

A stylized illustration of a tropical road scene. The background is a vibrant pink and purple gradient. In the foreground, a road with white dashed lines leads into the distance. Two cars are on the road: a dark car on the left and a light-colored car on the right. The road is flanked by tall palm trees and other tropical plants. The sky is filled with white, swirling, abstract patterns. The overall style is graphic and modern.

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The Marian Sims Baughn
Center for Literary Arts



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Foreword

This would not be a complete 2020 publication without acknowledging our current pandemic—COVID-19—that has thrust many of us into intimate isolation, changing the routines and social interactions we once relied on. During this time, as we sit at home, we can find comfort and solace in great storytelling—within each poem and short story a piece of human connection awaits. This editorial team has had the pleasure of delving deep into the wonderful storytelling of our community.

Long Beach City College is a strong and diverse community of creativity and connection; though we are a big college, we come together to make a family. We know that the Creative Writing Committee, as well as the English Department, have had a huge part in inspiring and encouraging students to share their work. A big thank you to all of the professors who have shown up to support the making of this journal—above all Professor Jason Casem our advisor and mentor to our English club.

Most of all, the biggest thanks to the authors and poets who shared their work, their hearts, and their stories with us.

So please, take a seat and let these stories and poems carry you away to magical places—cry with us, laugh with us, and isolate with us.

Yaz Khajavipour Thompson

Editor-in-Chief and President, English Majors and Minors Club 2019-2020

Ivory Incisors

by Jessica Parker

From across the table, my mother stared at me,
a fork full of mashed potatoes halfway to her mouth.

Over empty salad plates and half-eaten slices
of bread, she made her confession:

I have all of your baby teeth in an old prescription
bottle. But I can't give them to you - they're mixed
in with your sister's and I'll never be able to tell
what's yours.

I wondered where does a woman keep hidden a
plastic amber vial with forty years of collected
calcified pebbles, and more importantly, why?

Then I looked at her, really looked at her,
mother to mother, and I knew:

This is love.

“As Some Day It May Happen”

by Samuel Pflugrath

Like the weighted blade of the guillotine, the downtown courthouse loomed high and threatening over Jack’s balding head. A monolith of wet gray concrete with dark-green opaque windows, its upper floors vanished into the white morning mists and became one with the rainy gray sky above. A two-story digital billboard on the front of the building displayed a marble statue of blindfolded Lady Justice, with an ever-waving black, white, and blue flag behind her. Swarms of police drones orbited the building about a hundred feet up—some of them periodically breaking from formation to follow the people below as they came and went from the parking garage.

It’s a room with two doors, Jack thought to himself as he exited the garage and passed by the line of white prison buses parked outside.

Jack liked to think that somebody working for the county had a crush on him, because every year, without fail—usually toward the end of fall or the beginning of winter—he was sure to receive a summons for civic duty. Or perhaps God, or whatever force or forces truly govern this universe, had a special interest in making sure that he participated in as many trials as possible: that he may know Justice as few others did. He found either possibility preferable to the thought that he wasn’t actually special—that his experiences with the legal system were entirely typical and routine.

Not three doors, or four: only two.

As the forecast had not predicted rain, he came casually dressed in a plain blue t-shirt and white khaki shorts, neon green running shoes and white crew socks. The trudge across the puddle-drowned concrete courtyard was unpleasant, but as he wasn’t wearing much compared to other civilians, it took much less time for security to search him at the door.

The one or the other.

Once that little formality was over with, a pair of armed and armored guards escorted him into the break room, where all the others who had been selected that day were waiting. After being assigned numbers to listen for, they all watched a short orientation film together, laying out the basic mechanics of what was expected of them. Jack chuckled to himself over the video’s age: it had been produced the same year he was first called in, more than twenty years ago, and would probably continue being shown there long into the future, after he was gone.

That’s the way it’s always been, ever since it was built, however long ago that was.

The waiting room was large, with grimy yellow walls and floor and ceiling. There were patches of mildew wherever Jack looked, and water damage from half a century of leaking air conditioning units and unexpected winter rains. Rows of cold metal seats with tattered and fraying upholstery took up most of the room’s space—enough seating for close to five hundred people, not that they’d ever need that many in only one day and at only one city courthouse.

The one door is the one that everyone has to go through, whether they like it or not.

Apart from the projector screen, which was really just a bare and unpainted wall, the whole front of the room was taken up by tellers’ bullet-proof windows: where people would be remunerated by the state in exchange for their lost day of work. The only decorations were a series of full-length posters lining the other three walls, showing ominous humanoid figures lurking in urban shadows, along with the legend: POVERTY BREEDS HOMELESSNESS; HOMELESSNESS BREEDS CRIME; CRIME BREEDS PROTEST; and finally, PROTEST BREEDS TERRORISM.

You can go in and go out through that door lots of times in the course of your life—every day even!

Jack sat near the tellers’ windows, playing on his phone to pass the time. People’s numbers were called over the PA system every now and then, summoning them off to play their special role in the trials going on elsewhere in the building.

But the other door?

It was about three hours in when Jack noticed a short young woman, dressed in what he assumed to be her Sunday best, stumble into the waiting room with shaking knees. He probably hadn’t noticed her there earlier, either during the orientation or when her number must have been called, but it was plain for him to see that she had just completed her day’s duty.

Once you’ve gone through the other door, there’s no going back out.

The woman had brown eyes like his, but her hair and skin were much darker. At the moment, however, her face was whiter than death, and she breathed through her mouth in slow, shuddering gulps. She went up to the teller to receive her digital paycheck, and then ran, not to the exit, but to the civilian women’s rest facilities, which were located at the other end of the room.

Not in one piece, anyway.

Jack had witnessed this same basic scene play out at least once every time he was called—his first time there, in fact, it’d even been him. As a veteran of the selection process, he took some pride in trying to comfort any younger people who might be new to it. So, he put down his phone, moved to a seat right next to the ladies’ room, and then waited. After about five minutes she came back out with a scratchy paper towel pressed against her

mouth, her dark brown face soaked by both sweat and salty tap water.

And if you're not willing to go through the one door...

"Your first time?" Jack asked, but he could see the woman only closed her eyes as she passed him to try to avoid conversation. Still he continued, rising to his feet and following her: "You know, I'm old enough to remember when jury duty was still a thing they did here? I was in my twenties when they abolished it. Never got called in to jury duty though, but this? Every year, just like clockwork."

"Like clockwork," he heard her repeat slowly, with a soft alto voice.

... then sooner or later, you're going to have to go through the other.

"They made me hold it up," she continued, falling down into a seat as Jack took the one next to her. "Why'd they make me hold it up like that?" And so, Jack replied, "Because it's tradition. It's the way they've always done it."

That's just the way it works—the way it's always worked.

"But that's bullshit," she replied; her speech seemed to be turning delirious. "You just said that you remember a time before all of this, before the Comm-in-Chief and the G.A.P. and everything else. That all happened before I was even born, but you? How is it that I know this isn't right and you don't? You ought to know this isn't how things are supposed to be, in this country or anywhere!"

And yet of course, people still always ask, "Why?"

"I remember what this country looked like before the G.A.P. seized power," Jack said, "and believe me when I say that for all that we've lost and for all that we've gained and all that we've preserved, it was worth it. They made our country great again. Do you believe me?"

Well you see, there is a reason for this. A very good reason.

"I don't believe you at all," the woman said; Jack could hear the anger, the emotion in her voice. "You just want a way to justify being a coward who lets other people die—who makes other people die!"

It's Justice. This is Justice, whether you want to accept it or not.

Jack sighed and, affecting his most fatherly tone, tried to explain: "I was just like you the first time I had to do this. But after my first orientation—it was in this very room, more than twenty years ago—they brought in a guest speaker. He was an Air Force sergeant, and the week after the Great Election he'd presided over more than three dozen military executions. And he told everyone here that: 'It's a room with two doors; and if you won't go in through the one door, then sooner or later you're going to have to go in through the other.' You understand?"

This is what Justice really looks like.

"Oh, I understand," she said, a snarl in her voice.

Real Justice isn't about kindness, or compassion.

Before he could try to push this discussion any further, the PA system finally called out his number, so he rose to depart. "Well, wish me luck," he

said, attempting a self-deprecating sigh.

Real Justice comes from Power, from Authority.

"Bad luck!" he could hear her reply from behind his back. She's probably going to have to go through the other door before the year's out, he thought glumly. With "bad luck," I might even be the one who has to do it to her.

And the State, which is ordained by God, sustained by the Market, and protected by the Military...

A pair of guards met Jack in the marble hallway outside the waiting room: each in full body armor with gas masks and bayoneted assault rifles at the ready. They led him down a gauntlet of sterile, empty corridors before they finally arrived at an elevator. They took it straight down into the sublevels beneath the courthouse basement. The doors opened into another corridor, this one much narrower, and of solid concrete, with weak fluorescent lamps lighting the way. In all, it took less than three minutes for Jack to make his way from the waiting room to the Chamber.

Well, what has more Power, more Authority than that?

Like the corridor leading to it, the entire Chamber was made of dark, solid concrete and lit with dim fluorescent lighting. It was rectangular, with the ceiling about ten feet off the ground. The door Jack came in through was in the middle of the long wall; set into the wall opposite the door was a narrow chute leading down into the building's incinerator. The entire wall to Jack's left was a giant two-way mirror, while in the wall to his right was the other door. Both it and the one he passed through were flanked by a total of four more guards, just as armed and armored as his two guides.

Thus, it must be the State that determines what is Justice.

The machine sat bolted in place at the very center of the Chamber. Its design had more in common with the German model than the original, more famous, French one. Built entirely out of dull, cold metal, it was barely eight feet high, but the blade was weighted heavily enough to make up all the difference. Twin maglev tracks raised and held it automatically after every use—releasing it, however, still required a human component.

The State is the determiner and executor of Justice.

A sheriff's deputy stood tall and erect beside it, his back to the two-way mirror. He wore black wraparound sunglasses and a uniform duster: metallic blue, like a spider-wasp. What little of his face was visible under the visor of his matching service cap was waxy white, and his small mouth was held in a deliberate scowl. He held his arm out like a waiter; instead of a towel, however, he held a transparent plastic rain poncho for Jack to wear over his casual shirt and shorts.

For who or what else could be trusted with this, with Justice?

Then, with a loud and performatively angry voice, the deputy instructed Jack to stand to the left of the machine, directly underneath a large

red alarm light in the ceiling, his right hand (not his left!) gripping the lever and both feet pointed in the direction of the two-way mirror at the front of the Chamber (as indicated by tape marks in the floor). Once he was in position, the other door finally opened and the condemned was brought in.

And it is in the name of Justice, and in service of the State, that we perform this sacred duty.

They were strapped face-down to a gurney wheeled in by four more armed and armored guards: barefoot, in an orange prisoner's jumpsuit and with a black bag over their head. Although it was frowned upon, Jack tried to get a glimpse of them with his peripheral vision: instead, he only caught an eyeful of an inscription someone (presumably one of the guards) had carved into the machine with a knife: "Hans & Sophie's Straight Razor". Jack wasn't sure if he got the reference, but he was certain he wouldn't have liked it if he did.

We do not need forgiveness —we are the ones who forgive.

The gurney was wheeled up and the condemned—motionless, voiceless, barely breathing—loaded into the machine. The deputy, who had not moved at all before this—took his mark standing against the wall next to the incinerator chute. All was ready: Jack's sweaty hand gripped the lever, eyes unblinking and ears primed for the signal—facing the mirror and whoever lay behind it, a neutral mask on his pale, staring face.

It is in the room with two doors that Justice is executed.

The red light in the ceiling flashed, and the alarm blared.

It is in this room...

And Jack stood there, the lever not moving and his hand not moving, even though the deputy was there and all the guards with all their guns and knives and tasers and everything else were all standing there, their hidden eyes fixated on him he could tell. There was no clock in the chamber, though there must have been one behind the mirror, so he couldn't tell how long it'd been since the flashing light came on. He stood there, beads of icy sweat on his forehead. He could smell himself; before this he hadn't noticed the smells of condensation and dried blood in the air. His arm still hadn't moved; he wasn't even sure if he'd told his arm to move, or if he was still capable of moving it. The deputy was standing there, he could feel the man's anger rising, and oh this was gonna be it, he could tell, this was when they were all going to spring on him. They were going to call in backup just to make sure he felt it all, teeth knocked out of his head and stomped on with heavy black boots and bayonets in the back, stuck right between the ribs; they were getting ready, he could feel it, the lights were dimming and everything was dimming and his eyes darting at everything. The condemned raising their head to try and see through the black bag; why were they still alive, why was he still alive, they had to be toying with him, but no he could hear them in his head screaming at him, his knees giving way; yes that was it he leaned rightward and put all his

body's weight on the lever as everything was turning black and white and blue and red all over and around and...

... that we find out who we are as human beings.

Then the blade fell, with an echoing metallic clang. The condemned convulsed and then ceased to move, while the bag fell into the basket. Jack felt a hot spray hit him in the face while his teeth rattled in his clenched jaws. He opened his eyes and found himself kneeling next to the machine, both hands clutching the lever for dear life.

And everyone must go through the one door sometime...

The deputy approached with bounding strides, took off his hat and bowed to Jack, thanking him for a job well done—if there was any malice or intent to arrest him, it didn't show through the friendly grin he now chose to display. Jack rose to his feet, clutching his chest and trying to catch his breath.

... and anyone can go through the other door anytime.

