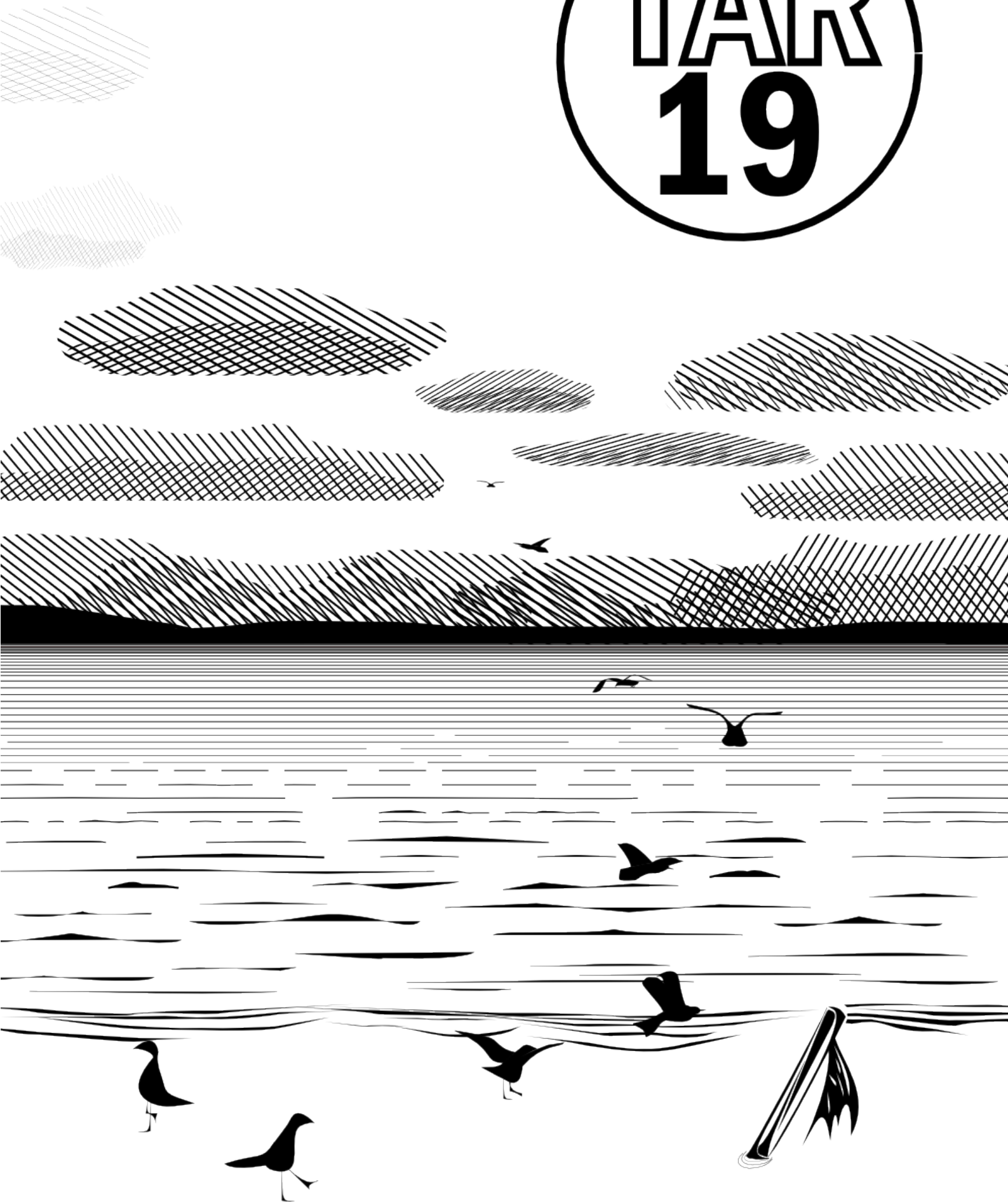


# TAR 19



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## PREFACE

The April Reader is a monthly publication of poetry, prose, and user-submitted content. Conceived as a successor to the Zine Writer's Guild, The April Reader aims to become a hub of online writing and content. Operating under the belief that the internet has allowed the written word to regain parity with mass-media and television, TAR hopes to serve as a launching point for the future writers of this generation.



## FROM THE EDITORS

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With the end of September, Autumn cascades over the world (or at least the Northern Hemisphere). Issue 19 is riddled with the symptoms of head colds, allergies, and midterm stress, with stories of innocent spaghetti westerns, premature Christmas shopping, Russians in Ushankas, and a heart-warming Lich; the poetry is severely plagued with black mouths, white lips, spiders, and Kafka's Vermin. Flu shots are *not* included.

In response to the colder weather, the folks at TAR are working on a way to fight the chill with fire material. Coming Soon™, TAR will be providing *print copies* for your burning pleasure! Check out the wordpress blog for more info: [theaprilreader.wordpress.com](http://theaprilreader.wordpress.com)

-Mr. Thrills

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Hello. We sincerely hope that you enjoy the following. Because if you don't, I will kill myself, and when my tainted soul finds its destination, I will topple the master of that dark place. From my black throne, I will lash together a machine of bone, and blood, fueled by my hatred for you this Fear Engine will bore a hole between this world and that.

When it begins, you will hear the sound of children screaming – distant at first – then, a smoking orb of *nothing* will grow above you, and from it, will emerge a murder of thousands of starving crows. As I pass through the void, you will behold my radiance but briefly before you are incinerated by my Glory. Then, as tears of the blackest, bubbling pitch stream down my face, my true work will begin.

I will open one of my six maws, and I will sing the Song that Ends the Earth.

Kisses~,

--Lith

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Since most of the things needed to be said have been covered, I'll be brief. We've been taking it pretty easy this month, the start of the university season (among other things) has made it harder for us to focus on TAR solely as had been the case during our summer months. Our apologies to those authors who did not receive prompt status updates regarding their submissions, this problem has stemmed from the change in monthly schedule.

I have high hopes for our current experiment with paper circulation. For the longest time, I've felt that TAR has not been able to adequately provide exposure for authors. Hopefully this change will be able to give them the scope and prestige they deserve.

To achieve a paper circulation however, we have had to sacrifice the money being used to fund author awards. Viewers may already be aware that over these past few months few such awards were given, but the change is now official. Perhaps at a later date we might be able to bring back the idea, or at least provide awards without any monetary content.

Well shit. This wasn't brief at all. Hope you find this new issue of TAR to be as rewarding to read as it was for us to make. Cheers

-Prole

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# FICTION

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## In the Pines

By Leonard Price

I remember sitting alone one night watching a Spaghetti Western on TV. Movies like this usually showed later in the evening, and had become something of a fixture in my life now that had school ended for the summer. In this movie a group of young cowboys decide to avenge the death of their friend; making a blood pact to show their dedication.

The day afterwards my friends and I decided to perform our own blood pact since we'd all seen the movie and felt the desire to emulate them although a cause was lacking. We stole a knife from Glenn's father and drew it across each of our palms then shook hands all round, laughing and trying not to get the trickle of blood on our shirts or trousers.

For a short while we were the Magnificent Four of Edmonton, patrolling the night on the lookout for Indian invaders. My labrador Sally enthusiastically but unknowingly filled the role of the town's livestock, the envy of cattle-thieves despite her tendency to give away our position by chasing cats or vomiting on the sidewalk. After we'd circulated a copy of *Call of the Wild* amongst ourselves she became the fearless half-wolf Buck, prepared to stop any rogue Indians from stealing the young girls of Edmonton away to their forest camp for purposes that were never made clear in the movies.

My cousin Kurt lived in the next street, occupying a house with the exact same design as my own. We lived in a large suburb of newly built houses, bordered on one side by a wide river which separated our little colony from a flank of cornfields. Ralph and Glenn lived close by, and every morning we'd all meet by the upturned roots of a large pine tree that had fallen over the river to plan the day's activities.

We spent the early weeks of summer playing cowboys and Indians on the small wooded hill

beyond the corn field. Kurt and Ralph would declare they were the Indians every time. This would almost always end in a Yankee defeat, with the rules of the game insisting we first had to climb most of the hill before any ambush could take place. With my only ally being a bespectacled, overweight boy of ten years, the prospect of historical accuracy wasn't promising.

One mid-summer night I heard Kurt calling me from my back garden. My parents were asleep so he whispered just loud enough for me to hear.

"Ralph says to meet at six tomorrow morning; he's got a new game for us to play."

I attempted to complain but he darted into the shadows and away.

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The next morning the sun skimmed the head of the cornfield as if it were an eye bent to the ground attempting to locate lost jewelry. I stood at the root waiting for the gang to arrive. Before long I saw Kurt leap down from the road and come jogging towards me

"Ral...Ralph" he leaned over and tried to catch his breath. "Ralph said not to blab and not to be a sissy" he looked back up to gauge whether I accepted what he'd said. Satisfied, he broke off and bounded up onto the road and back out of sight.

Minutes later I saw four figures approaching from the same direction. Soon they were descending the bank. I had no idea who the fourth person was, but thinking it was a cousin of Ralphs, I just hoped they played fair. Soon enough I realized who this stranger was.

Grace Farrow lived in the house behind Glenn. She was a tall girl of seven or eight years old. We would often sneak into Glenn's parent's bedroom at the rear of the house and look down into Grace's back-garden. She would sometimes be hanging out washing with her mother or practicing dance routines with a Walkman clipped to her belt. If the latter were the case, we would all laugh among ourselves and end up play fighting until Glenn's father shouted at us from below.

Only Ralph would remain at the window while we giggled and converted the energy of unripe hormonal impulses into poorly-imitated wrestling moves. Ralph was in the year above us at school, and a year's worth of locker room gossip and dirty jokes seemed to have instilled in him a longing that we were oblivious of.

Grace seemed to be flicking her right leg as she walked, and her head was turning from side to side, her face obscured by her swinging fringe.

"Hey James, look who we found!" Kurt shouted. I could see he was holding Grace's left arm, and that she was being half carried, half dragged through the scattered shrubs to our meeting point.

She had a scarf covering her mouth. I looked to Kurt, demanding a reason why.

"Thanks for coming early Jimmy" Ralph said, standing coolly while Grace struggled in his arm. "We're bored of playing cowboys. It's a girl's game, right boys?"

