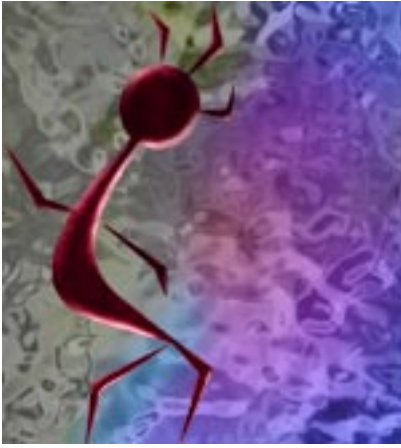




stickman review

v1n2



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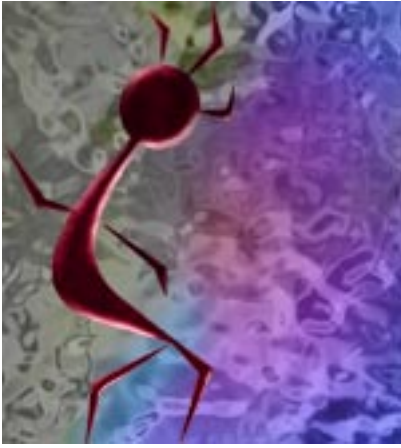
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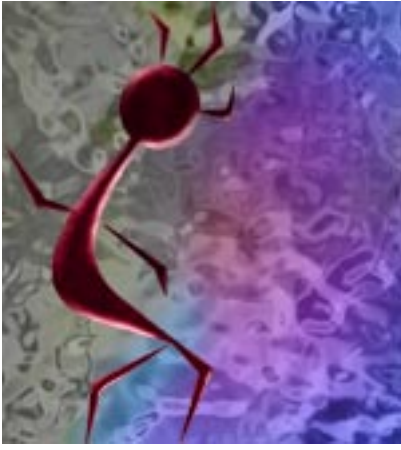
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STICKMAN REVIEW FICTION CONTEST

FIRST PRIZE

Solid Gone

by A.C. Koch

For a number she had never forgotten, Margie Finn was having a hard time hitting all the right buttons. It was the white pages that was throwing her off, following along with her finger on the page as she poked the buttons on the phone, not trusting her memory. And there was something strange about this pay phone. She realized on her third try, after losing a buck in quarters on wrong numbers, that this phone was so low to the ground because you were supposed to use it while sitting in your car. A drive-up phone. She twisted around to gaze across the asphalt at her Beetle, cute as an after-dinner mint, parked at the curb in front of Fred's Liquors and Liqueurs. Should she go get the car, drive up to the phone, and try punching the number one more time? Driving always sharpened the mind. Click, buzz-buzz. The line connected. Margie waited for a stranger's voice at another wrong number, but the sound that purred into her ear was as familiar as her old junior varsity letter jacket. "Yeah?"

"Bobby! Hey—you know who this is?"

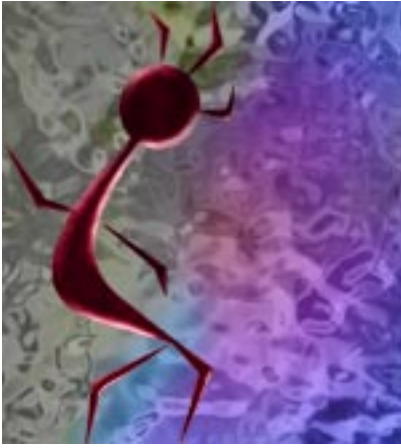
A few seconds went by, as the last ten years ticked backwards in his head until he got to the tiny wrinkle in his mind that had been reserved for remembering Margie Finn. "Ho-ly cow! Is this Margie Finn on the horn?"

"It's me, Bobby. Is that you?"

It was him. They chattered for the duration of two more quarters while she stood stooped at the low phone, not taking her eyes off the curlicued neon signs hanging in the window of Fred's Liquors and Liqueurs. Molson's. Bud. Bobby was saying he wouldn't let her past the state line into Indiana if she didn't drop by to say hello and have a beer, catch up a little on these last ten years. "You still remember how to get out here?"

"County Line Road 66, three lefts and three rights."

"Hell, Margie. If you still remember that, then how come it's been ten years since you showed your face around here? Did you call it quits with that woman? I heard something about you and this gal—"



"My dad—" she started.

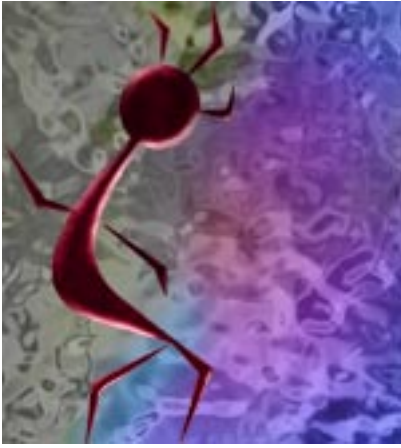
"Yeah, I heard about that, too. Jeremy called. I'm real sorry, Margie."

But none of this was good for the pay phone. It needed to be a front porch conversation, with the sun gone down and the fireflies hanging like ornaments under the cottonwoods and cigarette smoke curling up from their hands, keeping the moths away. She said, "Hey, you need me to pick up anything? I'm on Orchard, right by Fred's."

"Fred's? Get some juice, then." A smile curled up the ends of his voice. He didn't mean fruit juice. Her quarters were gone so they signed off. She crossed the asphalt and stepped inside Fred's to a blast of cool air that brought out goosebumps on her bare arms. She hugged herself as she walked through aisles of cases stacked shoulder-high. A bottle of Bushmills and a twelve-pack of Negra Modelo. As the cashier rang it up, she let her eyes roam over the pint bottles on the back shelf. "Give me a little Jack," she said, waving a finger at the one she wanted. The pint bottle was flat and curved, made for a back pocket. She could almost taste it already, the heat of it. Two days on the road: freeway, freeway everywhere, and not a drop to drink. A little sipping now wasn't going to hurt anything between here and Bobby's, six miles away. She kept her hand steady as she handed over the fifty dollar bill. "Give me a couple dollars back in quarters," she said. She had another call to make today.

Just yesterday morning, three hundred miles east of here, she was sitting on her mother's backyard patio getting sauced under the Kentucky sun. Everything about the late morning was adding up perfect—the cushioned wicker chair, the Tanqueray on ice, the sky cotton-balled with clouds that floated above the fringe of dogwood and birch leaves—except that her father wasn't here, and this was the third day without him. "Margie!" rang her mother's voice from the kitchen window. "I know you already told me once, but are you a cream-n-sugar person?" The same question, every morning, like a ritual. Margie wondered if it was more than just stress or grief: the onset of that forgetting disease she didn't want to say the name of. "Black," she called, like every morning for the last week.

She wasn't going to worry about her mother. That was a decision she'd come to, like a New Year's resolution, and she intended to keep it. Her

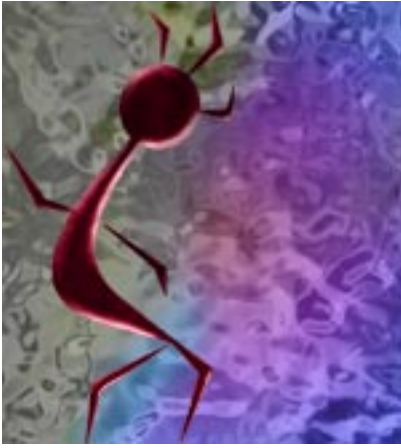


theory was that there was only a finite amount of worry in any one person, and you had to spend it wisely or you'd have nothing left for the times you'd really need it—like when you had kids, or when your husband started working later and later. There were no kids, and no husband, anywhere on Margie's horizon, and a truckload of worry hadn't helped her father one bit. So her mother was on her own. Margie watched her come outside, sliding the screen open and then shut with a slipped foot while holding a tray full of breakfast cocked out on one arm, with all the skill of a retired waitress.

The funeral had been a blast, as far as wakes go. Henry Finn had been the center of gravity to a whole clan of mountain boys and coal miners who clawhammered their banjos as fast as they put down their whiskey. They called him Hank, and it wasn't unusual for a truck to pull into the drive at three in the morning, someone catcalling his name in the moonlight: "Hankleberry! Git on outta there!" Her daddy would shuffle onto the porch in his p.j.'s, pick up a drink and strum a guitar, and he and his buddies would be barking at the moon until the sun came up. Now he was, as they said, solid gone, and there was nothing they could do to wake Hank up, but they sure as hell were going to go hoarse trying. That was, she supposed, why it was called a wake in the first place. A half dozen guitars jangled on the porch, strumming under a banjo that clattered like crickets tap-dancing on a snare drum, and the songs blended from one to another without ever starting or finishing.

Every fifteen minutes, at the buffet table in the dining room, you could hear someone else saying, "It's what he would've wanted," as they slammed down their empty whiskey tumblers and pawed through the deviled eggs and tuna canapés. They dragged Margie and her mother onto the living room rug for a jig, and they hollered to the banjo player flickering his way through "O, Death" for something more uppity, and they puked over the porch rails into the lilacs. And they were right—he would've wanted it that way—but that didn't stop Margie from wincing every time she heard it. She was a professional entertainer, playing piano and singing torch songs into a boozy microphone in half a dozen lounges six nights a week, and her ears were attuned to the kinds of empty platitudes that would never fail to get a crowd to raise their drinks and toast. Her father's wake should be different





from those working nights, shouldn't it? People should have something more meaningful to say. Wouldn't her father have wanted it that way?

Now she sipped her morning gin-and-tonic and watched the clouds slip behind the crests of trees that marked the line between the backyard and the woods. Half this land had her name on it, in the will. It was hers now. "You bury my ass out there," her father had said just a few days earlier, motioning with his chin out the window, across the yard and into the woods. "Wherever your mother's got me planted, you go dig me up and haul me into the trees somewhere."

Margie had been the only one there that day, sitting on the rocker beside the bed. Prescription bottles stood like a patch of weeds on the endtable. Her mother and Jeremy had gone into town to pick up Chinese because the Mexican delivery boys wouldn't drive their motor scooters this far out into the boonies. It was late afternoon and the light hung like candle smoke in the room. "Nobody's going to be digging anybody up, daddy."

He coughed, a sack of bolts tumbling down the porch steps. He'd driven a forklift for thirty-five years, and smoked a pack of Pall Malls every one of those working days. On the weekends, jamming with his buddies on the porch or gigging at some local bluegrass festival, he'd smoke four packs. With a thin and tuneless voice now, he mumbled the words to a song but only got through the first line before the cough caught up with him again. Margie knew the song. She finished the lyric in her vibratoless soprano: "Oh, rest my soul in those hills of coal, until this earth does tremble."

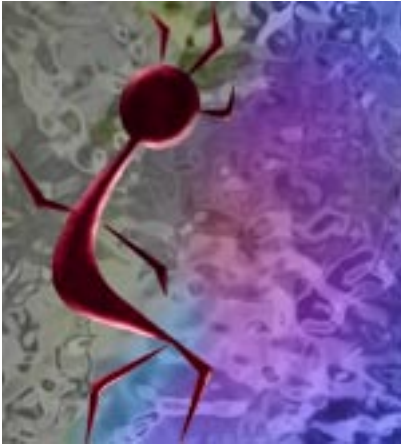
Her father nodded. His head was still turned toward the window but Margie couldn't see if his eyes were open or not. There was cancer in him like jelly in a donut. That was what the doctor had said. There might be a bite or two of plain dough, but after that it was just filled to bursting. The image was enough to keep Margie off jelly donuts for the rest of her life. She sipped her bourbon and the jingle of the ice got his attention. He rolled his head away from the window and fixed his eyes on the cut-glass tumbler in her hand. "Last train to Hoochville," he muttered. He winked, and the eyelid that slid over his eye was as thin and crinkled as tissue paper.

"Daddy, that's the worst idea you've had all day and you know it."

"Come one, dammit. What's it going to hurt."

Margie looked into her glass where the booze curled off the edges of the





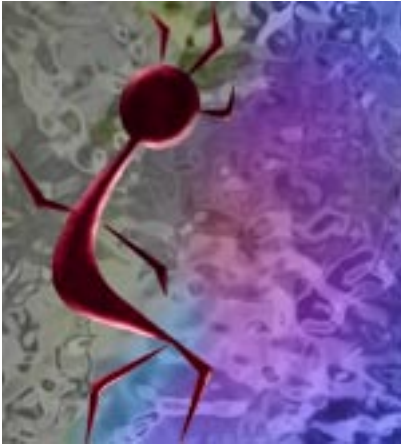
ice cubes in golden swirls. They both know it would hurt a lot. They'd taken him off the dialysis machine to bring him home, and his kidneys had given out. He was filling up with his own poisons like a cow that hadn't been milked—another choice phrase from the doctor. Any more booze would be pure venom in the blood. "Buy your old dad a drink, for Christ's sake," he said, a whisper. "Come on."

She understood the feeling. Something inside her said, "Come on," in that same whisper by about eleven o'clock in the morning every day of the week. She could hold out until four or five if she had errands to run, but giving in felt so much better. The ringing ice cubes, the golden swirls. The first lick of fire, then the smoldering deep down that burned all other feeling away. She leaned over the bed even as she heard the crackle of tires on the driveway. Her father lifted his head an inch off the pillow and she cupped her hand under his skull to steady him as she brought the glass to his lips and tipped it up for the tiniest of sips. He grinned with his lips peeled back from his teeth and said, "Hoo-eee!" in the strongest voice he'd used in days. In the next instant he was racked with coughs. "Keep it down, dad," she said as she went to the hall and listened to the garage door grinding its way open. "Pretend you're asleep so they don't smell it on you."

He had turned his head back to the window, watching the woods filter the daylight into darkness. "They won't smell anything," he said, "with that chop suey stinking up the place."

There was a night, twenty years ago, when little Margie was spying on her father and his buddies gathered on the porch with their guitars and their banjos, playing up a storm in the night, every one of them drunk as a banshee. Her father kept a slim pint bottle of bourbon in his back pocket and pulled it out for a sip from time to time. Late in the evening, as Margie watched from the corner of her bedroom window, her father made his way into the shadows at the edge of the spill of light to take a piss into the yard. On his way back up the porch steps he stumbled over his own feet and went down hard on his ass. Everyone burst out whooping and laughing while he clambered to his feet, patting the back of his jeans where the denim was soaked. He felt his back pocket where the bourbon rode, now dark and wet. "God, I hope that's blood," he said, and his buddies cackled.





And they kept on jamming, banjos crackling and spoons clacking, and Margie stayed awake half the night twitching her foot in time, letting the raspy voices spin themselves into her dreams until she was asleep with her head on the windowsill. That was how her daddy taught her just about everything he knew.

Her mother was halving grapefruits on the patio table under the morning sun. Margie gave her gin-and-tonic a stir with her pointer finger and then put her finger in her mouth to suck it. She reached for the Tanqueray bottle and added another splash, another stir, another suck.

By some accounts the wake last night had ended badly, although Margie had been drunk beyond the point of conscious recall by then. "You don't remember what your brother said about Jazmine?" Her mother peered up from slicing her grapefruit zests with a steak knife. Margie didn't remember. "Well, it certainly made an impression on you at the time," said her mother. "You wacked him so hard he fell over in his chair."

It wouldn't be the first time something like that had happened. Margie picked up her drink and brought it halfway to her lips before stopping. "So what'd Jeremy say about her?"

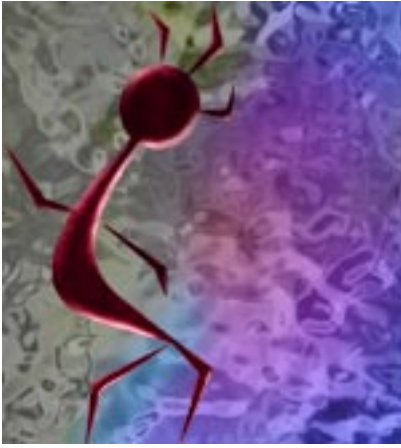
Her mother went back to concentrating on slicing the skin away from the juicy part. "Called her a whore," she said without looking up.

Margie set her glass down hard enough to spill a dollop of gin on the white painted table. "What!"

"Margie, please. You already threw a fit about it last night. You don't need to throw another over breakfast just because you don't remember anything."

A whore. That was a word you didn't hear too often these days, at least not when you lived in the city and spent your days and nights among people who wore ties. But you couldn't expect Appalachians to like or even understand what the high-rollers did in their downtown offices. Jazmine was a lobbyist for an environmental action group in Denver, and the one time Margie brought her back home to Keokuk, Jazmine told dinner table stories about taking state senators on golf junkets and ski weekends at borrowed condos. She had an office on the thirty-third floor of a glass skyscraper downtown, and she drove a company BMW. No one had called it whoring at





the time, but you couldn't blame Jeremy for feeling touchy about it. He'd been working for hourly wage at Jiffy Lube for the last ten years.

"Do you agree, mom? Jazmine's a whore?"

Her mother set down the knife with a clatter. "Now, come on, Margie. You know I think she's very nice."

"What does 'nice' mean?"

"Eat your grapefruit, Margie. You need to get something in your system with all that hooch you're sucking down."

It was during that trip, when Margie brought Jazmine home to meet her folks in Keokuk, that her father caught the two of them red-handed. She and Jazmine were standing out in the yard past midnight with the birches and dogwoods towering overhead and pointing up at the stars which splashed across the sky in a way that just astounded a city girl like Jazmine. They spoke in the low and quiet way that is the exclusive territory of established lovers with nothing to prove. "I hate stars," said Jazmine. "The stars hate you," said Margie. "I meant movie stars," said Jazmine. "So did I," said Margie. A satellite slid overhead, a motionless point of light, rendering them both silent. Some machine up there, circling the earth. The two of them, at the edge of the woods in the hills of Kentucky, staring up at it. Vertigo and love, physics and dry palms. They laced their arms around one another's waist, and Margie was pressing a kiss into Jazmine's white throat, when her father stepped up next to them in the dark with a long whistle. Look what we got here, the whistle seemed to say. "Starry night," he said.