With a hand clad in a black leather glove, the deputy fished the bag out of the basket and gave the head to Jack. He stepped forward and looked up, finally catching sight of his own red-soaked face in the mirror. Raising his right hand in salute, he held the head aloft by its filthy matted hair in his left and said, "Hail the Comm-in-Chief." He could hear the sounds of camera shutters going off behind the mirror, and short flashes gave glimpses of the dozen or so people who had been watching him. After he laid it down on top of its former owner, the two guards again escorted him out, while the others wheeled the gurney over to the incinerator chute.

Maybe someday the Comm-in-Chief himself will go through one of those doors. Maybe.

The guards escorted him back to the waiting room. His companion from before had already departed, for better, happier things, he now hoped. After a quick trip to the civilian men's room to clean his face and hands he went to collect his stipend. The teller, as usual, asked if he would be willing to donate it to a charity of the State's choice in the courthouse's name, but he declined: "The city's threatening to tear my house down if I don't fix my roof, so I need every cent I can get."

But I know that one day, I will fail my duty to the State—fail my duty to Justice.

"Ah, good idea," the teller replied. "After all, you wouldn't wanna end up—" and with her head she indicated toward one of the waiting room's posters. Saying nothing more, Jack nodded, took his money, and left.

And that... that will be the day I go in through the other door, Jack thought to himself as he made his way back to the parking garage, a police drone following him every step of the way.

Ode to Freddie Quell, or the Sunken Sailor from Nowhere

by Brandon Ordonez

Thrown from the abysmal whirr of the pacific
disassembled by the Navy with
no agenda or family to your name
nor a place to unpack what you ran away from was you, Freddie

a sailor strung from the second world war

stumbling upon my stolen ship with a face clenched like a boxer's fist
chest sewn by unrestrained nerves
a back arched like the broken crane of an abandoned ship

distraught and without a thought for anything unrelated to booze
or sloppy sex
reckless to the degree of a filthy animal
manically hopping on their three legs
waiting for a master to sweep them away
only to nestle their dysfunctionality and
shame their nature

your skillset limited to our family that is The Cause
cast under the same spell I had you under before
your mania enveloped itself like a ruptured blood vessel
spreading across the pale canvas of your milky eye
wallowing in the gentle sweetness of you, Freddie

I unfold myself to your moonshine
made from a place impacted by sea salt and dazed visions of
women prancing at the sight of your stillness
knowing they are only a facet of your perversion, Freddie

I came back from the beyond to confess and detach from a
family stitched by the farce of my emptiness
to pedal away from my vision not for The Cause, but
for you, Freddie

yet, capturing you away from
the debris of your past
doused my mind with musings and delusion, Freddie

as I could not abandon you and cradle your nostalgia
yearning to be captured again

for the dream of you and I waltzing to Brahms
is far beyond reach as it sunk from
the weight of your absence

Ruben's

by Vickie Wippel

I was killing time at Ruben's Deli and Diner (home of, in my opinion, Boulder's second-best Rueben). That morning, I'd headed downtown for a job interview but decided, while looking for parking, that it wasn't the job for me. Let somebody else be an assistant data analyst, whatever that is. I think I'll have a sandwich instead. After ordering a turkey pastrami, I texted my regrets to HR and waited for the server to deliver my food. If I had gotten the job, I might have ordered a drink. Instead, I had the mini cup of dispenser water, an emblem of the struggling class.

Ruben's had all the charm of a 3-star Yelp review. People come back for the sammies and curly fries, not necessarily for the red vinyl booths I hadn't slid into since I was a kid. The restaurant's lighting was just a tad better than the fluorescent tubes at Happy Teeth Dental (I should leave a 3-star rating for Dr. Modesto). Returning felt a little bit like coming home.

I saw her sitting at a countertop stool facing the window, two seats away from a front door that jangled every time it opened and closed. She had the most content smile I'd ever seen. And when she turned her head, a rainbow reflection from the salad bar's stained-glass pendant light ran across her face. Blue eyes, straight hair pulled back. Wrinkled, but pretty, like Jane Goodall (I've always been into chimps). Like I said, it was her smile, showing off just the tips of her top teeth, lips pulled up like a bunny slope, that drew me in.

The woman drank iced tea from a tall glass, smiling as she watched the scene outside. Parents rushing tykes across the parking lot, little palms wrapped around pinkies. A senior stooping down to collect a dropped coupon. Children, maybe middle schoolers, at the bus stop, playfully nudging each other while sharing smartphone screens. It was early fall, and the kids were still growing into their new winter coats. She winked at me and said through her smile, "Kids taking the bus. Wonderful. Hope they're going somewhere fun."

"Don't you think they're just going home?" I responded as my food arrived, eating a fry before it had cooled. After I moved back home, my older sister began recommending podcasts; all of them told me to look for adventure and connection every which way. I decided to push forward, "Why? Where would you go?"

She smiled at me and motioned for me to lean in. "Have a minute?" I nodded yes and moved a few seats closer. "I have a story about love," she said.

"I don't care much for romance," Shying away, I looked down at my phone. Ugh. Mom had already texted:

Hi, honey! Your dad and I are hoping for an updated "job report." How'd the interview go?

In the few months I'd been home, Mom and Dad had gone from being "patient" to being "helpful," sending me leads and asking everyone's cousin if they knew of any internships. I put my phone back down and sighed, frustrated with myself for not meeting their expectations.

"Young lady, I'm not much for romance either." The woman looked down at my phone on the table then back at me before starting right into it. "When I was a little girl, we lived in Antionito, a few hours from here, right off the Cumbres rail line. It was different then. Less cars. Less people. More freedom." She used her napkin to wipe invisible crumbs from the countertop.

"My older brothers and I played in the meadows right by the train depot." I took a bite of my sandwich. I love when they remember the extra pickles.

"I looked like you, even the freckles and ponytail. We collected acorns and rocks and sold them at a General Store we built ourselves using junk wood. Our neighbors would give us a nickel or two, which we'd take to the Five and Dime for scoops of vanilla ice cream. That ice cream was better than air conditioning today." By now, the bus had collected the school children, and the bus stop was empty.

I didn't know a thing about trains. I mean, I couldn't tell the difference between a freight engine and the Little Engine that Could, but this lady's sparkle, I liked. And, right about now, I'd much rather be skipping through meadows than scrolling through job postings.

"Sounds fun. Where were your parents?" My own parents still watched me every time I pulled out of the driveway, I thought, taking another bite. Mustard and lettuce squeezed out onto the table, so she passed me another napkin, continuing her story.

"Dad died. Mom worked any odd job. The oddest was park ranger. For a time, we even had a pet squirrel she brought home injured." I didn't know what to say about the pet squirrel, but her mom's job sounded good to me. I bet she came home dirty finger-nailed and full of accomplishment.

"Those meadows were everything," she kept on with her story, sometimes looking at me, but always going back to the window. "We made daffodil chains while waiting for the train to come so we could wave at the passengers. Wouldn't you know, they usually waved back," her eyes laughed at the memory. Now, I was smiling, too. "So many happy times; I thought it'd always be that way. But my older brother ended up getting a job for the Rio Grande Southern Railroad and headed down to Albuquerque." She exhaled and looked back at the window for a moment.

I cleared my throat before I spoke, which made it seem like I was go-

ing to say something grand, “I know what you’re taking about.” I wiped my mouth and fidgeted with my own napkin. Here I was, sharing more than I ever had, to a stranger in a sandwich shop. I continued, “I’m happiest outdoors, too. I even minored in environmental science, but the only outdoor jobs hiring are for landscapers and farm hands. I saw an ad for a snow shoveler that pays \$22 an hour. But that one doesn’t start until November.” The door jangled; the lunch rush had begun, with a crowd of folks taking their 30-minute away from the daily grind.

“Well, what makes you happy?” How about that for a question? So different than what I’d been fielding since graduation, *what do you want to do?* Until now, I thought they were one and the same.

“Me? I have no idea,” I sipped the last of my small cup of water. “I just graduated from Denver University this summer. I followed the advice from every high school graduation speech; I soaked up each moment, made friends with professors, joined student clubs, and tried to keep my student loans down.” I didn’t mention that I already knew the State of Colorado permitted backyard farming; home grow laws allow twelve marijuana plants per house. I couldn’t tell her that I grew two plants in my closet under a UV light junior year, using directions I found online. Not to get high, but to make a salve for my snow-chapped cheeks and lips.

She reached for her iced tea, stirring the glass with one of those long spoons nobody keeps at home. When the server offered a refill, she replied, “Thank you, no.”

“So, what happened?” she asked, eyeing the last of my fries like she was going to grab one, but she didn’t.

“Following all those directions should have led me to my next step. I should be on my way. Yet, here I am at Ruben’s, not going to the interview my parents are waiting to hear about.”

Just yesterday, my mom left a present on my bed—a teal colored leather day planner. It’s the same bed I’ve had since middle school, with a trundle tucked away for sleepovers. I looked down at the planner, shoved in my interview bag. Across the top, it read *Planning on a Great Day!* with the protective cellophane wrapper still intact.

“So, was this a love story about your brother?” I ask. It was time to go, but I didn’t get up.

“No, child,” she touched my fingers tips with her hand. “It’s a love story about me. It’s a love story about you. If you want to work with your hands, do that. We’re allowed to fall in love with our lives.”

“Is that why you smile?” I gathered the sandwich wrapper and napkin for the trash.

“I smile because I’m happy.” She tilted her heads toward me, raising her eyebrows as she spoke, “But easy and happy are not the same. We wake up every morning and make a choice.” She placed her hands back down in her

lap, giving me a moment.

“I think, sometimes, that’s true. And, sometimes, it’s hard to do.” My mom keeps insisting that *she just wants me to be happy*. But, let’s say, for example, would she really be ok with my growing medicinal marijuana? Do I owe my parents an office job for helping me with tuition? “Maybe I can just tell my folks that I want to work in the CBD supply chain.” For a woman with such an easy smile, she didn’t laugh at my joke. The truth is, I wasn’t comfortable explaining it wasn’t really a joke. That I’d been mulling over making edibles from scratch, however, did seem crazy. I want to use “Mom’s Marvelous Brownie” recipe.

The woman collected her things and dropped her tea glass in the dirty dishes bin. “I am just so glad we met,” she beamed another smile my way. “I hope you love your life. Maybe, you can start by running through the meadows.” I chuckled. She grinned some more. “Don’t laugh! Actually, do laugh! Go dance through meadows and laugh. Goodbye, my dear.” The bell on the door jangled again as she walked out.

Fall in love with my life? Huh, I liked the sound of that. I went back to the counter and ordered three sandwiches to go. I would talk to my parents over dinner. Maybe Dad could help me build the raised garden beds. For this conversation, I was going to need a lot of extra pickles.

Man at Sea
by Jack Nugent

Hills and valleys on the ocean's surface softly clapped against the sides of the 28-foot Skipjack within which Alan sporadically slept. The rising sun annexed the unbroken edge of the horizon in a wash of orange-satin light; Alan snored seemingly in sync with the gentle to and fro of the ocean's chaotic rhythm. A shift in the orientation of the vessel nudged him awake.

He hadn't dreamed that night—not that he could remember. His eyes burned from the depth of his seasick sleep. The sultry sunrise reflected off the surface of the sea like a mirror in every direction. Nothing interrupted the vast expanse of open ocean surrounding him. He yawned and smiled. He had awoken into the purest state of contentment that he could imagine.

Alan cut a plain dollar-store bagel in half, smearing a scant dollop of dollar-store cream cheese onto it with a filet knife in the cabin's minimal kitchenette. He set each slice on the table behind him and hand ground coffee beans. He took his morning shit in the pit toilet opposite a single-burner stove, sink, cutting board and oven. He felt somewhat bad for not doing his business over the edge of the boat, given that the space in the toilet's waste tank was limited, and that he would have to live with the smell for the remaining 36 hours of his weekend at sea—but something felt good about exercising his prerogative onto an enclosure within which he could move his bowels without risk of falling overboard. Comforts were few whilst at sea.

He opened the two-flap doors of the cabin onto the deck, placed both hands at his lower back, and stretched his torso and spine with a yawn. He was in sandals, wearing a paint-stained hoodie branded with his son's high school lacrosse team, as well as blue-plaid pajama pants that hung loosely on his hips. He let out a hoarse cough and began to spray down the deck from the bloody mess of yesterday's bait run.

The run had gone well, and he caught enough appropriately sized flying fish to supply a weekend worth of kite fishing for an elusive breed of Pacific Bluefin Tuna that, according to the people of the various fishing channels Alan frequented on his VHF radio, were biting as of the previous week, and that the weather this weekend could be conducive for the catching of a giant. He flipped on the fish report channel.

—*[If anyone wants numbers for the wide open tuna it's 30-16 over 25]*

—*[could you repeat those numbers cap'n?]*

—*[there's a pod a' bottlenose out here, helluva sight]*

He then changed the channel from fish report to the general communications channel and continued tidying up the deck. The dated deck-speak-

ers emitted a dissonant hum that could force a meditative state even within the least spiritual person.

—*[Boat outside the Coronado Islands come back]*

—*[Boat outside the Coronado Islands come back—I'm having boat trouble—can't get my second prop to turn over]*

Alan pictured a two propped fishing boat spinning in circles at 20 knots and chuckled to himself while he sprayed the remaining scales and gunk into the drain at the back of the deck. He thought about maybe joining in on the conversation and then decided not to.

It was imperative that Alan keep each flying fish alive for the entire weekend in the 25 gallon tank that sat at the center of the boat's swim step. This was made possible by the noisy water pump connected to the bilge pump that constantly refreshed the tank's water and was to remain on at all times.

