

ROGUE WORLDS

#9



OUT OF THE SHADOWS AGAIN



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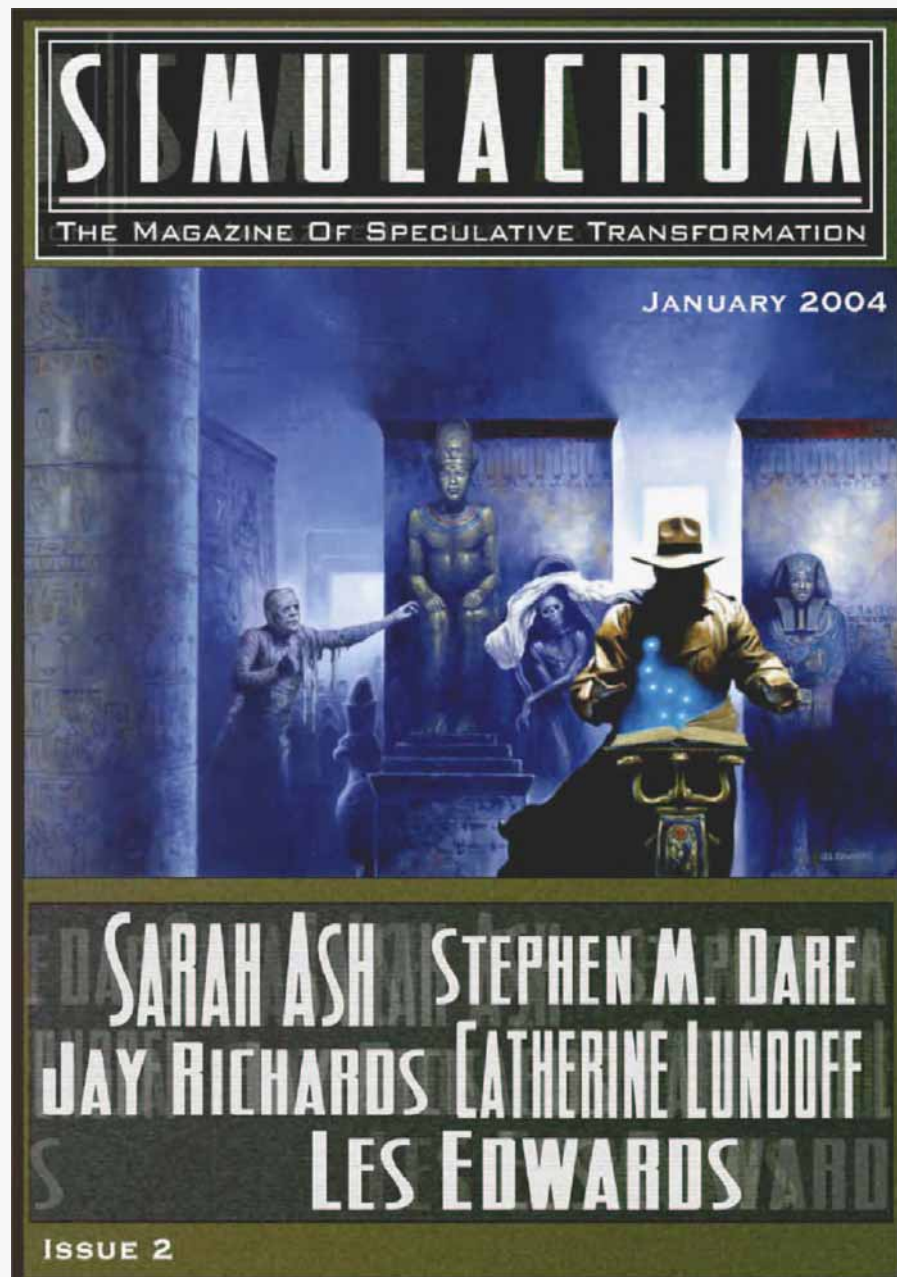
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EDITORIAL: OUT OF THE SHADOWS

by Doyle Eldon Wilmoth, Jr

Well it's been a bumpy road back to say the least. After a year on hiatus and being ill most of the year with one irritating ailment after another (nothing too serious), I'm returning back to the fold of good health and good fortune.

I'd like to thank the fifteen hundred people that subscribed while the magazine was in the process of changing formats because I thought about giving the magazine a burial in December when I was down with the flu. But subscribers kept poring in – as many as ten and twelve a day at one point. So, I thought it over and decided maybe the magazine's time hasn't yet come and this ol' dog still has some bite left in her.

So thanks for subscribing and keeping me out of the shadows.

I must admit it wasn't easy getting this issue ready for publication – everything that should have been done a lot earlier was pushed to the last minute. And, well... to make a long story short, everything that could go wrong, did. Hopefully, all the rust has fallen off the armor and I can get back into the battle without getting my head lopped off.

I'd also thank all the writers for continuing to support the magazine as well – some waiting as long as a year to see their work published. And, my deepest apologies and thanks to the untold hundreds of writers still waiting to hear back from me on submissions. Why should I thank them? They could easily have pulled their stories and sent them off to other publications. Remember a magazine is as only good as the content inside – and without great writers submitting work; the magazine wouldn't be worth reading.

And thinking of reading, I think it's time to let you go read what's truly important: All the great fiction and poetry inside.

Enjoy!

Doyle Eldon Wilmoth, Jr

BELLY OF THE BEAST

by Jason Brannon

Jason Brannon is the author of over 100 published short stories, four short story collections, two novels, and two chapbooks. His writing has appeared in such diverse publications as Dark Realms, The Edge, Wicked Hollow, Black Petals and Dark Karma. Author's website: <http://www.angelfire.com/rant/puzzles/>

Sheriff Kent Rivers pulled the reins taut, slowing his horse. A look of sincere disbelief covered his face like a Halloween mask. "I shot him six times, Jacob. I shot that Mustang he was riding too. We saw it drop in the desert and fall on top of him."

Shielding his eyes against the sun, Jacob watched the outlaw's horse racing away into the hills, leaving behind a cloud of pale dust. "Maybe the horse just tripped when we saw it go down. Maybe one of Clements' feet is caught in the stirrup and he's being dragged along."

The bullet that zinged past Jacob's face made him quickly reconsider.

"Still think he's dead?" the sheriff said.

"I saw you shoot him, Kent. I saw every one of those bullets hit their mark. There's no way Clements could have survived."

"That may very well be," the sheriff said, kicking his steed in the ribs. "But something's keeping Dirk Clements alive after I emptied my gun into him. Needless to say, I don't think it's the Good Lord's mercy."

"Maybe we can still catch up," Jacob said, trying to seem optimistic. "Then we'll see for ourselves."

Yes, Rivers mused to himself. *We'll catch up and see that Dirk Clements is dead and rotting just like John May and just like Clark Logan.* The thought didn't reassure him in the least. Even his gun wasn't much of a reassurance at this point. It hadn't been very effective against Clements the first six times he fired it. Still, he could see the thread of cohesion that was steadily running its course through the events of the previous months and years like a lit fuse to dynamite. That fuse was now burning in his direction.

There was no way the deaths of May and Logan could be something as simple as coincidence just as it was no simple coincidence that they were chasing Clements through the desert. The millstones of karma were about to grind him to a pulp, and there was nothing he could do about it.



Kent remembered the way the four of them had drawn down on that innocent squaw who had been filling an earthenware jug with water from the murky creek. It did little good now to think that the booze was to blame for their actions. The woman was dead, and there was nothing he could do to rewrite history.

"I heard that Sheriff May over in Mingus killed Dirk Clements before Clements shot him," Jacob said over the thunder of galloping hooves. "Several of the deputies helped cart his body away. They said May put four bullets in his head. Added to the ones you shot, that makes ten. There ain't a man alive that could walk after that."

"I heard the same thing," Rivers said, trying not to give away his true feelings. "But obviously that can't be the way it happened. Otherwise we wouldn't be hunting him down for the murder of Clark Logan."

"Logan deserved what he got," Jacob said.

"You don't have to convince me. I've known Logan for a long time."

"Army?"

The sheriff slowed his horse to a trot, trying hard to ignore the shadowy figure he saw standing high up in the rocks, peering down at the two of them.

"Yeah, Logan and I were in the same unit," he sighed. "But we weren't what you would call close friends. We just drank ourselves into oblivion when the nights got lonely and we ran out of things to talk about. He changed a lot since those days. So did I."

"Yeah, it's funny," Jacob said. "You become a sheriff and Logan becomes a public drunk."

And yet we'll both wind up dead because of what we did, Kent thought.

"I heard Logan wasn't in very good shape when they found him," Jacob said, fishing for details.

"I wouldn't wish Logan's fate on anybody," the sheriff said, eyeing his deputy with concern. "You didn't see the body, and that's probably a good thing. When I first saw what was left of him, Clark reminded me a whole lot of an old bull that died out in one of my fields a year or two ago. There were big hunks of meat ripped out of his flank like something had been eating on him. In the case of the old bull, the vultures were to blame. Not so with Clark. They found him locked up tight inside his house. Even the dogs couldn't have gotten to him. The only reason we even know it was Clements is because he left his horse tethered in front of Clark's house."

"It would be a lot easier if we could just ask Sheriff May what really happened to Clements," Jacob said, frowning. "Of course, that's impossible since he's dead too."

Sheriff Rivers nodded grimly, remembering the drunken sorrowful look in May's eyes so many years ago. Unwilling to think about the way May's face had so acutely mirrored his own after they killed that poor Lakota woman, he urged his dark horse onward onto the rising mountain path. The horse stopped on its own before reaching the cloud of flies up ahead that were buzzing around something in the dirt.

