



Are You
Loathsome
Tonight?

Poppy
Z. Brite

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*For Ramsey Campbell,
Master of the Form*

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Introduction

Peter Straub

The inspiration of killing that man came to me out of the blue on the day I realized that one of my two different lives was making me crazy.

Poppy Z. Brite never really goes where you expect her to. While circling over certain common themes, she is waiting to sink her teeth into her obsessions. Every fiction writer worth reading for more than the sake of a momentary distraction hovers over the chosen territory in precisely this manner, hawklike, obsessed, awaiting the opportunity to plunge.

Until the moment inspiration settled its divine hands on my shoulders and pushed me out of my frame, I had been proud of my little balancing act. No other girl in my school could float like me—that's what I said to myself. No boy could, either. Pride like that wraps a blindfold over your eyes and plugs your ears with wax.

The simple sexual act is different from eroticism, the former is found in animal life, whereas human life alone admits of an activity defined perhaps by a "diabolical" aspect, aptly described by the word eroticism.

—Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*

*I am control and the uncontrollable.
 I am the union and the dissolution.
 I am the abiding, and I am the dissolution.
 I am the one below,
 and they come up to me.*

—“The Thunder: Perfect Mind,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library*

What does not partake of consciousness is not human, and yet even an ape can grieve.

See that half-naked girl smoking a joint on the riverbank between two guys wearing nothing but their grins? See the girl on the back of the Harley with her arms around the mountain-man? That’s me.

And here I am in my Junior English class, raising my hand to inform the dazzled Mr. Froelich that *Their Eyes Are Watching God*, a novel by Zora Neale Hurston, progresses through constant reference to a particular organic metaphor.

In this one I appear to be dead but have been merely rendered unconscious by a drug administered by the saintlike Denny Watters, who died of gunshot wounds three days later; this is me dressed up to go to the prom with Tommy Deutsch, who got into Brown on early admission.

This is the limousine that drove us around all night. Our driver thought we were disgusting.

This is the hovel I went to after I ditched Tommy Deutsch, and these are the people who lived there: fat, fantastic Toomey, his lover Jerome, and Jerome’s female hanger-on, Hilly, a succubus. Their band was called Duino Elegy. About an hour after I took this picture, we were resting up in a huge tangle on their mattress, and I remember thinking that Jerome would be much nicer if he settled down and stayed gay all the time, like Toomey. Jerome had the perfect body for a gay boy, almost like a girl’s body. Next to Jerome, Hilly looked like an evolutionary dead end.

The Daoist is listening for the mystical voices, which rise in him and sing in his viscera. He visualizes ethereal breath produced by the distillation of the juices of his entrails: it is at the paroxysm of the organic and at the lowest and most quotidian level that the body is decanted, that matter is transmuted into essence and that sublimation takes place. But this is made possible only because the organic functioning is sacred: because the inside of the body, where crude secretions are developed, is the vessel of delicate spirits.

— Jean Levi, *The Body: The Daoists’ Coat of Arms*

In a world where the body’s crude, functional secretions speak of sacred essence, the tissue of social interactions and the stabilizing consensus of judg-

ments derived from these interactions dissolve into weightlessness. When the literally internal is recognized as the literally central, a radical democracy asserts itself on all sides, and we occupy an egalitarian universe. Persons of the deepest conventionality, persons absent of any insight whatsoever, carry within themselves a quantity of divinity—of access to divinity—equal to that within the most enlightened. Everyone occupies the same spacious rung on the food chain; everyone is a potentially sacramental meal.

The same can be said of narrative, also of the version of narrative known as history.

During my year and a half at the State University, I followed my old pattern of living half in banal light, half in rich darkness. No one suspected, apart from the few other students doing the same thing, and most of these were girls who knew how to keep their mouths shut. To maintain two separate lives, you have to tend your fences.

It wore on me, though, it undermined my assumptions. The death of an assumption always breaks your heart. No sooner did I exchange a complicitous glimmer with a classmate in Art History 101, whom twenty-four hours before I had glimpsed in the tropical atmosphere of the hidden universe, than our mutual project seemed shallow and misguided. These doubts concerning my authenticity came to a head late one Saturday night when a girl named Abbey Pullman materialized beside me. Slinky, darkly gorgeous and corrupt to the core, Abbey Pullman came from New York City, and she existed within an aura of private schools, family trusts, and discreet holidays in detox-rehab facilities supplied with chefs instead of cooks. Abbey put her heart-shaped mouth to my ear and whispered, "Sweetie, do you have a beeper number for that sexy little beast you saw talking to me last night?" I packed my shit and got out of there the next day, sorry.

"All three saw a young child on the altar, and when the priest started breaking the Host, it seemed to them that an angel came down from Heaven and divided the child in two with a knife, and collected his blood in the chalice. And when the priest divided the Host into several parts to give Communion to the people, they saw that the angel was also dividing the child into several small parts. And when, at the end of the Mass, the hermit went to receive Communion, it seemed to him that he alone was given a part of the bloodied flesh of that child. Seeing this, he was filled with such dread that he screamed and said: 'My Lord, now I really believe that the bread which is consecrated on the altar in Your holy body and the chalice, that is to say the wine, is Your blood . . .'"

Believers, particularly in earlier centuries, confusedly understood God's sacrifice as a prodigy of abominable grandeur, and were quite conscious of the bloody fragment of divine flesh that descended into their stomachs in the guise of the Host . . . The child slaughtered by

the angel, his flesh cut up into small bloody bits . . . reflects this profound attraction-repulsion toward the sacrificial mystery . . .

—Piero Camporesi, *The Consecrated Host: A Wondrous Excess*

Certain cities and certain moments in time offer themselves to the imaginative eye. New York; Calcutta; Los Angeles; Shanghai before the Japanese invasion; the Sarajevo of 1914, in which a boy named Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Ferdinand and Countess Sophie; 1918 New Orleans, where a murderer calling himself The Axeman advised the readers of the *Times-Picayune* that he was "invisible, even as the ether that surrounds your earth"; 1967 London, where in an Islington terrace a failed actor named Kenneth Halliwell committed suicide after murdering his lover, the playwright Joe Orton; Jeffrey Dahmer's Milwaukee of 1993, glistening with the multiple snail-tracks of his obsessive progress; any place and time elevated by a distinguishing act of violence. Or any city, like Amsterdam, receptive to such an act by reason of its tolerance of what elsewhere is condemned as deviation.

I had a gig in Boca Raton where I put on a headset, dialed numbers all over the country and said, "Hello, Mr. (Name), I hope I have not reached you at an inconvenient time. You have been selected to participate in a nationwide survey, which will take only a few minutes of your time. After you have answered a few simple questions, you will be eligible to participate in our Grand Prize giveaway." I was living in an A-frame in Aspen with a ski instructor who had to snort half a gram every morning just to get out of bed. I transferred to Barnard, and this uptight guy in the next apartment paid me \$100 for every Harlan Ellison first edition I could steal from the Columbia library. I took a bus to Montana, talked myself into a job on a local newspaper, and, you could have fooled me, married a rancher. When Gainesville got risky, I took a bus to Palm Beach, where I screwed up big-time and almost went to prison. I worked in a Minneapolis massage parlor, where I rubbed peppermint oil into guys' backs, dipped between their legs, ran my fingers over their balls and asked if they cared for a relief massage, which of course they always did, never mind the extra \$35, you never saw so many bananas yearning upward, and when at the last moment the bananas did that thing where they locked into their yearning, they were filled with an essence having nothing to do with humanity.

At that moment, I attended to the descent of the sacred. I watched the muscles in the arms and legs stand out like ridgepoles. I observed the arching of the back, the tightening of the face as the inner man flew toward the surface. It was an effort, it was a labor. The body struggled toward a violent sur-

render. There were groans and curses. Then at last the inner man came leaping from the body, flowing from what seemed a bottomless well.

After that, most of those guys turned right back into assholes.

The Gnostic texts known as The Nag Hammadi Library were unearthed in a cave near the end of 1945 by two brothers, Muhammad and Khalifah Ali, from the Egyptian village of al-Qasr. They were looking for *sebakb*, a particular kind of soil used as a fertilizer, but instead discovered a tall jar, which they imagined might hold either treasure or evil spirits. Frightened but hoping to find gold, they shattered the jar with a pickaxe and discovered that it contained rolled-up manuscripts, which they brought back to their village.

Some months earlier, their father, a night watchman for the village's irrigation fields, had surprised and killed an intruder. In accordance with the tradition of vendetta, he was murdered the next day. A month after the library had been brought to al-Qasr, Muhammad Ali was told that a man who had fallen asleep near his hut, in fact an innocent dealer in molasses, was his father's killer. Muhammad, Khalifa, and their mother attacked the sleeping molasses dealer, murdered him, and dismembered his body. They removed his heart, cut it into sections, and divided it amongst themselves.

After the murder of the molasses salesman, the police often visited Muhammad's house. He blamed the library for his difficulties and lodged some of the volumes with a Coptic priest. His mother burned others for fuel. Some were sold for pennies to neighbors. A one-eyed local criminal named Bahy Ali managed to buy up most of the remaining texts and brought them to Cairo, where they were eventually acquired by the Coptic museum. In the meantime, the substantial Codex 1 had been smuggled out of Egypt by one Albert Eid, a Belgian art dealer who feared its confiscation by Nasser's new government. Eid hawked the Codex to the Bollingen Foundation and the Bibliothèque Nationale, to no effect. In 1952, after Eid's death, the Codex was acquired by the Jung Institute and presented to Carl Jung. Later, it, too, passed into the hands of the Coptic museum in Cairo. The next twenty years were a disgraceful, ignominious battle between rival groups of scholars. All of this is par for the course when it comes to sacred objects and sacred texts.

GnÛsis is a knowledge possessed of a revelatory force and rooted in a recognition of one's true self.

The night before inspiration told me that I had to save myself, find *salvation*, by bidding farewell to my false life through the murder of that man, I dreamed that I was embracing the corpse of the Savior.

Not long ago, Poppy Z. Brite ruffled a feather or two by publishing in her newsletter a lengthy meditation on the subject of an erotic encounter between herself and the mortal remains of William Burroughs. Burroughs, one cannot but think, would have been delighted.

At the center of its anarchic heart, the idea of narrative yearns simultaneously for wholeness and fracture. We begin in one place and time, we shift to another. Roughly, imperiously, we shift back. We catch up with ourselves, or we do not. It is satisfying when we do, but better, far better, when we scrap thoughtless versions of coherence. Jokes, anecdotes and shaggy-dog stories undermine lazy expectations, so let us sprinkle in any number of bafflements to the humorless. For the literal-minded, let us float the suggestion of a "theme": the "theme," say, of "possession." We may safely assume the failure on behalf on the literal-minded to recognize that every encounter with a text represents an act of "possession." As the reader devours the text, the text inexorably colonizes the reader, who is, unlike the devouring text, altered by this process, in large part by means of that truest, most infallible expression of "theme," the detail. As a result, every vibrant detail contains an erotic component.

There is much more in eroticism than we are at first led to believe.

Today, no one recognizes that eroticism is an insane world whose depths, far beyond its ethereal forms, are infernal.

. . . Eroticism is, first of all, the most moving of realities; but it is nonetheless, at the same time, the most ignoble. Even after psychoanalysis, the contradictory aspects of eroticism appear in some way innumerable; their profundity is religious—it is horrible, it is tragic, it is still inadmissible. Probably all the more so since it is divine.

—Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*

"God is in the details," wrote Flaubert, who once took the time to have a pharmacist named M. Homais take in the billowing of Emma Bovary's clothing before the glow of a wood stove.

Here are three details from these stories:

It was a semi-automatic pistol with a six-inch sighted barrel and a checkered grip of heavy rubber, nearly three pounds of sleek steel filled with little silver-jacketed bullets like seeds in a deadly fruit. ("Saved.")

It was like some enormous steaming bowl of stew, full of glistening meat, splintered bone, great handfuls of tubes torn loose from their moorings, and everywhere the rich coppery sauce of blood. The sewer smell of ruptured bowel rose in shimmering waves from his body. ("Saved.")

In the streets, the harsh reek of exhaust fumes was filled with a million subtler perfumes: jasmine, raw sewage, grasshoppers frying in peppered oil, the odor of ripe durian fruit that was like rotting flesh steeped in thick sweet cream. ("Self-Made Man.")

In "Vine of the Soul," a shaggy-dog story, the crowd on a street in Amsterdam moves in the "peristalsis" of waste through the intestines; "In Vermis Veritas," a bubble of pure inspiration written as an introduction to a graphic novel, presents the rapturous meditations of a "connoisseur of mortality," a highly conscious maggot devoted to the piquant memory-sensations embedded within "the translucent rose of fresh viscera, the seething indigo of rot" of those who died fearfully and in pain. The maggot is a reader for once gloriously empowered to stand in the place of the writer.

Who, if I cried out, would bear me among the angels' hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, "The First Elegy," *Duino Elegies*
translated by Stephen Mitchell

I dreamed of embracing the dead Jesus in that Tomb, no more than a cave, actually. His small, wounded body seemed extraordinarily beautiful to me, for it registered every trace of his journey toward crucifixion: the hard calluses on the foot soles, the legacy of anger written across the forehead, the harsh, knifelike furrows at the corners of the eyes, the grime embedded into the folds of the knuckles. And, of course, the wounds.

I touched every inch, every micromillimeter of his body, and under my hands, his body spoke. The language in which it spoke was *Braille*. His body was a *sacred text*. By slow explorations of my fingertips, tongue, eyelids, lips, by awed, sensitive tissue of my cheeks and my nipples, also the aureolae and undersides of my breasts, also by the delicate kiss of my labia, I read of an *abominable grandeur*.

His body was sturdy, banded with muscle like the body of a mule, a peasant's body, its Mediterranean complexion tinged with the green of a Levantine olive. His coloring, lightest on the palms of his hands, darkest about the knees, elbows and scrotal sac, was that of a meal prepared over a desert campfire, and the smell of his flesh suggested sand, blazing sun, smoky cookfires built on the sides of salty lakes.

That was the most erotic dream I've ever had, even though it was all about *knowledge*.

Braille is a two-way street.

Transfigured, I woke up to a transfigured world.

The world is a corpse-eater. All the things eaten in it themselves die also. Truth is a life-eater. Therefore no one no one nourished by [truth] will die.

. . . God [. . .] a garden. Man [. . .] garden. There are [. . .] and [. . .] of God. [. . .] The things which are in [. . .] I wish. This garden [is the place where they will say to me, ' . . . eat] this or do not eat [that, just as you] wish.' In the place where I will eat all things is the tree of knowledge.

—"The Gospel of Philip," in *The Nag Hammadi Library*

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In Vermis Veritas

In 1996 I was asked to write an introduction to Registry of Death, a graphic novel by Matthew Coyle and Peter Lamb, which was being published by Kitchen Sink Press. Here's what I came up with. This is the first in a loosely linked series of fiction in which all the characters will be worms or larvae.

In Vermis Veritas

“It’s nothing to do with mortality but it’s to do with the great beauty of the color of meat.” So said Francis Bacon, an artist of the twentieth century, explaining why he painted scenes of gore and squalor. While admiring his sentiment, I would also postulate that Bacon’s appreciation for the color of meat made him a connoisseur of the very mortality he pretended to eschew.

I consider myself a connoisseur of mortality. While my millions of brethren and sistren chew, chew, chew their way through whatever offal comes along, inexorable but mindless, I preserve my energies for the sweetest meat: the carcass tainted by fear. The carcass that suffered the protracted death, the agonizing death. Meat crisped alive by fire, meat sliced open by steel, meat with a bullet in its gut.

Here in the slaughterhouse, I dine well.

It is everything to do with mortality. It is the great beauty of the color of meat, of its many colors: the spongy purple of drowned flesh, the translucent rose of fresh viscera, the seething indigo of rot. Bacon must have painted in the slaughterhouse. It is the great beauty of the flavor of meat, of its many flavors.

When we reduce a carcass to bone, we not only reveal its structure; we become composed of its elements. For most of the others, this is a matter of breaking down proteins and replenishing simple larval tissues. For me it is a kind of catharsis. I take on the qualities of the deceased, I am nourished by his perceptions, and perhaps somehow I aid in releasing his soul.

Consequently, I have lived thousands of lives. I have memorized countless tomes, and written more than a few. I have constructed dynasties, then torn them down or watched them fall. I have been a foetus in a womb and a guru in a cave. I have digested the concepts of "freedom" and "love" and "eternity," and excreted them, over and over again.

Men kill other men, sometimes for sport, sometimes for love, sometimes just sending them to the slaughterhouse to feed still more men—or, if left too long, to feed me and my kin. Each one thinks he has lived in the worst of times, but nothing has ever been different.

I curl in the slightly damaged brain of a young man who died for no particular reason, after a protracted and honorable hunt. The glistening whorls are dissolving, coming unglued, breaking down into their chemical components. I gorge myself on the primordial soup of his mind. The terrible realization that dawned upon him at the moment of death sharpens the taste.

I become drunk on his flood of experiences and emotions. I synthesize his knowledge. I live his entire life in the time it takes me to eat a path through his liquefying brain. I wallow in his world. I die his weary death.

As always, it makes me glad to be a maggot in the slaughterhouse and not a man.

Arise

You may have seen artwork by Alan M. Clark. It's sinuous, organic, foetal, alien, exquisitely wrought. I wrote "Arise" for Imagination Fully Dilated, a refreshingly nonstupid concept anthology in which writers were to verbalize Alan's paintings, which would then be reproduced in gorgeous color alongside the resultant stories. I chose a very Southern-looking painting of mountains and bare trees and a ruined graveyard and a haunted house, then stuck a couple of Brits in it and proceeded to begin it in Gabon. Don't even ask why because I don't know.

Arise

N ightfall in Gabon, and the bush was the darkest thing Cobb had ever seen. It rambled along the edge of the little beachside town and stretched away into the West African hills. If you stood at the edge of the bush and looked out at night, you could see dozens of little fires flickering in the distance, giving off less illumination than lighters in a darkened stadium, accentuating the blackness more than relieving it. These were not the fires of poachers (for there was nothing left to kill nearby), but of straggling nomads on their way into or out of town.

Cobb sat in the tin-sided bar as he did most nights, drinking African beer lightly chilled by the bar's refrigerator. This was to Cobb's taste, for he had once been an Englishman. Now he was a citizen of nowhere on earth. He drank his beer and rolled his fat cigars of African ganja and fixed his rust-colored eyes on the TV set in the corner, and it was very seldom anyone spoke to him. This, too, was as he preferred it.

When the police came by, Cobb would give them money to go away. When the television broke, Cobb paid for a new one. Though everyone in the town knew this man was very rich, no one cared whether he was alive, dead,

or famous. The only conceivable reason he could have come here was to be left alone, and so he was.

He watched the television, mostly American cop shows and softcore porn from France. When the news came on, he ignored it. He had seen coverage of war, every kind of natural and manmade disaster, the assassination of one American and countless African presidents, the dissolution of the same Soviet Union he'd once written a satirical song about. But he never reacted to anything he saw on the TV.

Tonight, he saw a thing that made him react.

It began with the music: a few bars of a song by the Kydds, one of the really huge hits, one of Matty's. That was familiar enough, you couldn't watch TV or listen to the radio anywhere on earth without hearing the Kydds, and Cobb ignored it. Then the reporter's voice broke in: "Dead at 45, Eric Matthew, founding member and driving force behind the most successful pop group of all time . . ."

Cobb looked up. Matty's face filled the screen, an old picture. That girly smile, those fuck-me eyes that hid a will of steel. Then the screen switched to a picture of the four of them in concert, 1969, all long stringy hair and, Jesus Christ, velvet suits.

". . . suicide at his New York apartment. Eric Matthew is the second member of the Kydds to die; guitarist and singer Terry Cobb was killed in a plane crash in 1985. All the details coming up on CNN."

Cobb didn't go to the bar for a week, but stayed in his house drinking whiskey. On the eighth day, a young African showed up at his door with a Federal Express box addressed to William Van Duyk, the name that had appeared on Cobb's passport for the past ten years.

The box was heavy, ten or twelve pounds at least. The return addressee was someone or something called Gallagher, Gallagher, Campbell, on the Upper West Side of New York. Cobb found a knife and opened the box. Inside was a cream-colored envelope and a heavy plastic bag full of what looked like coarse sand.

He stuck a long forefinger under the flap of the envelope and tore it open. A key fell out, and he let it lie on the floor for now. Inside the envelope were some folded sheets of creamy paper. "Terry," the first line read—

Cobb dropped the paper. No one had addressed him by that name in over a decade.

His hand shaking a little, he picked up the letter. "Terry," he read again, and this time he realized it was Matty's handwriting. He knew that neat schoolboy script well enough, had seen plenty of first-draft lyrics and signatures on contracts and bossy notes in that same hand. Matty knew where he

was—had known where he was. Had known all this time. It was like one of the morbid jokes Cobb had always collected: Matty had known he wasn't dead, and now Matty was dead.

"Terry, you always said I had to have the last word, and it looks like you were right. I've found the most private place in the world. It wasn't enough to save me, but I think it might be just the thing for you. Get the fuck out of Africa at any rate—it's unhealthy for a Manchester boy. The house is yours. Do whatever you like with the other. Peace & Love—MATTY."

Cobb flipped through the other papers. One was a deed to an estate in North Carolina, ownership of which had been signed over by Eric James Matthew to William Van Duyk. Another was a hand-drawn map of the estate and its environs.

He swore and threw the papers on the floor, then glanced at the box again, remembering the plastic bag inside. He knew it wasn't sand. He slit the heavy plastic with his knife, took a handful of the contents and let them sift through his fingers onto the wooden floor. Most of the material was pulverized, but here and there Cobb saw recognizable bits of calcified bone.

"Bastard," he said.

The flight from Port-Gentil to London was terrifying. Aside from the fact that he hadn't ridden in anything larger than a taxi in years, he had no idea how recognizable he might be. He couldn't wear dark glasses, for they had been one of his trademarks in the old days, tripped-out mirror lenses spinning daisy wheels of light. Despite a steady intake of two vodka tonics per hour, he was shaking when he deplaned at Gatwick, was certain he looked like a drug mule or worse, was shocked when he was waved through Customs without delay. Having been out of the loop for so long, Cobb didn't realize that in the one suit he'd managed to salvage—crumpled but classically cut black linen, with a gray T-shirt underneath—he simply looked like a disheveled jetsetter returning from a particularly strenuous holiday.

Which he was, more or less.

No one stared at him in Gatwick Airport. He didn't care to try his luck in the streets of London, a city he'd last seen in 1975, the psychedelic sparkle of Carnaby Street morphing into the black-lipped punk snarl of King's Road. Though he'd had his hair cut short and neat, though a Gabonese diet had left him far thinner than he'd ever been in his performing days, someone in London would surely recognize him. Possibly even someone he'd slept with. Cobb couldn't imagine anything much worse than that, so he bought a copy of *Rolling Stone* with Matty's face on the cover and sat down to wait for the plane to America.

He had to fly into Atlanta, go through Customs again (they searched his bag this time, cursorily, but there was nothing to find), then endure a two-

hour layover before the flight to Asheville, North Carolina. Cobb didn't think he'd ever been in North Carolina before, and by this time he didn't care. He planned to find a hotel room, sleep for at least a couple of days, then rent a car and check out Matty's alleged secret hideaway, which looked on the map to be a couple hours' drive from Asheville.

When he saw the heavysset man at the Asheville airport holding the sign that said WILLIAM VAN DUYK, he should have just kept walking. Instead the old Terry Cobb took over, the Rockstar Asshole, and he looked down his nose and snapped, "Who the fuck sent you?"

The man held up one hand in a placating gesture. He had a thick moustache and a widow's peak, and his suit was the opposite of Cobb's, cheap but well pressed. "Sir, I work for a driving service, I was hired to meet your flight—"

"How'd you know when I was coming in?"

The driver grinned. "Not that many planes coming into Asheville. We've had a standing order to meet any flight with a William Van Duyk on the roster."

He's just a stupid bick, Cobb thought. So Matty had hired a limo. That shouldn't surprise him. Matty hadn't minded spending money when he was alive; why should he mind now?

When Matty was *officially* alive, Cobb corrected himself. He knew quite a lot about the difference, and it was this knowledge which made him deeply suspicious of the circumstances at hand.

It had happened in 1985, after the Kydds' acrimonious breakup and the flop of his own solo career. The solo failure had bothered him for a long time, because he thought they were good records—but he'd gone back to his roots, old rock and blues, and that had been a mistake. Cobb blamed it on the endlessly layered, flowery, overproduced sound that was so popular in the seventies, a sound that the Kydds in their later days had helped to create, a sound that dominated Matty's successful solo efforts. Nobody wanted to hear Terry Cobb cover "Crawling Kingsnake." It was the timing, that was all. Only when he was very drunk or very depressed did he consider the possibility that his edge wasn't as sharp without Matty's melodic genius to back it up.

So he fucked around in New York for a while, just doing drugs and being famous. By that time cocaine had arrived in a big way, and his flirtations with it made him paranoid. He converted more and more of his assets into cash, gold, and even diamonds without quite knowing why.

On the ninth of December, 1985, Cobb had a reservation on a flight from New York to Amsterdam. Possibly due to the aftereffects of the speedball he had snorted the night before, he overslept and missed his plane. It wasn't a big problem; he'd only been going for the good hash. He rolled over and went back to sleep.

Hours later, the clock radio woke him. A Kydds' tune, one of his. Cobb almost reached over to turn it off, couldn't muster the energy, and lay in his darkened bedroom listening. The news came on. Three hundred miles out of New York, the plane he'd missed had fallen into the Atlantic. And apparently everyone thought he had been on it.

A search was launched, of course. But the plane had exploded in midair, then plunged into some of the deepest water between the U.S. and Europe. The ocean was black, frigid, and shark-infested, and the diving crew only found about half of the bodies. Terry Cobb's was not among them despite the crew's extra efforts (they were all Kydds' fans, they told the press, causing a minor uproar among the families of the other victims).

Which is it better to be? Cobb asked himself that night, over and over. A washed-up rock star, or a dead one?

The answer was always the same.

When the phone began to ring, he unplugged it.

He didn't make his escape right away. There were important things to be procured, documents that would allow him to travel as somebody else, anonymously, very far away. He took everything he needed to a hotel in Times Square and hid there by day, slipped out by night and gradually, expensively, got what he needed. He opened a vast New York bank account in his new name, acquired credit cards, and said fuck the apartment, the investments, the royalties; let them go to Matty and the other two and whoever else was still making a profit off the Kydds.

Near the end of January 1986, a man with a U.S. passport in the name of William Van Duyk boarded a flight to Bangkok. Cobb spent the next several years wandering through Thailand, Bali, India, Turkey, and Morocco before fetching up in Gabon. There inertia took him, and he stayed.

But he'd been bored for quite a while now. And the night he'd seen the TV report of Matty's death, he realized that he missed Matty more than he'd ever let on to himself. They had been essentially married to each other for a decade, after all, without the sex but with all the joys and sorrows, the shared jokes and secrets, like it or not. If Matty was really dead, Cobb wanted to see what his partner had left him, and why.

If Matty wasn't dead . . . well, Cobb didn't know what would happen then. Matty had known he was alive all these years, had even known where he was, and hadn't made a single overture.

Cobb pressed his forehead against the window of the limo. He could imagine Matty speaking to him, could hear the words clearly. *I came back to you plenty of times, it said. Too many times. If you wanted to be dead, I wasn't going to argue . . . and you always knew where I was, too.*

That was true. He'd never forgotten the address or phone number of Matty's New York apartment, had contemplated sending a cryptic postcard or

making a transatlantic phone call on any number of lonely, drunken nights. But he hadn't known of any secret hideaway in North Carolina.

He opened his eyes and looked out the window. They were driving through mountains, great green humpbacks shrouded with mist. He glimpsed wildflower meadows, waterfalls, mysterious little overgrown paths. The area was beautiful, he supposed. Unlike Cobb, who always wanted to see the squalor of a place, Matty appreciated natural beauty.

Cobb frowned. The *Rolling Stone* tribute said Matty had shot himself in the head—in the mouth. He'd had to be identified by fingerprints. Matty appreciated all natural beauty, yes, but none more than his own. He'd been vain enough to get manicures, and even in their earthiest hippie days, he'd always kept his hair squeaky-clean and short enough not to hide his pretty face. Most of all, he'd known he had a pretty face—God knows the press had told him so often enough. Would he have destroyed that face?

Somebody had died; Cobb was sure enough of that. There had been an autopsy, though of course that was subject to conspiracy. Certainly, though, he had let someone's ashes trickle through his fingers onto the floor of his house in Gabon. (He'd kept the ashes for a few days, still in the Federal Express box, then carried them to a deserted beach near the town and thrown them handful by handful into the sea. It took nearly an hour, and by the end of that time he was so thoroughly drenched in sweat that he never noticed the tears spilling down his face.)