After clearing the deck of its thin layer of blood and scales, and being unable to cut through the grease that had formed overnight, Alan began winding his expensive reels. He always considered it good luck to keep them equipped with fresh 80-pound test—a gauge that, rest assured, could pull in a more or less 200 pound fish if wielded by the right man. After placing each of his three, top-of-the-line rod-reel combos into their respective holsters at the floor of the captains deck, he lifted a hatch hidden under the stairs to the cabin and removed two wooden boxes—one much larger than the other, both their own form of humidior, encrusted with the white salt-stains from many years use at sea. He sat in the small nook next to the bathroom stall and opened the smaller box first, methodically unlatching the small brass clasps at its front. In the box was an assortment of Cuban cigarillos. He took one out, snipped the end with a plastic clipper, tossed it into his mouth, and lit it with a dull-silver Zippo lighter. Closing the box and scooting it to the other side of the table, he fake-cracked his knuckles dramatically and unlatched the larger box. In it was a red and yellow kite, folded in half and set into molded foam next to an assortment of dowels. Alan took a heavy breath and assembled the lucky kite—the one he only brought out when the blues were wide open. He just needed to wait for the wind to pick up.

An indecipherable voice was jumbled by radio static on the VHF.

He knew, somewhere deep in his soul, that this was the weekend that he would finally do it—this was the weekend he would bring home the elusive giant Bluefin of his fishing dreams. He saw visions of cozy summer nights, smoking the class—A tuna he caught completely on his own. He found it somewhat fitting that he had embarked alone, just this once—something he normally would call somewhat irresponsible and exceedingly difficult, but his normal partner, David, one of his first friends from attending meetings at the local AA, was sick with the flu and couldn't be bothered. He lacked the dedication to his craft that Alan so proudly withheld.

This solo excursion had also presented Alan with a coincidence that

reinforced an idea which had presented itself in a chance revelation months before—a revelation that normally comes to men his age in the form of a sports car or vintage motorcycle project, but came to him instead in the form of a small plastic baggie on the ground outside his office door several weeks before. It was time for a change.

With only his index finger and thumb, Alan gingerly lifted a corner of the satin lining of his lucky kite box to reveal a clear plastic baggie laying in a hidden compartment. In this baggie was his favorite fungal friend from his former alcoholic life, one he missed dearly, above all else—with all the drugs and alcohol that fueled his 20s, this one sat at the forefront of his brain when he felt weak and in a crisis of self. He knew precisely what it was the second he almost stepped on it as he left his office on that muggy Friday afternoon, but could muster no idea for who would ever leave something so precious on the ground in such an obscure, industrial quarter of his small coastal town—roughly 2 grams of dried cubensis mushrooms. They stared him in the eyes and beckoned his attention, his eyebrows raised as he dragged his cigarillo. He blew a billow of smoke out of the cabin’s doorway that was instantly lost in the gusts.

Through the smoky cabin light, he saw his cell phone flipped upside down next to the stove. He had vowed to himself to leave it where it was, just for the weekend, but the arterial leash that connected his cyborg mind to the media beckoned him insatiably. He picked up the phone, unlocked the screen, and on it were an endless array of emails, texts, and notifications—different splinters of his life that demanded a slice of his being. He crumbled under their weight. He put the phone in the cupboard beneath the sink, next to the coffee grinder.

* * *

The cawing of a lone albatross directly overhead severed the white-noise of the wind and radio hum. Several hours had passed in waiting for a weather window, and Alan was hastily hand-grinding the mushrooms in the cabin with the coffee grinder.

After the fungus had been completely pulverized into a fine powder, he placed 4 slices of whole grain bread on the cabin’s countertop. On each piece of bread he applied the same dollar-store cream cheese he ate for breakfast, 3 slices of dollar-store ham, several shakes of dollar-store buffalo sauce, a hefty pinch of salt and pepper, and, on the left sandwich only, poured the entirety of the ground mushrooms onto the cream cheese. He closed each sandwich carefully, meticulously aligning each topping and piece of bread, making sure that each one was indistinguishable from the other. Only one sandwich would be eaten that day and he had decided that he would leave the decision to chance, in mortal fear of the guilt that would arise from such a breach in his almost 25 years of sobriety.

He took a long breath and placed each sandwich on top of an identi-

cal napkin, then placed each sandwich and napkin into a tin-foil wrapping and set both packages into a 5 gallon bucket from below the sink. In a circular motion, he shuffled the sandwiches in the bucket. He then brought the bucket out of the cabin and onto the deck—he noticed the wind was starting to really blow and that it was time to move. He wasted no time choosing one of the foil balls, he unwrapped a bruised and malformed version of one of the perfect sandwiches he had constructed and, without hesitation, stuffed it into his mouth in 3 and a half bites breathing aggressively through his nose.

* * *

It was finally time to begin, the early afternoon sun beat the boats deck like a drum, and the winds whipped relentlessly. The boat rocked like a rollercoaster, and Alan’s overconsumption of dollar-store cream cheese was not agreeing with his ever-weakening stomach. He stumbled across the deck, holding on to whatever he could—side rails, crow’s perch ladder, bait tank, fight chair—and then vomited over the side of the deck into the violent water.

After several minutes of emptying his gut, Alan gurgled the last bile from his burning throat and spat it in stringy heaps over the railing. He worried about if he had held the sandwich down long enough, that is, if he had eaten the right one, for the drugs to take effect. The weather window he was waiting for had arrived and was quickly running out—he checked the bait tank for life, some of the winged fish had died and floated to the top of the tank, but some were alive, waiting to be casted to the sea. He plucked a live one with a small bait-net, pivoted on his bare heels and stumbled to the cabin to ready the kite. The wind howled and the waves crashed while Alan’s brain sloshed inside his skull.

“This here—careful to make sure the—that’s right—c’mon—hmpf,” he whispered to himself as he haphazardly finished assembling the lucky kite, sun-bleached, salty, and delicate with its many years at sea.

He removed one rod and reel from the holster outside of the cabin-hatch and attached the end of the line to the bottom of the kite, checking every other second to make sure the fish was still flopping. He set the kite-rod back into its holster and removed the heftier rod next to it. He held the end of the second line carefully and tied a double barbed, three-inch eagle-hook to the end of the thread. With a dirty rag he found his confidence, stifled his post-retch trembling with a deep breath, and picked up the flying fish by the tail. He found the soft spot between the anterior dorsal tendon and the crown of the fish’s skull and tore through it with the hooked line. The dirty rag was painted instantly shit-red as the fish squirmed from his grasp and landed, wings writhing, with a wet smack on the floor.

“Sunuva—god dammit.”

Alan pressed his left hand into his back as he bent down to retrieve the pitiful creature. The fish was alive, and so was he—in a way he could only

be in that moment, with the air blowing hard and the ocean writhing. The sea was the last wonder in his life; today he meant to unearth its final mystery. Turning toward the captain's wheel, behind the table and next to the bed, he lifted the anchor, and set off at a slow troll, pilotless, against the wind.

He stumbled out of the cabin into the screaming gales, rod and flying fish in hand. Fastening an expensive goldfinger clip to both the kite line and the bait line, he dropped the fish into the vessel's wake. It attempted to return into the void of the ocean depths, but it was instead held aloft at the surface of the water by the kite that Alan then released into the wind above it.

He then sighed, placing the rods into the holders at each arm of the fight-chair, his hands in the air above his graying hair.

Hobbling on each aching leg stiffly, back and forth, he took the cigarrillo he held between his canine teeth and rolled it in his fingers, contemplating its worth, and cast it into the sea: its cherry hissed in the waves. The white-capped waves looked almost rhythmic in their chaos. The line was let out slowly, exactly as he had seen on the internet a hundred times. Shielding his gaze from the sun's, he squinted and eyeballed the ideal trolling distance from bait to boat, about 75 yards, more or less.

—*[Hooked a biggie! They're wide open! Come n' get 'em! Yeehaw]* a man's voice on the VHF that Alan recognized from earlier said. He felt a wave of anticipation wash over him and tingle the hairs on his thinning scalp.

All at once the wind began to slow, the kite line began to bend, and the wail of the wind fell to an unwanted peace. The color of the ocean faded away from its midnight blue to a devastating purple, and back to blue. Alan's heart replaced his jugular, his teeth clenched, and as the kite hit the water without the heavy wind to carry it, the unmistakable zip of drag being pulled from the reel tore through the fresh silence like a fire alarm.

"Oh—oh fuck," Alan said, jumped, and scuttled into the fight chair.

—*[that's another one! Oh man]* another voice said on the VHF.

His palms were sweating as they gripped the foam-bound handle of the rod, one above the reel, one below. He waited for several infinite seconds before he hoisted the rod behind his head and set the hook into the maw of whatever beast was on the end of the line. His breathing was short and inconsistent, he slid the end of the rod into the holster between his legs and let the fish have some line. Dark grey sweat stains encroached from beneath his armpits and after deciding that the hook was set, he began the ebb and flow of pulling in line by cocking the rod behind his head and reeling it back onto the spool as he lowered it.

Cock, reel, cock, reel.

After almost 30 minutes of fighting the massive weight of the fish, Alan's lumbar began tightening up, the muscles that controlled his grip were spasming, his stomach was churning, and his head felt light and detached

from his body. He became overwhelmed by the fight with which he was barely half-way over with; his body felt brittle and fried. He started gritting his teeth and incoherently making sounds with his tongue to quell the anxiety of potential failure. His heartbeat picked up, and his chest felt like it was being split open slowly by a dull knife. He felt too weak to continue the fight with his old bones and lack of a partner, he was convinced that these shortcomings would bring his failure.

As he looked back out over the ocean, brooding on his condition, he noticed his mouth was dry and his heart was beating harder, but not faster—he perceived a hyper awareness of his skin, wrapped around him like a dull and dry husk. His muscles ached from the cabin's stony vinyl and he felt claustrophobic and trapped in an exponentially aging body. He missed playing football as a teenager, missed the 5k jogs twice a week in his 30s, missed being able to keep his erection long enough to achieve orgasm like he used to before the onset of his 50s. He knew that his life would cease eventually, but that ultimate end had never before felt quite as palpable as it did in that moment—he had never considered that he would feel it coming, however slowly—the encroaching sag of entropy. It horrified him, and made him miss his family—he felt an incessant guilt for using fishing to escape them.

Cock, reel, cock, reel.

The thought loops from several hours before began flooding back into the surface of his conscious brain and as he continued in agony. Why had he canceled the infinitesimal rarity of a weekend trip to see his son, just to go fishing for the blue that he knew he would never have the strength to catch on his own? Why did he let his resentment for his wife's manic spending of their savings cheapen the happiness that thrived effortlessly before their kids started moving out of the house? Why did he choose to dump the rest of his Sertraline prescription into the master bedroom toilet in a lousy attempt to muster his happiness intrinsically? Why did he keep working? Why had he given so much of himself to his business and his church? Why did he continue to sacrifice so much of his life to hard work to provide for a wife and kids who had never once considered his sacrifice? For a moment he hated them, and none more than himself.

Cock, reel, cock, reel.

His body burned in lactic fire, his vision bent and blurred.

He looked into the desolation of the sea and envisioned himself as a grotesque creature dissected at the stomach with various arteries stretched and fastened to the things in his life that sucked him dry—each arterial fuel line pumping liquid contentment into each mandatory commitment, ever hungry for more and more. He thought about how he could possibly sever and kill the connections without subsequently ending his own life. How had his own life—his own individuality—become dominated by a conglomerate of people, places, and things that could not live without him? The vision rotted

in his mind as he continued cocking and reeling, his eyes burned with his muscles. His feeling of being needed seemed like it should be a source of pride in a family man's life, but it felt to him like a cage to which his dependents held the key. He felt a keen defragmentation of his identity as the winds receded slightly and the hiss of the line's drag became the only sound, aside from the light patting of the waves against the sides of the boat, to distract him from his thoughts.

The existential typhoon dominating his conscious thought was a feeling that he did not at all recognize.

He considered the translucent fishing line as a connection of spirit between the fish and his own body. He felt empowered by his impending victory and made a hapless effort to set his thoughts back on track to finish what he had started.

Alan's breathing grew heavy, his heart felt weak and his arms weaker. The fish was 50 some ought yards from the boat—Alan knew that this was it—that this would be the moment he finally brought in a giant blue. He would take a picture with it at the docks and brag to David about how much he missed out, pay a dock-worker less than minimum wage to filet and shrink wrap the fish into nice packages to give away to his friends and family, sear thin-cut chunks of only the best meat for a sashimi dinner with the guys from work, call his son and tell him how hard he fought and hear how proud his son is of him and how thankful he is for having such an inspiring dad, call his wife and get no answer because she rarely answered calls from his cell anymore.

Alan reached his aching right leg over to the wall of the boat to kick the gaffing hook from its hanger in preparation for the fish's surfacing. Ten yards down he'd reckon.

"Slowly, Slowly," Alan said as he narrowed the range and intensity of his cocks and reels.

—[*it's probably you*] said a jumbled voice on the VHF radio

Alan twisted his neck to look back at the radio set, while holding his white knuckled hands firmly on the rod's handle.

The line pierced the water just feet from the boat as the fish pulled into the depths in one last attempt at escape as he began cocking without reeling—a technique that his father had taught him when he was young, one useful for heavy fish when they dive directly below the boat. A thought invaded his mind about the possibilities of losing the line. His sweating intensified as he slowly reduced the drag on the reel and pulled on through the searing pain in his back and arms. His body felt constructed of sick. The fish was tiring, but he was tired. He closed his eyes as a black mass began to reveal itself below the surface of the water, where the hue moved from almost black to turquoise. He couldn't bear to know its truth until he had won the fight.