Later, Margie and her father had a heart to heart on the back porch with a bottle of Jack while Jazmine helped her mother wash up in the kitchen after dinner. "She the love of your life or something?" her father said.

"Yeah."

"Well. How about that."

"You know I like to do things my own way."

"Yeah, I do know that."

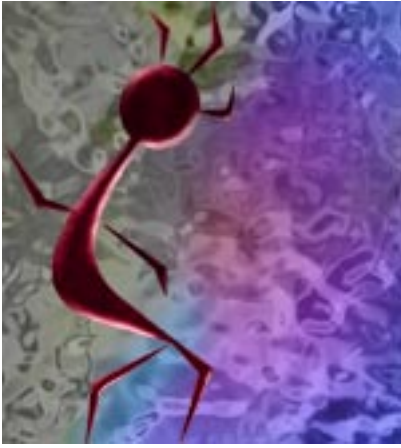
Sip from the bottle, passed from one to another and back again.

"She make you happy?"

"Yeah."

"What I mean is, you don't feel like you're missing something?"





"No, dad, I don't."

"Alright, then."

She thought he was going to leave it like that, not quite a ringing endorsement, but at least not a condemnation. Then he said, "So I guess you and Bobby Bogue won't be making me a granddad until this passes."

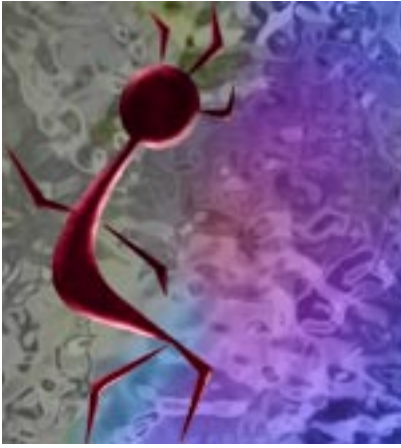
She'd just taken a sip of bourbon and had to grimace to swallow it down. It had been ten years since she'd brought Bobby home from college, but her father made it sound like it was just last week. Hope dies hard in the heart of a mountain boy, thought Margie. That was a line from a song somewhere. She passed the bottle back to her father without saying anything at all. If he thought he'd said something wrong, he didn't show it. His lawn chair squeaked as he shifted his weight, staring out into the woods at the edge of the yard. Until this passes. Like the person she'd chosen to be was just a low pressure front stirring up weather on the horizon. And maybe he was right. Because there were not going to be any grandchildren anytime soon, with Bobby Bogue or anyone else, and she was sure of that.

Her mother was back in the kitchen, pretending to rinse out the bowls and mugs but really only staring into the sink while the water curled down the drain. If her mother hit the bottle every once in a while, Margie thought, it would probably soothe something down deep. Down where no one else could touch. Margie had hit that smooth spot now, somewhere between the second and third drink, when something clicked. It was a physical feeling, like a switch thrown in the brain. Her eyes relaxed, everything went soft around the edges, the tinkle of the wind chimes became a distant fuzz. "Ah," she said. Time sailed.

Was it the drink that killed her daddy? or the cigarettes? Margie didn't smoke anymore, because it was hard on her voice, so she already had a leg up on her father. And if there was ever an occasion for getting on the wagon, this was it. She sipped her gin. An ice cube kissed her upper lip as the last floes of booze threaded their way onto her tongue. She set the tumbler down. She had made the resolution before, but things were different now. Her daddy was in the ground, and all this land was hers. "Momma, I better be getting on my way."

"Already, hon?" Her mother spoke through the screen in the kitchen window where she looked like a ghost of herself.





"You're supposed to be three hours early for the plane these days."

"Well, I'll tell your brother to put your things in the car."

"I can call a cab."

Her mother didn't even respond to that. They both knew that there was no such thing as a cab around these parts.

Jeremy drove a primer-grey '76 Buick Riviera, which he'd bought in high school and had been souping up ever since. The back seat was a pair of bean bags lashed into place, flanked with giant speakers in the bubble space under the rear window. The dashboard was missing, and none of the dials on the instrument panel worked, but Jeremy said he could drive the thing by feel alone. Over the winding road that cut through the woods and towards the interstate, he wheeled them around curves under the hanging branches of dogwood, around the mud ruts that lay crusted in the straight-aways. He flicked his long bangs off his forehead with a twist of the head that almost seemed like sign language. No trespassing, was the message. Growing up in the woods had kept him wirey thin, and jumpy as a squirrel. His eyes flicked back and forth, skittering over the road, flashing into the woods. He steered with his wrist, one hand curled over the top of the wheel, the other hanging out the window and thumping the door like waves under a rowboat. "So you gonna sell?" he wanted to know.

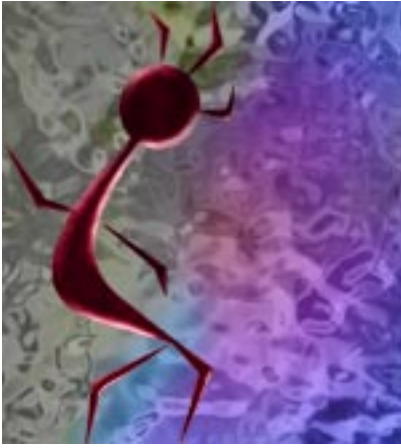
"I don't think so, Jeremy. That's not really what daddy would want, is it?"

"Who the hell can say."

"You know what I mean." She kept her hands folded on her knees, with her suitcase under her legs where the handles dug into the undersides of her calves. The tape deck played an tape of Bluegrass tunes and Margie was concentrating on the music all the way down to her fingertips. She could feel exactly how to transpose the jangling guitar into liquid piano, slowing it down and deepening it. Well, listen here fellers, so young and so fine, and seek not your fortune in the heart of the mine,...

Like drunken percussion, the car shuddered and shook across the washboard road under the flashing trees. Her father had left three hundred acres to each of them, although Margie's parcel included the house and the garage and even the trailer where Jeremy lived, while Jeremy's parcel was nothing but a rocky hill with a stream cutting down the back side of it.





Perfect for hunting, but not for much else.

One song ended, and the next was “Bury Me,” one of Hankleberry’s favorite front porch numbers. “Did daddy say anything to you,” she began, then fell silent. She knew she shouldn’t say anything, especially not to Jeremy, but it was already out. Maybe it was the gin talking. The woods flickered past the window and she cast her eyes into the shifting layers of green.

“What,” he said.

She looked at him from the corner of her eye. A wrinkle had spiked into the flesh over the bridge of his nose. He’d get angry if he had to say it again. She said, “He told me he wanted to be buried in the woods. Not in the church lot in town.”

“Well, of course he did. But mom wasn’t going to do that. Why—what he tell you?”

“He said, ‘You bury my ass out there.’”

Jeremy barked a laugh with his head thrown back. He waved a hand at a ridge to the east, where Keokuk lay on the other side, where their father lay under a heap of fresh dirt behind the Presbyterian church. The double headstone bore their mother’s name, too. “So let’s go dig him up. I’m game if you are, Margie. He wasn’t kidding when he told you.”

“I know, Jeremy. He wasn’t kidding. It’s what he would’ve wanted.”

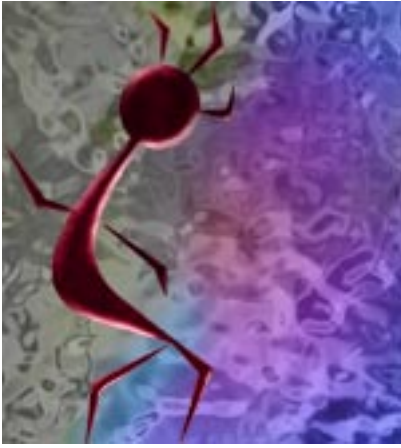
Jeremy snorted. “First time I’ve heard you so worried about what he would’ve wanted.”

She let a few curves in the road go by in silence. A dare-devil squirrel high-tailed it across the gravel like it had just been waiting for a car to come along. “I’ve always been worried about that,” she said. Until this earth does tremble, went the song.

“Too late now.”

It was two hours to the airport in Lexington, but not much more was said until they were pulling off the highway onto the access road. Margie pointed through the windshield at a tall sign that said AVIS. “Pull in there,” she said. “I want to rent a car.”

Jeremy gave her a look, but he steered them into the lot past rows of gleaming new cars to the office building that sat like a glass island in a sea



of asphalt. She went inside and did the paperwork while Jeremy sat in the Riviera smoking one Winston after another. She watched him through the picture windows while the credit card went through, wondering what were the chances that Jeremy would actually get a wild hair up his ass some night and drive down to the Presbyterian church with a pick and a shovel in the trunk. He could fit a casket into the back of the car if he just took out those bean bags and speakers. She wouldn't put it past him.

"I don't know if this go-cart is going to make it all the way to Denver," he said when he'd loaded her bags into the trunk of her mint green Beetle. It was one of the new ones, with the bulbous fenders and big windows. "What about the plane? You afraid of flying all of a sudden?"

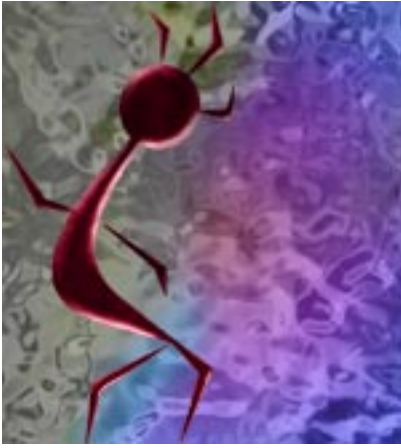
Margie watched her brother, wishing she could put her arms around him. He stood under the sun in his tissue-thin tee shirt with his ropy arms as tanned as belt leather, shaggy blond hair in his eyes. He was almost thirty, and still a kid, and without a father now. "I got a lot to think about, Jeremy. Driving clears the mind, you know?"

It also clears the blood, she thought. Fifteen-hundred miles sober, between here and Denver. Three days dry. Freeway, freeway, and not a drop to drink. On a plane, it would be five hours of booze, and no time to think. Half the flight fearing a fiery death and praying to a God she normally didn't talk to, and the rest of the time guzzling mini-bottles of California white wine and fingering an in-flight magazine. All thought and emotion neutralized, like the landscape you were flying over without touching a thing. No, driving was the way to go. Clearing the mind. But she didn't try to explain any of that to Jeremy.

A smirk played on his face. He wasn't sure if the driving-clears-the-mind thing was meant to make fun of him, so he turned away to light another smoke with his hand cupped against the wind. "I guess it does," he said with lips pressed tight on the filter, sucking the ember alive. "Hey, I talked to Bobby Bogue this morning, told him about the wake. He said to give you a kiss for him, but I'll just let him speak for himself if you don't mind."

"Bobby Bogue," she said.

"You should stop in and see him, since you're going overland. He's still on his folks' place, but they're long dead now, you know. Country bachelor."



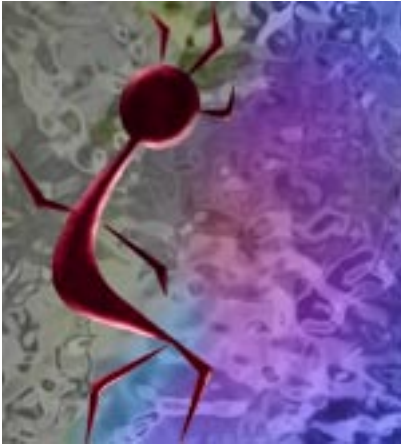
Margie watched her brother, seeing traces of her father in the lines that made parentheses at the corners of his mouth, in the droop to his eyelids and the hollows of his cheeks. Maybe he wasn't such a kid anymore. Maybe burying his father had grown him up a little. "You should drive out to Denver yourself and visit some time. Would this jalopy of yours make it that far?"

"I can make it make it," he said, grinning. And he probably could. Not for nothing had he spent ten years at Jiffy Lube. "You say hi to Jazmine for me," he said as she got behind the wheel, poking around to find the button to lower the window. Now she was the one smirking, but she couldn't read anything in his face with the sun behind him. Say hi to the whore for me. "I will," she said, and rolled the window back up, searching for the air-con buttons.

All day without another drink, crossing the Appalachians on Interstate 75, weaving down through the back slope of Kentucky as the sun sank ahead of her. Sleeping in a Motel 8 with the television on, waking up without a hangover but not feeling particularly good. How many days had she woken up hungover? Rolling into work at six in the evening, already half-sauced, then tinkling out a couple hours' worth of lounge piano without a single head turning in her direction. No one noticing if she was dead or alive or Mozart or drunk off her ass. She played jazzified versions of old bluegrass numbers, liquid and slow, and no one raised an eyebrow. The words floated through her head as the tune reeled out, and no one noticed. She could turn any tune into something mellow and jazzy and piano-friendly, and the crowd watched the hockey game, the baseball game, the football game. One night after another: How you folks doing tonight? I want to thank you all for coming out, got a real special number for y'all, a tune my daddy used to play,...

Crossing the Ohio river before ten o'clock in the morning, threading her way through the smokestack outskirts of Cincinnati, onto the rolling ribbon of State Route 503 and into Preble county. Here the green hills started to look like the same planet where she'd gone to college. She'd ridden these same roads with carloads of boys, bashing mailboxes with baseball bats and hucking empty beer cans out the window into the dark.





Working on memory, she found her way into Bellefontaine and all the way along Orchard Avenue to the strip where the highway widened into a thoroughfare of fastfood joints, warehouses and shopettes behind skirts of asphalt. Fred's Liquors and Liqueurs was the place where she used to buy beer when she was a freshman, before she even had a legal I.D. After all this driving, was her mind any clearer now than it had been yesterday at breakfast with a gin-and-tonic? Maybe a clear mind wasn't the kind of thing you could feel at all, and you only wished for it when your mind was cloudy.

She set her paper bags full of booze on the passenger seat and jingled the handful of quarters in her fist. Her hands looked older now than they did when she'd last bought a bag of booze at Fred's, back when the first Bush was president. You could keep your body in shape, and rub your face in miraculous pomades to keep that fresh look of a college freshman halfway through your thirties, but you couldn't do anything about your hands. She'd have to get some driving gloves, to keep her mind off it.

She steered her minty green Beetle across the asphalt and up to the pay phone as close as she could manage and lowered the window. It was easier to use the phone from this angle, plugging the quarters in and punching the buttons. She didn't have to consult any phone book, because the number was her own, half a continent away, and her finger hit the buttons by itself. A click and a buzz, then Jazmine's voice rustled in her ear. "Hyello?"

"Hi, babe."

"Jesus, where are you? I thought you were getting in yesterday."

"Change of plans, Jazmine. I'm driving."

"What do you mean, you're driving? I thought you had a plane ticket."

"I need some time to get clear. I got one of those cute new VW's."

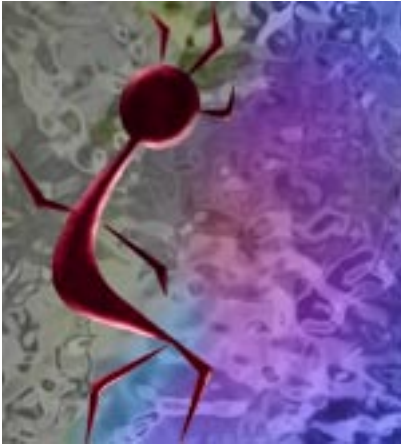
"Get clear? Are you okay, Margie? Did everything go okay?"

"No, Jazmine. My dad died and we buried him behind the Presbyterian church. That's not everything going okay."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry to put it that way. But is everything okay, considering?"

"Considering?" Margie ran her free hand over the steering wheel in circles. The engine was idling, and all she had to do to end this conversation would be to drop into gear and hit the gas. The receiver would be pulled





right out of her hand as she covered ground. You don't feel like you're missing something? her father had said. "I miss you, Jazmine. I'm going to be a few days more."

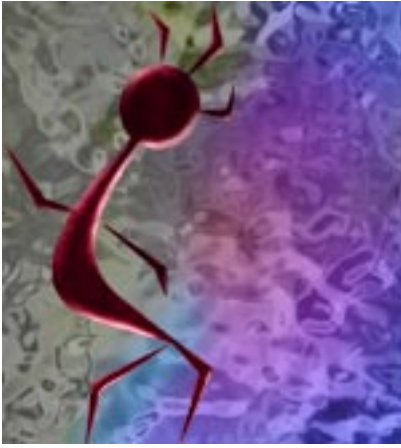
"How many days, Margie? When should I expect you?"

"A couple three. I've got some friends along the way, a few places I can stay the night. Look, babe, I'm out of quarters. I'll call tomorrow."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"I love you, baby." She hung up without saying more, hanging the receiver on the hook and pulling away into an empty space at the edge of the parking lot. She pressed the rest of her quarters into the coin holder in the console under the stereo. Then she reached for the paper bags on the passenger seat and pulled out the pint bottle of Jack Daniels, twisting off the cap and pressing the glass mouth to her lips without even thinking about it. Tip, sip, burn. She sucked air through her teeth as a chaser, the whiskey burning her throat as it went down. It was only a sip, after all. Bobby's place was less than a half-hour out of town, and she could drive the road blind-folded even after all these years. That was just one of the many ways in which driving cleared the mind.