"It's a severed hand," Jacob exclaimed, backing away instinctively. Already maggots were beginning to dig their way out of the rotting flesh. One of the fingers twitched involuntarily.

"It's more than that," the sheriff said, feeling sick. "Look at that tattoo across the palm."

"A crucifix," Jacob noted, shooing the cloud of flies away from his face. "Clements had one like that on his shooting hand."

The sheriff took a deep breath of clean air and then knelt to examine the grisly artifact. When he stood up again, there wasn't much color left in his ruddy face. He had a pretty good idea about what was happening, but he didn't want to say anything just yet. Jacob would think he was a fool or crazy or both.

"That hand wasn't cut off," he said at last. "There wasn't a clear laceration at the wrist. Only a ragged, rotting stump."

"How do you explain the fact that the hand's already started rotting?" Jacob asked. "Clements came by this way not more than five minutes ago. Nothing deteriorates that fast."

"I can't explain any of it," Rivers said, keeping a steady eye fixed on the rider in the hills. He was surprised and a little disconcerted to discover that another rider had joined the first. What was even less comforting was the familiar way the second rider's cowboy hat cocked ever-so-slightly to the left. There was only one man he had ever known that wore his hat that way, and yet Sheriff May was dead.

In the glaring sunlight, it was difficult to tell much about the riders that were trailing them from the mountain path that flanked the edge of the desert. Still, Kent could see enough to discern that one of them wore a feathered headdress.

That, more than anything else, was enough to convince him that this had everything to do with that fateful evening when they had all emptied their

revolvers into that poor woman at the river. He had been expecting this day for quite some time now and was actually a little relieved to learn that it was finally here. The running and hiding were over. The only thing that worried him now was that Jacob might get killed because of something he had done a long time ago.

Up ahead, Clements had stopped and so had the two shadowy forms in the rocks that were keeping pace. Jacob maneuvered his horse around the thick clumps of chaparral brush that were blocking his view.

“Look,” he said, pointing at the man they were chasing.

Kent saw what was wrong with Clements as a vulture swooped down out of the sky and plucked a ribbon of flesh away from the outlaw’s chest with its scissored beak. If there had ever been any doubts that the man was well and truly dead, seeing that bird help itself to a bit of Clements’ flesh was enough to dispel them.

“He can’t be dead,” Jacob said, disbelieving his eyes. “Dead men don’t ride out into the middle of the desert.”

Hoping to prove his own theory, Jacob drew his revolver and fired. Thrown from his horse, Clements took one bullet high in the shoulder and one in the throat. Thick green tendrils of smoke wafted out of the bullet wounds, drifting away into the sky like gasoline fumes. Unfazed, the outlaw got back on his horse, surrounded by an eerie green haze that circled his head like a halo.

“I don’t believe it,” Jacob muttered, holstering his revolver. “It’s impossible, I know, but the horse is in the same sad shape.”

The greenish smoke was seeping out of two large wounds in the horse’s flank. Another bullet had torn away a large fraction of the stallion’s face. Clearly, it was as dead as the man who rode it.

Frightened and unsure of what to do, the sheriff scanned the rocks for the men that were tracking them. To his horror, there were now three of them, all watching him. This time Jacob saw them too.

“Who are they?” he asked. “What is going on?”

“I’m about to pay for my sins,” Kent said calmly, trying to prepare for the worst.

“I don’t understand any of this,” Jacob said. “Look. Clements is joining them.”

Rivers sighed, wondering whether he should tell the whole story. He stopped short of his first word, however, when he saw the four horsemen coming down from the rocks.

Jacob had enough words for both of them.

“That’s Sheriff May,” he exclaimed, able to make out the first of the four. “But that can’t be Sheriff May. Sheriff May is dead.”

“That’s Sheriff May,” Kent confirmed. “And Logan and Clements and what looks like a Lakota shaman.”

“This is all very confusing,” Jacob stammered, keeping his hands close to his revolver.

“Me and Logan were in the army together,” Kent explained. “But May and Clements were in that unit too.”

“So you knew Clements before all of this?”

The sheriff nodded slowly, his eyes full of pain and regret. “We accidentally killed a Lakota woman who was drawing water at the creek. We were drunk and didn’t really know who or what we were shooting at. Or maybe we did and just didn’t care. I’ve felt guilty about it ever since. May did too. I think that’s why the two of us became sheriffs. We wanted to atone for our sin. As you might imagine, Logan and Clements didn’t really care one way or the other.”

“And now they’re all dead,” Jacob said. “You’re the only one left.”

“It appears so,” the sheriff replied. “But I don’t think it will be that way for long. I think I’ve been drawn out into this desert to be killed for what I did. May and Clements killed each other in that gunfight. Then Clements killed or was directed to kill Logan. Now they’re all coming after me.”

“The only question now,” Jacob said, “is who brought them all back to life.”

Kent didn’t have an answer for that, only a suspicion. “I think we’ll find out soon enough,” he said.

Jacob drew his gun as the horsemen drew closer. Kent motioned for him to put it back where it belonged, in the holster. “You and I both know it’s not going to do any good,” the sheriff said solemnly as the group wandered down the path toward them.

Even from a distance, Kent could tell that things weren’t as they should have been with the men. Hunks of flesh fell from their bones as the horses’ jostling shook the men loose. A cloud of flies hovered over them contentedly, following their every move.

Clements, always the most vocal of the group, shouted to them from the closest hill. “We killed this man’s wife,” he explained, motioning to the Lakota medicine

man. "I don't think he liked that too much. Now we're all paying for what we did. Well, everyone but you. You're the only one of us left that's still alive, but we'll tend to that soon enough."

Kent sucked in a deep breath. "You should go, Jacob," he said. "I don't want to get you killed because of something I did a long time ago."

"I'm staying," Jacob said firmly. "I'm not leaving you out here to die."

"I'm as good as dead already. I'm going out to meet them."

Jacob knew it was pointless to argue. The sheriff wasn't going to drag anyone else into his problems. But that didn't mean Jacob couldn't go of his own volition.

The trail was flanked by ragged clumps of arroyo, cactus, and small boulders that grew in size as they headed further into the mountains. Kent tried to ignore the stench of hot putrefying flesh as he rode to meet his destiny, but the breezes were brisk. Even from a hundred yards away he could smell the dead men and something else that reminded him of honeysuckle.

"It's best this way," Sheriff May croaked as Kent got closer to them. May's skin was a sickly rotten gray, his face a burrow for worms, his eyes little more than sightless gaping holes where fly larvae could hatch. He wasn't the friend that Kent remembered.

Kent couldn't imagine sharing a similar fate and made a split-second decision with little regard for consequences. He drew both of his guns before he had a chance to reconsider and rode toward the band of men, firing at will, hoping to inflict as much damage as possible before they took him down. One bullet took the side of Logan's face off. Another ripped all the way through Clements' abdomen, boring a ragged hole. A third hit May in the eye. The back of his skull exploded like a hunk of rotten melon. Yet none of the men felt any pain. They simply gathered closer around the shaman, intent on protecting him from any stray bullets.

Kent never saw the figure that jumped out of the rocks, knocking him from his horse.

"You killed my woman," the shaman said as his dead squaw bit a hunk of flesh out of Kent's bicep. "Now she's going to kill you."

Kent squealed in pain and revulsion as the zombie woman squirmed on top of him, leaving behind a messy coating of slime and blood. Even after all these years, he could still see the holes that they had made in her body with their guns and their alcohol-numbed trigger fingers. Horrified, he tried to push the squaw off of him. But as so many discover with their last breath, the power of death is much too weighty to slink away from.

As the Lakota woman devoured him bite by bite, Kent knew that Jacob would be riding to his rescue with guns blazing. He also knew that Jacob would pay for that decision with his life.

He scarcely had time to think about the burgeoning family Jacob would be leaving behind as he felt two new sets of mouths fasten to his skin like leeches. Logan gnawed at him with what was left of his mangled jaw while May feasted hungrily. The back of the former sheriff's head was like the ragged half of a broken eggshell, all sharp bits of bone and goo. Kent would have gagged at the sight if he hadn't been in so much pain. Instead, he simply howled.

As the blood flowed and the life ebbed from his body, Kent watched as Jacob rushed toward the cadre of dead men. He never made it as far as his fallen friend. Clements saw to that, rushing out of the shadows, his torn lips drawn back from his blackened teeth in a painful grimace. Jacob was quick enough to pull his revolver and fire a shot into Dirk's thigh, but the bullet didn't slow the dead man down.

"Jacob," Rivers cried out as Clements opened his mouth and took an enormous chunk of flesh out of the younger man's face. From the looks of things, Clements had been shot in about twenty different places. Thin wisps of green smoke trailed from his wounds like the lingering remnants of a smoldering tobacco pipe. His face was a twisting writhing nest of made up of insects and rotting flesh. He was missing his gunfighting hand. In its place there was only a gangrenous stump to mark the place where the extremity had rotted away. Some of his teeth had broken off at the gum. The ones left behind were stained with blood and ragged bits of flesh.

Jacob managed to empty his revolver into the zombie outlaw, but the bullets were pitifully inadequate. Clements bit down hard into Jacob's skull. The sound was like the crunch of teeth sinking into a ripe apple. The shaman, meanwhile, dismounted his horse and knelt to say prayers to some dark desert god, thanking him for the vengeance.

