

Our Day of Passing

An Anthology of Short Stories, Poems, and Essays

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Memoratus in aeternum

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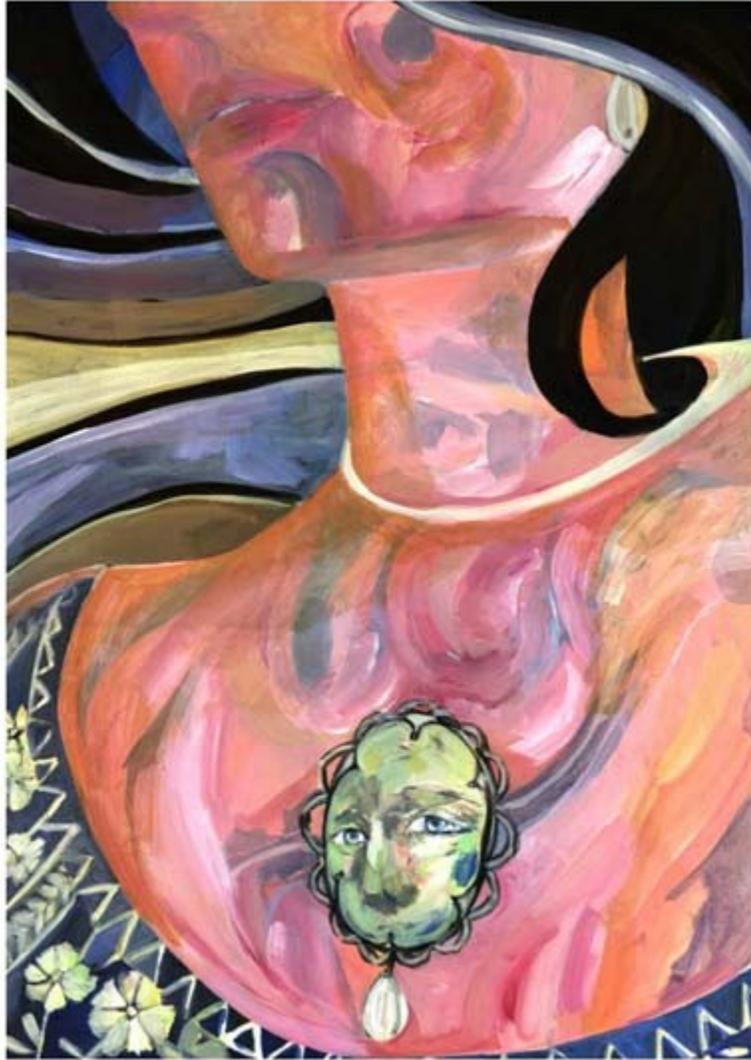
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CHAPTER ONE

DEATH: MYSTERIES, MIRAGES, AND MIRACLES



“Where we must go will all mysteries be untold: and on passing from this day what new sea our memories hold...” Franco Esposito.

Orazio and Me
By Franco Esposito

He sleeps in silence
like the wind that passes through the night
his destination is not of our sight

We call his name
as if we had some power to display
but yet he does not hear our cries to awake
nor speaks to our mortal fears
lies quiescently between his ears
for he rides happy on his own
on a journey home

And to a place he longed await
away from our shallow grasp
and where the angels will keep him safer than we
back to his nature at last
to run quick and free
as a river
and grow grand and boastful
as the shade of a mighty tree

But it is not him I cry
it is for me
for my friend Orazio
I can no longer with my own eyes see
that I call as in our prime
to come out and play for awhile
for I am alone
and in need of your company
and your smile

And we will go as we have went
along the city and the streets that bend

and the pretty girls there that knew you then
and just to wet our appetite for more
to get a bite before

And at that table
all that was good of life we took
and from the corner of your owlish look
had the world at your knees
that saw you drink with thirst
and eat with glee
and knew there was not a better friend
than you and me

ABOUT FRANCO ESPOSITO

Franco Esposito was born in Montreal in 1954, the oldest of six siblings. Franco began formal writing in 2010, as a voyage of the heart to which poetry was the most natural fit. Earlier, he had submitted several tag lines and billboard advertisement ideas to Air Canada, his employer at the time, and that was the tail end of it. This book is the first publication of any of his writings.

Franco's style is personal and confessional, immediately visual and mysterious. His themes are universal; unity, loss, love, the sea, the searching spirit, the muse- the soulful other. His influences can be traced to his childhood. Growing up in the 60's, he read comic books, collected cards and listened to early rock and roll and Beatles music, like so many others. At age five and again at seven, he made two trans-Atlantic crossings; due to his mother being ill working several years in refrigerated conditions and needing to return to home soil. Franco would be marked by this trip abroad and mesmerized most especially by the sea, of which he wrote a series of poems of its effect on him, fifty years later.

His writing of angst and emotional turmoil is also a result of his parent's early experiences and memories of the Second World War. All of which has motivated Franco towards narrative structure and emotional content that brings characters to face their innermost antagonists; quest driven tales with lingering notes and uncommon turns that unravel into descriptions of new possibilities. Franco is inspired by the cracks between the sidewalks and the thin lines in our own concrete.

Franco studied Psychology, completing a Bachelor of Arts Diploma from Concordia University. He worked as a replacement teacher before training and practicing Acupuncture in Montreal. Franco's first contact with Ingrid Hall was by way of a poem about friendship he entered in a contest on her website. "Years from Then", won him first prize in March of 2014. More importantly it opened a door to a kindred spirit and a devoted writer, to whom Franco pitched an idea, the genesis of this book. Franco met Valeri Beers one year earlier through Twitter and together began their poetry blog. Both these individuals have helped Franco enormously, gaining him confidence, making contacts with other writers and cross thresholds he would not have otherwise.

Franco now works back in Montreal, in business with his brother at a coffee shop. He is currently studying and writing screenplays, and preparing a forthcoming book of collected poems.

You can contact Franco at:

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

The Tunnel Betwixt... (Chapter One)

By Ingrid Hall

The tunnel is dark but warm. The sensation as I enter it calming, balancing; peaceful and even though I sense that I am not meant to be here and that I have arrived ahead of time. I am intuitively aware that no matter where I go from here I will come to no harm; I know that whatever awaits me on the other side will be far from unpleasant. I still have enough presence of mind to realize that if I want to return to my husband, then I should do so soon before I go too: before the signposts become more distant, before I pass the point of no return.

I have a choice; a decision to make. The ties that bind me to those that I love, to all that I hold precious and dear, are still strong for I can hear my husband and my mother calling out to me in the distance. Overwhelmed by their grief, their anguish, I find myself reaching out to them. I realize that while my will, my desire to go back, is indeed strong, my energy is waning, and I am forced to ask myself honestly whether I have the strength to go back.

Confused is suddenly how I am feeling as a wave of hysteria washes over me. Simon and I are newlyweds. I can't die now! We are going to Antigua for three weeks in the summer, and then straight after that we are planning on starting a family. Chewing anxiously on my bottom lip as I am prone to doing when I find myself in a quandary when the clock is ticking, and time is against me, I force myself to take stock. I make myself cast off the negatives as if they were old clothes, just like my mother taught me to during the angst-ridden years of my teens. Then imagining that I am drinking from a steaming mug full of positivity and peace, it dawns on me that the entrance and, therefore, the exit to the tunnel is still only just behind me.

Relieved that it's not too late, that I can still turn around and try to find my way back home, I decide to rest for a short while. Some time spent in quiet contemplation taking stock is probably just what I need right now. Veering ever so slightly to my left, I am momentarily stunned to find a row of bright yellow plastic seats, the type that you sometimes find in a busy hospital corridor. The type that you can just pull down and which then pop back up neatly when you move on. It quickly dawns on me that these seats must have been strategically placed here for a reason; that crippling indecision at this particular point in the journey is not uncommon. That I am not the first person to find myself in this predicament, I am not the first person to have wandered inadvertently into this tunnel; this passageway to the unknown nor will I be the last. It is also comforting to know that the laws of free will that have served me so well up until now are still in force.

I sit quietly, and as I relax, and I unwind and bit by bit I empty my head of clutter. Diligently sifting through and analyzing the rubbish that I have meant to dispose of for months, years even,

but which the irrational, disorganized, chaotic part of me has always found an excuse to keep. I soon become aware that while I may indeed have embarked upon my journey without a companion, while I am traveling light and on my own, I am by no stretch of the imagination alone. For it is a busy motorway that I have just pulled over from, and the motorway has been split into three lanes. Not the fast and slow lanes that I am accustomed to back home but rather one lane for cars, one for cyclists and the third for pedestrians. What's more, it seems like there are hundreds of us on foot. There is just about every make of car imaginable. Everything from the small and humble Fiats being driven by people in jeans to the pretentious Audis with their designer-clad occupants. I smile wryly, as I am reminded of how my grandpa used to mutter baldly to himself about death being the ultimate leveler. How he used to delight in delivering the "kiss of death" whenever he felt that someone was getting too big for their boots. When they were getting ideas above their station and "Lording it" over everyone else by bragging about their expensive new house on "that" estate. Their top of the range car, or the latest expensive gadgets that they just "had to have." How he used to look at them like they were a piece of shit that he had trodden in before making a big show out of picking his nose and wiping it on his trouser leg. Grabbing them tightly by the hands, he would say "Lassie, you can fill your house with as much expensive crap as you can lay your hands on. You can deck yourself out in designer clobber day in and day out if it makes you feel any better. However; money might make you feel good now, but it won't be any use to you when you are gone..." Looking now at the different cars, at the people who are riding in them. At their clothes and the way some of them are still fiddling with their gadgets and their mobile phones, I wonder for a split second if my grandpa was, right? Or whether he got it horribly wrong?

What is it about this tunnel? Is it just the corridor between the worlds: The passageway to the other side? Or is it something else? What happens when you arrive at the other side? Is there a team of border officials waiting to stamp your passport? Will they impound the cars: The unnecessary gadgets then? What happens to you if you don't have your passport? The accident happened so suddenly, and I never thought to bring mine.

Death, and dying, the big mystery, the eternal conundrum, the one thing you avoid thinking about; the only thing you refuse to give any credence to when you're young. When you think that you have your full life ahead of you? It's not something that Simon and I discussed, except for the couple of minutes that it took to read over and sign the life insurance documents that came with a mortgage when we bought the house. It was a hot potato, a taboo; it'll never happen to us scenario. Something, neither of us were comfortable even thinking let alone openly discussing and so we hastily scribbled our signatures on the dotted line and then started talking color schemes.

I wonder what Simon is thinking right now. Has it dawned on him that he "gets" the house? Then I start wondering, just how many "Julia's" How many young people just like me have found themselves catapulted out of their lives and into the great unknown in the very same moment as me? How many of them are making this particular journey; this particular crossing, right here, right now? Feeling an unexpected rush of exhilaration not dissimilar to the adrenalin rush that I got whenever I had too much caffeine, I perk up, and it is with a morbid sense of

curiosity. A ghoulish sense of spectatorship; a sublime sense of solidarity and anticipation that I once again find myself studying the facial expressions and mannerisms of the occupants of the passing cars. Searching for Julia's, not because I am in need of a traveling companion but rather, I want to know. The more I watch, the more I tell myself that this cannot be right. For far from the uniform expression of sorrow, pain or sadness that I was expecting. I am stunned to note that everyone is wearing a slightly different expression and that there is no uniformity in their demeanor, in the way in which they are presenting. I can only conclude that for each of them, their experience of death and dying has been truly unique, and I wonder if they can see me. If anyone is studying me, just as I am mawkishly studying them?

Where to now? The appearance of the tunnel has changed while I have been musing, the exit, the route home has disappeared and I wonder anxiously how this can be so? What has changed? I only paused by the wayside to gather my thoughts. Is this a consequence of my indecision? Am I to keep journeying towards the light that in spite of the changes, still burns brightly some distance ahead of me, is there a chance that I can still find my way back home? Rising to my feet, I wipe away the tears that have started to spill from my eyes. I note that the state of the art safety features and lighting, which were visible when I first entered, have disappeared. That there is an older, more dated feel about the tunnel and that it is strikingly reminiscent of the Tyne Tunnel of my youth. The Tyne Tunnel that I traveled through each glorious summer with my parents as we headed to Scarborough. The more I remember, the more comforted and safe I feel and the more my fear subsides. So as an elderly gentleman wearing a tweed jacket and brown cords silently but politely makes way for me, I fall willingly into the long and winding line of pedestrians and start moving forwards towards the light.

The journey, I have to say is pleasant, cathartic. The route that we take unique, even though we walk it as a collective. At first I am bemused when a child of about eight or nine, a beautiful girl with hair the color of ocher breaks out of line. Returning giggling minutes later with her green jeans rolled up to her knees, her milk-white legs covered in wet sand. Then a young man of about my age charges bullishly into line waving a handful of cash and tells us about his win at Newcastle races and to my surprise I find myself walking the hills of the Cheviots. The hills that I have roamed and sought solace in ever since I was a child. Then, just as I am about to lose myself in the solitude, the tranquility of it all. As I step confidently onto the beautiful stone footbridge, preparing to embrace the light, I hear a distant but friendly voice. My Aunt Veronica's I think, calling out to me, telling me to stop and wait before making the final crossing because while I have done well to make it this far on my own. While I have nothing to fear from the peace that awaits me on the other side, it is way too early to be making the crossing for I still have a life to live.

Just when I need him most, Simon, my gorgeous husband, the one true love of my life appears and wraps me up in his big strong arms. I am comforted as he whispers over and over again that he loves me; that he always has and always will. Then something goes wrong. There is a breakdown in communication and in spite of my becoming increasingly vocal; Simon is unable to hear me. His raw grief, his emptiness breaks my heart, and his tears rip through my soul like a razor blade. Then someone tries to comfort him as they yank, and they pull him away from me.

My sobs and wails blend and mix with the tears that are streaming unchecked down his face. Almost banshee-like in my despair, I cling and I cling and this time it is my husband's grief that mixes with my tears as we keen for the life that has been cut short. The life that was never fully lived, the memories, good and bad that we should have shared. The children we should have lovingly made and cherished. Then, because I can feel him slipping and fading away from me, I start to scream. I scream so hard, so loud that the footbridge on which I am still standing starts to shake. So much so, that Aunt Veronica begs me to stop as she whispers sorrowfully that for now Simon can't hear me; that he has gone. That for now it is just me and her and reaching out to me with arms outstretched Aunt Veronica implores me to take a step back. I am however hesitant to do as she bids. For although I sense that my mother's younger sister is my escape route out of this curious and disturbing little nightmare, I am aware of a discreet and subtle change in my perspective. I know that even though I spent many a pleasant weekend at her house, we were never what you would call close. Reading my mind, Aunt Veronica whispers that if it is my mother that I am pining for then all, I have to do, is step back off that bridge and reach out.

Without warning, my mother and I are back in the reassuring warmth and familiarity of our family home. Snuggled up and cozy in our dressing gowns and slippers, happy and content in the divine sanctuary that is her kitchen. I am sitting at the table which has seen and survived so much over the years, the dining table that was handed down to my mother from her parents shortly after she married my dad. The table on which I revised first for my G.C.S.E's and then my A Levels. The table that the whole family used to gather at night after night. Laughing, singing, crying, arguing while my mother dished up pie after pie, lamb stew after lamb stew, homemade apple crumbles after apple crumbles. For now, though, it's just the two of us. The time passing by amiably before all hell breaks loose and my younger brother Michael starts banging impatiently on the back door. Shouting arrogantly to our mother that his bike needs fixing and that Dad says she has the keys to the shed.

Sighing softly, like she's scared our moment of togetherness might come to a sudden and abrupt end, my mother gives me a big squishy hug. The type she used to give me when I was a little girl and I had grazed my knee, or when the dog had ripped the arm off my favorite teddy bear. Whispering with salty teardrops gushing, cascading like a waterfall down her face that I will always be her baby girl; that she loves me, always has and always will. Overcome with emotion, I give her a big squishy hug back. Then rubbing noses like we used to when I was five I whisper that I love her too. I tell her that she'd better go and see to our Michael before he wakes the neighbors with all that banging and hollering. I tell her that I will be right here waiting for her when she gets back inside Smiling warmly back, just like she should, mother nods in agreement. However, there is something about the way she looks wistfully back over her shoulder and blows me a little kiss. Shaking her head sorrowfully as she unlocks the door and walks shoulders hunched to tend to my brother that jars at my soul.

Then to my annoyance, frustratingly, because all, I want, is to be back home watching Dirty Dancing with my mother, I find myself standing at the edge of the old Tyne tunnel again. Looking all around me and seeing nothing but an indigo mist, I take one small step inside, and I am strangely comforted to see that the tunnel is as it was when I was last in it. Cars of all makes

and models, being driven by folks of all shapes and sizes from all backgrounds are still being driven through it. While the faces in the long and winding queue of foot traffic are undeniably different, the sense of individuality, the clean aroma of uniqueness about the shared journey is the same. The yellow pop down chairs on the walls are exactly where I left them. The only difference being that the chair that I occupied for so long while I paused, and I reflected last time around has been taken, and a wizened old Mexican woman has taken my place. I can't help but notice that she too seems to be in awe of her surroundings as she warily takes stock and does the unthinkable, by gradually adjusting to the simplicity of her new reality.

As for me, well, I immediately realize that I have no need for reflection this time around. I know where I am going, where I need to be. Falling into line with a young Japanese woman who is nursing and cooing at her new-born baby as lovingly in death as she did in life, I offer up no resistance. I allow myself to drift aimlessly, before peacefully marching towards the light that glows brightly in the distance. Untroubled by the subtle shifts in my levels of awareness and consciousness that are becoming increasingly pliable, I twist, and I wind. Irrevocably bound by the invisible but powerful chords of death to my comrades in arms who willingly walk by my side.

At first I choose to march in silence. I choose quiet contemplation over histrionics. A choice born not from fear, for fear, is for those who have yet to embark upon this magical journey. I choose silence out of respect for the quintessential and timeless exquisiteness of death: an exquisiteness that borders deliciousness. The deeper I go, the further I march, the lighter, more ephemeral that I become: The more I radiate light, the more joyful I become. As one by one, I cast off my inhibitions, my fears, my doubts, my anxieties and my insecurities, the hurtful and harmful masks that the living wear. The superficial clothing of the malcontent and the spiteful that even a happy go lucky young woman like me was cajoled into wearing. The poison that I blindly, naively, dutifully immersed myself in whenever Simon and I had a fight. As I bask in the wonder of the light that surrounds me, the more joyful and girlish I become. As I twist and wind gladly with the tunnel, I am untroubled by the fluctuations in my awareness. In my differing states of consciousness, I delight in the heady sensation that I get. The comfort that I glean from telling myself that I am ready. That early, or not, and seeing as I have no idea how to go back I am going to march on over the stone footbridge and will gracefully embrace whatever awaits me on the other side.

ABOUT INGRID HALL

Ingrid Hall, like many authors, knew she wanted to be a writer from a very early age. However, it was the sudden passing of her father in 2011 that was the driving force that led to her becoming the accomplished author she is today. In fact, death or near death has played a very strong role in Ingrid's life, and it was her Near Death Experience that was the inspiration behind *The Tunnel Betwixt...* While in her twenties a routine operation went very wrong, almost resulting in her death.

One of life's survivors, Ingrid has also battled with Endometriosis and Ovarian Cysts; despite being told she would never have children naturally, she has two! At the time, she felt so passionate about raising awareness of the disease that she dressed up as a tampon and bounced up and down on a trampoline in Newcastle City Centre - An experience that she will never forget! A series of traumatic events in her life led her to seek her own kind of therapy; through the development of her literary character, Granny Irene.

When it comes to overcoming adversity, Ingrid has been there, got the T-shirt and wears it with pride! She is currently working on a book to raise awareness of Ovarian Cancer.

When she is not writing as Ingrid Hall, her alter ego and pen-name Luna Ballantyne gets to play! As Luna, Ingrid gets to indulge her naughty and much wilder side by writing a series of erotic romances that are centered on a witch and a time-travelling gigolo, otherwise known as the Highwayman. The first book, *Freedom*, is available now, and Luna is busy working on the second one... there is no rest for the wicked!

Ingrid is a 'proud of her roots' left-wing Geordie Lass, who lives in Newcastle upon Tyne, close to the beautiful Scottish borders. She shares her home with her husband, two children and their stubborn as a mule dog!

You can contact Ingrid at:

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The Transition

by Kin Asdi

The world outside was vibrant as usual; cars honking, the truck engines making the glass in my window rattle. Normally I liked the confirmation that I was still alive but today I had had enough.

Enough, because it felt like it was no use anymore.

Enough, because I was not in the mood to be engaged by the outside world.

Enough, because of the pain I felt with every breath I took.

Today was supposed to be as absorbing as all the days before, but something had changed. I couldn't put my finger on what had caused the change.

I was trying to read the newspaper, but it was difficult as my eyes were not up to reading the small letters anymore. I knew the nurse had shown me how to enlarge the screen, but I had forgotten it again. It was one of the many things I hated about reaching a 'certain age'.

The phrase 'a certain age' should be excommunicated from the language! What use is it to be constantly reminded that life ends?

That was the change I couldn't put my finger on: am I approaching death?

I never realized that dying meant reliving certain events in my life in such detail. Only the pivotal moments in life flashed past - as if I was sitting on a huge roller-coaster, seeing it all rushing past me. Nothing was in any particular order, which made me think that it was just a bad dream.

But then I was suddenly back in the present moment, looking at the beautiful body of the nurse who was carefully shaving my gray stubble. The gentle but steady strokes of the shaver were part of my daily routine since she had taken it over because I couldn't manage it myself any more. It was frustrating to start with, but within a few days she was better at it than me.

She seemed to me to be the same woman I made love to just a few moments ago, at least it felt like it. But clearly you can't make love and have a shave at the same time. It must have happened somewhere else and with someone else not unlike her.

I whispered her name, "Alisha."

The nurse chuckled softly; it sounded like tiny bells ringing in my ears. While she wiped the lather from my face with a warm, damp cloth, she said kindly, "My name is Mary, Mr. Bando. Don't you remember?"

My mind returned to when I had hired her. I remembered her fresh look and the rather impish expression on her beautiful face. I had chosen her with the feigned hope that she would be more than just a nurse. I never regretted the choice, but she had always kept her personal life

discreetly to herself. Fortunately, I had never done anything that would have compromised our working relationship.

I smiled at her when she finished shaving my face. The prickling of the aftershave on my skin wasn't as refreshing as usual; it seemed as if all my bodily sensations were less present.

Mary's beautiful feminine curves normally triggered little sparks of pleasure in my body, but today they were absent as if a life enhancement switch had been turned off.

The constant jumping backward and forwards to different moments in my life confused me, and I had trouble figuring out where I really was.

The confusion together with the general sense of numbness made me impatient, and I started to get grumpy.

Mary looked at me with her twinkling eyes and asked, "Are we getting agitated, Mr. Bando?"

It had the desired effect of calming me, but it felt different than when she had lifted me out of a despondent mood in the past.

It was strange that my emotions were less clear cut.

She took my hand and said, in her wonderfully warm voice, "Have a little nap, Mr. Bando. It will make you feel better."

I ignored the fact that her warm hand didn't make my heart beat a little bit faster. I closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep.

The light in the room was much brighter than I thought it would be, and I wondered what was going on.

I felt a lot better. I felt better than I had for several months. It was as if the short nap I had taken had rejuvenated me.

The nurse came in, and I was taken aback that I couldn't remember her name again. She looked so stunning that my mouth fell open. I couldn't recall her ever looking as fantastic as she did right now.

Her impish expression was all the more captivating as she said, "Well, well, Mr. Bando, I see your little sleep did wonders! You can close your mouth now. It's just me."

I still couldn't remember her name, so I tried the first name that came to mind. "Miranda, you look so beautiful," I said with a tremor in my voice.

Her curly blond hair seemed to radiate light as she turned to look at me with a concerned expression on her face. "Paul, is everything OK?"

The fact that she used my first name told me she was more concerned than usual, which had happened twice before when I had overstepped her boundaries. I knew I had gone too far both times, but knowing that I was in the last months of my life she had generously forgiven me when I apologized.

I didn't understand why she was looking so alarmed because I had never felt better. I chuckled to show that I was feeling much better than this morning, but when I wanted to say that I felt amazing, I realized that I couldn't move my mouth.

The warmth of the bed was soothing, and I was filled by a wonderful sense of wholeness

which made me happy beyond belief. The fact that I couldn't answer her question was no longer important to me.

The rattling of the glass in the old window made me smile, and I tried to turn to look outside, but all I could see were Mary's beautiful eyes filled with tears.

I was amazed I could remember her name again, and I wanted to wipe the tears from her flushed cheeks, but her bright blue eyes kept me from moving. A sense of bliss filled my chest as I lost myself staring deeply into her wonderful eyes.

I started to feel cold, and I noticed to my horror that my heartbeat was slowing.

No! No! Not now!

I wanted to drown in her mesmerizing eyes.

The room was getting dark, and I started to panic that I would never see her again.

But then, suddenly, as if my brain was patching up the connections again, I could see her.

I was so happy when I could see her eyes again.

Her anxious eyes.

The noises in the room ceased like a switch had been flipped. I couldn't feel my own heartbeat. A cold shiver ran along my spine, and the only thing I could do was look into her beautiful eyes.

Her enchanting eyes!

I had never had the chance before to look into her extremely bright eyes for so long, and they were so close. They were bright and hypnotically beautiful with little golden sparks that were dancing towards me.

More sparks flew in all directions, and the irises changed from an intense bright blue to an intense white. They became so bright that I wanted to look away to escape the inevitable blinding light.

The light grew brighter and brighter until there was only white all around me, but strangely I was not afraid anymore.

I exhaled my last breath into the white nothingness.

I was calm, and the brightest light I have ever seen gradually dimmed into darkness.

My eyes adjusted, and I could see Mary, standing by my bed holding my hand, weeping. I was surprised to see myself lying in the bed with the hint of a smile on my face. The features of my face had changed; it was as if it was someone else.

Mary closed my eyes which made it seem less strange and awkward, but I was shocked to see how my body had changed in the last few months since the cancer had spread into practically every cell of my body. I was looking at what had been my body and now seemed like an empty shell.

No, it looked like a corpse.

It was then that I realized, with a shock, that I really was dead. The distance between me and my body started to widen as if I was moving upwards and away.

I was trying to stay with Mary to comfort her, but there was nothing I could do, and the distance between us quickly grew. I wanted to call her name, to tell her I loved her but to my

dismay I was merely a spectator.

I had never believed that when you die you would go to a particular place like heaven or hell. I believed that when you die you simply cease to exist. Nothing could have prepared me for this excruciatingly painful separation from my beloved Mary and the world I used to love and live in.

I had no idea where I was going. I really wanted to stay with Mary to comfort her, but I found myself passing some boundary and entering into a new realm. It was definitely not a place on Earth. It was unimaginably vast.

I tried to look around, but I had no means to turn and I realized that I could only feel what was around me. The concept of having eyes had no meaning here, but I was aware of others just like me.

Some were close and others far away, but it felt like I was linked to them all. I felt as if I was with other living beings I knew, but I couldn't figure out from where or when. But I had died, and those who were with me must have died as well.

Then it dawned on me; I was now a soul!

A soul with other souls, floating around just like me!

I wondered if I could find any souls I had lived with on Earth, but I had trouble remembering who I knew when I lived on Earth.

I had the eerie feeling that I had no influence over what was happening, and I longed to be back in the place I was before. I wanted to be in control, but then I remembered that actually I wasn't much in control when I was on Earth either!

Another soul passed by very close, and I felt the familiarity of it although I couldn't explain that in words.

The idea of putting feelings into words felt strange and somewhat alien which made me aware that only instinctual events were still a part of me. It was just the essence of my life which remained.

I had no idea how long I had been floating around when I felt that I passed another border to a place that was vaster than the previous one. It was a pleasant sensation. I felt the most incredible swirl of energy.

The huge swirl was surrounded by millions of bright points of light and I felt drawn to one of them. I was fascinated by the countless particles in the swirl, which all seemed to radiate at different levels. They looked like colors. More souls moved swiftly to the lights while others moved towards the swirl into which they disappeared after a while.

The excitement of going towards the lights was a nice change after the more recent uneventful journey, and I was even more thrilled when I felt there was another soul close by just like me. It felt as if we were the same but with subtle differences. One major difference was that the other soul was female, and I was attracted to her. She must be my soul mate!

When I arrived at the source of the light, I had the most wonderful feeling of coming home. It was so comforting that you would think twice about ever leaving again. I was no longer alone and, together with my soul mate, I became one with the source. I felt as if all of me was being mixed together but kept separate at the same time. It was as if parts of me were interchangeable

while the essence of me remained the same.

I felt a gentle motion of separation as I was drawn towards the great swirl of energy again, as if I was being called to seek new creations.

My soul mate had already left and was at the swirl where she disappeared in an instant. I knew I could find her if she were close by.

The colors of the swirl were even more fascinating than before, and as I got closer, I could feel the amazing possibilities of each particle. Some were more attractive to me than others, but I had no idea which one I should take.

The swirl kept moving, and I sampled thousands of specks of light before sensing which of them was simply irresistible.

That was where I wanted to be, and it pulled me closer and closer. I was moving faster and faster towards my destination. I was glowing with excitement. The attraction to the pure joy of the possibilities was so overwhelming that I was sucked into the particle.

It was warm and comfortable. The darkness and the warmth, together with the soft rhythmic booming and other weird noises around me, were very comforting. I was quite happy for a while, but it was starting to become somewhat cramped.

I didn't understand why, but I noticed that I couldn't move freely anymore. The rocking helped; most of the time it put me to sleep, but there were moments when I wanted out. Pushing with my limbs didn't help either, so I tried to turn hoping to end up in a better position.

I woke with a start, feeling an uncomfortable pressure on my body and I knew it was time.

The rhythmic pounding was much faster, and I felt like I was being pushed head first through a narrow channel.

Suddenly, it felt cold, and a bright light was shining on my eyes. I wanted to shout to turn off the lights, but all I could do was cry.

I heard a soft voice. "It's a boy, Mary."

Suddenly I felt the reassurance of something soft around me, and I heard a very familiar warm voice saying, "Oh, he's so beautiful!"

"Have you thought about names already?"

I felt so comfortable, and I was very happy when I heard her say, "His name is Alex. Alex Paul Kley."