Kurt nodded enthusiastically; Glenn looked down to the ground solemnly. Ralph eyed them both then returned to me.

"I've got a new game, it's better than anything else we know. Do you wanna play or are you gonna go home and blab?"

I was glad we weren't going to play cow-

boys and Indians, and having woken up early I didn't want to go home and be excluded from this new game and spend my day doing chores. Grace was probably just being a typical scaredy-cat anyway, I thought. All girls were like that.

Ralph realized I wasn't going anywhere. He and Kurt got up onto the thick trunk and pulled Grace with them. Glenn shuffled past me, still facing downwards. The sun spilled over the heads of corn and I noticed Glenn's cheeks were tracked with tears. I looked up and saw Grace, now halfway across the river. The sun seemed only to illuminate her.

"Across the Rubicon we go boys" shouted Ralph. I helped Glenn onto the trunk and followed the party across the river, hoping Grace would come round.

The trail we'd made through the corn was only wide enough for one person at a time, so I remained at the rear while Glenn trudged and tripped in front of me. After ten minutes or so we reached the edge of the field and began to ascend the wooded hill. The snapping dry twigs were like breaking bones echoing through the trees. I could hear Ralph and Kurt laughing ahead of us, occasionally bursting out into song or quoting dialogue from the most recent movie. They were gaining height faster than Glenn and I, but we didn't mind.

Before long Kurt shouted to us and announced a change in direction. We usually fought our battles around the crown of the hill, rarely venturing onto the side shadowed from the sun. This is where they turned, moving towards the slight descent above a small wooded valley where we were told local villains and ghouls had their lairs. We'd decided long ago that the beastly Indians were also camped here, waiting for the right time to attack.

Sliding down earth banks and ducking our way through huddled layers of branches, we carried on, trying not to lose the others. When

we caught them up Ralph was sitting on a fallen log eating ham sandwiches from a greased paper bag while Kurt attempted to pierce the hole on his carton of juice.

“We’re nearly there” Kurt said, throwing away the blunt straw in frustration.

“Here, try this”, Ralph pulled a switch knife from his denim jacket pocket and passed it to Kurt.

Glenn let out a whimper and I wondered why Ralph had brought the knife. We never brought knives. I hoped it had nothing to do with the new game.

“Why did you bring the knife Ralph?” I asked.

“Why not Jimmy? You’re not scared of it are you?” he replied with his mouth full of food.

I saw Grace winding the scarf around a tree to my left, blocking a small hollow at the centre of the trunk. She seemed content enough and was holding a half-eaten sandwich in her spare hand so I figured she’d calmed down and decided to play the yet-announced game.

We finished eating and Ralph announced we’d be departing.

“I’m tired Ralph, can’t we just play blind-man’s touch or something?” pleaded Glenn, looking to me and Kurt for support.

Ralph walked over to Glenn and took a hold of his collar.

“Look you little wimp, blind-man’s touch is a little boy’s game. We’re not playing that crap today, Grace is with us and I’ve got a better game”

He acquiesced silently and we set out again, Grace walking along beside Kurt and Ralph while Glenn sobbed quietly behind. I thought

he was tired or hungry so I walked with him while the others cracked their way through the trees, soon I couldn’t make them out at all, hearing only Glenn wheezing by my side.

“James, let’s go back?” Glenn was seated again, removing his shoes and emptying the pine needles.

“Come on Glenn?” I said, fingering my pockets for food in order to tempt him onwards.

“I just don’t wanna play this game. It’s not right.” He fell back to sobbing quietly. I managed to find a melted Freddo bar in my back pocket and we continued on the trail the others had carved through the trees. As we made our way ahead, sinking further into the thickening forest, I had a sense that the further we travelled from the river the more like Indians we were becoming.

“Come on you guys!” Kurt shouted from up ahead.

I raced on, and Glenn followed. Through a tangle of branches was a small shack. At each side of the wooden door were small windows with jagged glass like a set of broken teeth looking in on a single darkened room.

“What took you guys so long?” asked Kurt, “The game’s already started!”

“What the hell is this place?” I asked in awe. I thought we’d found the storehouse of an old-time bank robber or the home of some obscure pioneer.

“This, gang” Ralph stepped out of the door, “is our den, and I don’t want none of you telling anyone about it” he said sternly.

Kurt went over to talk with Glenn, who was sat cleaning his glasses in his shirt.

“Where’s Grace, Ralph?” I couldn’t see her



around anywhere, and I assumed the game involved us finding her. Maybe she was playing the role of the kidnapped damsel, and that we were the posse assigned to rescue her from the Indians.

“Ah! I told you we had a new game to play didn’t I?” he asked, grinning now and twirling the knife with his fingers. He leaned his face to my ear.

“You ever saw a girl’s *you-know-what*?”

My heart began to race and I could feel my cheeks reddening at the concept. That wasn’t something one simply *saw*. It was like the inside of dad’s medicine cabinet or the double-digit television channels after a certain time of day.

“R-ralph, I...I don’t-“

“Oh just go inside!” Kurt blurted out from behind me. Ralph stepped aside to let me through the wooden door.

“I don’t want to play. I wanna go back”” pleaded Glenn.

“Get inside fatso!” Kurt shouted, kicking the small of Glenn’s back and making him fall headlong into the dirt. Kurt’s blue jeans had dark brown blossoms around the zipper. Glenn reached for a nearby tree and threw his arms around it crying.

Inside the shack was a mattress. It wasn’t an old rotten one but the type we’d often pass, left beside the garbage bins when whole streets would spring-clean their houses, making sure to discard anything their neighbor was in order to appear equally affluent. I never understood the mentality in disposing of such things simply because others were doing the same.

The mattress had obviously been hauled there recently since it was devoid of the dead leaves and cobwebs which covered everything

else. On the mattress I saw Grace lying on her side with her hunched back towards me. I could see her arms tied behind with the scarf. She was sobbing in spasms and before I could turn to ask what was going on I was pushed inside. Ralph closed the door and stood above me.

“I ever tell you the one about the Indian, the priest and the farmer’s wife?” he seemed expectant of an answer, ignoring the writhing figure by my side. I could do nothing but stare in silence.

“Kurt says you’re a wuss Jimmy. Are you?” He languidly stepped to the window.

I looked at Grace. Her left shoe had come off and her frilled skirt was hoisted up to her thigh. I noticed a light red streak leading from the shadow of the green material to the inside of her knee. It looked like red paint when mixed with too much water in Mr. Wright’s art class. A darker red had stained an area of the mattress.

“Well? Are you a wuss or are you a man Jimmy?” he was looking toward me again smiling.

“Kurt says you haven’t even *done* it with a girl. Is that *right*?”

I felt a raw shame in my chest. I realized why the other boys always wanted to play as Indians even though we all knew that cowboys always won in the movies.

“Grace. Grace are you ok?” she was still sobbing and had curled her legs up into a fetal position

“Hey don’t you talk to her. It’s the rules of the game. She can’t talk. Do you wanna play or are you chicken?” he threatened me now, raising his voice.

“Ralph you better put that thing away” I said, getting to my feet

“Aww, Jim you’re ruining the game” said Kurt, leaning on the door frame and picking at the rotten wood. “Come on Ralph, let’s go back. Glenn’s crying like a baby out here and he says he’s gonna have an asthma attack”

Ralph realized his fun was over and sulked over to Grace, bending down and cutting the scarf from her hands. She left her hands in the same position, her arched back heaving with the sobs.

Eventually Ralph went outside with Kurt to smoke some cigarettes he had stolen from his father. Glenn came inside and helped me raise Grace. She didn’t say anything, refusing to meet our eyes. Glenn was smiling for the first time all day, whispering to Grace that it was ok, that the game was over.

“We’re going!” Ralph shouted from outside. “Me and Kurt are going to watch one of his dad’s movies. Don’t bother asking to come, you might get scared and wet yourself.”

We heard the two boys performed their Indian war-cry, slapping their palms against their mouths to make the sound they made in the movies. They charged through the thick clusters of trees and broken branches. I heard the snapping wood drift into to a crackle as they disappeared.

Glenn and I offered to take one of Grace’s arms, but she kept them folded. She followed us through the trees, lowering her face and kicking pinecones whenever we’d turn to talk. At last we reached the small hill where Ralph and Kurt would wait to ambush us in our old game. We descended to the field and made our way along the narrow path to the river crossing. Here we waited. She soon appeared from the alley of corn and walked past us, hopping onto the fallen tree.

“I don’t want to play with you guys any more” was all she said, facing away from us with the sun on her shimmering hair, toeing a

caterpillar into the water. She bounced along the makeshift bridge and fell away into the distance towards the houses. I could hear the credits rolling as the river flowed below.

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## Why are your Christmas Lights Still up?

By Anonymous

Something in her ached with a forlorn and distant need, sitting on the patio swaddled in monogamous breezes that would brush over only her, and not the stunted tick-tock-time-to-get-up worker bees that were busy in bed at this hour. She never wanted to feel busy, especially not while she slept. She wondered if Father Moon minded seeing her 'connect' with her breakfast in a bathrobe. Connect. That was a word she heard too often these days. "Connect with nature! Connect with God! Connect with your fellow man! Connect with the you that you were before that horrible divorce and six-month-as-yet-ongoing drinking binge!" No, thanks.

She had a spoon in her mouth. For a second, she almost considered thinking about Life as a big picture, instead of dozens of half-glanced at puzzle pieces from the recommended ages 4-7 bracket. But thoughts like that are better left to the depressed and overtly intelligent. She was better than that. Better than life, for that matter. With its cliché · interpersonal relations, predictable disasters and age-old easily ignored remedies to problems thought by fools to be only recently invented, life had never surprised (or amused) her. This was okay, she supposed, since she didn't really expect much of something she had to share with over a billion worker bees.

Scoping out the cereal bowl nestled between her knees, she imagined small, greedy-hearted people living inside it. Chipping away at the dried bran flakes with tiny pick-axes for tiny paychecks and feeding tiny livestock on the sparse globules of milk to fatten them for tiny slaughter to sate their tiny, voracious hungers. They vanished with sharp clatters as she used the spoon to crush their tiny, ugly world.

Going back into the house, she left the dish festering on the table so that when she woke up that afternoon she would have something to ignore.