Winking his eyelids fiercely to keep the blood from blinding him, Jacob weakly found the gun that he had dropped in the struggle and managed one more shot. This time he didn't aim at the zombie that was on top of him. Instead, he went for the shaman, and a strange thing happened. The bullet hit the Lakota chieftain in the thigh, and all the zombies responded as if they were the ones who had been shot. A hunk of bloodied meat fell from Clements' lifeless mouth as he wailed out in pain. Jacob instantly made the cognitive leap. If physical harm to the shaman meant physical harm for the zombie, it was likely that killing the Lakota mystic would put the zombies out of commission for good.

"Shoot the shaman," Kent rasped with bloodied lips, unable to stand the agony any longer. "Shoot him now."

With trembling hands, Jacob cocked the hammer on the revolver and fired. But the shot went wide, giving the shaman opportunity to pull himself onto his horse and ride toward the hills away from danger. The zombies, although hurting from their master's wound, resumed their feasting. The gun quickly fell from Jacob's hands.

Sadly, Kent watched his friend die and knew that the zombies were saving the worst for him. Yet, in a way, he was grateful that this whole horrid mess was about to be finished. He was tired of looking over his shoulder.

He screamed once at the sight of May, Logan, Clements, and the Lakota squaw rushing toward him with red-rimmed mouths. Then he surrendered quietly, thankful for a little peace.

That peace was short lived, however, when he opened his eyes and realized that eternity had no room for his marred soul. It seemed that there were, in fact, fates worse than death.

The shaman laughed at him and beckoned him forward with a gaunt hand. Like a puppet at the end of a string, Kent responded, staggering toward him on legs that were little more than bone with scant bits of flesh.

He suspected that it would be quite a while before the shaman allowed him to return to the dust. But there was another way around that torment. They had all seen what had happened when the shaman took a bullet. Killing him would free them all.

Kent fingered the knife that he wore on a belt sheath and lumbered toward his new master. He stopped short, however, when he saw the snaking open wound on the shaman's throat.

"A necromancer draws power from death," the chieftain rasped, the slash opening and closing with each word like a second pair of lips. "And I grow stronger every day."

The confusion must have shown on Kent's face.

"That whole bit with the bullet was just an act on my part. There's nothing better for crushing spirits than a sense of false hope."

Kent rushed at the shaman anyway. The medicine man made no attempt to exercise control over his newly risen manikin. Instead, he allowed Kent to bury the knife hilt-deep into his chest before waving his hand to set the others in motion.

Like sharks stirred into a frenzy by blood, the zombies leapt on Kent with ravenous mouths. Kent screamed once because he suddenly knew that there was no end for him now, not ever.

Eternity was going to be a dark place, and his hell a four-fold torment. Even after the zombies were done consuming him, Kent still had cognizance and the ability to fear and dread. He knew where he was and hated the thought of spending infinity rotting in the stomachs of three men and a Lakota squaw.

Still, at least he wasn't alone in his misery.

Situated there in the bellies of the beasts were bits and pieces of his long-time friend and deputy.

"Hello, sheriff," Jacob seemed to say.

Unable to do anything else, Kent could only imagine himself screaming.

THE END

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THE ZOO

by Barbara Harrison

Barbara Harrison is a South African by birth and lives in Gauteng, South Africa's smallest but most populace province. She is a journalist by profession and has worked at both national and local newspapers in South Africa. In her professional capacity she has reported on a wide range of issues, including crime and local politics. Despite a love for reading, especially horror and science fiction, she only recently started writing fiction.

To the back of the group one of the others screamed. The child's voice was high and piercing, like an electric saw slicing through a sheet of metal. Somehow it managed to convey fright, horror and almost instinctive revulsion all at once.

A shiver of disgust rippled through the entire gathering. Closer to the front the older boy gasped, only suppressing a hysterical shriek with every ounce of his self-control.

"...And this pair are the pride of our collection. The specimens were acquired at great cost and are being studied by our best zoologists. They are the only ones left," the tour guide said.

The two repulsive creatures skulked in a far corner of the compound. The female had her back turned to the tour group, but the male (identifiable by its large, dangling genitals) was less demure. It crouched next to its mate, muscles tensed as if ready to pounce, small, malevolent eyes darting from face to face as the group filed past the enclosure.

The older boy sucked in his breath again, his heart pounding, his skin tingling. The monster had caught his gaze and held it. Its grotesque, twisted features would be etched in his memory forever.

In the background the tour guide droned on, mindlessly spewing facts and statistics, just like he had done at every one of the other exhibits.

The boy stared, sickened but nevertheless mesmerized. Nothing had prepared him for this. They had seen mammals, reptiles, fish and birds, all on the brink of extinction, but nothing like the hideous creature, which glared at him now.

The tigers, with their fiery orange pelts and black stripes, had been beautiful and majestic, even a little scary. You'd have to be a bit clueless not to be frightened of their long, yellow teeth and razor-sharp claws.

Nevertheless there was something noble about them, and it was sad to think they no longer roamed the far off forests of central and south Asia, or the Siberian steppes. Of the eight species of tigers that used to hunt in the cool, green forest, or raise their cubs on the frozen wastelands of Russia only one species, the Bengal tiger, had survived. There were only 200 left.

The tigers had become extinct as a result of hunting and the destruction of their natural habitat. The rhinoceroses had met their doom in a similar way, hunted to oblivion for their horns, which were used in traditional medicine.

Of the five species of rhino, which had lived in Africa and Asia, only two were left. Four African white rhinos, with their broad-lipped muzzles and gray hides, and twenty Indian rhinos were the only living proof that these strange grass-eating mammals had once lived.

Like the tigers, the rhinos had an air of nobility and innocence about them, not so the two creatures that lurked in the shadowy corner of the enclosure, their patchy pelts glistening unnaturally, their skins slick and covered in grime. Physically they were unimpressive, but cunning and sly malice seemed to ooze from them and infest their environment, the very atmosphere they breathed, like a deadly disease.

The boy tried to look away, his heart beating frantically, threatening to explode, but the creature held his gaze with its glittering, evil eyes. He couldn't move or even make a sound. He was its prisoner, his willpower draining away and his mind being sucked into a swirling vortex of bloody images: a dead elephant, ragged, crimson cavities where its tusks had been; a majestic redwood, crashing to the ground; a gorilla's hand, severed at the wrist; a penguin, covered in oil slick.

Then the monster stormed. One second it was still crouching in the corner, the next it was rushing insanely across the expanse that separated it from the boy, bellowing at the top of its voice.

Again the child tried to turn away, but the pair's eyes were still locked. He could only watch as the creature came crashing towards him. Sweating profusely now, it heedlessly trampled vegetation underfoot and swatted the branches of trees obstructing its progress out of the way. Once it almost stumbled, but staggered to its feet again, denying the boy even a second of hope.

No one, not even the tour guide, made a move to help him, and he knew he was going to die! The creature would overpower him, rip out his eyes with its blunt, dirty nails, and sink its yellowed teeth into his flesh. Waves of blind panic washed over him, and he could feel the blood coursing through his veins to feed his thumping heart. Soon that heart would be silent.



The creature was only a couple of yards away, and he could see the whites of its bloodshot eyes, the beads of sweat on its face, smell its rancid odor. A high fence separated the crowd from the animals, but the monster could clear it, if it was determined enough and wasn't stopped. Why wasn't anyone helping him? Didn't they know the creature meant to kill him? He was going to die!

Just as the monster reached the barrier the life returned to the boy's limbs, but it was too late. He turned, stumbling deeper into the safety of the group, looking over his shoulder to see how far behind him it was. The monster leapt, its legs frantically treading the air as it gained height, its arms whirling wildly.

It was about to clear the fence, but the tour guide calmly stepped forward, reached up and prodded it with an electric baton. The creature harmlessly crashed to the ground.

"Normally the fence is electrified. As you can see they're dangerous, but not very intelligent. It's no wonder they destroyed their entire planet. This boys and girls is Homo Sapiens Sapiens, hunter of animals, polluter of rivers and oceans, scourge of the earth," the tour guide said.

The boy watched the sickening, pale pink creature cower on the ground, trying to imagine how something so obviously inferior had killed an entire planet. It was impossible, and he shuddered with revulsion, encircling his torso with an orange tentacle to calm himself.

He could not understand what the creature had howled when it attacked him, if its hollering had made any sense at all. Nevertheless, the sounds had stuck in the boy's mind, like a haunting refrain.

"Help us!" the creature had screamed, "For God's sake, help us!"

THE END

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KIDS' GAMES

by Morris Solomon

Morris Solomon is a born and bred New Yorker and he has worked for a number of years in New York as a Film Editor on both Features and TV series. He now devotes his time to writing fiction in a variety of genres.