ABOUT KIN ASDI

Kin Asdi (aka Victor Vergeer), was born in 1964 and raised in the Netherlands. He is happily married and lives with his wife and teenage daughter in a village on the outskirts of The Hague. He studied Sonology (the science of sound) at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague where he learned to appreciate a wide range of music and other creative arts that involved the use of sound. His particular talent was for human interfaces. His passion for computers and programming began as a boy when his father introduced him to the world of bits and bytes. Today he earns his living as an HR programmer.

In his free time, he has always been involved with creative activities varying from building speakers and furniture, to creating colored light objects using LEDs and electronics. He likes to create unique objects, and constantly seeks new challenges to push back the boundaries of his own knowledge and satisfy his curiosity about the world.

Reading a lot of indie-published books made him aware of the 'new' way of writing and publishing.

It was then that he discovered how much he enjoys writing stories: something that provides another outlet for a creative mind. He was surprised to discover that, for him, writing is both demanding and relaxing. The differences between programming and creative writing are actually surprisingly small. Whether you are writing a program or a story, you need a structured framework; a beginning, a middle and an end, all of which has to flow and make sense in order for it to work.

Being able to put his imagination to work and express his ideas in words has opened a new chapter in his life. He published his first young adult sci-fi adventure novel last year and the second is currently in preparation. He has written a number of short stories, one of which is included in this anthology. He finds it very rewarding that others like to read what he has written, which gives him the encouragement to continue to explore the world of creative writing.

You can contact Kin at:

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Turn
by Allyson Lima

The fact of rotting leaves
And hardened blackberries.
Open and without sides I empty
Into spaces folding back and back
All touching, breaking apart.
Clusters of berries on branches
Infinite seeds making and remaking
mysterious math of numbered days

ABOUT ALLYSON LIMA

Allyson Lima earned an MA in Spanish Literature from the University of Oregon in Eugene. Before moving to the east coast in 2008, she taught Spanish Language, Literature and Culture classes at Oregon State University. She has also taught the course, Latin America: History, Art, Literature at American University in Washington D.C. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland.

A Paul Peck Humanities scholar, Allyson participated in the 2013 Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship, a year-long collaboration between Montgomery College and the Smithsonian Museums in Washington D.C. Her teaching is enhanced by object-based learning and the exploration of cultural identities through the discovery and exploration of museum objects and artifacts.

Allyson's childhood on the Northern California coast is central to her poetry. Humboldt County bays and beaches, redwood forests, mountains, rivers and valleys appear throughout her poetry, linked indelibly to her creative process. For Allyson, close observation of the natural world evokes intuitive connections that when compressed into language, make poems. She explores the power of visual objects in nature, art, and literature, which when read in relationship, generate new meanings. For her, poetry creates a new space where self and other merge and connect with dimensions beyond the self, both human and other.

Currently, she is collaborating with noted author and artist Mario Bencastro on a book of poems in Spanish and translates his poems into English. In July 2015, she will present a paper on Bencastro's fiction at an international conference on Latin American Literature in El Salvador.

In response to a colleague's chance request for poems, her first submitted poem was published in thesongis.blogspot.com and has resulted in requests for other submissions. She is delighted to join the literary adventures of fellow poets and readers.

You can contact Allyson at:

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A Walk by Waterfalls
by Franco Esposito

A shield that spreads and fills a gap
a jewelling crown upon a map
a wilderness that dwells untapped
from plain to mountain top
a mother's lap
no finer dream that would I nap
could see

This space that rounds and circles me
as arms and hearts that will not leave
no matter where I be
a childhood memory wrapped in a father's glow
a day that will not let me go
and I lie now
to see where it may flow
a creek that lulls my feet to sleep
and channels me atop a lake with shells I once had played
a team of horses all run in a honey gold of hay
I ride between both sea and sky
and a thresh of stairs again evoked
a view so clear that I could clearly find my way
by stars alone aligned if I had just awoken

No trace of plot by compass drew
could pen so strange a land
that join in hearts of men the old with new
and I look hard and apart from where I am and see
that life is an endless score
that swells and bellows out
from fresh to salty shores

In all this world a place so green
where season's turning leaves fall quietly

upon a gray and brown of ground that yields my knees
and wind that blows with a rolling hound that thrills in me
a light that breaks through the gleaming tops of trees
and lifts my frown away that I might hear myself pray
as call his name

No space that sounds as gentle peace that's found
a walk by waterfalls
he waits there long for me to show
my heaven
to him
my love
I go

Extract from 'Five Steps to Enlightenment.'

By Mark Aspa

Life Experience

The beliefs we have come from a combination of how we were brought up, the general influence of society around us and our life experiences.

Native South American Indians, who have been brought up in the rainforest, see the world very differently from a Western European viewpoint. Those who have grown up in rural China have very dissimilar life experiences to someone from urban Australia; their perceptions of what life is about and what is important will widely differ.

A common belief that affects us concerns life after death. As someone becomes elderly, naturally they think about the possible fate that awaits them. If we perceive death as a step into a better world, then we will feel very differently in this last stage of life, to those whose perception is that this is the final end.

I have been fortunate to have three interesting experiences around this theme. The first occurred when I was working as a psychiatric nurse and was assigned to one patient, on 1-1 nursing. It was a non-psychiatric ward and was quite busy, but my patient was sleeping, so I was sitting next to his bed. Across from me was an elderly man, and I remember the nurses decided not to wash him because he was also sleeping. Then something strange caught my eye. I could see a white cloud that was hovering just above this elderly man. It was about the length of his body, had no distinct features and to my amazement remained there a few minutes. Then one of the nurses came to him, found him unresponsive and after some investigation he was declared dead. I am sure I had seen his soul leaving his body.

The second incident happened while I was working at a home for physically challenged people. There was one elderly man, Stanley, who had an electric wheelchair. He was not able to feed himself and also could not speak properly, communicating with grunts and facial expressions. He was a bit gruff in character but mentally normal. I don't think his life had been great. That evening I had been assigned to help him eat. I was praying for him and felt this nice presence around us, as I slowly cut up the food. After 10 minutes, he excitedly shouted 'ook!', and was staring fixedly at the wall, a meter in front of him. I didn't see anything, but he was totally out of character and in a very animated state. He repeated 'ook!' and tried to tell me something. I couldn't understand him and was rather puzzled, but he remained in a buzz. In fact the next day when I came, he was going around excitedly in his wheelchair and came up to me and tried to tell me a few sentences, which I could not make out. The following day I came, the staff told me Stanley was dead. I believe he had a vision of the next world, maybe of his loved

ones, and that had made him so lively.

The third event happened when I was helping with another group of physically challenged people. There was one middle-aged lady who was quadriplegic, could not speak, and her limbs were held in a spastic. For some reason, I held her hand to comfort her and then felt so much pain traveling from her subtle body into mine. It was shocking. When I got home, I cried for this poor woman, who was trapped in her body in permanent pain. I prayed to God to help her in any way He could. The next week I went back to the same group and found God had released her from this torment, and she has passed on.

Some people have a great fear of death. If they could research this subject through Near Death Experiences, they might well find their fears easing. I read my first book on the subject when I was 18 and have since been convinced that there is nothing but joy for us in the next world. We might even begin to look forward to the great transition that awaits us, as this comic tale suggests.

Harry and Wilma enter Heaven

Harry and Wilma were an elderly couple, who died while traveling in the same car in a road traffic accident. They had been avid church goers, helped out in the community and were regarded by all as good people. Good enough that St. Peter was there welcoming them at the Gates of Heaven.

“Come in Wilma and Harry. We are expecting you and have everything ready for you. Wilma, here is your heavenly home which as you can see, sparkles with gems and gold and will never need cleaning. And here are some of your old friends who got here a few years earlier, waiting to show you around.”

Wilma was, of course, overjoyed with what she saw around her.

“You can see that both your bodies are now that of young 30-year-olds. In fact, these bodies of light are ageless and will remain ever healthy.”

St Peter then turned to Harry, “My son, over there you can see Heavenly Spices, a restaurant where you can eat as much of your favorite Italian dishes, with none of the wind problems that plagued you the last 20 years.”

Bringing them swiftly through the air, they came to a beautiful area of nature, adorned with countless lakes and lagoons. “And here Harry, you can enjoy your love of water sports again; diving in the ever sparkling waters, with millions of the most beautiful fish you have ever seen.”

At this point, Wilma noticed Harry looking a little pale and wondered why. Next, St Peter whisked them off to a massive expanse of greenery, filled with undulating lawns, shrubs and trees. “Harry, we know your love of golf; there are endless courses here; the balls never get lost and, of course, you will never get tired.”

Harry could not control himself anymore. His face was red and his eyes twitching. He shouted, “Wilma if you had not fed me with all those whole wheat muffins, I could have been here years ago!”

ABOUT MARK ASPA

Mark Aspa has always been fascinated by the transforming power of the spirituality that dwells within each of us. A life changing encounter with the Divine at 18 convinced him that through self-training he can reach an inner world that is so full of peace and love as to be beyond description.

He has entered this inner dimension thousands of times and found it constantly healing and affirming. It never changes despite stress, trauma or even lack of faith. It is simply who we are: the Self, Soul, God's Presence in us, Divine Consciousness.

He has been most blessed to have a fully Divine Teacher, Sathya Sai Baba, who still keeps him close and guides him. He credits his Divine Teacher with bringing him through confusion and problems. He has been sustained by his love over the years, and Mark has received healing and initiation in the Truth. He is open to all spiritual paths and has frequented the temples and read texts from all the religions such as the Bible, Koran, Dhammapada, Zend Avesta, the Vedas and many more.

He believes that we can develop ourselves through all means, not just the so-called spiritual, including suffering - if only our heart and mind are open and we can trust ourselves to move to the next step.

He worked as a trained psychiatric nurse for six years in the UK until 2000. Then lived in India for ten years, where he worked voluntarily for six years in the media department of a large ashram and also assisted at a children's and old people's home.

In India he met many holy men, visited many ashrams and spent many hours in blissful meditation and study of the scriptures. It was a time of great spiritual development and service for him. He also met his ex-wife in that country, and their daughter was born there. He now lives in Berlin where he works in psychiatry. When he has the time, he enjoys singing, writing and playing tennis.

You can contact Mark at:

<http://5stepsenlightenment.blogspot.de/>

The End
by Eileen Hugo

The crossing was quick once I shed the pain
And passed into the Light.
The sound of my name rang
As if a chorus of all mothers and fathers
Called me in a single ancient voice.
My eyes closed tightly.
I called back
Maaa Paaa

ABOUT EILEEN HUGO

Eileen Hugo lives in both Stoneham, Massachusetts, and Spruce Head Maine. She served as the Poetry Editor for The Houston Literary Review and has been published in various small press publications as well as in the anthologies Southern Breezes and The Baby Boomer Birthright. Most recently, she has collaborated with nine other women from mid-coast Maine to produce the anthology titled A Taste of Ink.

In addition to writing poetry, Eileen spends as much time as possible in Maine at her summer home. Family and friends frequently visit, so she has a chance to feed them. Cooking is one of her favorite pastimes. Eileen has just finished her twenty-fifth quilt. Watercolor painting and gardening are also part of her recreation. In the winter (New England 2015) she shovels and tries to avoid the arctic breezes.

Eileen attends a workshop at the Farnsworth Gallery led by Kathleen Ellis every summer and another at the Rockport Library. At home in Massachusetts, she belongs to the Middlesex Writing Group. In writing groups, Eileen finds comradery and critique both ladled out in kindly spoonfuls.

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CHAPTER TWO

OTHER WORLDS



“...can we possibly exist alone in the universe...what planets have we come from...and what planets shall we travel to...” Franco Esposito

Beyond the Night
by David A. Slater

In a strange world full of darkness
Where no light remains
In league with the malignant shadows
A realm between the living and the Damned
Upon a valley of echoes
Silhouettes bereft of substance
Wander an eternity beyond time.
Their reality of death
Erases all traces of humanity
Tainted and blemished are the fallen
These forces, unrecognizable
Wage an eternal battle for lost souls
Upon the waves of empty dreams
Poisoned and diluted amongst the void of nothingness
We,
The last vestiges of Hope
Crumble to the soiled earth of desecration.

ABOUT DAVID A. SLATER

David A. Slater writes mostly for enjoyment. Like many authors, he also considers it to be a form of therapy. He has recently joined an online poetry forum and is an active participant. He has had poems published in several anthologies. David lives in Suffolk, England.

This Empty Place

by Michael Brookes

Death sat alone at the moment the universe died. His duty had lasted for forty billion years was now complete. Although never part of the physical universe, he remained the single entity in existence.

The universe had always seemed an empty place, but now it truly was. He wore his favorite suit, one given to him by the universe's most interesting inhabitants. He remembered them with something he believed, akin to fondness.

They'd pictured him as a tall skeleton, wearing a black cloak and wielding a scythe. He'd always felt comfortable wearing that particular guise. He couldn't explain why. Maybe the humans had infected him with their unusual mind states. Emotions they called them. Death considered it a pity they had been such a short-lived race. The universe was a duller place without them.

Before the beginning, he existed. With no time to measure he couldn't know how long he waited in this state. He remembered being for an undefined moment and suddenly there was light.

Time came into being at the same point as the big bang.

After billions of years only he and time remained. He wished that wasn't the case; time only gave the hollow moments greater weight. Eternity was a long time, especially when you were aware of every single second.

From the first moment; that burst of energy birthing the universe, Death understood his duty, and, in the same second of creation, also experienced the first death. The death of particles as they collided with each other. His duty was simple. He bore witness to every death, no matter how small and unremarkable.

He didn't know why he'd been created for this duty, or what created him. He learned that he had no choice in his duty. Wherever a death occurred, he would be present. No choice or effort was required; he always appeared and bore witness. In this first moment, he discovered another unique ability. No matter how many deaths occurred at the same time, he was present for every one of them.

The universe expanded and as it grew. What, at first, looked like an even bubble of energy showed imperfections. And those imperfections became objects of wonder. He witnessed the formation of matter. The matter clumped together and transformed into energies, which ultimately spawned the first stars and galaxies.

Death's eyes perceived everything, and he saw the chaos evolve into a universe wearing a disguise of mechanical perfection. He knew the truth, but still felt awe at the majesty of this

sight.

A billion years passed and then he witnessed a new wonder. At first he thought he'd discovered an illusion of complexity. On a green planet, orbiting a bloated orange sun, something moved. Only death could have seen something so tiny unaided, but from billions of light years away he saw the first living thing.

At a macro level, it appeared uncomplicated. This tiny thing possessed a spark of something death couldn't understand. At an instinctual level, it presented an affront to him.

And that fascinated him.

Death understood the mechanics and processes of the universe. This new thing didn't quite correspond with his understanding. It existed for a few seconds at most, but in the struggle of its death another wondrous event happened.

The creature divided in two and then two new entities existed. Amazed Death could only watch this miracle unfold. He'd learned, during the birth of the universe, he couldn't interfere directly.

His purpose was simply to watch.

Across the universe, on trillions of planets, he saw this new thing come into being. The change didn't happen all at once and, in the vast expanse of space, life remained an uncommon occurrence. And each instance was different. With great interest, he examined each one.

Death thought he discerned some purpose to these signs of life. As if some goal drove their development.

He liked the thought. He still did, even if the evidence was stacked against it.

And there lay the paradox. For a universe, appearing to want life so much, it proved a hostile place. Almost everything in existence threatened these fragile creatures. And they always died. Not just singly but in entire populations. On planet after planet, simple organisms appeared only to be wiped out.

For billions of years, Death endured the same cycle. Sometimes the cycle lasted longer, and Death saw the simple become more complicated. And he wondered where the process would lead.

Then, after nearly sixteen billion years, something changed. On a blue planet, orbiting a small yellow sun at the edge of an unremarkable galaxy, life became complicated. In fact, it bloomed in ways he'd never seen before.

And it survived.

That in itself was unusual. Rarely had he seen life survive for so long. The universe did try to stop this remarkable development. Comet strikes, asteroid collisions, solar storms, nearby supernova all lashed against the small planet.

Somehow the primitive life survived the onslaught and continued to evolve.

Despite his fascination his duty continued. Something died, and he appeared to witness the event. He tried to understand why he had to perform his duty but found no answer to this riddle.

Another billion years passed.

Now giant creatures roamed the planet. The planet contained such an abundance of life that it glowed with its richness. He witnessed more deaths here than in the rest of this galaxy

combined. Despite this, the planet's surface continued to teem with multitudes of life forms.

The universe made another attempt and with a combined solar flare, and asteroid strike wiped out the giant creatures. They didn't all die at once, but for next few years Death attended the demise of each one.

He couldn't help but question the colossal waste of energy the deaths represented. Why would the universe want such a thing?

Before long he wasn't the only being in the universe asking such questions. In amazement, he noticed bipedal creatures in small groups. These creatures changed, they evolved; they formed larger groups, and they questioned the world around them.

To Death's amazement, he saw them create things. They created things they didn't need. The strange beings daubed colors on the walls of caves. These paintings showed no simple replica of the world around them. He discerned a style to them indicating they understood the world in a non-literal sense.

They evolved quickly, these creatures. Their evolution wasn't limited to their forms, which changed little. Instead, Death noticed greater changes in their behaviors and interactions. Within a few thousand years, they changed the world around them. They cultivated the land and domesticated useful creatures for their needs. They rapidly became the masters of their world in a way Death had never seen before.

Intriguingly these humans developed an understanding of the universe both less and more than reality as Death understood it. They created imaginary beings. They labeled forces of nature as gods; gods that if placated provided shelter or assistance. Death considered this fruitless behavior until he discovered they had also named him.

In their beliefs, Death wore a variety of forms. More importantly they understood his purpose. He was the guide who ushered them from this world into the next. He wasn't sure that was the truth, but perhaps. He didn't know what the next world was, but his own existence hinted at something other than the reality of this physical universe.

Their attitude towards death also mystified him. Sometimes they revered him and his role in a human's passing. Other times they vilified him for stealing their kin from them.

Eventually, the spiritual explanation for their reality no longer satisfied their curiosity. Instead, they devoted their energies to probing the universe itself. They delved and explored, calculated and theorized.

At first their understanding was crude. A child's drawing of a splendiferous scene. All too quickly they developed a keener grasp, always pushing the leading edge of their knowledge.

Death understood this science of theirs better than their theologies. With his own senses, he regarded the fabric they investigated. Their discoveries reminded him of his own investigations back when the universe was young.

He walked amongst them, observed their lives and as his duty demanded, he witnessed their deaths. He didn't know if he helped them pass into the next world, but it was a nice thought.

As they neared the apex of their development, they harnessed the power of the sun. For a brief moment, he witnessed the detonation of light so bright it rivaled the stars, if only for a second. The shockwave passed through him, and he marveled at the ingenuity of these short-

lived creatures.

For all their science and spiritual understanding, their day to day existence impacted him the most. Their feelings and emotions separated them from the other life forms he had seen. Not so much in their existence, but in their intensity. The influence of these feelings appeared to outweigh their significance.

At first they seemed to be little more than a curiosity for Death until they started to color his own experience. For humans, they often provided strength and a sense of purpose. In Death, they proved less beneficial.

Now he realized how alone he was.

On the day, they launched themselves into space he dared to hope this species might survive. He envisaged they would spread throughout their Solar System. Possibly even beyond.

They'd already demonstrated the ability to adapt themselves to almost any environment.

They traveled to the Moon. To Death's astonishment, they landed upon its gray surface and raised a flag to celebrate their proud achievement. But then nothing. They continued launching machines into space, but when they tried to leave their planet it was too late.

They poisoned their world. Their population increased beyond the capability of the planet to sustain them. When the end came, it happened quickly. The planet hemorrhaged. Earthquakes shook the land and triggered giant tsunamis that then swept across the oceans. Volcanoes erupted and belched sulfurous ash into the air.

Human civilization fell apart, and billions died within weeks. Some survivors hung on for another few years under the acrid sky, but with failing crops and a destroyed infrastructure they finally succumbed.

Death was there to watch the last human die. He recalled the scene with absolute clarity, but this memory held some importance to him.

The last human lay coughing in the ruins of an old farmhouse. Twelve years had passed since the cataclysm. The sky remained the color of lead. Acid rain pelted the ground with the sulfurous smell of the damned. A few days earlier her mate had died. Since then she neither ate nor drank, and she deteriorated rapidly.

Unseen, he remained by her side for her last hours. She didn't speak; she stared into the distance. Death wondered what she saw. He needed to understand this woman as if with the death of her species there would be a revelation. The thought was strange; he never before entertained such flights of fancy.

Her final breath misted into the gray air. The human race existed no longer.

New life forms rose. They destroyed themselves in cleansing the world, making the planet once more inhabitable for more complex beings. It was a wasted effort; complex beings never existed again.

The first fifteen billion years of existence didn't bother Death at all. Time passed but held no meaning for him. Time existed purely as a method for measuring the sequence of events.

Now time crawled by. He became painfully aware of each moment. And he felt alone.

Loneliness was an odd sensation for Death. He never interacted with anything except to witness their passing. Now he wished the universe wasn't so empty.

Never again would life blossom in the way it once had on that small blue planet. For the next ten billion years, life tried repeatedly to reach those dizzy heights, always to be annihilated almost as soon as it birthed.

The universe continued to expand. As the fabric stretched, it grew colder. The temperature didn't affect Death but, as the universe cooled, life made fewer attempts.

Death's duty didn't end there. He continued until this final moment – the heat death of the universe. Sadly for death time didn't die, so now he existed in nothing but the expanding dark. He thought back to what one of those humans had written. Strange Eons had indeed passed, but Death himself had not died.

ABOUT MICHAEL BROOKES

By day Michael Brookes works as an Executive Producer for one of the leading UK independent game developers. He considers himself fortunate to be able to focus so much of his time on his life's passions of writing and computer games.

He writes in a wide range of forms from drabbles (stories that have exactly 100 words) to full-length novels. His stories cover a range of topics including the horrific, the technical and the metaphysical.

He currently lives in probably the flattest place in the world in the east of England which has some of the finest skies, night or day, in the world.

You can contact Michael at:

<http://thecultofme.blogspot.co.uk/>

The End of Days

by Edward Meiman

"Josh, you'll be late for school if you don't hurry," Mary called.

Josh eventually came down, shoved some pancakes in his mouth, and was gone. Mary grabbed some pancakes and a cup of coffee before she headed off to work. Mary sighed as she made her way to the car, knowing that this was the last morning rush she would ever have. It wasn't that she was depressed at its passing; she had just skipped the other phases of loss, going straight to nostalgia for days that would never come again. This was the last morning for humanity. There were less than sixteen hours left and then there would no more tomorrows.

As Mary arrived at work, she got the usual "Good Mornings" from the crew. The sentiment behind each salutation varied from autopilot acknowledgments to heartfelt well wishes to satirical commentary to sad lament. It was amazing how much meaning could be conveyed in just two words. Mary's replies were a mix of all of the above.

"So we gonna do this," her foreman Bill stated more than questioned.

"Do we have a choice?" Mary looked over the readouts from all her substations, seeing that most regions had already started the preparations. "Let's just do this and get it over with."

"Are you going to be like this for the next fourteen hours, thirty-seven minutes, and change?" Bill was kidding—at least she thought he was.

"No, I just need to make that 'mental adjustment to a new way of life' that the Ministry of the Environment keeps urging us to make. God, I won't miss those commercials." Mary was starting to get back to her old surly, damn-the-system demeanor.

Felix, the head of the Mechanics Department, came bursting through the door. "The hydraulic pressure in the Fargo stabilizers has dipped .0001% below the minimum. I don't know how long it will take to troubleshoot and get them back within tolerances."

Mary looked at Bill. "The people of Fargo can handle a little bit of an extra jolt. They're tough bastards to begin with."

"And if they happen to disappear, I don't think the rest of the world will notice," Bill quipped. "Tell Miseraski and Cornwall they have twelve hours to figure it out and get it fixed. They're the closest ones to Fargo. Should be able to get there in an hour."

Felix looked at the two, saw that this was about as serious as they were going to take the situation, turned and left.

"Should I start reading the status updates," Mary asked Bill, "or are the fires under control?"

"That was actually the first one of the day. Everything else seems to be well within tolerances."

"Well, we have had ten years to get ready for today." Mary looked wistfully around,

temporarily returning to her nostalgic state. "Ten years. My god what we've done in ten years. Soon we'll know if we are saviors or mass murderers."

"If it's the latter, we'll be two of the victims and so I guess no one will be able to lynch us." That was Bill's favorite line when people would make any remark concerning the project failing.

"Ha. Ha. Ha," Mary replied, putting noticeable pauses between each 'Ha.' "We better get back to work or the day's gonna end before the days end."

For the next eleven hours, Mary and her team completed the remaining tasks. Mary took only one break, and that was to go to the roof to watch the last sunset. It was of course too overcast to see much in the way of the beautiful colors of the sunsets of old. But it marked a passing, and today was all about passings.

As midnight approached, Mary transferred the 'control' of the system over to the U.N. for the ceremonial flipping of the switch. Since she had various overrides still at her command, the Secretary-General would be in control of little more than a red light on a \$2 oversized button. But it made for a good show and, over the last ten years, Mary had grown to hate news cameras pointed at her. The Secretary-General could have all the attention he wanted. So, like the rest of the world, Mary sat back and watched the show. At exactly midnight Eastern Time the button was pushed and 'Mary's Monster,' as it was called in the press, brought the world to a stop.

"Everything seems to be working." Felix's voice, as usual had that tone of impending doom that everyone dismissed as normal.

"How's Fargo?" Bill asked even though he knew the answer.

"Fargo's well within tolerances," Felix replied, his voice starting to show a little confidence.

"Earth rotation at 80%," the computer informed everyone. For the next four hours everyone in the world, all two billion people, listened to that voice. When it reached "0%" and the U.N. Secretary General announced that the world was stopped, there was a collective sigh from the residents of the last habitable portions of this once vast planet.

Back in Mary's control room things hadn't stopped. Things would not stop there for at least a few generations. The Earth wanted to continue to rotate, and Mary's people, and her machines would be fighting that desire with everything they had. Still, with the gravitational and magnetic polarization fields completely in sync, it was time for a brief celebration.

"Well it's done," Bill exclaimed. His usual overconfident demeanor gave way to relief as he realized they had succeeded. "Now we just have to hope those eggheads in Thermal Dynamics are right, and that damn dwarf has enough energy left to keep us warm."

He and Mary had gone up to the roof to look at the white dwarf sun that had once been the giver of abundant life to the planet. Mary just looked at the sad little star, stuck forever at a point directly 'above' Chicago. It would always be noon here. The night was dispelled, and humanity had begun its longest day. Without knowing the reason, Mary began to cry.

ABOUT EDWARD MEIMAN

Edward Meiman (pronounced MY-man) was born in Louisville, Kentucky on January 17, 1964, received a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Dayton in 1987, and received a Master's degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from George Mason University sometime in the middle of going for a Doctorate in the same specialty (He is currently ABD4Life). He has worked in the following industries: Horse Racing, Paper, Industrial Chemicals, Industrial Equipment Manufacturing, Government Consulting, and Finance. Edward now lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

You can find more about Edward at:

http://meiman-ed.com/microstories/mstory_about.html

The Suns' Death
by Sasha Kasoff

Once more I ask you
To look to the heavens
To witness the sun's blood
As it stains the hovering clouds above
In the day's last death throes
Before the inky black
Spills across the page
Blotting out all traces of the fireballs' path
Though stars shine through
And twinkle down at us
Like holes in heaven's floor
Though the moon shines like a beacon
A tool for navigating the shadows
Heaven's undulating door
In the vast expanse of black
In the heart of things
All that is good wishes for sun's rebirth
Is comforted through long suffocating nights
Battered by storms
When not even a sliver of hope is to be seen
Comforted only by the knowledge that soon
The sun will shine again
Though it may shine on happy upturned faces
Or on sadness and destruction
It will shine again
Tomorrow will always be a new day
Whether or not we think so
Our sadness does not touch the sun

ABOUT SASHA KASOFF

Born and then raised in California, Sasha Kasoff is an avid reader, published poet, photographer, fantasy writer, baker, and tentative artist. Sasha and her songwriter boyfriend, Richard, live happily with their old but cute Parson Jack Russell Terrier that has been with Sasha since she was ten. She doesn't really recommend getting one, no matter how cute they are, as Sweetiekins is very poorly named. Sasha and Richard often drink tea and coffee, play Scrabble, read books out loud to each other, eat muffins Sasha has baked, and take the dog for long walks while judging people's houses. Sasha has been to twelve countries and is looking forward to moving and traveling abroad with Richard again soon, much to their dog's despair.

Having recently returned from studying abroad for a semester in Cork, Ireland with Richard, she is currently attending University of the Pacific earning her BA in English with a focus on Creative Writing. After graduation this spring, her studies will hopefully begin in creative and novel writing as a graduate in England next fall. Sasha dearly wishes that the opportunities in the UK will get her fantasy series, Vineheart, off the ground, or at least get her more formerly introduced to the publishing world. Sasha's poetry can be found in two self-published books, Life Encomium and A Wayward Soul, as well as in a multitude of anthologies, magazines, and various other literary presses. Her most recent endeavor is compiling, printing, and distributing O' Words Anthology as a fun school project to learn more about the other side of publishing. Look for her author pages on Goodreads and Facebook and remember to keep an eye out for her books in the years to come.

You can contact Sasha at:

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Why Death

by Megan Caito

Shapeshifting into the form
Of nothing.
Shadows of life and everything
Comes back.
We fade in until the light turns away
The light gives us a chance
And we go so quickly
Some say it's easier as you age
I say it's sad to think I have to wait
Wait for what?
Some say that's the question
But why wait?
I've been dying to end this.
Not for myself
But for more space
Room for other lives
Room for living
For thriving
In a world that is unknown
Uncharted
And unending
Until we live again.
Until we can see again in life
But for now we're dying
And it's okay to cry
Because the wasting away is easy
But the memories are all but too warm
We're too shallow to hold them all
And I say stop
Stop taking my time, my space
And give back.
Give back the life before you take it
Give back the death before it comes.

There's a lot to it
There's nothing stopping you
From expanding
But time will happen
And motion will quicken
Until you cannot live more
Than you do in death.

ABOUT MEGAN CAITO

Megan Caito is a nineteen-year-old student at Tallahassee Community College. Her main loves are animals, writing, and stories, (reading, watching and listening to them. Her time is spent writing poems and journal entries, taking classes to get an English major, drawing, loving every dog that she sees, and learning as much as she can. She is just starting out but hopes to become more widely published in the very near future.

You can contact Megan at:

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CHAPTER THREE

LOVERS IN THE STREET



“I have searched through all the shadows, across gleaming waters - in gardens by flowers I have sat silently waiting...” Franco Esposito

Rendezvous **by David King**

When I woke up, she was looking at me.