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## A Lifetime in Belgrade

By Wilson C. Beaver

I am lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. Jelena is sleeping next to me. I have always had trouble falling asleep. I think, and I think, and I become so consumed by what I am thinking about that I cannot fall asleep. Soon I become impatient and decide simply not to sleep. I get up, grab my reds and a lighter and head out to the balcony.

I only met Jelena three months ago. I had been in Belgrade for a week, staying at a hostel, before I met Jelena at a taverna (a sort of folksy Serbian bar) in Skadarlija. She's a law student at the Pravni Fakultet Beograd, originally from one of the Serbian parts of Bosnia. She's twenty-seven – a year younger than I am. God, Europeans spend forever in university. I've been staying in her apartment in Novi Beograd for a month now. Staring across the river at Kalemegdan, I take the opportunity to reflect. I go through events in my life, in sequence, and try to piece them together. I spend a lot of time doing this, actually. See, in my mind I am the main character in a novel. There is a beginning and an end, and there should be cohesion to the story. I try, as always, to find a theme, an undercurrent, a purpose of some kind. It always seems, though, like a disjointed montage. Having grown up a Navy brat, never having lived anywhere longer than three years, all of my memories are attached to places. To remember when something was, I must first think about where it was. This makes every memory of mine seem like a separate story, each with a different setting and different characters. Trying to piece them together is one of the main themes of my life.

I'm eleven years old, in a red-and-black baseball uniform at a park right on Narragansett Bay. The bases are loaded and it's the top of the ninth with two outs. We're down by three. I don't know if I'd ever been so nervous as when I walked up to the plate. On

the second pitch I ground it to shortstop, bringing in one run and beating the throw to first. The next hitter is thrown out at first. Everyone else is upset we lost – I am merely relieved it was someone else's fault and not mine.

I'm thirteen years old, and I'm separated from the group. I'm on a ten-day canoeing trip with the Boy Scouts in Minnesota. The bastards brought nothing but canned tuna fish for the week. I hate tuna fish and refuse to eat it. For ten days I eat nothing but the fish I catch, clean, and cook. One day while fishing I get lost, and cannot find anyone. It takes me half a day to make it back to camp. They try to fake being angry but are all appreciative that they've had the day off from canoeing while waiting for me.

I'm fifteen years old. I'm in the bathroom of my private school in the Netherlands, looking at my reflection in the mirror. My white undershirt is stained with blood from my nose and my busted lip. I've just lost a fight in what we military brats unimaginatively call a fight club. One of my ribs feels bruised. Is my nose broken? I throw away the undershirt, wash my face, button up my dress shirt and go to class.

I'm sixteen years old, wearing a too-tight club shirt and jeans in a nightclub in The Hague. I'm tipsy, dancing with a French girl in a jean skirt. I now have the start of a black eye, but I'm in a good mood. Two Arabs present had been bragging about how they were going to beat up the only American in the club. I guess they were mad about Iraq. While I was at the bar getting drinks, one of them came up and punched me in the eye. The other grabbed me by the collar and threw me over the bar. I kicked him in the chest, leapt up and punched his friend in the mouth. I then punched the first one in the stomach and he doubled over. I squared up, waiting for them to retaliate, but a third Arab came up and dragged his two friends

out of the club. A cheer went up and I suddenly had more drinks than I needed. I went back to the French girl, momentarily feeling very pleased with myself.

I'm seventeen years old and in a deep depression. I've moved back to the United States, to a suburban school where everyone has known each other since elementary school. It isn't like a Navy base where everyone is new and you instantly make friends. Here it takes a long time to meet anyone, so I become a recluse and spend my time reading classic literature and studying languages. I decide that Hemingway is my favorite author. I think that there are certainly better authors, but as an American Hemingway speaks to me more than anyone else. I read *For Whom the Bell Tolls* four times. It annoys me when someone mentions *The Old Man and the Sea*. It is undoubtedly a good little story, but mentioning it immediately after mentioning Hemingway is a sure sign that it's his only book you've read, and that you read it in sophomore English. It will be over a year before I have anything approaching a social life.

I'm eighteen years old, wearing a leather jacket and a black scarf. I am on a gap year, teaching English in the Russian Caucasus with a State Department program. I'm lying on a park bench with my head on my girlfriend's lap. I had thought for some time that Russia was the furthest I had ever been from home. Now I am not so sure. At this moment I feel more at home than I can ever remember feeling. A light snowfall has just begun – the first this winter. I stare up through the snow, past the trees, up to the stars, the same stars that I have always seen. I lose myself in them, simply staring, my mind empty of the doubts, fears and preoccupations that usually plague it. Yana leans down and kisses me, “О чём ты думаешь?” she asks. “I'm not thinking at all,” I answer. I'm happy.

I'm nineteen years old, wearing a tie and an ID badge. Having returned from Russia just after the start of the semester, I will have to wait eight months before starting university. I

am working two boring jobs. Life seems on hold. I wait for something new.

I am twenty years old, pulling a suitcase, just having arrived in Vienna for yet another year abroad. Throughout this year I will travel extensively, live large, and generally wine, dine, and wench for ten months straight. I listen to the seagulls as I cross the Bosphorus. I pray to God in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I float in the Dead Sea. I am tear-gassed at a Greek riot. I make love on a boat on the Danube in Budapest. I come to blows with a Moroccan drug dealer. I blow the clutch on a rental car in the remote mountains of Crete. I take the Orient Express (what's left of it) through the Balkans to Istanbul, stopping all along the way. I have multiple amorous liaisons in hostels. I climb the Rock of Gibraltar. I endure a cold Pasternakian night train in the Ukraine. I haggle in the souks of Fez and Marrakech. Sitting on a surfboard out in the waves off the beach in the Algarve, where the dark waters of the North Atlantic meet the clear, bright waters of the Mediterranean, I realize that I am merely content. Something is missing, but for the life of me I don't know what it is. What the hell is wrong with me? Later I will decide that travel, booze, sex, all the most self-absorbed pleasures of life, have no staying power. You tire of a place, of one-night stands - you need another drink.

I am twenty-one years old, back at school in the States. I take nineteen hours and work two jobs. I have a girl and sometimes I go to bars, but I'm not really into it. I prefer to read. I devour the classics I have neglected for so long, finally reading *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *Dr. Zhivago* etc. etc. The passions of the nineteenth-century Russians enthrall me. I work out constantly. I feel that this is an interim phase in my life, so I must prepare for the important parts coming up.

I am twenty-two years old, doing a single semester abroad in Shanghai. It is not like living in Europe. It takes time to acclimate to the crowds, the smog, and the persistently odd smells. I study diligently yet struggle with

Chinese. I begin to realize my limits. The Western world seems very far away.

Then I am twenty-five years old, at a forward operating base in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. We play cards and smoke for most of the day. The occasional half-hearted Taliban attack is considered by many a respite from the boredom in the heat. I had dreamed of glory in the Marines. Unfortunately, I don't think there is glory any more. We live in an age of malaise, of relativism. Nothing is sacred, nor glorious. In trying to expel what we considered the evils of our forefathers, we have also destroyed the passions that made human life worth living. To read the stories of antiquity is to catch a glimpse of real passion, of real life. Yes, they killed more, they hated more, but they also dreamed more, loved more, imagined more. We now are content to be content. A comfortable, materialistic life is what most want, what most pursue. I am not satisfied. I want more and always will. Sometimes I wonder if there is anything left in this world that is truly exhilarating. Maybe the bland uniformity of modernity really has conquered everything.

And now I am twenty-eight, and all of that seems very far away. I'm out of the Corps, and traveling until I run out of money, for want of a better idea. I rather like Serbia, and have stayed here longer than I have stayed anywhere in some time. Serbs have recently become a byword for barbarism. I feel that Serbs are simply of a different age. They have been frozen in time, first by the Turks, and then by the Communists, for half-a-millennium. The Serbs I know have hatreds, yes, but in this part of the world everyone does. The Serbs make up for it with how much they love and enjoy life. I have never been to a place with such a gamut of feeling. Lost in thought, I don't notice Jelena is now awake and has been watching me smoke and think. She walks over and places herself in my arms. I put out my cigarette and hold her. For some time we look out at the confluence of the Danube and Sava, over at the fortress and the city, and up at the stars. Belgrade is not that bright; you can see the stars. The wind blows

and I close my eyes. It's raining, but so lightly that you wouldn't notice it if you were walking too fast. At this moment I don't feel much of a connection with the man in those memories. I hope that ten years from now, I won't look back and wonder who I was now. But for the moment, I feel my melancholy melt away. I am not thinking, only feeling. Jelena turns, kisses me, and asks "Јели све у реду?" I answer "да." Everything is fine. "О чему ти мислиш?" she asks. Looking down, I smile at her, kiss her, and tell her in Russian-accented Serbian that I'm not thinking of anything at all.

I'm happy.

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## The Adventures of Boris the Tentacle Monster – Pt.4

By Some Pervert

### PREVIOUSLY:

*Rachel falls prey to a tentacle beast. She returns to her dormitory to try and erase the memory of the incident with alcohol, and to clean herself of its wanton, slimy exudations. Meanwhile Amy, the grad student who was keeping the creature in her office, accidentally allows it to escape through the drain system, after which it has its way with another helpless victim.*

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Rachel ate with Stephanie in the communal kitchen. The food she had prepared was mediocre, but edible all the same. They made amicable small-talk throughout, although Rachel was understandably distracted. Stephanie was doing most of the talking, asking her all sorts of trivial questions about her course, her family back home, whether she had a boyfriend, and so on. Rachel decided that she needed to keep the alcohol coming, and had mixed some into her orange juice while Stephanie was refilling her own drink from the fridge. Half a glass later, the day's events were beginning to seem more distant.

After the meal, she stood at the sink to help with the cleaning, drying the dishes as Stephanie handed them to her. The girl spoke without looking at her, concentrating on scrubbing the burnt-on residue out of one of her saucepans.

"Is something on your mind, Rachel?"

"Huh?"

"You seemed a bit preoccupied this evening, is all. I was just wondering if everything really is okay."

"I told you before, I'm fine."

"You were being so quiet, though. Is it something I've done?"

"Stephanie. Really, it's fine. Can you please just stop asking?"

"O-okay," she said. She seemed a little upset. Rachel regretted snapping at her.

They finished cleaning up, and Stephanie put the leftovers in the fridge. Rachel finished the last of her adulterated juice, accidentally bashing the glass against the sink before giving it a perfunctory rinse.