County Road 66, three lefts and three rights. Corn fields flickered by, interspersed with stands of cottonwood and elm. Nothing looked any different. She'd started dating Bobby Bogue in the first month of her freshman year at Webster U., and it lasted until the summer after graduation, when everything changed. During those four years, she'd traveled this road a thousand times, pressed up against Bobby's shoulder on the front seat of his pickup or squeezed into the backseat of some other car filled with her whooping friends, roaring over the gravel fast enough for the tires to pop tiny rocks off into the darkness like b.b.'s. It was one of those nights, in a carload of drunks, that Bobby had first proposed to her. She'd laughed, with the wind through the window filling her mouth and rippling her hair across his face, pressed against her neck where he kept whispering. Her only answer that night was that laugh, like he'd just told a great joke. Days later, when she had to give him a reason why not, she said that her parents didn't want her to get married until she'd gotten her career started. That was very far from the truth and Bobby knew it, but you couldn't argue with a girl who was



turning down a marriage proposal. He resorted to flowers, bottles of wine, fancy dinners at the Italian restaurant in downtown Bellefontaine. He even made a cedar headboard for her double bed, but she never came around for him. When she gave it back to him, she heard later, he chopped the headboard into kindling and had himself a bonfire behind his folks' barn. What else he burned there, she didn't know.

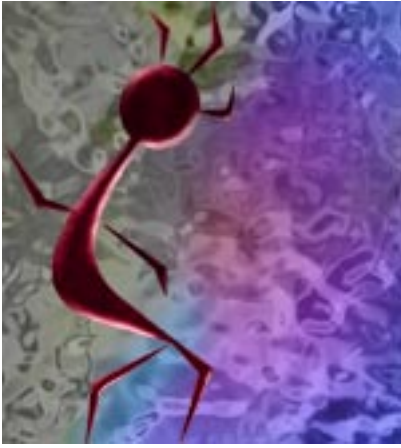
Margie wouldn't tell him her reasons, because she didn't know them herself. It was just a feeling, that she needed to wait. Then she met Jennifer Bashline at a graduation party, and everything changed. After Jennifer came Eliza, then Lucy, and finally Jazmine. What she'd been waiting for. Bobby never knew where he went wrong. "So what did all these girls have that Bobby didn't?"

It was Hank Finn's voice. Her father was only in her head, but she imagined him in the bucket seat beside her, speaking without looking at her, staring out the window with his chin in his hand. He was in his hospital smock because, she supposed, she would always think of him as sick. The road rumbled underneath, dull thunder. She let a couple fields of knee-high corn go by, mulling the question. Could it be reduced to one word? "Patience," she said, to see how it sounded. And it sounded right. "She has patience."

Her father snorted. That was the side of him that lived on in Jeremy, she thought. The incredulous snort. By now, Jeremy knew Bobby Bogue as well as she ever did, since the two of them went pheasant hunting every fall in the Blue Ridge Mountains. She was sure there had been plenty of campfire stories about the weird directions Margie's life had taken, the choices she'd made that didn't include Bobby Bogue. And she got the occasional update via Jeremy, like the thing about the headboard bonfire, the clean cedar smell of it. "If Bobby'd had a little more patience," she said, "maybe things would be different now."

"That's bullshit," her father said.

And he was right, only because there was no point in thinking about how things could have been different. She swigged from the pint bottle and held it out over the passenger seat as if someone there was going to take it from her hand. No one did. Had the grave cured her daddy of the drink? Certainly, nothing else on earth could do it. She had another swig, if only to prove she was still among the living.



"Tell you what," her father said, "forget about burying me out there in the boonies. I got a better idea: you move back home and settle down there on the land. Share the house with your old mother, or build a new place back in the woods. See if your girlfriend likes the idea, with her patience and all."

Half a smile turned up one corner of her mouth, imagining that. Yazmine, with her office on the thirty-third floor and her rolodex full of senators and CEO's, transplanted to the dark side of Kentucky where the only movers and shakers were crickets and racoons. She'd curl up and die from social withdrawal, a time zone away from anyone else who understood the cartoons in the New Yorker. Thinking of the tirade she'd throw at even the mention of the idea, Margie felt a twinge of loneliness, the need to wrap herself in Yazmine's arms, the soft smell of her.

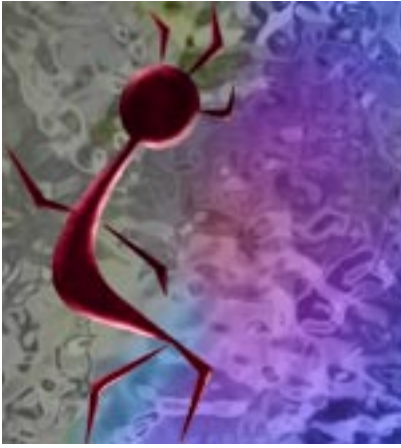
She felt her father's hand on her arm, a warmth. "I only want you to be happy," he said. She didn't know if it was something he meant, or if it was only the words to a song. She swigged another bolt of J.D., hissing her teeth at the empty passenger seat.

Meanwhile, the road rumbled on, and she realized that it really was clearing her mind. "I gotta buy one of these cars," she said out loud. She watched the gravel road coming at her under the late afternoon sun, recognizing the shape of a gnarled stump that stood like a hunchback at the crest of a hill, amazed that a piece of dead wood could have lasted so many years out in the elements, and equally amazed that some part of her mind had reserved a place for it. Two more miles to Bobby Bogue's, was what the stump reminded her.

She hooked the last left, wondering what they'd have to talk about now. After a decade of pheasant hunting, Bobby might just share Jeremy's ignorant attitude about her lifestyle. But of course, they had her dad to talk about. The late, great Hankleberry Finn. Speculating, over that bottle of Bushmills, whether Jeremy really had it in him to go grave-robbing behind the Presbyterian church. Or whether Margie had it in her to pack up and move back to the hills of Kentucky. Whether she knew any good recipes for wild squirrel. Getting a few laughs in while the night was still fresh and the lightening bugs cruised like shooting stars. She tipped back the pint of Jack, sucked her lips, and slid the bottle back between her blue jean thighs.

The sun had just slipped into the branches of a stand of cottonwoods on





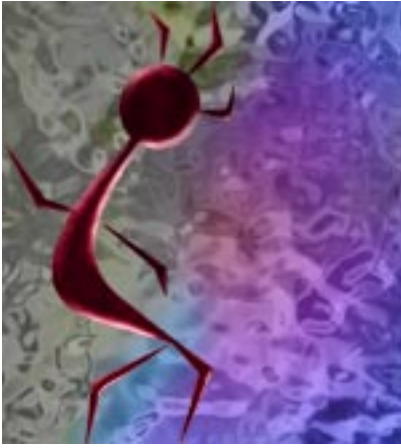
the flank of a hill when Margie saw the deer. Three of them, white-tailed does. They stood in the ditch at the edge of the road, their eyes black pools glinting with the last of the daylight. She tapped the brake and reached for the headlights switch at the same time. One of the deer took a step, seemed to coil on itself as the distance between them closed at fifty miles an hour. The lever that Margie thought should turn on the headlights and paint the instrument panel in a moody blue glow instead sent the wipers in a dry and stuttery arc across the windshield. Then she heard the skree of gravel somewhere underneath, felt the slingshot of gravity tightening the seatbelt strap across her chest. The horizon rotated fast, and slammed to a stop with a burst of confetti.

Margie, both hands on the wheel, stared over the dashboard at the road she'd just come from, steaming with dust. The three deer stood riveted to their spot in the ditch: they hadn't moved an inch. Now, in the ringing silence, they stepped gingerly across the road and slipped along the fence until their tails, like tiny white flames, disappeared into the swaying stalks of corn.

She held her hands up. No blood. She turned her head side to side, taking in the shattered passenger window where a fence post had burst through and punctured the head rest. Anyone riding there would have been finished, pasted, solid gone. She twitched her feet and found no problem there. But when she looked down, she saw her thighs were dark and wet. Shattered glass lay strewn across her lap like spilled popcorn. She pressed a hand to her thigh, feeling the stickiness that pasted the denim to her palm. "Please let that be booze," she muttered. She sucked breath through her teeth, brought her hand up, ran her tongue across her life-line. Jack Daniels. As far as bourbons go, the sweetest taste in the world.

Bobby Bogue's place was another mile up this road, and another mile to the right. The sun was gone, the sky bruising evenly from one side to another, and Margie Finn wasn't going to sit in her wreck waiting for someone to come along. Who knew what might be out here besides white-tailed deer? She left her luggage in the trunk, and carried only the paper sack from Fred's with the Bushmills whiskey and the Negra Modelo. Walking along the gravel,



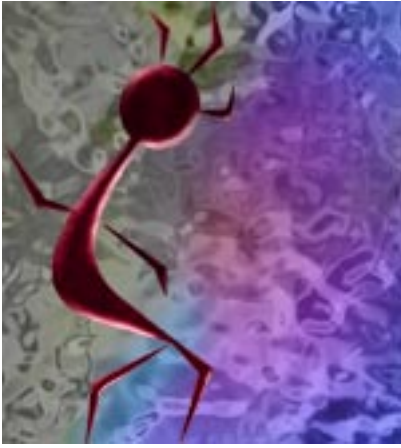


she found that her thirst was gone, as if something had clicked in her head and turned off the whiskey switch. Maybe all she'd needed was a good shake-up to break the habit. This would be the test: walking the two miles to Bobby's house with a sack full of booze, and not sneaking a solitary sip. If driving couldn't get her clean, then walking would. And when they were finally kicked back on the porch and having a laugh and a smoke, then a drink or two wouldn't do any damage. Besides, she hadn't crashed because of the booze; it had been the deer that had thrown her off, and the unfamiliar car. A bottle was a lot easier to control than an automobile, especially one of those space-age Beetles.

Without even coming to a decision about it, she set the paper bag on the ground and pulled out the bottle of Bushmills. The cap twisted off with a snap, and she tipped it back for a mouthful of fire. "Hoo-ee," she said in the twilight while the crickets chirped. It would be best to show up relaxed and confident at Bobby's, with just enough juice in her blood to take the edge off her nerves. She'd walk up the lane swinging one arm, the paper bag in the other, and she'd whistle at him where he sat rocking on the porch. He'd wonder what the hell she was doing walking around in the dark, where the hell her car was, where in God's name she'd been for the last ten years—and she'd have a great story to tell. Three goddamn deer! It would be a hell of a laugh. He'd slip his arm around her in the front seat of his pickup as they headed out to winch her car out of the ditch. Dark fields wheeling past. It would feel exactly like old times, like not a single day had come between them. As if he'd been patiently waiting for her to come back around, just the way her father would have wanted it. It was never too late to start worrying about that.

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STICKMAN REVIEW FICTION CONTEST

SECOND PRIZE

The Revolt of the Abyssinian Maid

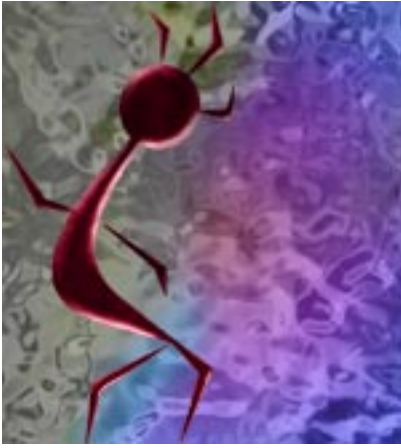
by Darla Beasley

She left at midnight, to the sound of a spoon. She quit without notice and took all the towels, which she had just washed and folded. She quit because her fingernails were bitten to the quick, because her skin felt faded, two shades lighter. When her hair was unbraided, it would not comb out, but retained the shape of a loose black coil, crouching on her shoulders. She quit because of the dampness, which seemed to curl around her and sniff. Because of the ice that formed, like one thousand mirrors, on the walls and ceilings. Other servants had gone before her, she had seen the signs. They appeared in the form of forlorn sachets. Hairbrushes, earrings, shopping lists—all things portable, yet forgotten in haste. She wondered if when they closed their eyes they still saw pale English hands, floating like miniature planets in dimly lit rooms. Beckoning, calling.

At 10:15, it was time for the Mister's medicine. Yessir, nossir, three spoons full, and he was off to his desk, where he tenderly folded parchment into origami doves. He tried and failed to propel them across the room. In the maid's opinion, the wings were too heavy with ink, which explained why the birds never got off the carpet. The Mister said they were prophesying war. After he had taken his medicine, his pupils were the size of the coins they gave her, which she'd never spent. Instead she wrapped them in a stocking, next to the brick she used to warm her feet, until she dreamed that a lion was standing at the foot of her cot. The lion brought a homesickness that she could not afford, so she buried the coins in a corner of the vegetable garden. The Missus exclaimed in surprise, a few months later, when the maid pulled up carrots the exact color of brass.

The household was operated like any other, on a combination of desires. The maid dusted and swept. She ferried trays heaped with nothing, because the Mister was experimenting with imaginary fruit. As for the Missus, the maid launched one thousand boats, whose gravy cargo was substantial enough. Her employers were especially pleased when she played the begena, the notes going places that only the maid's fingers knew. An outcrop, sand-





stone, the blue mouth of the Nile. A miracle of rare device. The Missus preferred low notes, which pleased her ear. This is what the moss knows, a somber green key. The maid would miss tending the gardens most—the way the tulips were planted like match sticks. The flare of pipes and sunlight, the scent of the trees, almost toxic with heavy perfume.

And she would miss the children, the pink flesh of their palms, their grubby supplications. The careful pressing and folding of their dresses and trousers, a task which always seemed ghostly to her, as if the clothes had shed some vital component. At home she would have washed the garments in the river, where the water would flush through the sleeves and hems. Gently ballooning the spirits back in, smelling of loam and chlorophyll. Here she was told to use the washing board, nothing more than an oversized cheese grate, which nipped at her skin until her knuckles were raw.

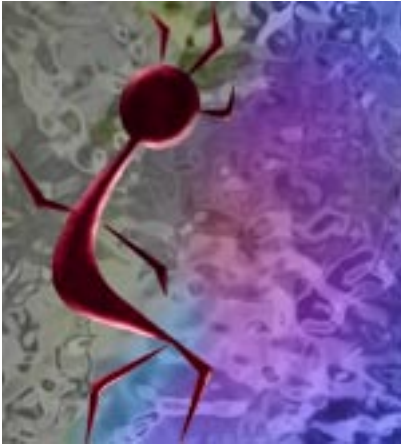
But It was not as if she was treated cruelly. She was loved by the members of the household in their own strange way. The Missus always gave her castaway trinkets—a broach she no longer wore, herbs she had pressed onto delicate paper. Advice. Beware, she told the maid when the Mister had doubled his dose of medicine. Beware, his flashing eyes, his floating hair. At times, the Mister got a little out of hand, but the worst thing he had ever done was to accidentally lock the maid in the library with him.

She watched from a corner in fascination, as he laughed and wept and wrote about savage places. Occasionally he would stop and put a hand over his chest, until he finally fell asleep upon the desk. She tiptoed around him three times just to be certain that the sentences hadn't killed him. Then she deftly extracted the key to the room from the chain around his waist. He was drooling slightly, and the saliva was smearing the ink on the page.

There were men, she had learned, who spent their lives cataloging words and constellations. Tracing and retracing comets and footfalls. And this is what finally caused the maid to revolt. To see the stars on paper, pinioned like butterflies. To be shown with casual mercy, the flesh of heaven, the exact arrangement of the sky over Kaffa.

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The Son

by Germaine W. Shames

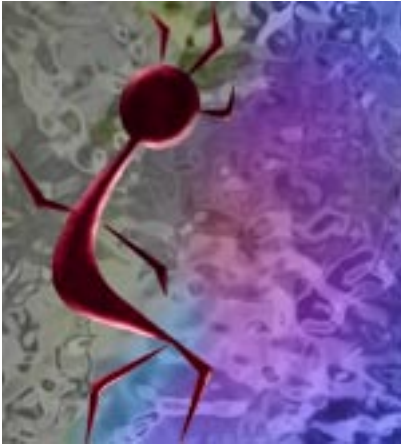
I have always known—every Hontu knows—the story of the Lumber Yard Massacre. Larger for its countless retellings, it unfolds before my eyes like a Technicolor film with Dolby sound (lacking only the bouquet of buttered popcorn):

A stand of caobas in the forest. Encircling it, the undefended bodies of my people, linked arm-in-arm to form a human fence. The white foreman, rifle at the ready, gives the signal. The shooting begins. The Hontus fall in an unbroken chain, a mile of them cut down like the trees they can't save. They fall and keep falling. My father, brandishing his machete, breaks ranks and hacks off his own arm, hacks it clean through and carries the limb like a blood sacrifice to the feet of the white foreman. The god of small places stanches the wound. The loggers, too stunned to keep shooting, plant their rifles in the earth.

It was then, amidst the carnage and wonder, that my father became a Great Soul. The survivors of the massacre still talk about how he stood unflinching before the foreman with his severed arm, chanting the prayer of safe passage for the dead.

They call my father Tano the Long-Rooted. Under his leadership, the people of Itok Island fled en masse to America—followed soon after by the loggers. Too many trees had already been lost. The monsoons washed the soil out to sea until no crop would take hold there.

I was four years old at the time of the exodus. The medicine man put my father's severed arm in brine and carried it aboard the ship in an empty kerosene can. The floating appendage exercised a morbid attraction: I could not stop staring at it the entire journey, nor could I resist the urge to poke it and swirl its salty surrounds each time the adults left the can unattended. Later, once the community had settled into its identical tract houses on square plots of bare dirt with one tree each, the medicine man transferred the arm to a fish tank and placed it in the center of the makeshift spirit lodge. A pack of the older boys, recently introduced to the American



custom of mischief, added Kool-Aid to the brine, turning it a bright orange. The Hontus counted the transmutation a blessing and reeling with jubilation gave thanks to the god of signs and glad tidings.