“Let’s do it again,” she said.

And we did.

When I woke up, she was looking at me.

The blades of the fan above us turned slowly in the humid air.

“I want you,” she said, soft and husky.

And I rolled toward her.

When I woke up, she was looking at me, eyes melting in the hot orange light.

“Let’s do it again,” she said.

And we did.

I tried to remember how we got here, to this room with its slow turning fan, deep shadows, and hot orange light.

A road. Night. Lines flashing by in the headlights. Was she with me then? No. The car around me had been empty.

Lines flashing by, one after another. Hypnotic, mesmeric

And earlier - but still night – my fingers tapping a computer keyboard.

Looking up through the window in front of my desk to the apartment opposite.

A handsome young man, a beautiful young woman, seen through their lit-up kitchen window. Her legs around his slow thrusting flanks, her fingernails digging into his back. Rivulets of blood.

Why couldn’t they close the blinds? Why did they have to flaunt it in my face?

Lines streaking toward me in the headlights, one after another. Sudden, large raindrops spattering the windshield. The wipers flicking back and forth...

The young man thrusting harder. Faster. The young woman’s face rolling in ecstasy.

Why couldn’t they close the blinds? Do it in the bedroom? Why flaunt it in my face when all I wanted was to be her guy and fuck her like that?

Thunder. Lightning. Raindrops splattering the windshield. The wipers scraping. Lines looming out of darkness and disappearing under the bonnet.

The kitchen window lit up like a department store at Christmas. Or a vertical cinema screen, full of empty promise.

My fingers hovering over the keyboard. The cursor blinking on a blank screen. A thousand ideas, falling half-seen like raindrops out of the sky.

She came to the kitchen sink then, in front of the window, and poured herself a glass of water. Looked up as she drank, and we stared at each other across the darkness.

A sudden sound – the scrape of a shoe on wood – caused me to look around. An envelope had been pushed under the door.

When I looked back to the kitchen window, she was gone.

Raindrops splattering the windshield. The wipers flicking back and forth. Lines appearing and disappearing in a cone of silence. Was it real? Was it a dream?

I ripped open the envelope, pulled out a sheet of notepaper. Her handwriting glowed rich India Blue. A date, time, address. The scent of promise.

The young man's flanks grinding. Her eyes closed, lips parted, fingernails clawing his back, and blood trickling from the wounds.

Did I dare? Was I good enough?

Too late to back out now. The woman was staring at me from behind the rain-spattered window of a roadside café. And I was staring at her from behind the dirt and rain-streaked windshield of my car. Darkness all around, my computer keyboard and her kitchen window a hundred and eighty kilometers behind.

Rendezvous. The tang of illicit passion.

She got up and left the table, and when she reached the passenger side of my car, I imagined her high-heeled shoe leaving the glistening tarmac. She was Lauren Bacall; I was Humphrey Bogart. She was Sharon Stone; I was Mickey Rourke. She was Brigitte Bardot, and I was Jean-Paul Belmondo. I would have lit a Gaulois and exhaled a stream of cool blue smoke except I didn't smoke and never had, and that didn't feel right in this noirish setting.

"There's a motel up the road," she said, soft and husky.

So I put the car in gear, let out the clutch, and imagined the rear wheels kicking up a spray of loose stones as we took off into the night.

Lines streaking toward us, vanishing under the bonnet.

My mind strangely empty, as if the only moment that ever existed and ever would was now.

Why are you doing this? Who put the envelope under my door? Where's your lover?

Questions I should have been asking but didn't dare. It was too fragile, this dashboard-lit silence with her beside me in a metal capsule hurtling through the night. I could scarcely believe she was there.

Then I felt her hand on my leg, her fingernails digging. I looked across, but her face was shadowy. Her hand moved up to my crotch, her fingers kneading, and I was getting hard and wanted to screw her there and then.

I took my foot off the accelerator and was about to pull off the road when she threw herself at me. Her whole body seemed to expand, envelope, smother and blinden me. Like a blanket, she seemed to wrap herself around me, cloying, clinging, inhuman. I struggled, clawed, scabbled to get free as the car jumped and bumped over rough surfaces and banged and smashed against things I couldn't see.

Finally, I pushed her – it – aside – and saw, too late, the dark abyss of a river rushing toward us...

Black, ringing silence.

When I woke up, she was looking at me.

“I want you,” she said, eyes melting in the hot orange light.

And I rolled toward her.

When I woke up, she was looking at me.

“Let’s do it again,” she said.

And we did, with the fan turning slowly above us.

When I woke up, she was looking at me.

“Again,” she said.

And this time, something made me look the other way.

“No!” She grabbed my face to stop me, eyes burning. “You mustn’t!”

But I pulled away and looked – and saw, behind me, the window of our room was uncurtained.

And beyond it, across a chasm of darkness, was another room. And through the uncurtained window of that room, a young man sat in front of a computer screen. Staring at us...

ABOUT DAVID KING

David King won his first Australian national writing award in 1971 at the age of 16.

Following a three-year university course in vocational writing (during which he was heavily exposed to avant-garde and European cinema), he embarked on a varied career as an independent filmmaker, a freelance cameraman, and radio advertising copywriter. In the early 1980's, he became a radio and television scriptwriter with the ABC and penned four episodes of the Awgie-award-winning young people's TV series, Home. He also co-wrote and co-edited the independent rock 'n' roll sex comedy feature film Coming Of Age.

After several feature film deals had fallen through, he turned to journalism and became a senior writer with the Herald Sun's award-winning leisure and lifestyle magazine, Time Away. In the 1990's he wrote for a wide variety of newspapers and magazines in Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria before returning to independent filmmaking in 1997.

His short films, Enigma and The Job screened at film festivals in England, Italy, and Australia. The Job also screened on community and cable TV in Australia and New Zealand and was picked up for international distribution by Kanopy Streaming. He continued writing casually for magazines and by 2007, was an international journalist published in England, New Zealand, and the USA.

In 2010, he completed his first ultra-low budget sci-fi feature film, the critically-acclaimed Purge, which was picked for international distribution by Troma Entertainment, New York. The three-minute experimental video spin-off, Dystopic Overload, was selected by the Cologne International Videoart Festival and screened in Italy, India, Morocco, Mexico and the USA.

David also published the critically-lauded sci-fi novella, Outcast by Marc Saville, available at Amazon Kindle store. Outcast is a novelization of Purge. Born with a sensory-neural hearing impairment, David has lost most of his hearing over the years. He now divides his time between publishing, writing, and experimental/underground filmmaking.

Some of his experimental works - What If You Woke One Day...? Infatuation and Dystopic Overload - can be seen on Vimeo and YouTube. Rendezvous is a short story that showcases his visual style and sense of the bizarre and surreal. It was based on an idea for an experimental film that proved too expensive and logistically complex to make. David lives with his partner and daughter in a seaside town on the edge of Victoria's Port Phillip Bay.

You can contact David King at:

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The Lovers' Death **by Madison Meadows**

When a person encounters their twin soul, it is as if eternity has opened up and on a deeper level there is the recognition of belonging to the other. The lovers are in love with the other's true self. This mirroring back to each other is essential for cultivating the seed necessary for union; through the death of the ego.

A connection is first established in the instant of the eyes meeting the other's eyes. Through this intense magnetism, a tunnel is created from the heart of one to the heart of the other. They can live thousands of miles apart and still maintain the nourishment of the energy between them.

One knows the tunnel is activated by words that are felt. For example, a song can play on the radio, and all of a sudden your hair stands up on end and the lover comes to mind. It's as if the Universe is speaking to you the language of love. Also, the dream world is a place where the lovers often meet to convey feelings and thoughts to each other. Confucius describes the inner connection as, "my heart in sympathy with yours."

This inner connection feels like they share a destiny together. There is much adjustment in the beginning brought on by fear, doubt, and hesitation. One feels madness that one has gone completely insane. For both to succeed, the ego must die, and the 'true self' must emerge and take over the direction of their lives.

When the lovers have moved past humanly desires and the ego is no longer present, union is possible. Only by observing chastity are the lovers able to guide the sexual energy between them inward, which then makes a way upward, thereby transcending reality and merging with the other (the Beloved) in pure ecstasy. During this blissful state, they are swallowed up into a larger awareness. The lovers emerge with new eyes to see the world.

The I Ching says, "Their approach towards each other has come from a high place." If the lovers trust this love and bind themselves to God, Creator, Christ, etc., then they can enrich the lives of the people around them. They know sincerity, patience, and faith adds growth to the others true self and this free flowing energy extends to others.

Hafiz says, "Loving is the greatest freedom and fulfillment, so the wise, being wise, cash in on that." Loving wisely is allowing your feelings for the other to mature gradually by observing chastity. Alchemy takes place when there is a longing for the eternal Beloved. The virtues of chastity unveil God's secret, revealing the Beloved in all His splendor.

The lovers learn about the power of their love through their interactions with each other on the invisible level. Their trust becomes so strong that they know what the other is feeling at all times. When they recognize their mutual destiny together, the love between them will grow and bloom.

Love is the energy that holds the Cosmos together. It comes through the lovers and is their source. It is a gift that frees them from their ego and awakens the divine within. Learning to love in this new way takes humility, patience, and tenderness. Developing this type of love, one must become entirely dependent on God. The lovers' path is knowing God through his beautiful creation. A pure heart sees the death of the ego as a bridge he or she must cross to reach the eternal Beloved.

ABOUT MADISON MEADOWS

Madison Meadows grew up in rural Illinois. As a child, she was repeatedly attacked by a demon. Her parents divorced when she was nine, and this caused her to go into a depression. She moved to Phoenix to live with her father at the age of fifteen. Her complicated inner life she kept hidden. She started down a road of self-destruction when at the age of eighteen she became an exotic dancer. During this time, she began exploring consciousness and the dream world.

She started to journal her dreams, insights, spirit encounters, and astral projections in her early twenties. Her faith in God got her through many dark nights. Madison's life changed forever when at the age of twenty-four she encountered her twin soul. When her eyes met his eyes, she felt eternity open up. She began her esoteric studies and found in religious text answers to what she experienced throughout her whole life.

Madison had her kundalini awakening at the age of thirty-two. This was due to a psychological crisis when her marriage was falling apart. She also contributes it to her yearning for God, years of yoga, and meditation. She has learned that the worst things in life are there to strengthen your spirit. Madison's mad love for God enables her to share with others her incredible journey.

Madison has been blogging about her supernatural experiences since 2010. She self-published her first book, *Stringing Beads: Making a Beautiful Life Moment by Moment* in 2013. Her writing is inspired by encounters she has in the Dream World with spirit beings, the Beloved, and her journeys beyond the physical realm.

You can contact Madison at:

<http://madisonmeadows.blogspot.com>

Clairvoyant **by D.B. Mauldin**

Katie was excited. She was having dinner with an old friend tonight. Katie and Bruce were 'off and on' lovers about ten years ago. After a couple of years, the passion between them had dwindled. They parted as friends and went their separate ways. They called each other about once a month or so just to stay in touch, but she hadn't seen Bruce face-to-face since they had parted.

Katie was nervous. She had changed during the past ten years, gained a little weight, which made her voluptuous, but Katie considered it fat. She colored her natural brown hair to brunette to hide the gray that had started peeking through. Katie wondered if Bruce had changed, too.

Katie walked into the restaurant three minutes late. Bruce was already there. He stood up so Katie could see him. Katie walked to the table and gave Bruce a hug. She immediately felt dizzy. Bruce was sending out some very uneasy vibes. Katie's vision blurred, but she managed to stop it before it started. She had learned how to shield herself as a young teenager.

As soon as her grandmother saw that she had inherited clairvoyance, she took Katie under her wing and taught her how to handle, use, and stop her clairvoyant images.

Once she felt completely shielded, she pulled back from Bruce and looked him over. Bruce had put on a few pounds too, she noticed. His hairline had receded, but it was his pale drawn face that she noticed most.

"Wow, Katie, have you missed me that much?" Bruce asked jokingly referring to her long hug.

"Yes, yes I have," said Katie giving him her flirtatious look.

"It has been a long time, and I've missed you too," said Bruce as he helped Katie settle into her chair.

Katie didn't want to start the conversation off talking about the uneasy vibes she had gotten from him or his pale drawn face.

"What brings you to New Orleans?" she asked.

"I wanted, needed to talk with you face to face, to see you, to touch you. Anyway, how is business going for you?"

"Are you kidding? Being a Clairvoyant in New Orleans brings in a pretty good living."

"I pretty much gathered that from when we talked on the phone."

Katie's vision started to blur again, but she managed to stop it. The waiter came, and they placed their orders.

Bruce was staring off into space. He looked like he was in deep thought. Katie wondered if she should break his reverie or leave him to his thoughts.

Finally, Bruce looked at her. "I would really love to see your house," he said.

"Bruce, are you in some kind of trouble? Do you need a place to stay? What's going on?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I would just like to see your home and visit with you a bit, maybe reminisce a little."

Katie nodded. She thought back to their chats on the phone over the years. Neither of them had married. Bruce did have a relationship, for about a year, and Katie had felt that they should marry, but they ended pretty much the way Katie and Bruce ended, as friends.

Katie had her share of lovers when she wanted them. She never felt close to love with any of them. Maybe they both were just destined to live a single life.

The Waiter brought their food, and they ate in silence; each left to their own thoughts.

"You haven't been, you know, seeing anything have you?" Bruce asked.

Katie stared at him, felt the dizziness, but pushed it back.

"It's very strong and wants to come out, but I've kept it at bay so far," Katie replied.

"Good. Keep it that way and I will try to hold it back, so it will not be so strong. I don't want you to see until we are safely at your home."

"Are you saying you would like a reading from me?"

Bruce looked uncomfortable. "Why don't we just get out of here and walk and talk," Bruce said as he waved the waiter over and paid for their meal.

The night was humid and heavy with the scent of Jasmine. Bruce and Katie held hands, walked and talked. They laughed about some of their antics when they were younger. They sighed when they talked about their love affair. Suddenly Katie had a thought, was it, love, they had? A love that neither was ready for, love that kept them calling each other through the years, love that brought them back together.

Katie felt the tears sliding down her cheeks as she opened the gate leading to her home.

"Your home is gorgeous, Katie, just as I had it pictured in my mind," Bruce sighed.

"Wait until you see the inside," Katie replied.

An older woman stood at the doorway ready to welcome them.

"This is my Aunt Virginia, my grandmother's youngest sister," Katie said as she introduced the two.

"She lives here with me and insists on being the 'Door Greeter' Katie said as she kissed her aunt on the cheek. Virginia giggled like a young girl when Bruce took her hand and valiantly placed a kiss on top of her hand.

"Will you need refreshments," Virginia asked Katie.

Katie looked at Bruce. He shook his head. They had shared a bottle of wine with their meal.

"Maybe just some tea, Aunt Virginia, and my special blend," Katie told her Aunt, who nodded and headed for the kitchen.

Katie led Bruce into her formal living room where they sat in chairs facing each other. They chatted about Katie's home while waiting for the tea. Once Virginia brought in the tea, (two cups for Katie and one cup for Bruce), the conversation turned to matters that were more serious.

“You know I’m freelancing now,” Bruce said.

Katie took a sip of her tea. “No, I didn’t know that. It must have happened after the last time we talked.”

“A lot has happened since the last time we talked, Katie.”

Katie was feeling dizzy again and realized that Bruce was no longer holding back. She stood and waited until she felt steady on her feet. She picked up the other cup of tea and motioned for Bruce to follow her.

Katie led Bruce toward the wall beside the fireplace. She pressed a button that blended into the mantle and the wall opened.

“I usually take customers down the hall, where there is a regular door to this room,” Katie explained as she lit some candles and pushed the wall shut. She motioned Bruce to a chair and then sat across the table from him. There was a crystal ball sitting in the middle of the table, but it was mostly for effect and Katie felt no need to use it with Bruce.

Katie turned the cup up and drank all the tea in a single gulp. She took Bruce’s hands into hers and immediately felt the dizziness. She didn’t try to stop it this time; just rode with it until the blurred visions became clear.

She wept silently at what she saw.

Katie sat quietly in a trance. Bruce noticed the tears sliding down her cheeks and knew she had seen. His hands still lay limply in hers.

When Katie first let go and entered a trance, she saw the cancer eating inside of Bruce. She saw him at the hospital after his tests and then talking to the doctor. Katie heard the doctor say, “10 to 12 weeks without treatment, and 4 to 6 months with treatment.”

Bruce thought it over and decided he had rather have 10 to 12 good weeks than 4 to 6 months of being sick and losing all of his hair. His doctor had agreed with Bruce’s decision and signed his release papers.

As soon as Bruce arrived home, he phoned Katie and set-up a dinner date with her. Then he called the airport and arranged a one-way flight from Los Angeles to New Orleans. He didn’t even think about it. It just seemed to be the right thing to do.

Katie could feel his need, his love, all of his emotions. Time began to swing backward, and she could see the two of them talking in her old kitchen. It was near the time of their parting ways, and that is what they were discussing. Even though Bruce was saying they should part, she could feel his feelings and see the love pouring out of his eyes. Why hadn’t she seen it then? Would it have mattered?

Katie watched as Bruce flitted from one place to another. He taught High School English and wrote on the side. She watched as he sold his first best-seller.

Katie saw Bruce sleeping with many women and trying to settle down with the one she had thought he should marry. She could see what kept them apart. Even if Bruce was not aware that he was still in love with her, the woman knew. She sensed Katie’s presence in his life and refused to marry Bruce.

Shortly after the break-up, Bruce sold his second novel, moved to Los Angeles, and settled down. His writing stalled. He simply could not concentrate long enough to write a novel. He turned to free-lance writing, articles, and short stories. Then he went in for his yearly check-up.

He hadn't been feeling well, but could not put his finger on the problem. He was talking to his doctor about it when he remembered he had seen some blood in his stools. Bruce hadn't thought much about it. He figured it was just hemorrhoids. The doctor, however, thought they should do some tests to be sure.

Time flew forward again in Katie's trance. She could see herself holding Bruce as pain wracked his body and then she saw Bruce lying in a casket. Katie couldn't get a period in her vision, she could smell the jasmine, but was it this year's jasmine, or jasmine blooming in another year?

Katie broke the trance and looked into Bruce's eyes. She could see the love, the need, and the fear in his eyes. She squeezed his hands, then stood up and hugged him.

"I'm here for you Bruce. I will stay with you until the end," Katie whispered into his ear as she felt his body shaking with the tears.

ABOUT D.B. MAULDIN

D. B. Mauldin is a professional and published author. She writes articles, short stories and is currently at work on a fantasy novel. She also serves as a judge for Dragon Knight Chronicles Writing Competition, a Blog Host for Dragon Knight's Book Promotion Services, a Book Reviewer, Character Interviewer, and Author Interviewer for Dragon Knight Chronicles. She also serves on the staff of Dragon Knight Chronicles E-Magazine.

She is a Certified Aromatherapist, with several Aromatherapy Articles published, and holds an Associate's Degree in Human Services.

Although writing has long been a passion, D. B. Mauldin began writing and publishing full-time only two years ago. She had some poems and short stories published when she was only sixteen and served on her high school's weekly newsletter for three years, two years as Editor.

She lives in 'small town' Alabama, with her husband and two rat terriers. "We are blessed to live on a lake," D. B. says. Together, they have three beautiful daughters and six grandchildren, four girls, and two boys. "My passions are being in nature, fishing, gardening, genealogy, helping others, hiking, reading, reviewing, spending time with my grandchildren and my family, and writing, not necessarily in that order."

You can contact D.B. Mauldin at:

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My Juliet Awake
by Franco Esposito

Awake my dream awake
that I might sleep in your arms that take
me to silver meadows by wooded creeks
to a setting sun and a moon that comes
to cool the air and light the stars
that above us stare
to ease our fright
as darkness slumps

Awake my dream awake
that I might shake the somber sleep from your eyes
and go to where so many times our hearts would rise
to stroll along the sanded shore
and watch canoeing clouds drift on blue water riffs
to hold our hands as the swelling winds begin
and take us to and fro
as kites that twist and spin held in flight by just a string
and the children's cries below
so shall we know all that we have been

All through the day did we laugh away
until the setting sun cooled the air, and the moon would come
to light the stars that from above us stare so bright
and share in that moment with each in each other's eyes
to ease our fright
as darkness slumps

Awake my dream awake
that I might take my soul to yours
and walk with you along that way secure
to deep within the forest ground
past silver meadows and wooded creeks
where all shall lose in sleep and none be found

And the setting sun will cool the air
and the moon that comes to light the stars
will once more above us stare
to ease our fright
as darkness slumps

But we will find a life together even there
in love as we have always been
on that distant sanded shore
within

Anguish
by Sasha Kasoff

You have not heard anguish
Unless you have heard a grown man weep
Unless you have heard
The sound a woman makes when her lover dies in her arms

You have not seen anguish
Unless you have looked into soulless eyes
Unless you have seen
A person collapse into grief
Deeper than drowning

You have not felt anguish
Until after a loved one is long gone
And it still hasn't seeped in
When you cry yourself to sleep
Wishing to talk to them
Just once more

Flowers for the Dead

By Joan Mc Nerney

This is the way
I see your face.
O you are dead
your face frozen
and moist.

I love you and search
for you everywhere as
light dims to darkness
and darkness brightens
to light.

We once arranged our
days in that small
vase of time given us.
I see your face
reflected there now
in a vase full of
flowers for the dead,
reeds of tears.

O your face facing me.
Tears flowering from me
until my vase of time
spills over and we meet
in that season called
eternity.

ABOUT JOAN MCNERNEY

Joan McNerney, originally from Brooklyn now resides in Ravena, a small town near Albany, New York. She has been the recipient of three scholarships which includes one from the University of Mexico School for Foreign Students in San Antonio, Texas. She received her Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Literature from New York State Board of Regents, Excelsior College. Most of her professional background was spent in the advertising business.

Without a doubt, the digital revolution has been a boom for her and her writing. She enjoys receiving many literary website subscriptions and has been included in many print anthologies. Although her book Noah's Daughters is one long poem, she is now pursuing her love of the short poem and also diving into flash fiction.

Her poetry has been included in numerous literary magazines such as Seven Circle Press, Dinner with the Muse, Camel Saloon, Blueline, Poppy Road Review, Spectrum, three Bright Hills Press Anthologies and several Kind of A Hurricane Publications. She has been nominated three times for Best of the Net. Poet and Geek judged her poem as the best for 2013, and her poetry was a finalist recently in a Furious Gazelle contest. Four of her books have been published by fine literary presses, and she has four e-book titles.

Joan McNerney has recited her work at the National Arts Club, New York City, State University of New York, Oneonta, McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas and the Arte Publico Press, University of Houston, Texas as well as other distinguished venues. A recent reading in Treadwell, New York was sponsored by the American Academy of Poetry. Her latest title is Having Lunch with the Sky, A.P.D. Press, Albany, New York.

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We have danced in all the rooms
by Strider Marcus Jones

we have danced in all the rooms,
made love in all their tunes
with the curtains open
and each thought spoken
in summer bliss
and druid mist.
we have roamed those meadows
where no one goes,
living without walls and windows,
coming together
on purple heather
being who we are and what we were
roaming fields of lavender.

ABOUT STRIDER MARCUS JONES

Strider Marcus Jones – is a poet, law graduate and ex-civil servant from Salford/Hinckley, England with proud Celtic roots in Ireland and Wales. A member of The Poetry Society, his five published books of poetry are modern, traditional, mythical, sometimes erotic, surreal and metaphysical. He is a maverick, moving between forests, mountains, and cities, playing his saxophone and clarinet in warm solitude.

His poetry has been accepted for publication in 2015 by mgv2 Publishing Anthology; Earl Of Plaid Literary Journal 3rd Edition; Subterranean Blue Poetry Magazine; Deep Water Literary Journal, 2015-Issue 1; Kool Kids Press Poetry Journal; Page-A-Day Poetry Anthology 2015; Eccolinguistics Issue 3.2 January 2015; The Collapsed Lexicon Poetry Anthology 2015 and Catweazle Magazine Issue 8; Life and Legends Magazine; The Stray Branch Literary Magazine; Amomancies Poetry Magazine; The Art Of Being Human Poetry

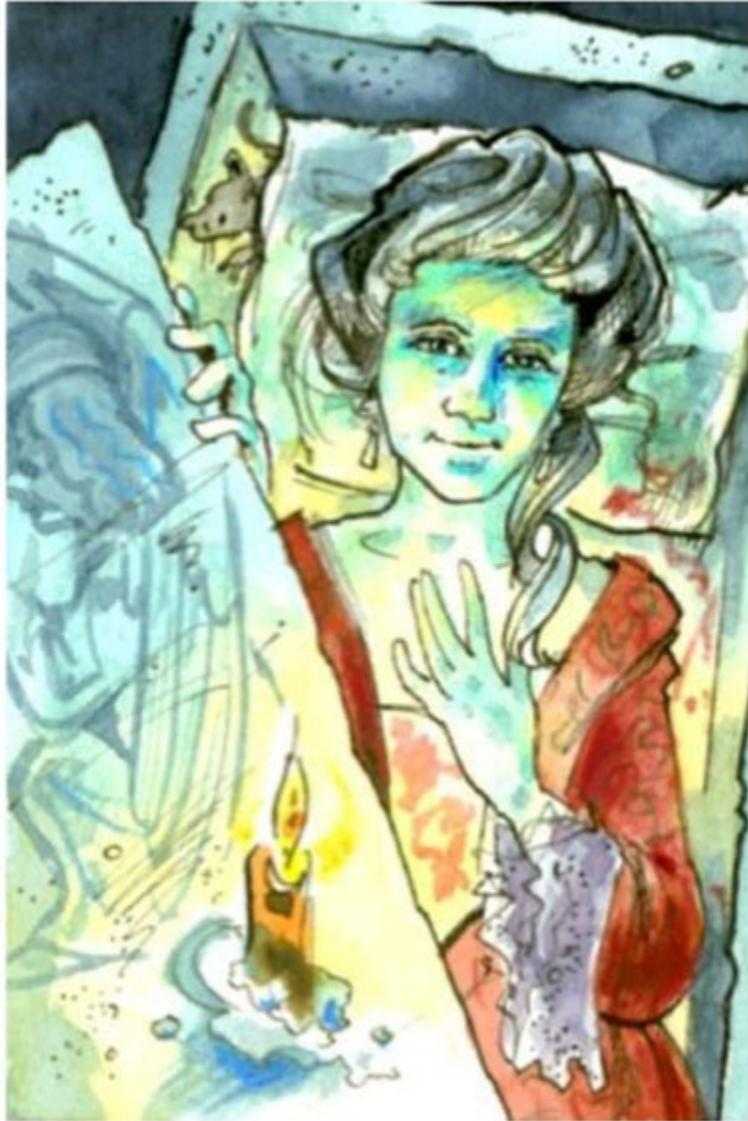
Magazine; Cahaba River Literary Journal; East Coast Literary Review; Nightchaser Ink Publishing Anthology - Autumn Reign; Crack The Spine Literary Magazine; A New Ulster/Anu Issue 29; Poems For A Liminal Age Anthology; In The Trenches Poetry Anthology; Outburst Poetry Magazine and The Galway Review.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE UNCLAIMED



“Love is a dream we call to ourselves: the unclaimed...” Franco Esposito

Maybe it is
By Donald Illich

The people who are broken are broken.
They cannot be put back together again.
The glue gets up and is confident

it can assemble the fingers and hands.
It only sticks to itself, while loose
digits scatter across the floor.

The tape wants to seal the head and neck,
but the blood flows too much, the head
rolls around the ground, speaks about itself

as the controller of a body that's left.
The people believe magnets will help.
They are strung together without order.

The elbow converses with the eye.
The teeth meet the soft buttocks.
Eventually, it's decided to leave them.
If you want to ask a mysterious question,
maybe they can answer. Not knowing
the world as it is, except for the spirits

they see, the afterlife they believe in.
Maybe it is angels. Maybe it is flames.
Maybe it is the sky, the sky, the sky.

ABOUT DONALD ILLICH

Donald Illich has recently published online in Catch & Release and Passages North. Earlier print publications include The Iowa Review, LIT, and Nimrod. He has been recently nominated for a Best of the Net award. He lives in Rockville, Maryland.

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The Alder in January
by Marianne Szlyk

The Art Deco building haunts the city
as it did when you lived there.

The Muddy River, half-blue, half-brown,
without the rowers found on the more famous river,
slows to an almost-icy crawl.

Nevertheless, the grasses on the bank
spring to life.
The day is already longer
than it was when winter began.

The alder, now leafless,
will soon purify this landscape.

For now, though, it still reminds you of a horror movie
where plastic bags float__downstream like drowned girls.

But the building is not haunted.
It was restored years ago.

The girls who dash out of the building
with shopping bags full of crop tops
and micro minis
will never float beneath the alder
through the Muddy River.

Not that you did.
Not that anyone else did either.

ABOUT MARIANNE SZLYK

Marianne Szlyk is a professor at Montgomery College in Maryland. She recently published her first chapbook, *Listening to Electric Cambodia, Looking Up at Trees of Heaven*, at Kind of a Hurricane Press: <http://barometricpressures.blogspot.com/2014/10/listening-to-electric-cambodia-looking.html>. Her poem "Walking Past Mt. Calvary Cemetery in Winter" was nominated for the 2014 Best of the Net. Individual poems have appeared in print and online, most recently in *Black Poppy Review*, *Poppy Road Review*, *bird's thumb*, *Carcinogenic Poetry*, *The Flutter Journal*, *Of/with*, *Walking is Still Honest*, and *Literature Today* as well as Kind of a Hurricane's anthologies, most recently *Switch (the Difference)*.

You can contact Marianne AND submit a poem at:

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Melissa
by J.S. Little

"If you don't put your hands on my ass and push, I'm going to slip."

That perfect, round ass was caught at the top, holding herself up above the out-turned spikes. Samuel braced his legs against the ladder and pushed the ass up and over, into the overgrown estate. He followed her over the fence and into the high grass. She might be stronger, but he'd jumped more fences. The high-security kind were tricky, but thick leather gloves and heavy blankets worked wonders.

"Did the camera make it? You said we needed the night-vision to see some of them," Samuel said.

"It looks fine. I have a few extra batteries, too. Give me some credit," Melissa gave him a thin smile and nodded her head toward the unpaved road that curved off into the woods. Credit was something that she didn't need. The skirt she had worn for him had earned her enough to keep him on the hook for life. She knew how rough the grounds were, and her stockings were already ripped from landing in the brambles and she was still willing to wear the skirt. Even if it had taken a little convincing on his part, it was worth it. She'd finally agreed to the skirt and hose for their little journey after he promised to only touch when she asked him to. It was a small price to pay. She looked perfect.