"Do you want to do something else?" Stephanie asked. "I've got some DVDs in my room, if you wanted to... to watch one, or something, together."

"I'm kind of tired," said Rachel. "Think I'll call it a night."

"But, it's only half eight."

"No thanks," she said. "It's fine. Maybe some other time."

Stephanie came over and hugged her suddenly, out of nowhere.

"Whatever it is, I hope you get over it soon," she said.

"I told you..."

The girl squeezed her tighter. For somebody who she'd only spoken with occasionally until today, this was a bit unusual. Rachel put one arm around her, not quite touching, and patted her on the back. She laughed nervously.

"Uh, you can stop now, Stephanie."

The girl eventually released her. Stephanie looked at Rachel for a few seconds with an almost guilty expression, and left to go back to her room. Strange girl, Rachel thought.

She grabbed a few chocolate bars to take back to her own room, along with the rest of the orange juice to dilute the vodka that was waiting for her.

A few hours later, a severely inebriated Rachel managed to climb half way into bed before falling asleep, vaguely aware that her pillow seemed to be becoming damp for some reason.

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Amy spent the night fretting about Boris's whereabouts, and what might have become of him. The data she had access to suggested the creature might have some sort of aquatic origin, but it seemed equally comfortable on dry land. Could it survive the flushing, or had it consigned itself to a watery grave? What if there were macerators in the sewer system?

There was little she could do now besides waiting. She spent a while trying to concoct various elaborate tales about how Boris might have escaped through a ventilation shaft, or climbed into a bin and got taken out by one of the cleaners by accident, but there was always the danger that some unconsidered detail might trip her up when she was explaining herself. She decided it was probably best to deny everything if anyone noticed something was amiss. She deleted all the entries she could find in the department's database that referenced the creature, which took her until three in the morning. Even then, she couldn't rule out some kind of backup or paper trail. The creatures were valuable. A lot of care was probably taken to keep track of them all.

At a quarter past four she got into bed, closed her eyes, and remembered that Dr. Bryant was expecting her to present her research to the visitors from the funding body the following morning. It looked like sleep would have to wait. Four hours of work later, Amy considered the worth of going to bed for the single hour she had left between now and standing in front of that audience, and decided that energy drinks would be a more effective measure.

The time to give the talk came. Half way through it, Amy was sorely regretting her earlier decision to have a third can of the

heavily-caffeinated drink. Taking a bathroom break now, between slides with and twenty people watching, would be severely unprofessional. Dr. Bryant was seated at the back of the room with his arms crossed, nodding along in an unimpressed manner as she presented the first of several slides about the phosphorus nuclear magnetic resonance spectra collected on samples from subject B0-RL5 - work he already knew well, and would probably jump to ask a question about at the end of the talk, just to test her. In addition, there was a contingent of biochemistry students from another department, frantically taking notes. The visitors from the funding body were seated, as always, in the front row. They were dressed in their usual black suits, looking like they had dropped in during their break from working at the funeral parlor.

Amy stood very still during the latter part of the talk, thighs clenched together tightly, the laser pointer in her palm slick with sweat. The last section, her "conclusions and recommendations," was delivered in three minutes flat. The men in suits seemed as detached and dispassionate as always. One of them whispered something in the ear of a colleague, who nodded solemnly.

"Any questions?" she said, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "No? Well, I suppose-"

"Yes, here." The voice belonged to one of the student contingent, for whom English was clearly not his first language. He groped around to find the right words to articulate his question, while Amy nodded and tried to finish his sentences for him.

"You say, in slide seven, about the eggs," he began.

"Yes," she said, gesturing eagerly that he could continue.

"And you say," he said, "the creature, he deposit the eggs, inside of the other creatures?"

"Yes, that's right," she said. "We assume that



part of its life cycle is a parasitic one, where the egg derives nutrition from a host. We haven't got any data on the later stages, though."

"How did you collect the data?" he asked. "On the oviposition."

"Um," Amy wondered if putting that particular aspect of the creature's physiology in the presentation had been a mistake. "Animal studies," she said. "With pigs." She had thought that pigs might be a reasonable animal to use. She had genuinely intended to do the experiments, which made it mostly true - the fact that she hadn't carried them out yet was just a small detail.

"And the eggs," he continued, with excruciating slowness, "they are, how do you say, they are haploids? How are they fertilized?"

Amy glanced up at Dr. Bryant, feeling the weight of his gaze upon her. "We don't know yet. The chromosomes aren't normal. We can't really see them."

"Did you try with the, ehm..." the student sifted through his mental lexicon, grasping for a word that didn't seem to be there.

"An instrument?" Amy asked, desperately trying to move him along.

"Yes, yes," he said, "the microscope, he sees with, how do you call them,"

"Fluorescence," she said. He shook his head. "Electron?"

"Yes," he said, "did you try looking with the electron-"

"No, haha, not yet," she said, "we're still, still waiting for the stains, so we can't prepare samples yet, but yes, very good point, we'll get right on that. Good point." She nodded emphatically.

The student leaned back, looking satisfied with himself.

The situation was becoming direr. Amy's bladder was aching severely. She glared at the

student next to him, who looked like she, too, was going to raise her hand. Amy shook her head every so subtly, staring her down until the girl looked away and scribbled something irrelevant on her notepad instead.

"Well, thank you for your attention," she said, "looks like it's back to the lab. Back to work. Bye!" She exited through the door at the bottom of the lecture theatre before anyone else had the chance to express their interest. She ran back to her office, one hand firmly clutched between her thighs, to find that there was a sign affixed to the door of the bathroom opposite. "Closed for refurbishment," it read. There was plaster dust on the floor. She pushed open the door regardless, to find a pair of workmen dismantling the whole place: all the cubicle panels were stacked against a wall, and the process of removing the tiles had already begun. One of the men stopped drilling, and looked up at her.

"Can't come in here darlin',s being refurbished," he explained. "Didn't ya see the sign?"

She stormed back out, screaming internally. There was a bathroom near reception. She might just about make it. Amy jogged awkwardly up the stairs, through what seemed at this moment to be miles of corridors before finally emerging into the reception area, normally empty, but currently filled with about a dozen of the people who had attended the talk, on their way out. Dr. Bryant was talking to the suited men, and the students were comparing notes, or looking at their phones. The girl who had almost asked a question before excusing herself from the group, making her way into the bathroom before Amy could reach it.

It was okay. There were two stalls in there. She was going to be fine.

"Ah, Amy, I was just telling-"

She pretended not to have heard her supervisor from six feet away, staring intensely at the opposite wall while she limped to the

bathroom. It was taking both hands now to contain her bladder; she stepped around a trolley of cleaning supplies, and pushed the door open with her shoulder.

The first stall was occupied.

She shuffled further in to see that the second stall, too, was closed, the chipped red paint above the sliding lock signifying her doom. She hammered on the door.

"Hey, you finished?" she pleaded.

"What the fuck?" came the reply. "Ever heard of privacy?"

"I've gotta go! Now!"

"Occupied, sorry."

"Please!" she begged. She took a step back, her thighs trembling. "It's really urgent, I'm-ah!" her foot slipped out from beneath her, and her other heel bumped into the yellow plastic "wet floor" sign behind her. Amy sprawled backwards, landing hard on her butt. The shock of the fall had broken her concentration for one, critical, irreversible moment.

A wet patch began to spread across her jeans.

"No!" she cried. She tried to scramble to her feet, but it was too late to do anything about it now. The warmth crept over her thighs, and down between her legs. She was powerless to stop it. She had to simply remain there, cheeks burning with the shame of it as the piss soaked through her jeans, forming an acrid puddle on the floor beneath her. She stood, so that she was no longer sitting in the spreading pool, and the hot liquid continued to trickle down her legs relentlessly.

There was the sound of flushing from one of the stalls, but its occupant had finished too late. She said nothing upon exiting, merely looking down at Amy, scowling, and then walking out without washing her hands. Amy hobbled into the now-vacant stall, pulling her soaked jeans down around her ankles and sitting down just as she expelled the last few squirts. She buried

her face in her hands, wishing that she could disappear forever, or that she could wake up yesterday morning, with Boris still safe in his tank, and none of the events since having ever happened. Her life, she thought, was very miserable right now.

The occupant of the other stall left a little while after. Amy remained in a daze, not really paying attention to the growing feeling of cold clamminess around her thighs. The missed sleep only made her state worse; she was a wreck. The caffeine buzz from the drinks had worn off now, leaving her drowsy and disoriented. She groaned, and kicked her jeans off into a damp heap on the floor with a sloshing sound.

Once she was sure everyone would have dissipated from the reception, she shambled out from the stall, and reached for some paper towels to begin trying to clean herself. The dispenser was empty. Great, she thought. The cleaner was thorough enough to make sure the floor was spotless, but seemingly hadn't bothered with anything else. No hand dryer, either. She glanced down into the bin to see that whole wads of paper towels had been dumped in there, probably by some inconsiderate bitch who thought it took twenty of them just to dry your hands.

Then she noticed that some of them were stained with familiar, orange mucus.

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Rachel missed three days of lectures, spending them in her room instead. She felt constantly tired, and had slept solidly for fourteen hours on the first night, although the alcohol probably had something to do with that as well. She hadn't seen Stephanie since then.

It looked like she would have to go outside today, though - there was nothing left to eat. Rachel had been consumed with an abnormal hunger of late, to the extent that she had found herself waking up in the night to eat bowls of cereal. She had depleted a week's worth of food, and now her stomach was empty and

aching, even though she had eaten half a loaf of bread only three hours previously.

She looked at herself side-on in the mirror while she pulled some clothes from her wardrobe. Her profile had changed, she was sure of it. Her belly, which was feeling sore and distended, was sticking out by a noticeable few inches. Could she really have gained that much weight so fast? She thought back to her ordeal with the creature, and wondered whether it could have given her some kind of disease. She didn't exactly feel unwell, though. Maybe it was the food after all. She'd have to try and cut back.

She collected some groceries in the late afternoon, having to take a shortcut around a section of street that had been closed off with traffic cones. There were some workers in fluorescent jackets standing around a manhole, and two men off to one side, wearing black suits. The first was typing something into his laptop, held in the crook of his arm. The other was speaking on a handheld radio. Clearly the city was taking the maintenance of its water systems seriously.