Cock. Rest. Cock. Rest.

—[*Do something about it, coward*] the same jumbled voice said through the VHF mockingly.

Alan squinted through his eyelids and scanned the horizon, turning away from the water, making it impossible to identify the species at the end of his line—he quickly decided he was hearing things. The sea and the sky seemed to breathe together in solitary waves across the horizon, suggesting idyllic calm to his pumping heart. The line bobbed slowly with the fish's dying tail-beat as he clumsily balanced the gaff on the top of his bare foot and kicked the handle end of it up into his right armpit.

"I'm losing it," he whispered to himself as he readied the gaff in his right hand and reeled the tired fish with his left.

The black mass formed slowly into the vague shape of a fish. It was massive. Alan held his breath and reeled with surgical care. He stepped out of the fight chair and hung the gaff over the edge of the boat. The fish's entire form came into view—the most invariably perfect Pacific Bluefin Tuna he had ever seen alive. Exhaustion bore a piercing pain into his abdomen as he waited for the beast to rotate in the water so he could gaff the side of its stomach.

"Oh god, *thank god*," Alan wheezed, still holding the rod in his left hand.

All at once, without a split second of hesitation in his fatigue, he thrust the gaff over the side of the boat, severing the top of the tuna's head between the dorsal fin and the crown of the fish's skull.

—[*I'm talking to you Alan—watch your grip*] the same voice over the VHF radio said, without the mask of radio static.

Alan fell backwards, and tried to steady himself on the left arm of the fight chair—his feet slipped out from under him.

Within seconds of Alan losing his grip on the gaff the fish jolted back to life and hurtled itself downwards in a heaving surge of propulsive power; it left a trail of sodden red behind it until it disappeared into the sanctuary of the ocean depths, rod and reel trailing behind it.

"No, no—fuck!" Alan screamed and stared into the void. Both of his hands gripped the thinning hair on the sides of his head.

He kicked the wall of the deck with a sandaled foot and gnashed his teeth while holding his big toe. Wading through an all-red sea of rage, he walked to the cabin, flung open the hatch-doors, picked up the microphone attached to the VHF, and inhaled profoundly.

—[*Who are you, you son of a bitch? I'm no coward. I am a man. A good man. I'm the best man that I can be. You don't know shit about shit. I own a business. I work hard. I can retire whenever I want. I work so my family doesn't have to. Because I care. Because I'm selfless. Because I am a family man. I bought a home that my family loves. I have a home that my family loves. That I love. I own a boat. I have a 401k. I can pay for it. If you think you can sit behind your radio and call me a coward—you're the fuckin' coward.*]

My wife loves me. My son looks up to me. They love me. I'm living the Dream. Who're you? You made me lose my fish. Who the hell are you? You made me lose my fucking fish. Fuck you.] Alan wailed back into the VHF mic and coughed into his shirt. He was answered with a moment of abrasive silence until the static shifted to signal the activation of another mic. He received no answer.

He dropped the mic on the ground.

"I'm living the dream," Alan said again to himself.

Barnes & Noble Is A Terrible Place To Have A Breakdown

By Taryn Boyle

The Goblin lives in the space between my eyes and brain,
his spindly fingers intertwined within the muscles,
strung taught like an instrument.

The Goblin is a creature of his own yellow-toothed convenience,
he does not tell me when to laugh at a bad joke or
when to hold my tongue or
not to lose my shit in public.

The Goblin pulls a string one afternoon
and I find myself standing in a Barnes and Noble,
between the wine-mom novels and murder mysteries,
wondering where I'd even parked the fucking car.

The Goblin clearly doesn't care for comic books
or self-help novels when he lead me here, no,
titles like "One Tough Cowboy" or "Surrender To Me" seem to be more his
taste.

The Goblin and I blink

at the rows of these overpriced paperback porn novels and I swear to god,
one of the shirtless men on a pocket edition cover just winked at us.

The Goblin digs his fingers deep and I am

cut out:

gasping for air, falling to the ground, the latest E.L. James stabs me in the
back,

but Sweaty Cowboy and Shirtless Man can't save me now.

The Goblin clutches the veins behind my eyes

as tunnel vision sets in and I wonder if

I'll drown here in the nation's largest retail bookseller when someone asks,

If I'm interested in a free months' trial for the Kindle?

The Goblin screams and laughs and chokes on spit

and I'm right there with him, ready to be cracked wiiiiide open, this is it

The Climax, are you ready?! Get your cameras in position, people, she's gonna
blow

but

I can

already feel

him fading

back

behind his curtain
as I break
the
surface,

and I almost miss him, when a security badge clutching my shoulders asks, do
I need 9-1-1?

No, but is that free trial still available?

Badge Number 1184

by Tim Potter

During his ten years as a conductor on the “Red Cars,” the colloquial name for Southern Pacific Railroad’s extensive subsidiary of electrified inter-urban railcars, Harry Doyle Sr. was known for his professionalism and polite, if at times gruff, demeanor. Most of his regular passengers on his standard Four-Mile Beach-Seal Beach-Newport run were generally glad to see him. On rare occasions, though, an unruly or disrespectful individual would make an appearance on his 1000-class car, and it would then take a great deal of effort on his part to control his Ulster Irish temper.

Often a troublesome patron would threaten to report him, to which his pat reply was always: “The name’s Doyle—Badge Number 1184. Make sure you get it right. They might not even know I’m here!” His seeming fearlessness and self-confidence in most cases served not only to quiet the obnoxious passenger but allowed him to vent some spleen at his superiors, particularly the nobs in dispatch.

This act did not always work. However, over the years, he and his burly motorman, Earl Whiteside, had worked out a system for dealing with the occasional yahoo. When non-emergency trouble arose that required more than a simple kind word, such as a patron that would refuse to pay his fare, Doyle would reach up and lightly pull the bell chord three times, emitting a soft *ting-ting-ting*. Earl would then slow the train to halt. Usually the mere sight of the imposing Whiteside walking back from the motorman’s compartment with the control handle in his hand was enough to make dead-beats launch themselves from the car with alacrity. One time, though, a well-dressed, pasty-faced fellow with a briefcase got on at Surfside and refused to pay his fare. Doyle tapped out his warning message and the car slowed. The “businessman” became irate: “I have places to be. Don’t you know who I am?”

“No, I do not, sir. But if you won’t pay your fare, you’ll have to get off,” replied Doyle.

“I have a mind to report a low-grade flunkey like you!”

“The name’s Doyle—Badge Number 1184. Make sure you get it right. They might not even know I’m here!” After a short pause, the conductor reiterated, “If you won’t pay your fare, sir, you’re going to have to get off.”

The man in the business suit suddenly became enraged. Quickly rising to his feet, he announced, “Well! You *put* me off!”

Standing up was his mistake. Doyle struck him with an open palm on the fellow’s right shoulder, which spun him sideways. Then, grabbing the man by his coat collar and the back of his belt, he ran the miscreant off the back

platform into the warm sand of Bolsa Chica.

Adding insult to injury, Doyle then kicked the son-of-a-bitch's briefcase out on top of him.

Whiteside had seen what had happened, about-faced, and went back to his compartment. The Red Car moved on to the applause of the regulars.

Not all malcontents were males. Regularly, on that same run south, a large, well-to-do woman who always wore loud dresses and a wide-brimmed, flower-bedecked hat would get on at Seal Beach, move directly to the first right hand seat at the front of the car and throw the window wide open. She evinced the air of royalty and would even brow-beat someone out of her "regular seat" if some lesser mortal had the temerity to ensconce themselves there. As the P.E. sped south, the other patrons would invariably be pelted with gusts of wind and wind-blown sand, the lady in question being blithely ignorant of the other patrons' plight. One day when she got on, "her" window was stuck.

"Conductor!" she called out in her high-pitched nasal voice. "My window is stuck. Open it immediately!"

"Just a moment, Mam," replied Doyle as he was working his way to the front of the car. "I'm collecting fares."

"Conductor, I DEMAND that you open this window immediately or I shall report you to your superiors!"

Conductor Doyle indeed lost his composure at this point. As he moved toward the woman, he reprised his mantra: "That's Badge Number 1184! Make sure you get it right! They might not even know I'm here!" In a moment, he stood over the now wide-eyed matron. Without saying a further word, he grasped the window handles and, with all his might, yanked upward. The sill flew aloft crashed to halt. A fresh blast of Pacific air rushed into the car and tore the matron's compendious chapeau from her coiffed, greying locks and sent it skittering down the length of the car and out the open starboard back door. Peals of laughter erupted. Thoroughly chastened by embarrassment, the bitty shut her gob for the rest of the trip. In fact, Doyle wasn't sure if he ever saw the obnoxious cow again.

* * *

In later years, Harry Doyle, Sr. always looked back fondly at his service with the Pacific Electric. He enjoyed taking people to where they needed or wanted to go, be it to work or a holiday or visiting relatives. He enjoyed watching the scenery of then largely undeveloped Southern California roll by. For the most part, it was pleasant work. And in an odd way he was proud of his badge number, which had become a sort of battle cry when dealing with the rare unruly passenger. But there was one incident, which occurred not long before he had to leave the line following a bout of typhoid fever, that made him especially proud of that number.

Prior to World War Two, his hometown and adjacent San Pedro were

the main ports of the U.S. Navy's Pacific Battle Fleet (not San Diego, as some historical nabobs have written). In the late 1920s, as Harry and his wife Eva began thinking about a college future for Harry Jr., Conductor Doyle began taking extra work on the weekends. These extra assignments usually consisted of hauling sailors and the odd Marine (are there any other kind?) from the San Pedro Landing up to Downtown LA for weekend liberty, where the blue-jackets and gyrines would proceed to get drunk out of their minds, raise hell, and, of course, try to bed any willing female in sight. Invariably, at the end of liberty, he would find a few swabbies, en route back to their ships, passed out drunk at the P.E. Main Terminal at 6th and Main, and would have to encourage some of their shipmates to get them up and on the train before they were secured by the Shore Patrol and have to go to the brig—which would become a permanent black mark on their service record.

"Hey, you men!" Doyle would call out. "Get this man up and on the train before the SP's come along!"

As the sailor suits of those days had no pockets, the bluejackets would keep their money in one of their socks. In cases like this, Doyle would reach into the swabbie's sock, remove the required fare from his "roll", then replace the remainder of his money along with a slip from his notepad on which he had jotted down his name, badge number (1184!), and how much money had been taken for fare. Being a former-swabbie himself, he had a lot of empathy for these guys. On one occasion though, he came across a passed-out sailor from the aircraft carrier *Saratoga*. Doyle dug through the guy's socks, but fellow was flat broke. Harry paid his fare for him, leaving a note in sock saying his fare was paid by "*Conductor Harold Doyle, Badge #1184, Pacific Electric Line*". Doyle shrugged. He figured it was a good deed for a fellow sailor, but that he'd never see that that money again.

Some months later, following a famous successful practice raid on the Panama Canal by the *Saratoga* (an exercise the Japanese Navy studied assiduously in those pre-Pearl Harbor days), on one of Harry's rare days off, the young bluejacket he had helped showed up at the Doyle's front door. He had gotten Harry's address from the P.E. dispatch office. He not only thanked the Doyle's profusely and paid them back the cost of his fare but brought them several little trinkets of exotic wood and ivory that he had purchased during the Sara's stop in Panama, including a small ebony elephant with actual ivory tusks—a memento that sat on Harry Sr.'s dresser for years. This occurred at time when the pay of U.S. enlisted men was rather paltry, and Doyle was touched.

In the Service, word gets around.

A few months later, Doyle and Whiteside were temporarily assigned to the Four-Mile Beach-Los Angeles run. The *Saratoga* had just pulled in after a training exercise and was now anchored off Four-Mile Beach near the battleships. One day he was working a three-car train. The ship's band from

the *Saratoga* were scheduled to play in a concert in L.A. and had boarded Downtown. The bluejackets were interspersed throughout the three cars.

At Compton Station a few people got on, including a skinny, dark-hued gentleman in a rumpled gray suit who took a seat toward the front of the middle car. As usual, Harry made his way up the cars taking tickets and fares. When he got to the man in question, he said, "Fare, sir."

"I ain't pay-in'. Ain't got no money, so I ain't payin'."

"Then, sir, I'm afraid you'll have to get off the train."

"Hah! You put me off."

Ah-hh shit, thought Doyle, *not again*. Turning and reaching up to the bell chord on the port side of the car, he rapidly but gently pulled it three times: *ting-ting-ting*. Whiteside slowed to a halt.

Harry turned and faced the fellow, who half-turned in the seat and glowered at him. The hairs rose on the back of Doyle's Ulster neck, and he started to remove his coat. *God-damn-it. I hate when this happens*, he thought.

Suddenly the *Saratoga* sailors at the back of the car stood as a man. "Is there any problem, conductor?" one of them called out loudly. Doyle looked in their direction. "Ya need any help there, conductor?" shouted another sailor. The assemblage of swab jockeys started to move forward. Harry turned around again—and witnessed the non-compliant passenger rapidly exiting the starboard front door. He was very fast.

Thank God for the United States Navy.

Through the windows of the connecting doors, Doyle could see Whiteside approaching. Their eyes met and Harry waved him off. Earl rolled his eyes, shook his head, about faced, headed back the way he had come. In a moment, the P.E., with Badge Number 1184 in charge, was again rolling toward Los Angeles.