"Are you sure about this? I mean, come on, all the ghost talk is just kids being idiots," Samuel said.

"You're the one that wanted this little outing. I could be out partying with Cherrie and the rest of my friends, but we're here in the cold, stumbling around in the dark. The least we can do is see something interesting."

He squinted into the darkness as Melissa brushed past; so close that he almost forgot his promise. In the dim light he thought he could see her nipples straining against the thin shirt. He grabbed the blankets and followed after his prey as she picked her way down the forgotten path. It was mostly overgrown, but even the sparse bits of gravel provided a clearer path than the surrounding brush.

The entire grounds had the same abandoned feel. He had grown up walking or driving by the fence that surrounded the immense property on the edge of town. It had been decades since anyone had lived there, but the fence was replaced every few years with a taller model. The plantation was a magnet for local legends and a frequent target for dares. It was the perfect place for their date.

"How far in is The Squaw supposed to be? Robert said it only took a few minutes to find her."

"She's not 'The Squaw,' you ass. Show a little respect. She was a Mvskoke woman of the Wind Clan during the Trail of Tears. She escaped with her family and took fifteen of her clan with her. They got to this forest before the Army tracked them down and massacred all of them but her. She got away with a bullet lodged in her skull and wandered the forest in a daze. Her wounds became infected, and she searched, looking for her clan, until she finally died."

"And now she wanders the forest seeking vengeance on all white people that enter!"

Melissa almost smiled, the edge of her mouth ticked up in the light of the camera's viewfinder.

"You can't even get the legend right. It's not vengeance. It's more like... being so full of sadness that if you get too close, you get washed away. How many people do you know that have seen her and lived to tell about it? Fifteen? Twenty? No one has ever gone missing that went out to see just her. I'm willing to bet we can get pretty close before anything bad happens."

They entered the outskirts of the forest, and Melissa led him off the road and deeper into the trees. She held the camera out, stepping over the branches that littered the forest floor while checking the viewfinder every few seconds. He kept close behind her, trying to watch for any sign of a ghost. The more distracting sight of Melissa's nipples pushing against the shirt made him glad he had stipulated she come without a bra.

"Anything yet?" he said.

"No, just be patient. She has to be out here. There's nowhere else for her to go."

"This forest covers miles. It might take a while to find her. We could sit and rest for a few minutes." The cold would force her to cling to him for warmth. The skirt and low cut top weren't just for visual appeal. A few minutes resting on a log, an arm around her shoulder, a hand sliding up her thigh, and he'd have her panties off in no time. The blankets weren't just to get over the fence.

"We have to get to the heart of the house before midnight; there's no time to sit around." Melissa was quick with the answer. The girl's unnatural blond hair stood out against the trees, and he watched it tilt at a coy little angle as she flashed an artificial smile. "There's a reward if we make it to the heart. But the house is still miles away so you'll just have to wait."

She knew how to tease him. Even hunched over the small camera, trying to find the Squaw out among the trees, her right leg was back a little farther than it needed to be, hiking the skirt up. It had been like this as long as he'd known her. Passing each other in the hall she'd lick her lips, or adjust the strap on her backpack so that it rested between her breasts, drawing his eye right to them. Little things like that drove him crazy.

A wave of cold passed over him, and he looked up from his daydream to see Melissa holding her hand up motioning him over. He stepped on an old branch that cracked like a shot in the night. Melissa glared at him. He grinned and shrugged. The forest was full of dead branches, he couldn't see all of them even in the bright moonlight. She waited until he was behind her, his hands on her hips, leaning over to see the viewfinder.

"Out to the left, behind the trees, you can see her walking."

"I can't see shit."

"Behind the trees, you see the fuzzy shape drifting along? That's her."

Samuel looked from the trees then back to the small viewfinder screen. There was a shape that only appeared in the viewfinder, and it was coming towards them. The air continued to chill as he watched the shape drift closer.

"It is getting colder isn't it, Melissa?"

"Yes, she's getting near. We can only see her with the low light settings on the camera, though. This far out from the heart it's hard to see them, even tonight."

His teeth started to chatter, and his breath hung in the air. A strange sound grew louder as he rubbed his hands together for warmth. It was like a sack being dragged across the leaves. Melissa shivered as she kept the camera pointed into the forest. He looked around and still couldn't see anything but trees. Dead leaves swirled around them in little cyclones of bitterly cold air. He glanced at the viewfinder and saw that the blurry shape that had been in the distance was upon them.

Melissa tilted the camera up to where the Squaw's head should be. The shape was indistinct except where her eyes should be. Perfect pools of darkness were all that remained. He fell into those black orbs.

His head was filled with the laments of his life. Watching Melissa flirt with the guys at school, the first time he'd locked himself away from the world and cried at the injustice of it all. She smiled for some prick that had broad shoulders and perfect hair. He saw the way that she licked her lips, talking to the douche-bag, bad-boy types. The nights of staring at her pictures, when he longed for her, played on a loop in his head.

Melissa knelt on the ground, holding the camera up but not looking.

"Mommy, I just want to go home," she sobbed. The shape in the viewfinder hadn't moved. The Squaw was holding them in place. Other shapes were visible in the viewfinder, they were closing in as well. His hands had gone numb. She was trying to bring him back to the painful times. The ghost didn't want to let them leave.

"Melissa, we have to go or she'll kill us."

"It's only the memories, they can't hurt us."

"You're wrong, there are others coming. Look in the viewfinder."

Melissa shook her head.

"No. No, you don't understand. We're too far from the heart." She stood and rubbed her eyes. She held the viewfinder up and looked around the forest. "It's her clan. They walk the forest too, but she's the strongest. She holds them here but never sees them. We might as well go. She'll just stand here all night trying to see if we are part of her clan until the sun comes up." Melissa closed the camera and set off through the forest. He did his best to follow, but Melissa was walking fast.

"Hey, slow down, don't we need the camera?" He was doing his best not to pant from the exertion. Melissa slowed the pace but kept walking.

"We won't need the camera anymore. The next ghost will be visible enough."

"I still can't believe it. Jesus, did you feel the sadness? Not to mention the cold. That's just insane. Come on, Melissa. That was just a trick in the camera and me fooling myself, right?"

"She's real. I thought that was the point. We test our courage together and make it to the heart. The legends around here are older than most people's families, and we've been told since

we were little how dangerous it can get close to the heart. Isn't that part of the adventure, facing the past and living to tell about it? Even when Stephanie got impaled a few years back, they kept the fence up to keep us out."

"But they are just ghost stories, spooky things the elders scare the kids with. We aren't supposed to actually see anything. We get over the fence without killing ourselves, make it to the house, view the heart which is just some old plaque, and make it back before dawn. It's just fun."

Melissa flashed a smile again.

"Isn't it more exciting when it's real?" The smile faded. The trees were thinning out, and the brush built up around them until it was too high to see over. The only way forward was the path between the walls of brush. They kept the pace up and Samuel did his best to enjoy the view of Melissa's thighs as she walked. They were strong thighs meant to be wrapped around him. Melissa stopped at the wall of brush in front of them.

"Okay, so we go down the blue stone path." She pointed to the left where two marble plinths framed a path heading off into the dark. "Or we go along the river." She pointed to the break in the brush where he could see the moon reflecting off of a small creek.

"Wasn't the blue stone path the one where the crazy guy raped and skinned all of those girls back in the 1800s? Would his ghost mind if I jacked it while he raped the girl ghosts?" Samuel laughed and started down the path that was barely wide enough for them to pass.

"You're not good at remembering the actual legends. I think you've been watching way too much porn, too."

He ignored her and sped ahead. The sharp spines of the towering brush caught his arms every few feet leaving them with dozens of scratches. In the moonlight, it was hard to see the blood against his skin. It was a small price to pay for his own personal show. If the closer they got, the more visible the ghosts, he was in for a treat with all those nubile young victims the serial killer had racked up over the years. They had to be getting close. The smell of blood was getting stronger. The brush led them along a winding path and finally turned and led into a clearing. An old well sat in the middle of the clearing and standing above the well, translucent and stretched, was the figure of a woman.

He skidded to a halt. A few seconds later Melissa trotted to a stop behind him.

"Look where you've led us. Straight to the Destroying Mother."

"What the fuck is that?"

Unlike the Squaw, this ghost was visible enough that he could make out features. The Destroying Mother stood astride the well like a gaunt watch-dog. Tattered clothes swayed in a non-existent breeze. Even Melissa was wary, looking around like a frightened rabbit. The Mother was angular, her bony arms longer than a normal person's, and sunken eye sockets filled with red light. She slowly turned her head from right to left, looking out over the walls of brush.

"She came here before the plantation house was built and had a shack close to here. Digging this well cost her two sons before it was done. The local tribes and later the settlers would line up to get water from the well. The water was said to cause miracle cures and make crops grow better. People wanted anything that would help the crops grow, and they would sneak up at night and steal the water. The Mother believed it was the ghosts of her two boys trying to care for her

and their siblings that gave the water its power. When people stole it, they were taking her children. One night she'd had enough, sneaked into the town and, somehow, took all of the children. The townsfolk showed up the next day and found her standing on the well, just like she is now. She invited them to get some water, and they found the well stuffed with their children's bodies. The grounds around the well were littered with dozens of dead townsfolk before they managed to kill her. Do you remember how I said that the Mvskoke woman wasn't dangerous? Well, the Mother is dangerous. To get to the plantation house we have to pass her."

"So, what the hell do we do?"

"We give her what she wants. Go up to the well and look inside until I count to five."

He gave her an incredulous look but crept up to the well. The stench of the blood was now overpowering, and the Mother looked down at him with pure hatred. He looked into the well.

"One-one-thousand."

The heat from the bodies was the first thing he noticed.

"Melissa, these aren't ghosts! They look solid. Real, like you and me."

The skinless children crawled on top of each other, reaching up towards him.

"Melissa"

"Two-one-thousand. They are just ghosts."

The children were coming up the sides of the well, toothless mouths open.

"Three-one-thousand."

The larger ones were almost to the top of the well. More than anything he wanted to push himself away.

"Four-one-thousand. If you look away, she will push you into the well. They are just ghosts."

The children had reached him. Their hands caressed his face, and he was screaming, unable to move. Bony hands pushed down on his shoulders and, for a second, he felt himself falling then Melissa was hauling him away from the well and The Destroying Mother was laughing at him. Along with Melissa.

"W-w-w-hat the hell was that?"

"Just a little humor. This trip is fun, right? You like looking at my ass while we walk, right? I thought it would be funny to rattle you a bit. We're still too far from the heart to run into anything dangerous. If it looks real enough to hurt you, it probably is. The specters can break you mentally, but not physically."

"You are shitting me! I felt the children's hands on me, and the Mother's when she was pushing me into the well. How could you let me think they were going to kill me?"

Melissa watched him for a minute before speaking.

"It was just a joke. They wouldn't be able to hold you down there. If you had paid attention to the legends instead of going on about nubile rape victims, we could have just walked past. I promise that's the last time I stretch the truth."

She was framed by the walls of brush, thumbs hooked in the belt loops of the skirt, pulling the top of it down. Almost low enough to see the baby blue panties. Teasing him again. He broke into a smile of his own.

"I get it. All in good fun, right?"

He could just push her into the brush. The panties didn't even need to come off. They were like a G-string, he could yank them to the side with no problems. Melissa was just a tiny bit taller than him, but he had more muscle. If he could get his arms under her, he could pick her up with one motion and pin her legs back while holding her wrists. The brush would scratch her a bit, but afterward they could take it slower. She just needed to know that he could satisfy her.

"Yeah, just a bit of fun. How much more fun is there before we get to the plantation house? The skirt looks good, by the way."

"I agreed to it. You had better be enjoying it as cold as it is."

"Oh, I am. It's made me very happy."

He stepped closer, close enough to run his hand up the inside of her thigh.

"Hey, remember the rules," Melissa said as she batted his hand away. But she had let his hand slip under her skirt and only knocked it away when his finger brushed the thin material that covered what he really wanted.

He could wait. Once they got to the heart, they'd be miles from any living soul, and they could finally be together. Melissa was leading him down the path again. It slowly widened until he could no longer see the walls made of brush. Melissa was leading him along a barren dirt road flanked by dilapidated shacks.

"Keep your voice down. I mean it this time. Keep your eyes on the ground and just follow me. Don't look into the houses and try to ignore the sounds while we pass through the Slave Quarters."

He kept his head down as they passed the lines of shacks that used to hold the slaves that kept the plantation running before the North came through. He didn't even let his eyes rise above Melissa's calves.

"How much farther is it?" He did his best to keep his voice down. The wailing that erupted from the shacks every few seconds should have drowned out his voice completely.

"We're almost to the forest. This plantation was one of the hubs of the slave trade, Native American, and African. Hundreds of thousands of families were torn apart right here. Plus a few thousand new ones created when the slave masters wanted a new plaything. There wasn't exactly an age limit on the slaves you could rape, so many of the girls were torn from their usage. And there wasn't any antibiotics to stop the infections. Sickness hit this plantation harder than most with all the shacks so close together to handle the stream of chattel passing through. A constant stream of fresh meat. You should appreciate that Samuel. New girls all the time. Now be quiet while we pass through the forest."

"There's no trees here."

"I never said it was made of trees."

Curiosity tempted him. The road no longer had the claustrophobic walls of the shacks along the edges. They had been replaced by poles rising out of the dirt. Even with his eyes cast down he could see the hundreds of mismatched posts rising up above them. There was a soft, undulating hum coming from above him. It kept falling and rising in a rhythm that felt familiar. It sounded like something his grandmother used to sing to him.

"What is that?" he said, as softly as he could.

"It's singing. Just ignore it and keep walking."

It wasn't just singing. Another sound was coming through, and it wasn't the wind. It sounded like an old tire swing he used to love at the park near his house. It was the sound of creaking ropes. In the back of his mind, he put it together but he had to be sure. He looked up at the hundreds of bodies hanging by their necks from the poles.

"Holy shit, they look real. Why aren't they like the Mother?"

Melissa sighed and shook her head. She kept walking with her head down, never looking up. He kept up with her, but he couldn't take his eyes off of the bodies. Black, brown, and even a few white. They swayed in the wind in unison. It was hypnotic. He could see their jaws moving in the moonlight, keeping time with their swaying. The dead were singing. The words were trying to come back to him. His grandmother would sing it while she worked out in the yard.

A whistling sound drew his attention away from the spectacle. The spear hit a pole, uncomfortably close to his head.

"Samuel, stop looking at them. It's disrespectful. Our great-great-great-great-grandfathers might be up there. Trapped here, never moving on to their promised afterlife. I'd be pissed off too and then someone that could escape just gawks like an asshole."

Gunshots in the distance were muffled by the noise of the singing. Splinters of wood sprayed him as bullets cut gouges across the gallows nearest him. He took off in a sprint. He remembered Melissa's warning. The hanged ones were close to looking as real as him or her. The gunshots might doom them to becoming permanent residents.

His flight was short. It felt like a freight-train hit him in the chest sending him tumbling to the ground. When the world stopped spinning, he was tangled up with Melissa. She smelled amazing. Sweat and a light floral perfume mixed to present a primal scent with a slight edge of femininity. Like an almost innocent whore.

She was on her back and the sound of the swinging ropes reminded him of some of his more elaborate fantasies where thick ropes held Melissa's arms and legs to the bed and she cried while he penetrated her. In his fantasies he didn't just fuck her, he raped her.

"Get off of me." She was still whispering. "We're still in the forest. Get up before they find us again."

He stood and helped her up. The gallows were no longer towering above them. The bodies were now at eye level. There was no stench of death and this close to the bodies he could see that they hadn't rotted. The hanged ones were watching him. Their song had turned into howls.

"Samuel, look away and just walk forward." Melissa was behind him, pushing him. He kept his eyes down and focused on the feel of Melissa's hands on his back. He stumbled forward across the uneven ground and soon they left the gallows forest. She kept pushing him until his feet hit the raised edge of a concrete walkway. The occasional gust of wind rustled the leaves around them, and he let out the breath he'd been holding since looking into the eyes of the hanged ones.

Melissa was still behind him.

"Don't turn around, Samuel." Melissa grabbed his hand and pulled his arm back. His fingers

were directed under Melissa's skirt, and in one quick motion, into the tight panties she had worn for him. Bliss! He was afraid to move, any question or reaction might bring this wonderful moment to an end. Melissa was shaking at his touch. Hot tears dripped onto his forearm. Before he had a chance to move his fingers deeper, it was over. She pulled his fingers out and pushed his hand away.

"Look up, we're at the plantation house. There is one more set of ghosts we have pass before we reach the heart."

"But we were just getting to the good part. Come on, Melissa. There's nothing around here right now, just us."

The plantation house answered with the opening of the front door. Up the large flight of stairs and under the wide wrap-around porch the ancient doors swung open to reveal a small white figure. It had been a girl at one time.

"Meet Katie, Samuel. You weren't entirely wrong about that serial killer. He owned this place at one time and enjoyed some particularly brutal games with many of the local children. Katie was his first victim. She stands in the doorway, unable to escape. Usually she just stands there, barely a memory. But tonight, this close to the heart, he gets to hunt them again."

A thick arm shot out from behind Katie and held her neck in the crook of its elbow. The mangled little girl was wrenched up by her neck and Samuel jumped back as a knife blade erupted over and over from her chest. It happened so quickly that he wasn't sure what had grabbed and killed her.

"Katie is the first, come on, we're going to the side of the plantation house."

Melissa grabbed his arm and hauled him up the stairs toward the still-open door. He started to resist as they got to the top stair.

"Wait, did you just see what happened? That crazy fucker just stabbed her to death; I'm not getting close to that door."

"We'll be going along the outer edge of the porch." Melissa pulled him close. She put his hand under her skirt and pushed it against her crotch again. "The heart is waiting, but it's too dangerous to go in the front. We can get there if we go in from the side. Come on, Samuel," she whispered in his ear. Her hot breath raised goosebumps up and down his spine.

His resolve crumbled, and he followed her along the outer rail of the porch. He heard screams and cries from deep inside the house. Melissa held his hand, and they crept by each window along the side of the house, pausing long enough for her to look inside and shake her head before moving on to the next.

"What happens if he catches us?"

"He destroys us. This close to the heart, we're no different than the victims he gets to hunt again. For them, there is an order, a series of events that will happen again. Not every victim is here, only the ones that were memorable to him. We're intruding on that, and if he catches us, we just die. They have a groove cut across time. There's wiggle room, but the events are set. So pay attention and listen to what I tell you when we get in there."

Melissa peeked into the next window they came to and smiled.

"Alexandra is still alive, she's the sixth victim. He's not even half done yet, so we have

time."

He moved his head up to the window beside Melissa. Alive meant something different to the ghosts. The girl was taller than the one in the front doorway, naked like the other, with her hands clasped in prayer. The girl's eyes were missing along with her lower jaw. Strips of skin had been cut from her making it look like she was wearing a one-piece striped bathing suit. It didn't seem to matter. Alexandra took brief breaks from prayer to peek out into the darkness outside. The house shook like it had been hit by an earthquake, and she sprinted from the room.

"Let's just go home, Melissa. I just wanted to see some spooky shit, but this is too crazy."

Melissa gripped his hand tighter, and he watched those luscious lips move, speaking the words that would give him the drive to press on. "Don't you love me, Samuel? Aren't I worth it?"

The words evaporated the last of his doubt. They would break in and make it down to the heart. Then she would truly be his. He started to put his hand on her hip, and she glared.

"Once we reach the heart. Not before. And Samuel, you must listen to me when we get inside the house. Follow my voice and do what I say and we'll walk right through there without any problems. They are acting out their own tragedy, don't let it become ours. Don't jump into the groove with them and the hunter will have no power over us; he only has power over the prey. Okay, it's calmed down. Let's go."

Melissa pushed on the window then dug her fingers in and pulled it open with a popping sound. She was through before he could blink. He crawled through as best as he could and followed Melissa to the inner door of the room. Blood was in a pool on the floor where Alexandra had been standing. Melissa straightened and brushed her skirt down.

"Samuel, think of me and follow."

Melissa kept her eyes forward and walked into the dark with confidence. He followed, trying to emulate the sureness she showed. The hallway they walked through was chaos. He could sense movement all around him and caught glimpses of moving bodies out of the corner of his eye. It was all happening at once. Small shapes darted through the house like dragonflies. The hunter roared through after them. As they walked down the hall and through the rooms, the ghosts stopped and stared at him for a few seconds before the hunter closed in. When the ghosts stopped and became solid, he tried not to stare at them. The little girls were hard to ignore, even with missing eyes or ears. A few had grown wonderful, pert breasts before they had died.

"Samuel! Remember the time we were alone in the house for the weekend?"

He remembered the fumbling and kissing and the long hours spent trying to push Melissa to do more. They were almost to the stairs that led to the basement. The heart was within reach. Melissa opened the door and pointed down the stairs. A body hit the wall the wall next to them. Most of the skin had been peeled from her face, but the rest of her body looked untouched. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but she might have been mixed race. The dark nipples, surrounded by lighter skin, begged to be touched. The light hair around her vulva spun obscene thoughts in his head.

"Samuel, think of me. Think of all of our years together. I remember you peeking at me after I showered. I was even excited when you touched me the first time. She is not part of our story."

His head spun as he tried to remember what Melissa was talking about. The images in his

head were muddled. The girl he had been staring at was gone. In her place was a large man holding a saber. He was red faced and panting, covered in blood. His crotch had been shredded. A mulched patch of meat where his penis and testicles had been. The hunter had been betrayed by his body as much as by the bitches that had tried to escape. He made sure that they paid in pain to offset his loss of pleasure.

"You're getting lost and he's getting closer. Come on, Samuel! Down the stairs!"

Melissa pulled him down the dark staircase, clutching at the railing to keep from falling. The door at the top cracked and broke with the charging hunter. His hunt had been disrupted. The prey would wait until the distraction was eliminated.

They hit the bottom stair, and Samuel fell to his knees, unable to keep up. Melissa grabbed both arms and hauled him up.

"Run, Samuel!"

Melissa led the way, crashing into doors, pulling him around corners in the enormous underground complex. Always behind them the hunter ran. They were interrupting his hunt, blocking his orgiastic glee at snuffing out the young, seductive fires of his prey. It was an unforgivable sin.

Samuel slammed into Melissa at the end of a hallway. She stood before a simple door. The sconce beside the door was lit, the only source of light he had seen in the plantation house. At the end of the hall stood the hunter, stalking towards them.

"Melissa, I can't help it, I can't get him out of my head."

"Shh, Samuel. It's okay now."

The hunter was just feet away, waving the bloody saber at them, growling with hate.

"What do I do?"

"There's nothing to do. We changed the record."

The same sense of motion he had tried to ignore earlier filled the hallway. Faster than anything human, the little hands tore at the hunter's body. It fell apart in the blink of an eye and sitting in the floor amid the remains of the hunter were six girls. The ones with mouths left grinned.

He recognized Alexandra, white skin now stained red with the hunter's blood.

"Sleep well, Melissa," one of the girls with a mouth said.

Melissa nodded and turned to the door.

"We're here, Samuel. The heart of the house. I'm yours now. I remember you coming into my room and crawling under the covers when you thought I was asleep. Dad thought it was just a phase and Mom, well, she just ignored it. You'd touch me then leave, and I'd lay there and cry. Come on into the heart, Samuel."

She led him in and the small lamp on the table cast enough glow that he could see a figure in the chair, a scalloped-shape piece missing from the head.

"These are the last ghosts in the house. At least the last that we can see. The house is odd that way, you only see things connected to you in some way. Through anger, fear, or synchronicity. Sometimes, you are just unlucky."

She hit a switch, and the overhead light came on and the body of Melissa sat in the chair,

missing half of her head.

"We're almost done. But first, the kiss."

She picked something up off the ground then pressed her body against his. Their lips met, and she forced her tongue into his mouth. He felt the heat of the passion between them as he grabbed the back of her head and kissed her harder. He tasted the sharp remnant of whiskey.

"Wait, we haven't been drinking."

"We did that night. Don't you remember yet? I needed the courage for this place, and for kissing you. I let you run your hands all over me, inside of me, just like you always wanted. And I got wet, and you had the vilest look in your eye. You said that was proof I wanted you and you tried to fuck me, right here, on the floor, in the heart of this place."

She backed away, towards the chair that held her body.

"But then I could see you clearly and I couldn't pretend anymore. If you got what you wanted, if you could have me for a night, I thought it might make things better. Maybe you wouldn't be obsessed if the mystery was removed. I couldn't imagine you were someone else anymore, and I told you to stop."

She sat in the chair and was whole again, staring at him with her tear clouded eyes.

"You were so angry. You called me a slut and a cunt and said I was fucking every other boy in the neighborhood; why not you?"

He looked down at the gun in his hand. It was solid; a heavy extension of his anger. She'd led him on and betrayed him. She promised herself with her wetness and then pulled it back for the other lousy shits that drove by every day and whistled at her, teasing her. She let them touch her with their filthy fingers and lips. All she had to do was open her eyes, he was right there, ready to take care of her.

Beside the chair where Melissa sat was a pair of legs. There was another body on the floor.

"Don't look yet, it's not quite time," Melissa wiped the tears away, but they kept coming.

All of the nights they had been alone in the house, sitting on the couch, holding hands; she'd been lying to him. She'd let him work his hands under her bra on many of those nights before pushing him away and running from the room. That little twinkle of fear was just nerves, crossing that forbidden line he knew she longed to dance over. His sweet words couldn't keep her on the couch. The promises and taunts and yes a few lighthearted threats, never swayed her.

He heard her, on the nights when the wind was still, moaning in ecstasy in the next room, rubbing herself, thinking of him. He was closer to her than any stranger. They were meant for each other.

"Now is the part where I look into your eyes, and I understand why you had the gun with you. Even if I had closed my eyes and let you fuck me it wouldn't have mattered. That I was a virgin wouldn't have made you any less angry, would it?"

Melissa had been accepted to a college on the coast. She'd always been the smart one in the family. Night after night she studied in her room with the doors locked and had enough credits to graduate at sixteen. Their mother was overjoyed to have a daughter bound for an Ivy League school.

He was losing the love of his life.

Soon she'd be off to college, surrounded by the older men that she craved. They would cater to her every need to get inside of her. Fingers and cocks splitting her open while she dreamed of her true love. This was it, the last chance to spend time with her before she left. It would be years before he could join her. He just needed some place they could be alone and talk. A little whiskey and they would celebrate her success. It might even lead to a little fun, for old time's sake.

Now that would be impossible. His hand shook as he pointed the revolver at his true love. His angel sat in the chair, silent, tears still running down her face. They slid over her jaw and down her throat before getting lost between her breasts. Melissa was shaking her head.

"Was there even the smallest bit of love for me? Please, just say you loved me. Even just the tiniest bit."

Melissa sobbed, shaking her head. Something scraped across the old wooden floor. Two sets of eyes watched them from the corner of the room. The kids couldn't have been more than eight or nine, wide eyes staring at him, filled with terror. He started to turn the gun towards them, but Melissa's voice stopped him.

"No, they are just here to see the ghosts. Like you said, 'Just a little fun on Halloween.' Finish it and they can run away and have stories to tell the rest of their lives. And I'll be able to rest for another year."

He cocked the hammer and felt his own tears start to well up in his eyes.

"You're mine," he said. It was as painful as the first time.

"I'm yours, now and-" The right side of Melissa's head exploded.

The world was closing in, and he could hear the roaring ocean filling his ears. He stepped over the gray matter and bits of skull. He knelt next to his love and stroked her face for the last time. The two boys that had been spying on them were pressed against the wall screaming. He cocked the hammer again and put it to his head.

Forever.

ABOUT J.S. LITTLE

J.S. LITTLE is an author and computer scientist living in Oklahoma and working in the tech sector. His nights are spent writing horror and dark fantasy while starting to branch out into hard sci-fi and slipstream. He looks for new ways to expand his writing craft and belongs to Critters.org, one of the largest online critique groups. His first novel, *Child of Doors* (Wolf on Water, 2014), was released to overwhelmingly positive reviews.

He was exposed to horror at a young age when he saw *Poltergeist* for the first time and spent the next week fearing that he'd start tearing his face off every time he looked in the mirror. Growing up in Oklahoma taught him to watch the skies during a storm. That same kind of face-tearing fear sets in when the rains stop and the sun shines, half of the sky bright and blue, the other half pitch black. The heavy sense of dread he felt as he waited to see if the storm was really over was one emotion he fought to capture. From moment to moment the siren's wail threatened to start. That complete focus and stomach turning anxiety was what he hoped his readers felt with *Child of Doors*. This was the kind of horror he felt when reading *The Amityville Horror* for the first time. It was the first time he slept with the lights on.

His experiences with horror movies and books slowly broadened his horizons, adding gore and violence, ever increasing vistas of hellish delights. But the stories he liked to tell himself, the dreams he had that woke him in sweat and kept him up the rest of the night, those were always the ones that had that sense of the inevitable terror about them. It was the quiet creeping death that was to be feared. In *Child of Doors* it is this sense of dread that builds as Arc and Aimii start to put together what is happening to them. Like counting down to their own executions, they try to find happiness in the little time they have left. The little pieces of their world break apart and soon they are left standing against the storm's raw fury. Death is terrifying for most of us, the thought of non-existence is anathema to us. But the terror that hunts Arc and Aimii promises an afterlife of endless torture. The nothingness of death would be preferable.

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From Student Body
by Rafeeq O. McGiveron.
Charleston, Chapter 29 pages 341-52.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Rick woke groggily on Wednesday morning, sensing the lateness of the hour, and knowing somehow that this was good. He rolled over and stretched, blinking in the sunlight coming from the windows on the other side of the apartment, unseen through the open door that was closer to the foot of the bed than the head, and also refracting from the sky in the window above Anna's side of the mattress. Ah, what a dear she was to have let him sleep a little longer while she managed the rising of the entire brood, and all the work that entailed! He would have to be sure to thank her, he told himself as he started to sit up on one elbow and try to do something considerate in return. But first, though, he had to start getting around because he needed to go teach and then head to the classes that he himself was taking—

Rick's breath caught in his throat as it all came back, and suddenly he felt like a ninety-year-old invalid again. Oh, Lauren, he thought futilely, Lauren! God, sweetie... His heart stuttered alarmingly beneath the fragile parchment that covered his lean ribs.

"Hey, Rick, honey," said Anna as she poked her head into the doorway, speaking gently as if to one of the children, "you starting to get up?"

