hand as the butler returned carrying a framed painting.
Gus paid little mind to art. He did appreciate the photos in *Iron Man Magazine*. But those museums all over Manhattan were too quiet for his liking. Not that there was anything quiet about “Howl of the Black Shuck.” The hackles rose on the back of Gus’s thick neck as he glanced at it.

One glance at the figure of Jove Lunge, his uniform flayed to shreds by the panther in his path, told Gus that Moiren liked his men strapping, bulging muscle and taut sinew. Lunge held in one clenched fist an exotic dagger. When Gus examined the panther, he realized the beast wasn’t at all a cat but an immense black dog or wolf with blood-red eyes.

“I do love my work.” Moiren motioned for the butler to withdraw as if shooing an errant fly. “There are others, if you wish to see the gallery.”

Gus shook his head. He wanted nothing more than to step out of the hot greenhouse and pour a cold beer down his throat.

“No? Pity.” He took a few steps closer to Gus. “What I need from you is to pose.”

“Pose?” Saul had shown Gus the covers. His first thought was, how many boys bought the adventures of Jove Lunge, Man of Daring to jerk off to pictures of their hero’s physique. Did their mothers find the books hidden beneath the bed and wish their husbands had even a tenth of Jove’s stature?

“Yes, yes. One would think, after thirty covers, I would have committed to memory every display of hard muscle and tendon the Man of Daring possessed.” Moiren stroked his lips a moment. “But I find it more satisfying to draw from life, capturing the moment.”

“It’s your spinach.”

“An apt bit of jargon,” Moiren said and rubbed a nearby leaf as large as Gus’s head.

Gus bet the Arrow Collar Man never had done this. “So I should—”

“Unbutton your shirt, Mr. Lunge.”

Gus did as asked, and when the old shirt fell to his waist, he was mindful that, in his current surroundings, he imitated a flower with drooping white petals. Only, he didn’t like thinking of himself as a posy.

“Stretch your arms wide. Curl them in. And...release. Yes, you may well be the best I have seen in some time. Lately I’ve received such poor offerings....” Moiren sighed. No, more like hissed.

“Now, rip your undershirt.”

“What?” Gus looked down at the tight cotton taut over his torso. The front was damp with sweat, darkened by his chest hair.


Gus shrugged, then took hold of the shirt by the curve by his neck and tore. Worn fabric ripped apart in his fists.

A silken leash of saliva linked Moiren’s parted jaws. The man’s excitement was evident in his trousers.

“Don’t you need your paints or something?” Gus asked. He brushed the front of his chest to tease the man.
“Yes, yes.” Moiren’s voice had softened to an awed whisper.

“Moiren. Moiren!”

The man’s trance broke. “Oh, we can’t begin painting now. The light fails. Too weak to illuminate the necessary daring. That will happen come morning. Besides, you have yet to meet my other guests.”

* * *

Once out of the greenhouse, Gus wiped the sweat from his chest with the ripped undershirt, and felt that buttoning his shirt was akin to returning to civilization. The butler took him upstairs, via a groaning staircase and down a dim hallway of closed doors. The butler stopped at the third. “This will be your room for the night. Supper is served within the hour. Proper attire is hanging in the closet.” The butler turned a key in the lock. “Do not be late.”

Gus anticipated a room decorated like a madame’s boudoir, with plenty of pillows, dark furniture, and too much burgundy, like God spilt the wine all over the place, not a room with holes in the plaster walls, a sagging bed that belonged in a flophouse, and by the water bowl and mirror, a pipsqueak in his undershirt, with his suspenders hanging down and a face full of lather. The kid held a straight razor. He could have stepped off the streets of New York, been any of the city gamins, swiping fruit, picking pockets, all the best ways for a dirty squirt to learn the hard lessons life demanded.

“You don’t look old enough to shave,” Gus said as he threw his travel bag on the bed. Bad springs groaned. Sleeping on that would be rough.

“And you look like the lost son of Kong.” Gus couldn’t place the kid’s accent but had to admire his moxie, though his eyes were wide, showing nerves. “The Empire State Building is thataway, big fellah.” The kid gestured at the window with the razorblade.

