

# TIGERSHARK Magazine



Issue Nine – Spring 2016 – Death & Disaster

# Tigershark Magazine

## Issue Nine – Spring 2016

### Death & Disaster

#### Editorial

Exploration can be a dangerous pastime, so it is only fitting to follow our recent issues with one dedicated to death and disaster. Be careful...

Best, DS Davidson

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Editor and Layout: DS Davidson

#### Next Issue's Theme:

**Funny Strange & Funny Ha-Ha**

<https://tigersharkpublishing.wordpress.com/>

Someone switched the tanks  
Laughing gas not oxygen  
Dying for a laugh

Earth's sun slowly grows  
Should've built ship instead of  
Underground shelter

*By Denny E. Marshall*

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### Flood Waters

By Aeronwy Dafies

Yet again waters rise, caress the doorstep  
 Not a friendly gesture, but a flood  
 Flowing in – in – in, rising fast  
 Staining walls barely dry from last time  
 They fight regardless, only to fail again  
 The waters unbidden and unbeatable

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<b>Artwork</b>		
All images are courtesy of pixabay.com		

### New

[Mars: Poetry and Fiction from the Red Planet](#) is available now from Atlantean Publishing, including work by Aeronwy Dafies, DS Davidson, Bryn Fortey and J.J. Steinfeld, as well as Rhysling Award nominees Christina Sng, Steve Sneyd and DJ Tyrer.

£3 (UK) / £5/€10 (EU) / £6/US\$12 (RoW)  
 Payments can now be made via  
<https://www.paypal.me/DJTyrer>

# Atlantic Widows

*(for the women survivors of RMS Titanic)*

*By Abigail Elizabeth Ottley Wyatt*

We come to it in our different ways – just as we,  
ourselves, in our lives before, were distinct  
in this and that: the fine arch of an eyebrow,  
the sloping of a shoulder, the tilt or thrust of a chin.  
We wear our losses awkwardly, like unfamiliar clothing,  
our real clothes being not what they should be:  
it is not what we expected: to be thus attired,  
to be dishevelled and hemmed by this dark.

After the grab and bustle, there is the slow pull of the oars;  
we are marooned in the grip of this grim spectacle;  
our ears are filled with a thunderous roar  
and this great, proud ship breaks its spine.  
Then its lights go down: there are no more cries;  
the weight of silence presses down on us.  
Once the sun shone warm and the band played on;  
now we shiver and we cannot take it in.

It is the little losses that torment our thoughts,  
as if to think such trifles might preserve us:  
a glittering frock with a silver fringe is torn past all repair;  
a matron weeps for a pin lost to the deep;  
a hollow-eyed bride mourns her trousseau;  
but, even as we draw our tatters close,  
our splendour is the wealth of the grave.

So, the frost stills our tongues as the hours limp by  
and we dare not give much credence to tomorrow;  
to think of it defeats our strength as if we too  
might lose our grip and slip into the deep;  
and, while some of us, a few, may survive our grief  
and, one day, think to love again and marry,  
for most of us, no matter how long,  
our drowned hearts will forever be in weeds.

# Practice Makes Perfect

*By DJ Tyrer*

“Target acquired,” the gunner stated efficiently, his tone bland and uninterested.

“Prepare to fire,” an officer responded, equally bored.

Upon the bridge of the starship, nobody was really that interested in what was about to occur. The ship might be new and improved, but it was merely an upgrade on what had already been, and they had seen it all before.

On the vast screen that dominated the bridge, an insignificant blue-green planet was displayed at the centre of a red crosshairs. Earth. Not that any present knew or cared about its name. It was merely The Target.

Down below, on that little world, none was aware of the doom that was about to be visited upon them. Everyday life went on as it ever did, people died and babies were born, marriages were made, divorces finalised, and one-night stands regretted.

Not a single scientist or lone military officer below noted a thing regardless of all the satellites in orbit and probes floating through the system. Not even the space telescopes put in place to watch for approaching meteor threats or the secret ring of satellites put in place specifically to seek out alien threats to Earth had picked the craft up on any sort of sensor. The world was oblivious.

The final minutes passed in the usual daze of celebrity gossip, reality TV, news filled with fear, terrorism, war in remote places, disasters and mundane human activity. Nobody looked skyward in trepidation and not even the doom-mongers imagined the end was quite so imminent. There was no warning; no reason to imagine what was about to happen. Doubtless, someone, somewhere, was watching *Star Wars: A New Hope* without realising the statistically-irrelevant irony of their choice. Certainly, there were some offering up praise for the miraculous preservation of their life from some danger or disaster unaware that their relief was a little premature.

“Ready?” asked the officer.

“Ready,” responded the gunner.

“Then... fire!” There was no ceremony or countdown, not a wasted word, just an order and an action.

The gunner pressed the button on his console and the starship’s enormous gun – a gun that comprised almost all the hull of the craft – fired a red lance of energy towards the Earth. A minute later – even at light speed, it took time to reach the target – the planet began to glow and, a moment later, exploded in a great halo of debris.

For the people of Earth, it was all over and they had never known.

Aboard the starship, technicians assessed the outcome of the test and pronounced it a success. Yet another warship crew was ready for the fleet.

“Take us home,” the officer told his crew, voice weary.

*Ends*



## Deep Blue

*By Denny Marshall*

Random thoughts  
Of doom  
Swim in the mind  
A flash flood lasting seconds  
Don't want to die  
Nor drown in sorrow  
I don't want to live  
Without her  
I cannot do both  
Dive into neither  
Constant strokes of her  
Like a tidal wave  
Inside the body  
Lost in the obscure  
See no other fish  
Even way down deep  
There are many hills  
Void of gills and lungs  
It's hard to breathe  
This deeper shade of blue

## ST. LUCIFER

**By Frederick J. Mayer**

Emotional sensation of clouds high.  
Insensibility of Reality  
That you're six feet under.  
Touched by the fact you didn't die.  
In the Valley of Shadows  
Death is to be reliable - fie  
The Lived in the reflective spell  
Thee Dead Angel of anguish cry.

## A Fleeting Moment

*By DJ Tyrer*

Life  
Such a fleeting thing  
Frail  
A fleeting moment  
In the eye of eternity  
Even stars die  
And existence  
Must come to an end

## Atlas Curtsied

*By Scott Thomas Outlar*

There is a difference between  
working together toward a common goal  
and  
working together toward purposes of power

Leaders bear the weight  
of the world

Despots dress up in wigs  
and pull the wool

Scott Thomas Outlar's chapbook **Songs of a Dissident** was released in 2015 through Transcendent Zero Press and is [available on Amazon](#). Scott's full-length collection **Happy Hour Hallelujah** is forthcoming in 2016 through CTU Publishing

# The Banmanush of Bangladesh

*By Richard Stevenson*

Oh, Hi! Don't often run into humans here.  
Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Mande Barung  
Or, if you prefer, the Banmanush of Bangladesh.

You don't know how long it's taken me  
To manage that mouthful of syllables, dude.  
Mostly, I just mutter *eugh, eugh, eugh*.

Go about gatherin' food. Though I've often  
wanted to speak to you about the trees  
you wanna harvest here. They're mine too, you see.

Can't have you choppin' 'em down snicker snack  
just cos you've got no hair or fur to speak of.  
Surely, you can just move somewhere hot enough

to make a home. Don't need all that lumber  
to build a man cave yer mate can brave.  
Jus' pick a sub-tropical glade. Doff the togs.

And another thing. Put away the thunderstick.  
You can stay with the missus and I right here!  
Don't need to be fillin' our arses with lead

to get ahead and make it in the jungle, son.  
Jus' chew on roots and berries, go vegan or vegetarian.  
Forget the big house in the 'burbs, the two-car garage.