It took several seconds before he noticed that the car had stopped. "You've got to be kidding," he said when he saw what was outside the window.

"Mr. Van Duyk, I was given very specific instructions."

"Drive me to the nearest town."

"I can't do that, sir."

Cobb stared at the driver. The man's eyes were steely. It occurred to Cobb that he was miles from anywhere and this guy probably didn't like him very much. "Right," he said, "fuck off, then."

The limo pulled out and sped away down the winding mountain road, and Cobb turned despairingly to face Matty's house.

He didn't know what to call the architectural style—wedding-cake Victorian, maybe. If so, someone had left this cake out in the rain for way too long. It seemed to have at least sixteen sides, and each side had two tall skinny windows, all their panes broken. The structure was built of once-white clapboard, great sections of which were splintered into sticks or missing altogether. There were two stories and, Cobb thought, an attic as well. Complete with bats, no doubt.

The rest of the view was no more encouraging. To get to the house, he would have to walk past an ancient graveyard whose stone monuments

looked as if they had frozen in the act of melting. In the distance, thinly forested hills arched their backs against a darkening sky. Cobb could see no other houses, no utility wires, no sign of human habitation at all except the empty road, which was really only a dirt track. He dimly remembered the limo pulling up at a chain stretched across the road several miles back, a sign that read PRIVATE ROAD, the driver getting out to unlock the chain and then again to fasten it behind them. This was all Matty's property, then, for God knows how many miles around. *His* property, now.

What a fucking treat.

He remembered Matty's map and took the creamy envelope out of his bag. Here was the map, here was the house, here was the graveyard represented by a scatter of crosses. And here, tucked inside the sheaf of papers, was the key.

Cobb hoisted his bag and walked past the graveyard, across the yard, up the four front steps to an absurd little porch that looked as if it had been pasted onto the front of the house as an afterthought. He paused at the French doors—the glass in these was still intact, at any rate—and looked in. He couldn't see anything, so he inserted the key into the lock and pushed the doors open.

The ruin inside was as great as he might have expected. A grand staircase swept upward just inside the doors, its elaborately carved newel post listing, its banister scarred, several of its risers gone. A tapestry of dust and cobwebs swathed the walls and ceiling. The floor looked solid enough, but he was damned if he was going to test it.

I've found the most private place in the world, Matty had written. It wasn't enough to save me, but I think it might be just the thing for you.

"Fuck you," he muttered, and took the sheaf of papers out again, perhaps meaning to crumple or shred them, he wasn't sure. But something made him turn over the estate map, and there was a rough sketch of the inside of the house. He'd seen it before and it had meant nothing to him, but now he recognized the French doors, the sweeping staircase. There in Matty's handwriting, very small, was an arrow pointing to the staircase and the notation PRESS THE NEWEL POST, TERRY.

He did.

A gleaming steel elevator rose silently out of the floor. The door slid open. The interior of the elevator was streamlined and immaculate. Cobb looked at it for a moment, then sighed, shrugged, and stepped in.

Four hours later, he lay sprawled in a sybaritic stupor. The place was fucking palatial, and it was all underground. Hewn right into the rock. He had no idea if anyone else was here, didn't think he'd explored even half of it. The epicenter of the place was clearly designed just for him: a huge bed (he had

always loved to stay in bed), a great stereo system with his favorite music on CD, a television with over a hundred channels (and where the hell was the satellite dish?), a lacquered rolling tray full of fragrant sinsemilla. His guitars were here, the ones he'd last seen in his New York apartment the night of the plane crash. The kitchen was stocked with beer, vodka, tonic, and Cobb's favorite foods, including a whole box of Cadbury Flake, an English chocolate bar unavailable in the States. He'd always bought them at the candy store in Manchester where he and Matty used to go after school. One of the clerks would sell them cigarettes, too, even though they were only fourteen . . .

If Matty was dead, there was no one in the world who knew him. The thought shocked Cobb out of his satiated doze, and he sat up in bed. He'd been close with the other two, of course, and with a number of women. But the intimacy of total *collaboration*, the sense of minds melding, had never been there with anyone else.

He went into the kitchen and got the bottle of vodka out of the freezer. Many shots later, he slept.

In his dream, he was standing atop one of the distant hills. He could see the house and the little graveyard behind him, but they did not look fearsome now.

With the smooth suddenness of dreams, Matty was beside him, resting one elbow on Cobb's shoulder as he'd had a habit of doing since they were school friends. A breeze ruffled Matty's dark hair, lifted it from his face. There were streaks of gray in that hair, but Matty's face in profile was as serenely handsome as ever, if a shade more careworn. Afraid to speak first, Cobb watched Matty out of the corner of his eye, and Matty smiled.

"I really am dead, you know."

"Well . . ." Cobb's voice was rusty, but he would not let it crack, *would* not. "You look damn good for a man who's taken a shot in the mouth."

"Oh, *that*." Matty turned to face Cobb. "I don't have to look like *that* to convince you, do I?"

"No," Cobb said hastily. "Look, do we have to stand out here?"

"Of course not, nature boy," said Matty, and at once they were back in the house, lying in bed. Cobb wasn't embarrassed, though he was naked and Matty appeared to be also; they had shared plenty of beds and bathrooms out of necessity.

Matty propped himself up on one elbow and lit a half-joint Cobb had left in the tray. Before Cobb had time to wonder whether the joint would be smoked when he woke up, Matty said, "I didn't die in New York, though. I died here, in this bed."

Then he passed the joint over, as if he knew Cobb would need it.

"It was cancer," he went on. "Bet you never thought of that, did you? No one has. No one can imagine why happy old Matty Matthew would suddenly up and blow his brains out, not even you. Am I right?"

"Fucker, you know you are."

Matty acknowledged this with a nod. "Well, no one knows happy old Matty had about three months to live, either. With a prognosis of drooling dementia followed by coma followed by death. I decided not to *let* them know. There's no dignity in it, you see. Better to go out as a tortured artist."

"What about the autopsy?"

Matty got one of his looks. Cobb hadn't seen that look for twenty years, but he remembered it perfectly. "The *autopsy*, Terry, consisted of a pathologist inking my fingertips and snapping a few Polaroids. How much d'you suppose those will fetch on the collector's market?"

"Hard to say. If the reports were right, they could be pictures of just *anyone* who'd blown his brains out."

"That's true." Matty grimaced. "But I had to do it that way. That's where the cancer was."

"In your brain?"

"Right in the center. Inoperable. I saw it on the X-ray, as big as a plum, and I had to have my files stolen from the hospital, and the X-rays too—"

Now he sounded as if he were bragging, and Cobb interrupted him. "What do you mean, you died in this bed?"

Matty went right on. "The doctor may leak it to the press anyway, but there'll be no proof, and he'll look as if he's just trying to make a buck—"

Cobb said it again, more loudly.

"Oh." Matty blinked. "Well, so that I could be here when you came. I didn't know if it would work. Looks like it did."

"How did you know I'd come?" Cobb asked, and got the look again for his trouble.

"Actually," Matty said, "I thought you'd be here sooner."

"You *thought*?"

"I suppose . . . I *hoped*."

"Why?"

"Because it's quite lonely," Matty whispered, and that was all they could say for a while.

"I arranged to have someone come to the house after I did it," Matty continued later. "To transport my body to New York and make it look good, make it look like I'd died there, so no one would know about this place."

"Then one person knows about it."

"*Knew*."

Cobb decided not to pursue this. His own cynicism was a point of pride, but somehow he had never wanted to know just how cold-blooded his partner could be.

He thought of something else. "No one could have gathered up all the mess you must have made."

"Ever heard of a rubber sheet, genius? I didn't want the bed to reek when you got here. Although I imagine you're used to reeking beds by now."

"I've seen a fair bit of the world," Cobb conceded.

"And some unfair bits too. I mean, Terry, *Gabon*? What kept you there?"

"Good weed, cheap beer, people left me alone. And really, Matty, how can you talk . . . I mean, *North Carolina*?"

They laughed, and it felt better than anything had in twenty years.

Cobb woke up alone. The sheets were twined around his body like an old lover. He looked over at the rolling tray and saw that the half-joint was gone. He experienced an instant of total mind-silence, and then tunes burst into his head like a psychedelic waterfall. Hooks, bridges, bass lines, lyrics, a clawing cascade of music, more than he could process. He scrambled for his guitars, grabbed one at random, switched on the stereo's directional mike and hit RECORD. There was already a tape in the machine. Of course.

Hours later, he reworded the tapes and listened to them in dismay. His guitar playing was terribly rusty, his voice out of practice, but through all that he could hear that this was easily the best music he and Matty had ever made. The only catch: they were both supposed to be dead, so what the hell was he going to do with it? Cobb addressed the problem in his habitual manner, by curling up in bed and going to sleep.

Matty was there. "You're going to release it," he said.

"Under what name?"

"Matthew and Cobb, of course." Matty said this patiently, as if Cobb were a slow child. God, he hated it when Matty talked to him like that. Only now . . . now it felt kind of good, too.

He even knew his next line. "Why not Cobb and Matthew?"

"Because I wrote more of it."

'How do you figure that?'

Matty rolled his eyes. "You're just getting started again. *I've* been saving this stuff up!"

"And the other little matter?"

"Well, obviously you can prove you're you. You can tell the whole story of how you faked your death and went traveling around the world, it's a great yarn, and you can say I left these tapes behind when I died, and you've reworked them, and I know some musicians you can use, and a terrific studio—"

"Fuck, Matty, that's what I died to get away from."

Matty's eyes narrowed. Cobb thought of daggers ripping through velvet. "No you didn't," Matty said. "You died because you couldn't do it anymore. With me, you can."

Cobb wrenched himself awake.

Matty was still there.

"Praise the Lord, I'll have a new body!" he sang in a passable Hank Williams voice. "Hey, Terry, look what I can do now! The longer you're here, the better I get! Oh Terry, old mate, it's *so damn good to see you . . .*"

He leaned over and kissed Cobb on the lips, open-mouthed, hungrily. Cobb could not make himself pull back, even when he felt a bitter liquid flowing from Matty's mouth into his own. After a while, he began to like the taste.

The studio was top of the line, the musicians crackerjack one and all: of course. Cobb finished the album in just under a month, living in Matty's New York apartment and laying down tracks every day. When it was done, everyone wanted to take him out on the town, throw him a party, get him laid, show him the time of his life. Everyone was astounded that he *had* a life. The world was giddy with the news of Terry Cobb's resurrection from the dead and his posthumous collaboration with Matty. It was as good as a new Kydds' album. It was rock and roll history.

"You gonna spend some time in the city?" the soundman asked him on his last night in the studio. He'd come in to do some last-minute tweaking on a couple of tracks, perfectionist shit, the kind of stuff he'd never bothered with in the past because Matty always took care of it.

"No," Cobb answered. "Got to get back out to my house in the country. Lots more writing to do."

"Man, you're on fire, huh? Bein' dead for a while must really get the old creative juices flowing."

Cobb gave the man a sharp look. Then he took a step backward, throwing his eyes into shadow. When he smiled, his gaunt face took on a skullish look that made the soundman shudder.

"It's like having a whole new life," Cobb said.

Saved

Poppy and I met in a boy-brothel in Thailand in 1936. We found we had a lot in common and decided to take over the world. Poppy and I are very different in the way we use language and construct stories, but our writing styles turned out to be weirdly complementary. We could see around each other's corners.

—Christa Faust

Christa and I wrote this story for Young Blood, an anthology of horror writers under thirty edited by the late Mike Baker. I guess it's our "minor" collaboration, the novella "Triads" in Doug Winter's Revelations being our "major" one. A bicoastal dominatrix, expert swing dancer, and Mexican wrestling valet, Christa has since published the ultraviolent-erotic debut novel Control Freak (Masquerade Books).

Saved

by *Poppy Z. Brite and Christa Faust*

"**Y**ou see," Billy told the hooker, "I've always wanted . . ." Words failed him. He reached into his flight bag and laid the Luger on the scarred Formica tabletop. The pistol was inert as the brittle drift of dead insects in the corner of the room—but this was an insect of machined steel and chitinous blue-black sheen, ready to click to life at his touch. And its sting . . .

Its sting could rule the world.

"I want . . ." he managed to say again, but his voice was a wraith, a dying ghost.

The girl raised bruise-colored eyes to meet his. Ever so slowly, she nodded. And ever so sadly, she smiled.

The Luger was a family heirloom, a keepsake from his grandfather's war, an artifact from Billy's own claustrophobic Georgia childhood. It was a semi-automatic pistol with a six-inch sighted barrel and a checkered grip of heavy rubber, nearly three pounds of sleek steel filled with little silver-jacketed bullets like seeds in a deadly fruit. Granddad took it down once a week to clean and oil, not minding Billy's solemn five-year-old face hovering beside the armchair, Billy's wide eyes following every move of Granddad's gnarled fingers as

they performed the intricate ritual dance of ramrod and soft cloth, thick unguent that smelled of metal and mysterious manhood.

"You see this?" Granddad had asked him once, cradling the pistol in both giant blue-veined hands. Even at five, Billy knew it was a dumb question: the gun was right in front of his face, wasn't it? If it had been Momma asking, he would have told her so, and watched her mouth prim up with the dislike she always tried to hide. He had his father's logical mind, she said, and hippiegirl Momma didn't believe in logic. Or guns, for that matter. But Billy loved his grandfather, so he just nodded.

"You don't touch this," Granddad told him. "Leastways not till you're grown. Then it's *yours*."

Six months later Granddad was dead of an embolism, a fat gobstopper of useless tissue invading his steadfast soldier's heart. Billy understood none of this at the time, did not even properly understand that his grandfather had died. No one had told him. "Do you want to see Granddad?" Momma asked him when he came running into the house one day, knees scraped raw from the big girls pushing him into the grit and gravel of the vacant lot next door. He wiped the dirty tears off his face—Momma would never notice them anyway—and nodded. Of course he wanted to see Granddad. He always wanted to see Granddad.

Momma lifted him up and up, through the warm viscid air of Gramma's parlor, past the shelves of fragile knickknacks and figurines Gramma always told him not to touch, even though Billy didn't *want* to touch them; they were useless, not like Granddad's gun. The gun could blow them into a million razor-edged smithereens. Momma lifted Billy until it seemed his head was nearly brushing the cobwebbed crystal teardrops of the antique chandelier.

And there was Granddad, looking more enormous than ever because he was so still, his best-suited body long and narrow and somehow *flat* in the confines of the wooden box that cradled him. Billy felt his heart rocketing in his chest, a strange and fearful excitement building there, trickling down through his ribs and into his groin. *Dead*; this was what the grownups meant by that short, inflectionless, utterly final word.

Then he remembered that it was his grandfather who was dead, and it felt as if someone had punched him in the stomach harder than the big girls ever could. The air in his lungs went hot and searing.

Granddad's cheeks were so sunken that Billy could see the outlines of his false teeth in his mouth, big and horsey. Granddad's eyelids were stained pale blue, webbed with tiny threads of purple and scarlet. Granddad's nostrils were huge and black like holes in the earth; Billy could see tiny yellow hairs bristling at their edges, and deep inside the left one, a delicate scrim of snot. How could you be dead and still have a booger in your nose?

"He's just sleeping, honey," Momma whispered as if hearing his thoughts. Looking back now, that seemed the cruelest thing of all. She had made him think Granddad would wake up, would come back somehow, someday. But Granddad never did.

Within the year, Momma was gone too. This was the Summer of Love, and she heard the siren song of San Francisco, of men who had never seen a Georgia dawn and never wanted to, who thought of her pussy as the gateway to the Goddess, not a combination sperm receptacle and baby dispenser. She wanted flowers in her hair, music and orange sunshine swirling in her brain, not the endless dull trap of motherhood.

She never found any of it. Hitching on I-95, she got in the wrong car somewhere outside Las Vegas, a haunted part of the desert just south of the Nevada Test Range. A skull turned up a year later in a dry lakebed, bearing the toothmarks of coyotes, bleached to a brittle sheen; flesh and hair long since stripped away. The remaining teeth matched her dental records, and they shipped it back to Georgia in a cardboard box. Grammaw had it buried in the church cemetery next to Granddad. Standing at the grave, Billy felt a dull vindication. He hoped she had known fear and pain. He hoped she had thought of him when she realized she was going to die.

Billy's father, he of the logical mind, was long gone. Billy remained with his faded belle of a grandmother, who always smelled of sickly-sweet dusting powder and lost time, who was kind to him but so vague that she could barely carry on a conversation with an intelligent six-year-old.

Each Sunday Billy was forced to sit through the slow torture of a Baptist sermon, enjoying only the lurid image of Jesus nailed to the cross, filthy iron spikes raping his hands and feet, acid-green thorns piercing the smooth flesh of his brow, raw infected gash weeping in his side. *He died for your sins*, thundered the preacher. *He suffered for you*. And Jesus' pain was all the sweeter once Billy knew he was responsible for it.

He heard the Luger whispering to him as he wandered through the long afternoons, through the resentful house, always avoiding the parlor where Granddad had fallen into his last long sleep, where Grammaw now sat drowsing away the hours until her own. The gun told him stories of his own strength, strength he didn't know he had, strength that would be so very easy to discover if only he would climb to the top of the closet, open the shining walnut case, wrap his hand around that heavy checkered grip . . .

It took him nearly three years. He had always tried to be a good boy, to push down the anger he had felt rising in him for as long as he could remember, churning like some toxic black wave. But at last the wave crashed and foamed on the shore of his heart, and he saw that it was not black after all, not entirely. It swirled with a thousand oily tendrils of color, iridescent and

lovely, and if those tendrils were poisonous . . . well, then, he would learn to live on poison.

The day Billy finally made himself lift the gun from its nest of soft red cloth and cradle its amazing heft in both hands was the day he had his first orgasm. He couldn't remember if he had actually produced a squirt of jism; it seemed he'd been too young. But he never forgot the pleasure pounding though him like a summer storm, implacable and cleansing. It was so powerful he thought he would drop the Luger, wondered whether it was loaded, whether it would go off and shoot him, then realized he didn't care.

But he didn't drop the gun. He knew it belonged to him now, just like Granddad had told him.

Learning to shoot was more difficult than he had expected. He'd tried it alone at first, as he did everything, skulking into the woods to aim shots at tree trunks that seemed to sway mockingly when he sighted on them. The trigger wouldn't budge at first, and Billy wondered whether it could be rusted; then all at once it *clicked* back with a dangerous ease, and the muzzle flashed and the sound of the shot filled the world.

All his shots went wide, and the Luger's recoil left his hand sore. He masturbated with that hand, remembering the little blurt of fire and the smell of cordite, the huge hollow noise, the power pounding back up his arm and shoulder, sending electric tendrils into his heart.

But firing wild shots in nighttime woods and vacant lots soon grew dissatisfying. Billy wanted to use the gun right, to aim it and hit what he meant to hit, without crippling his arm for the next day and a half. As soon as he was old enough to go without a parent, he signed up for lessons at a firing range. There he learned how to brace his arm, how to squeeze the trigger slow and gentle. He learned to hit a man-shaped target in the head, the heart, the guts. The instructors praised the cherry condition of the Luger. One offered him two hundred dollars for it, then laughed at the stricken look on Billy's face. When anyone asked why he was learning to shoot, he replied *For pleasure*.

He began to let himself think about the things he really wanted to do.

The ad in *B&D Connection* promised a "true submissive," an adventurer with no limits. Billy called the number, got an answering machine with no message but silence and a beep, and left his own message nearly as cryptic. When she returned his call, her voice was low and husky, utterly devoid of accent. They talked business. Later that same day he bought a train ticket to the city where she lived.

Not until he was actually on the train, *inside* the train, like a bullet nestled snugly in the chamber of a long-barrelled gun, did he realize how scared he

was. What if the hooker knew he was a virgin and laughed at him? What if she was ugly? What if he simply couldn't bring himself to do what he had come for, what he had dreamed of?

As soon as he met the girl in her cheap hotel room, his first two fears were put to rest. She was far too passive to laugh at anyone. And she was beautiful in the manner of a well-carved mask or a porcelain doll, her skin matte-smooth, her features faintly Asian, almond eyes ringed with black liner, lips smudged deep red. Beneath the black spandex skirt, her ass was as round and sweet as a pair of ripe mangoes. Her face bore no visible scars, no indelible pain, no emotion at all. She held her tall, slender, almost angular body rather stiffly, as if half-sensing some pain ready to flare at any moment from deep inside. But her spine was straight, her shoulders unbowed. The submissiveness was all in her bruise-colored eyes, her mouth lush as an open wound.

And he had not even had to say what he wanted, not in so many words. The girl was already nodding, urging him on. She regarded the gun with an odd serenity.

"It's not loaded," he lied. Exploding shells were illegal but ridiculously easy to obtain. The first time he got some, he'd balanced a watermelon on a pile of bricks and blown it apart in a satisfying spray of red and black and green. After that he got a hard-on just holding one of those shells in his hand, warming it in his palm, imagining how it could make flesh rupture and explode.

His eyes cut away from hers, dry and burning. Twin heartbeats pounded in his throat and the head of his penis.

"Fine," she said.

His fingers felt chilled and clumsy as he groped for his wallet. Holding it beneath her line of sight, he opened it and extracted ten crisp twenty-dollar bills. It was nearly the last of the money from the sale of Gramma's house in Georgia. After this he would have to get a job, or starve, or . . . well, after this, what did anything matter?

A small sepia photograph of his grandfather stared up at him, broad-shouldered and smiling in his Army uniform, three years younger than Billy was now. There was the Luger at his hip, sheathed in hard leather. Billy closed the wallet on the only person he had ever loved. He pressed the bills into the girl's narrow, bony hand.

"Okay," he said, his voice hardly shaking at all. "Here's what I want you to do."

Now he was standing just outside the door of the room, in the dingy fifth-floor hallway of a flophouse in a city whose name he had already forgotten. They were all the same to him, cities, the downtown business districts of smooth gray stone and blind silvered glass, the slums and suburbs forming like ulcers around a larger wound. That was what cities were, the wounds of the

world. Billy supposed that made him and the girl in the room maggots, burrowing into the world's decayed flesh for sustenance.

He dipped into his flight bag, tugged a rough wool ski mask over his head. He wore a pair of grimy black jeans, but had taken his shirt off and stuffed it in the bag. The night air coming through the cracks and seams of the ramshackle building made his skin ripple with goose bumps, his nipples shiver erect.

There was a mirror in the corridor, its glass cracked and smeared with sticky fingerprints. Billy's reflection was only a dim black oval, unrecognizable and sinister. For the first time in his life he looked dangerous—now that his face was covered, his soft, weak, almost pretty face. Every time he looked in a mirror he hated his mother all over again, cursed her for the bowed Cupid's lips and stupid round blue eyes, for the wispy shock of hair that fell across his forehead like spun copper.

Billy pressed his ear against the door just below the metal numbers that hung nailed to its surface, slightly askew. He thought he could detect movement inside the room, faint and slow and silken.

He took the Luger from his bag and stood in the hallway cradling it for a few minutes, loving its weight and heft, cold metal sheathed in overheating flesh. If anyone had come out of their room during that moment, he would have bolted and lost his money. But no one came out. It was just after eight, dinnertime, and apparently this was a residence hotel: the sad smells of poverty cuisine seeped into the hall, frying meat and Wonder Bread, the sickly-cheese aroma of canned spaghetti.

He pressed the barrel to the slow steady throb in the crotch of his jeans, and his skinny body shook with a rush of heat nearly nauseating in its intensity. He was a criminal stalking the night, incapable of mercy, bristling with murderous intent. He was a soldier, grimy and desperate, under attack from an enemy more insidious than any his grandfather had known.

Billy twisted the knob. It slid through his sweaty fingers, unlocked. He pushed the door open.

The girl was sitting at the mirror, her reflection indistinct in cloudy glass, brushing the long midnight spill of her hair. The brush slipped from her fingers, thudded on the worn carpet. The bruise-colored eyes went wide.

"Who are you?" Her trembling hand clutched at the front of the filmy white nightgown she'd changed into. Beneath that, a lace bra cupped smallish tender breasts, nipples stiff with terror or arcane desire. She was playing along beautifully. "How did you get in here?"

Billy showed her the gun and watched her cringe. Her face went pale and the irises of her eyes showed a panicky rim of white. God, she was good.

"Shut up, whore." He spat the words in the cruelest tone he could muster. Tears darkened those eyes like a summer storm rolling in. Billy almost expect-

ed them to stain her cheeks inky purple as they spilled over, but no, they were clear as rain. With the Luger's barrel he gestured at the gown. "Take that off."

"Please," she whispered.

"*Shut up!*" Billy lunged at her, grabbed double handfuls of fabric and tried to rip the gown off her. The flimsy weave resisted him. Enraged, he rent it with his teeth, filled his mouth with the bland dry flavor of nylon. The gown fell away. Billy's lips brushed lace, skin. His nostrils caught the lemony tang of sweat. Maybe she really was afraid of him.

If she wasn't, she would be.

He pressed the barrel hard against the girl's breastbone, just above the visible flutter of her heart. When she flinched away, he saw a thin red circle already pressed into the flesh. The ghost of a bullet wound. He thought his penis would soon burst the confines of hot denim.

"Take off your bra."

"Please," she said again, barely audible.

He jammed the gun into her face, into her soft mouth. The barrel smeared her lips across her teeth, and blood blossomed, spilled, ran in thin bright streaks down her chest. Her eyes were huge, gone from bruise to an impossible purple-black, the color of rotting flesh.

"I said, shut up!"

Her hands spidered to the frontal clasp of her bra. When he nudged her again with the gun's barrel, she undid the clasp and let the scrap of lace and elastic slide off her shoulders.

The girl had no breasts.

With the gun still pointed at her heart, Billy bent to retrieve the bra, stared into the gossamer cups. Flesh-colored padding, with hard little dots of pink rubber like pencil erasers where the nipples should be. *Mastectomy?* But there were her real nipples, small and chocolate-brown on the flat unscarred chest. They didn't sew the nipples back on after a mastectomy. Did they?

He yanked down her panties, heard lace rip and elastic give way. *There:* glossy black delta of hair at the juncture of matte-pale thighs, unadorned, unencumbered. Between those thighs he would find no threat, only fleshy frills and folds opening on an absence of flesh, on a hole, on nothingness. Right? *Right?*

He pushed her back on the lumpy mattress and forced her legs apart. He stared and stared; he could not stop staring.

The soft flesh was dimpled where testicles had been pushed up into the groin. A rubbery penis stretched taut as chewed gum, wedged all the way back into the crack of the ass. No, not *wedged*. Billy saw the gleam of metal and bent to look closer.

The head of the penis was pierced with a silver ring that entered through the urethra and exited through the little wrinkle of skin at the base of the

glans. This was linked with a large safety pin sunk deep into a thick fold of the perineum. The piercings had a dry, elastic look: they'd been there for a while, though the boy looked no older than nineteen or twenty.

His eyes were still purple with fear, though, submissive as before. As he tugged the lush synthetic spill of hair off his head, Billy saw his graceful hand trembling. His real hair was cropped close to the skull, bleached an incongruous white-blond; the contrast made his skin seem a shade darker. His left ear was pierced with a number of progressively smaller silver hoops spiraling up the rim of cartilage and into the whorls of the ear, his right spiked with a single ruby through the lobe, vivid as a drop of gore.

"Are you mad?" asked the boy. There was no trace of mockery in his voice, only the same soft monotone as before.

Billy was utterly bewildered now. The ski mask had grown hot, prickly, the coarse wool damp at his lips and nostrils. He pulled it over his head, felt static electricity frizz through his hair, rubbed his chin and scowled. The criminal in him was stealing away, absconding with the jewels of pain and forced terror. The boy's slender legs were still drawn up and splayed, and Billy couldn't help noticing that his ass was still as round and sweet as a pair of ripe mangoes.

"Punish me then," said the boy.

Billy blew out a long pent-up breath. The room, the building, the entire world seemed to have suddenly gone inverse. The gun dangled all but forgotten at his side, his hand still curled loosely around the grip but no good strength to it, no raw singing power.

"What's your name?" he said at last, stupidly, almost shyly. He realized he had not thought to ask before.

"Jesus."

Hispanic, then, maybe; not Asian. But the boy pronounced the name as they had done at the Baptist church Billy's grandmother had dragged him to, in the sermons he'd hated except when the preacher detailed the agony of the wounded man on the cross, as it had been intoned over Granddad's coffin in the parlor that day. Not Hay-SEUSS but JEE-zus.

Billy pictured a sacred heart pierced with thorns, limned in scarlet flame, dripping lurid blood. No Baptist icon this, but Roman Catholic by way of a Georgia tattoo parlor. He imagined jamming the Luger's barrel up against it and blowing it into a million chunks of useless twitching muscle. He thought again of that figure on the cross, pale and thin and pierced: a true submissive, a submissive for all humanity. He remembered a line of graffiti he'd seen scrawled in the men's room at Port Authority once: *Sure Jesus loves you, but will he swallow?*

He realized he had not lost his hard-on.