Gus strode over to the kid, who retreated in turn until he bumped against the slender table beneath the water bowl. Warm water sloshed them both, but most of it dripped down the kid’s scrawny chest.

“W-What, you wanna see my diploma?” the kid asked.

“Who the hell are you?” Gus forced the kid against the faded wallpaper.

“Haven’t you ever read a Jove Lunge novel?”

“Lemme guess. You’re the shoeblack boy?” Gus grabbed the kid by the neck. The lather made the grip like catching an eel in water, but he didn’t want to strangle the kid, just make sure he knew who was tops. The razor dropped from the kid’s hand to clatter on the floorboards. “Perhaps you should find another room.”

“I-I can’t,” the kid rasped. “Moiren...”

“He put you in here?”

The kid nodded. Spittle frothed his pretty lips.

“Why?”

“Please...”
Gus released the kid, who collapsed to the floor, where he sputtered a while. Gus kicked the blade out of his reach, not that he looked like he had any spirit in him. “So?”

“Moiren didn’t know if you’d rather have kitten or keister.”

“So she is here.” Gus wiped his hands dry on the towel.

The kid shrugged. “The girl? I just saw her once, when she came in.” The kid rubbed his neck. “Moiren’s sedan brought her.”

“What’s your name?”

“Carl. Carl Heim.”

Gus nodded. “Okay, Carl, you better clean up. I don’t share a bed with bums.” What kind of a job did I get into here? he thought. Nancies in a weird greenhouse wanting to paint me stripped down fighting boogeymen.

* * *

The dining room was long and narrow. Everything was dark wood and shining silverware, which left Gus thinking of a coffin at a funeral. At least a fire roared in the fireplace chasing away some of the chill. Moiren, now dressed in a tuxedo and a Kraut’s spiked helmet, sat at the far end of the table. Gus took a seat at the man’s left. He fingered a knife and wondered, if necessary, could he make the throw? He remembered that time in Red Hook….

“Ah, I see your oldest friend’s son has arrived,” Moiren said as Carl walked into the room. “Do join us, Timmy.”

The kid cleaned up well, some would even call him pretty, with that chestnut hair slicked and parted down the center.

“Mr. Lunge, I won’t ask you to recount your time spent exploring Egypt with the professor, who fell victim to the Blue Pharaoh’s sinister death traps. I applaud your kindness at making Timmy your ward and constant companion on your more recent adventures.”

“Hope you’re luckier than your old man, Timmy,” Gus said.

Carl took the seat directly across the table from him.

When she sauntered into the room, Moiren rose from his seat. The photographs of Samantha Kingsford that Saul had shown Gus failed to capture her smolder. Her hair might as well have been coiled flames. She wore a skimpy number that would have given the happiest of married fellahs nervous ideas. Those lips, red and plump, savored rather than breathed the air. She was trouble, all tied up like a kid’s Christmas present.

“Miss Samantha, how pleasant you could join us tonight.”

“And who is she?” Gus asked. “Jove’s squeeze?”

Moiren giggled a moment. “Oh, no. She doesn’t have a part to play. At least, not yet. That all depends on you, Mr. Lunge.”

“I hope we’re having steak. I just adore a good cut of meat.” Samantha took the only empty seat, beside Carl, who glowered at her with about as much fondness as a mouse would to an alley cat.
“I haven’t quite decided her role. She would make an excellent ingénue in distress. Or maybe a temptress playing a risky game. Yes, I think you would all agree—”

“I hope that the dress came free with the perfume.” Carl rubbed his nose. She gave him a scathing look in return.

“Well, now that we are all here.” Moiren gestured to the butler, who poured red wine for all. “A toast. To Jove Lunge in the Jungle of Doom. And to proving Oscar Wilde right. ‘Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.’”

Gus brought the wine to his mouth, hesitated a moment, then trusted that the same iron gut owned by his father would keep him safe from mickeys. The wine tasted sour, but Moiren smacked his lips in appreciation. It must have been expensive, probably from France or Italy but kept dusty in the cellar for years.

“And what will be the feature course tonight, sir” asked the butler.