*VROOM, VROOMVROOM, VROOM, VROOMVROOM, the boys in their school uniforms roar at her, getting up engine speed with their mouths as they rendezvous, assembling in V formation, about ten feet away from where she stands dressed in plaid skirt and white blouse, frozen with fear and terror, her tears streaming down her face and staining her blouse, V-R-O-O-O-O-M, V-R-O-O-O-O-M, the noise blasting into her ears and grating into her brain, VROOM-VROOM, VROOMVROOM, the boys quickly achieving air speed, then peeling off, first one, then another, then a third, their arms held straight out as wings, now screeching in high-pitched whines as they bank and turn and swoop down upon her in dive-bomber formation, while she, feeling those terrible pains in her back, screams and screams, trying to reach for her embroidered handkerchief pinned to her blouse to wipe her tears, **ALL AT ONCE** the boys dart in at her, dive-bomber screeches changing to a chant, **rub, rub, rub-her-hump, rub, rub, rub-her-hump**, and their outstretched wings now hands again, quickly rubbing her back, at the same time chanting the words, **goodluckgoodluckgoodluckgoodluck, goodluckgoodluckgoodluckgoodluck, goodluckgoodluckgoodluckgoodluck** - for everyone knows that for it to work, the goodluck words must be said four times as fast as they could, and the whole phrase three times as fast as they could - and then the boys wing away, **V-R-O-O-O-O-M**, and soar upward to that same rendezvous point, resume that same V formation, repeat that same daredevil run at her, diving, swooping, chanting **rub, rub, rub-her-hump**, darting, rubbing, chanting **goodluckgoodluckgoodluckgoodluck**, then wing away, over and over again, until, finally, her father, shouting at the boys, comes rushing out of the house, stamping off the porch that is about thirty feet away from where she is standing in terror all that time, and chases them away. He takes her hand gently and they walk quietly into the house.*

* * *

Objects. Festoons of objects. Flourishes of objects, brandishes of objects, cascades of objects. Arrays of objects, hordes of objects, armies of objects. Objects familiar and objects strange. Objects for the body and objects for the soul. All in a flea market shadowed in endless time. Frenzied bargain-hunters gorge every path of the market place, shoving, elbowing, jostling, crashing against infinite numbers of booths, stalls, tables all brimming over with trifles,

curios, knickknacks. They eye, finger, fondle unwanted gimcracks, haggle for worthless gewgaws, covet just-sold-under-their-very-nose useless bric-a-brac, then move on to crash again and again against countless booths, stalls, tables.

* * *

She clings tightly to him in the predawn morning. Lanterns on the tables of concessionaires who had set up early do not fully dispel the darkness surrounding the concessions. The weak, yellow beams of flashlights carried by bargain-hunters moving from concession to concession barely reveal the paths ahead.

Her father stops and pulls a flashlight out from his rucksack. "Here," he says, handing it to her, "this one is for you. It's yours. I have one also."

She clicks it on and off a few times. "Thanks, papa," she says. She seems to be standing a little taller. "I love you."

He smiles down at her and says, "Happy birthday, my Maddy." As they walk on in the darkness, Madeline plays the flashlight's beams on the ground ahead with one hand, not letting go of her father with the other. People emerge from the shadows between the concessions, walking quietly and speaking in whispers. Madeline watches them as they enter into the feeble splash of the lanterns. They bend down close to the tabletops, shining their beams on the wares. The concessionaires standing behind their tables bend down with them, almost in unison, to make sure that nothing is pilfered. She has to stand on tiptoe to shine her flashlight on the tabletops. The concessionaires bend down for her, too. To Madeline it all seems a funny dance, everyone bowing to each other.

It's been dark for a very long time, she complains. When will it be day? She wonders if the sun has died. Cold and tired and barely keeping her feet, she leans heavily against her father while holding tightly to his hand. Her flashlight, together with all the objects her father had bought for her, has been stowed away in the rucksack.

Bargain-hunters still appear from the surrounding darkness, still walking slowly and speaking in hushed tones as they swing their flashlights from side to side, but to Madeline, weary from the cold and darkness and barely able to keep her heavy-lidded eyes open, the bodies moving silently around her take on weird, unrecognizable shapes as their shadows elongate and contract in the undulating beams, and suddenly everyone in the market are not living beings at all, but ghosts who drift out of black nothingness, glide from stall to stall, hovering over and searching each table with soft moans, then slip back into the black nothingness.

Her eyes wide with fear, she turns her face up to her father and asks, "Are these ghosts, papa? Are all these people around us ghosts?"

He looks down at her and answers, "No, Madeline, not ghosts, just people looking for their souls that were taken away from them because they were bad."

"Then what are we doing here, Papa?" she asks, her voice quaking. "I wasn't b-bad was I? My s-soul wasn't taken away from me, papa, was it?"

He doesn't answer her immediately. She grows even more frightened and begins to cry, the tears streaming down her face. "Was it, papa? Was it? Was my s-soul t-taken away from me b-because mummy died?"

"Oh my God, no," her father quickly answers, alarmed at what he had said. "No, no, my Maddy, oh my God, No!" He stoops down and throws his arms about her and picks her up. He holds her close to him and says, "I'm sorry, Maddy mine, I'm so sorry I frightened you. You're not bad, you're a very good girl. You can never be bad, you're my Maddy, and you are a very, very special child, you are a child of God!"

* * *

A child of God, indeed! She tells herself in her more perverse moments she's in good company, sharing with Richard the Third his rage, and his winter of discontent, making it her own private season...

...I that am rudely stamp'd...

...I that I that am curtail'd thus of fair proportion,

Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,

Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time...

Into this breathing world, scarce half made up....

She'd researched all too well. Too much revelation, no use for it.

* * *

"It's a rotten thing to do," she said to the concessionaire.

"Rotten? Rotten?" the dealer answered, a small smile of amusement on his face.

"I have to point out to you, miss, that you examined the box with great care."

Madeline glared at the short, neat man with the pencil-thin mustache for a moment, then spoke in a measured voice. "The lid was cracked, it jammed when I tried to open the box. You had an obligation to tell me that."

"Listen, miss, I had no such obligation," the concessionaire exclaimed. "Everything here is `as is', everyone knows that," he added, sweeping a hand over the crowd that had gathered around the stall, "everyone!"

She continued, quietly. "For you to sell me that box at that price, without telling me, well, that's criminal!"

"Criminal? Criminal?" the concessionaire uttered, a moue distorting his lips. Puffing himself up before the onlookers, he declared in a superior tone, "You are making a mistake, miss! I repeat, I had no such obligation, however," he said, quickly holding up a hand to forestall any further unpleasant reaction from this troublesome woman facing him, "however..." and thrust at her a tightly closed fist with some crumpled bills in it. "Give me the box," he demanded with a sniff of arrogance, "here is your money."

The concessionaire instantly metamorphosed. His face, which seconds ago had smiled, frowned and moued, was now a mask of frozen indifference. His only movement, as he waited for the box to be returned, was a leg jiggling with impatience.

Madeline held out the small, black-lacquered box slowly, with reluctance. She knew that objects disappeared very quickly in these markets, that the person behind you - the one always crowding you, always craning their neck over your shoulder - would snatch up that piece from right under your nose, and you would never see it, or anything remotely like it again, in this market or any other. Opportunities were given to you only once.

With an audible sigh, she made the exchange. Still, she thought ruefully as she moved away from the concession, she never did get to see what was in the box. And now it was gone, forever.

* * *

Men, women, children continued to stream into the already teeming market despite thick masses of billowing, gray clouds that had appeared from the direction of the western sea, threatening thundershowers. The footpaths that crisscrossed the treed market place, and all the grassy areas in between, were tightly packed. Buffeted continuously by these surging tide-swells, Madeline felt tossed about like spindrift in a multitudinous sea, barely able to keep her equilibrium in the sweltering heat. She had expected to see Heilig today but what with this swarm of humanity, she knew it would be impossible.

Children - formed, finished, whole - were rampaging through the square, shrieking at the top of their lungs. She watched them nervously as they chased each other up and down the glutted paths, jumping over and ducking under iron railings, slipping and skidding through grown-up legs. She had, so far, managed to stay out of their way.

Her searches today had added up to nothing more than the usual ordeal of desultory rummages. She had bought and dickered and bought more charms and trinkets, soon to join the countless other curios and baubles crammed into

drawers; stuffed into duffel-bags, valises and trunks; stowed away in chifferobes and on back shelves of closets.

She was weary, weary of a complaining body, weary of a mind forever filling her with false expectations, weary of all the disappointments and the terrible consuming lethargy that followed.

Yet she felt, no, *knew* in her heart that if she could just find that one object - it might be an African idol doll or amber beads or a medicine bag containing blue corn kernels - it would work like an amulet, a magic talisman, and she would become, Yes! Yes! Oh my God! Yes! just another everyday, ordinary woman. She would sell her soul to the devil for that!

* * *

Shrill and piercing cries of children shouting back and forth to each other came to her from somewhere nearby. She looked nervously up the path, her cheeks flushed from the exertion of pushing herself. They appeared without warning, boys and girls in school uniforms zigzagging down the path, making a great deal of noise as they brushed and knocked against people. They were tearing down in her direction. She looked anxiously at the wooden benches lining the path. There were no empty seats. She twisted her head back to the screaming children. They were coming closer. She could not move. They were racing towards her. She darted her eyes around wildly. They were almost upon her. Seeing an empty space between two benches that was not there a second ago, she stumbled backward into it just as they came rushing by. Some of them tried to touch her, laughing in her face, and she shrunk back in terror, pressing against the iron railing behind her. As she watched the last of them go by, she allowed her body to slacken, then, taking a deep breath, stepped away from the railing. "Look out! Behind you!" someone shouted out. Twisting her head around sharply, she saw a child hurtling down the path toward her, it was too close, she could not step out of the way in time, and it flew against the back of her legs, throwing her violently forward. She flung out her arms to regain her balance, but kept stumbling, stumbling forward, with each step closer and closer to the graveled path. Her feet began to go out from under her, and she shut her eyes against the coming terrible impact when, all at once, arms reached down, stopping her headlong plunge.

Regaining her feet, she shook off the arms without looking to see who it was had helped her, and began to walk with small, angry steps to where a girl in a plaid skirt and blue blazer was sprawled on the ground. She advanced on her, not quite knowing what she was going to do. The girl struggled to her knees. She was almost upon her. The girl scrambled to her feet. She reached down, her hands clenched. Twisting away, the girl quickly gathered up her book-bag and fled down the path as fast as she could, her arms and legs pumping wildly.