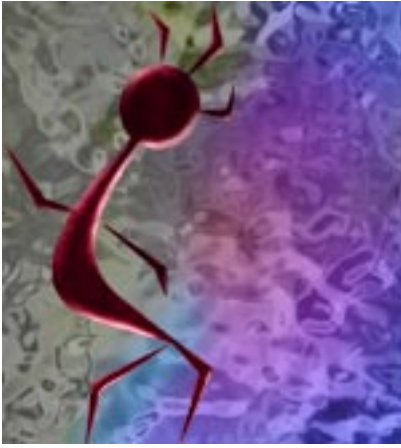
My father, torn between tradition and the inevitable, appointed a council of elders to help him govern the transplanted community. The sudden plethora of choices kept them sequestered in the spirit lodge day and night, grappling to reconstruct their island in the dry sea of suburban America, circa 1960. An impossibility. Already the young Hontus were seduced by the glimmer of roller skate keys and yellow hair—glimpsed only at a distance, for they were schooled at home and forbidden from playing with the nontribal children in the neighborhood.

From a tender age I displayed an almost feline aptitude for escape. The hunger to foray beyond the imposed bounds, to skip off the front curb and cross to the “alien” side of the street, surpassed any scruples or fear I may have felt. There, the girls and boys rode scooters, bicycles, blew enormous bubbles out of chewing gum, walked side by side licking ice cream cones... “Only a trickster god would countenance such foolishness,” opined my father, gazing woefully at their white faces from the threshold of the spirit lodge. In consultation with the elders he formulated the policy that would define our relations for all times: “compassionate non-intercourse.” Gesturing with his one arm toward an imaginary Itok, he spoke the words that would later be etched upon our doorposts: “Never forget!”

Shortly after the council issued this decree, the Hontus raised a fence along the border that divided our land from the land of these menacing others, a fence made not of collective will but of heavy-gauge steel wire. The chain links, while they did not stop me from gazing toward the forbidden world ten meters away, redoubled my hankering to break free. I developed the habit of pacing. The older boys tied my shoelaces together and nicknamed me Devil, after a misfit they had read about in a Gideon’s Bible someone left at our doorstep, but their taunts only added fuel to a fire already stoked. No sooner were their backs turned than I leapt the fence and raced across the asphalt to hide in the backyard of my one friend, a sticky-faced little girl named Marjorie, who dressed like a lumberjack and liked to play in mud.

Permit me to clarify—not to defend my acts but merely to place them in





perspective—that I was not the only Hontu youngster to transgress the decree of non-intercourse. The older boys had become quite adept at mischief, and once got caught in the company of cheerleaders, slurping shave ice at a Dairy Queen. But I was the son of a Great Soul, and therefore scrutinized. People began to whisper that I had gone bad. In truth, I was not yet bad, only naughty. Years later I would earn my nickname, become the misfit my people expected me to be—what recourse had I? To hack off both my arms? I might sacrifice every limb and digit and still my father's glory would eclipse me.

To Marjorie I was just another playmate. Unlike the grown-ups who ruled the neighborhood, she seemed not to notice our differences. Only once did it occur to her to ask, "Where'd you folks come from, anyway?" I told her about my island, omitting any reference to the massacre, and she removed the Tootsie Roll from her mouth long enough to say, "I'm from Ohio," and to show her teeth, which were brown in some spots and white in others.

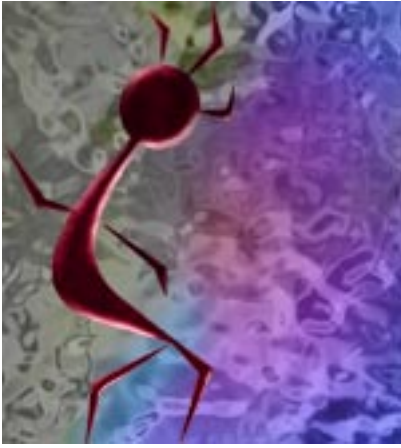
It was through Marjorie that I gradually came to know the other nontribal children on our block and to join in their games. In the great American tradition of show and tell, they displayed to me, first, their toys, then their weewees—the latter, not so different from my own. Having no toys, I lowered my pants. Thus, I established rapport and earned a place in their circle, but they were not satisfied for long. Have you no bicycle, they asked, no GI Joe, no football...? None of these things could I lay claim to. The Hontus disdained ownership; what little the community had was held in common. Tomorrow my Keds might be taken from me and passed to another child whose need the elders deemed greater than my own. "Can't you see he's poor," Marjorie said with a shrug of her freckled shoulders.

The concept of poverty was new to me, but I sensed in it something dark and isolating. Already the white children were drawing away from me, their attention riveted by the chrome hood ornament on their father's new Buick or the tinny refrain of the Good Humor truck.

"I am not poor," I protested, puffing out my scrawny chest as I had seen the other boys do. "I have a special thing... a thing none of you has ever seen, not even on TV."

"He's faking," accused a buck-toothed youth with incipient acne.





"I have a thing you will not find in any store," I insisted, "a thing you cannot buy or trade stamps for or win in a sweepstakes."

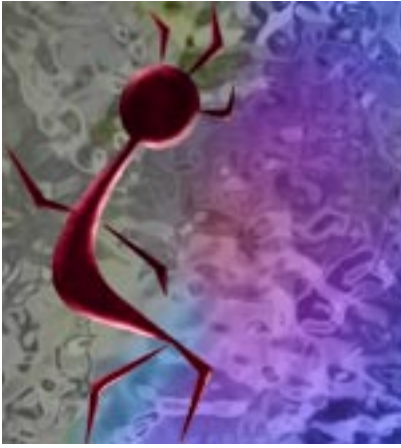
A chorus of voices demanded, "Show us!"

Had I ignored their taunts and dares, how different my life might be today—the Hontus, however fiercely they defend the traditional ways, do forgive their own. The god of return and reconciliation sees to it. But I did not stop to think about waterlogged deities with the faces of fish. A moment's hesitation and I might lose my chance to ride the shiny scooters, to suck jawbreakers, to touch the yellow down between the little girls' legs... all the joys for which there were no gods. "Wait here," I said and raced hammer-hearted across the street.

As I hurtled the chainlink fence, I could smell yams frying for the midday meal. While the women labored singing in the communal kitchen, the men and children napped in the scant shade of the widely spaced trees. The door to the spirit lodge stood open. Seeing no shoes lined up beside the footbowl, I stole inside.

Illumined only by the embers of a wood fire, the room lay cloaked in a perpetual twilight. The cloying scent of incense could not quite mask a second, more pungent smell, reminiscent of the morning after a pig roast. I pinched shut my nostrils and approached the fish tank. Its orange brine glowed faintly in the penumbra. I could not see my father's severed arm, but I knew from the stench that it was somewhere nearby. Beginning first to sweat, then to pant, I reached deep into the tank. My fingers made contact with the spongy dead flesh—recoiled—groped for a firmer hold. The arm had lost its resiliency; saturated bits of skin and tissue broke away at my touch. I submerged my other hand, then my forearm. The embalmed appendage, bloated to twice its original size, slithered from my grasp again and again. Extracting my hands and wiping the slime on my polo shirt, I gulped back a sob, raised myself up onto the balls of my feet, and plunged my face into the tank. My jaws closed about the floating trophy. A taste of salt and sugar and rancid hope stunned my senses. I reared back, claspng it to my heaving chest with both hands and spitting gristle out from between my teeth. Zigzagging, I crossed the room. Not until I reached the doorway did I notice the men huddled there, praying in whispers. They made no attempt to stop me as I passed, only prayed at my back in a low moan that has rung in my ears ever since.





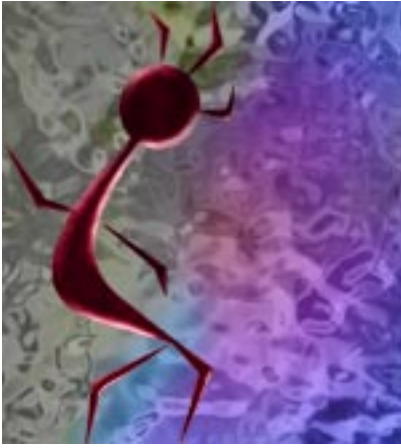
The white children made much of the wasted arm, pummeling it with sticks and baseball bats until the last bit of flesh jarred loose from the bones and lay rotting on the sidewalk. I left them to their fun and walked down the highway, weaving among the cars.

Damn the god that spared my life! Damn the policeman who led me by the collar through the front door of my father's house. "Is this your son?" asked the white stranger, brandishing a shiny badge I would have given anything to wear.

"I do not know this devil." My father raised his one remaining arm as if to strike me. For a moment it hovered in mid-air, then slowly it dropped and hung dead weight at his side.

I might have repented, might have purged the wicked wanting from my heart and embraced anew the scaly gods of my island—there are rituals for such things. But repent I could not. The pliant animal of my nature would not allow it. Soon I would be old enough to choose among an endless gamut of vices and indulgences; I would be white; nobody's son.

The medicine man scraped the remains of my father's severed limb from the pavement and replaced it in the fish tank, along with a second dosing of Kool-Aid. Between mischief and miracles the distance had already narrowed. An open Gideon's Bible lay bathed in an orange glow. Soon we would all be white.



Ghost Stories

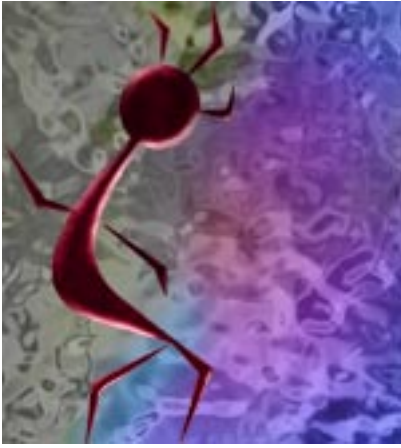
by Rochelle Spencer

This morning I decided to become a lesbian. The other thing that might interest you is my friends. The thing with them is that they are all crazy, and it's not like they can help it, they just are. But what's more is that they are crazy people who enjoy their craziness; they think it makes them unique, and their entire lives are as sweet and airy as a mouth full of pink cotton candy melting against your tongue.

Craziness is my friend Truth, an ugly man with a blonde Afro who tells the most beautiful lies. It's my girl Tapeika who barks at people and shakes her topless breasts at the sky when it's raining and smiles and says there's no greater freedom when I ask her why. It's also me, my unnatural obsession with this man who simply will not flat out refuse to talk to me no matter how many times I pray/cry/beg, and the way my thoughts and desires are tangled into his soft deeply dreaded hair. (And craziness could also quite possibly be my friend Lincoln—we call him that because he looks like a black Abraham Lincoln and nobody remembers his real name anymore. Lincoln is a man who thinks he is responsible for the pain of everyone and his is a sad craziness because he doesn't know he is.)

In the coffee shop, Truth is sitting on Tapeika's lap blowing cancer all over the place. Tapeika is barking at him; Lincoln is reading a book he doesn't even look up from when I come in and kiss him and the others on the cheek. Lincoln is angry but not surprised that I am late, I always am. I myself know I am late and don't give a damn; once I got here, I stood in the doorway for three full minutes enjoying the smell of cigarettes, coffee, and dry, dying flowers because Al, the owner, is trying unsuccessfully to grow a garden out back. It's an ugly garden, patchy and uneven because of Al's lack of a green thumb, but we love it. I think sometimes we love everything about Al's. The scratches on the floor. The chairs, large and old and falling apart, velvety and ripped out and dirty in some places. It's a quiet place, cramped; the coffee and pastries are only so-so. But we take what we can get. We can't afford Starbucks.

Al, sitting behind the counter reading the paper, knows how I like my



coffee; Al knows how I like everything. Last year, Al started having poetry slams every other Saturday to generate customers and one time he read a poem that was so good it made my stomach hurt, my head light, and I felt the way I do when I fall in love, when I first stopped smoking, and I told him so and he took that to mean he could try and feel on my booty and then I bit him on the cheek, and now there's an understanding between us. Al hands me a mug and the comics section, and within seconds I'm sipping on coffee creamy, hot, sugar-sweet, even though I actually don't even like coffee (hence, the sugar) but I drink it now to be sophisticated.

When I sit down and tell my friends about the thing that's happened, there's a woman with long red hair who is pretending not to listen to our conversation. She's nodding her head up and down like she understands and she looks sad and eager whenever she takes peeks at us from behind the pages of the magazine she's not reading. I don't care anymore, and I would invite her to join us, but is it my fault that she's tacky enough to listen but not bold enough to interrupt? But if people stare at us hard then look away it is because they should, because we look strange, not that we can help it, we just do. There are few people of color in this town, those who are here look like updated episodes of the Cosby show or the iced up rappers in the MTV and BET videos. There are none who look like us, not like Tapeika with her long, purple braids, Truth with his thorny gold 'fro, definitely not Lincoln and his long, sad face.

"You didn't even steal the good CDs?" Lincoln asks me after I explain it all. His long flat hands pat me on the back; he makes me spill coffee all over the place, and I would be mad but I know he can't help it and was only trying to be comforting.

"He didn't have any," I use napkins and the Mary Worth section of the comics to stop the flow, that's quickly going everywhere.

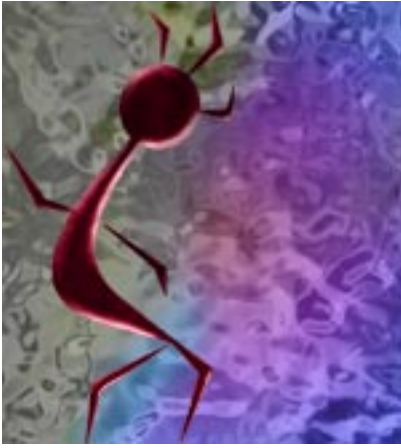
"No CDs at all?"

"Jazz shit...But still, mostly records."

"You'll get over it."

"Wouldn't have worked anyway, he's a Virgo." The woman who has been pretending not to listen squeezes my shoulder as she walks out the door.

And I nod because it's true—Libras should never date Virgos, no matter how firm the butt or brilliant the mind. It's a mistake.



"We're going to a Séance tonight," Truth tells me as he jumps off Tapeika's lap, and I can't tell whether he's lying or not. Because of his lies, women are always in love with Truth, even though he's ugly, even though he's got a round pumpkin head and slightly crooked teeth...His lies are little miracles. He'll tell you you can fly, and you'll touch your back and feel for wings.

"If you like women now, why aren't you attracted to me? I'm cute." Tapeika frowns and taps her mouth with a braid.

"Beautiful...But unfortunately not my type."

"Te gustas?"

"Haitian Virgos with locks." Lincoln answers for me.

"So whatsup? You headed to the Séance or not?" Truth stabs his cigarette out on Al's table, and I stare at him longingly, the thing I miss most about smoking is being able to make such definitive gestures.

"I'm tired and I'm staying home. I don't feel like going anywhere."

"You need to go. Maybe you'll meet someone there."

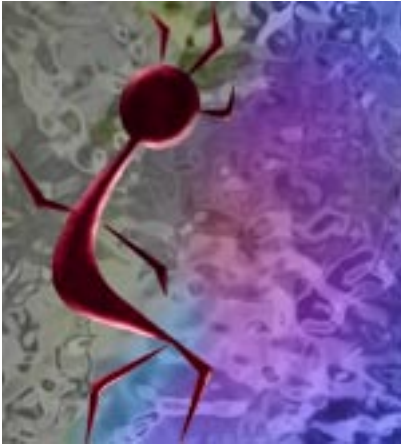
"From the other side?"

"Does it matter? You were going to the other side anyway," says Truth. "Of course, it is possible to fall in love with a ghost. Happened to an aunt of mine once. She was going to church every day, praying that she'd meet someone when one day she was like ah, fuck it, and went to a Séance and met this dead guy who turned her out! Forget the holy ghost, she needed one who was a bit more secular...Now they have sex four or five times a night and everybody thinks the house is haunted, but it's not. It's just the sweaty sounds of their own passion."

I nod, sip my coffee, and believe him.

Because he really does tell the most beautiful lies.

For the most part, I like my life. Why not? On sunny days, we can sit outside and laugh at the people walking by and drink coffee so hot, it's black sunshine. We can split croissants dipped in butter, and break them apart with our fingers and talk about politics and music and what was on tv last night and all the silly things that don't matter. You can tease me about pouring cups of sugar in my coffee and still not drinking it, wasting it. Then we can complain that we don't have money. Then we can complain that we don't



have jobs. And then we can complain that we don't have the money to get jobs to get money. And then maybe, depending on how our week's gone, we can either laugh some more or argue.

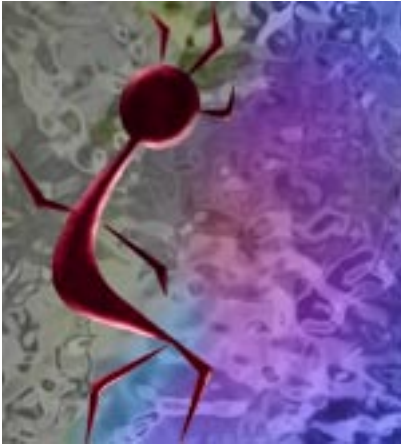
But then there was this one time. The sky was this deep blue-green, and there were clouds shaped like fish, and the air was so cool you could float in it. We were walking through the park, breathless from climbing up and down rocks, the messy wooded trails, enjoying a day so beautiful it made us both dizzy. We finally stopped at place that was shady and hidden, more than a little muddy from where it had rained the day before. I stood with my back against a tree and thought about kissing you, and just as I was leaning in to brush your lips I saw, out the corner of my eye, this brother wearing nothing but boxing shorts and a long red coat that made me think of Superman's cape.