"Okay," he said, a little cautious but still eager. It wasn't as if he'd ever been with anyone at all; he didn't *know* what he liked. Maybe it could still be good. Boy, girl, what did it matter? Inside the fragile envelope of skin, they were much the same. Jesus' body was a mirror image of Billy's own; bleach the raven tuft of his pubic hair, yank the genital hardware, and from the neck down they would be twins.

He slid the gun's barrel under the flaccid shaft and pulled up. Jesus moaned, shifted his bony hips on the mattress. Billy wanted it to hurt, and it looked as if it did, but the ring popped open just before flesh tore. Jesus' penis sprang free, already beginning to harden.

Take, eat, this is my body.

Billy realized the torn lace panties were still dangling from his left hand. He crumpled them into a silky ball and dabbed at the blood on Jesus' mouth. The fabric began to stain deep red. Jesus' lips felt slick and tender against his fingers, and those Oriental eyes glittered with—what? Desire, fear, pain? Or some exotic blend of all three, some new emotion brewed just for Billy?

He knelt at the foot of the bed, pressed his lips against the velvet concavity of the boy's stomach. "Don't move," he murmured. "Be still. Be quiet. Be cold . . ."

His tongue flicked into the cup of the navel, around the curve of a hipbone. The gun moved lower, nudging Jesus' thighs apart, kissing the dark sweet cleft of his buttocks.

" . . . wait . . ."

Billy's head jerked up. His hand flashed out and smacked the boy's face hard enough to make his palm sting. "*Don't talk!*"

Helplessly, Jesus gestured at the nightstand by the bed. Billy saw a large jar of Vaseline half-hidden in drifts of tattered Kleenex.

"Oh . . ." He blinked, sheepish. "Okay." He grabbed the Vaseline, popped the top off and stuck the Luger's barrel deep into the opaque snot-colored whorls of petroleum jelly. It came up glistening with grease, its notched sight nearly hidden in a thick coat of the stuff, the tip of its bore clogged. None of this mattered.

He eased the barrel back between the cheeks of Jesus' ass and found the tender hole, hesitated only for an instant, and sank six inches of greased steel deep into the boy. Jesus' eyes went wide. He sucked in a harsh breath, then let out a long shaky one; his penis gave a little jump and wept a single crystal tear.

As Billy struggled to free his own hard-on from the tangle of jeans and underwear, then kick his legs free of confining fabric, he felt the rest of his life peeling away. There had never been anything but this, no stuffy parlor where his grandfather slept in a long wooden box, no pretty mother who disap-

peared forever into the Summer of Love, no brittle bleached skull shipped home in a cardboard box, no withered years or husked dreams. There was only the giddy throb of his cock in his hand, only this boy's willing pain that flowed over him and into him, burning like napalm.

Billy felt orgasm stalking him, moving fast and close, then drawing away again. It had eluded him this way on so many lonely nights when his own hand was not warm enough, was not slick enough, was too obviously his own unsundered flesh. But all at once Jesus was tugging him up on the bed, nearly making him lose his sweaty grip on the gun. All at once Jesus was wrapping skinny arms around Billy's hips, sliding a mouth hot as an open wound around Billy's cock.

It was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for him. It was a feeling he wanted to last a thousand years, to last forever. It eclipsed his feeling of moments ago. *This* was all there was. This was all there had ever been. He and Jesus, their wet flesh melting into one another, the linkage of their bodies by orifice and cold metal, the mingled smells of sweat and Vaseline. The mattress beneath them was insubstantial, a cradling hand of mist; the tawdry hotel room shimmered and began to dissolve at the corners of Billy's eyes. He was dimly aware of Jesus thrusting his hips against the Luger, letting the barrel slide in and out of his ass.

Nothing else had ever mattered. There was only this moment, this unique point in space and time. There was only this boy he had met perhaps half an hour ago, and given ten crisp twenty-dollar bills. There was only the sweet ass inches from his face, glistening with Vaseline, accepting his love. There was only the gun, an extension of his body, of his very being.

"Do you love me?" Billy whispered.

Jesus twisted his head to look at Billy. His lips still encircled the head of Billy's cock, pale pink petals half-concealing livid purple fruit. His eyes were very wide, very clear. "Yes," he mouthed, and swallowed Billy deep again.

Billy felt a burst of light fill his skull, travel down his spine, go blazing through his balls and down the shaft of his penis. Then it was spilling into Jesus' mouth, and there was the answer to the hateful scrawl in the Port Authority men's room: yes, yes, absolute and indelible yes.

And in the final moment of orgasm, all Billy's muscles cranked tight. The long muscles of his buttocks and groin and the virgin bud of his sphincter. The muscles of his face and throat and scalp. The muscles of his hands.

The muscle of his trigger finger, squeezing slow and gentle.

He didn't hear the shot so much as feel it, a muffled shock like a fist punching raw meat. He felt Jesus' body jerk against his, felt a rending pain in his crotch as the jaws surrounding him clamped reflexively shut. A spray of blood and tissue blinded him.

Billy managed to get his hands to his face, scraped gouts of gore out of his eyes. He reached down and worked a finger between Jesus' teeth, pried his lacerated penis out of Jesus' mouth. Then he sat up and looked at his work.

Jesus wasn't dead. His eyes were bright with brutal awareness in his shock-pale face. His narrow chest heaved for breath. His abdomen was an impossible carnage pulsing with the efforts of failing organs. It was like some enormous steaming bowl of stew, full of glistening meat, splintered bone, great handfuls of tubes torn loose from their moorings, and everywhere the rich coppery sauce of blood. The sewer smell of ruptured bowel rose in shimmering waves from his body. Billy saw a gleam of metal: the spent casing of the shell, nestled in a dark purple loop of intestine. He had wondered whether exploding ammo would blow a body wide open like a watermelon. Now he knew.

Those bright knowing eyes sought Billy's. Billy wanted to look away, but could not.

" . . . you said . . . "

Billy leaned closer. He could smell his own come on Jesus' breath, a sharp clean smell that always reminded him the traces of detergent in freshly washed clothes.

" . . . said it wasn't . . . "

A black gout of blood shot through with pearly threads of jism welled from Jesus' mouth, spilled over his chest. A long slow shudder ran through him, and the hectic light went out of his eyes.

You said it wasn't loaded.

Billy hadn't meant to kill the boy. He hadn't meant to shoot him *at all*.

Anger rose in him, immediate and caustic. Now this was gone too, whatever he might have had with this boy, another possibility stolen from him. *It wasn't fair. It was never fair.* He pulled the Luger out of Jesus' asshole, raised it and shot him in the face. The fine smooth features unraveled like a ball of yarn, painting the wall behind the bed with a thick chiaroscuro of gray and crimson.

He hadn't meant to shoot him *at all*.

Billy put two shells in Jesus' chest, watched it crack open and fly apart.

He *hadn't*.

He fired into the ruined stew of guts, then fired again and again. A spent casing landed on his thigh and left a long weal of burned flesh, but he did not feel it, did not notice. The body on the bed was little more than a series of smears now, like a canvas painted by a bad artist in a hurry.

Someone pounded on the door.

Billy pushed himself off the bed and backed across the room, away from the gun and the swampy mattress, his hands outstretched in uncon-

scious denial. It wasn't fair. Nothing had ever been fair for him. He hadn't meant to shoot the boy, he *badn't*, he had only tightened his finger on the trigger a *little* . . .

"What the hell's going on in there?" An ugly voice sinister as a slowed-down record, not kind to the ear like Jesus' soft monotone. And more pounding.

Only the tiniest bit . . .

"This is security. Open the fucking door."

Billy's right index finger curled convulsively against his palm, scraping up blood. He caught sight of himself in the flyspecked mirror, his face and bare chest splashed with blood, speckled with bone and tissue and the fragrant contents of Jesus' intestines. Then he was at the window, leaving smeary red fingerprints on the filthy glass, staring five flights down at cars passing oblivious, at a Greyhound bus pulling out of the station across the street. Useless. He would never get out of this room.

Billy picked up the Luger again and lay down beside Jesus, in Jesus. There was one shell left in the eight-shot clip. He bit down on the barrel, tasted gore and Vaseline and the faintly spicy musk of Jesus' asshole. He closed his eyes and imagined himself asleep in a long wooden box, spinning in a void without weight, without care.

The pain, when it came, was a white-hot supernova filling the vault of his skull, then bursting it wide open. But it felt so much cleaner than the pain he'd had all his life. And it only lasted for a second.

Two bodies came into the city morgue early Saturday morning: a Caucasian male in his twenties, underweight, head all but shot off; and a male perhaps eighteen, maybe Asian, subjected to gross trauma by firearm. Both were unidentified, the faces gone to pulp and bone meal. The antique Luger was pried out of the white boy's rigid hand, bagged, and spirited off to the police station. The cop who stole it a few months later would have no way of knowing where it had been; he would simply wipe the sticky patina of Vaseline off the barrel and reload it with ordinary hollow-point bullets.

The bodies were tagged and photographed and scraped into adjacent cold drawers. The attending policemen forgot the white boy as soon as his drawer slammed shut, but they stood gazing at the Asian for a moment, fixing his picture in their minds. The morgue workers had been awed at the corpse's condition, and even the cops had seldom seen a body so thoroughly ruined.

"Looks like this piece of shit pissed off the wrong guy," observed one.

"*Loved* the earrings," remarked the other, with the air of one sharing a choice witticism. He had picked a number of small silver hoops out of the wreckage of the head before the guy from the M.E.'s office told him to stop.

Not until he saw a fragment of ear cartilage with something similar dangling from it had he realized what they were.

“Maybe we can get disinfected back at the station.”

“Don’t scratch your ass, whatever you do.”

The cops left the morgue, bantering, and drove back into the clear blue canyons of the dawning city.

King of the Cats

My best friend, David Ferguson, lived with me in the summer of 1995 while assisting with the research of my Courtney Love biography. David is first and foremost a singer, a skinny gay white boy with a big black woman inside him; formerly of Athens, Georgia, band the Go Figures, he recently recorded a solo album, Extra Clean. That summer, though, his band had just broken up and he didn't want to sing. Instead, he wrote his ass off. He wrote short stories and bits of erotica to amuse me. As always, he kept a voluminous journal. He started what would become his first novel.

Meanwhile, mired in Courtneyland, I'd been asked to contribute to a volume of erotic fairy tales for gay men. I desperately wanted to do it but couldn't find the time to produce a draft. Since David was handy in my spare room, I asked if he would script an erotic version of any fairy tale he chose, which I would then revise and color. Appropriately, since we'd both been raised by Siamese, he chose "The Poor Miller's Apprentice and the Cat." And we all lived happily ever after.

King of the Cats

by Poppy Z. Brite and David Ferguson

There once lived a young miller's apprentice named Nick. He was one of three hired boys who had worked most of their lives for a rich old miller. The miller had neither wife nor children, and the other two apprentices, Simon and Oliver, argued constantly about who would inherit the mill. Nick cared little for this argument. Though he worked as hard as the other two, the mill's hypnotic motions—the golden stream of grain pouring out of the coffer, the inexorable grinding of the great stone wheels—had always secretly wearied him.

One day the miller summoned Simon, Oliver, and Nick. "Boys, I grow old. When I die, who will take over the mill?"

Simon and Oliver interrupted, talking over each other. The miller held up a hand to silence them. "I have decided it will be whichever one of you brings me the finest horse, for I wish to prance around the countryside in my old age."

This was great sport! Simon and Oliver thought of themselves as quick-witted young rakes with taste and connections, sly dabblers among the social elite. They would raise and spend oceans of gold between them trying to outdo each other bidding on steeds.

Neither of them gave a thought to Nick. He was too quiet to be clever. Tall for his seventeen years, with fine features and eyes like violet moons, he never exhibited any signs of wit and had no connections at all. He spent most of his wages on ink and drawing paper, upon which he sketched endless cats: grinning greymalkins before their hearths, leopards rippling vivid along branches, lions on the hot veldt.

But when Simon and Oliver mounted an expedition with a train of coaches and servants, Nick packed his rucksack and accompanied them, better than stay and be fired by the miller. Oliver drugged his wine the first night, and Nick awoke to find that the camp had packed and gone on without him. Also, he had an appalling hangover.

Nick wandered until he found himself at the edge of a city. He followed a road that looked promising, but soon narrowed to lure him down a series of small twisting alleys to a stinking dead end. He turned to retrace his steps—and beheld a splendid black cat sitting in the path.

It showed no sign of fear at his presence, so he bent to stroke its head. The thick fur glittered like a puddle of oil, so black it seemed to absorb light. "Hello, handsome," said Nick, for it was clearly a male. "What's a fine one like you doing in this nasty place?"

"Hello, Nick," said the cat. "I came to meet you, for I knew you would lose your way. Stroke my back." He offered his sleek, muscular spine to Nick's hand.

Nick had never heard a cat speak before, but perhaps in other towns it was common. The thought excited him as the creatures themselves had always done. He stroked the cat, who threaded his tail around Nick's wrist and purred.

"I know what you're after," said the cat. "You want a horse, don't you? I can help you get a horse."

"How's that?" Nick asked, reaching up to scratch the velvety tufted ears, more interested in cat than horse.

"Oh, that's lovely," said the cat, arching his neck against Nick's knuckles. "You see, I am King of the Cats. All you have to do is come and be my faithful servant for seven years. At the end of that time I will give you your pick of my fine stable."

"That's it, is it?" Nick was amused: surely every feline on earth believed itself King or Queen of the Cats. But he had nothing better to do than follow this exquisite creature, and so he did.

He followed the cat through labyrinthine passageways and dripping, twisting corridors. At times it seemed they had left the city and now walked through a forest, though Nick could never quite make out the trees; at times he smelled city scents, the perfume of spices or the reek of a slaughterhouse. At last they came into an open area something like a plaza or a clearing, and Nick gasped at the sight before him.

A great onyx castle with a golden door, and waiting at the door a pair of slender Siamese, their cream-colored fur tinged at the legs, tail, face, and ears with a deep silver-blue. Their eyes were the clear blue of sapphires, slightly crossed but alight with fervid intelligence.

At once the pair began to talk, their loud, hoarse voices interrupting one another.

"O King, O King!"

"How we missed you—what have you brought us?"

"Who's that boy?"

"What's his name?"

"What's his breed?"

"Tell us, naaaaow!"

"In time you shall know all," murmured the king, rubbing past them, briefly entwining his bushy black tail with their long whiplike ones. Nick followed, and the pair parted to let him through.

"Nao and Rao, my watchmen," explained the king. "Busybodies, but they are loyal and good-hearted, and they can frighten off any intruder with their racket."

That evening a great feast was set before Nick: tender meat, oily fish, saucers of sweet cream, tiny fried birds whose bones crunched bewitchingly between the teeth. There were no people in the castle, only cats and kittens everywhere, all sleek and proud. After the feast, they performed in the king's great dining room, juggling and doing acrobatic leaps, singing, racing nimbly across a series of tightropes strung near the gilded ceiling. Together with the quantities of food and wine, it all made Nick dizzy.

At last the revelers began to leave in straggling groups and pairs. The black king fixed Nick with his luminous golden eyes and gestured at the near-empty hall, dim now that the torches had burned down.

"Dance with me, boy," he said.

"I can't dance with a cat," said Nick heavily, for his belly was full of meat and wine. "I've never done anything like that."

"Very well, then," said the king. "Take him off to bed."

Nao and Rao materialized out of nowhere, their sinuous forms steadying Nick. They led him to a small quiet chamber deep in the castle. A set of deft paws removed his shoes, another his shirt and trousers. Rough tongues washed him from head to foot. A velvety tail caressed his face. Then they slipped away, and Nick was fast asleep.

In his dream, something had him by the back of the neck. A great coal-black cat-man had Nick in its jaws and was ripping at him with razor claws. Nick tried to cry out, but he could not. Calmness washed over him. There was no pain, only a brilliant, tearing ecstasy as he broke and bled.

Then the man-cat was thrusting against his ass, tunneling into him with something that felt like a handful of greased knives. The creature's muscles were bands of iron beneath the rippling black coat. Nick was pierced, impaled. He would die bleeding and struggling in the grip of something inhuman. Why did it feel so good?

He awoke with streaks of his own semen cooling on his belly and thighs. He must have scratched and bitten himself in his sleep, for he was covered with lurid marks, even in places it didn't seem he could reach. Nick shuddered, half in horror, half in a shuddering pleasure that curled deep in his gut, and fell asleep again.

Life in the castle of the cats was a jolly affair. The days were spent in mutual bathing, languorous stretching, exploration of high shelves, and the staking out of windowsills. The nights were reserved for the more serious business of hunting and eating. Every so often, all the cats and kittens would drop what they were doing to run from the end of the castle gardens all the way to the highest bell tower and back again. The king was always first.

Nick performed the few useful chores that the cats found difficult or tedious. There was no evidence of horses or a stable, but he had no intention of holding the king to his promise; this was far more interesting than running a mill. The dream came again and again, sometimes more violently, sometimes less. Nick never mentioned it to the king, but he began to look forward to going to bed in hopes that the dream-cat would visit him.

One winter night when the snow lay in milky moonlit drifts outside, Nick dreamed that the great man-cat was curled asleep around him, its purr a soul-deep rumble. The next morning, the king said to him, "It has been seven years since you came here."

Nick could scarcely believe it, for the time had passed as quickly as four seasons. But he could not question the king's word.

"Do you still wish to return to your mill with one of my fine horses?"

Nick knew that he did not. He had never cared anything for the mill. But if he had already enjoyed the cats' charity for seven years, he ought to do so no longer. "I will do as you wish," he said.

"Good. Then there is one more thing you must do for me before you go. Build me a cottage beside the castle. I have provided you with wood and tools. This is your last duty to me."

Nick set about building the cottage, though he could not imagine why the king wanted it done. *Perhaps to house his next guest?* he thought, and felt a twinge of jealousy. Nevertheless, he fell into the sheer enjoyment of the work, hammering and carving as if he had been born to woodcraft. Soon he had built a

cunning little house with feline gargoyles in the eaves, arching cat-shapes cut into the scrollwork, and a hundred windows with wide sills for sunbathing.

"You have done a splendid job," said the king. "Now we will go to my stables and you may choose your horse."

Nick followed the big black cat to a part of the castle he had never seen before. A stocky Himalayan stood guard at the stable doors, long thick coat impeccably groomed, round ice-blue eyes stern at their approach. The cat did not speak, but bowed to the king as he swept by, then suffered Nick to enter.

The royal stables housed the finest horses Nick had ever seen, shining steeds fit for any king. After much thought, he selected a massive chestnut stallion, in whose mane and tail scarlet highlights seemed to ripple.

"An excellent choice," said the king. "I call him Hell. Now return on foot to the miller's house and wait there. Tell no one of how you spent your time away. The horse will come to you in three days."

Nick thanked the king and stroked his glossy fur one last time, from neck to tail. The king arched against Nick's hand, and Nick felt a lump in his throat. How could he live again with mere humans when he had spent seven years in the company of cats?

Nao escorted him as far as the road that led to his town. The king had sent him away in the same shirt and trousers he had arrived in seven years before. Now they were much too small for his work-broadened body, and the cloth was worn to threads.

Simon and Oliver were lazing outside the millhouse when Nick came trudging up the path. Their horses grazed nearby. Dressed like dandies, Simon and Oliver laughed and laughed at Nick's dirty rags. "Ho, Nicky," they taunted, "where's your horse?"

"Coming in three days," Nick answered, "and he will be finer than either of these sorry nags."

Simon and Oliver's horses were handsome enough in truth, but both were a full hand shorter than the king's stallion. One had rheumy eyes, the other favored a tender hoof. Still Simon and Oliver laughed. They were certain no horse would arrive; where would stupid Nicky ever get a horse?

That night Nick was not admitted to the house, but was fed at the back door and told to sleep in the barn. Curled on a rough pallet of hay, he fell into the deepest sleep he had ever known. For unfathomable hours he dreamed of the man-cat gripping his neck fast in its jaws, entering him, possessing him.

He awoke to the sound of trumpets and horses in the yard. As he stumbled forth into the blinding sun, he understood that he had slept two days and three nights; this was the third day. A six-horse coach stood before the millhouse, the lacquer like wet ebony, the steeds' coats like mirrors. Simon,

Oliver, and the old miller tumbled out onto the porch, startled from their breakfast by the racket.

The coach door opened and from it emerged the most beautiful man Nick had ever seen, the most beautiful man he could imagine. Dressed in black and gold, he was himself black and gold: hair and skin like glittering coal, impassive burnished eyes. When Nick looked into those eyes and saw the slitted pupils, he knew that this man was a king, his king.

The king strode forward flanked by two tall, slender attendants dressed in silver garments, with sapphire eyes: Nao and Rao. The king raised a huge sharp-nailed hand. Around the coach, led by a stocky attendant with a great fluff of white hair, came the chestnut stallion.

The king bowed ever so slightly toward the miller. "We have a delivery for Nick."

"Why, that's the finest horse I've ever seen in all the world," said the miller, coming down the steps. Simon and Oliver stayed where they were. The miller pried the horse's mouth open, lifted each of its hooves, then patted its silken flank. "The mill goes to Nick!"

The king shook his massive head. "No, my good sir. You may keep your mill. And you may keep the horse. But Nick belongs to me." He smiled, and Nick saw that his teeth were white as cream and sharp as knives. "Nick, my men have clothes for you. Bathe and dress. You're coming away with me."

Nick found the sinuous forms of Nao and Rao flanking him, one with a parcel of fine clothes, the other with a pair of soft black leather boots. The swept up the front steps, past the astonished faces of the miller and his two apprentices, into a chamber of the millhouse where Nick was bathed and scented and dressed. The king waited below in the yard, cleaning his already immaculate nails, refusing to acknowledge the frantic attempts of Simon and Oliver to slip him their calling cards.

Soon Nick emerged, looking as regal as any member of the king's court. A long cape trailed behind him, his shirt was of scarlet silk, and his trousers were perfectly fitted to his muscular legs. He descended the stairs to his king, who met him with a smile of possessive pride and satisfaction.

In this great coach, the black castle was only a few heartbeats away. As the swept through the gates, the courtyard erupted with cheers. All the cats and kittens of the castle were men and women now, dressed in splendid clothes, holding banners and streamers aloft. As their smiling faces filled the coach windows, Nick had the fleeting impression that he could see the feline features just behind the human ones.

As they stepped out of the coach, Nick turned to look at the castle and gasped in shock. The tiny cottage he'd built had become a second castle, a soaring white wedding cake of a castle with elaborate carvings and colored

fountains. The grand front doors swept wide and the king led Nick into a hallway dripping with pearls and diamonds.

"This is to be our home," said the king. "Now will you dance with me, Nick?"

Nick nodded, speechless. The king folded him into muscular arms, nipped at his throat with sharp teeth, kissed him again and again, gently raked his back with those razor nails. Nick shuddered and surrendered as he was swept across the floor in the first of many dances of the night.

When they reached their wedding bed, the king buried himself deep in Nick, biting the back of his neck just as the man-cat had done in his dreams. Nick moaned and felt his insides tighten around the king's great cock, felt the skin of his back sunder and his blood spill beneath the king's nails.

"You are mine," purred the king as he turned his nails to his own chest, ripped a bloody X in his own ebony flesh. "You are mine. You are mine." As he leaned down to murmur it in Nick's ear, their blood mingled into a hot coppery slick. "You are mine. You are mine."

And they lived happily for nine lifetimes.

Self-Made Man

The greatest horror of this story is that it was written for Book of the Dead 3, an anthology that went through a series of delays, scandals, intrigues, and near-lawsuits before sinking under the weight of editorial and publishing idiocy. As for the story itself, it was written midway through my novel Exquisite Corpse, and I just had to get some of the Jeffrey Dahmer-mania out of my system before I could go on. Some readers have complained that the characters in the novel are too influenced by Dahmer. If you're one of them, you might not like this story.

Self-Made Man

Justin had read *Dandelion Wine* seventeen times now, but he still hated to see it end. He always hated endings.

He turned the last page of the book and sat for several minutes in the shadows of his bedroom, cradling the old thumbed paperback by Ray Bradbury, marveling at the world he held in his hands. The hot sprawl of the city outside was forgotten; he was still lost in the cool green Byzantium of 1928.

Within these tattered covers, dawning realization of his own mortality might turn a boy into a poet, not a dark machine of destruction. People only died after saying to each other all the things that needed to be said, and the summer never truly ended so long as those bottles gleamed down cellar, full of the distillate of memory.

For Justin, the distillate of memory was a bitter vintage. The summer of 1928 seemed impossibly long ago, beyond imagining, forty years before blasted sperm met cursed egg to make him. When he put the book aside and looked at the dried blood under his fingernails, it seemed even longer.

An artist who doesn't read is no artist at all, he had scribbled in a notebook he once tried to keep, but abandoned after a few weeks, sick of his own thoughts.

Books are the key to other minds, sure as bodies are the key to other souls. Reading a good book is a lot like sinking your fingers up to the second knuckle in someone's brain.

In the world of the story, no one left before it was time.

Characters in a book never went away; all you had to do was open the book again and there they'd be, right where you left them. He wished live people were so easy to hold onto.

You could hold onto *parts* of them, of course; you could even make them part of yourself. That was easy. But to keep a whole person with you forever, to stop just one person from leaving or gradually disintegrating as they always did . . . to just *hold* someone. *All* of someone.

There might be ways. There had to be ways.

Even in Byzantium, a Lonely One stalked and preyed.

Justin was curled up against the headboard of his bed, a bloodstained comforter bunched around his bare legs. This was his favorite reading spot. He glanced at the nightstand, which held a Black & Decker electric drill, a pair of scissors, a roll of paper towels, and a syringe full of chlorine bleach. The drill wasn't plugged in yet. He closed his eyes and allowed a small slow shudder to run through his body, part dread, part desire.

There were screams carved on the air of his room, vital fluids dried deep within his mattress, whole lives sewn into the lining of his pillow, to be taken out and savored later. There was always time, so long as you didn't let your memories get away. He had kept most of his. In fact, he'd kept seventeen; all but the first two, and those he didn't want.

Justin's father had barely seen him out of the womb before disappearing into the seamy night side of Los Angeles. His mother raised him on the continent's faulty rim, in an edging-toward-poor neighborhood of a city that considered its poor a kind of toxic waste: ceaselessly and unavoidably churned out by progress, hard to store or dispose of, foul-smelling and ugly and dangerous. Their little stucco house was at the edge of a vast slum, and Justin's dreams were peppered with gunfire, his play permeated with the smell of piss and garbage. He was often beaten bloody just for being a scrawny white boy carrying a book. His mother never noticed his hands scraped raw on concrete, or the thin crust of blood that often formed between his oozing nose and mouth by the time he got home.

She had married again and moved to Reno as soon as Justin turned eighteen, as soon as she could turn her painfully awkward son out of the house. *You could be a nice-looking young man if you cleaned yourself up. You're smart, you could get a good job and make money. You could have girlfriends*, as if looks and money and girlfriends were the sweetest things he could ever dream of.

Her new husband had been a career Army man who looked at Justin the way he looked at their ragged old sofa, as leftover trash from her former life.

Now they were both ten years dead, their bones mummified or scattered by animals somewhere in the Nevada desert, in those beautiful blasted lands. Only Justin knew where.

He'd shot his stepfather first, once in the back of the head with his own Army service pistol, just to see the surprise on his mother's face as brain and bone exploded across the glass top of her brand-new dinner table, as her husband's blood dripped into the mashed potatoes and the meat loaf, rained into her sweating glass of tea. He thought briefly that this surprise was the strongest emotion he had ever seen there. The sweetest, too. Then he pointed the gun at it and watched it blossom into chaos.

Justin remembered clearing the table, noticing that one of his mother's eyes had landed in her plate, afloat on a thin patina of blood and grease. He tilted the plate a little and the glistening orb rolled onto the floor. It made a small satisfying squelch beneath the heel of his shoe, a sound he felt more than heard.

No one ever knew he had been out of California. He drove their gas-guzzling luxury sedan into the desert, dumped them and the gun. He returned to L.A. by night, by Greyhound bus, drinking bitter coffee and reading at rest stops, watching the country unspool past his window, the starlit desert and highway and small sleeping towns, the whole wide-open landscape folding around him like an envelope or a concealing hand. He was safe among other human flotsam. No one ever remembered his face. No one considered him capable of anything at all, let alone murder.

After that he worked and read and drank compulsively, did little else for a whole year. He never forgot that he was capable of murder, but he thought he had buried the urge. Then one morning he woke up with a boy strewn across his bed, face and chest battered in, abdomen torn wide open. Justin's hands were still tangled in the glistening purple stew of intestines. From the stains on his skin he could see that he had rubbed them all over his body, maybe rolled in them.