Later that evening, halfway through her second microwave meal, Rachel clutched at her abdomen in response to a sudden, sharp pain. It couldn't be hunger this time. The sensation abated, she cautiously relaxed, and then it returned, twice as intense. Rachel hissed through clenched teeth. This felt bad.

She didn't know what was going on with her body recently, but the bathroom was probably the safest place to deal with this. She had to support herself against the wall on her way there as the pains became sharper, intensifying with each stab. There was a growing pressure in her abdomen, which she assumed was an urge to eliminate in one way or the other. This was apparently not the case, however - a few minutes of grunting and straining in the bathroom brought forth not much at all, and did nothing to help with the pain. It wasn't a feeling of sickness either, though - what was happening to her?

There was a stirring in her belly, and a feeling of movement in places that should be inert. Rachel felt like she was peeing, but the liquid that came out of her oozed rather than flowed - thick like syrup, and colored an orange hue that brought the memories that she had been trying to suppress to the forefront of her mind. The lasting effects of what the creature had done to her were becoming apparent.

A mass shifted inside her, and the depths of her nether began to ache terribly, although, strangely, it was no longer painful. Rachel shivered, trying to understand what was happening. Was something going to come out of her? She didn't know what birth felt like firsthand, but it was certainly not like this. What she was feeling now, a sort of thin, tingling tension, and felt like nothing so much as the early stages of arousal. Her nipples perked up as another dribble of mucus emerged from her. A cold bead of sweat ran down her back.

There were further, internal movements, and she bucked her hips involuntarily. Something seemed to be pushing, or being pushed, out of her. A series of rippling contractions were accompanied by a downwards shift of the bloated feeling that she had been experiencing these past few days, and this time, the mucus was accompanied by something more solid. Whatever was coming out had undoubtedly put there by the creature, and she found herself thinking about a film she had watched years ago, when she was far too young, in which a horrid creature had burst out of the chest of some character or other, and whether some similar fate might await her. She was anxious and scared, but despite all of that, she couldn't deny that it was also beginning to feel good.

Rachel parted the lips of her genitals to reveal the smooth, rounded end of whatever was inside her. A little cone of white, about an inch across, was poking out. She thought she should feel revulsion at this, but the fact that it was coming out of her own body seemed to render it no more disgusting to her than her

other excretions. It clearly wasn't normal, and yet somehow, it was hers. There was another wave of tension and release, and the protrusion emerged further, widening her hole as it was forced out. She covered her mouth to stifle a moan. It was like being fucked from the inside.

Soon, the thing ceased to emerge, no matter how many times she urged and pushed. Each effort was accompanied now by a surge of pleasure, and she was having trouble keeping quiet, in case someone heard her. She hunched forward, trembling, and heaved as hard as she could, using muscles with which she was still quite unfamiliar. The shape emerged a fraction of an inch more, and Rachel gasped and panted with the exertion. She reached down and gingerly touched the surface of the thing. It was wet, firm, and completely unyielding, as if it were made of stone. No wonder it was proving so difficult to get out.

She dismounted the toilet, and squatted on the floor in order to try and ease the object's passage out of her. She balanced on her toes, supporting herself against the wall with one hand, and gave another, hard push. This time, she failed to silence the moan accompanying it. The change in position had helped, though - she felt the mass slip down by a good half-inch or so, and the accompanying sensation was correspondingly intense. Her breath caught in her throat.

With great care, she managed to ease a single finger into herself, alongside the mass. She tugged gently, dislodging it a little further. The widest part of it seemed to be out of her now; the strain was lessening. Another, final push felt like her whole lower body was cramping up: her legs and abdomen quivered with the effort as a protracted surge forced the thing down and out of her at last. Her body, for a brief moment, was gripped by an ecstatic release, and the orgasm, elicited by such an unnatural ordeal, felt very strange indeed. She bit down on her knuckles, and tried not to cry out as the climax seized her.

The object fell into her hand, coated in

slime. It had a certain density about it, feeling weighty in her palm. She held it up to have a closer look. It was an egg, three inches from end to end, and almost the same girth at its widest part. Its surface was pale cream, still warm from the heat of her own body. She slumped back against the wall, exhausted, to catch her breath. The process had taken a lot out of her. Perversely, her genitals still felt tender and tingly from the weird pleasure of it all.

Rachel stared at the egg silently for a long time, considering her options.

She cleaned herself up, wrapped the egg in a nest of toilet paper, and carefully carried it back to her room.

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The distraction and worry was getting to Amy. For three days she had tried to carry on with her work, staying in the lab until midnight to meet the deadlines Dr. Bryant had imposed on her. She was making stupid mistakes due to the fatigue. She could not help but think constantly about the fact that Boris was somewhere outside of the lab's controlled environment, quite possibly alive and well. Now, the thoughts occupying her mind had caused her to ruin a day-long chemical extraction at the last step. She slumped down onto a stool, staring helplessly at her now-useless beaker of contaminated ethyl acetate and trying very hard not to burst into tears.

If she tried to do any more work now, she'd probably just screw up again. Best to leave, try to get a good night's sleep (although that seemed to be infeasible for her these days), and make another attempt tomorrow. She knew that when she went to bed her thoughts would return to the escaped creature, and possible ways she might find it and recapture it. How could she track it down? There was no trail, only the evidence from one bathroom that at least one other person had encountered it. Boris could be anywhere. Even worse, if she told anybody the circumstances of his escape, it

would be the end of her studies here. She didn't imagine Dr. Bryant would look kindly upon the use of the creatures for personal reasons.

She needed to find whoever had used those paper towels. That person must have found Boris before she had come down in the evening, and that explained why the creature had been so unmotivated to copulate with her. He had probably needed time to recharge. This also meant that whoever the victim was had been carrying one of Boris's eggs for three days now. Amy had no idea what that implied for a human host, but it would probably not be healthy. It was vital that she found them somehow.

She stepped out of the department into the chilly night air. Only one window was illuminated, up on the third floor, the rest of the building dark and vacant. She crossed the car park, wondering about the van bearing the logo and signwriting of "E-Z-Cleaning Ltd." Cleaning was usually handled internally. Maybe these people were the same ones who had left the bathroom floor in such a slippery state those few days prior. Amy made a rude gesture at the van.

She reached the path that lead through the small park adjacent to the building, the quickest route to the edge of the campus. Amy hugged herself as a cool breeze enveloped her, and leaves stirred at her feet. Strangely, the wind didn't seem to be coming from any particular direction. The night had been still a few moments ago. She looked up, to see that part of the sky was obscured by a looming black shape, with spinning rotor blades making the stars behind them flicker. A helicopter? It was almost totally silent, the downwash from the rotors the only real sign it was there at all. No lights, either. What the hell was going on?

"Amy Peterson?" a voice came from somewhere off to one side.

This wasn't right. She turned away, and ran straight into the chest of another figure who had stepped out behind her. They collided with

a thud. The man did not move so much as an inch.

"You're coming with us," he said.

"What? Why? Hey! Let go!"

Hands grabbed her from behind, pulling her arms back. There was a zipping sound, and something hard and plastic dug into her wrists, binding her hands together. Amy screamed for help. Someone pulled a sack down over her head and clamped a hand firmly over her mouth. She could see nothing through the opaque, black fabric. She tried to kick behind her, and someone grabbed her legs. Another pair of hands grasped beneath her armpits, and she was carried away, struggling in their iron grip to no effect whatsoever. From the sounds of things, they were once again walking on the tarmac of the car park.

She was hoisted up, and dropped onto a metal floor. The barely-audible sound from the rotors increased in pitch, and there was the sound of rushing air. Alongside her, she heard a voice.

"Good job, men. Command, this is echo one, we have her in custody. We're bringing her in."

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## Transi(ent) Beauty

By Kieran Hunt

*Hollow fluorescent lights flicker  
framing oil slick cityscape ripples  
as our train skims along the surface -  
could I anchor in your arms?*

**10: 37 p.m. PST.** The sky-train fills up, as the usual post-work pre-party crowd mulls to and from destination. Ding; next stop is Yadda Yadda Center, transfer to Expo Line via up-stairs walkway. Not to make it sound mundane - to an untrained eye (and He is very much an untrained eye) this mass exodus/arrival is almost poetic. It's not quite the "city that never sleeps", but the late night's jaunty pace is steadily sucking Him in. The on again off again lights, the low hum of the train going around bends, the squeal of the train going too fast around those same bends, that pungent urban smell of too many people jammed in too tight a place. Those inevitable few who run to catch the train at each stop, barely making their way into the overflowing car before the automatic doors slam shut; those that don't quite make it and meet His own gazing face with unwarranted scorn.

All these people with apparent places to go, people to see, time to spend elsewhere but while elsewhere hasn't quite arrive, they'll be here.

A friend once told Him that she spent up to 60 hours a month in transit going to and from some payless job just for a chance to *maybe* do something once she'd given away enough of her time.

He's just riding, what else is there to do when you're alone in the city?

Two weeks since He came here and everything is still glitzing with magic; the twinkle of flood lights over platforms that the train briefly stops at before speeding off to

other rural stops piques His interest right now. The train is packed to the gills and yet people still keep coming on. This brings about a certain question to someone whose eyes haven't been trained to look down, out, to the floor, or to the phone yet, someone looking at the honest to God *people* as they cram in side to side. A couple questions really; who lives at these stops if no one ever gets off here? How long do you suppose these people spend cozying up with strangers each day? If that person in front of you isn't an alluring specimen of the opposite sex, is anyone noticing anyone? Does anyone really notice you?

Maybe these questions don't have answers. Maybe the answers are so obvious everyone texting or pretending to text would scoff them off if you asked, like once a certain timespan has passed you'd just "click" and realise all these mundane questions are just that, and you could then go on about your life.