There ain't no place you need to go  
you can't get to swingin' on a vine  
or by beatin' a path by shank's mare.

Yer too soft in the belly anyway,  
and there ain't no telly tale or story  
needs sayin' more than what you can say

in moonlight by the bay or under stars.  
Me and the missus been marvellin' at  
them for years. And we've got a better story

than the sorry ass one you been tellin' yer kids.  
Ain't nothin' that needs to be parked in a zoo  
for you to go goo goo over. Forget popcorn,

pizza, and beer. Our cousins Alma and Yeti  
may have developed a fondness for yer Spaghetti,  
But it ain't helpin' them lose their swag bellies.

Sasquatch, Bigfoot, Yowie, Ucu, Orang Pendek –  
They all agree. You've become a pain in the neck.  
If you don't have one, you won't miss it.

And you won't be so all fired up to crane it  
around every bush or tree to name and tame  
us either, bud. Give it up. Put away yer toys.

Come and play with the big boys. Have some fun  
in the sun and frolic, Fred. You ain't so old  
you need to know who's dead or dyin' yet.

## **The Essence of Time**

*By Wayne Russell*

Feel the humanity fade  
as you await the dark moment  
riding stiff in sad gallop.  
Death  
when shall he announce  
your number?  
When shall he arrive  
to take you home  
abashed within stark dreamy  
nether worlds.  
I look at the wall of the dead  
some be damned  
some blessed.  
I mourn for those lost to me  
held only now within the shadow  
and warmth of dreams.  
I still loathe those  
that beat me down  
like a dog  
their pictures shall fry upon  
rabid flames that  
belch fall leaves  
an eternity.

## **Nature Signals**

*By Emanuelle Cartagena*

Fleeting the hum of a mockingbird,  
As was the buzzing of the bumblebees,  
Capturing the last vestiges  
of savoring,  
the moment,  
I afflicted my personal wounds to the air,  
And replete with vitriol and nectar,  
I summoned my demons to my face,  
and nose.  
caressing their delicate shadows,  
fondling the bruises they inflicted,  
embrace and deface capitulated itself,  
unto the situation.  
Necessary it was for me,  
To wear my scars as badges of honor,  
And not leave them for blackmail,  
or shame or humiliation.

But the bees would buzz,  
And the birds hum anyway,  
Whether I captured myself or not.  
I am not that important,  
But I am to me now.

Just like nature,  
I move on

*First published in **Linden Ave** literary journal*



# THE KING IS DEAD...

*By Bryn Fortey*

I suppose the one person we can blame for the whole sorry mess is Thomas Thorne Baker, an electrical researcher who in 1907 had been hired by the *Daily Mirror* to develop a way of sending photographs over telephone lines. He came up with a primitive version of a fax machine, which he called an electrolytic tectrograph. It did indeed produce recognizable, though grainy, images, but was considered too costly for further development. Baker though remained convinced that within what we now look back as being a Golden Age of Electrification, he could find both fame and fortune.

An electric lock which was opened by the playing of specific musical notes failed to catch on, but never mind, he had bigger fish to fry. Well, maybe not actually fish. Baker switched to a study of electromagnetic fields, theorizing that they could be just as beneficial as the sun's rays. Maybe they could even stimulate growth.

Since he could see potential custom from within the food industry, Baker's first subjects were peaches and Camembert cheese, exposing both to fields of electromagnetic energy. Both, so it seemed, ripened more quickly. Encouraged, he moved on to chickens. Soon twelve birds perched on insulated wires that were charged with five thousand volts for one hour each day and the results were promising. The test case chickens reportedly weighed thirteen percent more than those in a non-electrified coop.

Mr Randolph Meech, a chicken farmer from Poole, was impressed; sufficiently enough to allow Baker to carry out trials on a building which housed around three thousand birds. He wrapped the entire building in insulated wire and was soon announcing that the chickens so treated grew fifty percent larger in half the time.

Despite such grand claims, the relatively conservative chicken farmers of England did not queue up to switch to electrically treated coops. Baker's only convert was over in America where a Brooklyn dentist named Dr Rudolph C Linnau stopped pulling teeth and electrified chickens instead. Baker himself moved on to larger subjects, thinking he might find a cure for shortness in humans. He even used his five year old daughter Yvonne as a subject in some of his experiments, as reported in the *London Mirror*.

But Baker's moment in the public eye was fading, being overtaken by bigger and grander studies. Svante Arrhenius, who had won the 1903 Nobel Prize for Chemistry, electrified a whole classroom of children in a Swedish school. A five year old daughter in a cage could not compete with that.

Baker's most successful accomplishment however, gained him no credit whatsoever. Indeed, he himself had no knowledge of it at all. Within the perimeter of the test building on Randolph Meech's chicken farm, Stag Beetle larvae were feeding on rotting wood. Just why Stag Beetles responded so well to the theory of electrically enhanced growth was never investigated since it remained unknown. Mr Meech himself did spot a twelve inch specimen at a later date. But he merely said "Ugh!" and stamped on it. An act of violence not lost upon others of its species.

If God had not meant Stag Beetles to be judged by the power and dexterity of their antler-like jaws, then why had He given them such mighty appendages?

All hail the Mighty God Elvis, King of Rock and Roll!

Lucky Lucanus had crushed all opponents to win the leadership of his particular burrow, which didn't make him the smartest insect in the place but did mean that nobody wanted to take him on in a fight. Stag Beetle Superior had come a long way since the original larvae group had been the accidental beneficiaries of Thomas Thorne Baker's chicken experiments. Each succeeding generation had become that bit bigger until now, over a hundred years later, when the growth rate of Stag Beetle Erectus had tapered off at an average four foot.

As their size increased, so had their brain potential; not sufficiently to have produced a Stag Beetle Einstein, yet, but they were better equipped than your average unaffected insects. With wings now redundant and lifespan much lengthened, they lived in underground colonies and kept away from humans. The horrific story of the murderous Randolph Meech was an ever present syllabus highlight in all larvae schools.

Though raiding groups would make carefully controlled trips to the surface in search of bounty, human contact was to be avoided. On the thankfully rare occasions when they had been seen, the human was killed and the corpse disposed of. Just another unsolved Missing Persons case.

Our thanks, God Elvis, for the gift of mighty jaws.

The only semi-contact allowed was via the radio, which the Stag Beetles had developed with keen diligence just as soon as their technology had allowed. They kept up to date with surface news items and bopped away to whatever music was being played.

Which was how Elvis Presley, the King, became their God. They could relate to the way he had grown ever larger before ascending to Rock and Roll Heaven.

Stags Erectus didn't always exercise full and proper understanding of the surface world.

"General Franco Sinatra did things his way during the Spanish-Mafia wars," said Lucky Lucanus, pausing long enough to let his underlings show their support for his statement.

"He sure did."

"Right on!"

"True enough, boss."

"And I'm going to do things *My Way* now," he finished.

That usually meant doing extensive damage to someone with his all-conquering antlers, so his subordinates were relieved to learn that on this occasion personal violence was being sidestepped. "I want two patrols out tonight. Look especially for any discarded newspapers. There might be mentions of starting dates, that sort of thing."

"The radio only said they were proposals, boss. Nothing definite yet," said one who was a little braver than his fellows.

The Leaders handsome reddish-brown body glowed with irritation while his black wing cases glistened. "We can never trust the humans," he rasped angrily.

Ian Barton had dreamt of a show biz career for as long as he could remember. From Amateur Talent Shows to local bands to a singer/songwriter solo act; though he did prefer to forget his time with Cardiff punk outfit *Gobby Arseholes*, those safety pins really had hurt. None of it had ever amounted to more than a bit of local notoriety and he had rarely gigged outside his South Wales stamping ground. Not until the day someone had suggested his voice was well suited to Elvis Presley material.