Ignoring the press of people flowing all around her, Madeline stared at the girl until she disappeared into the market. She wrapped her arms about her and stood motionless, gazing at a far point, a place without articulation. "Yes, I know," she began to murmur to herself, muttering in angry exhalations, "everyone will say it was an accident ...nobody wanted to touch me...only an accident. They were only playing kids' games...that's all...only playing kids' games..." She knew all about kids' games.

* * *

Storm clouds, dark, thick, ragged-edged, accompanied by low-flying black patches that scudded across the sky, darkened the late afternoon, tripping photoelectric sensors, and neon lights suffused upward through the air, expanding out under the clouds, saturating downtown in a blood-red mist.

At the edge of the city, the massive oaks and sycamores dominating the flea market threw it further into shadow, and lanterns flared on at booths, stalls and tables as concessionaires prepared themselves against the coming of the night. The day slipped into a cheerless dusk, the time when spirits who are made too late to receive bodies, become demons. Madeline, who at times thought she was made too late, decided to leave the market.

A bell clanged as she entered a small alley that ran to the streetcar-stop and she quickened her steps, then, just as quickly, stopped. She tilted her head toward the market place. Yes, there it was again, a beckoning, no, more than a beckoning, an intensity as palpable as a hand gripping her shoulder. *Come back! The box is here. Come back! What you want is here, waiting for you! Come back!* With unsure steps she began to retrace her passage through the alley, then picked up her pace, moving at an awkward trot as the market came into view.

* * *

Dusk grew to night. A gibbous moon sat low on a far horizon. The concessions seemed to be further and further apart as she walked from one to the next in the darkness. Where was that little man with that mustache? She despaired she would ever find him now. It was just too dark to see beyond one's nose without a flashlight. She fell in behind a group strolling leisurely along the path, swinging their flashlights side to side. They were laughing loudly and speaking in a foreign language she didn't understand.

A mantra floated out to her from the lantern-lit booths. "Here, here," the concessionaires seemed to whisper to her, to her only. "Come here, come" they invited. "What you want is here. Come," they urged, leaning through the penumbra of their meager lights, crooking their fingers at her. She didn't recognize any of them.

* * *



The box is gone, she told herself in despair. She had not found the dealer, and the group she had been following had made a sudden turn off the path, leaving her in utter blackness. An unbroken silence surrounded her.

Craning her neck through the darkness, she saw an empty bench and made her way to it and sat down. Her right leg and back were aching terribly. She bent over and massaged the atrophied muscle of the leg vigorously. After a few minutes, she leaned back and shut her eyes. Only for a moment, she told herself. Vague feelings teased at her.

The urgent caws of a raven brought her abruptly up in her seat. How long had she been asleep? She looked around. There! A faint glow in the far distance. She rose and began to walk toward it with small, deliberate steps, holding out an arm to feel for any obstacle that might be in the way. After a few minutes, she stopped. The light, strangely, seemed to be receding with every step she took, and the path had begun to feel oddly different under her feet. She had been following it by sensing the gravel beneath her feet, but now she felt only grass. She dreaded she had strayed off it. She peered into the gloom. Shadows, blacker than the darkness, surrounded her. She saw booths, stalls, tables all strewn about in derangement, with obscure, forlorn figures draped over them. *These are my stations*, she lamented to herself, *these are my stations*, and she moved silently forward, toward the light.

* * *

Finally! she said to herself as she stood before the concession. Its lantern flickered weakly. The concessionaire was nowhere to be seen. With the thought that her soul was lying there before her, she glanced down at the tabletop.

The top was bare.

Bare except for a small, dark, rectangular shape that sat in a far corner. She smiled inwardly, a grim smile. The mysteries of the market, she said wryly to herself, birth, death and resurrection of a black-lacquered box. Why was she not surprised? Taking a deep breath, she extended a hand down to the box, but quickly pulled back. *No false hopes*, she told herself, *no expectations*. She bent down and picked up the box and brought it to her eyes. *Where is it?* She twisted it around, studying it. *Where is the crack?* All she could see was the continuous flow of the grain. "It's not there," she said aloud to herself, "it's not *there*." Her palms grew moist and she grasped the box tighter in her right hand to prevent it from slipping. She inserted the fingernail of her left forefinger into a depression at one end of the lid and began to push. It held fast. *It will open!* Stiffening her finger, she added more pressure. *IT WILL OPEN!* The lid, slowly, with great resistance, began to move. She continued to push it gently along its grooves until it was clear of the box. Letting her breath out with relief, she placed the lid and the box onto the table and stepped back. Again *no expectations, no false hopes*

cautioned her, but she could not suppress the excitement welling up in her, and she leaned back down and peered into the open box. Lying in shaped depressions of red velvet, were an ivory comb, and two tapered objects, one slightly larger than the other. Iridescent streamers of color played along their edges. Fugitive thoughts began to seep into her mind...*perhaps...?* and she felt the tremors of old dreams... *perhaps, after so many years...* remnants of possibilities, drowned over and again in dead seas of overwhelming defeats, began to rise up in her, almost an intrusion! ...*after so many years...is it possible...? could I...* Her hand shaking slightly, she picked up the comb. As she grasped it in her hand she thought she felt a hint of warmth flowing into her fingers. *What? What is it! Did I imagine it?* She returned the comb quickly into its recess and gazed at the tapered objects. Again whispers crowded in on her... *could I finally, finally rest...? ...will I finally be...?* She reached for the tapered objects, and easing them out of their recesses, held them closely, rotating each one with great care. Once again she felt the warmth, now flowing out of the tapered objects. She was not imagining it, she told herself, she was not! and placed them back into their receptacles. *Just more trinkets, more baubles? Or...could she finally rest? Will she finally... be... ord...*

Again she began to reach for the comb, when suddenly a twig cracked behind her and she whirled to face its maker.

And stared into unrelenting darkness. "Heilig?" she whispered.

No answer. A stillness enveloped her, then a soft wind came up, rustling leaves.

Come away from here, my Maddy.

"What? Papa? Papa?"

You must leave, now.

"Is it you, papa?"

You must abandon this place.

"Why, papa, why?"

That box and those things in it will not help you, Madeline.

"But I was given a second chance, papa."

There is no second chance, Maddy mine. You must leave now. It's almost too late.

"No, no, please, not yet." She felt her leg begin to ache. She had been standing much too long. "Please. I'll leave, papa, I'll leave, in just a few minutes. I only want to touch them again, feel them."

No, Madeline. They don't belong to you.

"Why can't I just feel them, only for a moment, papa?" she asked in a strained voice. The pain in her leg grew worse, and her back began to ache.

No! You must come away, now!

"But I need to pick them up," she whispered to no one. Stabs of pain were moving up her spine. "I need to."

They won't help you.

"I need them!"

Listen to me!

"I don't know. I don't understand," she said, a weariness coming over her. Then, slowly, as if in a dream, she began to reach for the ivory comb and the silver picks. "I need them, papa," she said in a barely audible voice. Her fingers moved closer to the set. "I *do* need them."

You must run from here, Madeline!

Her fingers brushed the comb. She felt its warmth again. The pain in her back began to lessen. "After so many years, no more suffering, no more pain," she uttered softly.

Don't! Madeline, don't!

"...so many years..." She began to stroke the comb with her fingertips. She felt the throbbing in her leg stop.

Leave them! Leave them!

Drawing a breath softly through parted lips, she moved her fingers along the tapered objects and caressed them lightly and a surge of energy came rushing into her hand and up through her arm. "After so many years. Finally."

No! Oh God, No!

She gathered up the comb and the tapered objects and felt blood suffusing through her right leg into the atrophied muscles and into her back. *Formed!* whispered into her heart.

THEY'RE THE DEVIL'S TOOLS, MADELINE!

Her hand began to close over them. *Finished!* murmured into her soul. THEY'RE...

She grasped them tighter and felt a weight lifting from her back. *WHOLE!* breathed into her being.

...TO CLEAN THE DEAD, MADELINE! THE COMB AND THE PICKS ARE TO CLEAN THE DEAD. PREPARE THEM FOR BURIAL!"

"What, papa? What? Clean the dead? The comb? The picks, papa?" Madeline cried, throwing open her clenched fingers as if someone had put a burning match to her hand. Her head began to swing violently back and forth as the comb and picks fell into the dust beneath her feet. "Clean the dead, the dead?" she screamed. Her body began to shake violently, and spittle appeared on her lips. "I could have been..." She felt the strength sapping from her leg. "I could have..." she gasped, as a sharp, pain shot up through it and continued up into her spinal column, "I...papa..." she moaned, and crumpled to the ground.

* * *

In the midst of her swoon she saw a fiery sky go by and an enormous roar ripped through the vault of heaven, and through the huge, jagged opening, countless young boys came tumbling down, dressed in school uniforms of every sort. They plummeted toward her, a writhing, seething mass jabbering and shrieking into her ears. She threw her hands over them to try to block out that dreadful babble, but she could not stop it and the terrible pains in her leg and back worsened.

*Then, through all the clamor, she began to hear a deep rumble building, swelling, reverberating louder and louder, until it drowned out all the other noise and became an enormous chant, **RUB, RUB, RUB-HER-HUMP, RUB, RUB, RUB-HER-HUMP, RUB, RUB, RUB-HER...***

* * *

Madeline leaned heavily against Heilig as they entered into the streetcar stop. Holding her gently about the shoulders, he helped her up the wooden steps of the waiting car and eased her onto the rush seat, sitting down next to her. She rested her head against his shoulder. He could feel her burning up. After a few minutes the streetcar gave a melancholy clang and began its run.