The Cuckoo's Song

by Samuel Pflugrath

Dr. Horn drove his bicycle down the lonely country road, and the whip-poor-wills sang in the verdant summer trees above his head. He stopped at the top of the hill a moment to gaze down upon his destination, the Reed Farm, its few buildings silhouetted against the darkening orange sky. Though it was still almost half a mile away, he could already hear the screaming he'd been warned about.

The closer he got, the more decrepit the farm became. He saw no chickens or turkeys, or any other kinds of animals; and a pair of trees planted next to the house stood black and leafless—like antlers sprouting from the very earth itself.

Mrs. Reed greeted him at the door: a small, frail, youngish woman in a black housedress, with bags under her large blue eyes and a sad white face. Her light brown hair was tangled and unwashed: two short tufts on the top of her head stuck straight up like horns.

"He's upstairs," she warbled meekly, "in his room."

She led the doctor up to her son's bedroom. Another scream—impossibly high and yet oddly musical—came from behind the door.

"From the sound of it," the doctor said, "I'd've thought you were torturing parrots."

The boy lay atop his bedsheets—naked, as his bedclothes could no longer fit him. His neck and torso were swollen and his skin taut, while shriveled arms and legs disappeared under sweaty rolls of pasty white flesh. From head to toe, he was almost seven feet long, and in the midsection more than three feet wide.

"Only seven years old!" Dr. Horn exclaimed softly, and Mrs. Reed repeated him with a sigh.

The boy screamed again, loud and high enough to shatter glass. His mother said, "I'm sorry, we don't have any food for you now. But we've brought the doctor! He'll make you better."

The boy groaned, then scratched at his belly with a shrunken, talon-like hand.

"Don't scratch," the doctor said, "You'll tear your skin."

He brushed the patchy blond hair out of the boy's staring blue eyes and placed a hand on his forehead, but then recoiled. The child's feverish skin felt like a balloon ready to burst; but beneath its surface Dr. Horn couldn't feel any bone. Instead, it was soft and airy, like a down pillow.

"I'm opening that window," he said, "the boy's burning up, you'd thi-

nk he's wearing a coat."

"That window stays closed," Mrs. Reed replied. "He can't move much, but at night he tries to climb out it and jump."

"I'll climb out it and fly," the boy said, his voice weak and breathy. "*In my dreams, I fly out that window, and up to the moon.*"

Outside, Dr. Horn could see the sun finally nearing its western terminus, while the great and greenish Buck Moon ascended to the top of the sky. He recoiled with a start when a great horned owl suddenly landed on the windowsill. He saw his own startled white face reflected in its all-knowing eyes before the creature turned to stare instead at the boy—specifically, deliberately.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said, gasping for breath as he closed the blinds, "but this is more than I was prepared for. Before I can continue, I think I'm gonna something for my nerves."

The adults left the room, another empty scream following them. They made their way down to the parlor, where Mr. Reed sat alone: holding his face in his hands, a pair of antlers mounted on the wall behind his head. He was much older than his wife, brown of eye and hair and skin, and dressed in dirty work overalls.

Mrs. Reed gave the doctor some water and apologized for not having any food to offer. "He only stops screaming when he's being fed: now the pantry's empty, and we can barely feed ourselves."

"It was that blasted egg," Farmer Reed growled into his hands.

"Egg?" the doctor asked, scratching at his head of thinning yellow hair; and so, Mrs. Reed explained:

"It was about a month ago—the moon had been full the night before. We were playing out in the fields when he found a bird's egg: in a little hole in the ground, like it'd fallen from the sky. It was bright green, smaller than a chicken's egg—just the perfect size for a child his age to put into their mouth. He thought it was a candy, and before I could stop him, he'd already swallowed it. Said it tasted like moldy cheese, but he ate it anyway. And next day's when he began—"

There came one final scream from above, followed by a loud thud. As the three of them raced up the stairs, they could hear glass shattering.

The boy's room was empty: the window smashed open, and bed-sheets scattered across the floor. Dr. Horn ran to the window, blue eyes flashing with fear at what they might see—but there was nothing on the ground below, even though the oddly green light of the full moon illumined all. Now the night was silent, too: the whip-poor-wills sang no more.

Then the doctor heard both of his hosts screaming, so he turned and looked behind him. In the middle of the floor, amidst the scattered bedsheets and split nearly in half down the middle of the back, there lay an empty and discarded human skin.

* * *

And that was the Cuckoo's Song.

Girlhood

by Matthew Jacobs

We hated our vaginas.
We were always losing things in there.
Batteries,
Little glass vials full of iodine.
We used to hide Rocket Pops inside
Our vaginas,
But we'd forget about them
And they'd melt.

We'd walk home from school with
Red, White, and Blue
Sugar water
Running down our legs
And staining our socks.

Then we'd get ants
In our vaginas.

We hated our vaginas
Because they were itchy
And sticky
And full of ants.

A Story About A Man With A Hole In His Chest

by Madeleine Wojack

This is a story about a man with a hole in his chest. He wasn't sure whether this had always been the case. His doctors could not reach a consensus on this. "Congenital," one had said. "Quit smoking," said another.

But the man with a hole in his chest did not want to stop smoking. He wasn't even sure that was the problem. It was certainly how he had first noticed the hole. Wisps of smoke rising from his shirt collar, little plumes that he enjoyed watching delicately dance out from inside him to join the larger plumes blowing from his mouth.

When he first started smoking, the hole either didn't exist yet or was too small for him to notice. It wasn't until his mid-twenties, after a decade of cigarettes, that he realized there was a hole in his chest. How disconcerting, looking at himself in the mirror with his shirt off, fingering that little hole in his chest. He looked at his teeth, a little yellower than they used to be, and checked his tongue for anything resembling lesions. I'm a little young for lung cancer, he thought. Better go see a doctor just to be sure.

So he did, and then another, and then another. They weren't even sure the smoking was exactly the problem, and it seemed the hole in his chest wasn't really hurting him. Weird, sure, but essentially benign. "We can sew that little guy up," the doctors said. "No more smoke coming out."

"That's okay," the man with a hole in his chest said. "It's a great party trick."

And it was a great party trick. He would take his shirt off and puff and puff and blow it straight up into the air, so that the little wisps were plainly, visibly, coming from the hole in his chest. He repeated this trick so many times he was able to exhale all the smoke through the hole in his chest, which was getting a little bigger every year. The man with a hole in his chest tried shining a light into it while facing the mirror, but couldn't really see what the insides of his chest looked like.

When the hole in his chest was about the size of a quarter, the man got a girlfriend. She met him at a party, and had thought his party trick was hilarious. She, too, was a smoker, but she wanted to quit. This was the fourth time she had tried. After the novelty of couplehood had worn off, she looked long and hard at the hole in his chest, which was nearing silver dollar-size, and quit for good. "Why don't you quit smoking too," she asked the man with a hole in his chest. "We can quit together. It'll be good for us," she said, still staring through his shirt where she knew the hole to be.

So he did try, for her sake. But he would reach for his pack seventeen

times a day, and he couldn't shake why he started smoking in the first place. His first love, in high school, who would smoke behind the building while cutting class. He started smoking to spend time with her, to get close to her, to taste the cigarettes on her lips, but it didn't work. She only liked girls, and he wound up with an addiction. Now, instead of smoking, he would think of that girl who only liked other girls, and the hole in his chest, instead of blowing out smoke, whistled a little bit.

The whistling would not do. It drove his girlfriend crazy, and it drove his coworkers crazy, and it drove people on the bus crazy, and it drove people in the elevator crazy, and in the grocery store, and in the post office.

"It doesn't make sense," his girlfriend cried. "The hole in your chest is much larger than when you purse your lips. It shouldn't be able to make a sound, let alone that high pitch!" The man with a hole in his chest agreed, mystified. "Just start smoking again," she sighed, hands over her face. "Please, just make it stop."

And so, the man with a hole in his chest did start smoking again. His girlfriend, now a full year clean, stopped finding that party trick funny and started finding his cigarette breath intolerable. "It's either me or the hole in your goddamn chest," she screamed.

The man with a hole in his chest looked down at the hole, which was the same size around as his girlfriend's wrist when he wrapped his index finger and thumb around it. He took her wrist and held it against the hole in his chest. "Please don't leave me," he said.

It wasn't enough for her, and the man with a hole in his chest was alone once again. He went back to parties and to his singular party trick, but he was getting older and flabbier and it wasn't so weird and charming anymore, especially now that the hole in his chest was the size of a fist. He still couldn't see directly into the hole even when he was shining a light directly into it. Again, he stood in front of his bathroom mirror, looking at the hole in his chest. He wondered if his ex-girlfriend had been right, that it really was time to close it up.

So he went to the doctor, who referred him to a plastic surgeon. "Interesting," the surgeon said, fingering the hole in the man's chest. "Does this hurt at all? Is there sensation?"

"Yes and no," the man with a hole in his chest said. "I can feel that your finger is in the hole in my chest, but mostly because I can see your finger in the hole in my chest. It's like," he said, struggling for words, "it's like the opposite of a phantom limb."

The surgeon shined a little pen light into the hole in the man's chest. "Very interesting," the surgeon said. "I can see nothing in this hole. It is as if it were a void," the surgeon said, looking from all angles.

"Yes," the man said. It has always been like that.

"Curious," said the surgeon. "Has anyone written a study on you be-

fore?"

"No, sir," the man with a hole in his chest said.

"Well then," the surgeon said, cracking his knuckles altogether, interlaced. The man with a hole in his chest watched the gesture intently. It was almost like out of a movie in its timing and execution. And so, while the surgeon worked on his study of the hole in the man's chest, it grew even larger and darker.

The hole in the man's chest was now large enough for the man to place objects in, like his wallet and his keys. It was much more secure than his pockets. Who was going to pickpocket a pocket in a man's chest? But soon the hole grew too big for his wallet and his keys, and they began to fall out as soon as he started moving. After the first few spills, the man with a hole in his chest realized he could just hold his hand to the hole over his shirt. He walked around looking like he was reciting the Pledge of Allegiance over and over again in his head, a man with the utmost reverence for his country.

Unfortunately, the hole in the man's chest grew so large during the surgeon's study that the man lost his wallet and keys within its depths. This greatly excited the surgeon, who carefully plumbed the hole in the man's chest but could not retrieve any keys or wallets. This excited the surgeon even further, and he immediately called in a physicist. The physicist was excited beyond belief, and he asked if he could participate in the surgeon's study of the hole in the man's chest. The surgeon agreed, and they looked eagerly to the man who possessed the chest with the hole, but he had had enough.

"Please, please stop," the man with a hole in his chest pleaded. "Please just close it up. I'm ready to stop smoking, I'm ready to give up this great party trick, I'm ready to have a girl see me with my shirt off and not turn white as a sheet."

The surgeon and the physicist looked at the man, then at each other, then at the hole in the man's chest. The surgeon looked sheepish, the physicist desperate.

"I'll send you a copy of my study once I complete it," the surgeon told the physicist. The physicist turned three different colors: green, yellow, and red all at once, then left. The surgeon turned back to the man with a hole in his chest. "I guess it's time to finally schedule your operation," the surgeon said.

Three weeks later, the man with a hole in his chest became the man who used to have a hole in his chest. "Thank goodness," the man who used to have a hole in his chest said to himself as he left the hospital. "I was starting to worry that hole in my chest was going to swallow me whole."

Years went by, and the man who used to have a hole in his chest started feeling less and less like a man who used to have a hole in his chest. He quit smoking. He got another girlfriend. He got married to that girlfriend. He raised a family. But every year, he got a little bit lighter. Not much, and ce-

rtainly hidden by his waistband's expansion as he aged. But as he neared his sixties, his doctor noticed how different the number on the scale was from what it really should have been.

"How odd," the doctor said.

"Oh, that," the man who used to have a hole in his chest said. "I suppose that was always going to be the case," he assured his doctor. "You know, I used to have a hole in my chest."

The doctor ordered an MRI and was surprised by the results. "A void," she said. "It looks like you have a void inside of you. But where are your organs? I can hear your heart beat. You consume and expel food and waste. Where is it while it is inside of you?"

The man knew what was coming, and felt powerless to stop it. "Okay, yes," he said. "You may do a study on me."

The doctor trembled with fear and delight. "But I don't want to do a study on you right now," she said. "How are you alive?"

The man who used to have a hole in his chest touched underneath his shirt, touched where that hole used to be. He thought of the girl who only liked other girls, and what her mouth must have tasted like. He wondered what she was doing now, if she was still smoking and still kissing girls. "I don't know," he said. "I have always been like this."

He went outside and bummed a cigarette from the receptionist on her break and lit it, his first in years.

"Smoking kills you know," the receptionist said, and smiled.

"So I've heard," the man who used to have a hole in his chest said. "If something else doesn't get to you first."

The receptionist took a long drag and blew it up into the air. "I hear that," she said. The man who used to have a hole in his chest touched his chest again and whistled, low and long. He wondered what his wife was making for dinner.

The man who used to have a hole in his chest became lighter and lighter each year, until his poor wife was worried he would blow away in the wind. She started ripping out the hems of all his clothes and sewing pebbles into them. The extra weight made the man think of her all throughout the day, until he finally got used to them. Then she tried making him wear a kevlar vest that she got from an Army surplus store, bulletproof and heavy. He wore that for a while until it became too heavy for him. Besides, he enjoyed how weightless he felt, floating around the house. His wife cried every time she saw him lift off the floor.

"You're disappearing! You're leaving me from the inside out!" she screamed at him.