Elvis Presley Impersonators, most people called them, but Ian Barton was more ambitious. He was an Elvis Tribute Artist. He had read *Just Pretending* by Kurt Burrows, taking all his tips on board and practising hard with the five free karaoke backing tracks available with the book.

He was good, but that alone was not enough in such a highly competitive and crowded show biz sub-genre. Early Elvis, G.I. Elvis, Las Vegas Elvis, Black Elvis, Asian Elvis, Gay Elvis, Japanese Elvis, and so on. There was already a Welsh Elvis, much to his initial annoyance, but Ian had soon zoomed in on a gimmick he was fast making his own. He was Dead Elvis, stepping from an onstage coffin in full Las Vegas regalia and returning to it at the end of his act, and his reputation was growing with gigs all around the UK. One day he would make it to America where hundreds of Elvis acts congregated at conventions and in competitions.

He could see the headlines now: *Dead Elvis Wows America!*

Where was he playing the following Week? Ah yes, Salisbury. Wiltshire might not have the same ring to it as Texas or Montana, but every gig was another brick in the career Ian was building for himself.

\*

Great thought had gone into choosing the sites for their underground habitation. After some narrow squeaks and a couple of unfortunate incidents where human fatalities occurred, it had been decided to burrow deep beneath surface structures that mankind appeared to cherish. So would be unlikely to demolish and dig beneath themselves.

There were a number of these Giant Stag habitations hidden across the UK Island and the one where Lucky Lucanus was in charge was directly below Stonehenge. Though why a pile of old stones, however large, was so important, was beyond him. It wasn't as if God Elvis had ever appeared there.

"Humans think it's a *Good Luck Charm*," said one of his helpers.

"As long as they leave us alone, *Way Down* here," said another.

"*I Just Can't Help Believing* we are missing something by only ever seeing it in the dark."

"Well *I Don't Care If The Sun Don't Shine*. It's just a building site. It's no *Promised Land*."

"*A Little Less Conversation* and more action," decided Lucky.

*GOD ELVIS: The Lyrics* was required reading and no self-respecting Stag was without a copy, but not even the much loved rhymes of *Rock A Hula Baby* helped in this current situation. Mixed in with various human Transport proposals was a suggestion that a duel-carriageway tunnel be dug beneath Stonehenge. Something about ending A303 bottlenecks and doing away with long traffic queues. Not that the reasons mattered; human behaviour was way beyond Beetle understanding, God Elvis apart, and look what they'd done to Him!

He had been too forgiving when allowing lesser beings into the Million Dollar Quartet, even the great betrayer, Judas Lee Lewis. No wonder they called him The Killer! But God Elvis had put the frailties of Chart Success behind him and had entered the Land of Grace.

Lucky Lucanus lowered his head and rattled his mighty jaws. Human intrusion had grown over the years but up until now Beetle technology had kept them safe, successfully blocking and diverting sonar probes and the like. But a tunnel was something else.

\*

When the surface parties returned from their foraging that night they had managed to find a few discarded newspapers as ordered, and much consternation and twitching of feelers resulted. There were no mentions of the proposed tunnelling in any of them but one small item tucked away in an entertainment section provoked challenges not experienced in generations.

A small headline stated: DEAD ELVIS TO APPEAR IN SALISBURY.

The Stags were split between those expecting a Second Coming and others who considered the whole thing a blasphemy. Never had Beetle opinions been so divided. Males clacked their jaws with threatening intensity, arguing finer points of faith, while the antlerless females hid in nurseries and kitchens.

Stag Beetle society was strictly antler orientated. Those with, the males: ruled. Those without, the females: cooked, cleaned and tended the larvae. It was a system that worked and was accepted. Killer jaws guaranteed compliance.

In the end Lucky Lucanus called a Large Hall meeting that males only were summoned to attend. It was too big a topic to leave without an official line being decided upon.

“God Elvis is delivering a big Comeback Special again. He will stop the tunnelling!”

“He died, but was reborn to be King in Rock and Roll Heaven. God cannot become a Dead Elvis a second time.”

“Maybe we’ve got *Suspicious Minds*,” decided Lucky after the arguments had raged to and fro, “but I tend to agree with the sceptics. Only one way to find out for sure though, and that is to see for ourselves.”

\*

The Stag Beetle tactics of secrecy and isolationism had undoubtedly been their best way to ensure survival during their original transformation and development. But they were beyond the stage now where human contact could only result in extermination and specimen jars.

So reasoned Lucky Lucanus.

Might was right, in his book, and the occasional confrontation showed that humans, though mostly bigger, were no match for their superior jaw power. Maybe this Dead Elvis thing was a sign that they should return to the surface, and stomp on the humans if they objected.

“Why should we live *In the Ghetto* of this underground existence,” he muttered, convincing himself that action was the best policy. “No good *Crying in the Chapel*. It was time to hitch a ride on that *Mystery Train* and *Return*, not *To Sender*, to the surface!”

\*

Ian had drunk his usual Honey-laced Linctus to sooth his vocal cords and a can of Special Brew to calm his nerves. Feeling edgy before a performance was good. It showed he wasn't taking anything for granted. "Thank-you-very-much," he said in the way Elvis ran the words together, nodding to himself. He was sounding more like him all the time.

This venue at - where was it? Salisbury? - yes, Salisbury, boasted a proper stage and curtains. Not all places he played could say the same, but the Dead Elvis routine was able to cope with any situation. His coffin, in an upright position so he could open the hinged lid and step out, was hidden behind his own electrically controlled framed curtain. Once in his wooden box he would hear the announcer introduce him, knowing that the stage curtains were being opened to reveal his own smaller personal curtains. These would then open at the press of a button and Ian would sing *Love Me Tender* from inside the coffin before stepping out to continue his act.

Everything was going to plan, except for the audience being the noisiest he could ever remember hearing. It started all of a sudden, while he was being introduced. Shouting, yelling, what sounded like booze fuelled shenanigans. That was all he needed, a drunken audience!

Opening the coffin lid he stepped out, breaking into another ballad, *Are You Lonesome Tonight*. He would normally up the tempo with a couple of fast rockers next, but not tonight. Ian did not even finish the second ballad. He hadn't drawn in a large audience; indeed, he doubted that even the real Elvis would have achieved a full house here, but the hullabaloo he'd been hearing was because they were all fighting.

Struggling! Grappling! Losing! Dying! People were being killed by GIANT INSECTS!

Though he'd stopped singing Ian had not knocked off his backing track and it seemed highly suitable that *Paralysed* was playing, because he was; gawping, open mouthed and motionless, not able to believe his own eyes. Not only were people fighting, and apparently for their lives, but they were fighting against big insects with terrible horns.

"*It's Now Or Never*," Lucky had told his troops before leading them into battle. A few lines of *Love Me Tender* from behind a curtain had been sufficient. This was a charlatan, an evil copy, not the real God Elvis returned from Rock and Roll Heaven. This was blasphemy!

Ian Barton stared with unbelieving eyes as the creature clambered onto the stage and came towards him. "This is *Too Much*," he whispered, unable to move. No more booze, he promised, no more funny fags, no more pills. Just let me wake up!

Lucky Lucanus clicked and clacked his fearsome jaws in eager anticipation. This imitator, this False Elvis, had to die. "I know who you are," he shouted. "You're the *Devil In Disguise*!"

"*Don't Be Cruel*," whispered Ian unbelievingly, then the thing was upon him.

\*

So the first skirmish was fought. Soon full-scale conflict would rage as Humans and Stag Beetle Erectus vied for supremacy in the United Kingdom, but that is another story.