He didn't remember meeting the boy, didn't know how he had killed him or opened his body like a big wet Christmas present, or why. But he kept the body until it started to smell, and then he cut off the head, boiled it until the flesh was gone, and kept the skull. After that it never stopped again. They had all been boys, all young, thin, and pretty: everything the way Justin liked it. Weapons were too easy, too impersonal, so he drugged them and strangled them. Like Willy Wonka in the Technicolor bowels of his chocolate factory, *he* was the music maker, and *he* was the dreamer of dreams.

It was a dark and lonely revelry, to be sure. But so was writing; so was painting or learning music. So, he supposed, was all art when you penetrated to its molten core. He didn't know if killing was art, but it was the only creative thing he had ever done.

He got up, slid *Dandelion Wine* back into its place on his crowded bookshelf, and left the bedroom. He put his favorite CD on shuffle and crossed his small apartment to the kitchenette. A window beside the refrigerator looked out on a brick wall. Frank Sinatra was singing "I've Got You under My Skin."

Justin opened the refrigerator and took out a package wrapped in foil. Inside was a ragged cut of meat as large as a dinner plate, deep red, tough and fibrous. He selected a knife from the jumble of filthy dishes in the sink and sliced off a piece of meat the size of his palm. He wasn't very hungry, but he needed something in his stomach to soak up the liquor he'd be drinking soon.

Justin heated oil in a skillet, sprinkled the meat with salt, laid it in the sizzling fat, and cooked it until both sides were brown and the bottom of the pan was awash with fragrant juices. He slid the meat onto a saucer, found a clean fork in the silverware drawer, and began to eat his dinner standing at the counter.

The meat was rather tough, but it tasted wonderful, oily and salty with a slight undertone of musk. He felt it breaking down in the acids of his saliva and his stomach, felt its proteins joining with his cells and becoming part of him. That was fine. But after tonight he would have something better. A person who lived and stayed with him, whose mind belonged to him. A home-made zombie. Justin knew it was possible, if only he could destroy the right parts of the brain. If a drill and a syringe of bleach didn't work, he would try something else next time.

The night drew like a curtain across the window, stealing his wall view brick by brick. Sinatra's voice was as smooth and sweet as cream. *Got you . . . deep in the heart of me . . .* Justin nodded reflectively. The meat left a delicately metallic flavor on his tongue, one of the myriad tastes of love. Soon it would be time to go out.

Apart from the trip to Reno and the delicious wallow in the desert, Justin had never left Los Angeles. He longed to drive out into the desert, to find again the ghost towns and nuclear moonscapes he had so loved in Nevada. But he never had. You needed a car to get out there. If you didn't have a car in L.A., you might as well curl up and die. Los Angeles was a city with an enormous central nervous system, but no brain.

Since being fired from his job at an orange juice plant for chronic absenteeism—too many bodies demanding his time, requiring that he cut them up, preserve them, consume them—Justin wasn't even sure how much longer he would be able to afford the apartment. But he didn't see how he could move out with things the way they were in here. The place was a terrible mess. His neighbors had started complaining about the smell.

Justin decided not to think about all that now. He still had a little money saved, and a city bus would get him from his Silver Lake apartment to the

garish carnival of West Hollywood; that much he knew. It had done so countless times.

If he was lucky, he'd be bringing home company.

Suko ran fingers the color of sandalwood through haphazardly cut black hair, painted his eyes with stolen drugstore kohl, and grinned at himself in the cracked mirror over the sink. He fastened a string of thrift-shop beads round his neck, studied the effect of the black plastic against torn black cotton and smooth brown skin, then added a clay amulet of the Buddha and a tiny wooden penis, both strung on leather thongs.

These he had purchased among the dim stalls at Wat Rajanada, the amulet market near Klong Saensaep in Bangkok. The amulet was to protect him against accidents and malevolent ghosts. The penis was to increase his potency, to make sure whoever he met up with tonight would have a good time. It was supposed to be worn on a string around his waist, but the first few times he'd done that, his American lovers gave him strange looks.

The amulets were the last thing Suko bought with Thai money before boarding a California-bound jet and bidding farewell to his sodden homeland, most likely forever. He'd had to travel a long way from Patpong Road to get them, but he didn't know whether one could buy magical amulets in America. Apparently one could: attached to his beads had once been a round medallion stamped with an exaggerated Negro face and the word ZULU. He'd lost the medallion on a night of drunken revelry, which was as it should be. *Mai pen rai. No problem.*

Suko was nineteen. His full name was unpronounceable by American tongues, but he didn't care. American tongues could do all sorts of other things for him. This he had learned at fourteen, after hitching a midnight ride out of his home village, a place so small and so poor that it appeared on no map foreign eyes would ever see.

His family had always referred to the city by its true name, Krung Thep, the Great City of Angels. Suko had never known it by any other name until he arrived there. Krung Thep was only an abbreviation for the true name, which was more than thirty syllables long. For some reason, *farangs* had never gotten used to this. They all called it Bangkok, a name like two sharp handclaps.

In the streets, the harsh reek of exhaust fumes was tinged with a million subtler perfumes: jasmine, raw sewage, grasshoppers frying in peppered oil, the odor of ripe durian fruit that was like rotting flesh steeped in thick sweet cream. The very air seemed spritzed with alcohol, soaked with neon and the juices of sex.

He found his calling on Patpong 3, a block-long strip of gay bars and nightclubs in Bangkok's famous sleaze district. In the village, Suko and his

seven brothers and sisters had gutted fish for a few *babt* a day. Here he was paid thirty times as much to drink and dance with *farangs* who told him fascinating stories, to make his face prettier with makeup, to be fondled and flattered, to have his cock sucked as often as he could stand it. If he had to suck a few in return, how bad could that be? It was far from the worst thing he had ever put in his mouth. He rather liked the taste of sperm, if not the odd little tickle it left in the back of his throat.

He enjoyed the feel of male flesh against his own and the feel of strong arms enfolding him, loved never knowing what the night would bring. He marveled at the range of body types among Americans and English, Germans and Australians. Some had skin as soft and pale as rice-flour dough, some were covered with thick hair like wool matting their chests and arms. They might be fat or emaciated, squat or ponderously tall, ugly, handsome, or forgettable. All the Thai boys he knew were lean, light brown, small-boned and smooth-skinned, with sweet androgynous faces. So was he. So was Noy.

From the cheap boom box in the corner of the room, Robert Smith sang that Suko made him feel young again. Suko scowled at the box. Noy had given him that tape, a poor-quality Bangkok bootleg of The Cure, right after Suko first spoke of leaving the country. Last year. The year Suko decided to get on with his life.

The rest of them, these other slim raven-haired heartbreakers, they thought they would be able to live like this forever. They were seventeen, fifteen, younger. They were in love with their own faces in the mirror, jet-colored eyes glittering with drink and praise, lips bruised from too many rough kisses, too much expert use. They could not see themselves at thirty, could not imagine the roughening of their skin or the lines that bar life would etch into their faces. Some would end up hustling over on Soi Cowboy, Patpong's shabby cousin where the beer was cheaper and the tinsel tarnished, where the neon flickered fitfully or not at all. Some would move to the streets.

And some would simply disappear. Suko intended to be one of those.

Noy was just his age, and smart. Suko met him onstage at the Hi-Way Bar. They were performing the biker act, in which two boys sat facing each other astride the saddle of a Harley-Davidson, wearing only leather biker caps, tongue-kissing with sloppy abandon and masturbating each other while a ring of sweaty *farang* faces gathered around them.

Immediately afterward, while the come was still oozing between the thrumming saddle and the backs of their skinny thighs, Noy murmured into Suko's mouth, "Wouldn't they be surprised if we just put this thing in gear and drove it into the crowd?"

Suko pulled back and stared at him. Noy's left arm was draped lazily around Suko's neck; Noy's right hand cupped Suko's cock, now tugging gen-

tly, now relaxing. Noy smiled and lifted one perfect eyebrow, and Suko found himself getting hard again for someone who wasn't even paying him.

Noy gave him a final squeeze and let go. "Don't make a date when you get done working," he told Suko. "Take me home with you."

Suko did, and even after a night on Patpong, they puzzled out one another's bodies like the streets of an unfamiliar city. Soon they were the undisputed stars of the Hi-Way's live sex shows; they knew how to love each other in private and how to make it look good in public. They made twice as much money as the other boys. Suko started saving up for a plane ticket.

But Noy spent his money on trinkets: T-shirts printed with obscene slogans, little bags of pot and pills, even a green glow-in-the-dark dildo to use in their stage show. In the end, Noy was just smart enough to make his stupidity utterly infuriating.

I'm really leaving, Suko would tell him as they lay entwined on a straw pallet in the room they rented above a cheap restaurant, as the odors of *nam pla* and chili oil wafted through the open window to mingle with the scent of their lovemaking. *When I save up enough, I'm going to do it. You can come, but I won't wait for you once I have the money, not knowing how many ways I could lose this chance.*

But Noy never believed him, not until the night Suko showed him the one-way ticket. And how Noy cried then, real tears such as Suko had never thought to see from him, great childish tears that reddened his smooth skin and made his eyes swell to slits. He clutched at Suko's hands and slobbered on them and begged him not to go until Suko wanted to shove him face-first into the Patpong mud.

This is all you want? Suko demanded, waving a hand at the tawdry neon, the ramshackle bars, the Thai boys and girls putting everything on display with a clearly marked price tag: their flesh, their hunger, and if they stayed long enough, their souls. *This is enough for you? Well, it isn't enough for me.*

Noy had made his choices, had worked hard for them. But Suko had made his choices too, and no one could ever take them away. The city where he lived now, Los Angeles, was one of his choices. Another city of angels.

He had left Noy sobbing in the middle of Patpong 3, unable or unwilling to say good-bye. Now half a world lay between them, and with time, Suko's memories of Noy soured into anger. He had been nothing but a jaded, fiercely erotic, selfish boy, expecting Suko to give up the dreams of a lifetime for a few more years of mindless pleasure. *Asshole*, Suko thought, righteous anger flaring in his heart. *Jerk. Geek.*

Now Robert Smith wanted Suko to fly him to the moon. As reasonable a demand, really, as any Noy had handed him. Suko favored the boom box with his sweetest smile and carefully shaped his mouth round a phrase:

"Get a life, Robert!"

"I will always love you," Robert moaned.

Suko kept grinning at the box. But now an evil gleam came into his black eyes, and he spat out a single word.

"NOT!"

Justin hit the bars of West Hollywood hard and fast, pounding back martinis, which he couldn't help thinking of as martians ever since he'd read *The Shining*. Soon his brain felt pleasantly lubricated, half-numb.

He had managed to find five or six bars he liked within walking distance of each other, no mean feat in L.A. Just now he was leaning against the matte-gray wall of the Wounded Stag, an expensive club eerily lit with blue bulbs and blacklights. He let his eyes sweep over the crowd, then drift back to the sparkling drink in his hand. The gin shattered the light, turned it silver and razor-edged. The olive bobbed like a tiny severed head in a bath of caustic chemicals.

Something weird was happening on TV. Justin had walked out of Club 312, a cozy bar with Sinatra on the jukebox that was normally his favorite place to relax with a drink before starting the search for company. Tonight 312 was empty, save for a small crowd of regulars clustered around the flickering set in the corner. He couldn't tell what was going on, since none of the regulars ever talked to him, or he to them.

But from the scraps of conversation—*eaten alive, night of the living dead*—and edgy laughter he caught, Justin assumed some channel was showing a Halloween horror retrospective. The holiday fell next week and he'd been meaning to get some candy. You ought to have something to offer trick-or-treaters if you were going to invite them in.

He heard a newscaster's voice saying, "This has been a special report. We'll keep you informed throughout the evening as more information becomes available . . ." Could that be part of a horror filmfest? A fake, maybe, like that radio broadcast in the thirties that had driven people to slit their wrists. They'd been afraid of Martians, Justin remembered. He downed the last of his own martian and left the bar. He didn't care about the news. He would be making his own living dead tonight.

The Wounded Stag had no TV. Pictures were passé here, best left to that stillborn golden calf that was the *other* Hollywood. Sound was the thing, pounds and pounds of it pushing against the eardrums, saturating the brain, making the very skin feel tender and bruised if you withstood it long enough. Beyond headache lay transcendence.

The music at the Stag was mostly psycho-industrial, Skinny Puppy and Einstürzende Neubaten and Ministry, the Butthole Surfers and Nine Inch Nails and My Bloody Valentine. Justin liked the names of the bands better

than he liked the music. The only time they played Sinatra here was at closing hour, when they wanted to drive people out.

But the Stag was where the truly beautiful boys came, the drop-dead boys who could get away with shaving half their hair and dyeing the other half dead black or lurid violet, or wearing it long and stringy and filthy, or piercing their faces twenty times. They swept through the door wrapped in their leather, their skimpy fishnet, their jangling rings and chains as if they wore precious jewels and ermine. They allowed themselves one contemptuous glance around the bar, then looked at no one. If you wanted their attention, you had to make a bid for it: an overpriced drink, a compliment that was just ambiguous enough to be cool. Never, ever a smile.

Like as not, you would be rejected summarily and without delay. But if even a spark of interest flared in those coldly beautiful black-rimmed eyes, what sordid fantasy! What exotic passion! What delicious viscera!

He had taken four boys home from the Stag on separate nights. They were still in his apartment, their organs wrapped neatly in plastic film inside his freezer, their hands tucked within easy reach under his mattress, their skulls nestled in a box in the closet. Justin smiled at them all he wanted to now, and they grinned right back at him. They had to. He had boiled them down to the bone, and all skulls grinned because they were so happy to be free of imprisoning flesh.

But skulls and mummified hands and salty slices of meat weren't enough any more. He wanted to keep the face, the thrilling pulse in the chest and guts, the sweet slick inside of the mouth and anus. He wanted to wrap his mouth around a cock that would grow hard without his having to shove a finger up inside it like some desiccated puppet. He wanted to keep a boy, not a motley collection of bits. And he wanted that boy to smile at him, *for* him, *for only* him.

Justin dragged his gaze away from the swirling depths of his martian and glanced at the door. The most beautiful boy he had ever seen was just coming in. And he was smiling: a big, sunny, unaffected, and utterly guileless smile.

Suko leaned his head against the tall blond man's shoulder and stared out the window of the taxi. The candy panorama of West Hollywood spread out before them, neon smeared across hot asphalt, marabou cowboys and rhinestone drag queens posing in the headlights. The cab edged forward, parting the throng like a river, carrying Suko to whatever strange shores of pleasure still lay ahead of him this night.

"Where did you say you were from?" the man asked. As Suko answered, gentle fingers did something exciting to the inside of his thigh through his ripped black jeans. The blond man's voice was without accent, almost without inflection.

Of course, no one in L.A. had an accent. Everyone was from somewhere else, but they all strove to hide it, as if they'd slid from the womb craving flavored mineral water and sushi on Melrose. But Suko had met no one else who spoke like this man. His voice was soft and low, nearly a monotone. To Suko it was soothing; any kind of quiet aimed at him was soothing after the circus of Patpong and West Hollywood, half a world apart but cut from the same bright cacophonous cloth. Cities of angels: *yeah, right*. Fallen angels.

They pulled up in front of a shabby apartment building that looked as if it had been modeled after a cardboard box sometime in the 1950s. The man—Justin, Suko remembered, his name was Justin—paid the cabdriver but didn't tip. The cab gunned away from the curb, tires squealing rudely on the cracked asphalt. Justin stumbled backward and bumped into Suko. "Sorry."

"Hey, no problem." That was still a mouthful—his tongue just naturally wanted to rattle off a *mai pen rai*—but Suko got all the syllables out. Justin smiled, the first time he'd done so since introducing himself. His long skinny fingers closed around Suko's wrist.

"Come on," he said. "It's safer if we go in the back way."

They walked around the corner of the building, under an iron stairwell and past some garbage cans that fairly shimmered with the odor of decay. Suko's foot hit something soft. He looked down, stopped, and backed into Justin. A young black man lay among the stinking cans, his head propped at a painful angle against the wall, his legs sprawled wide.

"Is he dead?" Suko clutched for his Buddha amulet. The man's ghost might still be trapped in this mean alley, looking for living humans to plague. If it wanted to, it could suck out their life essences through their spinal columns like a child sipping soda from a straw.

But Justin shook his head. "Just drunk. See, there's an empty bottle by his leg."

"He looks dead."

Justin prodded the black man's thigh with the toe of his loafer. After a moment, the man stirred. His eyes never opened, but his hands twitched and his mouth gaped wide, chewing at the air.

"See?" Justin tugged at Suko's arm. "Come on."

They climbed the metal stairs and entered the building through a fire door wedged open with a flattened Old Milwaukee can. Justin led the way down a hall colored only by shadow and grime, stopped in front of a door identical to all the others but for the number 21 stamped on a metal plate small as an egg, and undid a complicated series of locks. He opened the door a crack and ushered Suko inside, then followed and turned to do up all the locks again.

At once Suko noticed the smell. First there was only the most delicate tendril, like a pale brown finger tickling the back of his throat; then a wave hit

him, powerful and nauseating. It was the smell of the garbage cans downstairs, increased a hundredfold and overlaid with other smells: cooking oil, air freshener, some caustic chemical odor that stung his nostrils. It was the smell of rot. And it filled the apartment.

Justin saw Suko wrinkling his nose. "My refrigerator broke," he said. "Damn landlord says he can't replace it till next week. I just bought a bunch of meat on sale and it all went bad. Don't look in the fridge, whatever you do."

"Why you don't—" Suko caught himself. "Why *don't you* throw it out?"

"Oh . . ." Justin looked vaguely surprised for a moment. Then he shrugged. "I'll get around to it, I guess. It doesn't bother me much."

He pulled a bottle of rum from somewhere, poured a few inches into a glass already sitting on the countertop, and stirred in a spoonful of sugar. Justin had been impressed by Suko's taste for straight sugared rum back at the Stag, and said he had some expensive Bacardi he wanted Suko to try. Their fingertips kissed as the glass changed hands, and a tiny thrill ran down Suko's spine. Justin was a little weird, but Suko could handle that, no problem. And there was a definite sexual charge between them. Suko felt sure the rest of the night would swarm with flavors and sensations, fireworks and roses.

Justin watched Suko sip the rum. His eyes were an odd, deep lilac-blue, a color Suko had never seen before in the endless spectrum of American eyes. The liquor tasted faintly bitter beneath the sugar, as if the glass weren't quite clean. Again, Suko could deal; a clean glass at the Hi-Way Bar on Patpong 3 was a rare find.

"Do you want to smoke some weed?" Justin asked when Suko had polished off an inch of the Bacardi.

"Sure."

"It's in the bedroom." Suko was ready to follow him there, but Justin said, "I'll get it," and hurried out of the kitchen. Suko heard him banging about in the other room, opening and shutting a great many drawers.

Suko drank more rum. He glanced sideways at the refrigerator, a modern monolith of shining harvest gold, without the cozy clutter he had seen decorating the fridges of others: memo boards, shopping lists, food-shaped magnets trapping snapshots or newspaper cartoons. It gave off a nearly imperceptible hum, the sound of a motor running smoothly. And the smell of decay seemed to emanate from all around the apartment, not just the fridge. Could it really be broken?

He grabbed the door handle and tugged. The seal sucked softly back for a second; then the door swung wide and the refrigerator light clicked on.

A fresh wave of rot washed over him. Maybe Justin hadn't been lying about meat gone bad. The contents of the fridge were meager and depress-

ing: a decimated twelve-pack of cheap beer, a crusted jar of Gulden's Spicy Brown mustard, several lumpy packages wrapped in foil. A residue of rusty red on the bottom shelf, like the juice that might leak out of a meat tray. And pushed far to the back, a large Tupperware cake server, incongruous among the slim bachelor pickings.

Suko touched one of the beer cans. It was icy cold.

Something inside the cake server was moving. He could just make out its faint shadowy convulsions through the opaque plastic.

Suko slammed the door and stumbled away. Justin was just coming back in. He gripped Suko's arms, stared into his face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing—I—"

"Did you open the fridge?"

"No!"

Justin shook him. The strange lilac eyes had gone muddy, the handsome features twisted into a mean mask. "*Did you open the fucking fridge?*" Suko felt droplets of spit land on his face, his lips. He wished miserably that they could have gotten there some other way, any way but this. He had wanted to make love with this man.

"DID YOU—"

"NO!!!"

Suko thought he might cry. At the same time, he had begun to feel remote, far away from the ugly scene, as if he were floating in a corner watching it but not caring much what happened. It must be the rum. But it wasn't like being drunk; that was a familiar feeling. This was more like the time Noy had convinced him to take two Valiums. An hour after swallowing the little yellow wafers, Suko had watched Noy suck him off from a million miles away, wondering why anyone ever got excited about this, why anyone ever got excited about anything.

He had hated the feeling then. He hated it more now, because it was pulling him down.

He was afraid it might be the last thing he ever felt.

He was afraid it might not be.

Justin half-dragged, half-carried Suko into the bedroom and dumped him on the mattress. He felt the boy's delicate ivory bones shifting under his hands, the boy's exquisite mass of organs pressing against his groin. He wanted to unzip that sweet sack of skin right now, sink his teeth into that beating, bleeding heart . . . but no. He had other plans for this one.

He'd closed the door to the adjacent bathroom in case he brought the boy in here still conscious. Most of a body was soaking in a tub full of icewater and Clorox. Suko wouldn't have needed to see that. Justin almost opened the

door for the extra light, but decided not to. He didn't want to leave the bedside even for a second.

His supplies were ready on the nightstand. Justin plugged the drill's power cord into the socket behind the bed, gently thumbed up one of Suko's make-up-smudged eyelids and examined the silvery sclera. The sleeping pills had worked fine, as always. He ground them up and put them in a glass before he left. That way, when he brought home company, Justin could simply pour him a drink in the special glass.

He used the scissors to slice off Suko's shirt, which was so artfully ripped up that Justin hardly had to damage it further to remove it. He cut away the beads and amulets, saving the tiny wooden penis, which had caught his eye back at the Stag. His own penis ached and burned. He pressed his ear against the narrow chest, heard the lungs pull in a deep slow breath, then release it just as easily. He heard blood moving unhurried through arteries and veins, heard a secret stomach sound from down below. Justin could listen to a boy's chest and stomach all night, but reluctantly he took his ear away.

He crawled onto the bed, positioned Suko's head in his lap, and hefted the drill, which was heavier than he remembered. He hoped he would be able to control how far the bit went in. A fraction of an inch too deep into the brain could ruin everything. It was only the frontal lobes he wanted to penetrate, the cradle of free will.

Justin parted the boy's thick black hair and placed the diamond-tipped bit against the center of the pale, faintly shiny scalp. He took a deep breath, bit his lip, and squeezed the trigger. When he took the drill away, there was a tiny, perfect black hole near the crown of the boy's head.

He picked up the syringe, slid the needle in and forward, toward the forehead. He felt a tiny resistance, as if the needle was passing through a hair-thin elastic membrane. He pushed the plunger and flooded the boy's brain with chlorine bleach.

Three things happened at once.

Suko's eyes fluttered open.

Justin had an explosive orgasm in his pants.

Something heavy thudded against the bathroom door.

Suko saw the blond man's face upside down, the lilac eyes like little slices of moon, the mouth a reverse smile or grimace. A whining buzz filled his skull, seemed to jar the very plates of his skull, as if hornets had built a nest inside his brain. A dull ache spread spiderlike over the top of his head.

He smelled roses, though he had seen none in the room. He smelled wood shavings, the sharp stink of shit, the perfume of ripe oranges. Each of these scents was gone as quickly as it had come. Lingering was a burnt metallic fla-

vor, a little like the taste that had lingered in his mouth the time he'd had a tooth filled in Bangkok.

Shavings. Roses. Cut grass. Sour milk. And underneath it all, the smell of rotting flesh.

Suko's field of vision went solid screaming chartreuse, then danger red. Now Justin was back, a negative of himself, hair green, face inky purple, eyes white circles with pinholes at their centers like tiny imploding suns. And suddenly something else was in the frame as well. Something all black, with holes where no holes should be. A face swollen and torn, a face that could not be alive, but whose jaw was moving.

A hand missing most of its fingers closed on the back of Justin's hair and yanked. A drooling purple mouth closed on Justin's throat and tore away a chunk.

Suko managed to sit up. His vision spun and yawed. The reek of rot was dizzying, and overlying it was a new stinging smell, a chemical smell he could not identify. Something salty ran into his eyes. He touched his face, and his fingers came away slicked with a thin clear substance.

The thing wrapped skeletal arms around Justin and pulled him off the bed. They rolled on the floor together, Justin's blood fountaining out of his throat, the thing grunting and lapping at it. Ragged flesh trailed from its mouth.

Justin wasn't screaming, Suko realized.

He was *smiling*.

It was the boy from the bathtub. Justin couldn't see his face, but he could smell the Clorox, raw and fresh. He had carved a great deal of flesh off of this one, as well as removing the viscera. But he had not yet cut off the head. Now it was snuggled under his chin, tongue burrowing like a worm into his wounded throat. He felt the teeth tearing at him, chunks of his skin and muscle disappearing down the boy's gullet. He felt one of the bones in his neck crack and splinter.

The pain was as shocking as an orgasm, but cleaner. The joy was like nothing he had known before, not when he watched his mother die, not when he tasted the flesh of another person for the first time. It had worked. Not only was the Asian boy still alive, but the others had come back as well. They had never left Justin at all. They had only been waiting.

He got his arms around the hollow body, pulled it closer. He cupped the cold rubbery buttocks, entwined his legs with the thrusting bones of its thighs. When its jaws released his throat, he pressed his face against the voracious swollen one, pushed his tongue between the blackened lips and felt the teeth rip it out. His mouth filled with blood and rot. He swallowed, gagged, swallowed again.

A head rolled out from under the bed, pushing itself by frantic motions of jaw and tongue. The severed ends of the neck muscles twitched, trying to

help it along. Its nose and left eyebrow were pierced with silver rings, its empty eyesockets crusted with blood and greasy black makeup. It reached Justin and bit deep into one of his thighs. He kicked once, in surprise, then bent his leg so that the teeth could more easily get at the soft muscle of his groin. He felt his flesh peeling away.

The upper half of a body was pulling itself out of the closet. Its black-lacquered nails dug into the carpet. Ropes of intestine trailed behind it, coming apart, leaving a trail of shit and ichor on the rug. This one had been, possibly, a Mexican boy. Now its skin was the color of decaying eggplant, and very few teeth were left in its gaping mouth. Dimly Justin remembered extracting them with a pair of pliers after the rigor mortis had slackened.

It tore Justin's belly open with its hands and sank its face into his guts. He arched his back, felt its fingers plunging deep, its mouth lapping at the very core of him.

The small pleasures of his life—reading, listening to the music of another time, choking the life out of boys and playing with their abandoned shells—were nothing compared to this. He wanted it to go on forever.

But, eventually, he died.

The corpse from the bathtub chewed at Justin's throat and chest. Half-chewed pieces of Justin slid down its gullet, into the great scooped-out hollow of its abdomen, out onto the floor.

The corpse from the closet sucked up the liquor and partly digested meat it found in Justin's stomach.

The head bit into Justin's scrotum and gulped the savory mass of the testicles like a pair of tender oysters.

They seemed to know when to stop feeding, to refrain from pulling him completely apart, to leave enough of him. When he came back, Justin knew exactly what to do.

After all, he had been doing it long before most of the others.

Suko stumbled out of the bedroom and slammed the door behind him. Something was rolling around and around in the refrigerator, banging against the inside of the door. He almost went over to open it, only caught himself at the last second. He wasn't thinking very clearly. His head felt wrong somehow, his brain caught in a downward spiral. He did not understand what he had just seen. But he knew he had to get out of the apartment.

No problem, a voice yammered in his head. Stay cool. Chill out. Don't have a cow, man. He barely knew the meaning of the words. The American voice seemed to be receding down a long black tunnel; already it was so tiny and faint he could hardly hear it. He realized he was thinking in Thai for the first time in

years. Even his native language was strange, a flurry of quick sharp syllables like little whirling razorblades slicing into the meat of his brain.

He fumbled with the complicated series of locks, yanked the door open and nearly fell into the hall. How had he entered the building? . . . Up a metal staircase, through a door at the end of the long dark hall. He reached it and let himself out. The hot October night seared his lungs. He could smell every poisonous particle of exhaust blanketing the city, every atom of shit and filth and blood baked onto the streets. Not like the ripe wet kiss of Bangkok, but so arid, so mercilessly dry. He felt his way down the fire escape and around the corner of the building.

The empty street seemed a mile wide. There was no sidewalk, only a steep curb and a long gray boulevard stretching away toward some other part of the city. There were no cars; he could hear no traffic anywhere. Even with his head feeling so strange, Suko knew something was wrong. L.A. streets were often empty of people, but always there were cars.

Far away at the next intersection, he made out a small group of figures straggling in his direction, bathed in a traffic light's red glow. For a long moment he watched them come, trying to be sure they were really there, wondering what he should do. Then he started toward them. The blond man had done something awful to his head; he needed help. Maybe the figures would be able to help him.