But the man who used to have a hole in his chest knew there was nothing he could do. "I have lived a full and long life and have been a good and loving husband to you, and father to our children," the man told his wife.

"Let me float a little bit."

Soon after this, when the man who used to have a hole in his chest and his poor wife got out of bed one morning, he realized he was shrinking. "Why, we're the same size now," he exclaimed. She turned white as a sheet.

It took several weeks for the man who used to have a hole in his chest to disappear completely. His children and grandchildren all had time to come see him and say their goodbyes. He had time to arrange his will. He had time to comfort his wife, although he was not altogether effective in this as he was now, disconcertingly, the size of her dachshund standing on his hind legs.

"I'm so sorry I have brought you such pain," he told his wife. "When you met me, I thought I was a whole man, with the hole in my chest surgically closed. But this was always going to happen, you see. That hole was always going to win; I see now. I'm just happy you don't have to watch it from the outside in."

There was no burial, as there was no body. There was a camera crew, at first, but the grieving widow made short work of them when she brained the crew's camera with her late husband's kevlar vest. "There is nothing to see here," she screamed at them. "There is nothing even for me to see here. There is nothing, no one here. Only a void catching up."

The Deer

By Brandon Ransom

It all started with a knock, and not a friendly knock. More like the knock of some ominous secret you didn't want to hear, lurking outside the door. It was late in the evening and Dr. Hodge had been in bed. He woke to the *thud, thud, thud!* coming from his front door. Rising curious and confused from his sleep, the Doctor donned a robe and some slippers and stumbled down the hallway.

He made a stop in the bathroom to splash some cold water on his face. It wasn't much, but it made him feel a little more focused. He shut off the sink and stared into the mirror. He was a middle-aged man, with a wrinkled forehead and a receding hairline. A thick, dark moustache sat under his nose, with flecks of gray to go with his hair. Friends said it made him look distinguished. Dr. Hodge thought it made him look old. He shook his head once more to clear his thoughts and headed back down the hallway.

He crept so slowly that he felt oddly like a thief in his own home. Approaching the door, he wondered who could be calling on him at this late hour. Hopefully there was no emergency. Work had been very busy the past week, and he dreaded the thought of seeing to a patient at this hour.

Dr. Hodge swung open the door with the resolve to dismiss without hesitation whomever was knocking. But just as soon as that determination had filled him, it left and was replaced with bewilderment. In front of him stood a young boy, no higher than the doorknob. He had messy brown hair and wore a gray coat that was perhaps a size too big.

"Message for you, sir!" the boy exclaimed as he shoved a package into the Doctor's hands. Then, quick as a startled cat, he pivoted on his foot and took off into the night.

"Wait—" Dr. Hodge began, but the boy kept running and the words were lost on an empty street.

Too tired to worry, Dr. Hodge shut and bolted the door, then went to his living room and sat on the couch. He considered the package. It contained something hard and round. He tore it open with great interest and dumped the contents into his lap. There was a brass pocket watch and a photograph. He picked up the pocket watch. It was dirty and dented, but otherwise similar to one he owned. Setting down the watch, Dr. Hodge picked up the photograph. It showed the remains of a burned building. Smoke rose to the sky in thick, black clouds, and wooden beams burned black protruded from brick walls. Now, it was only the skeleton of a house. The memory of what was once a home.

Turning the photo over, Dr. Hodge saw an inscription: This is how you will die. He looked at the building again and, to his horror, recognized it

as his own home.

"It's not possible," Dr. Hodge whispered to himself. But there was no mistaking the wooden railing on the stairs that he had built himself, and the small garden, now covered in soot, that sat under the window.

Then, another thought struck him. He picked up the watch again and studied it closely. Rubbing off some of the soot with his thumb, he noticed the initials "T.H." had been engraved on the back. With some dread, Dr. Hodge moved to his desk where he kept his own pocket watch. Picking it up, he saw what he expected. The same initials in the same style.

"Thomas Hodge," the Doctor muttered to himself.

Then he became angry. Someone must be playing a trick, he thought. But who would do such a thing? None of his friends would, and he could think of no one that hated him enough to be so cruel. Then his mind raced. What if it wasn't a trick? What if someone had foreseen his death? No, he decided, that's absurd.

Waving away all his worries, Dr. Hodge placed the watch and the photograph on his desk and returned to his bed. He would consider what to do about this messenger in the morning. For now, he was tired, and all that mattered was sleep.

When morning came, thoughts of the mysterious package were beginning to fade. Why worry about it, Dr. Hodge concluded. There was no way the future could be seen, and therefore no merit to this facetious warning. The Doctor brewed himself a pot of coffee, made breakfast and, after eating and reading the paper, headed out to his office for work.

The Doctor lived in a small town outside London. Little cookie-cutter brick houses lined the street. Aside from a homemade stair rail and a small window garden, Dr. Hodge's house was no different than the rest. Across the street was a large park that the Doctor occasionally went to meditate in. He had lived in this neighborhood since he was a child. He knew everyone and everyone knew him. He had helped everyone on his street and the next one over, kids and grown-ups alike. He was a friend. He could be trusted. And yet, the Doctor still lived alone. "One day you'll find someone," people would say. Dr. Hodge wasn't sure if he needed a someone or just something new. Right now, he needed to get to work. He threw on a winter coat and stepped outside.

It was a pleasant morning. The crisp winter air blew along the street, rustling trees and stirring leaves on the ground, taking with it all the worries of the previous day. The hospital was just a mile down the road, and the Doctor decided to walk. He needed time to be alone anyway. Dr. Hodge walked without haste. Today, unlike last night, there was no thought of doom. Only calm satisfaction.

Dr. Hodge wasn't sure what drew his attention across the street. Per-

haps it was a bird flying by or a breeze, or maybe it was just happenstance. But he saw him. Standing next to a light pole, clearly trying to keep warm, was the young boy who had dropped off the package the night before. His eyes were locked on the doctor. Dr. Hodge stopped for a moment and stared back. There seemed to be something hidden behind the boy's big, green eyes. He considered talking to the child, but shook his head and quickly determined to move on.

But he didn't move. His feet were locked in place and his body refused to go anywhere but to the boy. Curiosity had crept back in, and Dr. Hodge wanted answers.

"No," he told himself. "It's ridiculous. Better to just forget about it."

But he couldn't. Defeated, and against his better judgement, Dr. Hodge made his way across the street to where the boy stood.

The boy had so far kept eye contact, but as Dr. Hodge approached, he dropped his gaze and turned to leave. Hodge's quick "WAIT!" stopped him in his tracks. He turned back to the doctor, suddenly looking sheepish, like a thief caught in the cookie jar.

"I want to talk to you," Dr. Hodge said.

"I don't know anything about the package!" the boy blurted out.

"No, I'm sure you don't," said the Doctor. "But you do know something about who gave it to you."

The boy's face twisted.

"He said he'd pay me ten dollars to deliver it to you. Pointed out your house to me and everything. I thought ten dollars sounded good so I did it. I hope it wasn't bad. I'm really sorry. Really, really, re-I"

"Settle down, settle down!" Dr. Hodge ordered, placing his hands on the boy's shoulders. "I'm not angry with you. You've done nothing wrong."

"Really?" the boy said, clearly relieved.

"Really," Dr. Hodge repeated. He was quiet for a moment, then asked the boy his name.

"Lewis," the boy beamed.

"Well, Lewis, tell me who gave you the package."

"I don't know," Lewis said. "Some guy. Told me to deliver the package to your house. Said if I did it, he'd pay me."

"Ten dollars?"

"That's right"

Dr. Hodge sighed. "Did you get your ten dollars?"

"Yeah," Lewis said, smiling. He reached into his pocket and pulled out some sweets. "Bought me a whole bunch of candy."

The Doctor chuckled. "Good," he said. "Where did you meet him? The man who gave you the money."

Lewis pointed down the street. "Right outside the candy store. I went in after he paid me and bought my stash. Boy, was the clerk surprised to see

all my candy."

Dr. Hodge chuckled again. "And you couldn't tell what he looked like?"

"No, sorry. It was dark."

Dr. Hodge nodded. "Well, alright then. Enjoy your candy."

"Bye Mister," Lewis said as he took off at full speed. The Doctor shook his head as the kid disappeared around a corner. *Always in a hurry, that one*, he thought to himself. Then he turned and made his way back up the street to work.

Later that night, the Doctor found himself in his living room counting a handful of bills. The hospital staff poker game had gone especially well.

At least for him.

He totaled his winnings just shy of 2,000 dollars. *Not bad*, he thought. Dr. Hodge leaned back in his chair and stared into his fireplace. All was right with the world.

Suddenly, a window flew open allowing a strong wind to enter the room. The doctor quickly got up and shut it. As he turned back, he noticed something unsettling. Shadows appeared to be creeping from the corners of the ceiling down to the floor. Dripping down at an eerily slow pace, they seemed almost alive. Dr. Hodge heard whispers coming from all around and the temperature plummeted.

"What's happening?!" The Doctor heard himself scream. And where were the shadows coming from? His eyes darted around the room, but he could see no source. The shadows reached the floor and began converging on his position, blowing out the fire as they passed it. Dr. Hodge didn't know where to go. Was he going to die here and now? That didn't line up with the message he'd received.

Suddenly, the Doctor noticed a dark figure standing a few feet away from him. It didn't make a sound. Dr. Hodge found that he couldn't move.

"Disperse," the figure waved a hand. The shadows darted away and the fire relit itself, bathing the room in warm light. The Doctor collapsed on the ground, exhausted. The room was silent for a moment, then—

"Get up, Doctor," said a voice.

Slowly, the Doctor pushed himself up to sit on the floor by the fireplace and looked to where the voice came from. A man was sitting in the sofa on the other side of the room, smiling menacingly. His dark fedora and suit were starkly contrasted by his pale skin. His hair was silvery gray and slicked back. The aura he gave was one of regality, but his green eyes were chilling.

"Who are you? How did you get in?" Dr. Hodge asked, his voice tired and his eyes locked on the figure. He tried his best to sound brave, but something about the man put him at unease.

The man cleared his throat. "To the first question, I am known by many names. Anubis, Chernabog, Yama." He leaned forward. "But you know

me simply as Death.”

Hodge said nothing.

“Now, as to the second question, well...use your imagination.”

The Doctor remained silent.

“What, nothing to say?” Death held his palms face up and grinned in mock surprise.

Dr. Hodge swallowed. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He stood up. Instinctively, he straitened his tie and broadened his shoulders, but his eyes remained uncertain.

“Prove it,” Dr. Hodge challenged.

Death pointed across the room. A flower vase stood on a small table in the corner. Without warning the vibrant flora wilted and died.

“Good enough for you?” Death knew it was.

Doctor Hodge gulped and looked back at Death. “What do you want?” He was still whispering uncertainly.

Death stood up and moved to the Doctor’s desk. The dirty pocket watch still sat there.

He picked up the watch and held it up to his eyes. “I came to warn you of your impending death.” He looked to the Doctor. “You’re welcome.”

“Welcome?!” Doctor Hodge exclaimed, his voice finally coming back to him.

“Yes,” Death replied. “I don’t normally do it, but you’re a decent man. And it was quite amusing.”

“Then you sent the package?” Doctor Hodge had now moved to the couch.

“Naturally,” Death returned the watch to the desk and sat down in his seat.

Dr. Hodge let his gaze roam the room and eventually settle on the fireplace. What was going on? Why was this happening?

“Why warn me?” Hodge asked, his eyes returning to his ominous visitor.

“I have my reasons,” said Death. “Now that’s enough about me. Let’s talk about you. How did your game go?”

“You enjoy poker?” Hodge asked with some unbelief.

“Sure,” said Death. “It’s fascinating to watch people gamble things away. And I’ve snuck in a game or two myself.”

A thought occurred to Dr. Hodge. It was a long shot, but maybe...

“Would you be interested in a little...gamble, Mr. Death?”

Death was no fool. “You wish to avoid the inevitable, Doctor? I am afraid—I”

“Not avoid it,” Hodge assured. “I am a doctor; I know the inevitability of death. But I also know that death can be... postponed.”

Death leaned back and scratched his chin. “What do you propose?”

Dr. Hodge smiled. “A game of Hide and Seek.”

“You can’t be serious!” Death laughed. “If I choose, I can see you no matter where you are.”

“But you could choose not to,” the Doctor inferred.

“Yes.” Death allowed through gritted teeth.

“Then I propose,” Dr. Hodge continued, “That I hide and you try to find me without any special abilities. If I can hide for twenty-four hours, I get to live a while longer.”

“And if not?”

“If not, you can have me,” the Doctor conceded.

Death put the tips of his fingers together and squinted in the Doctor’s direction. No one had ever suggested such a thing, and he had no reason to agree. But Death loved a good game. What the heck.

“It’s a deal,” he agreed. Death reached into his pocket and produced a rolled-up piece of parchment.

“A contract,” said Death, handing it to the Doctor. “You’ll find my signature there already. It outlines the terms you have just set and a couple of my own. I will not be able use any of my supernatural abilities for 24 hours, making me almost as mortal as you are. But you must stay here in town. You cannot leave the country and no one can help you.”

Dr. Hodge considered the agreement. This was crazy! How could he possibly cheat death? He looked across the room and stared at the pocket watch on the desk. The Doctor grinned inwardly and turned to Death.

“Got a pen?”

Death produced a quill pen from another pocket and handed it to Dr. Hodge who signed the contract and handed it back.