*Ends*

## MechRaven

*By JD DeHart*

shroud world of patent  
self-discovery,  
the proverbial face seen  
in shadow  
or through it

another voice, another  
time, another mystery

a mechanical raven  
rests upon the bust  
of Poe's Pallas  
circumventing wisdom

is it there by choice  
or by the movement  
of those words we have  
known simply reappearing,

as if by magic,  
on yet another canvas  
recursively?

## DEATH IS COMING FASTER (THE BONEYARD SHUFFLE)

*By Neil K. Henderson*

Death is coming faster -  
Tension echoes in my marrow  
When He clatters in His barrow:  
"Come along, Old Bones, and scatter!"  
Death is coming faster -  
Let it come.

Death is coming faster -  
You can hear His charger thunder  
As the rumble churns you under:  
"Batter on, Old Bellows - harder!"  
Death is coming faster -  
Let it come.

Death is coming faster -  
Fit to blow this heart asunder.  
You can feel your maggots mutter:  
"Shall we make a meal of matter?"  
Is corruption any wonder?  
Let it come.

Death is done and over -  
Let's reflect a moment's glimmer,  
Cast a glance behind, and ponder:  
"Was it really worth the bother?"  
Better pushing up the clover.  
It is done.





## Beyond the Far Door”

*By John A. De Laughter*

‘Oh blind walker,  
How can you ignore?  
The dark gray place,  
Beyond the far door.

Why, oh busy people,  
Can you not see?  
That final abode,  
Which is your destiny.

Do you cling to a phantom,  
Hoping to stay.  
The question that is posed,  
By your last day?

Or will the claim,  
Of being someone.  
Stop the crimson  
Night to come?

Live then each day,  
As it may abound.  
Fear not the door,  
But know its crown.

For beyond that portal,  
You will be found.  
Deep beneath,  
The cold, hard ground.’



# C.O.D.D

*By Diane Arrelle*

Lisa stared at the gun pointed at her chest and held her breath. *Oh God*, she thought, fighting for control of the rapid heartbeat that threatened to shake her apart. *I knew his fooling around would cause trouble someday, but I never expected this.*

"Look, take what you want, take anything, but please don't hurt us," she pleaded to the crazed-looking woman who was holding the weapon in a one-handed, rock-steady grip.

The woman shook her short, brown hair and laughed. Using her free hand, she reached into the pocket of the army jacket she was wearing and pulled out a wicked-looking knife. "Yeah honey, I'm taking what I want. Give me your diamond wedding rings and kneel down with your back to me."

Lisa sank to her knees and stiffened her spine. *Please don't let this hurt*, she thought hopelessly, knowing the end had to be near. *And please, please, let the kids live*, she silently prayed as she fought off the light-headed feeling that signaled she was close to fainting. *Don't let her find my babies.*

The woman grabbed Lisa's long, blond hair and pulling hard enough to cause tears, snapped Lisa's head back, exposing her long graceful throat. Lisa gasped in pain and tried not to lose body control as she saw the long serrated knife swing down. Squeezing her eyes shut in terror, she waited to feel the burning pain, as the insane stranger laughed hysterically.

Suddenly the pressure was gone and her head swung forward as the pulling force disappeared. Lisa sobbed out loud, puzzled that she was alive, but still too numb to be grateful.

"Turn around, Bitch," the woman snapped in a voice that oozed both hatred and triumph. "I've got your husband, and I've got a souvenir. And you, you've got a bad haircut and your life, a life alone without a man."

She paused as Lisa, rubbing at her sore scalp, slowly stood up and turned around. When Lisa faced her, she continued. "Know why? Because you're a stupid, little, pretty-girl, dumb, blond bimbo who doesn't understand how to satisfy a good man."

Lisa's gaze shifted from the hank of long blond hair, her hair, grasped tightly in the woman's fist, up to meet the eyes of a madwoman, then back down to her roughly sawed off chunk of hair.

She wanted to laugh, laugh with joy over not having her throat slashed, joy because her children were going to be safe, and with ironic amusement because this woman actually used the term good man when speaking about Brad.

Suddenly she couldn't help herself, she felt the laughter come bubbling up her throat. Hysterical, uncontrollable, heaving bursts of laughter made her already shaky legs give out. She sank to the floor and laughed until tears rolled down her pale cheeks.

She was alive and losing her albatross. That was worth having her hair ruined. She wanted to scream at the psychotic nutcase in front of her. She wanted to tell her to take him and keep him.

But all she could do was laugh.

Lisa saw the woman's cheeks grow red with anger and her eyes slit down into quarter moons of malevolence. She quickly hiccupped herself into silence as the fear returned.

"What's so funny, Bitch," the woman snarled. "I'm taking Brad and all

his money away from you. All you'll have left are those disgusting brats. Brad told me he doesn't care about them or you."

Finally Lisa spoke, "Taking Brad? You have my heartfelt blessings. Only, when you find out what he's really like, don't send him back here. The next time I want to see Brad, is in a box waiting to go six feet under."

The woman spit on the floor in front of Lisa, turned about-face and strode out the door. Lisa sat on the varnished hardwood and stared after her for a long time. Feeling slowly returned and she wept. Relief and absolute loathing fought each other to gain control of her emotions. At that moment she hated Brad more than ever before. She wished him death, painful torturous death. She was sorry she'd let him come back those other two times. She often wondered what drove her to forgive a man who obviously came back for the money, to take back a man she didn't love anymore.

The answer was simple, she decided. The children. She couldn't be the one to destroy the happy portrait they made. They were the American dream, self-made wealth, healthy, happy children and loving parents. All her life she was raised to want that. If Brad left, everyone would say it was her fault if she didn't take him back. Even her mother told her over and over, "Men are supposed to wander. It's in their blood. A good wife turns her head, looks the other way and hopes he comes home."

Lisa remembered how many times Daddy left for business and yet when he came home they all seemed happy, just like it was here. Only this time, she'd see Brad dead first before she'd ever let him darken their door again. "How dare he!" she screamed in anger. "How dare he let an insane tramp threaten us like that!"

Getting up, she wiped the tears from her cheeks and picked up the phone. After she dialed, she took a few deep breaths and spoke as calmly as possible.

"Hello, this is Lisa Daily-Hammond, is Lieutenant Madison in? Oh, well, would you tell him I'd like to see him as soon as possible. Thanks."

She hung up and waited, sitting quietly trying to keep from shaking with reaction. She thought about going to the office of their business, the business she and her brother Tim started fifteen years earlier, but couldn't face the memories. That was where she and Brad met. Tim had hired him as general manager.

Brad was good, she remembered, thinking back to those early days. He had expanded the freight line to go international, instituted that rule she had found so silly, the fifty pound package weight limit, and got them into the overnight competition.

He changed the company name from Daily's Delivery and made their logo a national catch-phrase. Because of Brad's ingenuity, they became C.O.D.D.: Cheerful-Overnight-Daily-Delivery. He made them rich as everyone in the country grew used to, and automatically recognized, the flying fish on their fleet of Caribbean blue trucks.

It had been love at first sight for Lisa, she recalled with a derisive snort. Handsome Brad, six-foot-one and 175 pounds of blue-eyed innocence, just bowled her over. He wooed her, married her, and started cheating on her within two years.

"Brad's a great businessman but a lousy human being," she sighed, finally calmed down from her ordeal. "And if this woman proves to be his new norm, a really bad judge of character," she muttered just as Lieutenant Madison drove up in his police cruiser.

She got up and opened the door, watching the auburn haired officer walk up the steps to her brick-front colonial. As soon as he crossed the threshold, she threw her arms around him and hugged him. "Hey, what's this?" he asked as he hugged her back. "What happened?"

"I want to say I'm sorry."

"Please don't," he said rubbing her hair gently, fingering the chopped uneven edges. "I've waited for this hug for years. Want to tell me about your hair, and I hope it was one of the kids just fooling around."