Rain came down, pelting against the windows. Heilig watched the drops sluicing down in daedal patterns. As they passed The Ponds, the rain stopped as quickly as it had begun, and a fresh breeze rose up. Street-lamps along the right-of-way illumined the crested wavelets. The car clattered through intersections, clanging

twice in warning, then entered into the stillness of the Old Forest where the wind subsided softly and the clattering died away, deadened by the sepulchral woods.

They rocked on through the darkness, swathed in an integument of silence.

THE END

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PODS

by Kevin Anderson

Kevin Anderson has been writing in the Advertising and Marketing field for nearly 13 years and recently turned to fiction. With only a handful of short stories completed he has been published in *The Harrow*, *Writer Online*, *The Canadian* monthly anthology - *Thirteen Stories*, *Twilight Times*, *Champagne Shivers*, *Black Satellite* and R. Douglas Weber's *Black Spiral* anthology. When not writing he loves to photograph and make rubbings of headstones, collect records, monster movies, and spend time with his daughter Avalon Rain and the most tolerant wife on the planet, Hope, whom he married on Halloween.

“Halfway between heaven and hell is a spinning ball of dirt we call planet Earth and I’m here to tell ‘ya friends, — whether you fear God or the devil himself, there is more down on this rotating sphere to chill your bones and curl your insides than you could possibly imagine. This here is the Twilight Man and I’ve seen things that would make a Navy Seal run crying to his mamma. I could tell you stories, folks. Anyone got their ears on? Come back.”

Dale took the thumb off the CB mic’s call button and listened intently. His left hand gripped the steering wheel of the Mack truck like a vise. He was cutting through a stormy night northbound on Utah’s desolate Interstate 15. Thunderous rain explosions bombarded the eighteen wheeler’s windshield as Dale strained to hear the silence escaping from the CB’s speaker. He was a moment from hanging up the mic, resigned to continue his search for entertainment on the radio, when the speaker came to life.

“Breaker, breaker — that’s one hell of an intro you got there, Twilight Man.”

Dale grinned. “Like my expanding butt — it’s a work in progress. Who do I have the pleasure of jawing with on this dark and stormy night? Come Back.”

“Well, they call me the Night Crawler and I’m on the rebound — headed south on Interstate 15. ‘Bout eight miles from Paragonah.”

“Looks like we’ll be ships passing in the night, in say five — ten minutes. I’m currently Yankee bound just a mile shy of Cedar City.”

“I’ll be sure to wink at ‘cha, good buddy. Sounds like you have some stories to keep this old trucker awake for a few days — but I think I got a tale that’ll perk your interest. Come Back.”



“You’ve got my attention Night Crawler,” Dale breathed into the mic.

“Problem is, this tale has a beginning, a middle but no end.”

“Say again, Night Crawler.”

“Well, this thing just happened to me ‘bout thirty minutes ago and I don’t know what to make of it. Sure would appreciate your opinion.”

“The Twilight Man is here to help. Start spinning that yarn, good buddy.”

After a reverent pause in which Dale assumed the Night Crawler was using to elevate the drama of his tale, or maybe just finding the words to begin, the voice in the night continued. “Just after I left Salt Lake my bladder sent the clear message that I needed to shake hands with shorty. Which was fine ‘cause I hadn’t eaten all day neither. I pulled into a chew and choke called The Broken Wings Cafe. Kind of a heavily weathered place if you know what I mean?”

“That’s a big 10-4. I’ve passed it on many occasions, but never stopped.”

“Me and my ulcer can highly recommend the chili. But the company is definitely lacking.”

“How do you mean, Night Crawler?”

“You know how it is when you’ve been on the road for a few weeks straight with no one to jaw with. I went in there looking for a place to piss, some food that would continue to hurry me along to a premature death, and just a little human conversation. Not too much to ask. ‘Em I right Twilight Man?”

“I hear ‘ya, Night Crawler.”

“Now I admit that I hadn’t taken the time to wash the road off this body for nearly two days, and maybe my twelve hour deodorant was in the fifteenth hour of trying to do its job, but I tell ‘ya, Twilight Man, I tried with a big smile on my face to start no less than ten conversations with employees and locals.”

“And no luck?”

“Hell, Twilight Man, it was like trying to talk to an appliance. After thirty minutes of that I was more frustrated than a toothless beaver.”

Dale let loose with a few chuckles. “Well, antisocial behavior is not that big of a mystery, Night Crawler. The Broken Wing is not a trucker’s stop — more a local hangout.”

"I know Twilight Man, and at the time I chalked it up to my casual relationship with proper hygiene. But when the thing in the parking lot happened, I got to wondering."

"Do tell, Night Crawler."

"As I was leaving, my foot slipped off the brake and my rig slid back about ten feet before I got it back under control. I heard a loud cracking and tearing sound and I thought Lord-O-Mighty, don't let me have just kilt nobody."

"What did you hit?"

"If I knew the answer to that, I probably would not be telling this story. I jumped out of the cab and ran to the back of my trailer. It was plenty dark back there and my flashlight was flickering because the batteries were just two gasps from death. But it seemed I had backed through some sort of wall made of twigs and mud. I was plenty relieved, I'll tell you what. But then, I heard something that made my jewels jump up into my throat."

"And what was that, Night Crawler?"

"It was like something had just died. Something on the other side of that wall had just let out a death cry and it did not go gently, good buddy."

"Well, don't leave the Twilight Man in suspense. What the hell was it?"

"I climbed up on my rear tire and took me a gander over that twig wall. The wall circled round and made a huge bowl shape and lord have mercy. What I saw I don't think I'll ever be right with. Twilight Man, there was over a half dozen of these large oval shaped -- pod things."

"Come again, Night Crawler. Did you say pod?"

"Affirmative. Pods. Eight or nine of 'em. And my rig cracked two of 'em wide open. There was this red and yellowish slime spilling out. Looked like something my third wife would have served for supper. God awful in the kitchen she was -- bless her heart. But what was sprawled out in that slime was something she couldn't have conjured up on her worst day."

Dale began to wonder if the Night Crawler had downed a few spirits at The Broken Wing, before stumbling out to his truck. Then he remembered they were in Utah. "And what was that, Night Crawler?"

"Inside, the goop looked like the beginnings of a man -- or something close to it. It wasn't completely formed yet. The arms were frail and the head was dark and narrow, but I could see its eyes -- big, bulging and spaced far apart almost on the sides of its head."

“You wouldn’t be yanking the Twilight Man’s trailer now would ‘ya?”

“I wish I were. I hightailed it out of that parking lot and have been pushing ninety-five ever since.”

“Best keep them eyes open for Smokeys. You could be paying some heavy green at that kind of speed.”

“I’d rather deal with a bear than whatever the hell that was at The Broken Wing. I want to put as much distance as I can between me and that freak show. For the last thirty minutes I’ve been gnawing on the whole thing and I think I’ve got a theory. Did you ever see that old movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*?”

“Think so. Is that Mr. Spock guy in it?”

“Well, he was in the remake. The original came out in the fifties, I think. Kind of a red scare Sci-Fi.”

“Sure, sure. I see where you’re going with this.”

“It would explain things. Don’t it?”

“Explanation or not -- that is one wild tale you have there Night Crawler.”

“Yeah, definitely a story for the grandkids come Halloween. Hey, I think we are about to pass each other, good buddy.”

“I spy your headlights in the distance approaching fast.” Dale set the CB receiver down on the console so he could switch hands on the steering wheel and flash his headlights — giving the Night Crawler a friendly wink.

Both semi-trucks slowed down so they could get a look at one another as they passed. With only about twenty feet dividing them as they sped by one another, Night Crawler tapped his lights and threw out a wave.

But Dale did not do likewise. He had frozen like a slab of meat in the freezer.

“Hey now, Twilight Man — that is just plain rude. I thought we were friends here.”

Dale didn’t respond. A chill was moving through his body and turning his blood to ice.

“Twilight Man, you got your ears on? Come back.”

As if someone had snapped their fingers, Dale suddenly thawed. He grasped for the mic and quickly brought it to his lips. “Night Crawler. You have got something on your trailer!”

“What the hell are we talkin’ about, Twilight?”

“I counted three. Looked like they were crawling along the top working their way to the cab.”

“Three what?”

“They looked like men, but they had...”

“Had what?”

“They had what looked like...wings. On their backs they had wings.”

“Oh hell, Twilight Man. Now who is pulling whose trailer here?”

“I am not bullshitting you, Night Crawler! You have unwelcome guests!”

“I don’t see anything.”

“They’re on top. There’s no way you can see ‘em. I’m gonna exit and get back on going your way and come up behind you. Slow down so I can catch up but don’t stop. You hear me?”

“You’re scaring me, Twilight Man.”

“Just hang on and I’ll be there in a flash.”

Dale let the receiver fall onto his lap as he exited the freeway. He blew threw the stop sign at the end of the ramp and turned the steering wheel hard. Several wheels on the left side of the truck left the ground as he executed two quick turns and pointed the thirty-ton vehicle south. Pushing the accelerator to the floor, he sped down the onramp.

He fumbled for the CB mic which had slid off his lap and was dangling between his knees. “Night Crawler, I’ll be at your backdoor in two minutes.” Dale paused for his friend’s reply. Silence. “Night Crawler! Don’t go quiet on me, good buddy.” Still nothing. “Damn!” Dale shouted and tossed the receiver onto the console.

The rain seemed to be falling harder and Dale squinted to see the road. As the windshield wipers struggled to keep the glass clear, Dale could just make out the Night Crawler’s tail-lights. He was closing the gap very fast. Too fast. The Night Crawler was either going very slow or wasn’t moving at all.

Dale slammed on the breaks as he realized that he was only seconds away from smashing into the back of Night Crawler’s truck, which was stopped in the middle of the Interstate.