A certain beauty of the city, is what He's noting as He writes down in a blue braced notebook. The beauty of the moon over the ocean to His west. Dark, lighting on the fringes of the water giving it an eerie quality. Beauty of the unannounced, unspoken lines that form as the masses pass between trains or buses, uniformly and usually casualty free. Beauty of the city, illuminated only by itself - faint crisp neon announcing indecipherable gibberish several sub regions away. Beauty of the blue/white glow of an Asian student's iPhone while she facebooks through a brief, dark interval as the train dips under cover. Beauty of the unmanned train careening through the city, screeching its way to some far off destination. (or in His case, none at all)

A certain beauty standing to his left. Crisp, fragrant dark hair, even through the mix of smells the bodies around him emit. Her smell is

like tropical fruit and a day's worth of sweat. It's not unappealing, actually quite the opposite, it's almost intoxicating. Slender neck, the cool mocha of her vaguely Palestinian looks, (though He has been wrong with ethnicity way too many times to count) that simple cardigan/skirt/tights look every girl seems to own, and only a couple look jaw dropping in. She was one of the latter. Almost complimenting her natural dark tones, the cardigan is off-white, the skirt is blue (landing a little below her knees) with black tights meeting a wedge heel of some kind.. Shapely, but in His personal favorite kind of way. When She turns He sees her cardigan is done up tightly over two "underwhelming", possibly lopsided bumps. It's that almost imperfection that keeps Him staring, (and looking away, playing the game as old as time) though He'll freely admit to a certain attraction to beanpoles with b-cups, or less. Under the tight skirt he can see the formation of someone who does Pilates in the safety of Her own home, though with the typical beanpole build, it's not as though She'll filling out a pair of jeans anytime soon. The tightened legs seem smooth, supple, just enough to not look as chicken legged as He used to be.

It must be her face.

Granted, He's mostly catching Her profile, but on those rare occasions, like each stop when She checks how much closer She is to Her Boyfriend's house (speculation, on His part) and how much longer She'll have to spend in temporary purgatory, He catches Her face full on. Big eyes. Not the typical Arabic/Middle Eastern sexy, smaller eyes. Big eyes, like a kid who's about to grab her favorite candy, that permanent huge eye thing. Her nose is much smaller, well-formed just miniature, if that makes sense. Small mouth too - somehow her genetics worked it out that to compensate for the eyes She has to have a smaller everything else. Not that He was complaining.

Not that He had anyone to complain too, besides his small blue braced book that was get-

ting increasingly harder to write on as more people filled up the train.

*Husks of worn out eyes search elsewhere  
leering out beyond the black  
to another time, another place, another love,  
another face -  
may I lock up with your lips?*

**11:01 p.m. PST.** The train has reached maximum capacity. He could tell because the "SORRY, TRAIN FULL" sign was on, causing fits of rage at each stops - which seemed to Him funnier and funnier the longer He rode on. He had long since given up hopes of finding a seat and continuing writing down all that He loved about the city (He had given His seat up long ago to a weary looking woman in crutches), now most of His attention was being paid to Her.

Actually, it was hard not to pay attention to Her right now. The most recent stop (the one that had clogged the train to its limits) had pushed Him almost fatefully close to Her. Truth be told He was wedged right into Her. So close He could feel Her heart beating through Her cardigan and through His tawny sweater and undershirt. They were wedged the way cramped trains usually make people wedge together, She was sort of rearing into Him, facing away while He was pressed so tight against Her back He could smell nothing but her fruity/sweaty aroma. His nose tickled from Her hair, done up lazily in a bun, making Him think of impending doom if he perchance sneezed on Her.

He could catch her reflection in those plastic (fiberglass?) things the city calls windows, to which now doubled showing the inky beauty of the city AND Her large candy craving eyes. To Him, She almost looked pleased, like she was enjoying the boney body of this stranger rubbing coarsely against her skirt. To Him, anyway.

Here He was, a city of millions, a train full to at least the 100s, the car itself ranking somewhere

in the high 30s, and He was with her, pressed in more intimately than He'd been in the entirety of His last ill-fated relationship. The magic of this city. Like two peas in a pod meeting up somewhere in a Sheppard's Pie, some 3000+ miles away from where they'd been picked. He hadn't known what He was searching for, what He was riding for, where He was destined to end up when He boarded the train after a bout of "what do I do after work?" insomnia that'd plagued Him that night until the moment His fabric rubbed up against Hers.

Despite all pondering, He couldn't really tell how she felt about this moment, not really. Though He FELT like she might be enjoying this friction, grooving ever so slightly to jolt Him with hot flashes of excitement, He couldn't KNOW. Though He HOPED that Her eyes locked on the non-glass windows meant She was meeting the reflection of His eyes, He wasn't CERTAIN. Although He PLEADED with himself that She wasn't feeling His growing, "for you" erection, He KNEW She could. All other eyes were down and out, closed, or occupied, not looking at the flush faced tie touting young man gulping audibly and attempting to squirm the side of His body away from the beanpole b-cup ethnic beauty. Yet the more He tried to skidder away from Her blue skirt (it was a pale blue, He noted now much closer) the growing friction caused His member to swell, causing more friction, into a seemingly endless ad nauseam situation, one He'd turn into an anecdote He'd tell His friends (once He met some) in the near future. But the more He tried to skirt away from Her skirt, it seemed like the crowd pushed Her back into Him. So it seemed. Their eyes were still possibly locked in the reflection from the window as the train continued to buzz along the electric rail, the crowd continued to reek, the dinger "Ding!"ed, the expectant faces at the impending platform glared, and the other eyes counted off time until they could once again find meaning in their nights.

He could hear her heart beat a little faster,

though it could just be the throb of His own heart thumping in His ears. Another bump from an overweight, sloppily dressed man behind him sent Him further into her inviting body. Their legs became almost entangled with another, gray khaki kissing black tights, sneakers facing down pumps, rump meeting embarrassment, eyes luminously not bearing down on one another. Was it the train or were Her hips swaying? Was it the crowd anymore or was he rocking? He took a breath, a double take and assessed what was going on. This minute, unchoreographed danced was really happening. No more HOPES, FEELS, PLEAS, KNOWS, they were enmeshed anonymously aboard the late night train in mutual dry hump. His smile couldn't be wider right now.

Another bump. For the briefest moments He grabs onto Her arms to steady Himself, (among other things) it's almost electrifying. By now He is involuntarily pressing against Her slim build, His grip is firm on Her, their breathing heavy and in sync, their eyes have yet to leave the window meaning yet to leave one another's eyes reflection. There, in a moment, sandwiched between foul smelling jock types, and over glammed gals going out for a good fuck, right there He finds that one thing that seems to make it all worth it. Even when He wasn't sure what IT was, He found it and is currently semi-grating with it with increasing intensity.

The most astounding, breathtaking (though He's heaving out a lot of breath by now) aspect is they've yet to speak, or even acknowledge any of what's happening. He feels like She's grabbing His arm as He's grabbing Her arm as He's rock solid against Her buns o' steel. Like they're together experiencing this unspoken magic amidst the sea of ever searching, never finding eyes, like this magic could happen any day, every day, any time, it just so happens to be happening right now right here at **11:08 a.m. PST** on a Friday night between two complete strangers.

The magic of the city.



-  
-  
-  
"DING!"

"Next stop is DOWNTOWN at FORGET-ABOUT-IT"

The train emptied much faster than it has filled. Like a zit you wait day after day after day to become a whitehead, and then end it with one quick squish. The puss of the city oozes steadily out of its open pore. Drunken frat boys, drunken businessmen, just plain drunks, Asian students, White students, "the norms" in dated Canuck jerseys, single mothers who you just know shouldn't be out this late, they all barrel out of the train.

Her eyes blink a couple of times, she checks Her hair and makeup in the windows reflection, the both of them are full flushed and not acknowledging that fact. He's trying to meet her eyes, She quickly turns away before He can. She leaves the train a little slower than the rest.

But She still leaves the train.

He thinks briefly about running after Her, asking Her name, asking if She is indeed meeting her boyfriend, or just friend, or anyone at all. But have you ever tried to run with a raging hard-on? He could just imagine the sight of Him galloping triumphantly down the hallway, pushing old ladies aside as He called out a strangers lack of name (something akin to "Wait!") while full mast. Schlomping up and down, down and out, side to side, and chaff to chaff. The horror, the horror. He instead settles into a now empty seat, every so subtly tucks his still going on strong hard-on, and takes out his blue braced notebook again.

Where was he again about the beautiful things about this city?

*Transi(en)t Beauty  
whose face graces every corner of my mind  
if/when Our eyes meet  
I'll absorb you into words.*

*11: 49 p.m. PST. Still no sign of Her.*

*12: 24 a.m. PST. Maybe She just lives around there?*

*1: 02 a.m. PST. ZZZzzzzZZZZZZzzzzz*

*4: 53 a.m. PST. He's slumped with exhaustion on the back of the train. Clothing rumbled, being glared at by Transit security as just another drunk passed out of the train, no place to go so He stays on the go. In about 10 minutes the train will start up again, security will prod Him awake, force him to find somewhere else to call home. This is transportation, not free nesting. By that time He'll be groggy, the memories of His night will be drained down simply into whatever words he scratched down while waiting for Her to take a train back to anywhere. He'd been contemplating all night about whether to go out, or stay, or go home, or go after Her or do anything. But in the end He'd landed on waiting. He'd reasoned that fate brought him into this, and godammit fate could help him out in seeing her again.*

*But like most of us, it seems like He'll be waiting a long time.*

*And life is what happens when you're waiting for things to happen.*

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## The Lich

By Richard Grunert

Stretching high above the dark hills of a long-dead kingdom, the tower kept eternal watch over what remained of the rotted village at its base. Like a giant inverted cone the finely cut stone structure towered above all surrounding it, the apex expanding into a large disc of cracked granite supported by beams of wood so thoroughly decayed even the worms no longer wanted them. Ages before when the forests were green and the winds still carried the warmth of life it was built to keep watch over the valley, then a strategic point in some long forgotten war. Its innumerable rooms had once been host to the great gatherings and feasts of its day; kings and commoners alike were held in awe at the luxury of even the most modest rooms at the base. It was said the grandeur only increased as one ascended, the rooms near the top fit for even the greatest emperors of time. The greatest treasure of all however, was the great library housed at the top, said to contain all the secrets of time and existence. It was also there that the great monster sat, guarding his books as the great tower had once guarded the valley.