"No, I'm sorry I turned you away all this time," she said starting to cry again. "I was a fool to do this to you. Forgive me?" she asked giving him a salty kiss.

"Forgive you? I love you, Lisa! I've loved you ever since fifth grade. Now, tell me what happened, why are you crying like this? Did that bum hurt you?"

"Yes, no, not him exactly," she answered. "Look, Dennis, I'll tell you everything, but off the record, OK? I need your help. And Dennis, I've never said this before because it is the wrong thing to do, but I love you too. I think I always have."

When she finished telling him what happened, she made them coffee as he dusted for prints, scooped the glob of spit into a vial, and searched for other clues to the woman's identity. "I'll have Terry stop over tomorrow to do a sketch of her. He owes me a favor," Dennis explained to her as he worked. "After we learn who she is, you can decide what to do."

"I know what to do," Lisa said with a shudder. "Let them rot together as long as I never see either one of them again."

A few days later, Dennis called. "Lisa, that woman is Deloris Cafferty. She escaped from a hospital for the criminally insane two months ago. She is wanted in connection with two murders in Chicago last month and an attempted murder fifty miles from here in Tompkinsville."

He stopped talking for a moment then added, "I think you need constant police protection."

"Oh no, Dennis. If she wanted to kill me she would have done it already."

"I still think it would be best if you weren't alone, how about I come for a while and see how it works."

Lisa giggled. "Oh, I see. Yes, police protection sounds just fine. Too bad we didn't think of it fifteen years ago. By the way, I've contacted my lawyer about the divorce."

She fought off a wave of sadness as she added, "Poor Brad doesn't even know he ran off with a mad woman. Wait till she finds out what a louse he is. Too bad we can't warn him."

"Well he doesn't deserve it, but we both know that when he runs out of all that money he took from the business, he'll contact you. When he does, we'll have to apprehend her, so try to find out where they are and if you feel you must, you can warn him."

Lisa was surprised that ten weeks passed without a word from Brad. After twelve weeks she felt hopeful that she'd never hear from him again. All she could think about was Dennis and her children. They were the perfect family, a real portrait of the American Dream. Whenever the divorce became official, they'd have a quiet wedding.

Then one afternoon, Lisa found five boxes delivered to her office. They were the familiar Caribbean Blue crates and she wondered who would send her something from her own company. She opened the top one and found a letter inside on the packing filler. She opened it, then called Dennis. "Deloris was in San Francisco yesterday. I just got five boxes and this letter. 'Hey Bitch, You had the right idea letting that bum go. What a whining, cheap, son-of-a-pigslut.'"

"Did you look in the boxes yet?" Dennis asked. "Don't touch them, just wait for me. I'll be right over as soon as I report Deloris' last known whereabouts."

Lisa was sitting at her desk feeling both faint and nauseous when Dennis rushed into her office twenty minutes later.

"Sorry, Honey," she mumbled in a weak whispery voice. "I just had to open them. It seems Brad gained some weight since he ran off." She pointed at the five opened crates stamped, 50LB limit, and added, "Including the plastic bags and Styrofoam peanuts he's obviously more than 200 pounds now."

*END*

*Originally published in her book **Just A Flash In The Cup** in 2007*

## LA MOISSONEUSE BATEUSE

*By Neil K. Henderson*

"Life is sudden and without warning,"  
opines the seasoned ploughman, stalking  
images of godhead in his sombre furrow;  
and peering past his lunch-packed glory,  
seeks an answer to the protein theory  
left behind in some forgotten meadow.

Bare in the bones of this volcanic age,  
the ghost of Nostradamus walks the waves,  
extinguishing our daylights at a crack.  
The Maestro's tongue is quick to wag his wrath,  
until Dame Nature weeps to salt her broth,  
twisting DNA forever further back.

When Wormwood sent a piecemeal kiss  
to scatter fragments of apocalypse,  
we cheerfully embraced its golden shadow.  
While life's left-luggage ripens on his breath,  
it's only proper that we laugh at Death,  
defrosting ice-panes in his mirrored window.

We Universal children bend the knees  
to try to tempt St. Anthony with cheese,  
believing sandwiches betoken harmony.  
Forgiveness picnics with us on the lawn,  
radiating justice till the dawn  
unfolds the last four minutes of our destiny.

Each blade of grass is valiantly flying  
into a timewarp of its constant dying:  
Ursa Major cultivating Māhdresher.  
The bloom of youth in baleful series rolls  
beneath the prehistoric darkness of our souls,  
into the jaws of midnight's combine harvester.

## Memento Mori

*By DJ Tyrer*

Memento Mori

A reminder all shall die

A skull on his desk

Which had had bought secondhand

From a dead man's house clearance

## SPECTRE DEATH / SPECTRE LIFE

*By Frederick J. Mayer*

Find your own way  
travelling to day seething outside self  
Don't be afraid  
traversing, pulsating within Himself  
Spectre Death has His own haunter -  
His Spectre is Life.

## Lightning Tree

*By Aeronwy Dafies*

Growing strong and tall and straight  
The tree ruled over field and hedgerow  
Until the storm clouds gathered  
Until the thunder drums hammered  
And lightning lanced down to shatter, burn  
Leaving a blackened and tortured shell  
A landmark still, but no king  
A broken and ash-scarred wraith

Water broke the fall  
Uninjured did not notice  
All the hungry sharks

*By Denny E. Marshall*



# Delayed-Onset Grief

*By Allyson Whipple*

My Mother tells me my aunt is dead  
To act shocked would be a lie  
We've spent day after day in vigil, waiting  
For something to change  
Recovery always a wish  
Never a viable option

No siblings left for my mother  
No parents  
She's survived them all  
But this might be the moment of her decline

I have wine glasses on the table  
I have a bed ready to be unmade  
I have a lover opening the door

I think of my own body, the cervix  
Already sick, wonder  
How young I'll be, or how alone  
When the cancer comes to take my ovaries  
When the tumor fills the uterus I fought so hard to keep vacant

My lover's eyes make me hungry

When I tell my mother I have to go, she balks  
Reminds me that my aunt is dead

She is  
But I'm not

And I have a lover with perfect hands  
Making his way down the hall

Oh, later I'll hurt. Make no mistake.

But for now, grief, my old friend  
Can wait an hour.

# Adorable

*By Denny E. Marshall*

Andy hears a knock at the door. He opens its up to find no one there. Andy hears yelping and looks down and sees a small adorable puppy licking at his feet. Andy picks up the cute puppy. The reaction causes a large explosion. Bombs are getting more sophisticated everyday.

# Notes on the Pestilence

## Excerpts from the Podcast of the Oak Park Resettlement

*By Edward Ahern*

The devastation of our North American population began softly, with the nocturnal humming of housefly wings. Flies that had shared tens of thousands of years of daytime activity with us, living off waste and excretion, began to explore the night. And to explore other nutrition.

When the bite-less fliers found it they had dined on our sputum. Now, in the hours of darkness, they explored open sores, nostrils, ears, and mouths. What was not liquid enough for them to suck up they decomposed with their own saliva.

The flies' genetic aberration launched, not in a famine stricken region of tropical Africa, but in a privileged portion of the USA. The epicenter seems to have been near Murphysville, Ohio.

The infestation initially spread among those of us least able to fight against it- the infirm who could not swat away invaders, infants, addicts and alcoholics too stupor us to defend themselves. Those first corpses found were assumed to have become maggot riddled after having died, rather than having been promoted into death by the flies.

Female houseflies are sexually receptive within a day and a half of hatching, and lay 500 eggs every few days. Their newly respired genes dominated reproduction and dispersed rapidly. Before we grappled with the problem the flies had crossed the Mississippi, the great lakes, and the Appalachians.