"Y-yeah," he replied automatically. Then he looked uneasy. "Only—"

Anna, who had begun to turn back to the kitchen, stopped. She raised her mild brown eyebrows.

"I, uh..." Rick swallowed. He thought of the once-lively, flatteringly responsive body of his secret sweetheart now ravaged and motionless, those lovely long lashes closed forever upon porcelain cheeks gone deathly pale. The delicate little bosoms he had handled in his joy no longer stirred with the breath he had made quicken so expectantly, and the soft moist lips he had kissed with such passion now were as cold as dead angleworms. Yes, for the poor dear thing lay in a steel drawer somewhere as if no longer human or known or loved, or perhaps on an autopsy table being desecrated all the more... His stomach did a queasy flip-flop.

"I'm not sure I'm going to go in today," he managed, beginning to shiver. Trying to hide it, he pulled up the covers as casually as he could.

Anna's green eyes hardened, then narrowed faintly. "Really," she said flatly, watching his gray face.

Rick licked his lips in discomfort. “I just feel kind of off,” he attempted guiltily. “M-maybe it was whatever I had for lunch yesterday,” he suggested, thinking this might be preferable to still being broken up over the loss—even the brutal assault and murder—of someone he had known less than a year and who was supposed to be, essentially, merely a friend from work.

“Yesterday you came home before lunch,” Anna reminded him tonelessly.

He blinked. “Mm,” he agreed noncommittally. “M-must’ve been something else, I guess,” he shrugged at last, trying not to fidget beneath his wife’s steady gaze.

Anna pursed her lips, regarding him silently for a long moment, her pale lashes half lowered. At last, however, without a word, she simply turned around and left.

Rick dropped back to the pillow, and with his shoulders hunched up as if from cold, the shivering boy pulled the covers up about his throat, trying somehow to keep his chin from trembling. From the apartment beyond he could hear Anna banging dishes around, then puttering with the children now and then, and bitching at Prometheus not to get into something or other, and in the background there was Sesame Street from the little television in the living room.

After a while he heard his wife on the phone—it sounded like she was asking the University switchboard for the number for the English Department. Rick, blinking numbly up at the stuccoed bedroom ceiling, couldn’t make out what was being said, but oh, how his heart went out to her suddenly! Here he was, a grown man stuck shaking in bed like some character out of Poe, and clearly he had crept her out and aroused her vague wifely suspicions as well, yet despite it all, the brown-haired angel was calling in to work for him so that he did not seem like a complete flake.

And, really...why, if she hadn’t done it, he probably wouldn’t have—couldn’t have. So confused and distraught was Rick that he truly had not thought of the obvious step of calling in sick and having the secretaries cancel his class and put a note in his professors’ mailboxes for him. And even if he had considered phoning the Department...well, he was not sure he could have done it anyway. The notion of facing the world, even to the extent of staggering out into his own living room, filled him with a peculiar sort of dread whose very namelessness scared him all the more. Grief debilitated him, and he did not yet see how he could climb out of it. How thankful he was for the automatic kindness of the long-suffering Anna! Would he have been able to nurse his spouse in a sickbed as she did? Probably not, he admitted glumly.

Or... Well, Rick wondered upon reconsideration, was it all really just altruism and selflessness on Anna’s part? Maybe the woman, taken aback by his peculiar reaction to the death of someone whom she had never once heard him mention before, was less concerned for him than for herself—and, of course, her children. The next time she felt like a nice walk with the kids and brought the stroller full of them over to Morrill for a little picnic while he was studying some Saturday afternoon, after all, perhaps she would not relish the pitying looks she might receive from his fellow grad students and even professors as someone being married to a borderline mental case. And the best way, naturally, to keep herself and her defenseless offspring fed and housed and clothed was not to let him plunge off the deep end, for a guy who couldn’t be counted on to teach his class one semester most likely would lose his assistantship the next...

God, and then where would they be?

Rick sighed. Really, though, even if that were the case, he couldn't blame her. Anna was concerned about him—he could tell—but she was unnervingly wary of his obvious emotional near-collapse, too, and of course she had every right to be concerned about herself and the children as well. But he would get through it, he told himself unconvincingly. If the poor woman could just hold on, and not press him too closely, and humor her mysteriously afflicted husband a while longer, why, then surely he could come back to feeling human once more. Oh, he didn't know how yet, true. But that's what people did, didn't they? People kept on going. In a way, that perseverance was probably a crucial evolutionary trait.

Right now, though, he admitted to himself, still trembling as if with fever, it was grimly ironic at best to theorize about the continuance of the species when he could not even picture the continuance of himself. His dear dark-eyed Lauren did not continue on, after all, Rick told himself, trying not to snifle. Throughout their desperately secret, desperately fulfilling relationship there had been self-doubt and remorse and fear of discovery, and heartbreak as well, both that terrible summer day when at last he had had to call it quits and that terrible night just last Friday. Never, however, had he felt so empty and alone. Never had he thought she would be so...so gone. He could never apologize, or thank her for anything ever again. He could never feel like the wise, tolerant uncle-figure which he had hoped one day, with time and with healing, he could be.

But healing? God, it was hard, so hard, to believe that such a thing even could exist. He was depressed, Rick knew vaguely. And not the word people threw around so easily all the time, but the real thing, that which was delineated in the weighty, leather-bound DSM, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the condition for which some psychiatrist, nodding wisely, and perhaps shaking the modern equivalent of a feathered rattle of tortoise shell filled with magic bones, might prescribe the appropriate pharmacological witches' brew.

But joke as one might, he could feel the slackness of his facial muscles, the apathy, the listlessness, the dread of even beginning to think or act or try. For further effort could bring only more pain, and the stirring-up of the agony and the terror that lay in the silty black muck at the bottom of his mind. Every thought was booby-trapped, each neural impulse a potential razor cut to the soul. Any movement meant that he would be tortured by the thought of the atrocities committed upon his sable-haired beloved, or be crucified by all the things he had done wrong and all the things he had failed to do, or be buried by the utter finality of his own selfish loss.

In a way, thought Rick in bitter, circular self-accusation, the selfishness of his reaction was a low and terrible thing. Yes, a beautiful and fine young girl, one whom he had admired and cherished and, without ever quite admitting it to himself at the time, had loved so dearly and desperately, was dead. And she had not died easily. Things had been done, bad things, and she must have struggled and screamed and cried out in her pain, clawing at her throat as the very breath was strangled remorselessly out of her, but the panic and the fear never stopped, and unspeakable evil just went on and on and on... Christ, to think of her last moments out there, all alone and helpless, the girl never imagining that anything could be that bad, and yet it was, and no one would help her, and Rick had driven her away in tears—

Rick's face contorted, and shakily he turned over, and in the blackness of his rumpled pillow he sobbed, choking. He wanted to wail, to howl, to shriek out the horror...and yet there was Anna to think of, and the children, too. Yes, for even if he could simply rave as every convolution of his brain told him to do, and he let his wife draw what conclusions she may, still he could not frighten little Eric and Nathan and Amanda like that. No, for the utter madness of that voice would be a horrible thing, a sound to make them cry now in their own confused terror, and yet also a memory which, subconsciously, might haunt them forever. Why, it was unthinkable. But if not for them, he realized, he would have fallen into a place from which, perhaps, he might never come out...

And yet there again, he saw in sullen self-loathing, was the self-centeredness of the whole thing. An innocent young girl was irreversibly and revoltingly dead, and still it was all Rick, Rick, Rick—his crippling emotions, his pathetic breakdown, his marriage back in jeopardy once more.

But, hell, he was the one still alive, Rick told himself in guilty exasperation, feeling ashamed and unworthy even as he thought it, and yet knowing deep down that it was the truth, too. One could prate forever about untimely death, and the vicissitudes of cruel fate or fortune, and the savage injustice to one whose life was cut so unnaturally short...but nothing could push the grains of sand back up into the top of the hourglass, not until the very space time of the expanding universe had stretched, stretched, stretched, then slowed, and begun to contract once more, slowly at first and then faster and faster, at last hastening over the billions of years hence to the indescribable compression of a Big Crunch, from whence would spring another Big Bang, another rewriting of the equations of what could and would be, another firing of the Arrow of Time, another unforeseeable new universe.

He could not help his darling Lauren anymore, Rick knew sorrowfully—why, he had not even been able to do it when the gentle creature still stood living and so desperately needy before him!—but perhaps he could help himself somehow. Oh, one part of his mind, helplessly and sickly entranced, craved nothing more than to lie down by the side of his darling, his darling, his life and his bride, in the sepulcher there by the sea, in her tomb by the sounding sea... But that Poe-esque self-immolation was not the right way, he tried to tell himself, shuddering faintly as if swaying at the edge of a giddy precipice. He had to go on. It wasn't a betrayal of the memory of his dear lover and friend, was it? Was it? And all the while that he thought of her, he knew, doggedly, that somehow he had to think of himself, too, and not feel that it was an insult to one to whose memory he could never truly do justice. The dead no longer suffered, as admitted the melancholy man. The living did. For grief, loss, mourning—these were for the living, in a way truly were about the living.

Really...why, Rick had said this at his grandfather's funeral not even two years earlier, had he not? The sentiments he had delivered before the open grave had made sense then—probably platitudes, he suspected, perhaps things which countless others had said before, or notions from the Bible that he had heard second- or third-hand rather than actually reading in their original, and yet in the end they had been his own thoughts, with a purposeful dash of the "sunk low but mounted high" dichotomies of Milton's "Lycidas." And there seemed to have been truth in them,

too.

Unlike the brittle-tempered, shrewish wife who had preceded him into death and who had sent hundreds of dollars every month to flamboyant TV preachers like Rex Humbard and Billy Graham and Oral Roberts, who always seemed to be begging oh-so earnestly for funds to finish some great edifice at a worldwide headquarters or to make self-aggrandizing outreach efforts to the supposed heathens of Africa or South America or some such, the casually easygoing old man had been completely non-denominational, even non-institutional in his personal morality. The thought of some showy religious affair, therefore, had filled the younger man with the dread of an embarrassing type of inauthenticity. Anna, however, friend-of-a-friend-wise, sort of knew the funeral director, and she helped Rick arrange not some ghastly church-bound charade of sermons and organ music and flowers, but instead a simple graveside service with military honors from the local post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, followed by a brief oration by Rick.

It was not a eulogy—it was an oration, a purposeful public exploration of the highs and lows of life and death and reconciliation. With tone and mood and meaning carefully modulated, each word chosen with deliberation, and all balanced adroitly for spoken delivery, it was most likely the best thing Rick had ever written.

He had rolled all the constituent components around in his head for days, even while he hurt with the loss of his beloved and only father-figure, and at last he committed it to paper with only minor revisions. He had asked Anna once or twice, in a very offhand pose, if she would like to hear a preview, but it had never quite worked out. On the brisk February morning he drove them out to the little cemetery at the edge of the tiny town of Bath in the burnt-orange Toyota they had borrowed from his in-laws for the occasion, however, the woman, curious now, finally had asked him if he could please hand over the folded sheet from the inside pocket of his suit, but Rick merely shook his head. “It shall be delivered unto you soon,” he declared a trifle loftily.

After the formally correct but very rote presentation of the old VFW soldier, Rick suddenly had a case of cold feet. No one who taught for a living could ever have that fear of public speaking which is purported to be as strong as the fear of death, but the verbal artifact he had crafted, he realized all at once, was far more measured and old-fashioned and grave than anything his audience—even if they were mostly his family—could have expected. Yet the oration was good, and he knew it, and he could only inhale a steadying breath as he took his place before them all and finally, a little self-consciously, begin: Comrades and kinsmen, kind hearts all, we who gather here today to grieve the death and to celebrate the life of Raymond Sherwood O’Donnell do so in sorrow and in joy, in defeat and in triumph, in recognition of our temporal loss and in acceptance of his undying gain...

Oh, how stuffy it seemed, what a throwback to pompous bygone days! But it was right somehow, and true, and as he told the old man’s life in slow, achingly measured tones with but a few broad-brush yet evocative paragraphs, Rick exulted even in the midst of his own pain, for he knew that he had captured the poignancy of man that is born of woman and hath but a short time to live. The simple, small-town childhood of the 1920s and ’30s— The teenager’s exuberant athleticism, his talent for sketches and caricatures and cartoons of all variety, his renowned skill at drums and tap-dancing— His service during the war as an aerial gunner in the Army Air

Force, his return to the hometown that he loved, the raising of his family— Rick's two cousins and his grandfather's remaining brother looked at the solemn speaker in a wide-eyed sort of awe, and their three wives, and Rick's, and Rick's aunt, too, wept softly, tears running down their pink cheeks in the chill winter sun.

Rick touched upon the man's characteristic humor, too, as in the time as a boy he trapped homely muskrats from the nearby swamp, which his father then served to his business cronies, unknowing city-slickers from the railroad who swore they had never had rabbit so good, or the way in his basic training days in the AAF he had gotten even with the joker who during a twenty-mile hike in the Texas desert had put out a cigarette butt in his canteen: by urinating in the canteen of the offender. Yet after those choice one-line anecdotes that had made them all smile, Rick descended carefully to the emotional nadir of his composition. They could not know, he asserted quietly, how many stories now were left untold. They could not know how many deeds were left undone.

Rick described the seventy-four-candle conflagration on the birthday cake which he and Anna had served his grandfather the previous year and the hopes they had had, in vain, for one of the seventy-five candles in the coming June. He paused, and with a pensive, faintly pained look not at all rehearsed, he blinked down at the paper in his hand, and then, reading softly, he compared the open-hearted man's life to a candle that had been snuffed out just as irrevocably. Yet carefully now, and purposefully, Rick began to turn the mood: As we close, however, we must remember that the token services we solemnly offer up here today are perhaps less for the benefit of our beloved friend and benefactor than for those of us who remain—and rightly so. Why, the sufferings of the tired old body in the casket were done, were they not? Yes, for it was only the living who suffered now, and their longing for the lost companionship of the generous old man was in some ways a selfish thing, but an understandable one.

And besides, his grandsire was, spiritually, in a better place now, was he not? Rick was not very religious, really, and yet he believed, vaguely but stubbornly hopeful, that there was indeed something beyond the mere physical, and that, as Donne put it, one short sleep past, we wake eternally. Therefore, he asserted, Raymond has little need of our hopes and our prayers when he already has justified himself with a lifetime of benevolence and good humor. Raymond has little need, continued Rick quietly in the breathless silence, of our inadequate words and our tears when now he sees into every heart even more clearly than he did when he stood among us. All his uncertainties, all his disappointments, all his discomforts, are done.

And upon that solid foundation Rick performed a final Volta, and in a calm sort of triumph he brought it all together, polished it and presented it, pushing the mood suddenly up, up, up with an increase in tempo in his final firm and confident declaration: Ray's life was long, his death was short, and his life to come is longest yet. In the recognition of these comforting truths, and in the name of God, the all-seeing, the compassionate, the just, I wish each of us understanding, fellowship, and good cheer.

And Rick folded the paper back into his breast pocket, and he stepped out of the center of the moment, and he knew, glowing somewhere deep inside even while he missed so much the devoted old man whose finger the tiny boy used to hold through the bars of his crib as he fell

asleep, that he had said what needed to be said, and that, moreover, he truly had captured the meaning of the instant, and the very human condition itself, and he had made things better. There really was a closure of a sort, he found with some surprise, and later, much later, he heard that the funeral director had told Anna, shaking his head in slow wonderment, that in all his years he had never heard a graveside service so powerful and moving.

Oh, but could he ever get to that place with his feelings for Lauren? Asked Rick, empty-hearted as he sobbed softly into his pillow. God, to feel that it was not so immediate, so crushing, a thing that stabbed him and tortured him with every beat of his grieving heart! Not to think of those once-beautiful eyes now dull and dead and staring from beneath half-closed lids, not to be wracked with nausea, literal nausea, at the crime that had been committed upon her sacred pale flesh, not to feel the lack of her with every breath his lonely lungs took... For her life was not long, nor was her death short, and her loss was tragedy incomparable, to herself, and yet also to everyone who knew her, everyone. Lauren's poor violated self at least suffered no more—he had to keep telling himself that, had to, again and again—but it was the miserable souls that lingered on upon the bitter Earth whose suffering would not end.

Rick, who even as he tried so carefully to dissociate himself from the sweet infatuation of the past, the secret romance, the playfulness, the unspoken yet desperately meaningful love, nevertheless felt his chest chopped open and his heart and lungs and entrails flopped out upon the ground— The girl's grieving parents, who would have to drive in from Grand Haven, and who then, even amid all the other grinding agonies of dealing with the police and the medical examiner and the funeral home, would have the melancholy, heartbreaking task of going through her apartment shelf by shelf and drawer by drawer to clean out the final personal effects of their beloved baby girl— The remaining inhabitants of Nine Morrill who, stricken, could not help but remember their departed colleague whenever one's uneasy eye crossed her empty desk, or who sometimes might catch themselves for a disorienting split-second imagining that the sound of a seemingly familiar footstep in the doorway was hers— Even Lauren's students, shocked at the news of what had happened to someone so young and vivacious, and whom they had come to look up to, and count upon— Yes, all of them could only suffer on.

Rick wanted his hurt to end, but it could never end while he lived, not completely, anyway, not even if he lived another sixty or eighty years. And he was indeed required to keep on living, he reminded himself vaguely with his face wallowing mournful in the wet pillow—he had, after all, considered the matter again and again in those first bleak hours, and at least for a man with a wife and three young children depending on him, there of course was no other answer. Of course.

He knew Lauren did not hurt anymore, and did not fear, and did not worry, but knowing was not the same as feeling, and right now it was all just words, words, words, mere blank phonemes that gave no comfort. God, horrible things had been done, and his slender cream-skinned darling had cried out alone and terrified and confused, writhing like some helpless little animal in a trap as the life was choked out of her once-graceful throat, and she wriggled and whimpered, and died in pain and agony and abandonment...but somehow Rick had to get beyond it, did he not? The knowledge of what had happened seemed to hurt him as much as it had her, yet he had to dilute

that morbid immediacy, had to make it less vivid. But even that intention hurt him, too, for he felt—unreasoning, he knew, but still the notion was hard to shake—that it meant he was forgetting Lauren, and everything she had meant to him, yet he would never wish that, never...

Around and around went the crazy, half-formed thoughts in his fevered mind, and eventually, befuddled, he fell into a leaden slumber with his face half smothered in his damp pillow, and he could not tell dream from wakefulness or fact from phantasm. Rick knew only that Lauren was gone, gone forever, and that was the same awake or asleep. Once, his eyes puffy and red-rimmed, he woke from, or at least was driven to semi-conscious motion by, the throbbing pressure of his distended bladder, and as he shuffled unseeing to the bathroom, he heard Anna pause in saying something to one of the children. Somehow, scarcely even able to see the splashing porcelain before him, let alone the tableau in the other room, he sensed her attention upon him.

Oh, thought Rick as he leaned on the wall for support when he swayed forward to flush, how he craved the comfort of his wife's soft maternal arms, and her simple acceptance, even if she could not truly understand. But, God, what could he say? How could the man, guilty and shamefaced in what must have seemed to her his inexplicable emotional condition, even approach her? He simply didn't have the nerve to speak or to go to her, and he could only stagger back to bed without a word, drop once more into the rumpled sheets, and wallow in his grief and his self-pity. He could not help it. Maybe he was delirious.

ABOUT RAFEEQ O. MCGIVERON

Rafeeq O. McGiveron holds a B.A. with Honor in English and History from Michigan State University, an M.A. in English and History from MSU, and an M.A. in English from Western Michigan University. He also has taken courses in fencing, Spanish, and flight training, and he knows a fair bit about feline behavior as well.

Having taught literature and composition for many years at a number of schools, including MSU, WMU, and Lansing Community College, in positions that have allowed his scholarship to be driven by personal interest and the serendipity of the classroom rather than by necessity, he has authored some three-dozen articles of literary criticism on the works of authors ranging from Robert A. Heinlein and Ray Bradbury, to Willa Cather, to Shakespeare. Most recently he served as volume editor for Salem Press for *Critical Insights: Fahrenheit 451* (2013) and *Critical Insights: Robert A. Heinlein* (2015), assignments that included not only “editing” per se but also recruiting and managing scholars from around the world, plus writing introductions, an occasional chapter, and other apparatus as well.

Currently, he works in student services at Lansing Community College, where he has been employed since 1992. He also dabbles in fiction, occasionally poetry, and mobile art. His novel *Student Body*, the sensual, allusive, and introspective tale of a glib yet secretly troubled young professor-to-be and the women who love him, was released in 2014.

You can contact Rafeeq at:

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Something Else (Afterlives 1.5)

By Adam E. Morrison

An interview with ... something?

Posted by Admin on December 9, 2014

Hey there, fearless info seekers. We've got a very special post for you today. A package arrived on our desk this morning containing a Dictaphone tape and a note. We've decided to just transcribe everything on the tape for you until we can figure out how to get the audio up, but once we heard it, we realized something seriously bad might have happened here. We won't say any more until our suspicions have been confirmed, but we are posting the transcript for you now. To state the obvious, we haven't been able to verify anything yet and we may well be forced to take this post down, but we know you come to this site for real stories that might give a glimpse into what awaits us beyond this life, and this is from a reliable source whose name many of you will recognize.

Here's a transcript of the handwritten note that was in the package, followed by a full transcript of what's recorded on that Dictaphone tape. Brace yourself, folks.

I am Professor Alfred James. As you and some of your readers know, I have devoted much of my life and career to the research of paranormal issues, particularly those related to death and the afterlife.

I have had the unusual fortune this evening to encounter... I know not whether to say person or entity. The enclosed recording truly does contain all of the information I have on the creature. Although I am about to discover whether at least some of its claims are true, I fear I will not be able to share that evidence with you.

I am not even sure that this note will make it to you, as its contents were not specifically discussed.

God be with you all,

Prof. Alfred James

ALFRED JAMES: Hello. This is Professor Alfred James speaking. The date is December 4, 2014, and the time is 9:43 pm. I returned home about half an hour ago, after working late at the school, to discover a young woman waiting for me in my apartment. The door to my apartment was locked, and I have seen no evidence that the door or any windows to the apartment have been tampered with.

FEMALE VOICE: Hi, my name is Erin, and I'm an addict. I like taking short trips. A real turn off for me is guys who don't really know what they want.

AJ: The young woman you just heard is currently seated in a kitchen chair, which is the position I discovered her in, and I am seated at the table across from her. To look at her, I would estimate her age to be twenty or so. She is roughly five foot nine, she has black hair, violet eyes... {hesitates} which I have yet to see blink. They are bloodshot. On her forehead is what appears to be a burn wound or a brand in the shape of a lopsided letter X. Otherwise, she appears to be a normal young woman. Now, I should disclose that, although she should not make a particularly imposing figure and she has not risen from the chair for as long as I've been here, I have started this recording and placed my Dictaphone on the table at her request, under certain threats of violence that I think it would be irrelevant to name.

FV: {Laughs softly}

{Chair legs scraping against the floor}

AJ: {Clears throat} Now, I have nothing more to say. I have done as you asked.

FV: Yes, you've been a sport. That's as expected, but kind of disappointing. I want to talk now. Let's make it like a conversation.

AJ: Why have you approached me for ... whatever this is?

FV: I knew you'd believe me.

AJ: About what?

FV: What I am, what I'm doing, and what I'm going to do. Most people would have run away, called the police, maybe even tried to subdue me, but you... you can tell I'm something else, can't you?

AJ: I... I detect that there is something supernatural about you, yes.

FV: Supernatural? I've heard worse.

AJ: What is your nature, then? Please explain. Are you human? Are you a specter?

FV: No. I'm not a person. I was living, and now I'm not living, but I'm not a ghost. I'm much more than a living being.

AJ: Having been a living person and now being something else, what perspective can you offer about human life?

FV: Good question. Human life is an ugly thing, and all human lives are the same in a lot of ways. I mean, everyone's a snowflake, every human has different intentions, but the flaws... there aren't too many categories that those go into. Forget about carbon footprints. Everyone marks other people on their way toward whatever. They hurt others, and it's for selfish reasons. People let themselves ignore so much about themselves, what they think and things they do, by saying, "But I'm a good person overall." You're not. They're not. It's pretty simple, but I don't think I quite saw it before. I see it all very clearly now.

AJ: Are there others like you?

FV: Oh no, not even close, but I think you mean others who were alive and are in a similar state of being, right? Well, yes to that. There are two I'm aware of, but... they're not worth talking about. They're nothing. They're dogs, but less respectable. I wouldn't care if they died like humans.

AJ: Can you comment about what you know regarding what happens to people after they die?

FV: There's something. I guess that's basically what you're wondering—whether or not it matters what you do in life. It does. Think back on all your sins, why don't you? Everyone has added to the stain. You can't see it, but it's there. You're marked.

AJ: But you aren't dead? You never died?

FV: Oh no. I'm beyond that too.

AJ: If you won't tell me who you are—

FV: I'll tell you what I can do. I can be anywhere, anytime, like that {Snaps fingers}. I can't be hurt in any lasting way. I have killed many times. I make it bad. The picture got a lot worse for you lately.

AJ: What do you mean?

FV: Whatever I want is going to happen now.

AJ: What do you want?

FV: What I've just started doing. Picking, hurting, kill AJ: Picking and killing what?

FV: People. It could be any one of you, anytime. I make my choices...

AJ: Why... {Several deep breaths} What makes you decide to hurt and kill someone?

FV: Any number of reasons. People should think about what they do, starting now. They should think about all the things they've done too, not to mention just how they are, how they act. Say, professor, can you think of anything you've done that you know you should be punished for?

AJ: I don't know what you mean.

{Pause, followed by a chair shifting on the floor, soft footsteps, and whispering}

FV: I bet you've wondered so many times if she knew. I know the answer to that question. I know the answer, and I have the solution.

AJ: How do... I have no idea...

FV: {Soft laughter} Don't piss me off. We're not quite done here. I'm controlling myself until we are. I don't like the feeling, and I'm not planning on getting used to it.

FV: {Louder than before;} I'm sitting on the table now. I mention this as the prof seems to want to paint a picture.

FV: {Back at regular volume, affecting a British accent like Prof. James's;} Now, I...

AJ: I think that this has gone far—

FV: Shut up. Yes, I think we are done here, now. That was everything. No, wait, let's summarize. Everyone should be afraid, is my basic point. I'm not saying it will help them, like their fear should give them some kind of comfort, but start with being afraid of me. Everyone should be afraid of me. Let's say I have a plan.

AJ: What is—

FV: Enough. That's everything I wanted to say. Now, I'm gonna need your signature on a paper, and you might as well get this ready for mailing yourself. You can shut this thing off now.

{Thudding noise on the Dictaphone's microphone}

FV: It's just gonna be you and me soon.

ABOUT ADAM E. MORRISON

Born, bred, and still living in the Greater Toronto Area, writer Adam Morrison studied radio broadcasting at Seneca College, learning among other things how to communicate on a personal level with many people at once. He also created, operated, and wrote for a music review site dedicated to indie releases by Canadian artists, maintained a blog on radio station 102.1 the Edge's website, and wrote articles, conducted interviews, and participated in an audio podcast for a project called ExploreMusic with Alan Cross. While he never gave up music-related writing, Adam was inspired to start writing his first fiction story in 2012. It began with an image that popped into his head one day at work and morphed into his first self-published story, *The Pushers* (2014).

While Adam initially thought *The Pushers* told the whole story, he eventually realized that he was very wrong. This was good news as it led to the writing of *Absolutes* (self-published, 2015), the second *Afterlives* story. Time will tell if *Absolutes* is the thrilling conclusion to the series or thrilling without being the conclusion to the series.

Adam has also written a number of other short stories, including *Dreaming of Rest*.

Some of Adam's inspirations include Stephen King's and Clive Barker's ways of focusing on the humanity in tales that involve the paranormal; Steven Erikson's method of painting a massive, kaleidoscopic picture via the experiences and observations of a variety of fleshed out, relatable individuals; William Shakespeare's ability to create a conclusion that's affecting and devastating no matter how foregone; Jennifer Egan's demonstrations of how it is both cataclysmic and routine events that shape characters' personalities and points of view; and many other authors following stories to their natural conclusions no matter how dark or strange the path might get.

Adam cares about the people he creates, and he hopes that people find his stories as interesting and cathartic to read as he finds them to write.

You can contact Adam at:

<https://www.facebook.com/AdamEMorrisonFiction>

Matches in the Grass
by Donald Illich

White tombstones, red faces.
A little flame. They're ready.
A screwed-up corpse pretends
he isn't dead at all.
Grass tickles its shoulders.
Ha, ha, ha. Isn't that nice.
Lie down for a massage.
Enter the earth relaxed,
a birthday cake
about to be blown out
by a child. When he's done,
throw back into the oven.
360 degrees for the afterlife.
Matches smirk, knowing
they'll be reused again.
Always another body,
or pieces to swear in.
The judge takes their accounts,
unsolved crimes, silvery
descents, unable to recall
any of the long roads down.
Juries swivel their heads,

left and right, listen to noise.
Who did this to me? Who
did it? Who did this to me?
Everyone in the courtroom,
lawyers, innocent, guilty,
all, shuffle out
to the Baby Elephant Waltz.

Banishment and Regret

by Candida Spillard

He panicked. He had killed his beloved mortal: thrown her off the bridge with its pretty lights, into the freezing river. Fit of anger. He had got all the way back to his favorite chair, the one in the museum where he just looked like one of the exhibits, by the time the full implications of what he had done sunk in. No more Verity. She was mortal. You couldn't mess about seven minutes under water, without air, and that was it. How long had it taken him to get here? Less than seven_

He re-materialized at the bridge. No sign of anything: no divers, no struggle, no lifebelts missing either, he noticed. He had no way of knowing that after helping to save Verity, the two lads had put the belt back in its cabinet so it could be used again if need be.

He could search under the water: unpleasant but possible. All the way down to the Lock: nothing. That's odd. No sharks in the river, as far as he knew. Unless Verity's jokes about the effects of Global Warming were more than jokes, of course. No piranhas either. No Verity. But she had been wearing a dark dress. Try infra-red then: there would still be a little warmth. Again, nothing.

So he couldn't even look at her one last time.

That was it.

Back to the museum, straight to the gift shop. He finished off every last bottle of whiskey. Lucky mortals: that would have put an end to it. Drink. Sleep. Oblivion. Then an idea loomed out of the Scotch mist: he headed off to the University. Chemistry Stores. And sank the contents of every bottle, from every shelf. And fell over in agony: that was the Strychnine. But even that didn't work. This was getting desperate.