Was he really a monster? The great lich had forgotten what a monster was. He'd forgotten many things over the course of his thousand (or was it two thousand?) year existence. When one is dead the things that trouble the living, such as sleep, no longer need to be bothered with, and as such he'd spent his entire un-life awake, thinking. In the corner of that dark library in that slowly crumbling tower he'd sat pondering every philosophy, every aspect of magic, every minute detail of his world and surroundings, guarding a mass of paper and ink as rotten as his ancient bones. There was still one thing he was certain of though, that long ago when his heart still beat he'd been a great magician, master of the great tower he was now bound to. Vaguely he could recall the feeling of happiness from when he'd finally man-

aged to seal his soul into the one book he now guarded more than any other. He couldn't remember exactly why he'd done it, perhaps out of some great fear of death or lust for more knowledge than any one man can know in a lifetime; but the real reasons had been lost to time ages before. Fifty years into his immortality he'd finished reading the entire library, and it had given him oh so many wonderful things to ponder, but even those now bored him. Every few years he'd read one of his books again, but they had nothing left to offer him. Little by little the spell that held him to the earth had eroded the fabric of his once-great mind, and it made him worry that soon he'd no longer be able to think. He needed a student, one to pass on his knowledge to, lest it be lost forever. But he was bound to his tower, and his magic prevented him from leaving to find a suitable pupil. So there he sat, he'd practice a little magic every now and then, or stare in wonder out his window thinking of a past that slipped further from his mind with each passing moment, but mostly he just spent his existence in his great chair, worrying and forgetting.

He looked at his thin, skeletal hand, trying to remember what color his flesh had once been; for while his magic had defeated death, he was now its spitting image. White bones in a ragged robe and a soul in a book, that's all he was and all he could remember being. He knew not of the horror with which the living spoke of his land, tales were told of the terrors lurking within his walls, and few dared penetrate the dark forests surrounding his valley. In all his time not one living creature had ever dared to violate his sanctuary, and so for ages upon ages he sat, neither alive nor dead, slowly becoming one with the tower he guarded. Where royalty once slept darkness was now king and he was its only keeper.

When the three figures approached their

footsteps jolted through his empty, tortured consciousness like violent waves of energy. He lurched toward the arched window, and in the setting summer sun watched as the tiny silhouettes approached the base of his fortress. For the first time in an age a great warm feeling he barely recognized filled his hollow ribcage, which he released in the form of a piercing, frozen screech that reverberated throughout his valley, stopping the travelers dead in their tracks. He was excited; at last, pilgrims had come seeking his wisdom!

Down through the empty halls he flew, down through the empty rooms stuffed with the decayed beauty of the past. He descended the great central staircase shouting joyous spells, spells interrupting centuries of the slow, encroaching rot that covered his tower. Shimmering beams of light cut through the darkness, scorching the dust and restoring life to every surface it touched. Ancient tapestries sewed with the glory of hundreds of battles regained their color; magnificent mirrors trimmed with baroque swirls of radiant gold regained their luster; brilliant chandeliers of crystal shone once more with blinding prismatic radiance. As he reached the floor of the great entry hall he stopped and raised his boned fingers; immediately the head of every torch present burst into flame. He thought he must have been happy, for his tower was suited for visitors once more.

The sounds of the trio approached the great carved door and stopped, its caretaker flattening himself against the shadows of a dark corner. After an agonizing moment of silence and the loud, moaning groan of metal hinges a sword's silver tip emerged, swinging the door's left side open and revealed the first guest, a great man clad head-to-toe in heavy ringmail. He stepped slowly forward, a look of amazement crossing his bearded face as he beheld the lich's hospitality. The shade held his ethereal breath as the visitor looked over his shoulder and called to his companions. The two other men stepped in. One, whose bones must have really been aching under his great layers

of fleshy fat, nearly dropped the gilded suitcase he carried and ran an awed hand across his slick bald head, smiling greedily. Behind him stood the third: a shaggy, twig-like man dressed in leather, muttering to himself a thousand astonished blessings.

They lowered their belongings to the tiled floor and the fat one spoke. Centuries of solitude had made his words incomprehensible to his host, but a man's character shines through his voice, and this one had a tone to it that any creature, living or dead, could understand. This was a man of power, he spoke in firm commands to his companions and quickly the thin one shut the door. He pointed to the other exits and each connecting room was opened and explored in turn. The lich watched as they searched the entire first floor of his tower, creeping from shadow to shadow cast by the torches' warm light, studying his guests intently.

As the bearded man approached the great second floor dining hall their unseen host snapped his fingers once more. The door opened to a huge banquet, neatly set out with everything a guest could ever ask for. The sublime aromas of glistening cooked turkeys intermingled with the rich, thick smell of poured wine, causing his guest to nearly drop his sword in amazement. He yelled to the others, and both came rushing, their eyes growing delightfully wide as they beheld the great feast before them. The fat man sat down with earnest and began devouring the food sloppily, as did his bearded companion. The lich noticed however, that the third was not so quick. He eyed the table's contents with suspicious contempt, opting to eat only a green apple he removed from his pack.

Soon the meal was finished, and the lich had many new interesting things to think about. How did the man manage to eat so much without smearing his beard? How much wine would the gluttonous duo drink before their faces grew red? Just how many legs of turkey

would the fat man eat? Why did the thin one refuse to accept his generosity? For a moment he felt the cloud of boredom lift from his mind, and the renewed clarity in his thoughts was maddening; he needed to know more. With a wave of his invisible hand a silent breeze caused a side door of the banquet hall to creak open, causing all but the sated glutton to jump to their feet, swords at the ready.

The flickering wicks of gilded lanterns lit the hallway beyond. The thin man and his companion explored each connecting room top-to-bottom, but no danger was to be found, only the relaxing tranquility of made beds and fat pillows rewarded their search. Upon hearing no danger their leader himself stepped full from the banquet into the nicest of the rooms, ordering his bags to be brought up to him. They were, and he stretched out on the tasseled purple sheets. The group set up camp in the tiny passage, cautiously fortifying it with nearby tables and chairs and leaving the lights on. The bearded man disappeared into another bedroom while his thin partner took the first watch, and the lich again noticed something different about the man as he sat there in the hall with an agitated look upon his face. Why was he still so cautious? Hadn't he shown them yet that they had nothing to fear? It puzzled him, and proved to be a wonderful thing to ponder while his pilgrims slumbered.

Soon the light of morning crept in through polished windows; a gray, muted light, for the heavy clouds high above the tower never truly let the sun shine through. This light soon woke the fat man and his servants, although the lich noted that the thin one had never truly slept. The undead sage had spent the night in careful observation of them; peering into their dreams and delighting at all he saw. The leader stood up, scratched his head and called for their expedition to resume. The group hurriedly packed up their things (the bearded one slyly slipped a jeweled cup into his pack) and rallied together back in the banquet hall where the great table stood, again covered with all the wonderful

sorts of foods a living creature could imagine, as if they hadn't touched a morsel the night before. The fat one cheered, and his hearty breakfast cost them almost an hour. Soon however, the search resumed, and by early afternoon they had searched the third floor and begun on the fourth. Days went by, and on each another level of the tower was explored. Every night they spent in comfort, provided for by the magic of their unknown benefactor, who fed them and ensured they had only the finest rooms to sleep in. Slowly, very slowly, he began to understand their language and learned they had visited his tower to find something, but speak of exactly what it was they would not; but this did not trouble him, for surely they must be learned men searching for his great library and the knowledge it held. They took things here and there: golden candlesticks, jewels from the edges of mirrors and the like. But this did not trouble the lich, for his guests were welcome to take whatever they liked from the lower floors – after all, what use for gold and treasure did one who lived forever have?

By the seventh evening the group had reached the base of the great central staircase in the center of his tower. They camped there for the night and started early the next morning, the fat man needing to stop every half hour or so to rest. Over the two days it took the trio to ascend the lich continued to watch and wait, often returning to the sanctuary of his library to collect the books he considered to be the best from the shelves, arranging them in a neat pile so that his guests could read and behold the wonders contained within. He had decided that when the group at last reached his sanctum he would reveal himself and speak to them, he had so many great things to teach!

After another silent eternity the door swung open and they entered the low golden light of the lich's innermost home. Colossal racks of books reached high above them, as if they were treasure cases containing the great wisdoms of the world. Down the center aisle was stretched an elegant purple carpet laced with threads of

silver ending at a sharp obsidian staircase. Above this, flat on a stone table lay the most valuable treasure of all: a yellowed book of bound leather, the wizard's soul. On a low table to their left sat the pile their host had set out for them, the host who now watched from the shadow of a pillar near the wall behind the door.

The glutton pushed his way into the room and shouted an order to his group, which spread out and began haphazardly flipping through the books of the table. They then spread out through the aisles, pulling down tome after tome, casting them carelessly aside after barely a glance at their contents. The lich was puzzled, and emerging slowly from his shadows appeared before the leader, his haggard robe swaying slowly in the breezeless room.

'Pilgrims! What dost thou seek?' He questioned, his voice coming not from his form but emanating from the very bowels of the room itself. The man shrieked and fell back, his companions rushing to his side, swords drawn. For a tense moment there was complete silence, but the man soon regained his composure, and prostrated himself before the dark, imposing figure.

'Dark lord, I kneel before you as a servant. I have heard great tales of your wisdom. I seek the secrets of the powers beyond death, and would gladly pledge myself to your service to learn them.'

'Ye say ye seek my wisdom, yet ye cast it upon the floor. Why wouldst thou seek to suffer as I do if knowledge is surely not thy goal?'

'Why for great power, as you have, my lord.' As he said this a low rumble ran through the very foundation of the tower, as if the entire structure groaned in anguish. The lich's empty eye sockets darkened and his fingers clenched into a bony fist.

'Power! Ye would suffer as I do for such a little thing as power?! What good is power without the wisdom to use it? I see now thy cause is ignoble, and I was wrong to guide and provide for thee. Be gone from my tower and never return, for ye are not worthy to stand in my holy sanctum.' With this the lich vanished, and with him all the beauty he had prepared for them, and the tower once more was cloaked in rot and darkness.

'But great lord-!' The man stopped as the others pulled torches from their packs and lit them, the light illuminating the mask of frustration upon the face of their leader. 'All this way... for nothing?! Come, we shall not leave here empty handed.'

The trio returned to the center aisle and under the oppressive gloom searched the library a second time, but found nothing but dusty old books. Defeated, they regrouped and made their way up the stairs to the stone table upon which only one book lay, standing out from the rest.