But when he got closer, he saw that they were like the things he had seen in the bedroom. One had a long fatty slash wound across its bare torso. One had been gouged in the face with something jagged; its nose was cloven in half and an eyeball hung out of the socket, leaking yolky fluid. One had no wounds, but looked as if it had starved to death; its nude body was all bone-ends and wasted hollows, its genitals shriveled into the pelvic cavity, its blue-white skin covered with huge black and purple lesions.

When they saw him, the things opened their mouths and widened their nostrils, catching his scent. It was too late to get away. He couldn't run, didn't think he would even be able to stand up much longer. He stumbled forward and gave himself to them.

The little group closed around Suko, keeping him on his feet, supporting him as best they could. Gouged Eyeball caught him and steadied him. Slash Wound mouthed his shoulder as if in comfort, but did not bite. Lesions nudged him, urged him on. Suko realized they were *herding* him. They recognized him as one of their own, separated from the flock somehow. They were welcoming him back in.

Miserably, Suko wondered what would happen when they met someone alive. Then the hunger flared in his belly, and he knew.

Pin Money

People ask how Christa and I wrote "Triads." Answer: A lot of 4 A.M. coast-to-coast phone calls, a lot of Hong Kong gangster movies, and a lot of work, most of which was done by Christa. We shared the writing pretty equally, but she did probably 95% of the research and laying-out of the plot. Much of the characterization of the two boys from the opera school was hers as well. But the dangerous French-Chinese pretty boy who turned out not to be so dangerous—Perique—he was all mine. Two years later, I found another story to tell about him. It's actually a "prequel," but I hate that word.

Pin Money

Nicole cradled her newborn son and gazed through her window at the moon rising in the purple Shanghai sky. Her pussy throbbed in time with her heartbeat, a low, gnawing ache that persisted despite the bitter herb tea the midwife had made her drink. Though Nicole's labor had ended hours ago, her lover had not yet entered the room. She was beginning to feel afraid.

What is there to fear? she wondered. I'm in one of the finest houses in the French Concession. I've just given a rich man his first son. There will be no more eternal nights on high heels, no more grinning into ugly drunken faces, no more scrounging for the rent. It is nearly June already; why should I feel so cold?

She took a deep draught of the nighttime air, rich with the heady scent of roses. Her bedroom looked out over the formal rose garden, and she had breathed their perfume every day of her confinement.

Nicole had left Paris three years ago, in 1914, just before the first German bombs fell. Since then she had felt no urge to return. Her friends had said the Orient would be crawling with disease and danger, but Shanghai was cleaner than Paris had ever been. In Paris she sometimes had to do filthy things just

to feed herself. In Shanghai she made good money working as a hostess in a swanky dance hall.

As for the danger, she hadn't believed in it until she met Tom Lee.

A trader of things legal and otherwise—mostly otherwise—Mr. Lee had spent a great deal of money on Nicole, claimed to love her, then seemed to tire of the whole thing after a couple of back-scratching, eye-gouging marathon fucks. This was nothing new, and Nicole quickly forgot Mr. Lee. When she missed her next period, she had no thought of contacting him, but planned to see a herbalist to take care of the problem. If she had not happened to mention this to her friend Daisy, a Chinese bartender at the club, the matter would have ended there.

"*Tom Lee?*" Daisy repeated incredulously. "The *importer?* The man who moves so much opium that the Triads have given him a scale made of gold?"

"But I don't want a baby . . ."

"Listen to me. You cannot do this. Everyone knows that Tom Lee has always wanted an heir, but refuses to marry. If you abort his child and he finds out, he will have you killed."

"And if I tell him I am carrying it? Why should he believe me?"

"He will *want* to believe you. He will care for you until the baby is born, then pay you off and send you away. This is your only choice."

But Tom had made no mention of paying her, or of sending her away. He could not marry for obscure legal reasons, he said, but he would love Nicole as his wife and the mother of his son. He never mentioned the possibility of a daughter. Gradually Nicole succumbed to the vision of a hazy, wealthy future, a brace of shining sons, perhaps a small opium habit once the child-bearing was over with.

Soft footsteps sounded in the hall. Here was Tom at last, come to see his perfect boy. Nicole's fingers found the top of the baby's head, stroked the silky black tuft of hair. She could not say why she was afraid to look at the opening door, afraid to question the source of the quick light footsteps crossing the room.

A hand covered her mouth. Another yanked her head back. The moon engulfed her vision now, filled the whole sky with its dazzling brightness. When they began to work on her, she could not tell where the moonlight ended and the pain began.

The house of Perique's father contained many mansions. Some were made of precious stones and metal, some of hand-cut paper, some of carved wood or ivory. All were miniatures of famous Western and Oriental structures: a jade Versailles, a scrimshaw Taj Mahal. The summer he was ten, Perique spent a

great deal of time studying these mansions through their polished glass cases, wondering what life would be like there, no, *there*. Sometimes he thought he saw a ghost looking back at him, but it always proved to be the faint reflection of his own face: the sharp features and strange green eyes that marked him as a half-breed.

Today he was staring at a jewel-encrusted replica of Napoleon's tomb. He was admiring its blatant, unapologetic grandeur, and certainly he was pondering Paris. But most of all he was trying not to think about the tale his father had just told him.

It was not unusual for Perique to be called into his father's office. In 1927, Tom Lee had not yet despaired of teaching his son the family business, and Perique was sometimes recruited to add figures, stamp documents, or weigh out black bars of opium. Today he had had to do none of these things. Today he had only stood before his father's desk, eyes fixed on the tips of his glossy leather shoes, listening mutely as his father unraveled the world like a ball of string.

"Your mother did not die giving birth to you. That is what I allowed you to believe as a child, but now that you are growing into a man, you must know the truth. To discover what you are capable of, you must know what I am capable of."

Tom Lee described the dance hall, the brief romance, the blossoming of Nicole's pregnancy. He had hired the best midwife in Shanghai, paid her to ensure with certain herbs and prayers that the issue would be male. After Nicole delivered, while she was still in a semiconscious twilight of drugs and pain, Tom had the child taken from her arms and brought to him.

"I examined you carefully, looking for traces of ancestry—were you hers, or mine? I was most put off by your eyes, of course. Not only were they oddly shaped, but they were green!

"I thought of destroying you. But that was pure instinct, irrational. Of course, you were my son—and while I knew your mixed blood would make your life difficult in many ways, I also anticipated that Western connections could help our family in the future. That is why I named you as I did."

"Perique" was a diminutive of Pierre Jean-Luc, a name Tom Lee had plucked at random from some French novel.

"As I examined you, your mother was being killed."

Perique looked up. His father's gaze was steady, with no more conscious cruelty in it than that of a lizard or snake.

"Two of my associates entered her room. You know one of them—Cheung Toi, who died last year."

Cheung Toi had always been especially kind to Perique, like a trusted uncle. Perique remembered crying at the news of his death.

"He held her while the other man pushed a hatpin through her nostril into the brain. Death was instantaneous. She never felt a thing."

When Perique managed to make his lips move, his voice felt rusty. "Can I visit my mother's grave?"

"Her body was thrown from an opium junk into the middle of the South China Sea. By that time I had decided to keep you, based on a single identical characteristic we shared, a characteristic I took as a good omen."

Perique would not, could not ask.

"Our two cocks look exactly the same," his father said, and began to laugh with no humor at all.

Five years later, Perique's father ordered him out of the house, paid him handsomely to change his family name and leave Shanghai.

Perique had been dipping into the opium stock for some time, but that was acceptable to a point. When Tom Lee found his son in bed with two girls and a boy, a position not enhanced by the fact that the girls were hungrily sucking each other's pussies while the boys watched, mesmerized—well, that was completely unacceptable.

Perique didn't care. In fact, he had been taking all sorts of stupid risks, hoping something like this would happen. It was tiresome listening to shouted phrases like "you soft French faggot" and "your mother's poison blood" as he packed his considerable wardrobe, but as soon as he stepped out of his father's house, he was glad to have made the break at last.

He had his trunks sent ahead to the train station, then spent the afternoon shopping at Sincere's department store, his favorite place in Shanghai. He loved the ornate ceilings and fixtures, the red banners with their gold lettering, the air of opulence. He bought clothes, accessories, brightly colored little packages of soap, tea, candy. For a time it felt as if he would never stop buying things. Finally he caught a rickshaw to the station and boarded the express that was the first leg of the journey to Hong Kong. Evening gilded Shanghai's rococo skyline as the train pulled away from the platform.

If Shanghai was an aging courtesan in ragged Victorian lace, then Hong Kong was a ripe young whore whose gaudy makeup advertised a delectable array of treats. Perique found it a paradise.

He never spoke to his father, but once each month a package arrived from Shanghai full of more money than even Perique could spend. He had always liked the feel of money, but this money had the feel of shame. He let it slip through his fingers heedlessly, never walking anywhere when he could take a rickshaw, never settling for a rickshaw when his hotel's Bentley was available. He frequented the most scandalous nightclubs, acquired Western friends and mannerisms, learned the ways of the stinking, seething island city.

He had lived in Hong Kong for one year when his mother's ghost began to speak to him.

It was a ghost in his heart, the kind that never quite seems real but never quite goes away. It whispered to him in French—Perique was certain it was French, and he spoke fluent French, yet he could make out scarcely any of the words. This voice insinuated itself beneath the jazz music of nightclubs; it murmured in the pipes as he bathed. Opium could not drown it out. Upon waking, he often felt that the voice had just been speaking clearly in the room, but he could never recall what it had said.

He tried to distract himself with sex. One night when the whispering seemed especially loud to him, the American girl he was fucking gripped his shoulder and asked, "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"I could have sworn I heard a woman talking."

"In French?"

"Maybe . . . Say, is this some kind of set-up?"

Perique stopped going out. He huddled in his luxury suite drinking pots of room-service coffee, listening to the voice instead of trying to drown it. And, gradually, he began to understand. When he understood enough, he took the ferry to the mainland and boarded a train for Shanghai.

He had his hair cut short and removed all his jewelry before making his way to the French Concession. Night had fallen, and the neighborhood was silent, the wide streets and fine gardens lit only with flickering lanterns. The whispering was very loud.

He was recognized and received by the servant, who clearly didn't know whether he would be welcome or not. The old man brought a pot of tea, then left Perique sitting in the parlor for a long time. The voice was quieter now, a faint susurrant backdrop.

When the servant reappeared, he was smiling. "Your father is pleased to receive you. He says it has been too long."

Tom Lee sat behind his desk, his smile more strained than the servant's had been. Perique tried to seem contrite, implied that he had pressing business in the city and had decided to visit on a whim. "Of course, I have a room at the Grand," he lied.

"Certainly not—you'll stay here." His father paused, looking for a rebellious reaction. Perique offered none. "You've changed," Tom Lee said at last. "You seem much older." His tone was approving.

Perique bowed his head. "I am only sixteen. I still know little of the world." Inside him welled a dark joy. If his father was happy to see him—well, then, so much the better. Happiness was more precious than life, and just as easy to destroy.

He was given his old bedroom, which was unchanged but immaculate. For four hours he lay awake in the dark, watching the moon and breathing the scent of the roses.

He almost dozed. A sharp whisper woke him.

Perique slipped silently down the hall and stopped before an onyx replica of a Florentine cathedral. He lifted the glass top and gently tilted the carving. A brass key lay beneath it, as he had known it would.

He entered his father's office and crossed the thick carpet to the massive desk. The key opened the top drawer, as he had known it would. His fingers hovered over the contents—papers, a jade name chop, a pistol—then touched a long, narrow box.

"Yes," the voice sighed.

He placed the box on the desktop and lifted the lid. Inside was a silver hatpin, its last six inches still caked with dry blood.

The voice was gone when Perique woke the next morning. His head felt blessedly clear.

He had no trouble feigning surprise when the servant came in to say that Tom Lee had died in the night, apparently of a heart attack or brain stroke. "It was Providence that made you come home when you did, to see him one last time," the old man said.

Perique could read the suspicion in his eyes, and also the fear. The master was dead, and the son was now a very rich man.

When Perique went in to dress his father for the funeral, Tom Lee's face was exquisitely tranquil, the crow's feet around his eyes gone, his mouth relaxed into a half-smile. Only a small trickle of blood from his left nostril spoiled the illusion of peace.

America

Just a ditty to keep up with two of my favorite characters, whom I don't see often enough. The Magic 8-Ball says YES, Steve and Ghost may appear in another novel someday, but not right now.

America

The desert after midnight was an arid zone of silver and blue, the highway a glittering black ribbon into nowhere. The formations of rock and sand were incomprehensible to a Southern boy, wrong somehow, like the bones of the world showing through the desiccated flesh that was this land. Buttes. Dry lakes. Mesas. Who had ever heard of such things? Steve shook his head and took another hit off the sticky green bomber he was holding, and the desert went a shade weirder.

They had picked up a thirty-dollar quarter bag way back in Dallas, and it was so good it looked like it was going to last them through the next Lost Souls show in Flagstaff. When your two-man band was touring the country in a gas hog of a '72 T-bird, when your household consisted of a guitar, an amp, a couple of microphones, a cooler, two backpacks full of dirty laundry, and a blanket stolen from Holiday Inn, when you'd been on the road for upwards of a month, thirty-dollar quarter bags of excellent pot were a small but welcome manifestation of slack.

Steve cocked his elbow out the window and leaned into the wind. His dark hair whipped across his face, five days unwashed and one year uncut. He could put it in a ponytail now, but he left it loose when he drove because he

liked the feel of it blowing. He had a fresh six-pack of Bud on ice. There was only one thing wrong with his world tonight.

Ghost, curled in the passenger seat with his sneakers propped up on the dash, kept singing a toneless snatch of song under his breath. *"Been through the desert on a horse with no name . . . Felt good to get out of the rain . . ."*

Steve twisted the radio dial. FM, AM, it was all the same: dry scratchy static clear down the line, like the sound of the desert clearing its throat.

"Ain't no one for to give ya no pain . . . Nuh, NUH, nub-nub-nub-nub—"

"Quit singing that fuckin' song!"

"Huh?" Ghost looked up. The moonlight turned his eyes and hair paler than ever, turned his skin translucent, made him seem a true thing of ectoplasm, subject to shimmer and disappear at any moment. The open can of beer in his hand spoiled the illusion a little.

"You're singing that America song again. Quit it. I *hate* that song."

"Oh. Sorry."

Ghost shut his mouth and returned to whatever reverie Steve had dragged him out of. For thirteen years they had spent long easy stretches of time in each other's company. They had passed the last part of their childhood together, had grown up together. During these weeks in the car, though, their friendship had reached a new equilibrium. They talked obsessively and often, but they understood one another's silences too. Sometimes they went for hours without saying a word.

But once in a while they got on each other's nerves. A few miles later, over the roar of the slipstream from his cranked-down window, Steve heard, *'Nuh, NUH, nub-nub-nub-nub . . .'*

He gritted his teeth. He knew Ghost wasn't even conscious of singing aloud. Being a singer, Ghost tended to give voice to whatever scrap of music flickered through his brain. Sometimes it was unique and brilliant. Sometimes it was a glob of dreck from the seventies. America was only the first in a turgid alphabet soup of bands Steve hated, horrible bands with stupid one-word names: Boston, Foreigner, Triumph, Journey, Bread . . .

"Nuh, NUH—"

"Guess you heard of the man-headed cat that lives around here," Steve said.

Ghost stopped singing, looked again at Steve. His pale blue eyes shone silver in the light. "The what?"

"The man-headed cat. It lives out here in the desert, eats horned toads and rattlesnakes and roadkill, drinks liquor from cacti. About the size of a bobcat, but with the head of a man, shrunk down like."

"Really?"

That was the fun of telling tales to Ghost: he was always prepared to believe them. Born and partly raised in the mountains of North Carolina, he'd seen and touched things as weird as any Steve could come up with.

"Sure, man. Way I heard it, this guy got lost real late at night and his car broke down. Not on a main highway but way the fuck out on some desert track you can't find on the map. So he drank a bottle of whiskey he had with him and passed out on the hood of his car.

"When he woke up, the man-headed cat was sitting there watching him. There was a full moon shining off the sand and he could see it clear as day, the bald head and little wrinkled face. It had green eyes and the fur started at the neck, right at the collarbone. From there down it was all cat. But man-headed."

"Could it talk?"

"Shit, yeah! It could *cuss*! It opened its mouth and what came out was, 'Goddamn-shit-ass-motherfuckin'-bitchofagoddamnfuckin'—'

"Then all of a sudden it lunged and took off chasing him. They ran and ran out across the desert, so far that the guy knew he couldn't ever find his car again, so he knew that either the man-headed cat would kill him or he'd thirst to death out there. He figured it'd be better to go quick, so he stopped to wait for the cat. He was out of breath, exhausted; he'd run as hard as he could for miles.

"But when he turned around, there was the man-headed cat grinning and cleaning the sand off its paws. 'That was a *nice little run* we had,' said the man-headed cat. '*Motherfuckin'-piss-cunt-Jesus-lickin'*—' Then it crouched down, and its green eyes glowed in the moonlight, and the guy could see hundreds of tiny sharp teeth in its grin . . ."

Steve stopped.

Ghost waited about ten seconds, his eyes wide, his fingers scrunching the hem of his T-shirt. "What did it do to him?" he asked finally.

"Nothing," said Steve. "A little pussy never hurt anybody."

Entertaining Mr. Orton

Bill, an anthologist, was editing a book of erotic ghost stories for gay men. He asked if he could reprint "His Mouth Will Taste of Wormwood," my irreverent homage to Lovecraft's "The Hound" and my most reprinted story ever. I said sure, forgetting that I had already agreed to let two other anthologists, Michael and Tom, reprint it in a book of gay vampire stories for the same publisher. (Evidently nobody could figure out what the hell this story was supposed to be about.)

Michael and Tom's book came out a few weeks before Bill's was due at the publisher, and Bill sent me a remarkably polite but obviously nervous e-mail: his editor had been into having me in the ghost book, she wasn't going to be happy about this, she wasn't going to be happy with Bill, and I was going to look like a double-crossing full-scale weasel. (Well, he didn't say that, but it was obvious to me.)

"Don't worry!" I e-mailed back. "It is all my fault and I will write you a story by the end of this week and it will be even better." And I slammed this baby out. I don't know if "Entertaining Mr. Orton" is better than "His Mouth Will Taste of Wormwood," but I did invent marginally more of the plot.

Entertaining Mr. Orton

London, 1 August 1967

"Have you been reading my diary?"

Kenneth looks up from the baboon's head he is pasting onto the madonna's body. He is standing on the bed to reach the upper part of his collage, which covers most of the wall, and the top of his bald cranium nearly brushes the pink and yellow tiles of the flat's low ceiling. They have lived together in this tiny space in Islington for eight years.

"No, I have not been reading your diary," Kenneth lies.

"Why not?"

"Because it would drive me to suicide."

"Right," says Joe with an edge of impatience in his voice. He has heard this threat many times before, in one form or another, and Kenneth realizes dimly that his lover either doesn't believe it or just doesn't care. That doesn't mean Kenneth can make himself stop saying it, though.

"But if you won't read my diary and you won't talk to me," Joe continues, "what's the point of remaining in this relationship? You're always telling everyone how I make your life miserable. What keeps you hanging about?"

Kenneth wipes glue from his fingers onto his pants, then turns and sits heavily on the bed. He took a number of Valiums earlier in the day, but something in Joe's voice pulls his brain out of its pleasant half-numb fog. They can still listen to each other, and even talk seriously when they really try.

Of course, most of the serious talk these days is about writing. Writing Joe's plays, to be precise. The very same brilliant and successful plays that have made Joe's name synonymous with decadence, black wit, and tawdry glamour as far as London is concerned. If the talk isn't about Joe's plays, it is about what they should do with all the money Joe's plays are making. Joe spends most of it on toys: clothes, Polaroid cameras, holidays in Morocco.

"What surprises me," Joe continues, "is that you haven't killed me. I think you don't leave, or off yourself, because you can't stand the thought of anyone else having me."

"Rubbish. All sorts of people have you."

"Ah! You *have* been reading my diary."

Kenneth rises up suddenly in one of his outbursts. "When you come home reeking of cheap aftershave, I don't need your diary to tell me where you've been!"

Joe waves this away. "I mean, of anyone else having me permanently. And I can't conceive of it either, honestly. It's as if we've become inextricable."

Suspicion flares in Kenneth's mind. "Why are you talking about me killing you? Are you setting me up for something?"

Joe throws back his head and brays laughter, a sound which usually lessens Kenneth's tension but now induces a smoldering rage. "What did you have in mind? Me setting you up for murder and slipping back off to Tangier? My family gets your fat arse thrown in prison and you do your *Ballad of Reading Gaol* bit again? Oh, Ken . . ." Tears are spilling out of Joe's eyes now, tears of laughter, the kind he used to cry in bed after a joyous orgasm. Kenneth remembers how they tasted, salt and copper on his tongue like blood.

"I think I *could* kill you," he says, but Joe doesn't hear him.

Tangier, 25 May 1967

Five English queens stoned on hash and Valium and Moroccan boy-flesh, sipping red wine on a café terrace against a blood-orange sky. Two American tourists, an older married couple, sitting nearby eavesdropping on the conversation and making their disapproval evident. Joe Orton lets his voice rise gradually until he is not so much shouting as *projecting*, trained Shakespearian actor that he is:

"He took me right up the arse, and afterward he thanked me for giving him such a good fucking. They're a most polite people. We've got a leopard-skin rug in the flat and he wanted me to fuck him on that, only I'm afraid of the spunk, you see, it might adversely affect the spots of the leopard."

"Those tourists can hear what you're saying," one of the entourage advises. (Not Kenneth Halliwell; though he is present, he wouldn't bother trying to curb Joe even if he wanted to.)

"I mean for them to hear," Joe booms. "They have no right to be occupying chairs reserved for decent sex perverts . . . He might bite a hole in the rug. It's the writhing he does, you see, when my prick is up him, that might grievously damage the rug, and I can't ask him to control his excitement. It wouldn't be natural when you're six inches up the bum, would it?"

The Americans pay for their coffee and move away, looking as if they've had it considerably more than six inches up the bum—dry.

"You shouldn't drive people like that away," says the sensitive queen. "The town needs tourists."

Joe sneers. He has practiced it in the mirror. "Not that kind, it doesn't. This is *our* country, *our* town, *our* civilization. I want nothing to do with the civilization they made. Fuck them! They'll sit and listen to buggers' talk from me and drink their coffee and piss off."

"It seems rather a strange joke," offers another member of the entourage, timidly.

"It isn't a joke. There's no such thing as a joke," says the author of the most successful comedy now playing in London's West End.

Leicester, 2 August 1967

Joe leaves his father's small threadbare house and walks two miles up the road to an abandoned barn, where a man he met in town earlier that day is waiting for him. He is in his hometown, which he mostly loathes, to see a production of his play *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* and fulfill family obligations. Just now he has some obligations of his own to fulfill.

Joe often likes to have one-off trysts with ugly men, men he finds physically appalling, but this one is a beauty: tall and smoothly muscled, with brown curly hair that tumbled into bright blue eyes, a thick Scottish accent, an exceedingly clever pair of hands, and a big-headed, heavily veined cock.

In the late afternoon shafts of sunlight that filter through the barn's patched roof, they take turns kneeling on the dusty floor and sucking each other to a fever pitch. Then Joe braces himself against the wall and lets that fat textured cock slide deep into his arse, opening himself to this stranger in a way that he never can to Kenneth—not any more, not ever again.

London, 8 August 1967

Conversation after the lights are out:

"Joe?"

" . . . "

"Joe?"

"What?"

"Why did you ask me if I'd kill you?"

"I don't know what you're on about."

"Do you want to die, Joe?"

"Do I . . ." A sudden bray of laughter. "Hell, no! You twit, why would I want to die?"

"Then why did you bring it up?"

"Hm . . ." Joe is already falling back asleep. "I suppose I just wondered whether you were that far gone."

His breathing deepens, slows. Joe is lying on his left side, his face to the wall. The collage spreads above him like a fungus, its components indistinguishable in the street-lit dark. Kenneth sits up, slips out of bed, maybe planning to take a Nembutal, maybe just going to have a pee.

But he freezes at the sight on the bedside table: Joe's open diary, and balanced atop it carelessly, as if flung there by accident, a claw hammer. Joe hung some pictures earlier in the day, so the hammer has every reason to be there. But the juxtaposition of objects hypnotizes Kenneth, draws him.

He extends his hand cautiously, as if he is afraid the hammer will disappear. Then it is in his palm, heavy, smooth wooden handle, a comfortable fit. He raises it.

"Joe?"

Slow breathing.

"Joe?"

I suppose I just wondered whether you were that far gone . . .

And the knowledge that he *is* that far gone, that Joe must know that or be blind, sweeps over Kenneth like a dark sea. All the years he has invested, his work, his talent, his whole existence subsumed by Joe. The infidelities lovingly recorded in the diaries, literally under Kenneth's nose (the flat is only sixteen by eighteen feet). In that moment the dam overflows, the camel's back breaks, the shit hits the fan, and life as Kenneth Halliwell knows it becomes intolerable.

Without allowing himself to think about it further, he lets the hammer fall.

Nine times.

The amount of blood on his collage is staggering. Even in the dark Kenneth can see that most of the cutout figures are spattered if not obscured entirely. The thing on the pillow is no longer Joe; it is like a physician's model, an example of a ruined cranium. And yet he still imagines he can hear that slow breathing.

After undressing (Joe's blood is sticky on his pajama top) and scrawling a brief, unremarkable note, Kenneth goes for the bottle of Nembutal and swal-

lows twenty-two, washing them down with a tin of grapefruit juice. He is dead before his considerable bulk hits the floor.

Joe's sheets, however, are still warm when the bodies are found the next morning.

London, 8 August 1996

"Harder! It's not going in! Lean on it . . . Oh, bloody fuck, Willem, get out of the way and let me do it!"

Clive shoulders his way up the narrow staircase and pushes Willem away from one end of a large sofa upholstered in royal purple velvet. The other end of this venerable piece is stuck fast in the doorway of the tiny flat. Clive leans against it and gives a mighty shove. Wiry muscles stand out on his neck and shoulders. Willem mutters something in Dutch.

"What?"

Willem points at a spot just below his navel. "What do you call it when the intestines come out?"

"Hernia? No, look, you push with your knees bent. Like *this* . . . Ugh!" The paint on the doorframe surrenders several layers, and the sofa is in the flat.

Back outside, they struggle to get an antique steamer trunk full of Clive's photography equipment up the granite steps of the stoop. The staircase looms above them. Everything seemed much lighter in Amsterdam, probably because they had two friends helping. Now that they are here, their possessions appear enormous and unmanageable.

A young man passing on the street stops to watch their efforts. Clive is annoyed until the man, who is distinctly rough-trade, says, "Need a bit o' help wi' that there?"

They accept too gratefully, and he asks for forty pounds. They bargain him down to thirty. A bargain it is, for they could not have done it alone. By the time their things are in the flat, they feel sufficiently comfortable with the young man to ask if he knows where to get weed in Islington. The young man exclaims that he lives right around the corner and knows a guy who had some good stuff coming in today. They pay him the thirty pounds, give him an additional twenty toward the weed, and say goodbye half-expecting never to see him again.

Of course, they never do.

"Fucking London," Clive grumbles over Indian takeaway that night. "Fucking welcome home. Forgot why I left, I did."

On the verge of thirty, Clive has received glowing reviews for his art photography, but couldn't get the lucrative portrait work he needed to live well in Amsterdam. He has decided that Dutch people don't care for having their pictures taken nearly as much as the English do. Even Willem in all his scruffy

blond loveliness is a lousy model, always fidgeting, wanting a cigarette, wanting a joint, saying he is cold. Willem is a writer (some of the time) and can work anywhere (or not), so they have decided to relocate to Clive's home city. Willem is excited about the move; he is twenty-five and has never lived outside the Netherlands. Clive hopes it will be temporary.

"We'll get it somewhere else," Willem consoles.

"You're in England now, lovey dear. You can't just wander down to the corner coffeeshop and ask to see the menu. Anyway, I don't care about the weed." Clive makes an expansive gesture ceilingward. "It's the attitude of this place I loathe."

"The flat?" Willem looks around in alarm. He selected their new home, and particularly likes the pink and yellow tiles on the ceiling, though he wondered at the wisdom of bringing the purple sofa.

"No, no . . . London. Filthy place, innit? Always somebody ready to rip you off, from the drug dealer on the street to the poshest restaurant in the city." He looks up at Willem. "Don't you think so?"

They have visited London twice in their three years together, and Willem has been coming here on his own since his teens. He loves the grand spaces and vistas, the whirl of traffic, the diversity and dazzle. "No. I find it glamorous."

Clive smirks. "Wait 'til you've lived here awhile."