Then he remembered his time at Aldermaston. Biological agents, they might do it. Here's the canister with the last British Anthrax. But that just made him throw up. What else do they do here?...There weren't enough radioactive materials kept here anymore. A job like this needed a trip to Sellafield.

He didn't even have to get past security. Someone had left tools lying about: with just an ordinary hammer and chisel he could open one of the barrels of...oh but this one was leaking and nearly empty. Try the next one: it's still full. Would it be more effective to drink it or to try and drown in it? He tried drinking one, then opening the next one and climbing in. Still no joy. Enough Curies to finish off the entire population of the North of England, and all it did was make him itch all over.

The Judge had handed down his punishment: Banishment and Regret. No more England. No more Verity's birthplace.

He headed for the Amazon forest, where he knew of the most poisonous animal in the world: the Golden Poison Frog. He found a colony. He ate the lot.

And got indigestion.

And survived.

Unable to return to any part of the world where humans lived, he had only one place left to go: Antarctica. Perhaps the cold would send him to sleep, even if the effect wasn't permanent.

He had never been to such a place before. He sat down to look at the eerie landscape. It gave him a strange feeling. He noticed that movement became difficult. He ached all over. He wanted to curl up, pull his limbs inside himself. He desperately wanted to convulse, for some reason, but could not. His muscles pulled, against nothing. Then there was the unnerving sensation of having a mind that wasn't able to do all the things it should, like string together a coherent set of thoughts. He wanted...energy, but the ungrateful air seemed to drink it all up. He felt as if his hands and feet were being eaten alive. His surroundings ceased to make sense.

And then, of all things, there was Verity. In her white summer dress. Standing there, holding a needle and thread in her left hand, and some patches in her right, as if a spot of darning at the South Pole were the most natural thing in the world. Her hands were streaked with lilac, and the nails were pale blue. Her voice was faint, from blue lips, but the words were clear. She stared at him from eyes shot with red. There was frost on the lashes.

"How dare you...bring me back here? Throw me in the river...freezing. This is how it feels, to be a mortal with hypothermia. Delightful, isn't it? And I should know. Cold-hearted Verity, coldest heart in England. Cooled down...so they could patch it up and save my life. Hypothermia...beautiful way to die: terrible thing to be made to remember. How dare you remind me of how it felt..."

He couldn't even cry: only mortals could do that.

The Judge quietly smiled.

Two weeks of this should be enough, he thought: teach him a lesson he wouldn't forget.

ABOUT CANDIDA SPILLARD

Candida Spillard lives in York, which provides such a wonderful backdrop for stories that she marvels at how long it has taken her to cotton on to this fact. She is a lapsed Physicist, having researched for twenty years or so into the effect the weather has on radio reception: she was also a broadcasting technician back in the days when video machines were too heavy to lift. She knows enough Politics and Economics to be able to say with authority that we are all doomed, and has a passion for all things Environmental, self-sufficient or just plain eccentric: see previous comment about being doomed.

Most of what she has written in her life so far has been of a scientific and technical nature, though she has been known to make the odd foray into political satire, including a radio play (never broadcast) in which an innocent chemistry student accidentally turned Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister at the time, into Satan.

She has so far submitted short stories to BBC Opening Lines, Writers and Artists, and The Fiction Desk, plus a piece of flash fiction to York Literature Festival.

She has a novel, 'Fear has a Face', a political satire with Gothic overtones, submitted for the Dundee International Book Prize and the Bath Novel Award. She is now working on a sequel. Not bad going, considering she only started writing in October last year, one rainy Thursday tea-time, because 'she felt like it'.

She would like it known that she is not a vampire: her pale looks and fondness for drinking tomato juice being merely an unfortunate coincidence.

You can contact Candida at:

<http://spaceandspaceability.blogspot.co.uk/>

Picture Memories
by Virginia Wright

Oh, picture memories,
You are the best of what remains in her muttered thoughts.
 There is little life circling, as she withers away,
You brought her mind searching for something familiar.
 Life matters are fading except for one,
Of a childhood memory in Bayside with lots of fun,
 And those bring her toward that tunnel of light...
Picture memories of a little girl on Grampy's knee.
It merely happened by gazing up and in the corner by me,
 Heaven beckoned her home with flashes of light,
Blinding beauty beckoning her above with wings ready for flight.
She took her last breath in a masterful way, picture memories aboard,
 Up, up, and away.

ABOUT VIRGINIA WRIGHT

Virginia Wright, born in 1958 as Virginia Brown in Belfast, Maine, was raised in the coastal Belfast area throughout her childhood and into her teen years. Wright is author and illustrator of three children's books—Crying Bear: Yes, Bears Cry Sometimes, Too; The Princess and the Castle, and The Prince and the Dragon. She is also the author of an educational nonfiction book: Buzzzzzzzz: What Honeybees Do. The Christmas Secret deemed a Christmas Classic, is her latest release.

Wright's work is published in several publications, and she considers herself first published in 1981 when a regional Maine publication— Washington County Magazine—paid for "Faith," one of her writings. Additionally, three writing pieces are published in Soundings, an anthology by the Poetry Fellowship of Maine. She has contributed various opinion articles on blogs published on Cincinnati.com (Cincinnati Enquirer), Boston.com (The Boston Globe), Barnesville-Enterprise.com (Barnesville Enterprise), and WSJ.com (The Wall Street Journal). As a Yahoo.com contributor, her titles include "One Nation Under God," "More Patient Advocates," "Cigarette Tax," "Caring of Elderly Parents," and "Made in America: One Citizen's Reaction."

Wright is a self-proclaimed foodie, with a Certificate in Family Nutrition, and she enjoys writing articles about food, health, and nutrition. She is an Ezine Articles Expert Author, with fifteen earned achievements. A few of her article titles include "How To Eat Fat and Get Healthy," "Choosing a Diet—Atkins Diet: Medical Community Less Skeptical," and "Learn How to Figure Number of Carbohydrates in Foods." Wright has received a number of awards and achievements for her writing, and recently won the Indie of the Day Award for her children's book, The Christmas Secret.

Lately, Wright has found her love of words in children's writing though she has been known to write in other genres and currently is working on a regional cookbook: Ayuh, Another Downeast Cookbook. She presently lives in the beautiful state of Maine, where she continues to write. When she is not taking photographs, sifting through recipes, cooking, or spending time with her husband, she is doing what she loves doing most...writing!

You can contact Virginia at:

<http://viriniawright.com>

CHAPTER FIVE

THE IMMORTALS



“Even a moment of existence creates an eternity, and love changes you...” Franco Esposito

Death the Invincible

By Pijush Kanti Deb

A frog leaps and sings in croaking tune
raising its proud head up
but makes a hungry snake to feel
the glittering of greed
in its sharp eyes
and thrilling, hisses in its pair of tongues,
“What a delicious dish!”

Within a fraction of a moment,
the croaking-box is swallowed up in a single bite
making everything silent as deep brine
with a merciless touch of chilled death.

Nevertheless, unabated is the human croaking too,
the babbling chatter-box is on
proclaiming its supremacy over other lives;
the exultant celebrates the victory,
building monuments commemorating it.
All are to be arrested
whether below, on or above the land,
and everything is to be controlled and regulated
for the fulfillment of rampant desires
and for their tumultuous celebration round the clock.

But to dignify the inevitable coincidence,
the almighty death - the invincible
smiles at the stupidity of the homo-sapiens,
looking at deadlines drawn by a mysterious hand
and spends only a leaping,
the millions of discoveries and inventions
forget their magical power of resistance
and finally the chatterboxes are struck silent forever
making all the haughty additions equal to zero.

ABOUT PIJUSH KANTI DEB

Pijush Kanti Deb is a new Indian poet with more than 234 published or accepted poems and haiku in more than 75 magazines and journals including Down in the dirt, Tajmahal Review, Pennine Ink, Hollow Publishing, Creativica Magazine, Muse India, Teeth Dream Magazine, Hermes Poetry Journal, Medusa's Kitchen, Grey Borders, Dead Snakes, Dagda Publishing, Blognostic and many more. His first collection of poetry Beneath the Shadow of a White Pigeon has recently been published by Hollow Publishing.

You can contact Pijush here:

<http://amzn.to/1g2h3ye>

Afterlife
by Donald Illich

In the streets, savage heaps of garbage.
There are vultures praising the carnage,

sun and heat, smells and dying.
In buildings the gravediggers are hiding,
the lovers hold together close. Acrobats
prepare themselves to leap over refuse.

In the sky, brown clouds in a gray sky.
There are angels coughing to death, blood
streaking cumulus, birds breaking their wings.

In the earth miners fear a cave-in,
their axes bleed dead gold. Canaries
fall over, acting as if they've perished.

In the afterlife, there's a line out the door.
No one really wants in. God the DJ plays

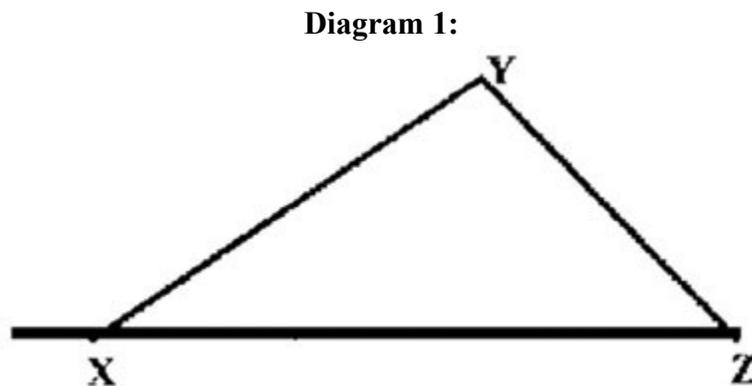
First Life, Death and Reincarnation

By Dada Vedaprajinananda

What happens when a person dies? Is there anything after life? Is there a previous life prior to our existence in this body? These are questions that are inevitably asked when we begin to search for an understanding of our place in the universe. Tantra yoga philosophy answers these questions systematically. However, in order to understand the response to these questions, it is necessary to understand the law of action and reaction.

In the physical realm there is a well-known law: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In the mental sphere, there is a similar law at work. For example, if Mr. A hits Mr. B, perhaps Mr. B will respond immediately, hitting Mr. A with a force equal to the first punch. In this case, the action was followed by an immediate reaction causing Mr. A to suffer a pain equal to that which he inflicted on Mr. B.

If we were to draw a diagram representing Mr. A's mind during this process of hitting and retaliation by Mr. B it would be as follows:

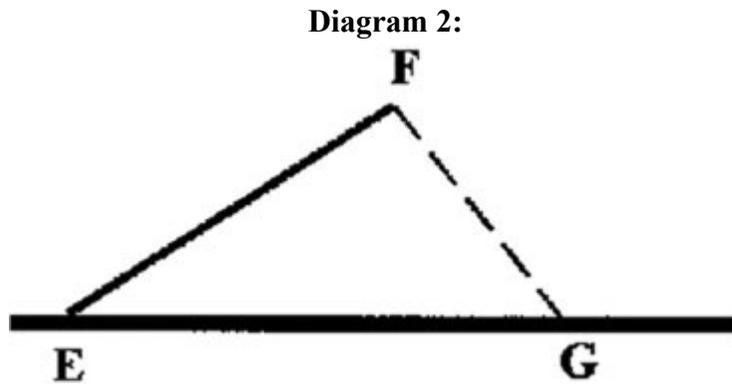


Point X is the original state of Mr. A's mind before the action of hitting Mr. B. Point Y represents the distortion of his mind's plastic portion (citta). Every time there is any kind of action, good or bad, there is some distortion of the citta. Point Z represents the moment when Mr. A's mind returns to the original state. In this case, it occurs as soon as Mr. B. makes his counter punch.

Whenever we make an action, our mind is distorted, and when we experience the reaction, our mind returns to the original state and we feel either pleasure or pain depending on the nature of the original action. Many times, the process of action and reaction works like this. There is an action and immediately following it the person experiences the reaction. If there has been no

change of time, place, and person the reaction will be equal in strength to the original action.

However, there is another possibility. Suppose Mr. A hits Mr. B but the reaction is delayed. Mr. B doesn't respond with a punch. Five years later, however, Mr. A walks down a lonely street in a strange city, and an unknown man appears and hits Mr. A many times. This is a reaction that was delayed and is experienced with an intensity exceeding that of the original action. This distortion of the mind which remains dormant for some time is known as a samskara in Ananda Marga philosophy. A samskara represents a reaction in potential form. In Diagram 2 it appears as follows:



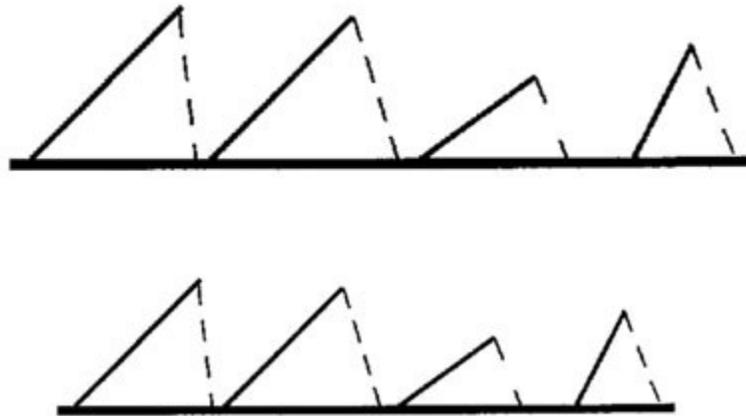
Line EF represents the original action, and line FG represents the potential reaction (samskara) which can be experienced at any time. Thus, apparent accidents are simply reactions to previous actions. They sometimes appear to be without cause, but that is only because we have forgotten the original action. The reaction will be stronger than the original action if there is a passage of time between the two events and if there is a change in place or person just as a bank deposit will acquire interest if left in the bank for several years. This law of action and reaction is known popularly as the law of karma. The reactions in potential form are known as samskaras or impressions on the mind.

Returning to the original question about life, death and possible rebirth we are now in a better position to understand what happens at the time of death. According to the law of action and reaction we must experience the result of every action, and each day we are certainly experiencing pleasure and pain as the different impressions of the mind caused by previous actions become ripe and express themselves. If one were to die at a moment when all previous reactive momenta (samskaras) are exhausted, and no new samskaras have been created, then the mind will be in a pure state and would merge in the cosmic consciousness. This state of permanent merger is known in Sanskrit as Moksha.

In reality, however, it is very difficult to exhaust all the samskaras and not create new samskaras in the process. Whenever we perform an action with the thought, "I am doing this action", an impression is made on the mind. So in most cases when a person dies, he or she still has many reactions in potential form which have yet to be experienced. His or her mind is

represented by the following diagram.

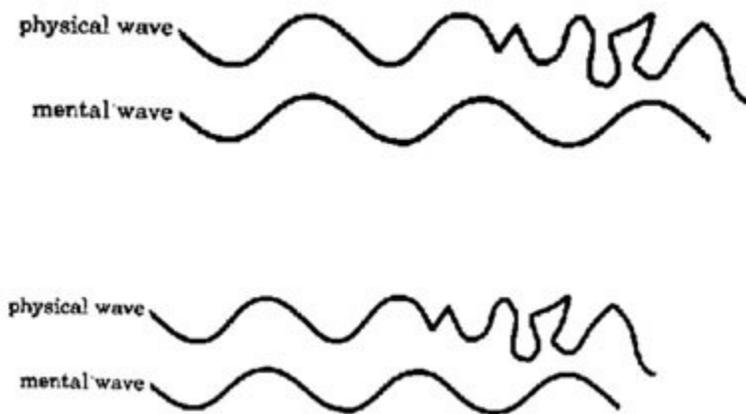
Diagram 3



What will happen in such a case? The reactions must be experienced, but there is no longer any physical body. Another body will be needed, and the mind must take another birth.

In order to understand the process of rebirth, it is necessary to understand what is life. According to Ananda Marga yoga philosophy, life is a parallelism between mind and body. There is a particular wavelength associated with the body, and there is a particular wavelength associated with the mind. Just as in modern physics, the yogis have said that this entire universe is in vibration and that the vibrations are of varying wavelengths. There is a particular wavelength associated with our body, and there is a particular wavelength associated with our mind. When these wavelengths are parallel, we have life. However, if something happens to the physical body such as an accident or sickness, the physical wavelength may change, and the parallelism may be lost. In this case, we have what is known as the physical cause of death.

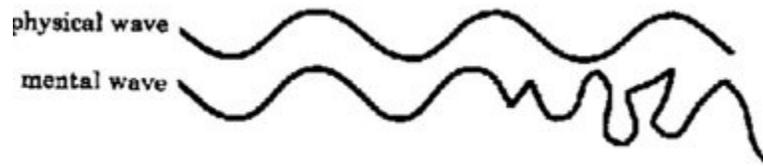
Diagram 4: Physical Cause of Death



Similarly, the body may be functioning properly but, if there is a severe shock to the mind,

the mental wave may change, and the parallelism is lost. This is known as the psychic cause of death. An example of this is a person dying due to having experienced something very fearful.

Diagram 5: Psychic Cause of Death



Another example occurs when animals live with humans. A dog living with a human family is constantly in contact with the more developed human minds. The dog who lives, eats and even travels with the human family begins to undergo an expansion of mind. His mind becomes gradually more and more human-like. If the expansion continues, there may eventually be death due to a loss of parallelism between his mental and physical wavelengths. In this case, the mental wavelength has changed due to the contact with human beings and will consequently require a more subtle body with which it can find parallelism. This will probably be a human body.

There is another possibility, which is known as the spiritual cause of death. In very evolved spiritual practitioners, the mind will become absorbed in cosmic consciousness, which has a vibration of infinite wavelength represented as a straight line. If the mind attains prolonged parallelism with the cosmic entity, the person will lose parallelism with the physical body. In this case the person "leaves" his or her body and attains the state of Moksha. It is not a death in the sense of annihilation, but a merger into a state of infinite beatitude.

There is one more element that we must examine before we can fully understand the process of life, death and rebirth. In every living being there is not only a physical body and not only a mind, but also an "Atman" or unit of witnessing consciousness. This witnessing consciousness is the ultimate witness of the mind and is the source of the "I feeling" in the statement "I know that I exist". In an earlier chapter, the three functional parts of the mind have been discussed: citta (I have done), Aham (I do) and Mahat (I exist). The "I" which verifies the existence of these three functional parts of the mind is known as the Atman. It is the imperishable unit of consciousness and is the key to unlocking the mystery of life, death and rebirth. When a person dies, the vital energy of the body (prana) enters a state of disequilibrium and leaves the body. With the loss of the vital energies, the physical body ceases to function. The formerly living person loses all sense of pleasure, pain and self-consciousness. Although the mind enters a "long sleep" at the time of death, it has not perished as the physical body has. The samskaras -- reactive momenta of the mind -- exist and are recorded in the causal mind. The Atman remains as the witness of this inactive mind.

According to the type of samskaras, the inactive mind has a particular wavelength and where there is a proper physical body anywhere in the universe, which has a wavelength parallel to that of this mind, the mind will be reborn in this new body. The living being will then have the possibility to experience the potential reactions acquired in previous life-times.

How long will the interim period last? It can be very short, or it can be thousands of years. The important thing is that there must be a suitable body somewhere in the cosmos which matches the vibration of the inactive disembodied mind and soul. In Tibetan Buddhism, as soon as a spiritual leader (Lama) dies, his disciples search for his reincarnation in the form of a newly born baby. A suitable successor is groomed from among those young children who seem to have the same samskaras as the former Lama. A test is given in which different articles, some of which belonged to the Lama, are placed before the children. If the child can identify these articles, it is an indication that he may be the incarnation.

Another commonly asked question regarding reincarnation is whether one can remember his or her past lives. Up to the age of four years, a person has an extra-cerebral memory which includes memory of the past lives. However, if this memory persisted after the age of four, then a split personality would develop, and the person would die. Thus, nature protects humans by not allowing this development of multiple personalities in a single body.

Although it may be fascinating to delve into our past lives, there is usually no particular psychological or spiritual value in doing so. Rather, it is generally advisable for spiritual aspirants to forget their past deeds (especially the bad ones) and to begin a life in a fresh manner, concentrating on the present and looking ahead to a more glorious future. Sometimes, however, in special cases a great spiritual master may "show" a disciple his or her past life in order to teach some lesson to him or her.

In the book Ananda Sutram, Shrii Shrii Anandamurti describes the state of death as "the long sleep of the causal mind" and emphasizes that there is no feeling of pleasure and pain in this condition due to the loss of the organs and nerves. He also explains that these "bodiless" minds are without motor organs and that they cannot harm human beings.

As to heaven and hell, heaven is when we experience in this life the results of good actions of the past and hell is when we experience the results of past bad actions. Superstitious concepts of eternal suffering have been promoted by various religions, but they are not supported by a rational, spiritual world view. Rather, the ultimate goal of this cycle of life and rebirth is the moment when the unit consciousness goes beyond life and rebirth and unifies with the unqualified Cosmic Consciousness.

This is an excerpt from The Wisdom of Yoga by Dada Vedaprajnananda. A new edition of this out of print book will be published in 2015.

ABOUT DADA VEDAPRAJINANANDA

Dada Vedaprajinananda is a meditation teacher, writer, and a singer-songwriter. Dada was born in New York City in 1946 and graduated from Colgate University in 1968 with high honors.

Shortly after graduating, Dada hitch-hiked to California attracted by the allure of the “counter-culture” and the then-flourishing hippie movement. In California Dada met an Indian monk who taught him meditation and Dada became an avid practitioner of yoga and meditation. After only six months of yoga practice, Dada left his job as library assistant at Stanford University and became a full-time volunteer for the Ananda Marga yoga society. In the 1970s, Dada worked for the society in Los Angeles, Wichita, Kansas and in Washington, DC.

Since 1977 he has served as a monk and has taught in more than 30 countries around the world. During the 1980s, he traveled to India frequently where he met and studied under his spiritual teacher, Shrii Shrii Anandamurti.

Dada is an experienced editor and writer. He founded New Renaissance magazine (www.ru.org) in 1990 as well as two newspapers in the 1970s. He is the author of *The Wisdom of Yoga*, an introduction to yoga philosophy and *From Brooklyn to Benares and Back*, a memoir. He has written numerous magazine and journal articles, and his essay “Neo-Humanism, Globalization and World Futures” was published in UNESCO’s *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*.

Dada’s yoga teachings and written work are complemented with his music. In the last 12 years, Dada has issued three CDs of original songs and one CD of music for children. His music blends the rhythms of Western folk and country music with the themes of Eastern mysticism, ecology, and social transformation.

He is currently based in the Midwest of the US and is working on a revised edition of *The Wisdom of Yoga*, spiritual audio podcasts and a new music CD.

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The Pierce of an Arrow **by Stephanie Buosi**

The bruise that decorates my neck is deep purple. It still aches if I touch it. I suppose I am still semi-corporeal on this side. The memories are still fresh in my mind, the most prominent being that terrifying moment of weightlessness before the air left my lungs, and my spine snapped. When I weigh my decisions against their results, I'm left wondering whether it was worth it. In a sense, this battle of doubt is almost as disturbing as my current predicament. Then I wonder where my bones are.

Will my mistress take pity on me, on us, and bury our bones? Will she find the strength to forgive my betrayal and whisper the prayers necessary for me to finally be allowed to cross? I'm not too certain if I will ever be whole enough to be called to the crowded port. I can roam the woods if I choose and explore the endless shadowy pathway. But encounters with the others only depress me further. They, who are so full of bitterness and despair for the unexpected turn of events that shocked everyone but the gods. The return of our master sealed our fate, and I'd rather not join in the conversations of false hope and sadness.

So I choose to sit here, on the cold, muddy banks of this dead river, and watch the countless trips pass to and fro. I know it is worthless to beg, but I still feel that desire, the pull to join the desperate multitude and appeal to Chiron. His tall, ancient form is all but hidden from my view. The shades who share my predicament attempt to overwhelm him, and chisel away his will. But Chiron shares the power of this ferocious river and beats them back with his oar; unmoving without the exchange of coin to his palm. Even from a distance I can hear the crack of bone. On this side, we can still hurt, as long as our material self is scattered in the world of the living. Without a proper burial, Chiron's ferry is denied to us. I must wait for my bones to fade away, yet every moment seems twice as long. Time does not share this realm.

I refuse to cry, though, even if my bruised throat is tight and my eyes sting from the effort. There is one small fraction of hope I cling to, one more piece of joy to look forward to. It is a rare blessing.

It is hard to wait. I feel myself slowly falling into doubt again as I relive memories and cold despair encroaches upon what little warmth I have gathered from my small hope. I wait for him to find his way through the trees.

Soon, someone does emerge; I hear the shade's whisper as it moves. One of my mistress' maids and my sister in misery. Younger than me in life, yet now we were of equal status and ageless. Her neck sports the chaffing of the rope, a consequence of her fight against fate. But it is pointless to try and escape when the fates choose to cut our strings.

"You really believe he will come to you when he has the whole of the Elysian in his path?"

You are such a fool.” Her eyes flash in perpetual anger; it is not directed toward me but is the result of her loss of hope. She too had sat with me once.

“Go. Away.” I bury my head against my knees, wrapping my arms around myself to build a cocoon.

“It is painful to see you hold onto this ‘hope.’” I feel a hand gently shift the hair covering my ear, and her voice breathes beside me, her ethereal lips ghosting my ear. “Come join us, your sisters... the men betrayed us, killed us! Who can you trust?”

Who indeed?

I lift my head and stare across the river in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the eternal yet elusive meadows. But all I can see is water. The putrid river contaminates the ether with sharp smells of decay, and I wonder if the opposite shore is less foul. The fear that he is already there and possibly enjoying the waters of Lethe is unbearable. I am selfish to pray that he isn't, but it is a terrible twist in the story that killed him, killed us all. I sometimes wish I could forget...

“Go away. Please.” I beg her to leave me, and meet her hard gaze with my own unshed tears. The passionate anger that burns in her gaze is enough to wake the furies, but she turns away and heeds my plea. She leaves in a hurry, and her wails join those that echo in the forest.

He was the son of King Nisos, and another of the unfortunate suitors of Odysseus' queen. We met almost by chance, as I was ordered to stay clear of the men. Unfortunately, the men were adept at finding us. He was different, though, and our serendipitous meeting lasted only a moment, just long enough for him to bend his knee and retrieve my water jug. That act alone startled me, and I can remember blushing heavily. So hard it was for me to imagine anyone of his status lowering himself for me, it made me lose my words.

He smiled and offered his apology, and gave me his hand. In that brief touch and in that one glance we shared, I knew that I needed to see him again.

It was more than carnal pleasure, though. I was told that everyone is bestowed with a gift from the gods at birth, something to possess them and eventually bring ecstasy if only we had the courage to seek that gift. I was sixteen. I was merely another slave, bought from a father who had one too many females to feed, and kindly employed as a maiden to the queen.

My life was protected yet mundane, and there was that naive fear that this gift would never be found. The stories of heroes were often shared around blazing fires while I lived, and this ecstasy seemed only to be grasped through adventure. He was my adventure.

In time, I grew used to his strange social behavior towards me, yet his kindness continually left me flushed. There was a strange need for him to remain a suitor; he confided one night as I lay nestled between his arms, listening to his heartbeat. He felt the same apprehension and excitement as when he was a young boy, listening to the stories of heroes for the very first time. I didn't understand and silenced him with a kiss.

Only after death do I realize that the story that unfolded must have been part of a grander design and I merely played a small role.

Now, as I watch the countless shades emerge from the thick, ashen forest, I feel even more

minuscule. My desires don't matter for I am lost, unable to be a part of the afterlife, destined to be forgotten or diminished in memory. Sixteen years is not a long time to leave an imprint on the story of man and I'm afraid I barely made a scratch.

Suddenly, I hear a new cry. The forest is filled with these noises - death shrieks; the last sound the living body creates which is carried to the afterlife. It is the final connection the body has to the shade. I know this voice. It is the recognition that prompts me to lift my head and collapse my makeshift cocoon. Slowly I stand and, when I train my gaze, I recognize the re-spirited clamoring of the shades surrounding Chiron's port, a sign of new arrivals. The departed and trapped would once again attempt to gain passage on his massive vessel. I watch, my fingers dance in the loose grip of my clasped hands. My mouth opens with a small yet sharp intake of breath as a figure begins to push and shove in the wrong direction.

It is hard for me to tell exactly what is going on. Perhaps my thoughts are merely playing me for a fool? Perhaps I am going insane... another torture. But a shade does emerge from the unfamiliar mass and begins to limp toward me. My breathing quickens.

His chest is pierced by Odysseus' arrow; the force of the shot has buried the shaft deep within his flesh. His blood-caked hands, moving alongside a strong body draped in a tunic soaked in red, tell me the story of his pain. But his smile is bright, and his beautiful eyes flash in joy. At last, Amphinomus, the son of King Nisos, the bearer of my heart. I reach for him, my own face finally decorated by the tears I refused to shed and laugh. Our fingers barely join. I feel no warmth, nothing at all. His expression falls, and I look at his palm, the fingers transparent against my touch.

My unfortunate suitor moves to touch my cheek, but cannot. He cries out in despair as I step back.

"Show me your other hand," I whisper, although I already know fate's final twist before he reveals it to me. Two gold coins; Chiron's price. To me, one who is in between, he is as tangible as an illusion.

ABOUT STEPHANIE BUOSI

Born in a little suburban city just west of Toronto, Canada, Stephanie has since spent the last five years away from home, her family, and her pet bearded dragon. In Ottawa, Canada, she earned a B.A. in History and English at Carleton University and solidified her love of writing. It was during this time that she realized that life would be meaningless if she couldn't write to find ways to play with reality.

Inspired by the works of Ursula le Guinn, Margaret Atwood, Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury, and Neil Gaiman, and described frequently as a young lady with her head constantly in the clouds, her writing has become a way to inspire and provoke a response. She has published the short stories "After it all" in *Until the End*; a dystopian themed anthology celebrating love at the end of the world, and "The Ginger Man" in *Dark Fairy Tales Revisited: Volume II*; a retelling of the gingerbread man fairytale.

Currently she resides in Edinburgh, Scotland and spends her time climbing small mountains, enjoying ghost walks, and sipping earl grey tea while researching for her current novel—an endeavor filled with magic, adventure, witch-hunts, and a touch of romance.