"Got yourself a fine one, there," he said and nodded at me as he flew past, holding the edges of his coat in his hands.

"She's beautiful, right?" I think you might have said and laughed, and so did I even though I couldn't tell exactly why we were so happy only I knew that we were. Still, I don't think the why mattered. Because seconds later, there they were...Crisp dollar bills, bright green, sparkling against the deep blue of the sky. And they were like feathers, the way they drifted from the sky. Then again, maybe they came from him, the man with the red coat, which makes about as much sense. But we grabbed fistfuls. I even opened my bag. You kissed me. We started laughing all over again. It was...Thirty seconds of magic. Then it was gone.

Right now it's warm and gray and probably will storm, not at all like that cool, beautiful day in the park. I'm searching my bag for an umbrella but does it really matter if I find one or not, the air is already steaming my face. I find an umbrella just in time, before it comes pouring, crashing down. I'm being careful, avoiding the newly formed puddles when I slip and run smack into the store window of Lulu's, this tacky lingerie boutique. It's the thing now, to make store mannequins as erotic as possible, and the ones in Lulu's have belly buttons and actual nipples and look realer than real women. They wear lingerie in ridiculous shades of lime green, electric blue, and the material's so thin you see the flesh-painted skin underneath. You look at them and are ashamed, and even though they have no heads or faces you feel





as though they are blushing. Maybe then, in that sense, they are nothing like real women. Sylvia, the realest woman I know, she never blushes. She says she has forgotten how. Sylvia is a belly-dancer; she's the woman I decided this morning to fall in love with. Sylvia is sixty-ish with wavy brown skin that kind of ripples into itself. She dances in this café that I go to when I want decent pastries and decide it's time to cheat on Al.

She was in the middle of her routine when I walked in last night. Her eyes were closed but she tossed me a pink flower anyway, and it was a carnation, and it landed right in my lap. I stayed until everybody had left because I wanted to know what it was about her. When she finished her dancing and was sitting with her eyes closed and butt in one chair and feet in another, I kind of understood. Her body looked knowledgeable, wise. Like it knew all kinds of yummy secrets.

"You must have the best job in the world," I told her.

"It's so hard to work at night." She opened her eyes—but only a little—and smiled. "Actually, I love dawn, it's my favorite time of day."

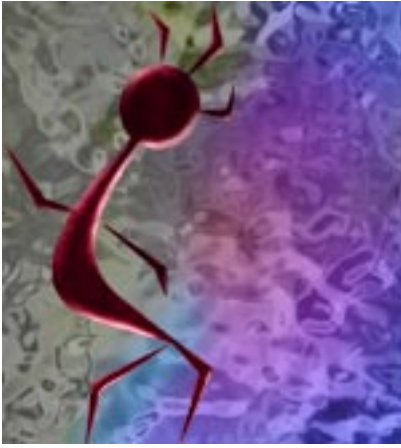
"It's special because?"

"Things reinvent themselves." She closed her eyes again and asked me to light her a cigarette. Then she congratulated me about finally quitting smoking and then she asked me about you. I didn't know what to tell her. She asked me if you were my first love; I told her yes; she shrugged and said I'd get over it soon.

"Remember, you're a good person," she said as she removed the cigarette from her mouth and kissed me. "You're a good person—don't ever forget that," she whispered, and her breath smelled of carnations.

This morning, getting out of bed, the first thing I see is that carnation taped to my mirror. I think that symbolizes something but maybe it doesn't. My apartment's this studio that's smaller than small; I see everything it, and I can't walk around it without tripping over books, papers, yellowing plants that desperately need water and don't look much better than Al's. Today it takes me forty-five minutes to make it to one end of the studio to the other because I keep finding books I either want to or need to read. When I finally make it to my closet it takes me another hour to try and pick out some Séance appropriate clothing. I have no idea what to wear. I want to be comfortable and maybe wear jeans, but I figure that's too informal and disrespectful to the dead.





The navy skirt and shirt I pick out, I think they're okay, but who knows if the outfit really is appropriate or not? But it doesn't matter; I'm always inappropriate, and I've done more than a few wrong things in my time. I made dinner for this Muslim guy I was dating and accidentally fed him pork. I cancelled a date with a man I'd been seeing for almost a year on Valentine's Day because I wanted to stay home and write. I set one guy's apartment on fire when I was lighting candles to try this new thing that I read about in *Cosmopolitan*. Still it could be that the thing with you was the worst.

I'd like to think we're going to get back together, but it's not going to happen. Every time I think we might, I remember what happened four or five months ago, when I was sleeping and Lincoln came over and scared the shit out of me. It was after midnight but not quite morning, possibly 3 a.m., a time when I'd forgotten I'd given all my friends keys. He didn't say anything to wake me up, he just stood over my futon watching me sleep, until I yawned and looked up and saw him standing there. It was the coldest winter in years, and he was wearing a loose fitting Hanes undershirt and faded jeans. Snowflakes that hadn't melted clung to him—his black skin, hollow face, skinny, uncovered arms and neck. He looked like the Ghost of Christmas past. I started screaming. I didn't know how long he had been standing there waiting for me to feel his presence, understand his sadness. He listened to me scream until I finally got over it and drowsily made him some tea.

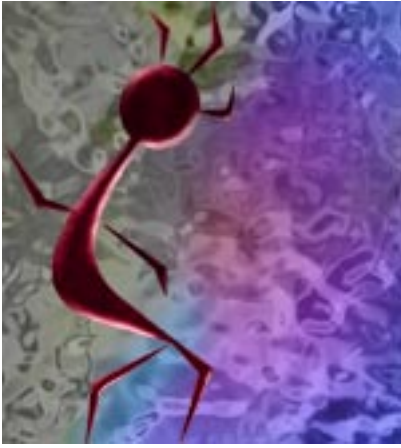
"It's not your fault," I said after I'd given him a robe and handed him a mug. "You didn't kill her."

Lincoln didn't say anything but he shook his head like he didn't believe me. "I wasn't there for her, which is the same thing...She deserved to have somebody there for her, nobody should have to work that hard in life. She was a cook, picked cotton, a maid. You know she could pick a pan right up from the oven—no potholder, towel, nothing—and not get burned? One time one of the kids slammed her hand in a car door and she didn't even wince." He looked down at the mug in his lap, then he reached for the honey and lemon and began stirring vigorously. "I should have done more for her."

"You were only seventeen."

"She was sick."

"You took care of her, much as you could. It wasn't your fault."



"I want my mother back." He put the mug back on the table, untouched. "Ever since she passed, I feel like I'm sleeping and will never wake up. Like I've been dreaming for hours and hours and don't even know it."

Truth, Tapeika, one day they might grow up, grow out of their craziness. But Lincoln and I, we'll always be crazy; we can't help it... Anything truly damaged stays that way.

The place where they are giving the Séance is a disappointment. The outside is slightly supernaturally looking with chalkboard signs saying \$5 Palm Readings and a mysterious black curtained window, but the inside is just some woman's living room. Truth is already there and so is Tapeika with Leah, her girlfriend. Lincoln, the one the Séance is for, hasn't shown up yet, which surprises me because I'm late, and he never is.

Truth, Tapeika, and Leah are eating. Tapeika made dinner—chicken and rice—and it smells wonderful and there are candles all over the place and the whole thing looks like an informal dinner party. There is a naked little girl—the psychic's daughter I guess—who's running around. Tapeika is barking at her, which makes the little girl laugh. I watch them for a while then fix a plate for myself and sit down. Truth cleans his and asks for some of what's left on mine. The little girl comes and sits on Tapeika's lap; Leah begins instructing the psychic, a chunky lady with silver hair, in how to pronounce her name.

"No, not like Lee. There's an ah at the end."

We wait a few more minutes making small talk, until everybody knows everything about each other.

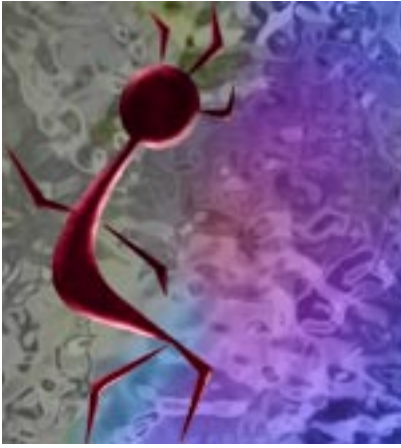
"Where is that motherfucker?" Truth asks the psychic's grandfather clock as he lights a cigarette. Nobody says anything; we all stare at the clock. Finally, Lincoln comes in, wearing a rumpled dress shirt and jeans, and he doesn't look like himself. He looks young and scared and not at all like Abraham Lincoln.

"We can begin," the psychic says and flings her hair dramatically over her shoulder. It must be a cue; the little girl leaves the room, and everybody seats or reseats themselves at the table.

"Close your eyes."

We do that, and we all bow our heads like we're in church. I get curious





and sneak a peek around the table to see if anyone else is actually doing this mock-prayer thing and apparently they are because the only person who catches my eye is the psychic and she gives me the dirtiest look ever.

“To find the spiritual side, we must have everyone’s concentration,” she says, and I hate the witch. But I close my eyes again, even though I think it’s unfair that she’s the only person allowed to know what’s going on.

The psychic begins chanting words that make sense to no one and she goes on like this for more than twenty minutes and I begin to wonder if I have enough underwear to make it through the week? I have five pairs of panties but not a clean pair of socks to my name. I am calculating how much change I will need to do at least three loads when I feel a rush of coldness. I begin shivering but the coldness only gets colder and suddenly I’m numb. There’s a pressure inside my head that’s like your hair when it’s wet and heavy and pressed against my face. There’s a silence inside me, and it’s like the time that you told me how much you missed Haiti and how all the people in your family had died except for your brother and how you wanted me to say something and I didn’t. I still don’t know why I didn’t because I wanted to, I wanted to say something to make you feel loved. But maybe everything is more like the time I kissed your brother and if you had asked me why I couldn’t have told you. The whole thing had no reason. It was like money falling from the sky. Or store mannequins who look realer than real women but who have no soul.

I’m crying now. Up until now, I was never sorry for what I did. I was sorry for the consequences; I was sorry that you hated me; I was sorry that we weren’t together, but I was never sorry for what I did because I didn’t understand why I did it.

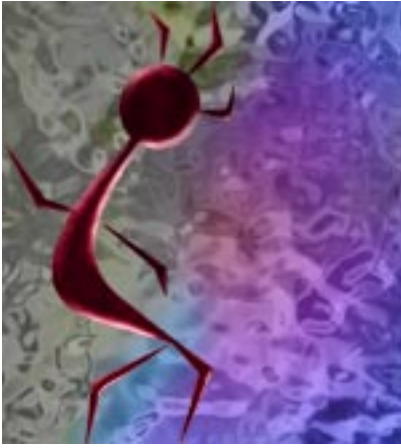
When I open my eyes again I am lying on the psychic’s couch and everyone around me is screaming. Most of the candles are out now, and the room is quite dark, and I wonder if the candles had less to do with atmosphere than an unpaid electric bill. My head hurts and everyone is shadowy, including the little girl who keeps trying to get me to swallow from a glass of Kool-Aid.

“Oh my god! Marissa, are you okay?”

“You passed out.”

“You were speaking in tongues.”





“You were channeling another person’s energies!”

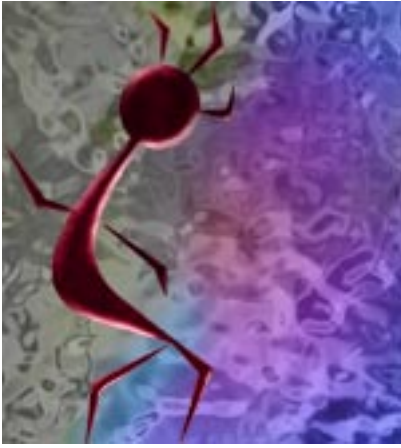
The only person who doesn’t say anything—at least to me—is Lincoln.

“My mother. I heard her voice, and she forgives me” he says this over and over again in wonder, and I think he’s part of my dream. He’s the only person I make out clearly in the darkness. He’s tall and rigid and still doesn’t look like himself. He looks beautiful—and peaceful.

I could have had Lincoln or Tapeika take me home, but I tell them both no. Truth even offers me a ride on his precious motorcycle, but I turn him down also. I want to walk alone.

The sky and the streets are gray and cloudy and melt into each other as I walk out the house. I go past Al’s coffee shop, my favorite bookstore, all those places that mattered so much to me. I even end up walking past Lulu’s and her little shop of dead half-women. When I get there, I look up at the store window and see the naked bodies of the mannequins. I smile at them, their shiny pinkish beige flesh, and they no longer make me feel ashamed. Still, maybe you don’t understand my reaction—you always were a night person. But I’m smiling because by now it’s dawn. And I love this time of day.





The Pied Piper of the Jews

by David Winner

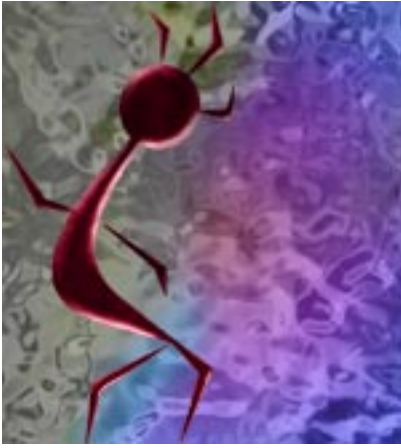
“You wouldn’t believe the yearning,” is how Feldman describes them on the day I let him back into my apartment. On the little Hasid faces, means Feldman, the innocent denizens of Bedford Street across from us in Brooklyn. They always gaze, he tells me, down to the river and across the bridge at our opulence, at our freedom. Away from arranged marriages, dour black clothes and girlish sideburns towards exotic tasting foods, unusual sexual positions, the late twentieth century in all its glory.

It had started innocently enough with real estate. When I’d banished Feldman for unpaid rent, he’d disappeared in search of cheaper digs. What could be cheaper, he’d declared, than to rent from Jews. When Feldman said Jews, he didn’t mean the relatively secular ones like us, he meant the “real ones.” Nineteenth century life-style, he figured, nineteenth century prices.

Yes, I have questions, doubts about the logic, the likelihood of all Feldman’s stories, this one included. But such objections are cavalierly cast aside. Was I there, his open-handed gestures invariably imply, what did I know? This is to explain why I didn’t suggest to him that those famous Brooklyn separatists would hardly rent to the likes of us, practically goyim. I didn’t dare suggest he should rent from the Poles a neighborhood away.

No, I didn’t exactly expel him. I didn’t say he couldn’t stay with me while he searched for a place he could afford: our 400 a month Avenue B apartment apparently too much for him despite his father’s assistance. It wasn’t really necessary for him to dramatically throw some but not all of his possessions (I found a large pile remaining in his room) into his lime green suitcase and walk, in order to save carfare, over the Williamsburg bridge to where the Jews were.

He explained how the bridge turned out to be eerily deserted as if he was already transitioning into some emptier Jewish past. Bedford Street, though, was packed. It may have been their ineffable foreignness — the male Jews in their big beards and the female Jews in their helmet wigs and housedresses — that got him actually thinking that it might not be so easily to arrange a rental.



Across the street, a yeshiva teemed with school life, a “just let out” anarchy that Feldman hadn’t expected from the ordered lives of the Jews. Boys in sideburns, hair vulnerably short on top, girls in dark parochial skirts, ran in and out of the main doors. An old yellow school bus arrived to pick up some of them, but several of the older ones, approaching the double digits of their lives, made their way across the street towards Feldman. Their destination was the old-fashioned candy store in front of which he had been standing. Kids were easier to talk to, Feldman figured. Adult conversations could follow, which could lead, in turn, to the broaching of the topic of real estate.

On a late summer day in a middle-western university town a few years before, the middle of the eighties, I stared at my cinder block dorm room wondering what the “Peter Elias Feldman” who was due to enter, would be like. His bags came first, boatloads of them including the lime green suitcase that appeared to date from the sixties, two American Touristers, which housed his soon to be signature dusty, three-piece suits, and a bona fide trunk of the type you saw carried aboard ships by servants in old movies.

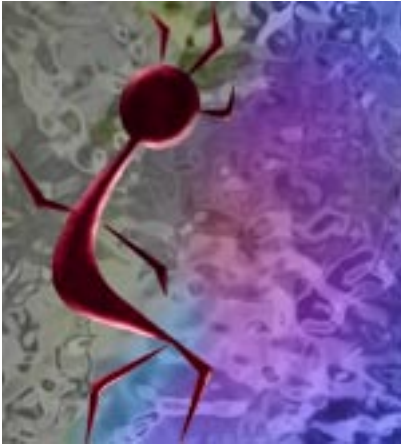
Finally, in Florida old man polyester pants worn with a button-down shirt but without traceable irony, and a misshapen hat pushed up from his skull by overflowing corkscrew locks: Feldman. From his slightly blistered lips, came his first story, an entrancing but not altogether believable hitchhiking tale from New York to the Midwest, involving domestic animals and a farm girl in a corn silo.

“How did you?”

“Parents drove,” I told Feldman. I’ve yet to match him.

A little rougher for wear, those little lines around the eyes that we’re already getting in our twenties, Feldman buys the little Jews candy and asks them predictable questions. He wants to know their favorite food, their grades in school, their career ambitions. They are not like other American children. They provide more than the sullen monosyllables we’ve come to expect. Their darling, high-pitched German accents respond with thought and enthusiasm. They are seven, eight; one is twelve. They, the boys at least, can’t decide if they want to be truck drivers, cantors, appliance sales-





men or doctors. Eagerly, they stick the gooey Kosher candies into their mouths and politely ask for more.