These altered houseflies were particularly fond of our nostrils, for after having dined on sputum and tissue they laid their eggs in the nasal passages, warm, moist placentas for the larvae which emerged within days and crawled further up to begin dining.. Snorting cocaine addicts were especially susceptible.

At first we ignored this nocturnal infestation, or treated it as nuisance, which could be quickly remedied. The maggots in our bodies were removed and then forgotten. But the damage had been done. The ten-millimeter flies carried on their bodies and in their spit and constant excretions diseases like antibiotic resistant dysentery, typhoid and cholera, and, as a bonus, various parasitic protozoa.

The night flies' spread was facilitated by the open sores given to us by other, biting insects, notably bed bugs and ticks, but even an overly aggressive scratch, self administered while half asleep, provided entrée.

As matters worsened the diseases would frequently leapfrog the houseflies, arriving in our towns by automobile and airplane and spreading without insectal help. We expended huge amounts of manpower and money to combat and isolate antibiotic resistant diseases rather than the bugs, requiring a lurching about face when we finally identified the underlying culprit.

The multiple epidemics were seized on by some religious sects as proof of St. John's Apocalypse, by others as the reckoning of Ba'alzebul, the Lord of the flies. It did not matter. Believer and disbeliever died indiscriminately.

Many of us living alone died and were undiscovered for days, allowing several cycles of reproduction and multiplication. But even supposedly sterile locations were not immune, and doctors and nurses reported discovering maggots in the bodies of patients being operated on.

Our domesticated animals died off even more quickly than we did. Several of the fly borne diseases transferred quickly to fleas who rode their hosts until they died. The litter boxes of cats provided millions of additional breeding grounds. House mice died and festered within the walls, attics and cellars of suburban houses, and flies began emerging from electrical sockets and the holes cut for water pipes.

As the plague of houseflies became overwhelming, our public authorities made urgent recommendations, which, on afterthought, merely compounded the problems. Some encouraged sleepers to use plastic plugs for ears and noses, but there had to be an opening to breathe, and the flies simply crawled up the back of the mouth and into the nasal passages. People resorted to taping a mesh over their mouths before going to sleep. But flies would explore the mesh for openings long enough for their constantly dropping, infection saturated feces to enter the mouth and throat.

The supply of insect repellent ran out quickly, and even those of us with a stock pile tended to over apply it, causing the skin to crack open and provide a nutritional sore. Bug zappers provided dead tissue for other flies to eat. Door and window screens were false reassurances, for the flies entered and left with their human hosts.

Our densely crowded cities died away first, the harvest of death facilitated by a double bladed scythe of selfishness and fear. We urbanites had been encouraged from childhood to care for ourselves first, and harshly declined to step into harm's way. No clean up details for us, thank you. And many who could still care and were unriddled by maggots were already riddled with dread. We offered money and encouragement but not ourselves.

Our financial and monetary systems collapsed along with the cities. Derivatives and swaps became inane once the underlying industries and agriculture broke down. Paper money was made worthless within days of an epidemic hitting a region. Gold and silver retained value only as ornamentation, worth a few small units of food or alcohol.

Scientists, with their long research lead times, were only beginning to gear up when the infrastructure fell apart. Their initial efforts included the study of housefly specific poisons, the sterilization of millions of male flies so there would be curtailed reproduction, the utilization of insect pests which subsist on the flies, and mechanical, electric and attractant traps. But the scientists had to break off their research and attempt to survive.

Disease and infestation broke down our sanitary services. Garbage collection stopped, Surviving sanitary engineers refused to handle fly breeding grounds. Police and Fire Department personnel inspecting a home would simply seal up the entries if they saw swarms of flies inside. Thousands of us began to die with no record of our passing.

Food burglaries became rampant. Gated communities were prime feeding grounds. After our minimum wage security guards had deserted, remotely situated, expensive homes became prized locations for both thefts and forced occupations. In some cases the security guards themselves ram sacked our houses.

Gravity fed water systems continued to provide drinking water to increasingly empty buildings, but the reservoirs for the water became contaminated with decomposition and disease vectors, and the water became undrinkable. Bottled water was quickly depleted. Many thousands of us independently decided to refill discarded water bottles with whatever water was available, reseal the cap and sell the water as pure for food, alcohol and sex.

Our military and National Guard were powerless to contain or defend against the infestation. Their sophisticated weaponry had no existential overlap with the life of a fly. They set up barricades and road blocks from which they perpetually retreated until, decimated by disease, they escorted the political leadership into hiding within sealed underground bunkers provisioned with food and water for years. Neither our elected federal officials nor our military played any significant part during the continent's degeneration. They did, however, issue daily uplifting radio broadcasts to we survivors who rarely had electricity or batteries.

Handguns and rifles were used more by our private citizens than by law enforcement. The murder rate soared to over one per five hundred survivors, many of us killed by armed occupants repelling home invasions. Our bodies lay where they had fallen, additional fodder for flies and disease.

The electrical and heating systems collapsed that fall, leaving us to die on an accelerated basis through the winter, many from simple starvation and exposure to the elements. The flies, however, hibernated. With the warmth of spring they resumed their circular expansion, reaching into Mexico by mid summer. Canada, with a colder environment, took until the next fall to be completely infested.

The vast majority of us owned a hand held audio/visual device, a telephone capable of taking pictures, an iPod, a Blackberry. Most of us were also members of a social network such as Facebook. As death approached and battery power remained we sent out pictures and messages, and recorded our thoughts on our pages. A few of us felt obliged to display photos of our worsening health. By far the largest number of us, however, sent out messages of love and remembrances of times shared. Many of the messages were stored unheard on the phones of the already dead. There were almost no messages of gloating or hate. Those of us filled with venom apparently died with it still trapped within us.

Many of these devices were gathered later from empty apartments and houses. Hundreds of the dying had the foresight to wrap their device in plastic and store it in a spot that would remain dry. The recorded voices are the words of ghosts.

Scott Krulwitz in Fairfield, Ct from his brother in Tennessee: "Scott, I'm sorry I never got around to calling. Maybe it's a guy thing. Anyway, I hope you're still okay. (Pause) We were never as close as I wanted. We're in pretty bad shape out here. Esther is gone, and both kids are sick. There's no power, and

we're down to eating canned stuff. I hope you're not in the same shape. If you get this please call. I'd really like to hear your voice."

Karen Donnahue in Kitty Hawk, NC, from her mother in Estes Park, Colorado: "Sweetie I got your message and I'm so sorry to have to leave one of my own rather than talk with you. Don't worry about me. I've moved in with what's left of another family. Just make sure you and Paul stay sealed up until this is over. I wish (message broken off by the sending unit)

Emile Langevin in Chicago, IL from his former wife in Sheldon, AL: "Hi. Long time since we talked. I don't want your memory of me to be that yelling and screaming argument. I never blamed you, not really. I just wanted so much, and what we had together seemed like so little. You were as good to me as you could be, I guess. (Coughing) Please try and get through this, for my sake. I'd like somebody to remember me."

The pestilences recrossed the continent in diminishing, overlapping waves, like echoes in a cathedral, infecting fewer of us with each ripple. Except for sporadic fires, our buildings, land and machinery were undamaged. The availability of this fully equipped and undefended territory was too much to resist. A major Asian power began marshalling troops and settlers. But the invasion force concentrated itself after the ocean hopping flies and diseases had established invasion fronts, and hundreds of thousands of military and civilians, forcibly prevented from dispersing, died of infectious diseases in their tents. The invasion was abandoned.

Some of us who survived the first wave tried to reverse our diurnal habits, sleeping during daylight hours and attempting to work at night, but the lack of illumination greatly hampered these efforts. Many of us continued our mundane habits, knowing no other way to assert that we still lived and were human. One of these was Alfred Gorshen, an undertaker.