You can contact Stephanie at:

<http://stephaniebuosi.wordpress.com>

That we would wait
by Franco Esposito

Forty lashes were administered
each biting into flesh and bone
as water roaring into flood
and to frown his head
a crown of thorns was made and pressed
rendering as a bird it's fitting nest
and like corn his blood was spread
onto the earth it sowed and wed

And upon his shoulders a cross he paid
for his kingdom and throne and crest
so all could see his trail
that bent the rule of might that on earth prevails
on a path of cobble stones was hailed
with pokes by sticks and rocks and bricks
through crowds of calls who mocked and ripped
his robe and skin to shreds and there his blood to rest

By each step he weighed fair and frail as the air he breathed
lingering mortal wrangling onto his knees
yet this tender breeze would not be swayed
and not by rail of mob or Kings of Israel be yield
by His accord again be raised
and his unveiling star ascent unleashed
as growing wind moves grueling sand beneath
so all could feel the rolling wheel that none could shield against

And too the soldiers of Imperial Rome
who tooled him as a languished thread
yet not once they led
could bound his arms and mark his bed cruel with steel
with decree still not his spirit as thunder shed
or bring to break his soul as bread

till all should see their zeal and vanity like walls of straw
come crushed and tumbling and then be healed

Bereft in ground of shell and haze
his mortal body hammered down by order raised
each earnest blow to siphon and quell
the clan who came to bow their heads as cross was raised
and yet the rising chaff would cast as net and bow
catching each as a grain below
in suffering found him not afraid
having heaven in his turning gaze to go

In his mother's eyes the moments filed in strain
and cannot hold her cries and pains
for his destined fate
fallen to her knees she prayed
her son could be some other one
and spared his falling gate
and from his stile feet she mournfully calls to God
to not prolong his wait

His voice not tied upon this pile of wretched wood
called to sky and earth from where his portal stood
kindly spoke of all that was to come of good
and carried to his mother's ear
as those who would still listen clear
his word that their lives as his be spared
and not by storm or darkened wind the souls of men be swept
but fall as wheat to heaven's bail and there be safely kept

His last remains gathered gently and retained
were anointed on a slab of stone upon a shroud was laid
for three days vaulted in a cave
held to claim his body dead
his words forbidden spoken spread halloed or be read
his followers kept to the promise made
and came in hopes to touch
his limber hand his wick of neck his reign of resin blood

His steps not heard
his call to cross not whispered echoed or stirred

the stone was silently turned
and moved as destined by some unknown fair
his holy body had unshackled
and miraculously disappeared
that he had gone to heaven no one questioned
but what of the rest of us still here

And the supper became the Eucharist
that we would wait
and in his name break with bread and wine
to awake his spirit to flow as water joining into flood
and his body and blood to spread as corn
from birth to death
and all that would be lost
in his hands nailed to a cross be found

**[To my young brother Pietro Esposito, born and died within minutes in 1956, may we
always believe we'll find you again.]**

Ewo; the tale that must never be told

By Prince Adewale Oreshade

This is a tale that must never be told. It is about my ancestral father. Anyone who tells this tale is recorded to have died soon after. The strong ones have only been spared seven days. No man, I repeat, no man born by a woman, who told this tale has lived beyond seven days. My grandfather only told my father when he was ready to die. He told him the tale on his death bed. And he warned my father never to tell the tale. He told him that his father told him the tale on his death bed. And so did my great grandfather. And since it was my ancestral father that lived the story, he didn't have to tell the tale. But as he saw that people who told the tale were dying, he did what was needed. He called on the priests, and they consulted the gods; Ewidumare! The gods told him there was no remedy. That the tale was one that should never be told. It was called Ewo! My ancestral father, whose name was Ewitade, did what any warrior would do. He called on Odewale to get him a well-bred cow. One that had never had sex. One that had never been beaten or gotten into a fight. One that was pure and clean. Odewale was the chief hunter, and he reared different kinds of animals. He was so famous that when a king of the neighboring town was told he was going to die if he didn't sacrifice a snake with seven heads, Odewale was consulted. Myth has it that he got there with seven snakes that had seven heads each, so the King could choose what color he wanted. When Odewale came with the cow. Ewitade, with grief in his face, put his virgin sword that had never spilled blood, to the neck of the cow and chanted these words:

“If death rides with my tale
if the wind fears my tale
if my tale stops the heart
Oh, God of the worlds
take my life now before
the last breath leaves
a living being.”

He was said to have died the night after, although his body wasn't found. But the Calabash had been opened. His body had been elevated to the heavens, and so was his wife's. Only the two of them had died in such a manner, their bodies elevated and never found. It was said to be a sign of Ewidumare being pleased. And so after their death, Alariwo, the town crier was sent to all the towns. It was a big campaign, and it took Alariwo seven years to return. He was accompanied by his wives, children, and slaves. They spoke to everyone. They told them not to tell the tale - the Ewo tale. Mothers would cover the ears of their kids when the announcement was being made,

so that they wouldn't inquire about the tale. This left the kids wondering and since it wasn't a written story, they would have to get someone to tell them, but no man dared to tell the story. No man!

My father was the first to write the Ewo tale. After the death of Ewitade, Ewikorede became king and, on his death bed, when he was going to die of old age, he called upon his first son, Ewilana, and told him the Ewo. He told him never to tell the tale until he was ready to die. Ewilana kept his father's words and told his first son the tale when he was on his death bed. And this was how it had been for seven centuries before the white men set foot on our land. The white men taught my father how to read and write in English. My father, a witty man, was very tall and handsome. His name was Akashu-Oro. Famously known as Akashu. It was Akashu that first wrote the story. His father had told him the story before his death. He thought to write the story because, after all, his father never told him not to write the story. He titled the book –The Story That Must Never Be Told; Ewo! He wrote the story when he was very old. He didn't want to take chances. When we got home that December to visit Father, we found him dead in his study. His head was laying on both of his palms, and his palms lay on the book he had written. I wouldn't have had to write the story again if my sister, your late aunt, hadn't burnt the book. She was a Christian and decided that such a book was against the Laws of Jesus. I didn't understand what that meant, and I still do not. Did Jesus write laws? And how did those laws apply to the Ewo tale? She stole the book from me and burnt it. As the flames fumed, she got sick. She inhaled too much of the smoke, we thought. Three days later, she died. The white man's medical doctor had done his best. He said she died of asthma. But I knew it was beyond asthma. I knew it was Ewo that killed her. So I have kept this story to myself all these years. But now that I'm old and feeble, I think I should reproduce this story, for posterity's sake. You see, Ewitade was a great man. He founded this country called Ewi. In fact, it was named after him. He was said to be a poet extraordinaire. No one knows who his parents were. No one knows if he had siblings. No one knows his story beyond the fact that he was a blind man that sat somewhere in the wilderness. He sat there and fended for himself. He would recite poetry from dawn till dusk every day. Myth has it that his poetry was a kind of spell, and that was why he was banished from his own country. But no one knows this country, and no country, even when Ewi became famous, claimed to have banished him. Neither did any country claim him after his death. Travelers always passed by him. Sometimes, they spent the night at his residence. They would set their tents, and listen to his poetry. He was said to be fantastic. He was called a Spirit. He was blind. And he was in the wilderness alone. Some said he was possessed by a Jinn, a Jinn that was a poet. Year in, year out, as the travelers camped at his residence, he entertained them with poetry under the moon light. He rebuilt his residence to accommodate more and more travelers. Some of them stayed behind. They sold wares, food and alcohol, and they built themselves huts round Ewitade's residence to house their wares, children, and family.

When people from other towns traveled, they would tell people they were going to sell wares at Ewitade's residence, or they were going to have a stop at Ewitade's. As more and more people settled round Ewitade's residence, the hitherto wilderness came to be known as Ewitade, or Ewi as it is now known. The white men planned to name it after their queen, but the people of

Ewi revolted. It was a fierce revolution. The People of Ewi only fought with poetry. They never carried arms. It was a taboo to carry arms against an enemy. And I hear Jesus also believed in this. I hear he said 'He who fights by the sword, will die by it.' Well, the Ewitadians weren't Christians. They looked the white men in the eyes, and they started chanting Poetry. And the white men were said to have died like flies. It is said that their spilled blood filled the streets. The only thing they demanded after bringing the white men to their knees was that the white man change the name back to Ewitade. The ones that were determined to trade with Ewi had no choice but to squeeze their lips to the name. The others ran away. They even called Ewi the Land of Dead-Air. They told the world that to live in Ewi, they would have to come with a mask, else they would die. Ewitade was built on poetry. It was reported that when Ewi first got to the land, he recited a poem that drove away all dangerous animals, and the ones that remained never bit any one. They were calm animals. Children of Ewitade were known to have snakes as pets, and the adults had bulls as companions. Ewitade was a pure land. It had every mineral resource known to man. Hence, the reason the white men had to do business with it despite knowing that their voices could kill them. But before Ewitade became rich and famous when the man, Ewi, was still blind and a beggar. An incident happened. And that particular incident was the story that must never be told. My father argued in the book that it was that particular incident that was the Ewo. That the history of Ewitade wasn't an Ewo. But he never told the history to any man either. He didn't want to take chances after seeing what happened to his sister. One blessed day, Ewitade was being listened to. Kings, queens, princes, princesses and peasants came forward to give him goods in appreciation of his accommodation and poetry. Sometimes, his poetry was said to have healed people suffering from all kinds of diseases. He would even open the eyes of the blind with his poetry, but he was never able to open his own. This day one of the princesses, whose name was Ewirewa, came forward. She dropped her gifts, and as she turned to leave, the hem of her robe touched Ewitade's face. Ewitade screamed so hard; it was recorded that everyone fell to the ground. The noise made everyone's eyes pop out so large, and their bodies shrank. The noise was said to have lasted for seven days and seven nights. It is said that it was this noise that gave all the people of Ewitade the inherent poetic power. They became mini-Ewitade and, after the seventh night, Ewitade was the first to regain consciousness. Suddenly he was able to see, and he became very handsome. He recited a seven-line poem that woke every other person. As they regained consciousness, they were in awe of what had happened. They never told anyone, except a very few, and you already know what happened to them. As Ewirewa woke up, Ewitade knelt by her and chanted these verses:

“No one will love you like Ewi will.
I love like my breath depends on it.
Whether in life or in death.
I will love like no tomorrow.

I do not need the riches and the fame.
I just want you to be the breath in me.

I will let you be the rose with its thorns.
I will love and caress every bit of you.

I will give you eternity to decide.
For I just want to satisfy the God of love.
So that it showers us with peace of mind.
And pats our shoulders for job well done.

No one will love you like Ewi will.

I love like my breath depends on it.
Whether in life or in death.
I will love like no tomorrow.

I do not live amongst men.
Though my being stand before you.
I live in a beautiful world beyond Earth.
Where everything is soft and beautiful.

Only I know this world.
This world of euphoric utopia.
Where lilies and birds sing songs of love.
And trees dance to the wind of hope.

No one will love you like Ewi will.
I love like my breath depends on it.
Whether in life or in death.
I will love like no tomorrow.

This is not a curse or a smear of arrogance.
But who else will love you like I will?
You can wake tomorrow and call it off.
I will live to love you when you return.
I am called a hopeless romantic.
By the cynics and the short sighted.
I am called poor and wretched.
By the selfish and greedy folks.

Only if they could see.
That I was made to love.
I live to love and hate to hate.

To love your soul and your soul alone.

No one will love you like Ewi will.
I love like my breath depends on it.
Whether in life or in death.
I will love like no tomorrow.

If the cloud was deep purple.
And the sun turned pink.
I would be the sparkling yellow.
Rain with rainbows of hope.”

As he recited the poem, it was reported that the flowers became colorful. Rain started falling, and the wind danced vigorously. The trees bowed, and the animals gathered, as if they could understand the words. When Ewitade finished, Ewirewa had fallen in love with him. She was so in love; it ended in a kiss. A kiss in the rain. This was how Ewitade was installed king of Ewi, and Ewirewa, the queen. This is why my father made sure my sister and I could read and write. He made me promise to make sure my children and great grandchildren would learn how to read and write. My father also wrote that this story was the basis of the people of Ewi's refusal to talk when they are angry. Ewians are known for their wits, and more and more Ewians are beginning to write. But none of them can write of this story, because my father was the last bearer of the Ewo! I love y...

ABOUT PRINCE ADEWALE ORESHADE

Prince Adewale Oreshade is a graduate of the Oracle University, where he had his Oracle Certified Associate and Oracle Certified Professional Certificates. He bagged his Diploma in Law – DL, and Bachelor of Laws – LLB Degree at the University of Lagos, Nigeria. After which he proceeded to the Nigerian Law School Lagos Campus for his Barrister at Law – BL, Degree. He is a Certified Member of the Association of Professional Negotiators and Mediators – APNM, and also a Certified Member of the Nigerian Institute of Management (Chartered) and Alternative Dispute Resolution – NIMCAr.

He is an author, editor and publisher of several books of poetry, essays, and short stories. This includes but not limited to Sad Nectar, Poetry of Love, Elegy to the Students of Buni Yadi, Dora Lives On, Keep The Flag Flying, Bring Back Our Girls, Cries of the Ink, Rice Politics, What is Victory, Cliteracy in Islam, Understanding Freedom in the Light of Morals, Ethics and Customs, Abayomi Died, Ewo, Chords that struck a Chord, How to Publish a Book in Nigeria in 5 Easy Steps, How to Write a Poem, The Hue in my Heart, Palestine; Forgive Our Silence, How the 'State of Israel' Ethnically Cleansed Palestine, Defining Self as a Universe, and he is presently working on 'The Waleje Epic'. The Waleje Epic promises to be the longest poem in the world.

Also, he is one of Nigeria's top 50 poets. He won the Editor's Choice Award and the Best Poem and Poet Award of the International Society of Poets in 2008. And he has over the years overseen the publication of books, magazines, and pamphlets.

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Loss as Prophet
by Michael M. Burke

Death is something only the living
Have to deal with
Those who've passed are busy being reborn

As the morning dew on fertile flowers
That grace our souls with the renaissance of smell

Some are just too beautiful to be confined to a body
They are meant to be shared

They are among the mist that makes the clouds
For to rain upon us purely peace

They are in the very air that we breathe
And each breath... each and every breath...
Divine...

They moved us through their existence
Now their existence moves through us

Because they shared with us a life of love
We now live our lives with love to share.

ABOUT MICHAEL M. BURKE

Michael Murphy Burke was born September 30th of 1959 in New Orleans, Louisiana. He has written all his life, mostly poetry, from when he was in grammar school into the present. He has been published in several anthologies, as well as quite frequently in Oracle magazine. His work has also been featured on several websites. Michael is the Director of The Sacred Sound Ministry at Unity North in Marietta, Ga..... Where he has performed for many occasions, including appearances by Deepak Chopra, Wayne Dyer, Flying Mystics, R. Carlos Nakai and Peter Kater... to name a few...He has also performed his own spoken word pieces at their fabulous sanctuary, accompanied by piano, cello, Tibetan bowls and Native American flutes. Michael hosts an open mic poetry night at Phoenix and Dragon Bookstore in Atlanta, Georgia on the second Friday of each month from 7 till 9. He also does live sacred sound meditations at various locales around Atlanta, including Sacred Mother, Open Mind Center and Synchronicity. These often feature Michael's poetry spoken during a section of the meditations. Michael is an accomplished custom woodworker and runs his own business called Creative Carpentry. His passion for creative woodworking has expressed itself for the last 25 years in some remarkable artistic creations in many private homes and several commercial endeavors... The custom woodworking he does encompasses poetic inspiration and expression by rebirthing nature into new life as beautiful interior creations. He is looking forward to having his first book released soon, entitled, "Dancing With The Divine " Michael is a poet, always and forever, it is sacred to his life and is what feeds the glory in his every breath.

You can contact Michael at:

<http://michaelmburke.com/>

CHAPTER SIX

GHOSTS



“Send me no flowers for surely I will be gone...” Franco Esposito

Ghost Tour in the Afterlife

By Marianne Szlyk

The car I knew as the White Ghost
now haunts the squares of Savannah,
carefully turning
first one side, then the next,
following the trolleys and tourists,

allowing its novice driver,
a young woman dead from exposure,
to navigate the compact city
of squares and one-way streets.

In this afterlife, no one curses,
no one honks, and
no one drives
up into the mountains
through the snowy forest
on dirt traces of roads.
In this climate,
no one dies from exposure.

Shaded in winter and summer
by evergreen leaves,
embellished with Spanish moss,
ghosts of flowers and frost,
not to be smelled, not to be touched,
this one-way street
is the world
this car was made for.

Let the other cars and trucks run free
like immense, powerful horses
on the routes out of town,
the highways to the sea,

and the dirt roads,
the roads not taken
into the mountains
miles and miles away
from my White Ghost
forever negotiating each square,

passing the haunted mansions,

sometimes reaching the river,
always traveling within
the world it was made for.

Ghost
by Sasha Kasoff

I know you're there
right there on the wall
spying and watching
for what else is there for a lonely ghost to do?
'Why not go scare someone?'
growled a dog that could see her
floating sulkingly on the wall
'I don't like to,' was her shy reply
for she had been young when she had died
so was a young ghost with a soft heart
'No' she added 'I want to teach someone.'
the dog laughed
'Only animals and babies can see you and they don't care.'
she was very upset and floated away
wishing she could still cry
'and no one cares!' she thought
Oh well, I will simply watch and stare and learn
until someone does care
and then I will have many things to teach and share with them

At the Termini
by Emily Olson

The well-dressed
Whisper-thin
Gray-tipped
Straniero
Travels with
Decaying flowers
Knows where to go
Knows what to do

I watch as
He passes by
Doesn't notice
I am lost.

I know
I am
lost.

ABOUT EMILY OLSON

Originally from Murrieta, CA, Emily Olson is currently a second-year student at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, CA. Emily is an honors humanities scholar and honors Pacific legal scholar, pursuing an accelerated Bachelor's degree in English with minors in Pre-law and Film Studies.

When not in class, she stays busy with a variety of extra-curricular activities: she's a staff writer for The Pacifican university news publication, the editor-in-chief of the undergraduate literary magazine Calliope, a member of the Sigma Tau Delta English Honors Society, a videography Intern for the university's communications department, secretary for the pre-law fraternity, Phi Alpha Delta and a content-writing intern for the university's admissions office. And on her lazy days, she's someone who actually gets sleep.

Emily came to college with the hopes of attending law school but recently decided that a writing-centered career – something more about creativity than 'cases of controversy' – might be a better fit. She has a new goal of obtaining a Master's degree in Creative Non-fiction Writing but first wants to follow graduation with a gap year for travel and time to write.

For now, she enjoys the myriad of opportunities she's found studying liberal arts in a small university setting. She received a scholarship to complete an Italian language immersion program over the summer and since her return, has been begging the university to fund her on other exciting excursions. Emily prefers prose to poetry but has been known to make exceptions; the pieces she wrote to capture 'la vita bella' in Italy are some of these rarities. She's only recently acquired the confidence to submit her pieces, so keep a lookout for more in future publications.

In the occasional instances she has spare time, Emily enjoys going for long runs, experimenting with cooking, watching classic Noir films, traveling near and far, and, of course – reading and writing, often with a big mug of coffee and never without an open mind.

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Signs From Across the Veil

By: Dennis Higgins

I am American author, Dennis Higgins. I would like to be able to say that my distant relative, Davy Crockett came to me from the afterlife and inspired me to write this piece. The truth is, he didn't, and I only discovered I was related to the King of the Wild Frontier in 2013.

However, I am writing this to explore the simple question: Can the dead communicate with the living? Can messages be sent across the veil?

My interest started when I had several significant experiences when people I knew or loved passed away. As a child, these occurrences scared the hell out of me. The very first visitation (wake) I ever attended was that of a great-great aunt through marriage. Everyone called her Bushia. But it was my own grandmother, Ruth, who inspired nightmares, suddenly yelling, "I saw my mama in there... I saw my mama in there," then fainting. IT TOTALLY FREAKED ME OUT! The story goes, Ruth's own mother, my great-great-grandmother, died as a young woman, and the young Ruth sneaked in while they were preparing the body. She saw her naked mother laid out on a slab, long black hair hanging off the end. From today's date, this would be a hundred years ago in the American deep south. After that, every time she looked upon a person in the coffin, she saw her mother lying there.

This experience had nothing to do with the dead communicating; it was just my first experience with death.

My second experience, the one that started it all, was with my girlfriend, Bonnie's father. He died suddenly of a heart attack. Right after his death, I felt like he was somehow present, watching us. Her dad liked me but didn't like the fact that I had deflowered his youngest daughter. We were both quite young. I think Bonnie felt it too, because for the rest of our seven years as steady boyfriend and girlfriend, she never again let me partake in her flowers. Right after her dad died, both she and her mother heard his distinctive cough and footsteps as he walked through the house at night.

I soon realized that I would experience that close feeling of the recently departed, every time. But it only lasted a day or two after their passing.

Sadly, the next death was one that profoundly affected my entire family. My dear sister, Trish took her own life at the tender age of thirty. This was 1981, and I was barely over the murder of John Lennon when it happened. This time I experienced deep and strong signs. I heard her calling my name; I swore I saw her on the street, smiling at me as I passed by in my car. Then one night I had the most powerful dream of my entire life. I won't go into all the details, but here is the nutshell version: I was working outside my house when a small, curly headed child brought my sister to me. I was so happy to see her and started asking her a plethora of

questions such as, what was it like being dead and where did she go. She finally asked me if I would like to see for myself... Heck yeah! It was then that the curly headed boy took us both to the place she had gone to. The three of us flew through the air, as if high above a city. Where we ended up was a sort of holding place, where crowds of people were waiting. It was as if they were waiting for something wonderful to happen, like people waiting in the lobby of a theater before a play or concert. I turned to Trish and asked her where the big guy was. I was referring to God. She told me, "Oh no, not here, not now." I was there quite a while, but the best part came when I got to witness my sister leave as if ascending, and I knew she had gone to heaven.

The dream brought comfort to myself and my poor grieving parents. We were unsure where the soul of a suicide could end up. In Jewish, Muslim and Catholic theology, a temporary place, or state of purification like in my dream, is believed to exist. It is called Gehennom in Jewish traditions, Al-Barzakh in Islam, and Purgatory for Catholics and some other Christians. The place, the flying, my sister, and the little boy were all so real to me, I woke up believing I had actually been there.

When my step-mother, Dora, died of breast cancer, my dad never left her side. He would sit in a chair next to her hospital bed. He even slept there. One night he was dozing in the chair when he felt a strong poke to his shoulder. He awoke, thinking his dear wife needed something, but he noticed that she was too far away to have been able to reach him. She lay there quietly with shallow breaths. He went over to her and took her in his arms, where she died peacefully, right then and there. Did she awaken him so she could die in his arms? Did someone or some other entity poke him? Dad died a few years later but always treasured this memory.

At the time of this writing, not even a year has passed since my dear mother, Betty, passed away. There was more phenomena experienced by me and my dear wife with mom's passing, than ever before. In the middle of the night, when we got the dreaded call of her passing, our canary started singing at the top of his little lungs. He never sang after sundown, not even once, and he never did again. But that night he broke into full canary song in the dark. My mom loved to hear his song. He was singing for her.

As always, in the days that followed, I felt her presence strongly. My mom was always there for me. She was part of my life. She lived independently just three blocks away in her own condo. My wife and I went to Mass with her on Sunday, always followed by breakfast at her favorite restaurant. The morning I went to her condo to gather photos for the funeral service, the sun was shining, and her house was lit-up and bright. It was a comfort to me as my emotions seemed to mimic the day. I felt so strongly that she was right there with me. I even chatted openly with her. At one point, I was searching desperately for a particular picture of her with my son. I just couldn't find it. So she led me to it. It was as if she told me where it was. I then heard her in my head scolding me into cleaning up the mess I made in her den. I even found myself talking back to her like I would have, "Yeah, yeah, mom, I know, I will."

But the strangest thing to happen after my mom's death involved coins. It took a couple of weeks to clean out her condo. Each and every time I went over there, either my wife or I would find a coin. This in itself is not that big a deal, but it started to get weird. I would leave the house or her garage clean, and I knew it was clean when I left it the day before. No one else had access.

I would go back the next day and find a coin where there wasn't one before. If I tried to look around and find a coin, I couldn't. It was always when I wasn't looking that there would be a penny or nickel (five cent piece) or some other coinage somewhere in the house. They weren't hidden in corners either. I would find them out in the open, or on counter tops. It became humorous. I would go over to have one last walk-through before handing the house over to the real estate agent or to take out the garbage and when I would come home to my wife, I would open my hand and show her a penny. We would laugh because it was clearly no longer a coincidence.

What I have recorded here is just a handful of the things I have experienced with loved ones who have passed over. I started asking around and discovered I wasn't the only one who received signs or special dreams from folk's dearly departed. I also discovered common themes, such as butterflies, feathers, late night phone calls, and yes, pennies.

I decided to compile all of these phenomena into one contemporary, fictional, yet beautiful love story. It is my love story about death. I call it: Pennies From Across the Veil. At the time of this writing, it is submitted to my publisher for approval.

Note: A wheat-Back penny is an American cent, minted between 1909 and 1958. They were struck from 98% pure copper.

ABOUT DENNIS HIGGINS

Relative of Davy Crockett...World traveler.

As a native of Chicago, Illinois, he has always possessed a romance with things of the past that are gone but not forgotten. Dennis now live in the suburbs with his lovely wife, their dog and a couple of birds. Among his influences are Richard Matheson, Jack Finney, Dean Koontz, Joan Wester Anderson, Peter S. Beagle and Audrey Neffenegger. The Time Pilgrims series is exciting, treasured and loved by YA, NA as well as adults. He is the author of Parallel Roads (Lost on Route 66) Katya and Cyrus Time Pilgrims Almost Yesterday Tomorrow's Borrowed Trouble Steampunk Alice - (A Novella) Pennies From Across the Veil - (Coming soon)

You can contact Dennis at:

<http://www.timepilgrims.com/blog>

I am Haunted
by Franco Esposito

In the darkness of a Tuscan tower
on a staircase of a wall edged and rounded
I am standing as a soul ungrounded
alone and lost of its power
transfixed as a stone of a step listlessly cascading twists
towards a lower landing from which I have come of when
or of which I am now to it bound

my senses swept by the scent of a flower
perhaps lately nipped
not well enough set
I am gripped to recall red lips in trances
then as quickly suspecting the odor to be musk
un gowned as rot of a dungeon hall
that reeks of dread and rust

where upon I am caught by the sound of a clock
rolling faint and obscure as the hours
that wain the years of rest of this tower
searching a crest walled to a trail
fingering along slippery bricks mortared by braille
I find myself stalked by the weight of a chain to my ankles
that clings as dangles as a tail underneath the mist ahead

to which I step onto an unveiling precipice
and take another chilling breath
and there uncalled set upon by some ghostly daunting shadow
whispering words I pray nevermore be said
than all at once its gleaming marrow
insidiously showed a glowing gallows
lurking aimfully towards my head

and had the apparition in that corridor of morning's narrow

sliced my very flesh with the lecherous words it blurred
or hanged my limbs to run white as curd
could the strain I heard not have wound me less
than seared and stirred its point to my bones by its cold riddled terse
and severed worse the roots of my very soul
with its haunting sinking verse

and no more that I took a second breath
while stood and fed the fowl air to my chest
did I lean more by my hands and knees
on the precipice of a thread
just then to my abrupt amazement
in the hall hollowing opening up down beneath me
as if my eyes were being led

streamed a light that beamed a shape
more shallow and sorrowed than before depraved
that shadow of life that went first through me
and for an instant appeared to retake
had in fact as I had witnessed my beheaded mistake
entered through a wall
as into a vault it sped with late

and there by my feet underneath I would see another
that walks across the floors far below they spread
as she slowly combs in that slip of shining
and cuts flower arrangements piling by her bed
and try that I might clearly see her as if I could fate
I am caught never more imprisoned in this place I look with wake
each step that pulls me falls grieving into shadows of empty shape

and lost
I dream of another
that has left me
as has the hand of grace
and again I sit upon a precipice
of a thread
I cannot chase

on the walls that circle round me
in each crevice my hands can trace

though my eyes above cannot assist me
hindered by the darkness of this place
I hope to move one step more towards her
and hold out for what might come to brace
the memory of one long ago embraced

then looking once more to that light
that lies as she beneath me
all at once I see her face
and in shock I drop a solitary space
as one foot inbounds me into the murky cloud that waits
and my arms though they be with me
want to lunge as if to race

but my heart
first in a pit then patter
shakes away the longing quiver she awakes
and with one hand that follows the other
from that wall I make my break
and down the imprisoned stairs to her
as before I quickly take

and as I jaunt to wheel in closer
the candle light does start to sleep
and all around her a ghostly shadow
falls as air that coldly creeps
and as if the walls had regained their darkness
and the steps had come to rest
I am once more in grief without her lost of life I knew the best

but in that hopeless moment's falling I am consoled as to her encased
and freed from my chains I am amidst the light that bathes her
translucent form that veils her crimson bed
and just then as I bend to hold her as once before a lover did
the ghost returns aggressed more un-wavered from that vaulted wall it sped
did lead with words unbroken that would not leave me
dare I pray nevermore be said

nor could make myself believe
in that haunting sinking verse
all that had gone before me

was but a preamble
to my ghastly haunting curse
than ran the words cold in my veins as dread
saliently whispered in my head

you come gleaming
you come streaming
from an unworldly home you shed
you come calling
hollowing following
in a tower out of nowhere
you come ghostly in her bed

in the dawning's breaking hour
am I waking am I sleeping
am I dreaming am I creeping
or am I just a ghost
keeping weeping a memory of love
like the breaking light of dawn
wakes me and is gone

The Hanging of Cousin Charlotte by Talia Haven

The cramped library is loud with chatter. Men, and to my profound relief, women mingle with fellow club members. Some of the guild's older women have drinks in their hands. A smaller group of very daring younger ladies puff on cigarettes between sips of their own drinks. They draw in deep, and the red tips glow then dim. Pursing their lips, they exhale the white smoke that curls about their faces before it drifts away into the air. The ladies regard me calmly where I sit alone perched on the edge of an older oak chair. One of them looks towards me then speaks up, just loud enough for me to overhear.

"I wonder if her Grandmother lent her that dress," she says.

Indiscreet snickers come from her companions. My cheeks flush; I fight to contain my composure remembering what my mother had always told me. "Remember Justine," she'd say to remind me that I had been lacking in self-control. "Women from the South should always keep an air of equanimity about themselves." It's a hard bit of advice to follow, for I would love to back out of my current situation, but I do the best I can, choosing to ignore the inquisitive expressions by pretending to smooth out an imaginary crease on my skirt.

The room continues to fill. Discreetly, I carry on with my study of faces, recognizing no one while noting to myself that at the age of 18, I am the youngest woman in the room. I idly wonder if these older, brazen women would dare act this way outside the safety of this establishment's walls.