Child molester slick, he promises them infinite sweets and constant conversation if they help him.

Help him how, they wonder?

(Recall this is Feldman's version, nothing witnessed, nothing corroborated.)

Help him find housing, a bed to lay his weary head. It all went together too, for how could he make good on his promises to them without a place to stay nearby.

Wait, says a future doctor, the boarder in the Levi house across the street is marrying and moving to a town of Jews upstate.

So our Feldman bids his little children adieu to receive the steely Levi stares that we might consider a more believable response to this oddly-dressed, almost non-Jew.

"No room," the long gray beard tells Feldman, "no room for goyim." (Our story, as it turns out, hinges on this oddly explicit rejection.)

Pop Feldman, an ordinary man, Westchester lawyer unextraordinaire, told me the one time we met, how shocked he'd been by the inexplicable creature that had emerged from his wife's loins. Lawyer, though, still a lawyer's son.

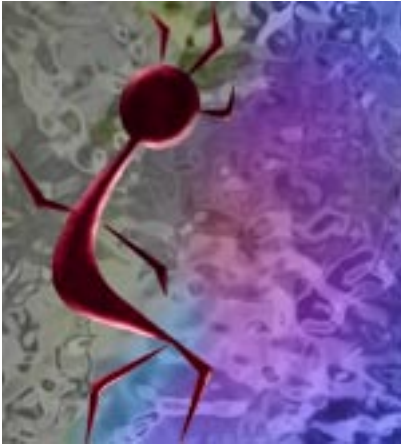
The Human Right's Commission of the City of New York, says Feldman, will not take kindly to discrimination against gentiles. Hardly legal. One might think that heavily accented old Levi would not have heard of such an institution, but any Jew knows the dangers of the wrong side of the law, the oily graves of the losers of law suits.

"Ridiculous, absurd," he says before breaking into the harsh, nasal world of yid.

There's a hesitance in his tone, though, the beginning of a question.

"Full name?" demands Feldman, "Identification?" Gestapo, Swazi, New York City Human Rights Commission. In the little room in back of the Levi kitchen for little money indeed, did Feldman find a home for himself and his lime-green suitcase. The rent was so undemanding that Feldman could entirely cease and desist with that most unappetizing of activities, the search for work. Lawyer Feldman's monthly support, intended as merely supplemental, was suddenly enough, when added to the array of credit cards that





Feldman somehow managed to procure without ever paying off.

How did Feldman spend his days among the Jews? Yes, he had considered the possibility of incognito, fake beard, sideburns and the like, but the word was probably out about the goyim in their midst. So, in the crumpled old suits that had only gotten more threadbare since undergraduate days, he promenaded up and down Bedford: coffee at the diner in what looked like a trailer home, Kosher Chinese from around the corner, and, when the Levis were not about, the furtive consumption of rice and beans and even Keilbasa from the neighborhoods surrounding the shtetl. And, more to the point of our story, he fulfilled his promise to the little ones.

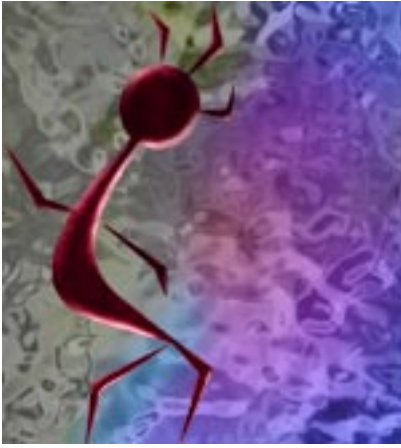
Every afternoon after school, he brought them candy and tried to free them from the Jews.

Feldman at the large Midwestern university took unpopular classes on liberations and complained about the unfathomable uncommunism of his own family. All the other children and grandchildren of depression-era Jews had such different stories to tell, even myself: the common man, the better woman, a socialist Brooklyn, a utopian Bronx. But from Great-grandfather Feldman in Latvia on down, there was no such tomfoolery. Your duty was to family and business. You were not even supposed to consider biting the hand that fed you.

Obvious dime store psychology provides our best explanation for Feldman's love of liberation: the family communism that wasn't. While I ineffectually tried to adopt the fratboy conservatism of my peers, Khakis and Izods in the dusking days of preppy, Bush, Reagan, "don't tread on me," Feldman worried about the abandoned peoples of our earth: Kurds, Gypsies, Palestinians. Of this, we seldom spoke. We understood each other and kept our distance: two sides of a classically Jewish coin. You'd hear his oddly compelling, nasal voice in dorm hallways and cafeteria tables painting surprisingly articulate word pictures of the deluded, the misled, those who failed to question the regimes and religions that erased them. He seemed to get away with even that most ubiquitous of cave analogies: why couldn't you just look outside and see the light, what was being done to you, what was being done in your name.

This was the root of the revolution he preached on Bedford Street, which





began, as it always should with the young, the impressionable little Jews. Subtle, careful not to play his hand too fast, he began by asking questions about the lives they expected for themselves. From the boys, he heard tales of commerce, of wives, of study, of being catered to once this messy business of childhood were over. The little female Jews, though, were the real objects of his scrutiny. From them, he heard contented but dreary stories of marriage, of children, of servitude.

Liberation, apparently, could easily be adapted to the circumstances of the oppressed. No, he didn't want to create some socialist utopia in Williamsburg. He didn't want little Lenins, diminutive Emma Goldbergs. All he wanted for his charges was the freedom of the secular life. It didn't matter how low his opinion of our more capitalist side of the river — he could only concentrate on one set of chains at a time.

"Won't you miss your hair," he asked one girl, who was older and closer to marriage, "won't you miss it." The thought of the wigs of married women, the remaining hair for a husband's private consumption, was almost the worst of our Feldman's burdens.

"Yes," she said, no need for his seeds of discontent, "of course."

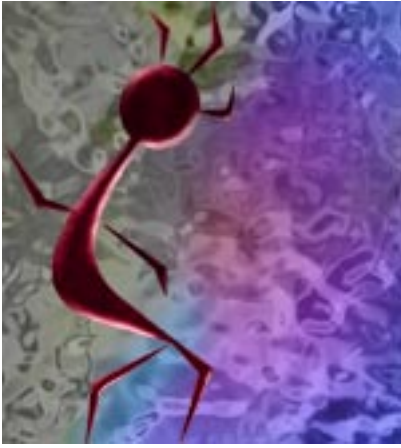
She, all the little girls Jews too, were the target audience of the hairy tales that soon followed of life across the river, the exotic colors, (blond and black, red and orange, blue and green) the vast array of styles: curls, waves, spikes.

Feldman chain-smokes his hand-rolled cigarettes as he talks to me, sipping cold black coffee left over from that morning. His face looks eager but a little impatient. It's crucial information but a little hard to explain.

When he finally pauses, I repeat it back to him, the basic gist at least. It sounds ridiculous from my mouth.

"So you rented an apartment over there and talked to these pre-teen girls about what they could do with their hair if they moved to the city." Such shallow fashion should reek, in Feldman's mind, of capitalist excess. Even I feel offended when hairdressers suggested feathery styles, short in front, long in back or visa versa. To pay money on haircuts at all was shameful for Feldman. Somehow he managed to never look like he's had one without his hair looking ostentatiously long.





"Well," he hesitates, not sure if he likes it so baldly put.
"Yes, that's right," he finally concludes.

The older girl who spoke about missing her hair was rather odd-looking. She and Feldman must have made a good pair. Fourteen or fifteen, her nose tilted slightly to one side as if it had been broken. One leg was longer than the other too, so there was a hint of a limp. The way her coal black eyes started so deep inside of their sockets, said Feldman, made her seem oddly wise.

What she was doing there wasn't clear, as she was much too old for the Yeshiva across the street.

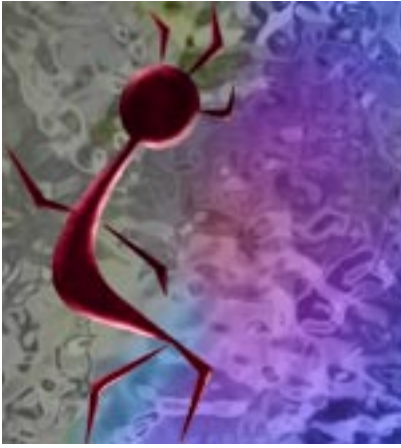
One morning, he found her waiting for him outside the Levi house. She scampered away after she was discovered but was back that afternoon with the smaller children at the candy store.

The distribution of sweets, Feldman interrupted himself to explain, had found its way into ritual. The children who lacked buses to board or mothers to pick them up would charge across the street towards Feldman and his gooey candy the minute after the school bell rang. He insisted on passing out his treasures with insufferable slowness, one at a time, for fear of quickly running out. Solemnly, he placed his candies into their hands like communion wafers on tongues as he told his tales.

On that afternoon, the week anniversary of his arrival among the Jews, his lesson for his charges involved the food available across the river. And what a steaming, gleaming picture he painted, so far from Bedford Street's dreary dumplings and boiled meats: noodles in twisted shapes and fluorescent colors, vibrant sauces and piercing flavors, the Chinese, the Malay, the Italian. The bits of fish uncooked with rice were intriguing even as they were disgusting for the little Jews as well as the curries and chilies, the creams and cheeses. Feldman avoided, or so he told me, the obvious trope; the issue of pork was left well enough alone. While the younger children learned of the food across the gentile river, distaste tinted with desire, the old girl, the young woman, stood a bit apart at the nearest doorway, pretending to be reading some sort of schoolbook. While the others dispersed to their homes, their bellies filled with sweets, their imaginations crammed with more exotic fare, Feldman approached for the second time that day.

This time she did not flee.





Taking a long sip of the cold coffee and pulling a sensual drag from his cigarette, Feldman paused. My occasional fumbblings led to little luck with girls. However far from stereotypically attractive, Feldman did quite a bit better. In college days, here in the city too, he was the object of impetuous crushes. Sometimes he obliged.

"What they think is this," he once told me by way of explanation, "it's dull to spend your life with who you were supposed to be with." The straight, the boring, the handsome, the kind. Feldman was "unanticipated," "out of character." How could they not give him at least one night?

But is that what our fourteen or fifteen year old little Jewess has in mind as she let Feldman approach her? Sexual liberation? I want to suggest to him that she probably had very little idea of what sex even was. Her parents floundered through punctured sheets, if the old story is true, during the non-Mikvah times of the month. But Feldman, to give him credit when credit was due, wasn't suggesting those sorts of motives.

She just asks questions. They, Feldman explained, wonder what goes on inside our doors and behind our windows.

"What's it like inside?" she wants to know, her nose twitching like she's trying to smell it.

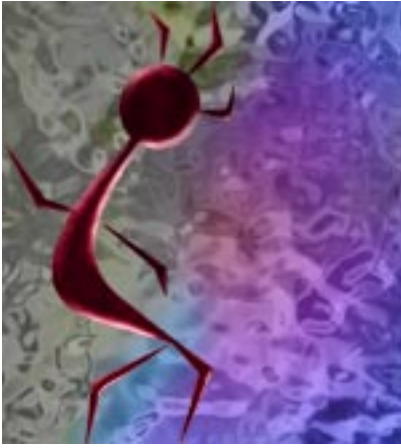
"Newer," says Feldman, trying to recall Manhattan interiors, the relatively rich ones about which the little Jewess has no doubt dreamed.

"More room" he goes on, thinking of the large families crammed into small spaces on Bedford Street, "more light."

The Jewess wants more specifics: bedrooms, kitchens, delicatessens, restaurants.

It's hard to answer, though. There are too many exceptions to figure out the rules.

He doesn't seem fazed, however, by being asked to describe what he so disapproves of. I've never confessed to Feldman that his admiration for my dingy flat kind of misses the point. My reasons for staying put are not based on ideals. An old family stinginess, inertia too, has prevented me from moving into the pleasanter world that my computer job could probably afford me. (Besides, I can't abandon Feldman, who can barely make half the rent on poor old avenue B.)



But apparently Feldman would have rhapsodized about wealthy Manhattan as much as he could if he had known what to say. Yes, he's got some images in his head, but he can't put them into words. The best he can do is show her.

It is in this spirit that Feldman makes his boldest step thus far. With the slyest, slightest, most subtle of "come hither" hand gestures, he takes off down Bedford Street in the direction of the Williamsburg Bridge. With something like Orpheus in mind, he doesn't look back for nearly half a block. When he does, though, he sees her in the distance staring at him but not moving. That makes him impatient. (And Feldman, for all his Zennish mysteries, is an impatient man.)

"Come on then," he barks.

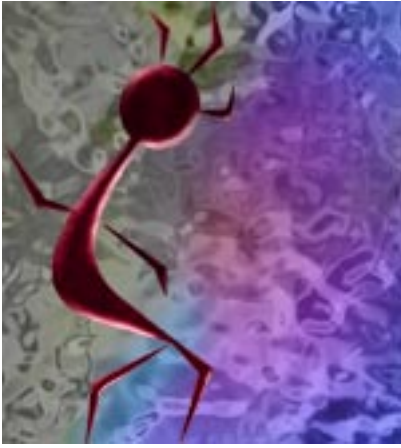
And she does.

They silently take the streets towards the bridge over gentle waters: him in front, her a hesitant step behind. They stare straight ahead, tunnel vision. But no one pays them any mind as they cross over the highway, past the used goods market, and climb the stairs to the footpath over the bridge, nearly empty this mid-afternoon. Every few steps or so, one or the other of them looks back at Brooklyn growing farther and farther away.

The train, clanking by on its way to Manhattan, is about the only living thing they see, that and an empty barge being pulled slowly northward. By the middle of the bridge, Feldman is tired of how timidly she lurks behind. Taking her by the hand, protector but also accelerator, he pulls her forward.

On the other side of the river, the path continues ever more desolately for what seems like forever, just huge Soviet-style housing projects in every direction. In other words, it's Brooklynesque, terribly far from the magical Manhattan Feldman had been spending so much time trying to conjure. Does she wonder if he's made it up? Does Brooklyn just continue on the other side of the river?

As Feldman is done with his coffee, he gestures with his cup. More and this time fresh. I won't do it. He has this quiet, insidious way of asking for things, and, before you know it, you are waiting on him hand and foot. It seems unlikely that the girl had never crossed the bridge that lay so close to her house. It wasn't like you didn't see them all over Manhattan. The whole



story is as unlikely as any Feldman has told, but if I question him too much, he will look wanly away and drift into silence.

When a cab drives past after they've descended from the path, Feldman hails it. He's got to get to the real Manhattan as soon as possible before his peculiar little charge is swallowed up by uncertainty. Besides, he figures, he also has to get her home before Bedford Street rises up in alarm at her absence and casts him out of his cheap rental.

"Where to?" asks the driver. Stumped, Feldman just deflects the question.

"Where to?" asks Feldman of the little Jewess.

She doesn't appear surprised or particularly put on the spot.

"One of the hotels," she says.

The hotels of which he had spoken were palatial, floor upon floor of marble and gold, restaurants with waiters in ethereal white suits, stores with jewelry and luxury tourist items.

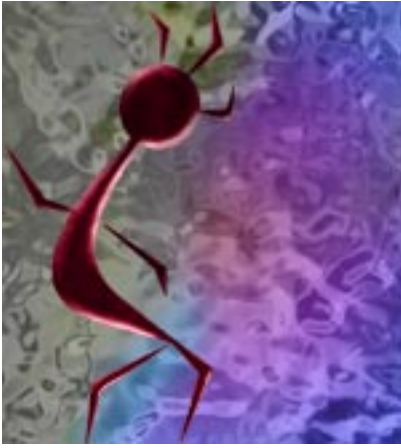
"The Plaza," he directs. His father put his grandfather up there once as a way to impress him. It had to be at least sort of grand. It was definitely all he could think of.

The streets grow larger as they head uptown, wider and grander as they get farther from the ghetto across the river. The driver has the wonderful good sense to take them right up to the entrance of the grand hotel in order for the door to be opened by a formally dressed footman.

The little Jewess's exuberant skip, past the doorman to charge inside, reminds him of her years or lack thereof. Thirteen or fourteen, only ten or eleven in gentile years once you took her outside the neighborhood.

A more serious issue has arisen. But when our Feldman manages, after a thorough scouring of coat, pants and wallet to approximate the carfare, the driver meditates upon it for a moment, ninety-five cents shy not to mention the tip, rumbles something in his native tongue and drives slowly away.

Inside the Plaza, Feldman sees that the girl has lost some momentum. Wide-eyed and tentative, she gazes at the commotion, tourists dashing in and out wearing such non-Jewish clothes. A little further inside, the tea room is right from Feldman's descriptions: lavishly table-clothed, waiters in glimmering white and gold, a string quartet playing on a raised platform in front of a Greco-Roman fountain. Before they know it, they are being lead to



a table near the music and handed enormous, elaborately printed menus.

I wait for Feldman's inevitable crack about how phony it all is, those anachronisms about the rich he used to love: "fat cats" "stuffed coats." But there is something almost like reverence in his tone.

I reach for my wallet instinctually, but there is no way I have been conned into paying for an afternoon tea that took place days ago. Somehow, though, I am making Feldman more coffee as he pauses, once again, mid tale. In the old days of my grandfather's stories when the rich looked like the rich and only the poor wore disreputable clothes, they wouldn't have been served at the Plaza in the first place.

Of course, she has no idea what to order. The foods were uniformly incomprehensible: petit fours, scones, crème fraiche.

Our usually savvy Feldman did not know to refuse when the waiter arrived to ask if they wanted "the tea," did not know that that was a lavish and extremely expensive ensemble.