“Mr. Lunge, as the guest of honor the choice is yours. Would you prefer the game hen—”

Samantha ran a finger around the edge of her wine glass. Gus felt something touch his thigh beneath the table. Her stockinged foot probably.

“—or the capon?”

Carl’s face blushed and he looked into the fire.

Gus realized Moiren wasn’t talking food. Was the man testing him? Could he suspect why Gus was really there or was this simply a game for his amusement? Neither situation sat well with Gus.

“Perhaps he would like a nice prawn, sir.” Gus stiffened when the butler’s long fingers stroked their way down his back.

“I’ll take the capon.” Better a familiar dish than one he didn’t like prepared….

“No one ever picks the prawn,” the butler said with a heavy sigh and returned to the kitchen.

Samantha wore a bored pout, what reckless, rich girls like to try on when they’ve been turned down. Carl squirmed, almost as if Gus had grabbed him by the throat again.

* * *

After dinner, they followed their host into a drafty drawing room decorated—no, Gus decided that wasn’t the right word—marred or maybe cursed by his paintings. A Jove Lunge broke the jaw of a masked man with a fierce right hook; another Jove strangled a man in an underground grotto’s pool; a dangling Jove clutched the torn canvas of a dirigible covered in Oriental characters; Jove crouched, ready to pounce, behind an idol that resembled a leering squid before which scarlet-robed men prepared to sacrifice a chesty dame. Each painting, each cover, was more reckless, more absurd than the one before it.

Brandy was poured. Moiren struck a match to a pipe, one of those long affairs with reeking tobacco, like a bad fruit pie left too long in the oven.

The butler offered them cigarettes from a silvered case. Samantha reached over Gus’s arm to take one.

“So, was it Daddy?” she whispered to him as the butler offered a flame.
“What?”
She leaned closer. “I assume it was either Daddy or James who hired you.”
Gus began to suspect this wasn’t the first time Samantha had strayed. “Lady, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Moiren hired me to be his hamfatter or model or something for the weekend.” He glanced in the direction of his host, who had taken Carl aside to show him some etchings.
“I read those tiresome Jove Lunge books. He rescues the girl at the end. Every time, even when she’s no good for him.”
“Doesn’t sound like Jove’s a sharp fellah.”
“No. Doesn’t. Some girls don’t want to be rescued.” She blew a stream of bluish gray smoke into his face.
“Isn’t always up to the girl. Not when she’s featured on the society page. All it does is make men wager on how fast and far they’ll run. Like they do the horses on the racing pages.”
She frowned. “Unless you have a sedan in your pocket, I’m not going with you back to New York, Mr. Lunge.”
The reward for her return was not scratch, but Gus found himself curious why she was there. Couldn’t be for the company; Moiren was one brushstroke away from being tossed into the loony bin. No, something was wrong, so he scrapped his original plan of grabbing her, kicking and screaming over his shoulder if he must, and stealing one of Moiren’s cars.
“So am I the only one here who doesn’t appreciate art?” he asked.
A bored expression passed over her features. Even though Samantha knew the truth she dismissed him as uninteresting. She seemed not to care if their host knew as well. Was that part of this entire game, or was she daring him to bring her back home? And why, Gus had to wonder, had she run away to Moiren’s in the first place?

* * *

Gus sat up in bed clad only in his boxers, smoking one of his own cigarettes, not the awful tobacco Moiren offered. He was waiting to see who’d come through the door. Despite his being a gambling man, he wouldn’t have wagered. Could be any of the lot.
The knob turned. The door opened a couple inches and the kid peered past the frame.
Maybe I should have played the favorite, Gus thought and motioned for him to come inside.
“Why’d you pick me? You don’t seem a queer.”
“Maybe I don’t like uppity dames.” He tapped a bit of ash over the side of the bed. “Or maybe I like kids that are scared of me.”
“I’m not scared.”
Gus patted the edge of the bed. “Then you better get over here.”
Carl walked over to the bed and lifted the pack of cigarettes from atop the sheets. He tapped out one and set it between his lips. Then he plucked the lit cigarette from Gus’s mouth to set his own smoldering. “You trust Moiren?”
Gus let loose a laugh. “Kid, I don’t trust anyone.” He stroked Carl’s thighs through his trousers. He normally didn’t play with rabbits, but the kid was begging for it. “Some don’t worry me, though.” Moiren though, Gus had to admit, something about the man worried him.