'This book must be valuable,' said the glutton. 'The demon keeps it away from the rest, it must contain great power!' He reached out his hand to touch it, but before he could the lich materialized and caught his wrist with a skeletal hand, breaking it with a sickening snap. The man screamed and fell back, clutching his arm to his chest as the bearded man lunged forward with his sword, managing only to slice the air as their assailant vanished once more. He stood there, bewildered, until the same hand grabbed his hair from behind and yanked back hard as the tip of an icy spear replaced the contents of his torso, impaling him like a skewer through meat. The lich pulled back, his right arm completely enveloped from the elbow down by a pointed icicle, dripping with crimson. The man's body slowly slid off, landing in a bloody mess on the floor.

Before the lich lay the cowering form of the glutton, still clutching his broken wrist to his

chest. He screamed once more and scrambled to his feet, fleeing into the dark aisles as his judge hovered calmly after him, a dripping trail of blood trailing his encased arm.

The booming voice seemed to emanate from the shelves themselves. 'What do ye hope to achieve by running? Come and cower before thy master once more, that I may render judgment upon ye.'

He was not hard to track, the lich knew every inch of his tower, and soon found his quarry clawing at the window, unable to open the rusted latch with one hand. The lich towered above him like a grand angel of knowledge and death, ready to pass sentence upon this pitiful creature. The ice melted away as bony fingers found their way around the glutton's throat, lifting him so they spoke face to skull. The doomed glutton looked into the dark, empty sockets, and for a brief moment it was as if he understood the great disappointment and suffering behind them. It completely enveloped his mind, and in an instant he was blind.

The lich spoke.

'Defiler, I showed thee nothing but kindness and warmth; I cared for thee as ye traveled through my great tower; Thy presence gave me the false hope that I may pass on my great knowledge to a worthy student. Thine actions have proven otherwise. Thy greed and short-sightedness has clouded thy heart, and I shall not have it corrupt my home. Ye are forever banished, be gone.'

He threw the writhing form through the window, shattering the once-beautiful glass into a cascade of faded color. There was a long, chilling scream which ended in a soft thud, and the tower was silent once more.

The lich turned and returned to his great chair, the stiffening body still beside it.

'Come before me,' he hissed, the voice like a

seeking snake slithering through the shelves.

The thin man emerged from the shadows into the center aisle, unarmed and wearing nothing but a cloth tunic. He approached the throne and genuflected, his long brown hair almost touching the floor.

'What is thy name?' The lich asked.

'Montresor, great lord.'

'And what dost thou seek?'

'Endless wisdom, wise lord.'

The master's empty eyes glow red.

'And for what purpose?'

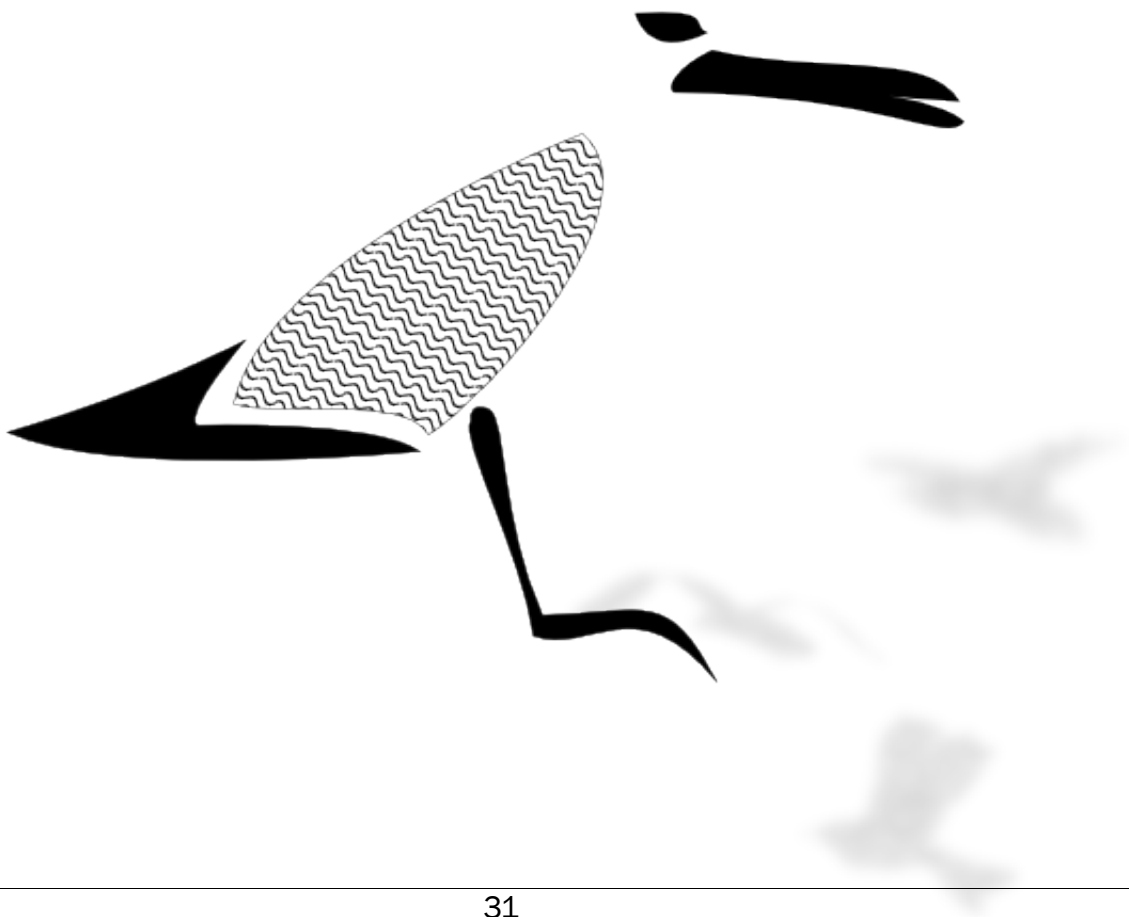
'To understand as you do, my lord.'

The lich raised a powerful hand and a book levitated to him, which he tossed upon the ground before his new pupil.

'Read,' he commanded. As the man opened the book and slowly began to digest its contents, the lich felt a deep, radiating warmth where his heart would have been.

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# POETRY



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**kathryn**

By Michael Petrobon

i love when people are beautiful.

when with eyes opened to me and me alone they are calm

when with panning eyes they sneak a secret look

i look for Possession: i want: to live in them, and them in me

but seldom is it found,

for in only one do the qualities of perfection dwell.

and in that i only did swim a month (swaying, thin, unanchored)

one per cent of one per cent



---

## Julia

By Andy Simmons

150 years ago you vanished.  
Surely dead and buried under  
a different name, you escaped  
all but thin paper. Imprinted  
into the confines of Chapter IV  
autobiography written by  
a self-proclaimed bum,  
you called yourself Julia  
which we know is not your real name  
and you wished your own child dead  
which is undoubtedly true.

Such is a fresh mask is your Julia  
that is plattered in perfume and makeup  
that has a distinct strawberries  
in April smell still residing  
in the old industrial towns.

It is a drift among sailing years  
that coasts land to land and  
which fingers the most  
sagacious boys to approach  
with an undertow of curiosity  
even in these days,  
where we believe  
what we know not true,  
to be true.

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## For the Removal and Attachment of Distance

By !fcp0e302SRa

The figure of inanimacy (or is it  
intimacy), laid back like Kafka's vermin,  
virgin legs twitching wither and thither  
and hither and yon.

That's bullshit, I say  
and he says: The rush  
of his hand down the neck;  
the plunge of his fingers into the wide white breast  
of death; the body yearning to moan.

A harem of trains erupts in the distance.  
A mechanism, I say  
and he says nothing.

The walls, the floor, my bed;  
my body, what is left of  
his body and his clothes;  
the sky, the strangers and the streets:

These are his masters, his partners  
in purpose. They trade off motion for meaning  
and the conclusion is all but love  
in his empty hands.

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**Frustum Elegiarum Modernorum**

by Lapideus

For a term I sought that rich banality,  
Called 'self's renunciation of itself',  
And 'Your yeas a hundred mine.'

I was the Seer of Your Eyes  
Who'd squander some vague inheritance,  
So eyes'd glow like a boomerang,  
Flung wildly into sandstorm.

Once I'd left behind a passion for rape,  
& little evidence of the crime,  
& sailed into the eye of her night,  
& Poisoned my eyes,  
In order to fig over,  
the august genitalia of my vision...  
Sober, I rebrand myself, the blind prince.

My eyes which walked and spoke ironically then,  
Called me a bitter giraffe,  
Who sought to affect the scorn of zebras,  
And turn paradise into manhood.

I am the mother who drinks,  
& swallows like lithograph to eyne,  
Like night's fire that frames, and mocks, the eternal gap.  
I am unfit alone for life, soul-fatted on tears,  
I'd lie, a cannibal of my eyes, of blindness a devotee.

I'd provoke with a metre of sight,

Your mother's breasts to gaping maw,  
& cart a malicious smile, mystical and green,  
into that titanic stomach, which eats abundantly.

So, my dear, I teach you about eyes where the spiders live.  
Where the eyes dance like spiders who weep labyrinths.  
We carry spiders in our heads  
Where leprosy begins, begins the eye.

The spiders are eyes which ironically watch me, even now,  
They look back into my eyes, - I do not know what they see.  
The eye alone sees itself.

## Exaltation

By !!fcpOe302SRa

There on my chest are the patiently unfortunate stunts  
of my plumage. I am no bird; that's not what I'm getting at.  
They are unbloomed and quite furled.

And when they unfurl, in that lengthy starvation,  
over across the threshold and under, through your legs...  
We will be pound by pound of flesh  
more real.

These are the things the black mouths  
of my breasts whisper vainly  
against your white lips.

## Platonic Rigidity

By Tom Costello

Back straight, straight, we can  
be beautiful together. What are  
the sociological ramifications  
of teenagers who drink amnesia  
in deserted parks? I chewed sidewalk  
for you. I tell people my acne  
is sunspots.

I stand with crooked vertebrae  
and think (stars are track marks,  
freckles on the back of  
my neck) of everything but how  
the sun bends me like  
a shadowpuppet, and I am  
trapped in this shifting cave of a person  
and I fell in love with  
a streetlight because it  
didn't love me back and  
I want to itch my skin off  
sometimes, because depression is  
a kind of fire too. But all I do is  
pick these chunks of gravel  
out of my mouth and  
fling them at moonbeams,  
and ride the subway because  
I love to shake, I want to hollow  
out my cheeks and stuff them  
with everything, everything, everything.

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## INFORMATION

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