Without gasoline, electricity, or even embalming fluid, Alfred continued to remove the dead from their buildings and assemble them for unmarked, communal burial in an already open excavation site. There were no coffins, just ragged rows of bodies. He noticed that the concentration of flies among the as yet unburied was much less than when the bodies were in their living quarters. This despite their further decomposition.

As Alfred was rope dragging a body into the pit he slipped and the body tumbled onto him. Along with the suppurating tissue and maggots he noticed a host of extremely small flying insects. After cleaning himself off he took a mason jar to another cadaver and collected about 50 of the bugs. They were smaller than a pinhead, almost impossible to accurately see even with his reading glasses. After letting them die he put them under a microscope and consulted a reference book on hexapods. They were, as best he could figure it, tiny wasps. He read on, and learned that the wasps drill a hole in the fly pupa case, dine, and deposit offspring of their own. Slaughter houses and livestock farms sometimes encouraged their presence to keep down the numbers of horse flies.

Alfred Gorshen wanted to live. He took another wasp loaded mason jar back to his apartment building and let them loose. They died within a week of natural causes, and Alfred brought more- there was no shortage of wasp-generating fly eggs. Within two weeks the fly population in the building had plummeted. Word spread that the building seemed safer than others and the apartment building was again fully occupied.

Alfred also began collecting the spiders, which spun their webs throughout the burial ground and dined on the flies. He let them loose in the apartment building and instructed the occupants to not disturb any web building spiders they encountered. The corners of rooms became festooned with webs and the husks of dead flies. A new superstition emerged that it was deadly bad luck to kill a spider.

Over time there were fewer easily collectable bodies, and Alfred organized a collection system over a ten square block area, about as far as a body could be readily dragged or carted. He no longer buried the remains but allowed them to weather into bones. The bones were periodically gathered and piled in heaps, in order to make room for new arrivals.

The only communication was by word of mouth, and when Alfred encountered foot travelers going to other districts and towns he gave them instruction in how to use the wasps and spiders, giving them a jar of the wasps to take along the trip. This became known as the Undertaker's Solution, and miraculously, Alfred's name remained attached to it, although the spelling of Gorshen varied widely and the first name mentioned was often Al, Alan or Albert.

The wasps and spiders were haltingly installed in our houses and apartments. Replenishment was a problem in communities with strict burial practices. Over time it became our unwritten law, under threat of being beaten, to never inter bodies. Corpses were gathered and concentrated in open air lots and allowed to rot and generate flies and wasps. These body collectors were still called undertakers, and for their efforts and risks became wealthy in the emerging barter economy.

The diseases ran their courses, dwindling spring river floods of death, cutting channels through some areas, sparing others for no apparent reason. Those of us resistant or untouched began to restart power facilities, plant crops, and repropagate the remaining livestock. Eventually we restarted oil and gasoline refineries. Our recovery efforts were slowed by rampant crime, ignorance, and lingering deaths from disease.

Our hermetically protected federal officials emerged from their bunkers to find that they were superfluous. Our society had clotted into communities and gangs. The senators and representatives attempted to reestablish their position and privilege, but whole units of the remaining military deserted to try and find family and reestablish their lives. Unable to persuade or coerce, the politicians snuck back into the residual populations.

Perhaps 60,000,000 of us in North America died from the fly borne diseases, and another 40,000,000 from varying combinations of exposure, starvation, dysentery, pneumonia and, of course, murder. The mass of bones accumulated became overwhelming, filling entire vacant lots and landfills.



Our recovery fostered innovative solutions. It was another, unknown undertaker who looked at the unrepaired, gaping potholes in many streets and highways and saw opportunity. Electrical and gasoline powered equipment was still a rarity, so he jury rigged a hand operated press to break our discarded bones into small fragments. These fragments, often still recognizable as finger and toe knuckles, were poured loose into the potholes, creating navigable surfaces. The idea caught on, and as damaged roads were filled in and reopened they were frequently referred to as “Memorial Highway” and “Remembrance Lane.” But the remembrance was only in the aggregate, for we would never know the names of those we walked and rode on.

Survival brought a search for blame. We grudgingly accepted that the mutation of the flies was unpreventable, as was the initial spread of suppuration and disease. But we tied the mass deaths thereafter around the necks of local and national political figures. In our rage we hunted down and killed several thousand former officials with whatever instruments we had at hand. In some cases we simply stoned them to death. Some of the politicians we lynched screamed protests that they had not even voted on a counter measure, and so could not be held accountable for a wrong decision. They were our ritual sacrifices, and their murders marked a steep decline in the overall death rate.

Many of our religious leaders who had promised an apocalypse managed to survive the pestilence and their mistake and reasserted themselves. They now preach to us that the pestilence was not, after all, the start of the Apocalypse, but merely a manifestation of the wrath of God, an unleashing of a devil, a reckoning by Ba'alzebub, the Lord of the flies.

*Ends*

*Originally published in **Danse Macabre***

## **Progress**

*By Denny E. Marshall*

After the aliens wipe out mankind the construction equipment pours in. The scale is large but with hundreds of thousands in the crew the entire construction project is finished rather quickly. The entire planet except for bodies of water has been paved over with concrete. The parking lot is done.

# QUEEN IN BLACK

*By Frederick J. Mayer*

Upon the hill amid shading twilight  
She stands with flowing, flaming hair  
Contrasting to soon jet black skies.  
Rarely appears Her grin  
But those eyes, they never quit.  
Skin softly pale; so tenderly aware  
Despite Her gem webbed veil of tears.  
Yes, She's my Romantic Queen.

Minuet among the flowers;  
Yet Her lips blossom before flora bloom.  
On hued winds of brownish purple  
Blows Her song, that I've heard before  
Deep within pitch prism regions of my mind,  
But now reflected as angel's strains.  
Sung by Her beckoned servants, all astride  
Night's mares - velveteen red airs.  
Understanding is my Queen's supreme trait.

Hands like willows in a summer breeze  
That caress as no other dream.  
Before Her around Her, She's sultry sweet  
Likened to auras of fantasy's flight.  
Romantic Queen brings to me  
Feelings unknown to mortal beings,  
Though not so creatures of the wood.  
By now Her veil has dropped behind me.

May my friends find not me  
Nor this Daughter rare,  
But find instead their thoughts into Being  
Of a Romantic Queen.

# The Gatehouse

*By Norman Klein*

I've lived in the gatehouse almost thirty years, first looking after both Gregory and his father, then just Gregory when his father died. It was a sad business. Gregory's mother had divorced his father, but when his father left the estate house, Gregory's older brother Brock began tormenting him, throwing his winter coat in the trash and urinating into his brother's new school shoes. When that happened, Gregory's mother threw up her hands and sent Gregory and I down the road to live with his father.

I suppose it's odd, but the three of us became a family that very day. I took Gregory's hand and led him upstairs to his room, the one between his father's room and mine. First we unpacked his trunk and his suitcase, then we sat on the bed and I told him I would always be there for him. He smiled and said, "Thank you Mother Olin."

During his college years, he'd come home to me for the holidays and most vacations. Half the time he'd bring friends home with him. I loved cooking for them, and month by month seeing Gregory become his father's son.

Grad school was different. After he earned his Master's degree we schemed together, asking ourselves if his next step was to become a forester or a professor who would earn a PH.D and teach forestry. "If Dad were here he'd want me to teach," he said and enrolled in the program at Washington State. He also found the time to meet Melissa, fall in love with her, and bring her home to me the first Thanksgiving they were together. What a blessing she was, so serious about learning to cook with me. I confess, tears came to my eyes when Gregory made an excuse to check on us in the kitchen and walked over to the stove and put one arm around her and other around me.