“I asked Moiren why he—”

“Hired you?” Maybe the kid was no chump after all. “What he say?”

“That Jove Lunge had a connection with all his comrades. If Lunge didn’t have feelin’s for Timothy, then the paintin’ would be insincere.”

“And pairing us up is supposed to start feelings?”

“Like a couple of real nancies.” Carl laughed, but he kept those brown eyes on Gus.

Yeah, begging for it. “I can feel you shaking.”

“Am not.”

Gus grabbed at the kid’s crotch, squeezing tight, not enough to cause pain, but staking his claim. The kid definitely trembled. Moaned a little, too.

“Maybe you don’t trust me.”

Carl reached out to touch Gus’s bare chest. His fingers tugged lightly the curled hair, squeezed the hard slabs of pectoral muscle. “Honest, you’re bigger than I’m used to. I think it would be like wrestling a bear.”

Gus let go of the kid’s crotch but grabbed his arm and pulled him down into bed, onto him. “Get ready to make me growl, kid,” he muttered before his lips overcame Carl’s.

* * *

While the kid slept, Gus slipped out of the bed. He opened his bag. The only change of clothing was a thick black sweater and dark trousers—he did not intend to stay for breakfast. At the bottom of the bag was a pair of brass knuckles. He didn’t like guns and had delivered the goods over the last six years without having to resort to one. He slipped the heavy brass into a pocket.

He found the door locked. Not much of a surprise. He could force it easily, but that would be tipping his hand too soon. And he still didn’t know where Samantha was staying in the mansion. That left the window.

He glanced back at Carl. If Gus did find Samantha and did throw her into the back of whatever sedan Moiren kept in his garage, where would that leave the kid? A loose end. Saul hated loose ends. Gus wasn’t fond of them either. But coming back for the kid would be a mistake. You don’t wager on a slow horse.

The window latch turned without effort and Gus stepped out on to the ledge. He was thankful that, though the night air was bitter cold, it lacked a biting wind. He inched along, wary of his step, peering into the other windows he passed, but saw no sign of Samantha.

As he neared one set of eaves, he noticed an old barn a couple hundred feet away from the house. Moonlight showed fresh footprints in the snow leading back and forth. That made Gus curious. He didn’t care for the feeling—he wasn’t paid to be inquisitive, he was no flatfoot or private dick—but everything about Moiren left him on edge. Not knowing what was in the barn seemed like a mistake. Mugs like him didn’t outlive mistakes.
He jumped off the ledge, his landing cracking the semi-frozen surface of the snow, before rolling to his feet. He looked over his shoulder. The mansion remained dark and still.

The barn doors looked ready to collapse inwards. Yet a massive padlock was meant to deter entrance? Gus took hold of the latch. The muscles in his arms strained as he tore it free of the doors, which buckled but didn’t fall.

Gus didn’t step inside until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The old scent of hay couldn’t disguise a new odor. Musky. An animal, big and furred. His ears caught the rattle of chains from deeper in the barn. Cautious, but curious what the hell Moiren was keeping inside, he crept forward.

A moment before he noticed the crimson eyes high off the ground staring at him, Gus heard the rumble. A growl.

Heavy paws pounded the packed earthen floor of the barn. The heavy chain warned him, and he stumbled back, slamming against the doors, as massive jaws began snapping the air where he’d stood seconds earlier.

Black wolves aren’t supposed to be the size of Packards.

A hand reached in through the cracked doors and pulled Gus back into the open. The shivering butler held a lantern. Moiren, dressed in a heavy fur coat, cradled an elephant gun in his arms. He wore another ridiculous hat, a tricorn, the sort you saw in a Wyeth pirate illustration, and a tremendous smirk.

“So, Mr. Lunge, would you say this night is fit for neither man nor beast?”

“What is that thing!”

The butler shut the doors.