Wheels skidded to a stop, and Dale's truck came to rest about twenty yards behind Night Crawler's rear wheel flaps. Dale's headlights did a decent job of chasing away the darkness and lighting up Night Crawler's back door. He sat still for a few moments and scanned for movement. Nothing.

He picked up the mic. "Night Crawler."

Soft static was the only reply.

"All right then." Dale grinned to himself. He reached under the seat and pulled out a sawed-off shotgun that was a gift from his mother, along with a knife so big it would have put Jim Bowie's to shame. He stuck the knife in a sheath clipped to his belt and then opened the cab door.

He jumped down from the cab and listened. The rain bombarded the ground with a thunderous roar and the wind howled like a pack of wolves. He slowly walked up to the backdoor of the truck. Remnants of the slime the Night Crawler had described decorated the back bumper. The rain was beginning to wash it away and Dale felt a twinge of nausea as he saw some of it dripping to the pavement. Twigs and globs of mud also appeared on the rear of the vehicle. And something else. Dale moved in closer and grabbed a large fragment off the door latch. It reminded him of shell remnants he had seen on his brother-in-law's Ostrich farm in Texas. Only this was bigger. Much bigger. Then it hit him. Night Crawler's body snatching theory was off. Way off. Not pods. Not aliens. But Eggs. His fellow trucker had backed into something's nest.

He let the enormous eggshell fall to the ground and he peered around the corner of the trailer. It was about a fifty-foot walk to the cab with nothing but stormy weather blocking the way. He got about ten paces towards the cab when he saw a hand, or something that looked like a hand, reach out of the driver's side window.

It adjusted the side view mirror, then recoiled back into the cab like a retreating cobra. A second later, Night Crawler's truck fired up with a roar. It vibrated under the hum of its 365-horsepower diesel engine, and Dale called out. "Night Crawler!" Dale heard the truck go into gear and it started to roll forward.

"Jeez!" Dale screamed and started to run back to his truck. As he jumped into his cab he froze for a moment as he heard and felt two very large somethings pass overhead. Big somethings. Whatever they were Dale sensed they were heading north -- back to the Broken Wing. Shaking it off, he slammed his door shut and put the truck in gear.

Both trucks raced south on the 15. The lead vehicle had a few seconds' head start, but Dale was gaining. He moved through the gears like a man with a purpose, and was soon pulling up along side Night Crawler's truck.

Dale's cab was even with Night Crawler's trailer as he pushed the accelerator to the floor. He inched forward, slowly overtaking the other truck. The two cabs were running parallel, with only a foot of space between them. And that's when Dale looked over into the other cab.

Glaring back at him from behind Night Crawler's steering wheel was something out of a nightmare. Its engorged eyes were pulled around onto the sides of its narrow head. The eyes were beaming back at him with rage and intelligence. Below the eyes, where humans displayed a nose, this thing had a hideous beak with jagged edges for tearing flesh. Jetting up above its shoulders were wings, which seemed to fill the cab.

Dale's eyes widened as the thing's beak opened and let out a hideous sound that could be heard over two semi-truck engines and a raging storm. It was the anguished scream of a parent that had lost a child.

A taloned hand thrust something out the window and it landed on Dale's truck. Night Crawler's severed head skidded across the hood and smashed into Dale's windshield before sliding off into darkness.

For the second time that night, Dale slammed on the brakes, bringing his truck to a screeching halt.

He sat for a moment and watched Night Crawler's truck become smaller and smaller until finally it blinked out of existence.

As the rain washed away the blood on his hood, Dale slowly turned the truck around and started heading north. He popped open his cooler, pulled out a Dr. Pepper, and drank it down quickly.

Dale thought about all the strange things he had seen on the road and wondered where this night fell on his weirdness scale. About a five or six out ten, he thought.

He crushed the can, threw it to the floor, and picked up the CB's mic. "Halfway between heaven and hell is a spinning ball of dirt we call planet Earth and I'm here to tell 'ya friends -- whether you fear God or the devil himself, there is more down on this rotating sphere to chill your bones and curl your insides than you could possibly imagine. This here is the Twilight Man, and I've seen things..."

THE END

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METAMORPHOSES

by Tyree Campbell

Tyree Campbell is the author of "Nyx" and the prize-winning short stories, "Hermit Crab" and "Dance By The Light Of The Moon." His work has appeared [so far] in *Chiaroscuro*, *Neverworlds*, *Champagne Shivers*, *The Martian Wave*, *The Fifth Di...*, *Rogue Worlds*, *The A-List*, *Intertext*, and *Aoife's Kiss*, and in the anthologies *SideShow Horror*, *The Modern Art Cave*, *Wondrous Web Worlds 1 & 2*, and *Sex and the Single Alien*.

After a week the muggers left him alone, his poverty an impregnable fortress, so he was able to feed the flocks in relative peace. Little bags of seed cost little, and the capacious pockets of the abandoned gray overcoat served him well as grocery bags. Cracked corn for the pigeons in this one. In that, unshelled peanuts, which he cast out individually onto the grass around the bench, each one a *casus belli* for the skittish squirrels and the occasional robber bluejay. Millet and radish seed for the mousy wee ones, the chickadees and sparrows and the infrequent rose-throated house wren evicted from some tenement by a janitor's broom. His friends and companions.

He gave them names, or tried to. The pigeons, innumerable as models of Toyota, each one distinctive to his familiar eye, the feathers iridescent or drab, except for the albino who came to feed, tentatively, after the others were sated. He even called her Alba, after the duchess who posed with such abandon for Goya. Outcast by her color, she had learned to feed and flee, feed and flee, while the others chased her, until finally he had set up a little spot by the ancient boot on his left foot, and just under the bench itself, where she might be safe, not only from her flock, but from the boys on bicycles and from the all-too-frequent assholes who thought scattering birds an amusement. He gave *them* names, too.

There were other disruptors in the park. Some dogs, unable to read the leash laws posted on the sturdy little signs they marked, ran free and playful. Passers-by, of course, deliberately not looking at him as they stepped quickly, too quickly, toward their destinations. He could read their silent thoughts. *There but for the grace of God---*

Women passed him by as well, in the park and elsewhere, his age almost as ripe as his body. There was scant reason to take care of himself, unless the birds had a sense of smell. He ate poorly, he knew that. Artificial eggs in the morning at the Salvation Army cellar, if he managed to roll off the dingy sleeping pad in the twenty-dollar-a-week room the city rented for him, as long as he kept off drugs,

which he couldn't afford anyway, not on his dole. Something at QuickBurger for lunch, or just after lunch, when no one would see him rescue the discarded fries from the bins under the condiment counter. And dinner...something usually turned up, and if not, there was always tomorrow. Better to feed others, he thought, and broadcast another handful of seed onto the concrete path.

He spotted the dog before he saw her. People resembled their dogs, it was true. A bulldog for a stevedore. A painted poodle for a painted lady. A cocker spaniel, the eyes pleading not to be hurt, and what did that say about the person at the other end of the leash? So he knew what she looked like, without looking at her.

The dog was a Heinz, of ancestry so maculate only the terrier showed through, and that badly. Tartared teeth, with the lower left canine askew, as if it had tried to open the can of Mighty Dog on its own. The right ear badly notched, a medal for valor in some skirmish long ago. Hair mostly mottled, brown and white, dry, but looking as if the dog had just stepped out of a downpour. Ornaments in the hair--burrs, seeds, fragments of vegetation--and a dead leaf adhered to the right rear paw, the squished brown turd a glue of sorts, and as the dog and woman approached, it paused, sat, and curled its muzzle to the leaf, tongue worrying it free.

And he looked up.

If anything, he had overestimated her. She was young, perhaps early twenties, half his age, but they obviously did battle over the same yellow-tag items in the Goodwill. The athletic shoes on her feet, the left from WalMart, the right from K-Mart, spoke to the rest of her disparate attire. The common, listless brown of her hair was identical to that of her companion. As was that of her eyes.

The leaf liberated, the terrier resumed its search for a suitable hydrant. The girl, attached to it by a length of blue cord, followed. But for the briefest moment, as she passed by, her eyes flicked his way, and her mouth seemed on the verge of a faint smile.

Yeah, that'll happen.

His cupped hand deposited another tiny pile of cracked corn beside his left boot, and Alba, trained now, came to feed.

"Who d'you reckon she is?" he asked.

Alba paused at the sound, tilted her head questioningly at him. *Is that all the corn I get?*

He dropped a few more kernels. "Just as well. What would I do if she did say hello? Fat chance, right? Like your flock says hello to you?"

Alba just looked at him.

And what if she did say hello?

He replayed the scene. Sitting on the bench, feeding the birds. Waiting for her, because he knew she was coming to him. A park date. An evening on the bench, gazing up through the canopy of leaves at the canopy of indigo infinity and the tiny sparks of fire that, he was certain, would reflect in her eyes.

What if she had said hello?

He looked up, where she had first appeared, and saw her approaching. Tall she was, and languid, yet deliberate in her movements, for she had a destination. She was coming to him, to *him*. Attired not in YWCA donations but in a black outfit from Earl Scheib, or by SCUBA, her contours a roadmap for his weary fingers, the vision of her a promise of nights to come, the faint smile on her face a light for the indigo vault of the stars. A strong leather leash restrained her companion. It was a massive creature, scuttling on eight legs and not loping on four, an arachnid the size of a platter. It was a walking statement to everyone else on the planet. Don't bother me. Don't bother her.

A squirrel skittered like a terrestrial dragonfly, out of harm's way.

And she drew up before him, her eyes a massage for his ancient soul. And he heard her words before she uttered them.

You look like you need someone like me. Let's go home.