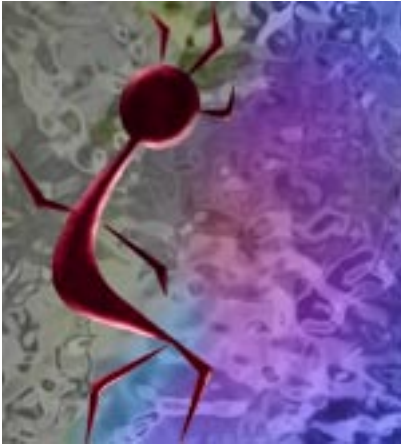
Which proceeds to arrive almost immediately. The little Jewess looks up at the waiter and at Feldman with really quite stereotypical city bumpkin wonder as the enormous pots of tea and chocolate arrive, quickly proceeded by a multi-storied platter of treats. At first, they are tentative consumers. A sly nervous sip, a disconcerted chew. But they pick up energy as they go along. A few bits or every last bite, Feldman figures, will cost the same money they do not have. By the middle of their meal, they are crudely tearing the scones and delicately crusted pastries and slurping the chocolate and tea.

The little Jewess can't quite articulate in words the message she's receiving from her bladder.

A bashful smile, and she flees the table. Once outside the tea room area, she dashes first to the right and then to the left. When she returns after a longer gap of time, it is with a look of relief.

As he sees her approach, Feldman knows he needs to act. (He does not confess to the thought that I know must have crossed his mind, ditching her to deal with the check and taking off to end up — where else?—at my apartment.) All the surly Eastern European waiters are in the far quadrants of the tearoom.

"I'll show you where the facilities are located," says Feldman loudly in



case anyone was listening. Then he grabs the little Jewess by the hand, and off they go out the front door of the Plaza in an ostensible, if maladroit search for the bathroom.

On neither their way to the subway, nor on the subway itself, does she question their unusual exit. Perhaps she understands that those of their ilk cannot behave conventionally. You may go to the Plaza for tea, but you have to slip away afterwards in make-believe bathroom search. The basic issue could not be such an unusual one. There were checks after meals on the other side of the river.

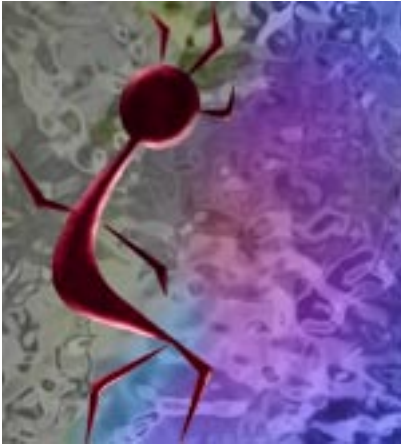
Chronic tale-tellers such as Feldman had explanations up their sleeves to fill their more gaping holes and glaring inconsistencies. The reason no alarm had been raised on Bedford Street, no accusations of kidnapping or white slave trading, was that she was "practically an orphan," mother dead, father a drunk. It was, I thought, a rather Victorian plot twist.

But a serious problem did await Feldman when he made his way to the candy store the following afternoon. The little Jewess had spread the word. He had not expected someone so retiring in appearance to have risked a father's drunken ire to boast about her afternoon away. Now, they all wanted to go. They were bubbling with it.

"Take me, take me," they begged. Some even refused his candy in hopes of future treats. They planted a wonderful idea in our Feldman's mind.

Yes, he would take them, all of them. They would follow behind him, the Pied Piper of the little Jews, down Bedford just like the day before. Ten, fifteen, maybe thirty of them would clank over the Williamsburg Bridge to be met by a fleet of cabs, maybe a prearranged bus. The whole tearoom would be taken over by an unusual form of liberation: Che Feldman. Yes, the post-tea future could not be predicted. Who could guess what lay ahead? But a seed of resistance would be planted. The little girl Jews would no longer be content to serve their husband/masters. No more dreary clothes. No more dreary lives. An absolute moratorium on wigs. The little boy Jews would yearn for the richer more vibrant life over the river, the shetl life no longer good enough for them.

The look I give Feldman, now sipping the beer I'd found for him in the refrigerator, is one of aggravated doubt. Was he really going to try to have



me believe that he had brought all this to fruition? At this moment, were little Jews waiting politely outside to be brought into my apartment for safekeeping until better plans could be laid.

Besides, Feldman had always so bitterly complained about the dangers of life on our side of the river: the fat cats everywhere, the poor folks like us. He would be dumping the little Jews from the frying pan into the fire.

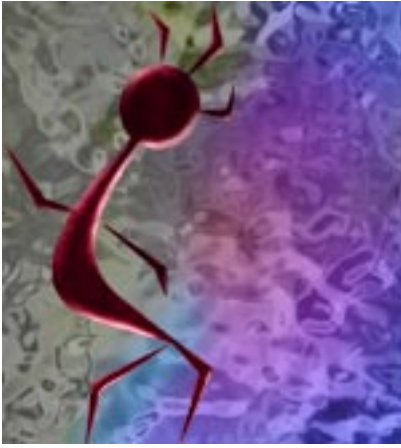
Strands of realism get breathed occasionally into the tales of Feldman. He couldn't really take them anywhere, not all of them. That was why he had to flee Bedford Street. They were pressuring and pressuring, bullying and cajoling, making life generally unbearable. He had to return to live across the river, however cheap the rent he had paid, however charmed the life he had led.

It goes without saying that Feldman believed enough resistance had been planted anyway, just by the stories, just by his presence among the Jews. But what did he really do — I have cause enough to wonder — sow depression, frustration, early suicide? Would the little boys and girls be ineffably dissatisfied from then on? Those glimpses across the river, that ever told story.

But even as these doubts circle my mind, I know I have fallen yet again for one of Feldman's stories. Maybe, just maybe — I can't help but wonder — some of it may have been true?

It won't leave my mind. The days pass, the weeks, a month almost. Feldman and I have fallen into our usual routines. He wanders the streets drinking coffee in cafes and diners, writing down lunatic schemes and enigmatic diagrams on napkins and shoplifted post-it notes. I go to my job, flow charts and html codes. For the first month, at least, Feldman pays me his share of the rent. Nothing more is said of the Jews across the river. Whatever plans have replaced them in Feldman's mind are in their silent, hatching phase.

Was it Costello who got the hypnosis intended for Abbot or Lucy for Ricky in those old routines? Whatever the little Jews across the river may or may not have been feeling, the seeds of Feldman's story grow in me until I am pregnant with them. But it is not until a slightly hung-over Sunday, a warm, late spring morning that I embark on a fact-checking mission over the gentile river.



Feldman had not returned the evening before from wherever it was he had been. Not entirely unusual but a little lonely-making. The little Jews, it occurs to me, have also been abandoned.

It is only fitting that the journey should be made on foot. But it is rather a painful day to be outside: the sky brilliantly blue, the few flowers and plants on the walk in that fierce early bloom, the kind of day to be spent if not in the arms of a lover at least in a park or playing field.

Near the foot of the bridge on the other side indeed lies Bedford Street. The Jews, as is their wont, are out on a Sunday. They stroll in family packs: tall, bearded patres familias followed by wives and little ones.

Can it really be true that they have so few glimpses of the world across the river? Can an afternoon at the Plaza really alter the course of their lives? Feldman exaggerates, extenuates, incorporates but does not, to my knowledge, hallucinate. Somewhere, there are shards of truth. But the yeshiva with the candy store across the street doesn't verify Feldman's tale; it could be just the fact woven into the fiction.

The store itself is open. The old man with the long gray beard looks up at me with a nod of faint recognition. There are those who have felt I look like Feldman despite my taller height, my shorter nose, my straighter, calmer hair. I don't hunch that badly either.

"Yes," I ask the old man as if he'd said something.

"I thought you were someone else," grumbles the predictably Yiddish basso.

"Feldman?" I ask.

I don't know he shrugs. It's not as if Feldman would have introduced himself by name.

The old man looks at me expectantly, and I oblige, buying some sticky looking candy.

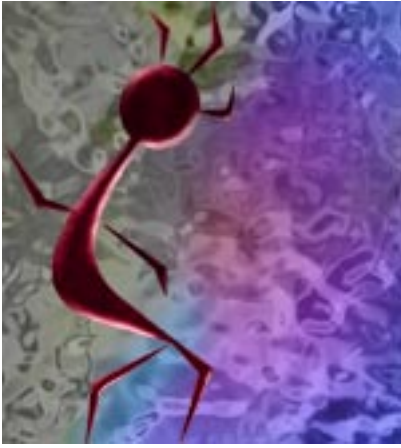
When I leave the store, there is indeed a little Jew outside, just one. Not the older girl with the deep, dark eyes, not a girl at all.

The little boy sticks out his hand in search of candy. Feldmanesque, I hand him a piece.

"When's he coming back?" asks the boy.

Before I can think what to say, he's run up the street to where his family is still strolling by.





This is where the little Jews run wild, parents not seeming to notice or particular care. Pigeons around crumbs, flies around honey, little Jews around candy: suddenly, there are three more. A boy and two little girls, eight or nine maybe. They don't seem satisfied with just the candy.

"I don't know where he is," I beat them to their question, "I don't know when he's coming back."

They look up at me a little puzzled, not a hundred percent sure what I'm talking about. I don't have any stories for them, if that's what they want. I won't take them to tea across the river.

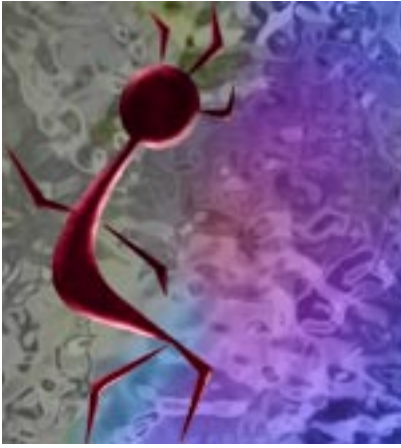
Finally, an opportunity to find the truth behind a tale of Feldman, but the sources run off without giving me a chance to ask. No one else appears outside the candy store for the several more minutes that I wait there.

The cardboard "for rent" sign a few blocks further up Bedford is really too weathered to have only been up for the month or so since Feldman had left.

It is enough that Feldman could have been there, that it can't be proved false, reasonable undoubt: a street called Bedford, a yeshiva in front of a candy store, a room for rent down the street.

My shaky index finger approaches the buzzer. Through the wardrobe into Feldman's tale. I can threaten the Human Right's Commission if the old Jew won't rent.



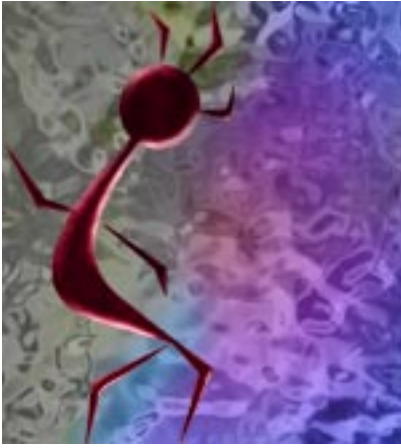


Birthday with Many Antecedents

by Michael Foster

I.

When I was here the first time
the long, gentle slope followed
by a long, gentle slope and another
and then another until they reached
the highway, distant but visible,
was deeply covered with snow, soon
to be covered in new snow just
beginning to fall. Biting cold impelled
us through our grave affair. Today
the undulate expanse is dotted
with blue canopies—tents the man
in the plaid blazer he shouldn't try
to button says as he gives directions
pointing alternately across the winter
brown of grass and to the photocopied
map on which he has marked in red
W. 28, B-I and my father's DOB
and DOD. The royal blue canopies
preen beneath the late November
sky, clear-eyed and crisply blue,
mottled with the warm sun, a lingering
moon, and two or three wispy clouds.
They direct attention to the temporary
sites where they will stand a day or two
before moving on.

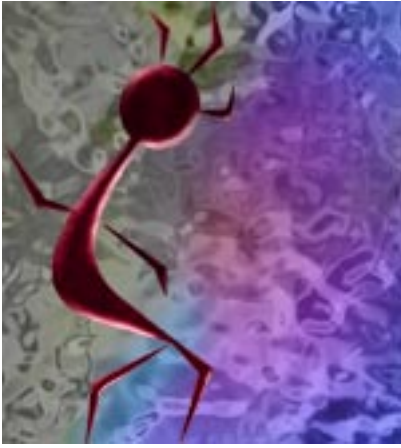


2.

The time is come, it occurs to me,
to count up the things I know: that
I will never comprehend the link
(leaving aside the tediously abstract
one) between the leaf that falls now, first
toward the loropetalum, then, caught
in a seasonal breeze, settling on a bed
of wild sweet william, and the one that fell
in the same place last year and the year
before that and all the years before
and the ones yet to fall in those years
I take pains not to consider because
they won't belong to me; that memory
is an uncertain friend, a cold, withholding
lover, a cruel master; another thing,
something about forgiveness I haven't
completely worked out yet; and the certainty,
now fading, that the sundry things I
placed on this list actually belong there
just as there was, I now acknowledge,
private truth in my wife's aunt's assertion,
repeated often and emphatically
regarding the King James Version:
it was good enough for the apostles
it's good enough for me.

3.

The middle of December comes
before the first insinuation
of winter: that faint, cold smell
to the air, a sky that is somber—
not merely overcast—the quickening
wind.

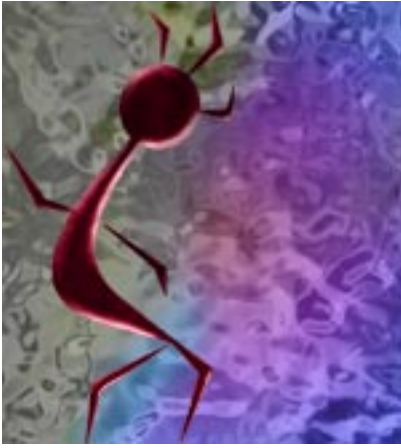


4.

Then, time slowed. Which is
to say my way of measuring
time caused it to seem
to slow. On the quiet day
of the year, the day after Christmas,
time comes for me to attempt
simply to remember those things
I have long strived to understand:
how the leaf, arcing as it fell,
looked like a heart at play;
how hearts at play have fallen;
how the poem, this time, has
come painfully slow as if the late
arrival of winter paces everything.

5.

The birthday in the title came
in the first week of November.
In the time since then
I've made two brief
lists, considered twice
one leaf falling, first toward
the loropetalum, then away
and last night, sleeping fitfully,
had a dream which found me
oddly bored in a place with rivers
that flow uphill and stones that burgeon
and flower.



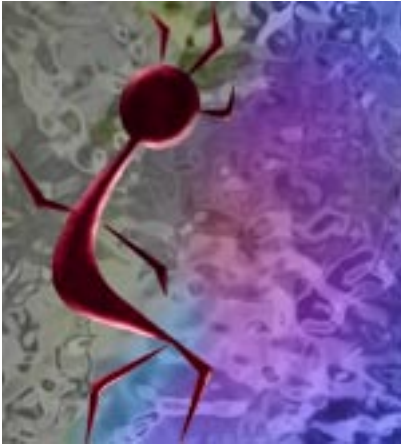
6.

The birthday served
to file another year
away. Christmas
brought its customary
measure of warmth.
But I haven't
understood anything

remembered anything

not with the clarity I wanted—
a clarity that defeats time.

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Fox Names Me

by Taylor Graham

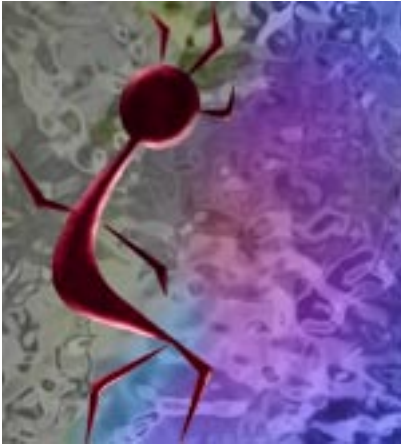
Under hot sky and the livestock trucks
headed for mountain pasture
under the speeding convertibles
bound for Valley cities,
under the bridge
where swallows daub their nests
with creek-mud and zip mosquitos
above thin water

on a dry-grass slope
across from the tanglefoot-garden
where a forgotten hand
sowed mock-orange and yellow
monkey-flower, and blue-
birds weave a nest of honey-
suckle bark

here stands Fox
in dry annual grass under a plain
June sun

in sable fur with ruddy
prick ears, unstartled eyes
staring at me staring at Fox
unafraid as Eden
taking my human picture
naming me.

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A Short History of Smith

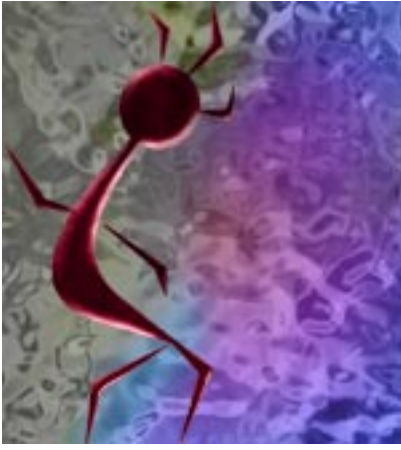
by Taylor Graham

Breakfast: his face considers
the frightful cans and rattling empty boxes
of serial meals. Over the table of every
kitchen, so much pulp chewed
between tooth and tongue,
and swallowed.

An infinite progression toward lunch,
hunched like a question mark
as he climbs aboard: the school bus, car-
pool minivan, the 747. And all
the while he's dreaming what will never
arrive in time for dinner: four horses
under the moon, all unshod, white.
And all the while, somewhere
prairies shine with buttercups and
muses. A mountain pond lies so thick
with lilies, its outlet flows no faster
than words that multiply
themselves in sleep.