“A lusus naturae. A fantoccini created especially for my art.” Moiren looked over his shoulder at the house. “Shall we head back, or would you prefer to re-enact something I painted ages ago?”

Gus nodded.

As they trudged through the snow, Moiren rested the rifle against his shoulder.

“Are you a good shot?” Gus asked.

“I’ve studied the male anatomy all my life. There are entry wounds that will never heal properly, leaving a man crippled for life. I suppose I could aim to be kind, but what sport is that?”

Gus’s guts told him that Moiren wasn’t boasting. He no longer seemed like the silly fool Gus thought he was. The danger level had just doubled. Gus paused and turned back to the barn.

“How many Lunges have there been?”

The other two men stopped. The butler began counting on his fingers.

“I mean, have you ever used the same fellah twice?”

Moiren wheezed that awful laugh. “Twice? My good man, I’d be astonished.”

“Sir, might I recommend some brandy and Benedictine to warm us?” said the butler.

Gus thought a stiff drink might be the only thing sane waiting for him back at the house. The job wasn’t going to be easy any more.
“Were you frightened?” Moiren asked as he sipped his drink from a flame-warmed snifter.
“I think when you see a wolf the size of a city bus, you’ve every right to sweat a little.”
“Well said. You are not only a man of action—scaling walls and trudging through my backyard tundra, but also a man of sense. Both admirable qualities in a hero.”
“Heroes are short-lived.”
“Oh, no, Mr. Lunge. You’ve faced some terrible things—the Hindoo Rahu, Captain Dream and his Zeppelin Marauders, even the Sons of Caqueux in Brittany…a favorite of mine, I must admit. Just picturing their weaving nooses from the sleeves of condemned criminals leaves me quivering.
“But they’re only stories.”
“Only? Your modesty is a disservice.”
“But you know I’m not really this Lunge fellah.”
Gus looked at the butler, who gave a tiny nod of disapproval. No, of warning. Too late, because Moiren threw his snifter against the wall.
“You are Jove Lunge!” Moiren ran a hand through his hair, dislodging his tricorn hat. The butler picked it up and brushed the felt with his sleeve. “Don’t you see…I need you to be him.”
But Gus didn’t see, didn’t follow him…because the edges of his vision had grown cloudy. He looked down at his own glass and fell forward off the chair.

The headache, the awful dryness in his mouth, the reluctance of his eyes to open wide enough to see right, all told Gus he had one mother of a hangover. Only, he couldn’t remember having more than a glass of the strong juice that could strip varnish with its fumes. Guess his only inheritance from his old man wasn’t proof against something slipped into his drink.
He groaned and rolled over, felt someone warm next to him, cracked his eyes again. Some young guy, dressed like a boy scout, started rubbing Gus’s stomach.
“Please tell me you didn’t help me cross the street and into a bar.”
The kid’s hand drifted lower than Gus’s waist. “I did my good deed. Twice last night. But today….”
Gus wiped his face with one hand. Despite the way he felt, the kid was managing to wake the rest of him. “Carl, right?”
The kid nodded. Looked even a bit hurt.
“Why are you dressed like that?”
“That butler knocked on the door an hour ago and brought us our costumes.”
“Any chance he brought a cup of joe—or better a beer?”
“Moiren wants us in the greenhouse.”
Gus sat up and winced. Then, other memories from last night came back to him. Sneaking outside. Seeing the largest mutt in the world chained up in the barn. The mickey in his drink. The butler must have carried his unconscious body back to bed—not that the guy looked like he could handle a sack of potatoes, let alone a dead weight of over two hundred pounds. Maybe he’d had help. Gus looked at the kid. That guileless face smiled at him, even as he stroked Gus’s dick. Maybe he wasn’t so innocent after all.

“Not now, junior,” he said, and took Carl’s hand off him. Then he rose out of bed and went over to the washbowl. He dipped his head into the cold water to chase away the fog behind his eyes.

“Go down and tell Moiren that I’m not stepping into that vegetable soup he calls a greenhouse without breakfast.”

Carl left. A few minutes later, the butler brought into the room a tray with cold meats and warm eggs. More importantly, there was a coffee pot.