A male voice suddenly speaking from behind causes me to flinch. Mister Johannes. In my nervousness, I had forgotten that he was there.

"Are you ready, Miss Clare?"

I nod once. Never looking back, I promptly busy myself with smoothing my skirt's invented wrinkle.

"Thank you, sir, for allowing me to speak tonight," I resist the urge to tell him. Instead, I clasp my sweaty hands together. "I know how short of a notice it was."

Mister Johannes leans down to speak softly into my ear, careful to keep his hands to himself as all gentlemen of good breeding should.

"I'm glad that you were able to speak so late this evening," he says. Sensing my anxiety, he continues. "There is no reason to be nervous. Everyone here," gesturing to the occupants in the crowded room, "...has some type of story to tell. They won't judge you crazy or a liar because they too have witnessed strange events and experienced unusual circumstances. Be sure to tell your tale exactly as you remember it. Leave out no detail."

He straightens upright as well as he can; steps forward to the podium, aged hands pulling his

jacket straight, before addressing the crowd. "Everyone, take your seats." The room quiets down. People settle in various areas of the room. Satisfied, Mister Johannes continues. "Tonight we will decide on the membership petition of Miss Justine Clare."

Mister Johannes steps away to take his place in the front row. Amongst polite applause, I rise from my seat and step forward. I take my place at the podium, ready to tell my tale for the first time.

"I was only eight when my cousin Charlotte came to stay with our family. Her parents were my Uncle Matthew and Aunt Jane, Daddy's sister. Uncle had business to attend to in England, so he and Aunt Jane brought Charlotte from Boston to stay with us. I did not know my cousin very well; her being so much older than me and from Boston and all. It was for that reason Father had made an older storage room into a suitable bedroom for Charlotte.

"For the first few weeks Charlotte appeared to be in good spirits and health. She spent a considerable amount of time with my mother helping with chores. During the heat of the day, they would head for the rockers on the porch to take up their sewing.

"Charlotte had been with us for several months when one morning she appeared for breakfast exhausted and in a most agitated state. In a quiet voice she wished everyone a good morning, then gave me a tight smile as she settled into the chair across from me. Dark circles, almost as dark as the color of her eyes, betrayed her lack of sleep. Mother, always the gracious hostess, normally would have inquired if there was something that she could do to make her guest more comfortable. She looked concerned but kept the question to herself. Biting her lower lip, she set a bowl of oatmeal down in front of Charlotte. Turning back to the stove, Mother shot Father a nervous glance. Father ignored them both. It was that lack of courtesy that drew my attention to Charlotte's plight.

"I had lived in the same house all of my life so any secrets my parents and Charlotte were keeping would not be hush-hush for long. I left them alone in the kitchen - the one place that I knew they would not talk privately - and headed for the place where I knew I could get answers. Located just above the library, the iron grated air vent in my parents' room was the finest eavesdropping place in the house. It was located in the floor along the inside wall, so I only had to scoot myself under their bed if I ever got close to getting caught. It was there I waited, stretched out on the hard wooden floor, still as I could be so I would not be heard downstairs. I didn't have to wait long.

"Father came in first. His chair springs let out a metallic squeak betraying the fact that he had settled down at his desk. The familiar sound of a desk drawer opening was promptly followed by the rustling of papers. The faint click of a door latch followed by quiet footsteps betrayed the fact that Mother had also entered the room.

"William," Mother's voice drifted upwards. She paused like she knew she had to choose her words wisely. "Perhaps we should let her stay with Justine."

"Slam! Went the desk drawer. I jumped slightly at the sudden sound and held my breath ready to roll under the bed if necessary. I knew without looking that Father was annoyed. Another drawer slid open. He didn't say anything; papers shuffled as he continued his search.

ABOUT TALIA HAVEN

Born in Michigan, raised in Michigan, and still lives in Michigan, Mama Cried is Talia Haven's first speculative ghost story.

She is also the author of A'dab's Gift and Ten Busy Brownies published by Keith Publications, Talia wishes she had an army of brownies cleaning her house for her. She would gladly feed them cream and honey cake if they would just move in.

You can contact Talia at:

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Another Life
by Donald Illich

Your skin has become translucent.
When they say they can see right through you,
they are literally and figuratively correct.
This is something you never asked for.
Fingers, breath, heartbeat --
all these you wanted to keep.
You wonder if your family has seen you
on a night where you've crawled upstairs
looking for a way out of this "life."
Did they gasp, did they flee back
into bedrooms, into a safer darkness,
one that doesn't record the dead?
All you got was this lousy t-shirt,
not the pathway to an afterlife,
not a judgment you can believe in.
Being a ghost is not all bad, though.
Learning how to float was thrilling,
as well as figuring out how to move objects
without touching them with your hands.
You are not required to haunt a house
for all eternity – sometimes the hold
is weak, you leave for a vacation
to a place where shadows are expected,
and the beach is bitter, icy and cold.
Fiery lights in the sky celebrate your arrival.
They cover the sky with your name.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE GHOST FAMILY



“All order turns into chaos, becomes unstuck. And we the living are the refuse remaining, unwilling...” Franco Esposito

At the Unveiling Ceremony
by Robin Reiss

we had not expected to cry, three cousins poised
in heels, elbows hooked past a year without the patriarch
and his disappointed voice. Sipping liquor, we stack our stones
on his, and the scotch swims like fish under my chest.
The ground still mounds up, bread in a tin, and marks
the bones below, slunk in the shape of an old man, and the day
we covered them in dirt. I wonder if it will sink to level
the neighboring graves; I suspect he insists on puffing out
his tissue paper chest; I think we shoveled to cover
too much, trying to pat him down like a root to forget, but,
nudging up from Sheol, he sticks out his foot and we trip.

ABOUT ROBIN REISS

Robin Reiss was born and raised in Massachusetts by a folksinger and a professional puppeteer who named both their children after birds. Even after her mother's early passing she grew up immersed in the arts and was the only kid in school not to groan when English teachers announced a poetry unit. She attended Westfield State University and studied elementary education until she realized she hated glue sticks, at which point she promptly changed her major to English literature, inexplicably got an A in her Creative Writing class after subversively handing in poems for every prose assignment, and graduated at the top of her class with a 4.0 GPA and absolutely no idea what to do with the rest of her life. After the subsequent, obligatory minor mental breakdown and a brief stint in Colombia teaching English as a Foreign Language she returned to Massachusetts and got an office job at Clark University where she writes poetry when work is slow and never has to plan lessons. She is relatively unpublished, with a few poems appearing in her alma mater's literary magazine and a critical essay entitled "Freudian Dream Theory's Influence on the Typography of E. E. Cummings" featured in The Sigma Tau Delta Review. She is only just beginning to cast her seeds to the wider world of poetry publications but also appears in the February 2015 issue of Futures Trading. In her free time she may be found reading, crafting, learning Spanish, eating copious amounts of pizza, tweeting about bagels, balancing things on her head, playing board games, and generally fretting over the future.

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Timber
by Sasha Kasoff

I saw a tree fall today
Slowly at first
I didn't know
My eyes were just
Drawn
To the wrongness
Of leaning too far
Then it was too late
I heard the sound
Of its mighty arms
Of its springy little twigs
In one heartbreaking crash
The leaves fell
Before they should have

Cecilia Brunette
By Sasha Kasoff

Short, funny, vibrant
You were a woman worth knowing
Watching your granddaughter smile

Sudden as an Irish rainstorm
Fleeting as the cherry blossoms
Lightning struck
And you left us

You will live on
In our hearts
Through our stories
Photographs, windows into the past
We will remember
We will miss you

We will feel your spirit
Give thanks for you
The angel on top of our tree
A fresh new year
First father's day
Mother's day without you

Tears hard as diamonds
Your memory will shine
You will live on
In all our hearts

Baby's Smile (Grandma)

By Malobi Sinha

Like
The sweetest smell
Of the fresh
Blooming jasmine
In the breeze
You come to me.

Like
The voices
Of the children
Playing like angels
In the sky
I hear you call.

Like
The saddest songs
We used
To sing together,
Grandma.
I love you forever.

Your soul lives on
In the gentle breezes;
The laughter
And joy
Of the children;
And
In
My baby's smile.

ABOUT MALOBI SINHA

Malobi Sinha spent the early years of her childhood in the freedom and vastness of Kenya, in East Africa; then her family migrated to Australia when she was in Primary School. She is the best-selling author of Non-Fiction and Fiction works, as well as appraised collections of poetry, and has had literary work (articles and poetry) published in various magazines and e-zines in Australia, UK, the USA and Israel. Her latest book, *The Castle and Other Stories*, a collection of YA Sci-Fi/Fantasy stories, was published by Cresco Books in October 2014. Malobi also is Copy Editor for the e-Publisher Stasia Press and is a Business Consultant. She completed a Bachelors of Engineering from Monash University and a Graduate Certificate in Accounting from Deakin University. Malobi enjoys playing the violin and painting.

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Edward Buchannan
by Sasha Kasoff

The good old days
When winter meant snow
Instead of sadness
Back where we grew up
Hidden in the mountains
That will always be my home.
Best friends until the end
There was no greater joy
Than the view of your house
Peering over the castle wall of bushes
Running up the steep driveway
I could never go fast enough.
Grandpa was always waiting at the top
He'd turn from the car he was fixing up
Standing tall and strong
He'd smile down at my breathless excitement
And softly chuckle as I'd whirl by.
A treasure trove of stories and comfort
The quiet reassuring presence of our childhood
How I miss the smile in those kind blue eyes
That sweet voice I could listen to for hours
Swept away into the good old days.
He stood for dreams
But was fettered by love
He had the biggest heart
And he always fought on
No matter how many times it failed him.
But the torch has been passed on
And we have big shoes to fill.
Never again
Will those blue eyes say 'I love you'
For the flame of hope
Dims dark this day

One of our brightest
Has finally faded away
A new star in the heavens
A new angel guards from on high
Know that we love you
Hearts breaking as we say goodbye

James Theodore Dean
by Sasha Kasoff

I remember
Him blowing bubbles that blew my mind
Letting me sit in his lap and drive the golf cart
When I was too young to reach the pedals
Looking for strawberries in the backyard
Helping refill the hummingbird feeders
Bowls full of whipped cream
Snowmen and bunny pancakes
Paper airplanes of every size scattered around the living room couches
Jars of coins for my birthday
When we spent all day putting them in paper rolls
His baseball photos, signed and hanging on the wall
Number 4 on the Dodgers, blue and white in black and white
Watched as we played tic tac toe over and over
Going to the grocery store to get bananas and apples
And a big bag of beans for the homeless shelter
I remember his laugh, his blue eyes, his strong grey curls
His art studio full of watercolor paints
The walls covered in paintings and prints

Lost Family
by Sasha Kasoff

crying out to them
you wish they were here
missing them more than ever because you know you will never see them again
had they been alive
you would have gone about your business
almost forgetting them completely
barely missed
but now you know they're gone the reality sinks in
you'll never see or speak to them again
with each death
in your family and others
you notice the old and frail
and dread when the time will come for them as well
you cry rivers of tears
the waters endlessly flowing out of your weeping soul
your heart is tearing at the seams
wailing like a lost soul you are dazed and unbelieving
eventually the tears stop
for you have none left

Ginsberg and the Afterlife by Donald Illich

My Dad knew where I wanted to go
after we finished delivering menus
to the houses – sliding them under doors,

affixing them to mailboxes, trying any trick
for them to pay attention to our food.
We slid into the Dairy Queen, no effort

to disguise our hunger. I picked a burger
and a Blizzard, inwardly consumed them
as I spoke to the cashier, and paced

inside my mind at our pearly table
where Dad tried to pick my brain.
“So, what were you reading?” “Allen

Ginsberg's obituary in 'Rolling Stone.’”
“I didn't know you liked his writing?”
“Well, it was interesting.” As our order

was called, I watched him beat me
to picking it up, while I remembered
I hadn't read much of Ginsberg at all,

found his poetry to be part of an age
I was transfixed by but didn't understand.
What would he say to us slamming

beef in our mouths, gobbling down death
in the shapes of fries and artificial
shakes? Or were his concerns more lofty

than a father and a son having lunch?

The afterlife would have to instruct us
somehow. Would he find me, lowly me,

in a supermarket, and would we end up
by the River Styx, shaking hands, saying
this is the end? Dad mumbled delight

through a fistful of sandwich, and I
couldn't help return a grunt, as America
slipped down my throat, started to burn.

Mourning Dad
by Strider Marcus Jones

he is decomposed
from a bramble rose
now-
his thorns
of storms
drow,
foetal curled
in the underworld
faerie peat without plough.

is it fun
with all those comical
musical
jacketed jesters-
or primplum
suitedrun
by posh ancestors-
doing the same this and that
to keep your spirit level flat
with docile protestors
wired to silicon investors.

I bought this new fedora hat
in whitewashed Mijas
to be my own brown
Romany
see as-
let them face their ignominy
when I wea it here in town-
like an unshoed horse
from the road gorse
prancing right
through their moral less light

brim slanted defiantly down
eyes outsider brown.

is it no Left or Right there.
do you have your chair
to sit in.
can you smoke your pipe
gathering stars in its clouds at night
thinking thoughts in nothing.
do you still use words
to help wingless birds
or is it silent
to the violent
fermenting fear
when the truth comes near
just like here.

Celtic Knots
by Strider Marcus Jones

when did I sleep
without the leap
of rapids thinking
in my head-
like my father, shrinking
and sinking
slowly into ethereal thread-
his Celtic knots
coming undone
before I got
to put them on.

I must make my own now-
stab the ink
of how I think
into my skin
somehow-
carve their grain and re-begin,
turning the silver
ring on my finger
my own difference to him.

The Green Man
by Strider Marcus Jones

I have the green man
growing in his tree
feet to earth
hands in sky
head with heart.

prophetic and pagan
his persuasion
is asking me to be
like the mother who gave me birth-
but now,
even how
we go to die
is apart.

his eyes
behind his hair
both stare
at Babylonians
becoming Old Bostonians
changing us from Custodians
leaving the DreamTime
to work in line.

my door
is always open
in case he comes back in
running half broken
father mine from the mill
dripping stale sweat
on the hearth floor
but I don't forget

him shaping his words and hands
everywhere he sits and stands
so selfless to let me see
how to set my own mind free-
break the blames that blind you
and liberty will find you;
real truth, is not what everyone knows
but in their echoes
unspoken shadows.

Standing Stones
by Strider Marcus Jones

I can still smell his shirt
when he tramped home from work
and slumped down beside us
in his chair,
lips cracked, shaking cotton fibres
from his tussled hair.

he was like that:
never wore a vain hat,
or mask to hide the man he was
and what he was
from himself
or anyone else.

he told me my first joke,
showed me how to roll a smoke
in his thick, stained fingers.
oh, how his voice echo lingers
sowing moral ethics
into politics-

through the night,
like Lenin, in reason and fight,
making Attlee and Bevan's lintels
bridge
the standing stones of Marx and Engels
over my youth.

rising like monoliths
of truth,
opposing the dangers
of privileged
abyss,

I watched, his turned wisdom change us
into opposite strangers.

Time was gone
by Mark David McClure

The day was November 15th...
The hour of eight was long
I prayed, but it was too late—
Time was gone—

Salient, sallow—he slipped away—
Leaving me helpless
Attesting to this abiding death—
I only presided, acquiesced...

As he left I was addled—
Conscious—confused—tortured—
Waking in the hearse called life
Time was gone—

The myriad memories left me
Poised, ready to go on—
Yet still longing to possess resolve
Time was gone—

Time was...gone

ABOUT MARK DAVID MCLURE

Mark David McClure was born and raised in Bay City, Michigan. He began writing in high school when he wrote an elegy for his father's funeral. He has been an avid reader, soaking in the plethora of worlds found in the works of Patricia Cornwell, Stephen King, Bev Vincent, Stephen J. Spignesi, Brian James Freeman, Sue Grafton, Joseph Payne Brennan and many others. His favorite genre is horror, but he finds himself indulging in an occasional mystery.

Mark has a lot to offer and can't wait to bring to the masses the enduring literature he has written and is yet to write. Supporting him in this undertaking are his wife and two daughters. They have been the sounding board for his work for some time. His growing list of short fiction and poetry includes Dear Diary, Her, Time Was Gone, You Stand Ashore.

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Dawn
by Sasha Kasoff

Her hair is as thin and golden as wheat
Her eyes glow, yellow as a cat's
As she battles silently,
Holding onto life.
You'd never know how hard it is
When you see her smile
Like a new-born dawn, breaking over the hill,
As wondrous as the first sunrise.
Her laugh is a wild mustang
Just as free
Just as easy to get caught up in.
In her arms is a sanctuary of hope,
As she holds you close,
You know you couldn't ask for a better mother.
As fierce as a bear protecting her cubs,
She stood up for you till the end,
Taught you how to live,
With the last of her life.

For Mom
by Valeri Beers

I
miss you.

There's
no forwarding address
to send
you
a Mother's Day card.

No
phone number.
No
answering machine.

I
have many
presents
for you
but
I
can only
leave them
on the ground.

ABOUT VALERI BEERS

Valeri Beers is from Bangor, Maine. She recently had her first book of poems titled ...details... published by Thomas Hill Publishing. Valeri has been writing all her life and is inspired to write by listening to music and needing to remember things. Valeri has been published in a number of print and online literary magazines including Zest literary magazine, Far Away literary magazine, The Writer's Drawer and Kumquat Poetry. She has been a guest poet on the Power of Poetics blog talk show reading her own poems.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

LOST AND ALONE



“Without you in my life I never would have written a word...” Franco Esposito

If I Should Die Tonight
by Eileen Hugo

If I should die tonight
will all they left unsaid
be said?
And if there is a hereafter
will I hear what they say?

As they pass by my
cold and empty body
will they murmur insincerely,
"How nice she looks."
then turn away, their lies
a stain upon their lips?

If they mourn will they
close their eyes to
my introverted excesses
my selfish vanity?
Will they forgive
my failed attempt
at life
should I die tonight?

Words of Love
By Franco Esposito

I've seen good times and I've seen bad
but in those times we always had
each other and we made it through
but that's something I just can't do
without you

You were my right arm when I was with you
my true north that I sailed too
and I'm weak and lost
without you

And each day that passes by
I just can't imagine not telling you why
I love you

For every cloud that darkens a sunny sky
hides a rainbow deep inside
that is like the colors
you left behind

You are forever the shining in my eyes
and the tears that they cry
are more words of love
that I send you

Ceremony
by Allyson Lima

Tom's gone
and the desire to repeat his story
pulls you to the lost coast of childhood
to confirm for him who wanted no funeral
the wild beauty of a restless shore
where hawk-winged imagination
hunts the misty cliffs and redwood valleys
soaring, circling, diving deep for prey.

The ceremony of the sea soothes
rising, retreating
surging, sucking
at the mind's shore
heaving creatures living and dead
leaving a tidal manuscript
of twisted driftwood, bleached bones
barnacle crusted debris, rubbery strands of
uprooted kelp, lost feathers and whole birds
blind-eyed carcasses, forgotten pop-cans
picnic trash, smooth stones, fragile shells
entire trees beached
reveal the rhythms of the sea.

The Funeral of Aunt Doris

by Edward Meiman

Tommy Wilkins was six years old when his favorite aunt, Aunt Doris, died. Even at his young age, Tommy knew all about death. You see, not only was Tommy taught all about Heaven at church and in religion class, but his pet hamster Sam had died just two months earlier and his parents had explained to the boy all about what happened to her. So when Tommy's dad told him about Aunt Doris, Tommy asked one question, "Did Aunt Doris go to Heaven?" His dad answered "Yes." Tommy told his dad that he was happy that Aunt Doris got to go have fun all the time now. He then went back to putting his puzzle together.

A few days later, Tommy's mother told him they were going to Aunt Doris' funeral. As she got her son dressed up in his Sunday clothes, she explained funerals to Tommy. Tommy listened intently, especially about the body in the coffin. When she was finished, Tommy had a few questions for his mommy.

"Aunt Doris did go to Heaven like Sam?"

"Yes," replied the mother.

"Then Aunt Doris isn't in her body anymore, just like Sam?"

His mother remembered what happened when Sam died. Tommy, upon learning that Sam's soul was in Heaven, didn't care what happened to her body. His mom ended up burying the hamster in the backyard, just in case Tommy needed to "see" her later. He never did.

His mother, after making this reflection, chose her words carefully. "No, Aunt Doris' soul is not in her body anymore. However, some people like to see her one last time, and the body is the only thing that they could see of her, even when she was living."

"Oh, I see. I guess I never saw her soul either."

Tommy didn't ask any more questions all the way to the funeral home. When they arrived, his parents took him into the viewing room where Uncle Bob, Aunt Doris' husband, was greeting people.

Tommy noticed how sad Uncle Bob looked. Tommy thought he saw his uncle start to cry once. The boy also noticed that everyone else was sad. This surprised him. After a while of watching Uncle Bob, Tommy had an idea and so went up to talk to the very sad man.

"Are you sad because Aunt Doris got to go to Heaven, and you can't go with her? I hated it when my friend Bill went to Disney World, and I couldn't go with him. But Mom said that I would get to go to Disney World this summer, so I don't feel sad anymore." Tommy looked up at his Uncle, who just stared back. From across the room, Tommy's dad saw what was happening and rushed to get his son before he bothered Bob too much.

Uncle Bob finally realized what Tommy had said, and a smile came over his face. "Yes

Tommy, I do wish I was with Aunt Doris now. I am sure she is having lots of fun. I also miss her quite a bit."

Tommy's dad got to the two and apologized to Bob as he ushered his son away. Tommy, for his part, began to wonder about his uncle's statement that he missed his wife. It had never occurred to Tommy that it might be a long time before he ever saw Aunt Doris again. He thought that was sad.

After his father had deposited him with the other children who had arrived, Tommy kept thinking about Uncle Bob. Uncle Bob was old, even older than his dad. Tommy knew that his uncle wouldn't have to wait that long to see his wife. The boy was sure that Bob had forgotten that. He also decided that the grieving man had forgotten that when you get to Heaven, you stay there forever. So, when he saw Uncle Bob alone, Tommy decided to remind his sad uncle of these things.

"Uncle Bob, you know that you'll go to Heaven when you die, and you'll get to play with Aunt Doris then?"

The man again was caught by surprise and so just stood there.

Tommy decided that his uncle's blank stare meant he should continue. "When you get to Heaven, you get to stay with Aunt Doris forever, and forever is so much longer than even a year. You're old. So you'll go to Heaven soon and then you can play with Aunt Doris forever."

Bob looked down at the very earnest boy and again smiled. "Yes, I guess I will."

Tommy then decided it was time to make the big offer. "And if you ever get lonely and miss Aunt Doris and want to play with someone, you can come play with me."

"Well thank you, Tommy. I will definitely come play with you whenever I miss Aunt Doris." Tommy's uncle looked over at the casket and then back at Tommy. "You know, I think that is exactly what Doris would want me to do."

The Last Gift

by Dee Thompson

The day my father died I learned for certain that there IS life after death. Dad had always lived life at breakneck speed and left all of us bobbing in his wake, and when he died, it was as dramatic as he had been.

Never mind that the body that ceased living on July 11, 1996, was a shell, a shadow of Dad. He had been diagnosed with cancer only five weeks before he died, but we had known for months there was something terribly wrong.

I lived in Atlanta, alone. I was taking off early every Friday and spending the weekend in Augusta at my parents' house, helping Mom with the nursing of Dad. One week past my 34th birthday, on Thursday, July 11th I woke up, and my first thought was I need to go to Augusta, TODAY. Now. As soon as that thought popped into my head, I dismissed it. I had a lot to do at work. Dad was very sick, and hospice had been called in, but I didn't think he was going to die that day.

I got dressed and went into work, and busied myself, ignoring the nagging little voice in the back of my mind that kept saying GO HOME. I am a paralegal, and I was working for an extremely demanding attorney who didn't like her staff to ever take personal time. I had been amazed she had agreed to let me take off early on Fridays. She was the type of boss who called me when I was on vacation.

That day, I had to send out some subpoenas and that meant I had to go to the bank and get certified checks for the witnesses, so about 10:45 I headed over to the nearby bank where the firm had its account, SunTrust. Ironically, my father had retired as a Vice President from SunTrust in Augusta the year before.

I got into my little white car after getting my checks. As I settled into the driver's seat, I felt a sensation like someone had taken a baseball bat and hit me in the chest. I gasped. I thought I am having a heart attack.

I looked at the clock. It was exactly 11:30.

I was 34 years old. No history of heart disease.

I sat for a moment, heart pounding, and realized the little voice that had been nagging me all morning was gone. That made me very uneasy. I took deep breaths, trying to calm down.

My chest continued to hurt for hours, but it was more like a gas pain than a heart pain, and I had the feeling that it wasn't really a physical pain so much as an emotional one.

I headed back to the office, and within 15 minutes my boss came in and closed the door, and told me my mom had called with the news that my dad had died. I started sobbing right away and cried for a while before I could pull myself together enough to leave. Other staffers offered to

drive me home but I lived 15 minutes away from the office, and I just wanted to get out of there.

I got back to my apartment and threw some clothes in a suitcase. Within 30 minutes, I was on the interstate headed for Augusta.

I called my parents' house from the car and said I was on the way. My aunt very calmly said to not go over the speed limit, and to be careful, so as not to stress out my mother even more.

I spent most of the 2-hour drive crying, of course. In the car, loud crying doesn't matter; no neighbors to bother. I felt Dad was with me, though, and wouldn't let me wreck the car.

My father loved to be in control of all situations.

My father, Tony, was tall and handsome, with curly brown hair and green eyes. He could charm anyone. He was an amazing storyteller, and he loved a good joke. He was devoted to his immediate family, and also to his brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles. He loved to organize family reunions. He loved to sip good liquor and sit around with his brothers telling funny stories from their childhood.

When Dad walked into a room, the energy changed. He rarely sat still for very long. He loved to sing, and would make up words to songs if he didn't know them. He was a force of nature – always impatient, loud, funny, loving. People were drawn to him.

I had always been close to my dad, even though we had lots of heated arguments when I was in my twenties – we were polar opposites politically. Temperamentally we were very similar. My mother is much more easygoing and calm, which is probably why they had a long marriage.

I got to Augusta and pulled up in the driveway of the suburban rancher. I walked in and immediately knew Dad wasn't there anymore. The house was filled with people, but strangely empty.

After hugging my mother and crying a bit more, I found my one sibling, my brother, and we finally had a chance to talk, huddled in a corner of the family room. I told him about my weird nagging voice telling me to come home, and the chest pain. He just nodded.

Brother had been in the room holding Dad's hand when he died. The day couldn't get any weirder.

The hospice nurse had dropped by the house around 11, saying she was simply in the neighborhood. She looked at dad and his complete lack of urine output and said "He's going." There hadn't been time to call me. My brother was there, plus my mom, and one of my uncles. They stood around the hospital bed that had been put in the family room, holding dad's hands and telling him they loved him.

"He died at 11:30," my brother said quietly.

"That was the exact time I got in the car and felt the pain in my chest," I said quietly.

Dad used to look at me when I was upset and say "When you hurt, I hurt." He adored his children. He wasn't a perfect dad, but everyone who knew him knew that his devotion to us was absolute.

I wondered if the pain I felt at his passing was his pain. I didn't want to think it was, and when I later told my mother, she said she felt like it was from her, that pain. She lost the great love of her life at 11:30 that morning.

She had been married since the age of 23. She had never lived alone.

My brother is not a religious man, but he believes in God. He told me that when Dad died, he sensed angels there in the room. "I could feel them," he said.

His words evoked a vision I found comforting, of Dad leaving his frail mortal body and going to be with his parents, in the light.

I felt bad about not being with my father when he died. I had wanted to be there. I felt like it was the right thing to do. He just died faster than any of us had realized he would.

Three days after he died, I was still at my parents' house. Everyone had left and gone home. The memorial service was over. The house still stank of flowers, and the fridge was still crammed with food. I went to bed unable to think of anything but the oppressive weight of guilt that had enveloped me since Dad had died. I should've been there, I kept thinking.

I should've listened to the little voice in my head telling me to go home all morning. I should have been there to tell him goodbye.

Not long before I woke up that night, I was asleep, having the usual sort of weird, disjointed dream one has. Suddenly, the dream disappeared, replaced by the feeling I was in another world. I was standing in a huge empty building, like a European train station. This building was spotlessly clean, though, and filled with light. I looked up, and Dad came walking up to me. He was tall and healthy looking, and wearing a beautiful three-piece suit. He was walking with the jaunty step he used when he was really happy and excited. I knew that step well, but I hadn't seen it in a long time.

When he got to me, he enveloped me in a big hug. I could literally feel his strong arms around me and breathe in his cologne. No dream had ever been so real.

"It's OK. Everything will be OK," he said to me.

I believed him.

Dad came to me to give me that message, that it didn't matter that I wasn't with him when he died. I woke up happy for the first time in months. It was exactly the reassurance I needed, seeing him healthy and happy, and able to give me one last hug.

That visit erased all doubt from my mind about life after death.

His life force lives on, and he comes to see us. The spring after he died, the roses he had planted were a riot of blooms, despite him not being there to care for them. Some months after his death, Mom saw him in a dream, too. They were together at her parents' old house, swinging in the porch swing, holding hands. My brother saw him in a cloud one day, with his favorite basset hound by his side. Before I adopted my son Dad came to me in a dream, urging me to adopt him.

I feel Dad around all the time.

His last gift to me was the certainty that Death is simply a doorway, and one day when I walk through it he will be there waiting for me.

ABOUT DEE THOMPSON

Dee Thompson is a freelance writer, and currently writes articles, blogs, books, essays, play reviews, and the occasional poem. Dee holds a BA in Drama from the University of Georgia and an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Tennessee. She is a published author of two books, *Adopting Alesia: My Crusade for My Russian Daughter*, and *Jack's New Family*. She also contributed essays to the recent bestseller *The Divinity of Dogs: True Stories of Miracles Inspired by Man's Best Friend* and the acclaimed anthology *Call Me Okaasan: Adventures in Multicultural Mothering*. For more than ten years, Dee has blogged at *The Crab Chronicles*, and she also contributed to *Monday Coffee: Mothering Children with Special Needs* and she edits a blog for Southern poets, *The Word Ocean*. Dee lives with her son in Atlanta and enjoys walking her basset, Lola, cooking, reading, and movies.

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Life, Love, Inevitably Death
by Virginia Wright

Life made through intimate love.
Baby reaches, crawls, walks, runs, experiences, grows.
Death envelops body, not soul.

THE END