Willem finishes his rice, sops up the last of the lamb vindaloo with half a chapati, and begins to clear away the containers. "Shall we do some unpacking tonight," he asks, "or are you too tired?"

"I think I'm too tired for unpacking."

Willem stops on his way to the kitchenette and looks at Clive. Clive is still smirking, but in a wholly different way.

"Only for unpacking?" Willem inquires.

"Well, the bed's already unpacked, innit?"

The first sex in a new home is unique, preserved somehow in the watching walls that have already seen so much. It marks the space as your own, and you are conscious of this during the act. It also awakens things in the space that may have lain dormant for years—currents, if you will, or points of energy, or electromagnetic impulses. Or ghosts.

Clive and Willem don't know anyone has been murdered here. Clive has heard of Joe Orton and his famous death, though he would be hazy on the details if asked. Willem has seen two of Orton's plays produced in Rotterdam, but knows little of the author's life in London. He found the plays very clever, had admired their facile wit. Now here he is, all unknowing, sucking his lover's cock on the spot where that wit met its end.

Admittedly, it is the obvious place for a bed, against one of the longer walls under the big window. Thirty years' worth of paint, the latest coat a

semenesque oyster-white, covers the bloodstains and nightmare collages. Clive lies sprawled on the bed, his back arched, his fingers tangled in Willem's hair. Willem's mouth is hot and smooth on his cock, tongue teasing the head, lips slipping down the shaft. The soreness and tension of moving day begin to drain away, and Clive lets himself relax into a stupor of equal parts bliss and exhaustion.

What the FUCK . . .

This is Joe's first thought, and he suspects that it is not particularly original. But the feeling is too much to describe, the memory of the hammer blows, the sensation of leaving his body slowly, so slowly, trying to wrench himself free of the mangled meat like an animal chewing off its paw in a trap. Kenneth nearby, but maddeningly cold and dead, having taken the easy way out. Having gotten the last word, Kenneth was not bound to this place; he could have died anywhere.

After that, nothing. It might have been a second or a century since the first blow fell. There was no heaven, no hell, absolutely nothing at all. Just as Joe had always expected. Until now. Until he finds himself not only sentient, but in the middle of an orgasm.

"Willem!" he hears himself gasping. The name is unknown to him, but the sensations are deliciously familiar.

The young man who has just finished sucking his cock looks up, smiling. His face is square, honest, and beautiful, his eyes china-blue, his full lips still glistening with traces of come.

"Please, will you fuck me now?" he says.

"Well—well, alright."

"You're not too tired?" Willem has a charming little accent, German or Dutch, could be Hottentot for all Joe cares.

"Absolutely not." As he gets up onto his knees, he takes stock of this blessed body he has found himself in. Its build is much like his own was, smallish but solid. It has a big uncircumcised cock already swelling back to half-mast as Willem kisses his mouth, strokes his chest, bites his nipples. It feels young, healthy, glorious.

He turns Willem around and rubs his cock between the younger man's arsecheeks. The crack of Willem's arse is lightly furred with gold. He groans as Willem pushes back against him. Willem passes him a tube of lubricant and a condom. Joe applies the lube to his erect cock and Willem's pretty arse, gently sliding a finger in, then two. He tosses the condom away, having no idea what else he is supposed to do with it.

Willem feels Clive entering him unsheathed, which is strange but not entirely without precedent; each of them has tested negative three times,

and since the third time they've gone condomless once or twice. It feels so good that he doesn't protest now. Clive's naked cock slides way up inside him, faster and harder than Clive usually puts it in. Clive's hands are clamped on Willem's hips, pulling Willem onto him. Clive has always been a wonderful fuck, but Willem cannot remember the last time he felt so thoroughly penetrated.

It seems to go on for hours. Just when he's sure Clive is going to come, *must* come, Clive stops and catches his breath and kisses the back of Willem's neck for a bit, then starts fucking him again. At one point he pulls out, flips Willem over with no apparent effort, pushes Willem's legs up to his chest, and re-enters him. They settle into a slow, deep rhythm. Clive is nuzzling at Willem's mouth, not just kissing him but inhaling his breath, sucking hungrily at his lips and tongue. Hungrily. That's how Clive is making love to him, like a man starved for it.

At last Clive whispers, "I'm going to come now." His cock seems to go deeper yet, and Willem feels it pulsing inside. Then Clive is holding him ever so tightly, pushing his face into Willem's neck and (Willem could almost swear) sobbing. His sperm sears Willem's insides, hot and effervescent, melting into Willem's tissues and suffusing them with something Willem has never felt before. It is a little like an acid trip, if all the hectic color and strange splendor of an acid trip could be folded into the space of two sweating, shuddering bodies.

"Thank you," says Clive, kissing him. Willem sees that Clive is crying, and when he kisses back, the tears taste of salt and copper on his tongue.

Clive knows *something* happened while Willem was sucking his cock, but he can't say just what. It was the sex of his life (both his cock and Willem's are satisfyingly sore for days), but there was something detached about it, almost as if he'd been watching himself fuck Willem instead of actually doing it.

Never mind, he tells himself. They were both exhausted from moving; that's why it was a bit odd. Not bad, though. He wouldn't actually mind if it happened again.

Within days of their arrival, Clive's entire Amsterdam portfolio is taken on by a posh London gallery for a handsome commission. He won't be doing any portrait work for a while. On the way home to give Willem the good news, Clive buys a Polaroid camera.

When he enters the flat, he is surprised to see Willem banging away on his old electric typewriter. As far as Clive knows, Willem hasn't done a lick of writing since the move. But now a sheaf of pages has accumulated on the desk beside him.

"I wasn't thinking of anything in particular," Willem explains, "and then suddenly I had an idea for a play."

"A play?"

"Yes, I've never written one before. Never even liked the idea." Willem shrugged. "I don't know what's gotten into me, but I hope it stays."

Monday's Special

Just a parallel universe in which I took another career path.

Monday's Special

"Dr. Brite?" I looked up from my computer screen, where I'd been idly following a Usenet flame war about some obscure writer accused of child molestation. I didn't envy the lives of celebrities; even the least of them, like this hapless fellow, seemed to exist to be abused by the Great Unwashed. I had nursed literary ambitions myself once, but now I was glad I'd chosen the comparatively peaceful life of a coroner.

My favorite assistant, Jeffrey, lounged in my office doorway. "A body just came in. Looks peculiar. Officer in charge wants you to see it right away."

"I'll bet he does," I said. Ever since I'd become the coroner of New Orleans, the cops were always in a hurry to show off their unusual cases to me, possibly (and wrongly) convinced that someday something was finally going to cross my disgust threshold.

"She, sir."

"Oh, sorry."

The detective who'd come in with the body was Linda Getty, a tall young black woman just recently promoted. The body, still bagged, lay on a gurney by the big metal sinks. I had a heart attack case and a decomp waiting for me

in the freezer, but apparently this guy came first. Jeffrey and I gloved and masked ourselves for action.

"Guy was found dead on the street in the Desire housing project," Getty told me. "Looks like he'd been dumped. No witnesses, nobody knows anything."

"Imagine." I unzipped the body bag and Jeffrey helped me peel it away. Our latest visitor was a young white man, skinny and blond, dressed in a black T-shirt and baggy pants dank with the residue of a rainy midsummer Monday. His bare ankles and feet were still bound with duct tape. Faint red stripes on his wrists suggested his hands had been bound too.

"Has he been searched?" I asked. Getty shook her head. I slipped my hand into his right pants pocket. It was empty.

But the left one wasn't. I pulled out a cheap leather wallet and a Baggie that held several small glass vials. Inside each vial was a crumb of something white.

"You'll want to run this by toxicology, I believe." I handed both items to Getty. "Anything in the wallet?"

She flipped it open. "Louisiana driver's license. Gregory A. Chapman. No credit cards or cash."

"I should think not."

She held the Baggie up to the light and frowned at it. "I'm gonna take this on upstairs. See if they can get to it sometime today."

I laughed. "Sometime this *week*, more likely."

"Yeah, you right."

She disappeared through the sliding doors that led to the elevator. Jeffrey finished undressing the latest visitor to our way station in the basement of the big stone building at the corner of Tulane and Broad.

"Hey, Doc, check out the bruises around his mouth."

I probed the orifice with a latex-clad forefinger. It was full of jellied blood and enamel splinters. Gregory Chapman's four front teeth, two up top and two below, had been smashed off at the gumline.

I took a careful look at the naked form on the gurney. "His abdomen's distended too," I observed. In fact, it was grotesquely swollen and firm to the touch. "Looks like he got a pretty good beating. We'll see."

I picked up a scalpel, placed the fresh blade tip against Mr. Chapman's chest and pressed down. The small amount of blood that pooled in the cut was dark and turgid, his skin rubbery. I made the two preliminary incisions that ran from the armpits to the sternum, then merged and sliced through the abdomen down to the pubic bone. The Y-shape formed by these incisions always struck me as apt for any number of faiths and persuasions: it might stand for the dark Yin or the vicious Yahweh, or represent a Yoni providing entrance to the forbidden recesses of the body. But this was pretentious tripe, the sort I might have fallen victim to had I pursued my

artistic goals; on a good many of my clients the Y could be said to stand for nothing but Yat.

We cracked Mr. Chapman's chest, spread his ribs, examined his heart and lungs. They were normal, as was his liver. I began to believe that this man had not died of a beating after all; there was no abnormal clotting, no suffusion of the tissues.

I glanced quizzically at Jeffrey, who shrugged.

"You want to open the belly for me?" I asked. Even after all these years, I still had an excitable tendency to thrust the scalpel in too deep, nicking the delicate viscera.

Jeffrey's skilled fingers ran the blade through abdominal fat and fascia as if he were cutting fine silk. The organs came into view, and almost in the same breath, we said, "What the *fuck* . . .?"

Some lumpy foreign substance filled the interstices of the man's abdomen, bits of something once white now stained lurid pink, small flecks and clots swimming in hemorrhagic blood, dotting the convoluted surface of the intestines. *Maggots* was my first wild thought, *maggots deep inside a fresh body, impossible*. If not maggots, then some kind of cancer. I scraped away little swollen grains of it to examine the stomach. There was a long, bloody split in the tissue, and more of the clotted pink-white stuff oozing out. Something had caused his stomach to burst right open.

I thought about the smashed front teeth, the bruises around his mouth, and at that point even I had to suppress a shudder. This man hadn't been beaten; he had been force-fed.

"Dr. Brite?"

I looked up. Detective Getty was back, standing halfway across the room so as not to contaminate the scene at the table. "Don't tell me toxicology ran that stuff already," I said.

Getty shook her head. "They didn't have to. Hennessey took one look at it, said "Not again," and stuck it under the microscope. He could tell right away what it was—apparently a lot of dealers have been passing the stuff off as crack, and this guy did it to the wrong people."

"Detective Getty."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"What the hell was in the glass vials?"

"Red beans," she said. "Raw, peeled red beans."

I looked up. My eyes met Jeffrey's, and I saw the corner of his mouth twitch. Still up to our wrists in Mr. Chapman, we both knew what had been crammed down his gullet until his stomach burst. It made perfect sense: what else was cheap, absorbent, and went well with red beans?

I held Jeffrey's eyes for a moment longer, then bent and started the laborious process of removing every grain of white rice from my patient's abdomen, wondering if I would find a sausage in there too.

Vine of the Soul

The better part of a decade later, Trevor and Zach from Drawing Blood are still in happy, disgusting, perfect love. Written for Sarah Champion's Disco 2000, it takes place (as do all the stories in the anthology) on the last day/night of 1999. William S. Burroughs died three days after I finished this story.

Vine of the Soul

The canals were completely frozen over that winter. All sorts of shit was embedded in the ice—either dropped in while the water was still in the chocolate-pudding stage, or else squeezed from the bowels of the canals by upheavals deep within the mud. Old bicycles, ladder-back chairs, toilets, even a human leg had been seen (though the last was soon chipped out and disposed of).

It was a cold season, but we were as warm as always. Even if we hadn't both had the South in our blood, I think we created enough cumulative friction to outdo a hundred summer afternoons. Amsterdam in December was nothing to us.

We'd been together for seven years then, Trevor and I. After we left the States and shook off the Secret Service, we spent eight months fucking around rural Jamaica until we found out most Jamaicans weren't as queer-tolerant as our friends who ran the pot plantation, and we had to leave in kind of a hurry. This being the second time we'd had to more or less get airlifted out of a place, we decided to try and make it the last. We scored black-market U.S. passports in Buenos Aires, caught an actual scheduled flight on a real airline, and ended up here in the land of subsidized art, legalized drugs, and

obscene amounts of money available for the asking to anybody who knows a lot about computers, like me.

It was easy to catch up on the stuff I'd missed during eight months in the Third World. Even if it hadn't been, I was ahead of these jocks, because I knew my way over, under, around, and through the American systems. The hard part was learning Dutch. It took me almost three weeks. Trevor's brain isn't wired for Dutch, apparently, but his Aryan coloring, his broad shoulders, and his vaguely hippieish look get him mistaken for an Amsterdammer even though all he can say after nearly seven years is "*Sprecht U Engels?*"

Maybe because we'd never actually "dated," we had this habit of making "dates." Trevor would be home all day drawing, and I'd be off tweaking machines, and we'd arrange to meet somewhere. On the last day of 1999, we hooked up at the Heavy Scene Coffeeshop in the red-light district for the express purpose of getting blasted on hash and watching the throngs rage as the century changed. I made my way down the winding stairs into the basement space that was the Heavy Scene: flashing Christmas bulbs, European MTV on the box with the sound turned off so the stereo could blare, fragrant with sweet smoke and already crowded.

There was always this little thrill upon seeing each other, as if this were a real date, two people meeting to size up their possibilities, two people who didn't have seven years of history and love and irritation and sharing a bathroom. All in all, I wouldn't trade the seven years. But that little illicit thrill gave me an under-the-table boner every time.

Trev was already at a table with an espresso and a joint in front of him. The joint was untouched, the coffee about half gone. He had his hair in a loose ponytail and a pencil smudge on the bridge of his nose. He'd spent the day penciling *Goth Squad*, the D.C. comic he drew purely for cash. It wasn't a bad comic, but it was scripted by a hefty deathrock princess from Minneapolis who hadn't stopped writing little mash notes to Trevor in her margins ever since she'd seen his picture in *Comics Journal*. I thought it was pretty funny, but it wasn't the kind of thing he could ever see the humor in.

His weary-watchful expression cleared when he saw me. "Hey," we said at the same time, and he half-rose as I started to sit, and we kissed lightly. A few tourists made wide eyes at us, but they knew they were in Amsterdam and had to Practice Tolerance while they smoked their legal pot.

I went to the bar, liking the sensation of Trev's eyes on me from behind. "Een Heineken, 'stublieft," I told the blue-haired black girl serving drinks.

"Nee bier," she said, slightly annoyed.

"Oh ja—pardon." There had been a law passed a few years ago that establishments couldn't sell cannabis and alcohol together—to keep the fuckups on the move, I guess. The tourists didn't know about it, and the potheads never

remembered. I ordered a can of fizzy mineral water and another espresso for Trevor, and turned around to see a tall, bleached-blond man in black leather leaning down to kiss Trevor on both cheeks.

"Franzz fucking Quaffka," I said, coming up behind him.

He turned with a grin that would've made a shark step back. I took a step back myself to avoid his kisses—not because I disliked them, but because I could never receive them without wanting to grab the guy's ass. It was just some kind of pheromone he put out.

"*I VASS BORN TO KEEL UND MAKE LOVE!*" he cried, as if to prove my point. Everyone in the coffeeshop turned to investigate this claim, but Franz's glittering black eyes were fixed on me. "Zach! It is so good to see you *zwei* out to zelebrate zee new millennium!"

"I'm sure you can help with our celebration," I said. "Why don't you sit down, Franz?"

"Ah, I am too restless! I cannot sit down! I stay here, fine!" And so he hovered, gesticulating, carving his own space in the crowd, at some point casually taking up and lighting the joint Trevor had rolled, which turned out to be at least half crumbly black hash. And he filled us in on his amazing life since the last time he'd been in town.

Franzz was a fashion designer of international repute and the attendant fame you'd expect; he and his more business-minded sister, Vittoria, had launched lines of ladies' wear, jewelry, and cosmetics that were huge status symbols all over the world. But Franz couldn't be counted on for anything except artistic inspiration. He would disappear from Quaffka headquarters in Milan with no notice and no entourage and only twenty credit cards, surfacing days or weeks later in, say, Amsterdam for New Year's Eve 1999.

And he sought out the company of other designers. But not the ones who made dresses, jewelry, or perfume. He generally found them a boring lot. Franz liked chemists.

He liked all science-minded types, really, which was why he had collected me. He said that our talent was electric, whereas his and Trevor's was like a swath of watercolor across a piece of raw silk. He talked like that, too. But best of all he liked attic alchemists and basement wizards, those who combined esoteric and often deadly ingredients to create, not gold, but buzzes. Franz collected drug designers—funded them too, probably, though I'd never ask and he'd never tell—and I knew he'd have something special planned for tonight.

Just as we were finishing the hash joint, I felt my micropager vibrating in my pocket, right against my left nut. I didn't even want the thing with me, but I'd come from a job in the Noord and hadn't wanted to go all the way to our flat on Reguliersgracht to drop off my stuff.

It was Piet at Systems Centrum Europa, a company I'd done a lot of freelance upsetting for. I considered ignoring the page, then felt sorry for him sitting out there in the silicon 'burbs on New Year's Eve and went to the pay phone to see if something interesting was up.

It wasn't. When I went back to the table, Franzz was illustrating some point by sweeping his arms in a great circle and shouting, "SUNDAY, BLOODY SUNDAY!" I ducked past him into my chair. "What's up?" Trevor asked.

"Nothing. Boring."

"No, no, tell uz," said Franzz, and I could see he really wanted to know.

"Well, see, a lot of people are convinced that all the computer networks are going to go down at midnight. The machines won't understand the changing of the dates, because computer years only happen in two digits. So supposedly they'll think it's 1900, which will cause them to go haywire in all sorts of interesting ways."

"Yes, I have heard of this." Franzz pursed his lips. "But I have been hearing it for years."

"They've *known* about it for years, but no one has any idea what to *do* about it. Piet's out there with a bunch of techs, just to watch his own little network, and they want to be ready for . . ." I shrugged. "Whatever. The techs have spent the past half of the decade trying to figure out exactly what's going to happen, and they don't even really know that."

"But you have an idea, as always." Franzz pointed a perfectly manicured, silver-varnished nail at me. "So, what happens to zee computers at midnight, Zach?"

"Probably a lot of them *will* go down. I don't think planes will start falling out of the sky, like the apocalyptic say, because people have manual control of that. But I believe all the records are going to be fucked up for a very long time."

"Records of what?"

"Everything."

"Und you don't vanna help?" Franzz inquired—with barely suppressed amusement, I thought.

"No way. I want to see exactly what happens, and then I want to go in and see what I can do with it."

Franzz's grin was approving. Trevor just shook his head and mouthed a word that looked like *extradition*, which I thought was pretty fucking unlikely after seven years. I hadn't even been old enough to prosecute as an adult when I did my worst stuff stateside. Anyway, Trevor knew he couldn't stop me. Something that big, I couldn't even stop myself.

"So," I asked Franzz, "what chemicals do you plan to be on tonight?"

He glanced around nervously, even though no one at the surrounding tables could have heard me over the guitarwail of the latest big hit off *Foo Fighters 10*. "Come back to my room. I show you."

"Yeah, I bet you'll show us."

"I show you that too, if you like. But first I show you new drug."

Franzz's "room" was an enormous luxury flat overlooking the gaudiest stretch of Oudezijds Voorburgwal, lent to him by an unnamed friend who had chosen to ring in the Millennium elsewhere. Through a vast picture window the pink smear of neon, the stone arches lit with globes of electric red, the shimmering black canal, the peristalsis of the crowds could be seen or blotted out with the touch of a button that turned the glass into a mirror. We left the view on.

Never one to waste time, Franzz produced a tiny plastic bag from somewhere and tapped its contents onto a glass coffee table. A scatter of white powder, which he began to caress with a razor blade. Trevor looked interested, but I backed off.

"Nuh-uh, you guys. Not if it's any kind of coke or speed, or even X, you never know what that shit's cut with. You know me and stimulants."

Franzz didn't look up from his task, but spoke without moving his lips to avoid blowing the powder, which made his indefinable accent even weirder. "Yezzz, yezzz, ZZach. I know you and stimulants. No coffee, no crystal, no Coca-Cola. This is something safe for you high-strung types."

I let that one pass, since my personality isn't particularly high-strung but my body undoubtedly is. "So what exactly—"

Franzz interrupted me with something so full of Z's that I could make no sense of it.

"Say again?"

He looked up, pronounced the two words carefully. "Sssynthetic ayahuasca."

Trevor really perked up then. "That's in Burroughs."

"Impossible," said Franzz, "since it was only synthesized to perfection one week ago."

"Not the designer version. The real article in the rain forest. He called it *yage*, and he went to Colombia to look for it at the end of *Junky*."

"Und?"

"Well, he found it, of course. He's written some stuff about it since then. A strange hallucinogen." Trev frowned. "Doesn't it cause projectile vomiting?"

"Fortunately," said Franzz, "they have synthesized that out."

He scraped up three large, sloppy lines. I noticed that the powder didn't have the icy glint of coke or the eggshell tint of heroin; rather, it gave off a pearly, subtle iridescence that I could have been imagining but didn't think I was.

"Gentlemen?"

Franzz was holding out, I swear to God, a gold-plated cocaine straw. Probably a vintage model from the seventies. What the hell. I turned my head

and exhaled, put a finger over my left nostril, bent over the coffee table and snorted my line of jungle powder.

I was ready for pain. The handful of times I'd snorted anything, my sinuses always seemed to think I'd jammed a flamethrower up my nose. But this went down *cool*.

"A touch of eucalyptus," said Franzz.

"That sounds healthy."

"Yezzz. Drugs are zo good for you."

I watched Trevor do his line, stray pieces of ginger-colored hair escaping his ponytail and dabbling in the powder. He threw his head back, closed his eyes, inhaled sharply, and smiled. I reached over and squeezed his hand as Franzz did up his own dose. His long pencil-callused fingers enfolded mine in a familiar grip. Whatever happened, he was there. I knew he was thinking the same thing.

"Zee very first thing this drug does," Franzz announced, "is to make you unbearably horny."

I glanced at Trev. His eyes were open, but narrowed. Was Franzz going to hit us up for a *ménage à trois*? He'd never tried anything like that before—seemed to know better. And, hell, he was in Amsterdam; he could have younger, kinkier stuff than us.

"So," Franzz continued with a smile, perhaps sensing our apprehension, "I leave you *zwei* alone for a little while. Maybe I bring someone back later. I will enjoy using the bed more if I know two beautiful boys have warmed it!"

Snapping up the collar of his leather jacket for emphasis, he strode over to the door, tipped us a salute, and left the flat before either of us could say anything.

"Uh," I finally managed, and then the ayahuasca hit. *White*, but iridescent, like the powder: a streaming, swarming rush of it. White white white, and maybe a fleck of color here and there but you couldn't be sure, it was all going so fast, it was so white, it dazzled the mind. I felt something warm and wet against my lips, realized it was Trevor's mouth, realized Franzz had been right.

We didn't warm up the bed for him, because we never made it that far: we fucked in front of the big picture window with the neon going insane down below. I could taste every pore of his cock in my mouth; I could feel the heat of his come pulsing through the various tubes and up and out over my tongue in a flood of sweet and salt.

Then Trevor was fucking me, inside me, and our eyes were locked, and suddenly time slid sideways and we were both looking at this TV set. It was a rounded, small-screened model from the fifties, a Jetsons TV, and William S. Burroughs was on it.

"Yage," he intoned. "Ayahuasca. Harmine. Vine of the soul." He looked even thinner and gloomier than he had when alive. "Said to increase tele-

pathic sensitivity. A Colombian scientist isolated from yage a chemical he called *telepathine*. Legend claims that the Sun-father impregnated a woman through the eyesocket and the foetus became yage, the narcotic plant, while still in the womb. Yage is the god of semen, both sexual and foetal. Yage may be the final fix."

"That last line was from *Junky*," Trevor said, and then Bill and the cartoon TV were gone and there we were on the soft carpet in front of the window, bodies intertwined, nerves thrumming in synchronicity. I grabbed his ass and pulled him deeper into me, and we came at the same time and could *feel* each other coming, feel every jot and fiber of all the voltage flowing between us, and it was so intense I think we lost consciousness.

Thunder woke us. We could feel the vibrations in our bones. The sky over the whorehouses blossomed with multicolored points of light. Fireworks. Midnight.

We pulled a comforter off the sofa and wrapped ourselves up in front of the window to watch the show. The fireworks were purple, green, gold, Mardi Gras colors, making me briefly homesick. Trevor looked at me, looked *into* me the way he always has, only this time there was something more to it. For an instant I sensed a kind of tattered aura surrounding us, connecting us, smoky blue and rent with electricity.

"Mardi Gras colors," he said.

I just smiled and hugged him closer.

It wasn't more than another half hour before Franzz came back. He was alone, but in good spirits. We were treated to "*I VASS BORN TO KEEL UND MAKE LOVE!*" again, in case we had forgotten, but we felt comfortable enough unwrapping the comforter from our sticky bodies and getting dressed in front of him. He'd been kinder than we could have expected.

"So did you see any planes falling out of the sky?" I asked.

Franzz thought about it. "No . . . only a cashier who couldn't ring up my Dr. Pepper because his machine, his register was broken."

Only one thing about this really surprised me. "You drink Dr. Pepper, Franzz?"

He shrugged, and this time his grin wasn't so much wicked as faintly embarrassed. "I had a boyfriend once who came from Texas. My boyfriends all leave, but their bad habits live on in me."

A pang of sadness flashed between me and Trevor. Was Franzz lonely? We had never imagined him so. The idea depressed us, and we responded—not deliberately—by flashing on a scrap of an old Beatles song that stayed stuck in our heads for hours. *Can't buy me love—ove, nonono, NO—*

"Oh yes," said Franzz, "and many of the prostitutes have signs in their windows: No Credit Cards. Tonight Only."

"I don't blame them," I said.

Mussolini and the Axeman's Jazz

After "Triads," I decided I liked writing historical fiction and wanted to give it another try. This story plays fast and loose with the facts of World War I, Freemasons, and New Orleans' only verified serial killer, the Axeman. Two things in it are undeniably real: Detective D'Antonio's statement and the Axeman's letter to the editor, reprinted from the New Orleans States and Times-Picayune, 1918-19.

Mussolini and the Axeman's Jazz

Sarajevo, 1914
Stone turrets and crenelated columns loomed on either side of the Archduke's motorcade. The crowd parted before the open carriages, an indistinct blur of faces. Francis Ferdinand swallowed some of the unease that had been plaguing him all day: a bitter bile, a constant burn at the back of his throat.

It was his fourteenth wedding anniversary. Sophie sat beside him, a bouquet of scarlet roses at her bosom. These Serbs and Croats were a friendly crowd; as the heir apparent of Austria-Hungary, Francis Ferdinand stood to give them an equal voice in his empire. Besides, Sophie was a Slav, the daughter of a noble Czech family. Surely his marriage to a northern Slav had earned him the sympathy of these southern ones.

Yet the Archduke could not divest himself of the notion that there was a menacing edge to the throng. The occasional vivid detail—a sobbing baby, a flower tucked behind the ear of a beautiful woman—was lost before his eyes could fully register it. He glanced at Sophie. In the summer heat he could smell her sweat mingling with the *eau de parfum* she had dabbed on this morning.

She met his gaze and smiled faintly. Beneath her veil, her sweet face shone with perspiration. Back in Vienna, Sophie was snubbed by his court because she had been a lady-in-waiting when she met the Archduke, little better than a servant in their eyes. Francis Ferdinand's uncle, the old Emperor Francis Joseph, forbade the marriage. When the couple married anyway, Sophie was ostracized in a hundred ways. Francis Ferdinand knew it was sometimes a painful life for her, but she remained a steadfast wife, an exemplary mother.

For this reason he had brought her on the trip to Sarajevo. It was a routine army inspection for him, but for her it was a chance to be treated with the royal honors she deserved. On this anniversary of their blessed union, Sophie would endure no subtle slights, no calculated cruelties.

The Archduke had never loved another human being. His parents were hazy memories, his uncle a shambling old man whose time had come and gone. Even his three children brought him more distraction than joy. The first time he laid eyes on Sophie, he discerned in her an empathy such as he had never seen before. Her features, her mannerisms, her soft ample body—all bespoke a comfort Francis Ferdinand had never formerly craved, but suddenly could not live without.

The four cars approached the Cumuria Bridge. A pall of humidity hung over the water. The Archduke felt his skin steaming inside his heavy uniform, and his uneasiness intensified. He knew how defenseless they must look in the raised carriage, in the Serbian sun, the green feathers on his helmet drooping, Sophie's red roses beginning to wilt.