As he departs this evening
the moon slips
pitifully bare down the long
switchbacks of sky.
A crescent of pure white
cannot be held in peace.

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Phoebe

by Taylor Graham

If one black phoebe lights on my garden fence
(this fallow gopher-ground that gobbles
dreams with eggplant in its jaws)

if I write to you about the bird that lights
unexpectedly, then zigzags its sky-trajectory
in a snap of insects;

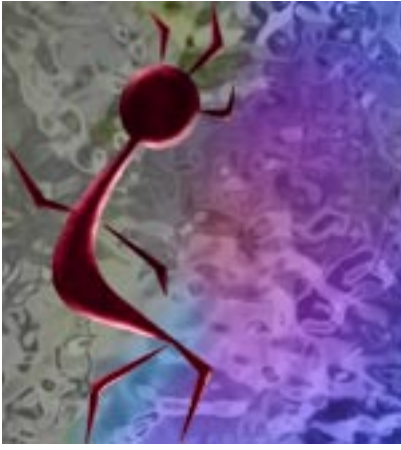
a bird with a hidden nest
and famished hatchlings; a bird
we almost never see here;

if I describe this to you in a letter
where's the healing?
Does a dark bird alighting

and unlighting in simple hunger
bring with it lightening from cancer?
Here's a mystery of separation's

clever mandibles.
Does it help
that I've never seen you?

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The Badge

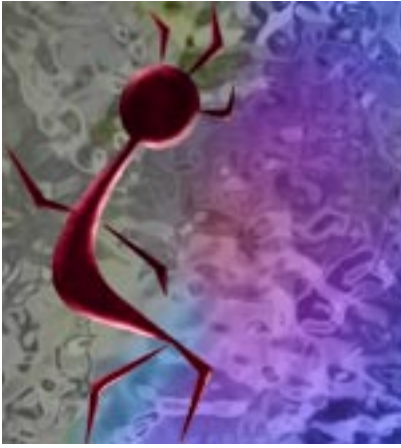
by Barbara Lefcowitz

In the 50 year old snapshot
I've almost reached the ladder's top rung,
white strapless bathing cap exposing my ears,
but the Junior Red Cross Lifesaving badge
sewn to my suit where my right thigh
meets my first sprigs of pubic hair, the badge
I was so proud to earn, barely shows.

True, I've yet to save a single life
except my own from time to time,
one hand paddling, the other clasping my waist
just like the Handbook says, hauling myself
onto dry land long enough to slip back into water—
sometimes a clear green where I float freely,
more often muddy black, all my colors merged
when I tried to decide which would best suit
a particular day, but could not bear to save a few
for another time.

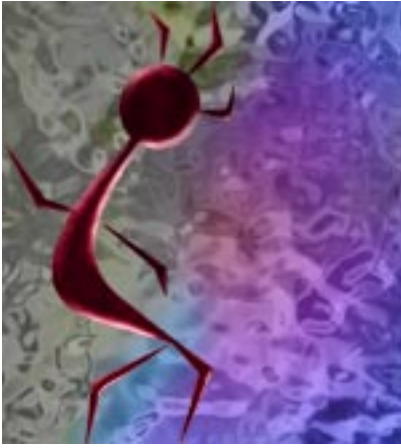
Yet my failure to save lives
might have some merit after all—
had I been there when Robert Schumann
jumped into the freezing Rhine
only to be saved, much to his despair,
by a passerby, I'd have spared him
two years of hell in a madhouse, a death
without music.

Or I could have saved that woman
hauled out of Chesapeake Bay
from a proper death the next day
locked in a hospital bed.



Still I'm proud of that badge.
Regret it doesn't show more distinctly
in the photo, that I have to fill in its shape
in case I should forget all those holds
I once learned, those dives and swift strokes,
head above water so not to lose sight
of what needs to be saved,
in case I should forget as I near
the end of my last crawl
between a pool's ropes.

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The Merangels

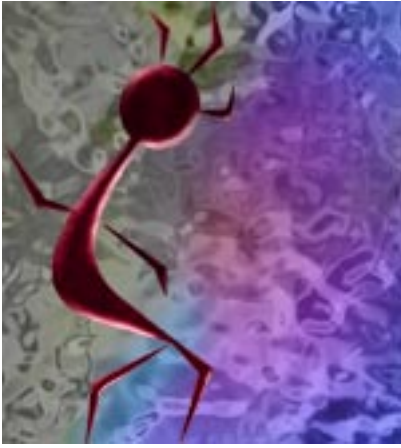
by Shawnte Orion

To what do virtuous seraphs aspire?
when halos hang heavy
as inadequate praise
Might the grace of the wing
be attained by the fin
With scales that are layered
like divine feathers

if hydrogen
is the difference between flying
and swimming
then hydrogen is the difference between heavens

Somewhere
beneath waves that roll like storm clouds
The Merangels rejoice with solemn silence
in the depths of heaven's heaven

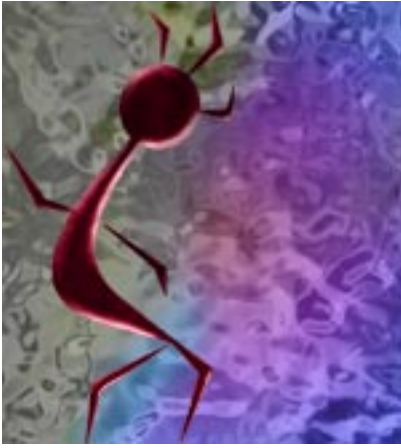
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Cold Fire

by Radames Ortiz

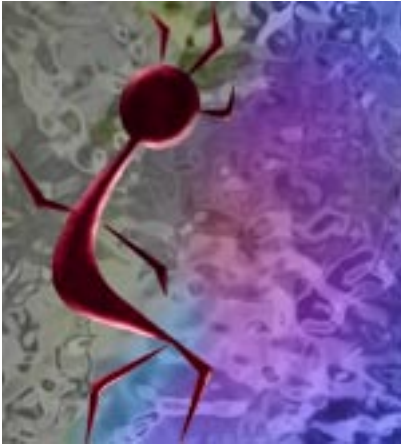
Once again, we find
ourselves under the
anarchy of starlight
while our dreams get
caught in the tangled
dance of branches.
Drinking glasses filled
to the rim with
Bacardi & Diet Coke.
A drink to calm the
nerves, to straighten
out the crooked smiles.
You mentioned Jesus
hanging like a red lantern
in the window, like
a sparrow dead on a limb.
On the last drag of a
Camel cigarette you say
the end is near, that your
azaleas & hollyhock can
feel the cool earth dying.
Like irritated blotches of skin,
the world is all blood & nail.
It's all to do with shadows
holding the horizon, all
to do with ghosts kneeling
in the woods. There's no
cracking of the genetic code,



no death in the womb.
We are in the last quarter of
the down & low, where we
deny worship of dark totems
& bleed ourselves into rapture.

—for iram hernandez

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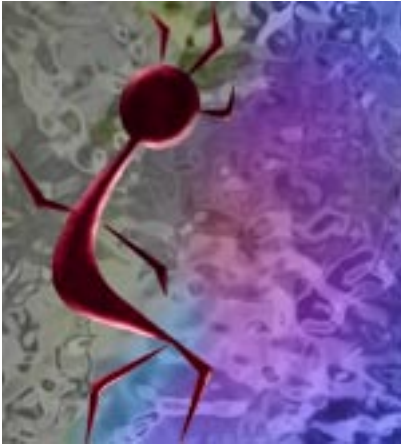


The Weakening

by Radames Ortiz

Lime green apron
draped against his hips
while pulling shots
at a cool 49 seconds.
Bitter steaming coffee
poured into porcelain cups.
With arms, like bending
branches, he works the smiles
of women into turtle-shell
glasses & snakeskin heels.
4 or 5 drinks at a time. Maybe 6.
Barista with the golden arm.
Tap dancing across chrome horizon
while his old man's voice
fills the cave of his ear,
"You ain't shit boy."
Like the eternal fluttering
of a crow's wings. Like the
eager humming of a dragonfly.
A scratching of the skull.
A pulling of the nails.
& though he hovers tabletops
with ragtime precision
or down & out boogie
the smooth song of his pops
shakes loose footwork
meant to out last
metaphysics & the flesh.

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we have built this silence

by John Sweet

we have built
this silence
ourselves

both of us clutching
talismans
in an unfamiliar country

the dogs with a language
the children smiling
but riddled with hatred

some of us pointing guns
others bleeding
and the question is god

the question is
the emptiness of the sky
on any given january
afternoon

there is room enough
beneath it
for all of us to be
wrong

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Dogfight

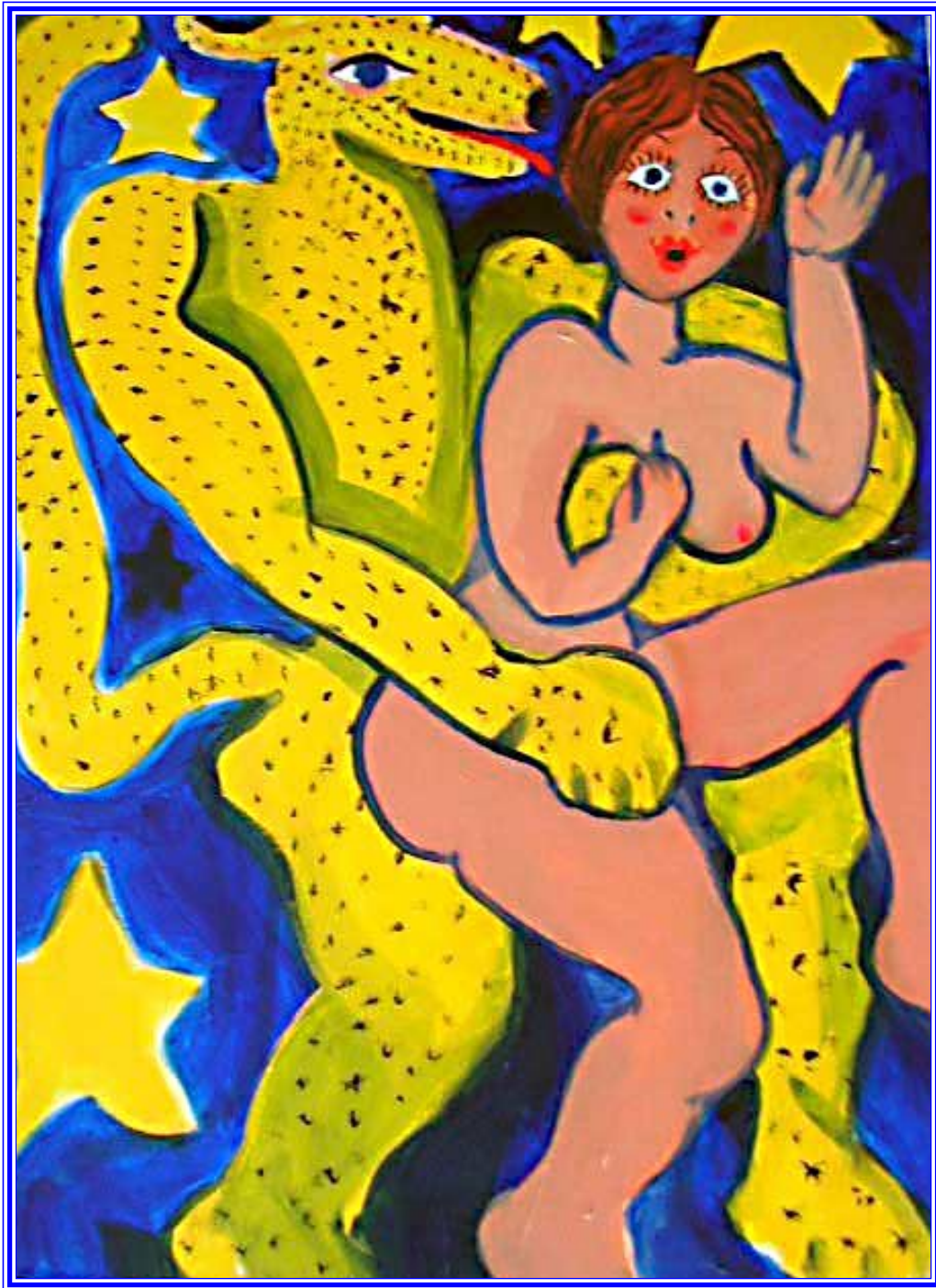
by John Barbato



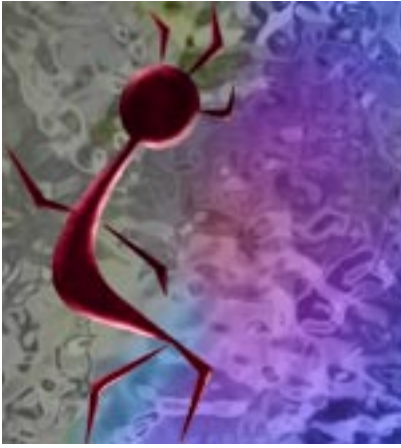
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Muffy and Spot

by John Barbato



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contributors

[John Barbato](#), poet and painter, lives in Southern Mexico near Oaxaca City, where he conducts creative writing workshops. He has appeared at many venues, including the 1997 National Poetry Slam, Lord Buckley Festivals, Sacramento Blues Festivals, Wordslingers, High Sierra Music Festival, and the Sacramento Poetry Marathon. His work has been published in *Tule Review*, *Northern Contours*, *Wild Duck Review*, and *ZYZZYVA*. His books of poetry include *Exuberance*, *Despair Vision*, *Music Once Made Like Love*, and *Face Up On Dash*. Many of John's poems and paintings have been inspired by his extensive travels in the Oaxaca Valley. His work can be seen at his website: www.angelfire.com/ak5/johnbarbato.

[Darla Beasley](#) has been the recipient of the Andre Dubus Award for the Novella (2001) and an El Andar Prize for Literary Excellence (2000). Her poetry and short stories have also received awards from the American Academy of Poets, The GroundZero Literary Project, Quoth The Raven Literary Review, and Outrider Press. She is currently pursuing a Masters degree in English at Indiana State University.

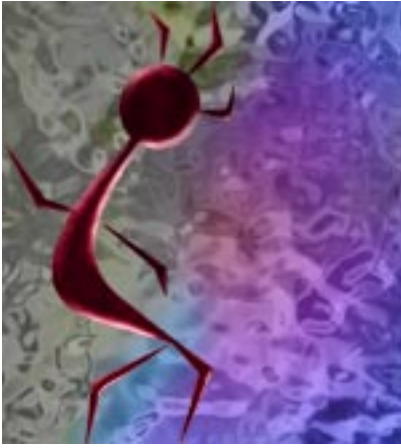
[Michael Foster's](#) poems have appeared in a number of print and online journals, including *International Poetry Review*, *Oasis* and *The Higginsville Reader*, and in several anthologies.

[Taylor Graham](#) is a volunteer search-and-rescue dog handler in the Sierra Nevada. Her poems have appeared in *America*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Poetry International* and elsewhere. Her latest book is part of the Pudding House "Greatest Hits" archiving series.

[A.C. Koch](#) lives in Zacatecas, Mexico, where he teaches English at a university and edits fiction for *The Zacatecas Review*. He moonlights as a guitarist in a bebop combo, *Clean & Sexy*. His work has appeared in *The Mississippi Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Oyster Boy Review*, and others.

[Barbara F. Lefcowitz](#) has published seven collections of poetry, a novel, a book of essays, and individual poems, stories, and essays in over 400 journals. She has won many writing fellowships and prizes from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Maryland Arts Council, and others.

[Shawnte Orion](#) was a finalist for Arizona Poetry Society and Writer's Foundation awards. His poetry was recently published in *UAS Explorations* and *The*



Peralta Press and is forthcoming in *Premiere Generation Ink* and *Facets* magazine.

[Radames Ortiz](#) is the author of a chapbook of poems, *Between Angels & Monsters* with a foreword by Junot Diaz. His work has appeared in many print and online journals including, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Headlight Journal*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Mesquite Review*, and *The New Journal*. He has won many awards, including the Fabian Worsham award for Poetry, the Meagera award for Poetry, and Holcomb award for Poetry. He currently resides in Houston, TX where he is Marketing Associate for Arte Publico Press.

As a foreign correspondent, [Germaine W. Shames](#) has written from six continents on topics ranging from the Middle East crisis to Aboriginal land rights, from the struggle to save the Amazon to the plight of street children. Her essays and short stories have been widely anthologized and her articles have appeared in *National Geographic Traveler*, *Hemispheres*, *Troika*, *Blue*, *Rotarian*, and *Byline* and others. Her novel, *Between Two Deserts*, debuted in summer 2002.

[John Sweet](#) has been writing for 20 years and publishing in the small press for 14. Recent (and upcoming) collections have been (or will be) published by Ravenna Press, Black Hoody Nation and Via Dolorosa Press.

[Rochelle Spencer](#) received her M.F.A. from New York University in 2000, and is the recipient of a Starr Fellowship sponsored by Teachers and Writers Inc., a Burke-Marshall fellowship sponsored by novelist Paule Marshall, and a Hurston-Hughes fellowship sponsored by novelist Alice Walker. Rochelle was a semi-finalist in Twentieth Century Fox's Chesterfield Film Writing Competition, and she has taught at New York University, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and Paine College. Currently, Rochelle teaches at Georgia Southern University, and she is a regular contributor to the entertainment magazine *Urban Stage and Screen*.

[David Winner](#) received his MFA from the University of Arizona. His story in the 2000 edition of *Fiction* magazine was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and another story was nominated for the AWP Intro award.

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