“Do get dressed quickly. I’ve never seen the master so eager to begin painting.”

*I bet*, Gus thought.

***

The clothes were khaki, short-sleeved and -legged. A bit snug around the thighs, but Saul’s tailor always paled whenever he had to measure him. The hard hat, which the butler insisted be referred to as a pith helmet, felt ridiculous. Gus missed his regular derby.

He followed after the butler on the way to the greenhouse when a *thump!* stopped him. To his right was the drawing room, the door askew. He opened the door and saw Samantha resting atop the divan, one arm stretched down to the floor. A crystal tumbler lay on a damp patch of the Oriental rug.

“I’d watch what you sip here,” Gus said, and sat Samantha up. She looked pale, her eyelids fluttering like a caged bird’s wings.

He glanced over his shoulder. The butler remained in the doorway, his face turned in the direction of the room’s frosty windows. Decorum or lack of interest?

“Mr. Lunge.” Samantha rested her head on his shoulder. “Do...do you want to know my hidden...my...my secret?”

Her perfume had faded. Only by being so close against her flushed skin could he catch a trace of its former elegance.

“He promised me...Moiren said, ‘Your father will never forget how I paint you.’” She slipped an arm around his neck, but the gesture seemed not one of seduction but to lean against his chest for strength.

“Listen, I don’t think you know the truth about Moiren’s paintings.” Gus thought back to the massive beast kept in the barn.

But she nodded, a sloppy, drunken gesture. “I want that cold bastard...Daddy to be...haunted.”

Gus began to wonder if returning all those girls had been for the best. He’d never failed before. Could deal with Saul’s fury at not bringing Samantha back, but he had to confront Moiren first.
The butler cleared his throat. “She’s for later, Mr. Lunge. Master Moiren is considering...well, the unheard of. He thinks you may be worthy of two paintings. You should feel honored.”

“Honored?”

The man adjusted his black jacket a moment. “Save the tempest for the greenhouse, sir. As for her—” The butler kicked the fallen glass under the divan. “She’ll do for the sequel. The Last Libation.”

“Who writes these books, anyway?”

The butler gestured for Gus to return to the hallway.

“Damn it, who writes them?” Gus yelled. He wanted to grab the guy by his monkey suit’s lapels and smash him through a wall.

“Don’t you know?” When the butler grinned, his scar rippled like a snake across his face.

* * *

Moiren stood by an easel in the heart of the greenhouse. He had traded one odd hat for another, a soft Frenchie number. His smock was stained, mostly in shades of an ugly brown. Gus told himself that had to be paint and not dried blood.

The surrounding plants were bloated and mottled. One had black thorns that seeped a clear fluid that could have been tears. Another resembled a gigantic trombone or Englishman’s pipe.

“I do hope you both come to appreciate my Nepenthes rex. I’ve spent the last decade cultivating it from seedlings found in the Amazon.”

“Listen, pal, I think you should know I didn’t come here to be your inspiration.”

Moiren smirked. “The Marquis once wrote, ‘Truth titillates the imagination far less than fiction.’”

“I don’t know what your game is—”

“Art. Rooted in suffering is art.”

Gus nodded at Carl. “C’mere, kid. Sorry, Moiren, but I think your guests have had enough of your hospitality.”

The familiar click of a safety made Gus’s head turn. The butler had leveled the elephant gun first at Gus, then at the kid.

“I have painted Lunge with bullet wounds in the past.” Moiren lowered his voice, perhaps to sound soothing. “You will all be free to go once I am finished.”

Gus cursed. He shouldn’t care about some gusel, but the way Carl looked at him, like a dog fearful it would be kicked to the curb, stopped him from tackling the butler. “Fine.”

“Wonderful. Now young Timothy, would you please take a few steps back.”

Carl nodded and slowly shuffled backward until he bumped into the swollen body of one of the plants. Emerald vines snapped around his limbs and he was lifted off the ground.

The tendrils dropped the kid into the gourd belly. They heard the splash and Carl began screaming, in fear, in agony.
“Not yet, Lunge,” shouted the butler, who turned the rifle at Gus. An elephant gun would blast a hole through him.