“I will spend the night at a hotel outside of town,” said Death. “Tomorrow morning I’ll begin looking for you. That should give you some time to come up with a plan.” Death laughed to himself. “Not that it will do you much good, Mr. Hodge.”

“It’s Dr. Hodge!”

“Well not for much longer, surely,” Death mused. He stood and headed to the front door. Opening it, he turned back to the Doctor.

“Let the game begin.”

The following morning, Death enjoyed a breakfast of toast, eggs, and crispy bacon. He did not need food, but since he was pretending to be mortal, he thought it best. Besides, he had twenty-four hours to find the doctor.

And he would find him.

Death finished his meal and headed to the Doctor’s house. It was unlikely he would be there, but Death figured it was a good enough place to start. Eliminate the obvious and there would be fewer possibilities.

Death strolled casually down the street, hands in his coat pockets, fe-

eling no reason to rush. He took a deep breath of fresh morning air and decided that breathing was an interesting sensation. So was eating. Mortals did strange things.

Continuing down the street, Death noticed something unexpected. A large, black cloud of smoke billowed above the rooftops. It came from the Doctor's street. Death quickened his pace, overcome with a need for haste. Sirens blared in the distance. Concerned citizens converged. The smoke cloud grew larger and larger.

Rounding the corner, Death saw firefighter's outside Dr. Hodge's home. The building itself was engulfed in flames and beyond saving. All the responders could do now was prevent it from spreading to other houses. All Death could do was watch in curiosity and surprise. Was Dr. Hodge inside? Had he gone and died despite their deal? It was possible. Death had promised not to take the Doctor himself, but he could not prevent accidents from happening. If the Doctor had caused his own death, then nothing could be done.

Death realized he would have to wait and find out. The firefighters fought with the blaze for a couple hours before it began to die down. Once it had, they rummaged through the remains. A body was soon discovered. Burned beyond recognition, and perhaps identification, it was carried off to the hospital for autopsy. The same question rested on everybody's lips: Was Dr. Hodge dead? The answer came later that day.

Dr. Hodge had perished.

Death returned to his hotel. He watched a little television, tried out the downstairs pool, took a walk to the park to see people playing frisbee with their dogs. 24 hours could not count down fast enough. And he hadn't even had the chance to play a good game. Ah, well.

Death wondered why his powers hadn't returned to him after the Doctor's death, but the wording in the agreement made it clear that he couldn't use them for 24 hours. So, he continued to wait, to twiddle his thumbs in anticipation. Being mortal was boring. The only consolation was the food. These mortals, weird and weak and useless as they may be, could make a delicious meal.

It was because of that love of food that Death decided have breakfast the following morning before returning to the great here-after. He could already see himself greeting Dr. Hodge with a tip of his hat and slap on the back.

"You tried your best," he would tell the Doctor, "But even you can't cheat me!"

Then he would laugh, and the Doctor would ask to be left alone. But he would never be alone again.

Death entered the dining room with a craving for pancakes dripping in syrup, eggs with pepper and salt, and a couple fat sausages straight off the grill. His craving suddenly disappeared when a familiar voice came from behi-

nd a newspaper.

"You lose," said Dr. Hodge. He flipped to the next page, not even looking at his adversary. Then he reached down, took a scoop of hash browns with his fork, and stuffed his mouth. His lips smacked and he turned to Death, pointing down at his plate.

"I would highly recommend these."

Death stood stock still, jaw gaping open, disbelief evident on his face.

"What, nothing to say?" Dr. Hodge mocked.

"It can't be," Death gritted his teeth. "You're, you're..."

"Dead?" Dr. Hodge shook his head. "No, no. I'm afraid I'm quite alive. In fact, I don't think I've ever felt better."

Death's paralysis disappeared and he leaned in close, breathing down Dr. Hodge's neck.

"There was a fire. Your house burned down; you were pulled from the ashes. How..." His voice trailed off.

Dr. Hodge set down his newspaper and smiled. "Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated. The body in the fire was a fake, as was the autopsy report."

"Then you cheated!" Death exclaimed, pointing an accusatory finger. "No one was allowed to help you!"

But Dr. Hodge waved away this little matter.

"No one helped me," he said. "I did the autopsy myself. Of course, no one knows that. Then I booked a room at this Hotel while you were out looking at dogs."

Death removed his hat and began pacing back and forth, staring intently at the floor.

"So, you see," Dr. Hodge continued, "I have won. This whole fire will be a mystery discussed for many years to come, but only you and I will know the truth."

The Doctor took a bow from his seat. Death stopped pacing and considered him. *This little, old man has tricked me. ME!* It was humiliating. But a deal was a deal. Reluctantly, Death held out his hand.

"Well done," he conceded.

Dr. Hodge shook Death's hand with vigor. Then he wiped his face with a napkin and stood. Once again, he straightened his tie and rolled back his shoulders, but this time his eyes were confident.

A suitcase was now visible on the other side of the table, and a thought occurred to Death. "You intend to stay dead." It was not a question.

"Yes," said the Doctor. "I've realized that life is too short. I am going to travel and enjoy however long I have left."

"What about family and friends?" Death inquired.

"You should know I have no family left," Dr. Hodge replied. "And I'll make new friends. The few I leave here will carry on just fine."

He grabbed the suitcase and pulled it to his side. He seemed like an old explorer ready for one last adventure.

"One day, I will return," Death warned. "And when I do, there will be no deals."

"And when that day comes, I will greet you as an old friend," said Dr. Hodge.

Death grunted with amusement, returning his hat to his head. Dr. Hodge made his way outside. As he left, he nodded at Death as if to say "till next time." After a few seconds, Death followed him out. A car sat by the curb. It was nothing fancy, but the car was sturdy and its gray-blue paint shone in the morning sunlight. The Doctor stowed his suitcase in the back, hopped in the driver's seat, and drove off. He didn't know exactly where he was headed, and it didn't really matter how soon he got there.

Death watched the figure drive off, silently cursing himself for being so easily fooled. *I'm never going to hear the end of this*, he thought.

"No, you're not," came a youthful voice. The man turned to see a young boy with messy brown hair standing behind him. The boy, the real Death, held his servant in a disappointed stare, green eyes boring into him.

"I'm sorry master," the man said. "I've failed you."

Death shook his head. "Outsmarted by a mortal. Pah! I told you a deal was a bad idea. You should have taken his soul when you had the chance."

"I know. I can't help it. Deals are my weakness," the servant whimpered, bowing his head. He knew there would be hell to pay for his mistake.

"One of these days we'll fix that. Then you'll be ready to be a reaper." Death turned and headed down the street. "For now, you'll go back to watching prisoners. At least they can't escape," Death spat. The servant followed his master down the street, head bowed the whole time. The two figures turned a corner into an empty alley and disappeared in a flurry of smoke.

When word came that the late Dr. Hodge had been seen having breakfast at a restaurant in Italy, people were naturally skeptical. All his friends had attended his funeral, seen his coffin lowered into the ground, and left tears and flowers on his grave. So, he couldn't be in Italy. "Perhaps he cheated death," some would say in jest. Rumors placed the Doctor all over the world, and no one believed them.

But Death did. Death knew the truth, and he would chase the Doctor like a hunter relentlessly pursues a deer that he refuses to believe he missed.

5 am Lullaby

By Madeline Topp

This is the sun-filled boat.
And you are your darkened skin turned red
from a day too bright, too sunshiney.

This is a memorial for a person long dead.
This is a memorial for the dead inside of me.
The dead selves and the salvageable pieces of me
I wouldn't let go of.

A memorial for those I have lost,
not through death,
but through change and through hatred and fear and pain.

And this is the vomit from the rocky sea
and the love I can still give.
Your skin so sweet against my ragged hand.

My teeth rotting inside my head.
The tobacco on my fingers.
The 5 am sleepless nights
and the headaches that can't leave me.

I am awake.
I am goodness
and I swallow fear before it swallows me.

Tragic Sailor

By Tim Potter

This piece is the first chapter of a novel in progress entitled *Tragic Sailor*. The work is essentially a sequel to the author's previous novel, *The Lost Boys: A Parochial Novel of the Vietnam Generation*. Any similarity between the characters in this novel and any real individual, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

1

Epiphany

*Four-Mile Beach, California
January 1985*

In his dreams, he once found himself on patrol...

They were moving upriver at a good clip. Dwellings, junks, fisher-folk, and jungle whipped past his eyes in a kaleidoscope of greens and browns. The national colors fluttered on its staff as the small fiberglass boat knifed through the brown water and tepid Mekong Delta air. A long, foamy wake trailed out behind them.

In River Patrol Force they liked to move fast.

It was at times like these that he felt almost happy. An ambiguous grin revealed a set of white teeth to the adjoining rice paddies. Pushed by a powerful jet of water, the PBR negotiated a bend in The River . . . the Chief really knew how to tool the boat.

A little farther upstream, the Cheshire Cat countenance disappeared when the tree line bordering the north bank suddenly lit up with yellow muzzle flashes. Simultaneously, the air filled with the terrifying rapid-rattle of automatic gunfire. If he had learned anything about combat during his time in-country, it was that it was LOUD. The white trail of an RPG whooshed behind him, the VC grenadier not giving his target enough lead. He watched a rope of green tracers arch over the cockpit, heard the "thunk-thunk" of slugs striking the fiberglass hull. Up forward, Daryl let loose with the twin fifties. A second later, he followed suit with the stern M-60, pouring a stream of copper-jacketed lead into the tree line, the machine gun spitting spent cases onto the deck. Astern, the trailing boat opened up too . . .

He and his compadre really poured it in there. "Shoot!" he thought. "What chance did Chuck have against a pair of fast-shootin' good ole boys from Texas?" The grin reappeared—but this time there was a fiercer aspect to it: the smirk of Carroll's character was replaced by the snarl of Blake's Tyger.

A moment later the PBR shuddered under the impact of a recoilless rifle round. He had to cling to his gun to keep from falling. Several heavy machine-gun slugs tore into the hull along the water line. The boat veered wildly toward the opposite bank, then straightened out and began settling by the bow . . .

They were out of the kill zone now . . . The Chief, his face cut by shrapnel and bleeding profusely, unleashed a torrent of obscenities. An UH-1B from the Sea Wolves literally appeared out of the blue. Streaking over the stricken boat, the gunship lashed at the ambush site with a barrage of rockets . . . He cast his eyes up forward. Smoke billowed from the bow; the acrid odor of burnt powder mingled with the sickly smell of charred flesh.

Where was Daryl? . . . He was nowhere to be seen. One moment he was there, firing away. The next, he was gone . . . just gone. Only the tangled metal of his gun mount remained . . .

He awoke to a cacophony of BLARING rock music.

*As his head rose slowly from the worn, dirty carpet, a SCREAMING hangover added its voice to the din. Squinting, his weak, bloodshot eyes picked out two indistinct figures lounging on the sofa a few feet away. The irregular blobs of men appeared to be engaged in an animated conversation, but he could not make out what they were saying through the noise. *Where's my glasses? I can't see a friggin' thing without them!**

Unsteadily, like some early hominid rising from all fours for the first time, he stood erect. One of the blobs turned toward him. Bender's affected voice emerged from the surrounding clangor: "I say, Christopher. Thou livest!" Wincing, he shook his head in an effort to clear it. Though the effort made his head ache even more, things came marginally into focus. He recognized the outline of his glasses on the coffee table. Making a successful stab at them after a couple of missed tries, he seated the spectacles across the bridge of his prominent nose (a gift from the Semitic portion of his ancestry). Now at least he could see—sort of. Harris Bender, Esq. grinned at him superciliously, while the balding Turk (who was by no means of Anatolian ancestry), red-faced and bloated, spewed mindless twaddle, oblivious of his return from the Netherworld. Both inebriates clung to bottles of Lucky Lager.

*Disgusted, he turned and began to trundle toward the kitchen. He had gone but two steps when the oldies station began blasting out Hendrix's "Purple Haze." Doing an about face, he spat out, "Can't you turn this shit down!" His fair-weather friends from the local dive ignored his plea and continued their debate. The thought "coffee" caused him to reverse course a second time. *What time is it?**

About the time he discovered that the coffee had run out, he remembered that he was no longer employed at his flunkey warehouse job—though whether he had been fired or simply quit, he couldn't quite recall (possibly both). This had occurred in the indistinct previous few days . . .

Time now being irrelevant—and sans java—he opened the fridge. The remains of a broken-open twelve-pack lay scattered on the middle rack, surrounded above and below by rotting vegetables, condiment bottles, and a partially spent half-gallon of rancid milk. Five of the stubby bottles had survived their most recent liquor store raid (whenever that was). Grabbing one he tore off the twist-top and guzzled its contents in three swallows. Placing the empty on the sink counter amid a collection of empty bottles and cans, he opened a second beer and took a long pull. Belching, he shut the reefer door and tried to figure out what to do next. The remaining beer wouldn't last long. He'd need more than three or four twelve-ouncers to "get well." *Why didn't those idiots buy tall? By now they should know—always buy in bulk!*

He leaned back against the tile counter. Taking another sip, he let out a long sigh and began to ponder. *How the fish had this bender started? . . . Was it over the job? An argument with Gail? My frustrated literary endeavors? Recurring demons concerning . . . His mind dashed away from the last topic. Never mind.*

Then he noticed the crumpled, half-remembered note lying next to the toaster. A dull, nebulous pang of guilt flooded over him. He took a swig of Lucky, picked up the piece of scratch paper, and reread the message. It was from Gail.