On the gray concrete beside Alba, little dark wet circles began to appear.

Alba cooed solace to him.

* * *

That evening he purchased a lottery ticket. One dollar, that he could ill afford. Two cups of coffee he needed to sustain him through the night. Wasted. Wrong numbers. Someone had misdialed his life.

But he had taken a chance. He thought about that as he wept on the lumpy pad, and slept, finally, fitfully, mercifully.

In the morning, he skipped breakfast, taking the time instead to search the dark nooks and crannies of the room, to no avail. He dressed, such as his limited wardrobe allowed, and stepped outside to the autumn breeze, cooler today than yesterday. The flock needed food again. They were dependent on him now. He dipped a hand into the pocket containing the cracked corn---

...and felt it. The omen he had sought. The portent. Might be, could be.

Would be?

How many lotteries could one person lose in a lifetime?

He found the bench unoccupied. The birds gathered expectantly, and the squirrels, wary of strangers and with good reason, but growing accustomed to his treats. He scattered lunch about him. Alba came, and waited patiently for him to notice her.

Would she come by today?

And what would he do if---?

He reached into his pocket again, seeking the reassurance of the hard carapace, the soft abdomen, the lifeless gift. It was there still.

Would she be there, when he looked up?

And the thought raced to him on wings of terrible experience, of prolonged and habitual solitude, the words his only defense against pain. *Don't look up.*

The faintest clicking reached his ears--the sound of dry nails on concrete. A rapid, repetitive series, of tiny legs moving very quickly. Alba remained in place, feeding, unafraid. He felt a shadow draw near, and slow...and loom over him.

Just one word, he thought. Just say the word. Make my lottery.

And in that instant, he knew!

He heard the "Hello" even before she uttered it.

From the pocket he withdrew the freshly-killed grasshopper and set it on the sidewalk in front of the spider.

THE END

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YOUR BAD BINARY BROTHER

by Bruce Boston

Bruce Boston is the author of forty books and chapbooks, including the novel *Stained Glass Rain* and the best-of fiction collection *Masque of Dreams*. Stories and poems have appeared in hundreds of publications, including *Asimov's SF*, *Amazing Stories*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Tales*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, and seven Nebula Awards anthologies. His fiction has received a Pushcart Prize and the Best of Soft SF Award. His poetry has received many awards, including a record four Asimov's Readers' Awards, a record seven Rhysling Awards, and the Grand Master Award of the Science Fiction Poetry Association. Author's website: <http://hometown.aol.com/bruboston/>

Surfing the variegated
and ever changing
hemispheres of the Web,
chomping down on whatever

choice tidbits my glancing
senses fancy, I arrive
at your portals when you
least expect it, tossing

your files to the electric
winds and spilling your
secrets into the night.
I invade the sanctum

of your private chambers,
a calculating viral infection,
the sick genius of a master
criminal with fingers swift

as thieves upon the keys.
When links scatter like rain
and columns of light crumple,
when the static of the void

sullies the bright phosphors
with its flickering stain,
I am the one you can hear
wailing in your drives.

And once your life
starts to crumble bit
by byte, and gaps appear
in your consciousness,

dark lacunae that spread
to devour what remains,
I will pull the shades,
close the curtains and

extinguish all the lamps.
In the crepuscular world
that I create I will show
you the worse half

of my crooked grin,
glimmering dimly with
pixels and pandemonium.
At last we will sit down

face-to-screen to discuss
the limits and congress
of what I choose to call
our virtual family business.

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MARTHA STEWART'S DOING TIME

by Christopher Hivner

Christopher Hivner has had short stories and poems published in numerous zines. Others have refused to publish his work, using phrases like 'crapola', 'God-awful' and 'please don't contact us again'.

Freshly ground,
the teeth make a fine seasoning.
Trimmed properly,
loose flaps of skin broil nicely.
Marinated in oil and cumin,
scar tissue kebobs for any cookout.
Into the stock pot,
shin bones, knuckles and sliced veggies.
Drained thoroughly,
open sores add color to any summer salad.
That's all for this week.
Join us next time with the warden
as he shows us 10 uses for your old shivs.

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UNIVERSAL TALES

by Christina Sng

Christina Sng, human, resident of the world, lives on the Equator with her husband and their big-boned cat. She is the author of poetry collection *The Darkside of Eden*, and her poetry has appeared or sold to such venues as *Flesh & Blood*, *Mythic Delirium*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Space & Time*, and *Star*Line*, among others. Visit her online at <http://www.mephala.com>.

The sea yawns like an angry maw
Beating furious waves onto
The young Coliseum shores.

The cold night mirrors the heart
Of a frigid spinster, frozen layers
Crystallising over the centuries

As she glances hard
At her promiscuous sister,
The moon,

Not even batting an eye
At her wards, flirting instead
With stray asteroids passing through

Like drunk sailors in the night.
In the distance, the stars watch silently.
They've seen this drama unfold

Once too often. No longer
Caring to comment, they merely
Chug away within their cells,

Spinning star juice like hay
On a universal spinning wheel,
Producing more worlds.

For in a universe
With such scant entertainment,
One must make one's own.

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THE BIOLOGY BUILDING

by Karen A. Romanko

Karen A. Romanko is the editor and publisher of *sf/f/h* and mystery e-zine *Raven Electrick* (<http://www.ravenelectrick.com>). Her recent and forthcoming credits include poems and stories in *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Speculon*, *Twilight Times*, *Martian Wave*, *Aoife's Kiss* and *Full Unit Hookup*. When not hunched at her computer, Karen enjoys the sun of Southern California with her biologist husband Bob Desharnais.

Kitty carcasses call out
to formaldehyde frogs
Cockroaches await counting
in baking soda buckets

The janitor sups, tonight
mystery meat on white,
while midnight whispers ooze
from a locked basement lab

As the steel specimen table
chills my bones, I ponder
my change of major
from English lit.

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LOVERS

by Sandy DeLuca

Sandy DeLuca's fiction and poetry has appeared in such places as *Space and Time*, *The Edge*, *The Urbanite*, *Thorns of Nature* anthology (SpecFicWorld.com), *Divas of Darkness* anthology. Her poetry chapbook *Burial Plot* in *Sagittarius* was nominated for a Bram Stoker award for the year 2000. And recently she's completed a short novel called *Settling in Nazareth*, and she's presently at work on two other novels. In addition her cover art and interior illustrations have appeared in various places across the small press and her paintings have been exhibited in local galleries. Author's Website: <http://sandydeluca.ameranet.com/>.

On the night of the Worm Moon
we crawled on our bellies to the
the graveyard beyond the gate,
avoiding watchers who stood
in the gables, flapping crow wings
ready to shred skin with knife point becks;
we traveled far from longing wives
whose skulls we'd shrunk and hung with the
Saturday laundry to dry

Our destiny was a scene from a
dark painter's fantasy,
sleeping beneath a killer's landfill,
dreaming of the tastes of human
lips and milky breasts,
trapped in moist rot tombs
by the words of an old Strega witch;
left behind were the cars, TV's
and brown leather shoes;
no longer would I touch the pages of my fairy books
or sketch the starry universe

The ghosts sang to us,
a blue green puff of mist above the trees;
a smoky gypsy put tattered cards
on our backs and read our fortunes;
the Minor Arcana showed only Swords
and The Devil rattled oily chains

Our hands bled and blistered



yet we scooped earth until bones showed through,
yellow and brittle with age;
pain splattered into empty souls of dark
and my hands cradled the wicked jaws
of one who murdered one hundred and two;
with each drop fresh white skin wove round
the withered cheekbones and
blood flowed into the gray knuckles

Now we fly through the towns and
above sleeping people,
seeking those with prayer beads wrapped
around their thumbs,
with holy vials on the window ledge
and we cut out their tongues with our kisses

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BOOK REVIEWS

by Jason Brannon

RAVENOUS GHOSTS

by Kealan-Patrick Burke

3F Publications

<http://www.3fpublications.com>

ISBN: 0-9729309-0-6

Kealan-Patrick Burke's name is virtually everywhere in the small press these days, and for good reason. Fans of horror, no doubt, have seen several of the stories from this collection in other magazines. Yet familiarity in this case doesn't breed contempt. On the contrary, the fact that these stories are reprinted just gives us another excuse to read them again.



One of the things that is most entertaining about Burke's writing is his ability to walk the line between suspenseful, atmospheric horror like that contained in "Haunting Ground" and the campy, pulp stylings of stories like "The Barbed Lady Wants for Nothing." Meanwhile, stories like "The Binding" and "Editor's Choice" rely on the twist ending. Burke is like a master of disguise-trying on different styles and voices to give his work a fresh, always unexpected quality. It's one of the things that keeps his work interesting and forces the reader to dive into the next story. That said, a bookmark isn't really a necessity when reading 'Ravenous Ghosts.' You'll be compelled to read until the very end.

So what differentiates this collection from the hundreds of other small press collections out there? Let's start with the appearance of the book itself. With gorgeous art by Mike Bohatch and a slick glossy cover complete with words of high praise from Jack Cady, Thomas Monteleone, and Gene O'Neill, this book would easily look at home in any bookstore. So what about the fiction itself? The subjects run the gamut, including stories about revenants, doppelgangers, a chance encounter with death, an all-too fitting description of writers, the Pied Piper, zombies, a jealous dead lover, and a comic-book store that's more than what it seems. Add Burke's storytelling talent to the mix and you've got a batch of tales that are both well executed and entertaining.

Verdict on 'Ravenous Ghosts': Definitely recommended. No doubt, you'll be seeing lots more of Burke in the future. For readers of horror, that's a good thing.