As they passed over the bridge, he saw an object arc out of the crowd and come hurtling toward him. In an instant his eye marked it as a crude hand bomb.

Francis Ferdinand raised his arm to protect Sophie and felt hot metal graze his flesh.

Gavrilo Princip's pistol left a smell on his palm like greasy coins, metallic and sour. It was a cheap thing from Belgium, as likely to blow his hand off as anything else. Still, it was all Gavrilo had, and he was the only one left to murder the villainous fool whose good intentions would crush Serbia.

He had known the other six would fail him. They were a young and earnest lot, always ready to sing the praises of a greater Serbia, but reluctant to look a man in the face and kill him. They spoke of the sanctity of human life, a short-sighted sentiment in Gavrilo's opinion. Human life was a fleeting thing, an expendable thing. The glory of a nation could endure through the ages. What his comrades failed to fully comprehend was that it must be oiled with human blood.

He raked his dirty hair back from his face and stared along the motorcade route. It looked as if the cars were finally coming. He took a deep breath. As the wet, sooty air entered his lungs, Gavrilo was seized with a racking cough that lasted a full minute. He had no handkerchief, so he cupped his hand over his mouth. When he pulled it away, his fingers were speckled with fresh blood. He and his six comrades were all tubercular, and none of them expected to live past thirty. The fevers, the lassitude, the night sweats, the constant tickling itch deep in the chest—all these made the cyanide capsules they carried in their pockets a source of comfort rather than of dread.

Now the task was left to him. Mohammed and Nedjelko, the first two along the route, were carrying hand bombs. One of them had heaved his bomb—Gavrilo had seen it go flying—but the motorcade had continued toward City Hall with no apparent damage. His comrades between Cumuria Bridge and City Hall—Vasco, Cvijetko, Danilo, Trifko—had done nothing.

The Archduke's carriage moved slowly through the crowd, then braked and came to a standstill less than five feet from Gavrilo. This struck him as nothing short of a miracle, God telling him to murder the villains for the glory of Serbia.

He fired twice. The pistol did not blow his hand off. He saw Countess Sophie sag against her husband, saw blood on the Archduke's neck. The deed was done as well as he could do it. Gavrilo turned the pistol on himself, but before he could fire, it was knocked out of his hand. The crowd surged over him.

Gavrilo got his hand into his pocket, found the cyanide capsule and brought it to his mouth. Hundreds of hands were ripping at him, pummeling him. His teeth cracked the capsule open. The foul taste of bitter almonds flooded his mouth. He retched, swallowed, vomited, convulsed. The crowd would surely pull him to pieces. He felt his guts unmooring, his bones coming loose from their sockets, and still he could not die.

Sophie stood on the steps of City Hall between her husband and Fehim Effendi CurciÊ, the burgomaster of Sarajevo. Though Sophie and several of her attendants were bleeding from superficial cuts obtained from splinters of the bomb casing, and twelve spectators had been taken to hospital, CurciÊ obviously had no idea that the motorcade had come close to being blown up. He was surveying the crowd, a pleased look on his fat face. "Our hearts are filled with happiness—" he began.

Francis Ferdinand was white with anger. He grabbed the burgomaster's arm and shouted into his face. "One comes here for a visit and is received with bombs! Mr. Mayor, what do you say?"

CurciÊ still didn't understand. He smiled blandly at the Archduke and launched into his welcome speech again. The Archduke let him con-

tinue this time, looking disgusted. Never once did CurciÉ mention the bombing attempt.

Sophie gripped her husband's hand. She could see Francis Ferdinand gradually pulling himself together. He was a man of inflexible opinions and sudden rages, painfully thin-skinned, capable of holding a grudge for eternity. He was like a spoiled child, bragging that he had shot five thousand stags, darkly hinting that he had brought down as many political enemies. But Sophie loved him. Not even her children fulfilled her vast need to be needed. This man did.

There was a delay while Francis Ferdinand sent a wire to the Emperor, who would have heard about the bomb. The Army wanted to continue with the day's events, but the Archduke insisted upon first visiting the wounded spectators in the hospital.

He turned to Sophie. "You must not come. The risk is too great; there could be another attack."

Fear clutched at her heart: of dying, of losing him. "No, I must go with you," she told him, and Francis Ferdinand did not argue. When they entered their carriage again, Oskar Potiorek, the military governor, climbed in with them. His presence made Sophie feel a little safer.

The motorcade rolled back through the thronged streets. When they turned a corner, Sophie saw a sign marking Francis Joseph Street. Just as she noticed this, Potiorek sat up straighter and cried, "What's this? We've taken the wrong way!"

The driver braked. The motorcade ground to a halt. Sophie felt something graze the top of her head, a sharp stinging sensation. The Archduke's head snapped to one side. At the same time, Sophie felt something like a white-hot fist punch into her belly.

Through a haze of agony she reached for her husband. He leaned toward her, and a torrent of blood gushed from his mouth. She crumpled into his arms. Attendants swarmed around them, asked Francis Ferdinand if he was suffering. The last thing Sophie heard was her husband replying in a wet whisper, "It is nothing . . . it is nothing."

They were both dead before the sun had reached its apex in the blazing sky.

New Orleans, 1918

New Orleans is commonly thought of as a French and Spanish town. "Creole," a word now used to describe rich food of a certain seasoning and humans of a certain shade, first referred to the inevitable mixture of French and Spanish blood that began appearing several years after the city's founding. The buildings of the Vieux Carré were certainly shaped and adorned by the ancestry of their builders: the Spanish courtyards and ironwork, the

French cottages with their carved wooden shutters and pastel paint, the wholly European edifice of St. Louis Cathedral.

But, block by sagging block, the Vieux Carré was abandoned by these upwardly mobile people. By the turn of the century it had become a slum. A wave of Sicilian immigrants moved in. Many of them opened groceries, imported and sold the necessities of life. Some were honest businessmen, some were criminals; most made no such clear distinction. The *onorata società* offered them a certain amount of protection from the hoodlums who roamed the French Quarter. Naturally they required a payment for this service, and if a man found himself in a position to do them a favor—legal or otherwise—he had no choice but to oblige.

The Italians gradually branched out of the Quarter into every part of the city, and New Orleans became as fully an Italian town as a French or Spanish one.

Joseph D'Antonio, formerly detective of the New Orleans Police Department, had been drinking on the balcony of his second-story hovel since late this afternoon. Bittersweet red wine, one bottle before the sun went down, another two since. His cells soaked it up like bread.

Two weeks in, this hot and sticky May portended a hellish summer. Even late at night, his balcony was the only place he could catch an occasional breath of air, usually tinged with the fetor of the Basin Canal nearby. Most nights, he had to force himself not to pass out here. These days, few things in his life were worse than waking up with a red-wine hangover and the morning sun in his eyes.

D'Antonio was forty-three. The circumstances of his early retirement had been as randomly cruel as the violence that presaged it. A crazed beat cop named Mullen walked into headquarters one afternoon and gunned down Chief Inspector Jimmy Reynolds. In the confusion that followed, an innocent captain also named Mullen was shot dead. Someone had come charging in and asked what happened, and someone else was heard to yell, "Mullen killed Reynolds!"

The yeller was Joe D'Antonio. Unfortunately, the dead Mullen had been widely known to harbor a strong dislike for Italians in general and D'Antonio in particular. No one accused him directly of killing Mullen, but everyone wondered. His life became a hell of suspicious looks and nasty innuendo. Six months later, the new chief persuaded him to take early retirement.

D'Antonio leaned on the rickety railing and stared at the empty street. Until last year he had lived on the fringes of Storyville, the red-light district. In the confusion of wartime patriotism, somebody had decided Storyville was a bad influence on Navy boys, and all the whorehouses were shut down. Now the buildings were dark and shabby, broken windows covered with boards or

gaping like hungry mouths, lacework balconies sagging, opulent fixtures sold away or crumbling to dust.

D'Antonio could live without the whores, though some of them had been good enough gals. But he missed the music that had drifted up from Storyville every night, often drawing him out to some smoky little dive where he could drink and jazz away the hours till dawn. Players like Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, and some new kid named Armstrong kept him sane throughout the bad months just after he left the force. He got to know some of the musicians, smoked reefer with them from time to time, warned them when undercover presence indicated a bust might be imminent.

Now they were gone. There were still jazz clubs in the city, but many of the players D'Antonio knew had moved to Chicago when Storyville closed down. They could record in Chicago, make money. And in Chicago they didn't have to sleep, drink, eat, and piss according to signs posted by white men.

Pissing sounded like a fine idea. He stood, steadied himself on the railing, and walked inside. The place had none of this modern indoor plumbing, and the odor of the slop jar filled the two airless rooms. Still, he'd never stooped so low as to piss off the balcony as some of his neighbors did, at least not that he could remember.

D'Antonio unbuttoned his fly and aimed into the jar. Behind him, the shutters on the French doors slammed shut with a report loud as a double-barreled shotgun in the airless night. His hand jerked. Urine sprayed the dingy wall.

When he'd finished pissing and cursing the freak wind, he wiped the wall with a dirty sock, then went back to the balcony doors. It was too hot in here with the shutters closed, and too dark. D'Antonio pushed them open again.

There was a man standing on the balcony, and the shutters passed right through him.

Francis Ferdinand scowled in annoyance. The first flesh-and-blood creature he'd met since his inglorious exit from this plane, and of course the fellow had to be stinking drunk.

Perhaps his drunkenness would make Francis Ferdinand's job easier. Who could know? When one had to put himself together from whatever stray wisps of ectoplasm he could snatch out of the ether, it became increasingly difficult to fathom the minds of living men and women.

Joseph D'Antonio had a shock of black hair streaked with silver and a pale complexion that had gone florid from the wine. His dark eyes were comically wide, seeming to start from their sockets. "Hell, man, you're a *ghost*! You're a goddamned *ghost*, ain'tcha?"

English had never been one of his better languages, but Francis Ferdinand was able to understand D'Antonio perfectly. Even the drunken

slur and the slight accent did not hinder him. He winced at the term. "A *wraith*, sir, if you please."

D'Antonio waved a dismissive hand. The resulting current of air nearly wafted the Archduke off the balcony. "Wraith, ghost, whatever. S'all the same to me. Means I'll be goin' headfirst offa that balcony if I don't get to bed soon. By accident . . . or on purpose? I dunno . . ."

Francis Ferdinand realized he would have to speak his piece at once, before the man slipped into maudlin incoherence. "Mr. D'Antonio, I do not come to you entirely by choice. You might say I have been dispatched. I died in the service of my country. I saw my beloved wife die, and pass into the Beyond. Yet I remain trapped in a sort of half-life. To follow her, I must do one more thing, and I must request your help."

Francis Ferdinand paused, but D'Antonio remained silent. His eyes were alert, his aspect somewhat more sober than before.

"I must kill a man," the Archduke said at last.

D'Antonio's face twitched. Then he burst into sudden laughter. "That's a good one! You gotta kill somebody, but you can't, 'cause you're a goddamn ghost!"

"Please, sir, I am a *wraith*! There are *class structures* involved here!"

"Sure. Whatever. Well, sorry, Duke. I handed over my gun when I left the force. Can't help you."

"You addressed me as 'Duke' just now, Mr. D'Antonio."

"Yeah, so? You're the Archduke, ain'tcha? The one who got shot at the beginning of the war?"

Francis Ferdinand was stunned. He had expected to have to explain everything to the man: his own useless assassination; the ensuing bedlam into which Europe had tumbled, country after country; the dubious relevance of these events to others in New Orleans. He was glad to discover that, at least in one respect, he had underestimated D'Antonio.

"Yeah, I know who you are. I might look like an ignorant wop, but I read the papers. Besides, there's a big old bullet hole in your neck."

Startled, the Archduke quickly patched the wound.

"Then, sir, that is one less thing I must explain to you. You have undoubtedly heard that I was murdered by Serbs. This is the first lie. I was murdered by Sicilians."

"But the men they caught—"

"Were Serbs, yes. They were also dupes. The plot was set in motion by your countrymen; specifically, by a man called Cagliostro. Perhaps you've heard of him."

"Some kind of magician?"

"A mage, yes. Also a doctor, a swindler, a forger, and a murderer. He is more than a century old, yet retains the appearance of a man of thirty. A wicked, dangerous man."

"He was born Giuseppe Balsamo in Palermo, 1743. By the time he began his scourge of Europe, he had dubbed himself Cagliostro, an old family name. He traveled the continent selling charms, potions, elixirs of youth. Some of these may have been genuine, as he himself ceased to age at this time.

"He also became a Freemason. Are you familiar with them as well?"

"Not particularly."

"They are a group of powerful mages hell-bent on controlling the world. They erect heathen temples in which they worship themselves and their accomplishments. Cagliostro formed his own 'Egyptian Order' and claimed to be thousands of years old already, reminiscing about his dalliances with Christ and various Pharaohs. It was power he sought, of course, though he claimed to work only for the 'Brotherhood of Man.'

"At the peak of his European success, he became entangled in the famous scandal of Marie-Antoinette's diamond necklace. It nearly brought him down. He was locked in the Bastille, then forced to leave Paris in disgrace. He wandered back through the European cities that had once welcomed him, finding scant comfort. It has been rumored that he died in a dungeon in Rome, imprisoned for practices offensive to the Christian church.

"This is not so. His Masonic 'brothers' failed him for a time, but ultimately they removed him from the dungeon, whisked him out from under the noses of the French revolutionary armies who wished to make him a hero, and smuggled him off to Egypt.

"The practices he perfected there are unspeakable.

"Fifty years later, still appearing a young and vital man, he returned to Italy. He spent the next half-century assembling a new 'Egyptian Order' of the most brilliant men he could find. With a select few, he shared his elixirs.

"Just after the turn of the century, he met a young journalist named Benito Mussolini, who called himself an 'apostle of violence' but had no direction. Cagliostro has guided Mussolini's career since then. In 1915, Mussolini's newspaper helped urge Italy into war."

D'Antonio started violently. "Aw, come on! You're not gonna tell me these Egyptian-Dago-Freemasons started the war."

"Sir, that is exactly what I am going to tell you. They also ordered my wife's death, and my own, and that of my empire."

"Why in hell would they do that?"

"I cannot tell you. They are evil men. My uncle, the Emperor Francis Joseph, discovered all this inadvertently. He was a cowardly old fool who would have been afraid to tell anyone. Nevertheless, they hounded him into virtual retirement, where he died."

"And told you all this?"

"He had no one else to talk to. Nor did I."

"Where's your wife?"

"Sophie was not required to linger here. We were."

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you."

"You keep saying that. Does it mean you don't know, or you aren't *allowed* to tell me?"

Francis Ferdinand paused. After a moment, D'Antonio nodded. "I see how it is. So I'm supposed to dance for you like Mussolini does for Cagliostro?"

The Archduke did not understand the question. He waited to see if D'Antonio would rephrase it, but the man remained silent. Finally Francis Ferdinand said, "Cagliostro still controls Mussolini, and means to shape him into the most vicious ruler Europe has ever known. But Cagliostro is no longer in Italy. He is here in New Orleans."

"Oh-ho. And you want me to kill him for you, is that it?"

"Yes, but I haven't finished. Cagliostro is in New Orleans—but *we don't know who he is.*"

"We? Who's *we*?"

"Myself, my uncle."

"No one else?"

"No one else you would care to know about, sir."

D'Antonio sagged in his chair. "Yeah, well, forget it. I'm not killin' anybody. Find some other poor dupe."

"Are you certain, Mr. D'Antonio?"

"Very certain."

"Very well." Francis Ferdinand drifted backward through the balcony railing and vanished in midair.

"Wait!" D'Antonio was halfway out of his chair by the time he realized the wraith was gone. He sank back, his brain seasick in his skull from all the talk of mages and murders, elixirs and dungeons, and the famous scandal of Marie-Antoinette's diamond necklace—whatever the hell that was.

"Why me?" he murmured into the hot night. But the night made no reply.

Cagliostro stood behind his counter and waited on the last customer of the day, an old lady buying half a pound of salt cod. When she had gone, he locked the door and had his supper: a small loaf of bread, a thick wedge of provolone, a few olives chopped with garlic. He no longer ate the flesh of creatures, though he must sell it to maintain the appearance of a proper Italian grocery.

Above his head hung glossy loops of sausage and salami, rafters of wind-dried ham and pancetta, luminous globes of cacciocavallo cheese. In the glass case were pots of creamy ricotta, stuffed artichokes, orbs of mozzarella in milk,

bowls of shining olives and capers preserved in brine. On the neat wooden shelves were jars of candied fruit, almonds, pine nuts, aniseed, and a rainbow of assorted sweets. There were tall wheels of Parmesan coated in funereal black wax, cruets of olive oil and vinegar, pickled cucumbers and mushrooms, flat tins containing anchovies, calamari, octopus. Enormous burlap sacks of red beans, fava beans, chickpeas, rice, couscous, and coffee threatened to spill their bounty onto the spotless tile floor. Pastas of every shape, size, and color were arranged in an elaborate display of bins facing the counter.

The aroma of the place was a balm to Cagliostro's ancient soul. He carried the world's weight on his back every day; he had pledged his very life to the furthering of the Brotherhood of Man; still, that did not mean he could shirk small duties. He fed the families of his neighborhood. When they could not pay, he fed them on credit, and when there was no hope of recovering the credit, he fed them for free.

He had caused death, to be sure. He had caused the deaths of the Archduke and his wife for several reasons, most importantly the malignant forces that hung over Europe like black clouds heavy with rain. Such a rain could mean the death of millions, hundreds of millions. The longer it was allowed to stagnate, the more virulent it would grow. It had needed some spark to release it, some event whose full significance was hidden at first, then gradually revealed. The assassination in Sarajevo had been that event, easy enough to arrange by providing the dim-witted Serbian anarchists with encouragement and weapons.

His name was synonymous with elaborate deception, and not undeservedly so. But some of his talents were genuine. In his cards and scrying-bowl Cagliostro could read the future, and the future looked very dark.

He, of course, would change all that.

This war was nearly over. It had drained some of the poison from those low-hanging clouds, allowed Europe to shatter and purge itself. But it had not purged enough; there would be another great war inside of two decades. In that one, his boy Benito would send thousands of innocent men to their useless deaths. But that was not as bad as what could be.

Though he had never killed a man with his own hands, Cagliostro bitterly felt the loss of the human beings who died as a result of his machinations. They were his brothers and sisters; he mourned each one as he would a lovely temple he had never seen, upon hearing it had been demolished. He could not accept that their sacrifice was a natural thing, but he had come to understand that it was necessary.

Mussolini was more than a puppet; he was a powerful orator and propagandist who would learn to yank his followers in any direction that pleased him. But he was unbalanced, ultimately no better than a fool, ignorant of the

Mysteries, incapable of seeing them when a few of the topmost veils were pulled aside. He would make an excellent pawn, and he would die believing he had engineered his own destiny.

The only reason he could be allowed into power was to prevent something far worse.

Cagliostro had seen another European tyrant in his cards and his bowl, a man who made Mussolini look like a painted tin soldier. Mussolini was motivated exclusively by power, and that was bad enough; but this other creature was a bottomless well of hatred. Given the chance, he would saturate all creation with his vitriol. Millions would die like vermin, and their corpses would choke the world. The scrying-water had shown terrifying factories built especially for disposal of the dead, ovens hot enough to reduce bone to ash, black smokestacks belching greasy smoke into a charred orange sky.

Cagliostro did not yet know this tyrant's precise identity, but he believed that the man would come from Austria and rule Germany. Two more good reasons for the Archduke's death: Francis Ferdinand would have made a powerful ally for such a man.

Cagliostro did not think he could altogether stop this tyrant. He had not foreseen it in time; he had been occupied with other matters. It was always thus when a man wished to save the world: he never knew where to look first, let alone where to begin.

Still, he believed he could stop the tyrant short of global domination, and he believed Mussolini was his key. Members of the Order in Italy were grooming him for Prime Minister. The title would unlock every door in Europe. If they could arrange for Mussolini to become the tyrant's ally, perhaps they could also ensure that Mussolini would in some way cause the tyrant's downfall.

Cagliostro finished his simple supper, collected the day's receipts, and turned off the lights. In the half-darkness he felt his way back to the small living quarters behind the store, where he sat up reading obscure volumes and writing long letters in a florid hand until nearly dawn. Over the past century, he had learned to thrive on very little sleep.

D'Antonio was sitting up in bed, back propped against the wooden headboard, bare legs sprawled atop the sweat-rumpled coverlet, bottle nestled between his thighs. The Archduke appeared near the sink. D'Antonio jumped, slopped wine onto the coverlet, cursed. "You gotta make me stain something every time you show up?"

"You need have no fear of me."

"No, you just want me to murder somebody for you. Why should that scare me?"

"It should not, sir. What should scare you is the prospect of a world ruled by Cagliostro and his Order."

"That guy again. Find him yet?"

"We know he came to New Orleans before 1910. We know he is living as an Italian grocer. But he has covered his tracks so successfully that we cannot determine his precise identity. We have a number of candidates."

"That's good." D'Antonio nodded, pretended to look thoughtful. "So you just gonna kill all of 'em, or what?"

"I cannot kill anyone, sir. I cannot even lift a handkerchief. That is why I require your help."

"I thought I told you last time, Duke. My services are unavailable. Now kindly fuck off."

"I feared you would say that. You will not change your mind?"

"Not a chance."

"Very well."

D'Antonio expected the wraith to vanish as it had last time. Instead, Francis Ferdinand seemed to break apart before his eyes. The face dissolved into a blur, the fingers elongated into smoke-swirls; then there was only a man-shaped shimmer of gossamer strands where the Archduke had been.

When D'Antonio breathed in, they all came rushing toward him.

He felt clammy filaments sliding up his nose, into his mouth, into the lubricated crevices of his eye sockets. They filled his lungs, his stomach; he felt exploratory tendrils venturing into his intestines. A profound nausea gripped him. It was like being devoured alive by grave-worms. The wraith's consciousness was saturating his own, blotting him out like ink spilled on a letter.

"*I offered you the chance to act of your own free will,*" Francis Ferdinand said. The voice was a hideous papery whisper inside his skull now. "*Since you declined, I am given no choice but to help you along.*"

Joseph Maggio awoke to the sound of his wife choking on her own blood. Great hot spurts of it bathed his face. A tall figure stood by the bed, instrument of death in his upraised hand. Maggio recognized it as the axe from his own backyard woodpile, gleaming with fresh gore. It fell again with a sound like a cleaver going into a beef neckbone, and his wife was silent.

Maggio struggled to sit up as the killer circled to his side of the bed. He did not recognize the man. For a moment their eyes locked, and Maggio thought, *That man is already dead.*

"Cagliostro?" It was a raspy whisper, possibly German-accented, though the man looked Italian.

Wildly, Maggio shook his head. "No, no sir, my name's Joseph Maggio, I just run a little grocery and I never heard of no Cagliwhoever . . . oh Jesus-Mary-and-Joseph please don't hit me with that thing—"

The blade glittered in a deadly arc. Maggio sprawled halfway off the bed, blinded by a sudden wash of his own blood. The axe fell again and he heard his own skull crunching, felt blade squeak against bone as the killer wrenched it out. Another searing cut, then another, until a merciful blow severed his jugular and he died in a red haze.

It was found that the killer had gained access to the Maggios' home by chiseling out a panel in the back door. The chisel had belonged to Joseph Maggio, as had the axe, which was found in a pool of blood on the steps. People all over New Orleans searched their yards for axes and chisels, and locked away these potential implements of Hell.

A strange phrase was found chalked on the pavement a block from the Maggios' house: "Mrs. Maggio is going to sit up tonight, just like Mrs. Tony." Its significance has not been discovered to this day.

Maggio's two brothers were arrested on the grounds that the Maggios were Sicilians, and Sicilians were prone to die in family vendettas. They were released by virtue of public drunkenness; they had been out celebrating the younger one's draft notice on the night of the murders, and had staggered home scarcely able to move, let alone lift an axe.

The detective in charge of the case was shot to death by a burglar one week after the murders. The investigation languished. News of the Romanov family's murder by Bolsheviks in Russia eclipsed the Maggio tragedy. The temperature climbed as June wore on.

"I detect Cagliostro's influences still at work on this plane," the Archduke said. *"We must move on to the next candidate."*

Deep inside his own ectoplasm-snared brain, which the wraith kept docile with wine except when he needed to use the body, D'Antonio could only manage a feeble moan of protest.

A clear tropical dawn broke over New Orleans as John Zanca parked his wagon of fresh breads and cakes in front of Luigi Donatello's grocery. He could not tell whether the grocer and his wife were awake yet, so he decided to take their order around to the back door. He gathered up a fragrant armful of baked goods still warm from the oven and carried them down the narrow alley that led to the Donatellos' living quarters.

When he saw the back door with its lower left panel neatly chiseled out, his arms went limp. Cakes and loaves rained on the grass at his feet.

After a moment, Zanca stepped forward—careful not to crush any of the baked goods—and knocked softly on the door. He did not want to do so, but there seemed nothing else to do. When it swung open, he nearly screamed.

Before him stood Luigi Donatello, his face crusted with blood, his hair and moustache matted with it. Zanca could see three big gashes in his skull, white edges of bone, wet gray tissue swelling through the cracks. How could the man still be standing?

"My God," moaned Donatello. "My God."

Behind him, Zanca saw Mrs. Donatello sprawled on the floor. The top of her head was a gory porridge. The slender stem of her neck was nearly cloven in two.

"My God. My God. My God."

John Zanca closed his eyes and said a silent prayer for the Donatellos' souls and his own.

The newspapers competed with one another for the wildest theory regarding the Axeman, as the killer came to be known. He was a Mafia executioner, and the victims were fugitives from outlaw justice in Sicily. He was a vigilante patriot, and the victims were German spies masquerading as Italian grocers. He was an evil spirit. He was a voodoo priest. He was a woman. He was a policeman.

The Italian families of New Orleans, particularly those in the grocery business, barricaded their doors and fed their dogs raw meat to make them blood-thirsty. These precautions did not stop them from lying awake in the small hours, clutching a rosary or perhaps a revolver, listening for the scrape of the Axeman's chisel.

In high summer, when the city stank of oyster shells and ancient sewers, the killer returned. Two teenage sisters, Mary and Pauline Romano, saw their uncle butchered in his own bed. They could only describe the man as "dark, tall, wearing a dark suit and a black slouch hat."

Italian families with enemies began finding axes and chisels dropped in their yards, more like cruel taunts than actual threats. Some accused their enemies. Some accused other members of their families. Some said the families had brought it upon themselves. Tempers flared in the sodden August heat, and many killings were done with weapons other than axes. Men with shotguns sat guard over their sleeping families, nodding off, jerking awake at the slightest noise. A grocer shot his own dog; another nearly shot his own wife.

The city simmered in its own prejudice and terror, a piquant gumbo.

But the Axeman would not strike again that year.

D'Antonio came awake with a sensation like rising through cool water into sunlight. He tried to move his hands: they moved. He tried to open his eyes:

the ceiling appeared, cracked and water-stained. Was it possible? Was the fucking monster really *gone*?

"Duke?" he whispered aloud into the empty room. His lips were dry, wine-parched. "Hey, Duke? You in there?"

To his own ears he sounded plaintive, as if he missed the parasitic murdering creature. But the silence in his head confirmed it. The wraith was gone.

He stared at his hands, remembering everything he had seen them do. How ordinary they looked, how incapable of swinging a sharp blade and destroying a man's brain, a woman's brain. For a long time he sat on the edge of the bed studying the beds of his nails and the creases in his palms, vaguely surprised that they were not caked with blood.

Eventually he looked down at himself and found that he was wearing only a filthy pair of trousers. He stripped them off, sponged himself to a semblance of cleanliness with the stale water in the basin, slicked his hair back, and dressed in fresh clothes. He left his apartment without locking the door and set off in a random direction.

D'Antonio wandered hatless in the August sun for an hour or more. When he arrived at the *States* newspaper office, his face was streaming with sweat, red as a boiled crawfish. He introduced himself to the editor as a retired police detective, an expert on both Italians and murderers, and gave the following statement:

"The Axeman is a modern Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. A criminal of this type may be a respectable, law-abiding citizen when he is his normal self. Compelled by an impulse to kill, he must obey this urge. Like Jack the Ripper, this sadist may go on with his periodic outbreaks until his death. For months, even for years, he may be normal, then go on another rampage. It is a mistake to blame the Mafia. The Mafia never attacks women as this murderer has done."

He left the *States* office with several people staring bemusedly after him, but they printed the interview in its entirety.

After that, he lived his life much as he had been doing before the wraith's first visit. Armistice Day brought throngs of joyous revelers into the streets, as well as a blessed wave of cool weather; it had stayed sweltering through October. The war was over, and surely the wraith would never come back and make him do those things again.

He could not forget the organic vibration that ran up his arms as blade buried itself in bone.