“It’s eating him alive!” Adrenaline rushing through his blood, Gus grabbed at several of the twisting vines, his ham-sized fists squeezing sticky fluid from them as he tore them apart.

“Yes, yes. Enzymes and mutualistic insect larvae and all that jazz.” Moiren waved a paintbrush in bored annoyance, and then turned back to his canvas. “Now whatever happens, don’t move.”

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To My Aunt’s Ghost Who’s Trying to Chaperone

Stop squinting in the window—
drift to that wide table of yours
to rearrange the sheets
that trace our genealogy.

Auntie, you’re invisible and garish
as the flyer caked in mud
on the street grate.
Tell the members of your writing group
I bedazzle flag pins for the mayor’s campaign
but the pizza boy’s standing on your hyacinths
lifting my Polly Pocket compact mirror—
the one stained with period blood—
to my face as I slurp hot and sour soup.

I will get into his car, like weather.
The disaster must unfold at the rodeo.

—Jackson Sabbagh
A native of Chicago, Richard Johns now lives, with his boyfriend of many years, in a small town on the far western fringe of that lovely city’s metropolitan sprawl. Three widely unavailable chapbooks bear his name: 2000 Poems, Hollywood Beach, and Explicit Lyrics: Poems. He sometimes checks his inbox at: richardmjohns@hotmail.com.
Trick or Treat

O little skull and cage of bone
who walk the earth under cover of darkness,
dragging your hunger from home to home,
I hear your pleas for a taste of human kindness.

Dear skeletized child—who may be a boy—
take this sweet morsel into your small hand
in this fugitive meeting of dread and joy
—the purely innocent gift of a strange man.

—Richard Johns
A contemporary story of betrayal and new beginnings, *A Strange and Separate People* by Jon Marans is an emotionally rich new play about a young Manhattan couple who find their world shaken when a gay doctor’s passion for his new religious beliefs challenges theirs and questions the meaning of love. This special edition includes Marans’ script along with a foreword by the playwright, theatrical production photos, special selected material, and afterwords by LGBT activists Jayson Littman and Chaim Levin.

“This engrossing three-character drama addresses the struggle for many to accept their homosexuality while adhering to their religious beliefs, in this case those of Orthodox Judaism… the play explores intriguing questions and yields affecting observations as it considers the courage required to make waves in any environment, from the synagogue to the New York State Legislature.”
—David Rooney, *The New York Times*

“A brilliant and insightful play about the intersection of God’s law and man’s love. “A Strange and Separate People” is rich in drama and Jewish tradition. The title comes from comments supposedly made by the late Queen Mother, who said she liked the Jews ‘very much, but they were a separate people and a strange people’ — perhaps in more ways than she ever expected.”
—Curt Schleier, *The Forward*
“Old-school theatrical storytelling meets gay liberation history in Marans’ off-Broadway play, based with emotional veracity, campy humor and provocative sexiness on the lives of the Mattachine pioneers who founded the first gay-rights organization in pre-Stonewall America. Introductions by political activist David Mixner and actor Michael Urie (of *Ugly Betty* fame)—he plays fashion designer Rudi Gernreich—provide cultural and theatrical context. Not every play translates well to the printed page, but *Temperamentals*—code for homosexual in the 1950s, it seems—reads like a good short story.”
—Richard Labonté, *Bookmarks*

“Temperamental” was code for “homosexual” in the early 1950s, part of a secret language gay men used to communicate. *The Temperamentals*, Jon Marans’ hit off-Broadway play, tells the story of two men—the communist Harry Hay and the Viennese refugee and designer Rudi Gernreich—as they fall in love while building the Mattachine Society, the first gay rights organization in the pre-Stonewall United States. This special edition includes Marans’ script and production photos from the off-Broadway production of the play, along with a foreword by actor Michael Urie; an introduction by activist David Mixner; a look at Gernreich’s fashion career by journalist Joel Nikolaou; and an afterword on Harry Hay by journalist Michael Bronski.

“Intellectual, emotional and sexual.”
—*The New York Times*