Chris,

I'm taking the girls over to my mother's. I simply cannot stand to be around you anymore when you're drinking. And I don't want the girls around to see their father in such a state. It's not healthy for them. Call me if and when you sober up. We need to have a serious talk.

Gail

"*Why am I so proficient at driving away the women in my life?*" he asked himself. It was a rhetorical question. He knew the reasons: his gargantuan ego, his intellectual *hubris*, the occasional fits of arrogant selfishness, the all-too-often fits of stygian melancholy, and, most of all, his attendant bouts of drunkenness—which, of late, had become pathologically self-destructive. Indeed, there were times—within the recesses of his tortured mind—that he wished he could have thrown himself atop the funeral pyre of Percy Bysshe Shelley (while Byron watched from offshore, of course).

At that point, a terrible realization assailed him. There was no denying it. He had to admit that he, Chris Gunn, who had literally grown up in the dives and slop chutes patronized by the United States Navy on six continents and innumerable islands, had to admit, at the still young (?) age of 39 (and a half), . . . *he* had a serious drinking problem. For years, he had shied away fr-

om the notion that he might be an alcoholic. But the evidence to support the fact was all too damning. *A bitter pill to swallow indeed, comrade.* Drinking, hanging out in bars, schmoozing B-girls, consorting with barflies, from his first Westpac deployment as a young lad until the present, had been an integral part of his existence. *What the hell am I gonna do now?*

Well, there was one thing he was going to do, at least for the nonce... He was going to have another drink!

The second beer was quickly drained and set on the counter next to its deceased brethren. Opening the reefer, he pulled out a third brew and twisted off the top. As he went to work on it, thoughts of shame and self-recrimination assailed him. Why must I always hoist myself on my own petard? Why must I always do this to myself . . . to the women in my life? First Lillie (God! Lillie!) . . . then Andrea, and now Gail. They fall for me, and then, despite my best intentions, I drive them away. Idiot! Jackass! Stupid A—.

"Ah, I say, Christopher?"

Dive thoughts, down to my soul. Here Bender comes.

"It seems our supply of sack is rather depleted, old man. Thought I might pop over to yon vintner's and restock in accordance to our needs."

Gunn, his headache having eased but slightly, grimaced and stated, "Sounds like a plan. Make it so, bo'sun."

"Only one problem, old boy. Turk and I find ourselves tapped out in regard to *dinero*. You wouldn't happen to have a few spare ducats lying about, would you? Spare a bit of change for camaraderie's sake?"

Scrounging in his pockets Gunn withdrew a quartet of ones and a handful of quarters (the typical denominations one acquires on a spree). He handed the change to Bender.

"*Oh-hhh!* I'm afraid that won't be enough to meet our needs, old man."

"What do you fuckin' leeches want me to do? Bust open the girls' piggy banks!" responded the hungover veteran somewhat testily.

"That's an idea!" blurted out Turk.

"Go fuck yourself, you bloated draft-dodger!"

"Now Christopher, profanity really does not suit you, old boy. Think, my friend. Think!"

Gail never left any money around when he was drinking. Usually, he could always bum at least a five-spot from the Coastguardsmen in the apartment upstairs (they were always high on *something*), but, alas, they were out on patrol. His mind raced. The vague notion that he had hidden some money away at some point in time chivvied his addled gray matter. Perhaps there was some change under the sofa cushions, or a bill or two in one of his jacket pockets?

Then, as if by Divine intervention, a metaphorical star shell burst inside Gunn's brain. "Kant!" he exclaimed, throwing an index finger in the air.

"Huh?! Did you say 'CUNT?'" asked Turk crudely. "Yeah, mother! I could *do* with some CUNT about now!"

"No, you lout! Immanuel Kant!"

"What?" managed Bender confusedly as he stood, apropos, in front of *Chris's Under the Volcano* movie poster.

At that same moment, Turk lifted an over-sized arse cheek and let go with a loud, raspy fart. "Hah! There's a kiss for ya, *squidly!* Hah-ha-ha-hah!"

"Cretin!" commented Bender.

Gunn ignored both of them. Side-stepping across the small apartment like a member of Greek chorus, he began rummaging through his compendious four-level bookshelf. Momentarily, he located the wily Scot of Konigsberg's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Rapidly he began thumbing through the work . . . And behold! There, lodged between its voluminous pages, was a twenty! "*Ecce!*" pronounced Gunn, holding the bill aloft betwixt two fingers. "If there's one place burglars or women won't look for your hideout cash, it's within the pages of Kant!"

"Yeah, *CUNT!* Right on. Hah-ha! Go get us some fuckin' beer, Bender."

"Moron! *Idi-ot!*"

"Fag."

Hungover as he was, Gunn had no time for such nonsensical repartee. "You gonna make that beer run or not?!"

Turning away from Turk, Bender snatched the twenty from Chris's hand and announced, "*Christopher*, thou art truly a *prince!*" That said, the pseudo-intellectual made a stage exit out the screen door.

"Just hurry up, fairy!" Turk called after him.

"Why don't you give the guy a break, you over-stuffed slob? At least he didn't bang his knee against the wall repeatedly to get out of the draft."

"At least I wasn't stupid enough to *volunteer*—so's some little slant-eyes could try'n blow my ass off."

"They would have had a hard time missing."

Turk seemed not to notice the quip. "And by the way, get me a beer."

Chris was too sick to argue—and too tired to kick Turk's fat ass. He trudged into the kitchen—but not before getting off a Parthian shot. "Can't you turn that shit down!"

"*Fu-uck.* And I thought you were an old rock n'roller."

Gunn grabbed the last two Luckies from the refrigerator. He opened one and took a swig, then tossed the other across the room into Turk's lap. "Last of the Mohicans, comrade," he told his sometimes drinking companion.

Turk responded with a belch. "Never read it . . . hah-hah-ha-hah!"

"That I can believe."

Chris picked up the footrest from in front the lounge chair and set it in front of the television. Turning the volume on the TV, he set the volume on low. Bob Barker materialized on the screen. *Mindless game shows, that's what I need . . . mindless game shows.* As Gunn sipped beer #4, Turk began crooning, rather off-key, to the oldies station's latest tune: Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild."

"Can't you turn that friggin' shit down!" implored Chris a third time.

"Turn it down yourself, genius."

Gunn turned up the volume on the TV ever so slightly and tried to lose himself in the inane efforts of the contestants. Holmes craved mental exaltation in his darkest moments before resorting to the needle; for hangers, Chris Gunn required banal TV game shows.

Bender arrived at last—bearing a case of Schlitz Malt Liquor. The effort had nearly done him in, and he plopped exhaustedly on the couch after unlading his cargo. However, a pair of 16-ouncers quickly revived his frail constitution. Chris and Turk wasted no time tearing into the supply of brew as well. After three cans, Gunn's need for television abated. The idiot box went off; Rock and Roll continued to blare. "Crank that shit up!" was Chris's new refrain. Fortunately, all the neighbors were either virtually deaf geriatrics or at work. Soon the lads were cavorting in Dionysian abandon as The Doors, The Kinks, the Stones, Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, Cream, and assorted other shamans of a by-gone era played pied piper to their middle-aged madness.

Then the trio of sileni began an orgy of destruction.

Bender stumbled against the coffee table, scattering empties on Gail's carpet. A moment later an ashtray of cigarette butts was similarly displaced. A lamp somehow (?) crashed to the floor. Gunn crushed an empty against his forehead and threw it contemptuously at Bender—after the latter had the gall to make light of Chris's theory concerning Dostoevsky's influence on Pete Townsend's *Quadrophenia*. In retaliation, the overdone bassarid attacked Chris's carefully compiled collection of literature and literary criticism, tossing the near-sacred volumes on the floor. "Tripe! Drive! *Merde!*" he cried with alcoholic venom as each book was flung to the deck.

Then, . . . in a bizarre *volte-face*, in a seeming rejection of all he held holy, Chris joined the dilettante in hurling Turgenev, Northrop Frye, Walter Kaufmann, Joyce, Tolstoy, Hardy, and Hemingway to the beer-sodden carpet. "You're right! You're right!!" he screamed. It's crap! IT'S ALL CRAP!" Then, with tears welling in his eyes, he added, "Even Nietzsche!" With that, the former sailor heaved his well-thumbed copy of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* against the far wall.

"Hah-ha-ha-hah! You fuckers are really full a'shit," expounded Turk.

Immensely saddened, Chris hung his head, his chin nearly touching his chest, and said, "*My soul us exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.*"

A moment later, though, his head suddenly snapped upright. "We

need light! LIGHT!" he shouted. "Let there be light!" With that pronouncement, Gunn leaped upon the sofa and began ripping down the drawn curtains. Bender joined him in his endeavor. Turk added to the vandalism by performing an impromptu galliard on the displaced shrouds.

It seemed to make perfect sense at the time.

More liquor was consumed. Shortly thereafter the trio of inebriates was droning in unison to The Who's "Behind Blue Eyes." Some undetermined time after that, Christopher Gunn, late of Task Force 116 and the U.S. Naval Support Facility, Saigon, passed once more into oblivion.

* * *

The Sun, which he had witnessed setting in all its reddish brilliance a thousand times at sea, was dropping below the horizon when he came to. The apartment was trashed. And so was he. Rising from the floor like a man awakening in jail, he began to scour the flat for un-drained cans of beer—but Bender and Turk, before fleeing, had polished off anything that was left. Harris, perhaps feeling a measure of guilt, had at least left several ones and a pile of change on the coffee table—the remains of Gunn's donation (and perhaps some change of his own that he had sequestered). His head was screaming and only one thing would stop the noise. Stuffing the money into the right-hand pocket of his jeans, he made a quick head call, threw some water on his face, and ran a brush through his prematurely graying hair. Then he headed for Littler's.

Happy hour was still in session by the time he had negotiated the block and a half to the bar. He piled his money on the bar top and ordered a rum and coke—which raised the eyes of Sam the Barman. He knew Chris as a confirmed beer guzzler; this was the first time he had ever seen the one-time swabbie order hard stuff. "Bad day, Chris?" he asked.

"You might say that," replied Gunn sullenly.

Sam mixed his a stiff one. At a buck twenty-five a round for non-call shots, Chris had enough cash to get a decent buzz on again. And, of course, he was always able to bum a drink or two from the other drunks who frequented the bar.

Part way through his third drink, the torment in his brain eased a bit, and a minor moment of clarity managed to slither into the forefront of his mind. He picked up a handful of coins from the counter and headed for the pay phone near the backdoor, between the entrances to the men's and women's heads. He had to cogitate for a couple of minutes while staring at the grimy phone with an empty bottle of Bud and snuffed-out cigarette butt sitting on top in order to arrange his thoughts—and to remember the number of Gail's sister. Finally, he reclaimed it from his blurred memory bank and, picking up the sticky receiver, dropped some coins into the slot. The phone rang several times before someone picked it up. A diminutive voice came on the line. "Hell-lo?"

"Jessica?"

"Ye-es."

"This is Daddy. Is Mommy there?"

"Yes."

"Could you put her on the phone please, angel?"

"Yes . . . and Daddy . . ."

"Yes, angel."

"I hope you're feeling better."

The little voice disappeared into the hum of the telephone line. Tears began to well in Gunn's eyes. He removed his glasses and quickly wiped them.

"Chris?" a voice asked through the receiver. It was Gail.

"Gail, I'm sorry, baby—really, sorry," he blurted out.

"I know, I know," responded his consort. "You always are."

"Babe, please come home. I'll get help. I promise. I looked in at the VA, after . . . the last time. They've got an alcohol treatment clinic. I'll go down and see about it getting into it tomorrow."

"You're not bullshitting me? You're really serious about getting help this time?"

"I swear it, babe. Please come home. I miss you and the girls."

"I don't know, Chris. You've talked about stopping so many times, but you never do anything about it. You stop for a while, then you got back to drinking. It's so much part of your persona. I just have a hard time imagining you giving up that *nostalgie de la boue* of yours."

"I'm ready to change, babe. *I mean it,*" Gunn pleaded, his voice becoming almost child-like.

"Oh, Chris . . . I can't stand the emotional roller-coaster you put me and the girls through every time you go on a bender. Yet, when you're sober, you're such a good guy, so good to the girls—and me. You're like Jekyll and Hyde."

Gunn then responded with the hackneyed alcoholic's declaration: "I really mean it this time." Through the receiver, he heard Gail let out a long sigh. A second later he added, "I know I've been all talk before, but tomorrow I'll go down to VA and talk them about getting into their program. I swear it, on . . . on everything I believe is good.

Gail let out another sigh. Through the phone line, Gunn could almost hear her conflicting thoughts. "All right then," she said at last. "Call me tomorrow afternoon after you've checked in with the VA. Show me proof you've actually done so and we'll come back.

"I will, I will. I love you, babe. I'll make it right for you . . . for you and the girls."

"Promise?"

"Yes!"

Gail then responded to his affirmative with one of Chris's oft-used

nautical imperatives: "Then, make it so bo'sun."

The next day, the one-time circumnavigator of the globe and ambivalent warrior walked into the Four-Mile Beach VA Hospital's Alcohol Treatment Center. Two weeks later he was a resident in their three-week in-patient program on Ward K-2.

In California
by Matthew Jacobs

I'm sorry.

I never meant to hurt you.
All I ever wanted
Was to indoctrinate you
Into my LSD sex cult.

I thought you'd like it.
I'm sorry things got so out of hand.
I'm sorry you wound up murdering
all those people.

I miss you.

Of all the runaway child-women
I've ever brainwashed,
you were by far my favorite.

We should get together
For coffee or something
If you're ever
In California.

English Majors
and Minors



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