In fact, he dreamed about it almost every night.

Francis Ferdinand returned in the spring of 1919.

He did not muck about with appearances this time, but simply materialized inside D'Antonio's head. D'Antonio collapsed, clawing at his temples.

"He deceived me for a time, but now I know he still walks this earth," said the wraith. *"We will find him."*

D'Antonio lay curled on his side, blinded by tears of agony, wishing for the comforts of the womb or the grave.

Giacomo Lastanza was a powerful man, but he had been no match for the fiend in his bedroom. Now he lay on the floor with his head split as cleanly as a melon, and his wife Rosalia cowered in a corner of the room clutching her two-year-old daughter, Mary. Mary was screaming, clutching at her mother's long black hair. As the Axeman turned away from her husband's body, Rosalia began to scream too.

"Not my baby! Please, Holy Mother of God, not my baby!"

The axe fell. Mary's little face seemed to crack open like an egg. Rosalia was unconscious before her skull felt the blade's first kiss.

D'Antonio lay naked on the floor. The apartment was a wasteland of dirty clothes and empty wine bottles. But his body was relatively sober for once—they'd run out of money—and as a result he was sharp enough to be carrying on an argument with the wraith.

"Why in hell do we have to kill the women? You can't be worried one of them is Cagliostro."

"He has consorted with a number of dangerous women. When we find him, his wife will bear killing also."

"And until then, you don't mind killing a few innocent ones?"

"It is necessary."

"What about that little baby?"

"If it had been Cagliostro's daughter, he would have raised her to be as wicked as himself."

D'Antonio got control of one fist and weakly pounded the floor with it.

"You goddamn monster—you're just gonna keep killing people, and sooner or later I'll get caught and rot in prison. Or fry in the chair. And you'll go on your merry way and find some other poor sap to chase down that shadow of yours."

"The next one must be him! He is the last one on the list!"

"Fuck the list."

A bolt of excruciating pain shot through D'Antonio's head, and he decided to drop the argument.

Cagliostro was reading by candlelight when he heard the chisel scraping at his door. He smiled and turned a page.

The creature crept into his room, saw him in his chair with his head bent over a book. When it was ten feet away, Cagliostro looked up. When it was

five feet away, it froze in midmotion, restrained by the protective circle he had drawn.

From looking into its eyes, he knew everything about Joseph D'Antonio and the Archduke Francis Ferdinand. But the creature upon which he gazed now was neither D'Antonio nor the Archduke; this was a twisted amalgamation of the two, and it could only be called the Axeman.

He smiled at the creature, though its eyes blazed with murderous rage. "Yes, poor Archduke, it is I. And you will not harm me. In fact, I fear I must harm you yet again. If only you had accepted the necessity of your death the first time, you would be Beyond with your beloved Sophie now.

"No, don't think you can desert your stolen body as it lies dying. You'll stay in there, my boy. My magic circle will see to that!" Cagliostro beamed; he was enjoying this immensely. "Yes, yes, I know about unfortunate ex-Detective D'Antonio trapped in there. But why do you think it was so easy for the Duke to take hold of your body, Mr. D'Antonio, and make it do the terrible things it did? Perhaps because you care not at all for your fellow human beings? 'When they came for the Jews, I did nothing, for I was not a Jew' . . . ah, forgive me. An obscure reference to a future that may never be. And you will both die to help prevent it."

He reached beneath the cushion of his armchair, removed a silver revolver with elaborate engraving on the butt and barrel, aimed it carefully, and put a ball in the Axeman's tortured brain.

Then he put his book aside, went to his desk, and took up his pen.

The letter was published in the *Times-Picayune* the next day.

Hell, March 13, 1919

Editor of the Times-Picayune
New Orleans, La.

Esteemed Mortal:

They have never caught me and they never will. They have never seen me, for I am invisible, even as the ether that surrounds your earth. I am not a human being, but a spirit and a fell demon from the hottest hell. I am what you Orleanians and your foolish police call the Axeman.

When I see fit, I shall come again and claim other victims.

I alone know whom they shall be. I shall leave no clue except my bloody axe, besmeared with the blood and brains of he who I have sent below to keep me company.

If you wish, you may tell the police to be careful not to rile me. Of course, I am a reasonable spirit. I take no offense at the way they have conducted their investigations in the past. In fact, they have been so utterly stupid as to amuse not only me, but His Satanic Majesty, Francis Joseph,

etc. But tell them to beware. Let them not try to discover what I am, for it were better that they were never born than to incur the wrath of the Axeman. I don't think there is any need for such a warning, for I feel sure the police will always dodge me, as they have in the past. They are wise and know how to keep away from all harm.

Undoubtedly, you Orleanians think of me as a most horrible murderer, which I am, but I could be much worse if I wanted to. If I wished, I could pay a visit to your city every night. At will I could slay thousands of your best citizens, for I am in close relationship with the Angel of Death.

Now, to be exact, at 12:15 (earthly time) on next Tuesday night, I am going to pass over New Orleans. In my infinite mercy, I am going to make a little proposition to you people. Here it is:

I am very fond of jazz music, and I swear by all the devils in the nether region that every person shall be spared in whose home a jazz band is in full swing at the time I have just mentioned. If everyone has a jazz band going, well, then, so much the better for you people. One thing is certain and that is that some of those people who do not jazz it on Tuesday night (if there be any) will get the axe.

Well, I am cold and crave the warmth of my native Tartarus, and as it is about time that I leave your earthly home, I will cease my discourse. Hoping that thou wilt publish this, that it may go well with thee, I have been, am, and will be the worst spirit that ever existed either in fact or realm of fancy.

THE AXEMAN

Tuesday was Saint Joseph's Night, always a time of great excitement among Italians in New Orleans. This year it reached a fever pitch. The traditional altars made of a hundred or more kinds of food were built, admired, dismantled, and distributed to the poor; lucky fava beans were handed out by the fistful; the saint was petitioned and praised. Still, St. Joseph's Night of 1919 would remain indelibly fixed in New Orleans memory as "The Axeman's Jazz Night."

Cafés and mansions on St. Charles blazed with the melodies of live jazz bands. Those who could not afford to pay musicians fed pennies into player pianos. A popular composer had written a song called "The Mysterious Axeman's Jazz, or, Don't Scare Me, Papa." Banjo, guitar, and mandolin players gathered on the levees to send jazz music into the sky, so the Axeman would be sure to hear it as he passed over. By midnight, New Orleans was a cacophony of sounds, all of them swinging.

Cagliostro walked the streets for most of the night, marveling (if not actively congratulating himself) at how completely he had brought the city together, and how gay he had made it in the process. No one so much as glanced at him: few people were on the streets, and Cagliostro had a talent for making himself invisible.

He had left the Axeman's corpse locked in the back of the house where it wouldn't spoil the groceries. First, of course, he had bludgeoned the face into unrecognizable mush with the Axeman's own axe. Everything that suggested the murdered man might be someone other than "Mike Pepitone," simple Italian grocer, was in the satchel Cagliostro carried with him.

On the turntable of his phonograph, as a final touch, he had left a recording of "Nearer My God to Thee."

When the jazz finally began to die down, he walked to the docks and signed onto a freighter headed for Egypt. There were any number of wonderful things he hadn't gotten around to learning last time.

Italy, 1945

Toward the end, Mussolini lived in an elaborate fantasy world constructed by the loyal sycophants who still surrounded him. Whole cities in Italy were sanitized for his inspection, the cheering crowds along his parade routes supplemented by paid extras. When Hitler visited Rome, he too was deceived by the coat of sparkle on the decay, the handpicked Aryan soldiers, the sheer bravado of *Il Duce*.

He believed he had cost Hitler the war. Germany lost its crucial Russian campaign after stopping to rescue the incompetent Italian army in Albania. Hitler had believed in the power and glory of Italy, and Mussolini had failed him.

Now he had been forced into exile on Lake Garda. He was a failure, his brilliant regime was a failure, and there were no more flunkies to hide these painful truths. He kept voluminous diaries in which he fantasized that his position in history would be comparable to Napoleon or Christ. His mistress Claretta lived nearby in a little villa, his only comfort.

On 25 April, Germany caved in to the Allies. The Italian people, the ones he had counted on to save him with their loyalty, turned against him. Mussolini and Claretta fled, making for Switzerland.

A few last fanatical companions attempted to help them escape by subterfuge, but they were arrested by partisans on the north shore of Lake Como, discovered hiding in a German truck, cringing inside German coats and helmets. They were shot against the iron gate of an exquisite villa, and their bodies were taken to Milan and strung up by the heels to demonstrate the evils of Fascism.

All in service of the brotherhood of man.

Are You Loathsome Tonight?

Intrigued by Caitlín R. Kiernan's deliberate use of words to create painterly mood rather than straight narrative in "A Story for Edward Gorey" (Wetbones #2), I tried it with extremely different results.

Are You Loathsome Tonight?

When Elvis was first cutting records in Memphis, back before pills and Colonel Parker really got their hooks into him, he used to shop at a black men's clothing store on Beale Street. The store was owned by a black man, and the clothes were aimed at young jiveass black men: ruffled shirts in painful colors, wide-legged pants with glittery stripes, jackets decorated with a king's ransom of rhinestones. Blue suede shoes.

No other white people ever shopped there. Elvis never forgot the fact that the owner had let him take clothes on credit back when his tastes outstripped the size of his wallet, and he patronized the store until it closed in 1968. Bought the owner a Cadillac too.

Of course Elvis loved the clothes at this store, but there was another thing that fascinated him: an eight-foot albino python the owner kept in a tank near the shoe display. Elvis could never quite get it through his head that the snake wasn't poisonous. "Looks just like a big ole worm," he'd say. "But if it bit you you'd fall down dead in two seconds."

"Naw, Elvis," the owner kept telling him, "only way that snake could hurt you is to get 'round your neck and squeeEEEEEEEEZE."

Elvis never listened. Well, maybe he did just a little. He'd always had a taste for things that made him feel endangered without truly being dangerous, movies with plenty of blood and guts, books by men who'd traveled through deserts or to the North Pole and written down every awful detail, snakes that weren't really poisonous but could still squeeze you to death.

After his Momma died, though, Elvis no longer cared so much whether things just *seemed* dangerous. For years now he has been edging closer to real danger in ways he can still deny from day to day. Pounds, *kilos* of bacon. Peanut butter and banana sandwiches fried in butter. Dilaudids and Seconals and Nembutals and Placidyls and Quaaludes . . . the names themselves are soporific to him now, making the back of his brain seem to lubricate with anticipation, much as his mouth waters when he smells food.

There was never a time in his life when Elvis couldn't get all the drugs he wanted. But sometimes even he has to level off a little in order to enjoy the next ride down. When that happens, when he begins to crave his handful of pills, the desire is like a big white snake moving slowly in his gut.

He loves the pills so much that the man who supplies them, Dr. Nick, was recently able to talk him into lending the Presley name—previously unsullied by product endorsement—to a chain of racquetball courts. Even in his fog, Elvis can see the pathetic humor in that idea, which fortunately never came to fruition. He loves the pills so much that once, when a doctor tried to talk him into cutting down, he threatened to go out and buy his own damn drugstore.

Onstage in Vegas in 1974, Elvis told his audience, "In this day and time you can't even get sick—you're *strung out!* Well, by God, I'll tell you something, friends: I have never been strung out in my life except on music. When I got sick here in the hotel, from three different sources I heard I was strung out on heroin. I swear to God. Hotel employees, Jack! Bellboys! Freaks who carry your luggage! Maids! If I find, or hear, the individual that has said that about me—I'm gonna break your neck, you sonofabitch! That is *dangerous*, that is *damaging* to myself, to my little daughter, to my father, to my friends, to my doctor. I will pull your goddamn tongue out by the roots! Thank you very much."

Then he sang "Hawaiian Wedding Song."

These days Elvis spends most of his time in his bedroom and adjoining bath. When maids come in to clean these rooms, Elvis sits awkwardly in the chintz- and doll-filled chamber that is always kept ready for Lisa Marie's visits. The

maid has to open Lisa Marie's windows afterward to get the lingering smell of him out of the pale pink room: a heavy smell of hair oil and sweat, for Elvis has a lifelong fear of water and hates to bathe. Often there is a faint chemical edge to his odor, the excess nostrums and toxins coming right out of his pores.

He is supposed to leave on tour tomorrow, twelve days, twelve shows without a night off. The list of cities alone would be enough to kill a lesser man: Utica, Syracuse, Hartford, Uniondale, Lexington. Fayetteville, Tennessee. And more. He doesn't want to be anywhere but this bathroom. He's told everybody he's not going, but nobody believes him. The Colonel says he can't afford *not* to go, and the hell of it is that this is true: Elvis spends so much, and his money has been so poorly managed, that he'll be broke within the year.

By the mid-seventies, the snarling voice that ripped through "Heartbreak Hotel" was gone, and there was only a touch left of the "Love Me Tender" croon. Now he has lost it all completely: no control of his breathing, a strain to hit the notes, a thick druggy glaze over the emotions that used to seethe just below the surface. He performs songs like "Unchained Melody," songs he can just belt out from deep in his considerable gut. He talks to the audience, particularly when they are unresponsive, trying to win them over. He has given away thousands of dollars' worth of diamond rings and guitars to strangers in Vegas nightclubs, just trying to rekindle that look of unconditional love he used to see in all their eyes.

It's all Elvis has ever wanted, really, unconditional love from everybody in the world.

Sam Phillips had Elvis's first Sun records pressed at Plastic Products, a vinyl plant and warehouse in a bleak part of Memphis. "That's All Right" was pressed there, backed with "Blue Moon of Kentucky." Thousands of black circles dripping with sex, menace, and magic rolled out of Plastic Products and into the clamoring world. Today the building stands vacant and derelict, humpbacked like a giant barrel half buried in cement, a footnote of corrugated steel behind high chain link.

When rattlesnakes convene for denning, they first form a bolus—a ball-shaped cluster, like a collection of rubber bands. Every member of the bolus keeps moving, the pulsing amalgam growing as more snakes arrive. One man peered into a cave and saw a bolus more than four feet thick. There are bigger claims, too, if you want to believe them.

Writer J. Frank Dobie reported the story of a hired man sent to bring in two grazing mules. The man's boss heard a scream, then a fainter one. He found the body in a gully amid hundreds of rattlers. The snakes were forming a bolus. The man, who must have stepped into the gully without looking, was already dead.

—Gordon Grice, *The Red Hourglass: Lives of the Predators*

Elvis sleeps through the day (rising usually between four and eight P.M.) and cannot abide the least sliver of light, so his bedroom windows are shrouded in musty cloth. The bathroom, though, is a shag-carpeted chamber of light with a big black toilet, modular and low-slung, that Elvis privately thinks of as The Toilet of the Future. He spends a good bit of time leafing through girlie magazines on that padded throne, not masturbating—he hasn't had a hard-on in months—but just looking. He's sitting on The Toilet of the Future right now, reading not *Penthouse* or *Cheri* but a book about sexual astrology. Elvis is a Capricorn and supposedly likes to be aggressive. His worst quality is an inability to take "no" for an answer. And that used to be true, actually, back when anybody still dared to tell him "no."

Right now the only thing telling him "no" is his own bowels. He's been sitting here for hours, it feels like. Sometimes he has to take an enema or soak in a hot tub until his belly softens up. His digestive tract, slowed to a crawl by downers, cannot handle the massive amounts of soft processed food Elvis shovels into it each day.

He strains, feels something deep in his gut stirring but refusing to dislodge itself. And then the pain tightens around his heart and begins to *squeeeeeeeze*.

Elvis hopes there will be peace in the valley for him, but he fears there won't be.

The colon is approximately five to seven feet in length in a person Elvis's size and should have been about two inches in diameter. By [Shelby County M.E.'s investigator] Warlick's estimate, however, Elvis's colon was at least three and a half inches in diameter in some places and as large as four and a half to five inches . . . in others. As [pathologist] Florendo cut, he found that this megacolon was jampacked from the base of the descending colon all the way up and half-way across the transverse colon. It was filled with white, chalklike fecal material. The

impaction had the consistency of clay and seemed
to defy Florendo's efforts with the scissors to
cut it out.

—Charles C. Thompson II and James P. Cole,
The Death of Elvis

Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final
criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of
a plot but the creation of a given sensation.

—H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror
in Literature*

. . . *And in Closing (For Now)*

Caitlín R. Kiernan

Afterwords, by their very nature, come *after* you've already read the *words*, the stories themselves. In this case, after you've read Poppy Z. Brite's second short story collection. So it seems, and has always seemed this way to me, odd to prattle on about how good or skillful or transgressive (or *whatever*) the collection at hand might be, when the reading's already been accomplished. You know, by now, how you feel about seeing Zach and Trevor again in "Vine of the Soul" or the historical macabre of "Mussolini and the Axeman's Jazz" (unless, of course, you're one of those perverts who skips ahead and reads the afterword first) and you surely don't need me, or anyone else, to assure you how you feel, one way or another, about these pieces. That's between you, the pages, and Ms. Brite. So, since I have been asked to provide an afterword, regardless of my feelings about those *words* which are meant to come *after*, I offer the following prattlings instead.

Poppy Z. Brite made her first fiction sale thirteen years ago, when she was eighteen and living in North Carolina, a story with the distinctly unhorrific title of "Optional Music for Voice and Piano," which was published by David

Silva in *The Horror Show* in early 1985. But you've probably read this part half a dozen times, at least; it's usually in the interviews.

I met Poppy on October 24th, almost five years ago, at a cozy and now regrettably deceased bookshop in downtown Athens, Georgia. A mildly blustery Friday evening, and I was in town for a Concrete Blonde show the next night, and Melanie Tem and Poppy were passing through on a book tour double-bill for Dell Abyss: "Madames of Horror," as the bookshop advertised the reading and signing, little red handbills with Poppy's photocopied eyes peering mischievously past a rose and ferns. It'll probably embarrass her to find out I still have one of those handbills, tucked inside the copy of *Drawing Blood* I bought that night. But she knows I'm a sentimentalist and, usually, she forgives me for that.

We sat very still in the little bookshop (which smelled like dust and old pages, as a proper bookshop should), our butts by turns aching and numb from the uncomfortable metal folding chairs, and listened while she read to us by candlelight, read to us about Zach and Trevor in the ghosted old house on Violin Road.

That was the night I met Poppy.

But I'd known her, as an author, since sometime two summers before, when a friend read me a review in which Linda Marotta listed *Lost Souls* as one of the ten best vampire novels ever (*Fangoria* #116, Sept. '92) even though the book wasn't even due out for several months. I was living in Birmingham then, working as a dancer and typist, trying to finish my own first novel, hardly making enough money for food and rent, much less new hardbacks. So, that November, when *Lost Souls* finally showed up at B. Dalton or Waldenbooks (or some other such mallspawn that definitely did *not* smell the way a bookshop should), I shoplifted a copy. I read it fast, and then promptly dumped my own manuscript in the kitchen trash, where it stayed for at least a couple of hours before a roommate rescued it.

At the time, I think I wanted very badly to hate her: for that book, for those words. For that beautiful sad story told in the lush and prickling sort of voice that so very rarely speaks from horror (Bradbury did it, but I can think of no one else offhand). That she'd been the one to say those things and not me.

And not just the simple quality of the voice, but the world it spoke from, and spoke *to*: I knew I'd never find Missing Mile on any road map, but knew, also, how much of my life I'd spent there, that Poppy had distilled something essential about growing up Southern. Growing up *weird* and Southern, more precisely, more importantly. That she'd tapped into the stickywarm, kudzu- and whiskey-scented days and nights of those of us who did not just survive our misfit Southern adolescences, but somehow thrived despite the Sunday

School and playground hostilities in a world that, never mind what you might have heard, was seldom so simple as black and white.

Like any writer worth his or her weight in the trees cut down to print her or his work, Poppy has attracted her share of criticism, especially, it seems, from *within* the "horror community." There has, from the publication of *Lost Souls* on down to *Exquisite Corpse*, been no shortage of authors, small press critics, and fanboys/girls willing to bend your ear (and patience) with an accounting of the many threats she poses to the future of dark literature. Or to the youth of America. Or whatever. Take your pick; the list is as long as the insecurities and fears of her detractors. She's been accused of rampant amorality, promoting irresponsible and unsafe sex, serial acts of bad taste, advocating the use of illegal drugs, attempting to capitalize on the self-immolation of a racist arsonist, jumping on the "homosexual bandwagon," and sleeping her way into a career. I suspect that she wears most of these as badges of honor, evidence that she must be doing *something* right. Authors rarely upset and draw so much flack from their peers unless they're perceived as a threat to the *status quo*.

After her strength as a stylist, I'd count Poppy's choice of themes and characters as the secret of her power (and, of course, the source of so much of the unrest). In the last half of this century, so much of horror has been given over to the business of defending middle-class Suburbia from its own guilty nightmares, sitcom *Good and Evil*, *Stoker's Company of Light* on riding lawnmowers. The protection of a way of life as vampiric and ultimately soulless as anything that Irishman ever imagined, and a world that, when she has even chosen to acknowledge it, Poppy has steadfastly insisted must be judged not by its words, but by its actions. Especially its actions against its children.

And this has been the vital spark that has brought her much of her readership, the dark children, the queer children who risk the wrath of parents and school counselors if they dare express themselves beyond the narrow confines of a long since bankrupted morality. The teenagers and young adults who *know* that *Nothing* and *Ghost*, Steve Finn and Eddy Sung and Zachary Bosch, Trevor McGee and Tran Vinh and Luke Ransom are far more honest and valuable role models for their generation than the preening Ken and Barbie fantasies passed off on television as "good kids."

For every critic who complains about the lack of sympathetic characters in Poppy's work, there are a hundred or a thousand of us who can see the truth in *Nothing's* desire or *Luke's* terrible anger, in *Zach's* recklessness or *Ghost's* simple love for Steve, because we've been there. Or because we'll *always* be there.

Two years ago, Poppy and I spent the week before Easter in Dublin, as guests of the Trinity College Science Fiction Society. We passed our spare time

walking in James Joyce and Oscar Wilde's footsteps, sampling Dublin's eclectic and uneven cuisine, and haunting every musty bookshop within walking distance of our hotel on Dame Street. Our hosts spent the week trying to keep the posters advertising our Thursday night lectures up, as another Trinity campus group, right-wingers with a history of denouncing the Society's taste in speakers, had decided to protest by tearing the posters from walls and bulletin boards. Despite the valiant efforts of the members of the Society, most of the posters wound up in trash barrels or simply vanished.

So, it seemed ironically appropriate that Poppy had chosen to devote her half of the talk to recent experiences with censorship, specifically, the resistance and rejection she encountered after finishing her most recent novel, *Exquisite Corpse*. She told the story of a friend who had, in June 1994, been interrogated and detained by the U.S. Justice Department and Canadian customs agents, after a search of his bags had turned up a Xeroxed copy of the opening chapter of the book. She described how Dell had rejected *Exquisite Corpse* without offering any explanation, how her British editor had also passed on the manuscript, citing his discomfort with the book's "tendency to see the characters as admirable, almost vampire-like figures" (I suppose it never occurred to him that vampires are, by definition, serial killers, or to question his implication that it's acceptable to view vampires as admirable), and how the book had bounced from publisher to publisher before finally finding a home with Simon and Schuster in America, and Orion in the U.K.

Indeed, the various controversies that followed the publication of *Lost Souls* and then *Drawing Blood* seem rather tame in comparison to the unease that *Exquisite Corpse* has elicited from some. Repeatedly, Poppy was told by prospective publishers that the novel represented her very best work yet, but that they could not, in good conscience, publish it. Their letters described the book as "too nihilistic," as "too extreme," and as "a bloodbath without justification."

At the root of all this anxiety and alarm seems to be Poppy's decision to portray the novel's two cannibalistic killers as human beings instead of reducing them to one-dimensional monsters who could then be easily dismissed by readers as Not One Of Us. That Andrew Compton and Jay Byrne are shown as men with passions and fears, strengths and weaknesses, that they are humanized rather than demonized, putting the reader at risk of gaining some insight into appetites so alien to their own, and so taboo to their society. And, I suspect, a fear that even the most disgusted reader may find a faint spark of empathy.

I've talked to some who've objected to my labeling the opposition Poppy encountered with *Exquisite Corpse* as actual "censorship." In fact, it may represent the most insidious form of censorship, far worse than the burning of

books or their removal from school and public libraries. By rejecting a book *not* because it's badly written, but because it happens to offend an editor's sensibilities, the publisher engages in a sort of preemptive self-censorship, that, if successful, will prove far more effective at quieting a subversive or disruptive or merely disturbing voice than all the rednecks who ever thumped a Bible. The message filters down to authors, and as Janice Eidus wrote in an essay published in *American Notes and Queries* in 1992:

It has become all too common these days for writers to plan to submit timid, bland, "least offensive" stories . . . to magazines and publishers in hopes of appearing in print . . . stories that do no more than fearfully celebrate the status quo. I have sat among groups of writers as they help one another to figure out—in cynical, defeated tones—which is their least offensive work, work that will, therefore, have the greatest chance of being rewarded.

This situation is surely as prevalent in horror and dark fantasy today as in any other area of literature. And again, I come to the value of Poppy Z. Brite as an author: that she stood behind *Exquisite Corpse* rather than backing down and offering to rewrite the novel as another tiresome morality tale, that her belief in herself has permitted us a powerful and compelling vision of minds that may be outside our everyday experience, but are certainly not outside the experience of humanity.

Another example:

When Poppy began soliciting stories for *Love In Vein II*, her second anthology of vampiric erotica, she was told by her editor to tell contributors that there should be "no taboos" this time around, instructions which she passed along to her prospective contributors. So, a lot of folks who might not ordinarily have approached the market were intrigued by the chance to contribute to a sort of bloodsucking *Dangerous Visions*.

So. The submissions came in (and came in), and Poppy selected the ones that she liked best, and then passed the manuscript (comprised of 22 stories) along to the publisher. And was soon informed that four of the stories, pieces by Nancy Kilpatrick, John Ames, Scott Urban, and Bentley Little, would have to be cut. No room for debate, never mind the original guidelines for the book, the anthology would not be released if these four stories were included.

Why?

Because they were *too explicit* for an anthology of vampiric erotica whose guidelines, at the editor's request, had specified that absolutely nothing could be too explicit. I recall, Poppy passed quickly through fevery stages of shock, anger, and depression. She briefly considered scrapping the whole project and I think she finally decided not to *only* because canning *Love In Vein II* would

screw the eighteen other authors (at this point, she'd already actually *bought* the stories, you see, all the authors had been paid and informed by Poppy that they would be in the book). The four offending stories were excised from the final manuscript, and an expurgated, presumably less taboo-violating and therefore more market-friendly, version of the anthology was released.

And, as Harlan Ellison has said so many times, so it goes. At least as long as we let it.

In 1995, Poppy moved out of her apartment on Royal Street and into a huge and rambling old house she shares with her husband, Chris DeBarr (a chef), 12 cats (Colm, Marie, Boris, Nicky, Tomas, Gideon, Milo, Maymay, Marcel, Rexina, Nathan, and Abby), three dogs (Charlie, Todd, and Annabel), and an albino king snake named Sredni Vashtar. She and Chris have made their bedroom in the beautiful old solarium looking out on the backyard and greenhouse.

It's the house where she finished *Exquisite Corpse* and wrote her biography of Courtney Love, the house where she's begun her next novel. The sort of house that's haunted in the most gentle way possible, ghosts you feel (but never see) waiting behind the sturdy lathe and plaster walls, or watching quietly from beneath the tulip trees; the wise and patient sort of house that all writers need, a house that's seen enough to know that things take time. A house as unapologetic and complex as Poppy's fiction. Which is a good thing, since, given the continued freedom to travel to her favorite cities on a regular basis (Amsterdam, San Francisco, Negril, New York, and London), it's a place she seems content to live for a while.

We should all be half so fortunate, I think.

Postscript: A few hours after I finished this piece, a friend at Aberdeen University in Scotland e-mailed me that comedian Jenny Eclair has been banned from reviewing *Exquisite Corpse* on British Radio 4.

[A shorter version of this essay originally appeared as "Approximately 2,000 Words About Poppy Z. Brite" in the *Program Book of the 1997 World Horror Convention, May, 1997.*]

About the Author

POPPY Z. BRITE is the author of four novels, *LOST SOULS*, *DRAWING BLOOD*, *EXQUISITE CORPSE*, and *THE LAZARUS HEART*; two short story collections, *WORMWOOD* (also published as *SWAMP FOETUS*) and *ARE YOU LOATHSOME TONIGHT?* (published in the UK as *SELF-MADE MAN*); and a biography of rock diva Courtney Love. She edited two anthologies of erotica, *LOVE IN VEIN* and *LOVE IN VEIN 2*. She recently wrote and illustrated the novella *PLASTIC JESUS* for Subterranean Press, and is at work on a new novel. She lives in New Orleans with her husband.