They shared Christmas with her family. I was invited, but Gregory's mother begged to me stay and catch up with Brock, Gregory's older brother. They were off somewhere most of the time, but she decided to celebrate Christmas in the estate house a quarter mile down the driveway. She showed me her photos of their tours of Japan and China, and asked me if I would be willing to be the executor of her will, and oversee Brock's trust fund.

"Mrs. Olin, You've done a remarkable job raising Gregory, and that's why I want you to look after Brock if I'm not around," she said.

I agreed to be her executor and serve as his chef as well if he wished me too. I didn't give it much thought. She was my age after all, and they both seemed healthy. Besides, I was having a great old time planning Melissa's wedding with her mother and Gregory. Melissa's mother and I did our best to select a date that would fit in with Brock's plans, but well after the invites went out, he declined saying he and his mother would be in Paris.

I knew what was going on. Brock hadn't changed. He still hated Gregory and resented him. Brock had dropped out of high school, while Gregory went on to earn two degrees and was now working on his third. But of all the things Brock envied about his brother, knowing Gregory was about to return to the gatehouse with a wife was the most hurtful of all.

I had hoped to find a way to bring the brothers together as they grew older, but that became more difficult when his mother died drinking with him in their Paris hotel suite. Moments after she died, he called me drunk wanting to know what he had to do. I contacted his mother's lawyer and she handled that. It took four days to get a French death certificate, then Brock flew home with her on a commercial flight back to the states. Her lawyer and I were there to meet him when he landed. He wanted her taken straight to the funeral parlor, but the lawyer had arranged an autopsy that she was certain would prove his mother had died of cancer, and not excessive drinking.

"I should have known. I could see she was in pain. Why didn't she tell me? I could have helped her," he sobbed, standing over her coffin.

I stopped in to say hello the next morning. He was still drunk.

"I'm doing my best, Mrs. Olin. The funeral is on Friday at 2:00. Will you come with me?" he asked, and I said I would if he promised to be sober. He said he would, and agreed to let me lock him into the guest room at the gatehouse just to be sure he would keep his promise.

Poor Brock. He made a mess of the funeral. He invited the people who delivered him his liquor, his take-out food, and his cleaning. His lawyer and investment manager were there, but he didn't recognize them. When the pastor of the church asked if he could be of help, Brock told him to talk to me. So I did. I told him Brock was not well, not at all himself. As the pastor walked away, Brock returned to me and asked how long we had to stay. On the way home he told me if he had had his way he wouldn't have invited anybody, not even me. It would have been just him in the church with the organ playing.

The following week was pure hell for him. He couldn't sleep. His mother's voice kept waking him up, telling him what to do, insisting he find a wife, a woman smart enough to run the estate and strong enough to keep him sober.

I was still in the Gate House, but he showed up every morning for breakfast to tell me what she'd said.

"She said I had to be up before eight with my suit on, that I had to get out of the house, and volunteer at a charity, and write a book about our travels."

Brock's mother may have valued their travels, but they were a drunken haze for Brock. I wondered if she might have preferred to travel alone, but knew he couldn't be left alone.

I had planned to move out of the Gatehouse in three weeks, the day that Gregory and Melissa moved in. But the weight of my promise to Brock's mother made me move faster. A week after the funeral I knocked on the front door of the estate house, and he let me in wearing his best silk pajamas and walked me into the kitchen.

"Thanks for coming Mrs. Olin. I know, you don't have to say it. The place is a mess," he said, shaking his head, apologetic and indifferent at the same time.

"Do you know about this?" I asked him as I handed him the letter his mother had written to me confirming our arrangement, and thanking me for looking after him for her.

He nodded and asked which room I would like.

"She said I should take her room, the blue room?"

"That's right, I remember now. See you later. What's for dinner tonight?"

I walked over to the refrigerator and found soft drinks, beer, and a loaf of bread. I told him there would be no dinner tonight, that I was going to scrub down the kitchen, check the pantry, and then make a trip to the grocery store.

"And while I'm doing that, I want you to clean your room and the dining room." I said, and then toured the house asking myself how a grown man could let an estate house become a twelve-room slum in the ten days he had lived there alone.

My second day on the job: I began my day with Brock's lawyer. I told him about his mother's wish to see him married.

"It will never happen. Who would want him?" he said.

I told him I had a plan. He encouraged me to give it a try, but if it failed we should check him into the Hosmer Clinic's two-month program for alcoholics.

When I returned to the estate house just before noon, Brock was in bed eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and drinking a pitcher of vodka and cranberry juice as he watched the movie *The King and I*. I asked him if he were sober enough to have lunch with me, and he said he wasn't.

"Okay, tomorrow morning then. Breakfast at eight."

We sat down together and tried to write a personal ad for the local paper, but it was like pulling teeth. "I wish to meet a woman who is relaxed and likes to do the kind of stuff I do," Brock said. It asked her to call so he could invite her for dinner at his estate house.

"On our second date I'll invite her to sleep over," he said.

What was he thinking? He wasn't thinking, he was just being Brock, an alcoholic 42-year-old man who behaves like a drunken 14-year-old boy. What was I to do?

Days later a thin younger woman accepted his invitation. She ate large helpings of everything, and then when Brock went to find a second bottle of wine, she came into the kitchen and thanked me in hesitating English.

“Very nice house. Very nice car. Super food,” she said and left.

I found a dating coach for Brock, but when Brock came down to breakfast to work on a list of questions for him, he was in obvious pain. One look at his left leg told me it was shingles, and I called an old friend who runs a nursing agency and asked for a nurse. Three hours later Lucinda arrived driving a yellow VW bug.

The first thing she did was teach me how to wash my hands properly, then she put gloves on me. While I bagged his laundry and dry cleaning, Lucinda put on fresh bedding and stripped him down to his underwear and put him in a cold bath to ease his pain. At the end of the day Brock said, “Very impressive, a strong girl with lovely hands.”

“Brock, she’s a nurse who wears surgical gloves, and she’s here to cure you,” I said.

“That’s what I meant. She’s an excellent nurse.”

But the following morning I caught him watching her apply the salve to the most painful patches on his legs, loving the care she was taking. The next morning when he didn’t come down for breakfast I climbed the stairs to find him standing with the shades of east windows of his room raised and his eyes fixed on the highway waiting for the yellow car to turn into our driveway.

Lucinda was pleased to see his progress, and how quickly he learned how to change his bandages in the middle of the night. She would come twice a day with tips on antibiotics and questions about other medications he was taking. She also recommended he take yoga classes.

“Look how you pull your shoulders in when you sit down. You’re too intense,” she said.

“Lucinda, could you teach me yoga?”

“I could get you started, I guess. But half the fun is doing it with other people.”

“Not for me. I want to do it here and have my own nurse and personal trainer.”

“You don’t need a nurse. What you need to do is stop drinking,” she said.

“She’s right Brock,” I said, but he ignored me.

“Lucinda, how did you know I’m a drunk?”

“Your eyes, your skin, the slight tremble in your hands, and smell of your room.”

“I’m sorry. My mother just died. I can’t stop now. When I hit bottom I will.”

“Do me a favor,” she asked, “stop drinking until your shingles clear up. Then make an appointment with your doctor to do a complete work up on you.”

“Do you think I have cancer?”

“Make the appointment. Go to your doctor.” Lucinda said, her stare driving him back two steps.

“Okay, will you help send for the records?”

“What records?”

“The ones from the French hospital they took me to when I had my heart attack.”



“Of course I will.”

“Thank you,” he said and then hurried to the bathroom and locked the door.

What a strong person Lucinda is, and a good person. Seeing Brock make his dash to the bathroom reminded me of Gregory’s eighth birthday party. Brock came, but was hanging back, following Gregory and several of his friends as his father led them into the south forest on the estate, then stopped to show them how the forest re-grew itself in a field cleared by Gregory’s great grandfather. First came the birch, next the oaks slowly growing taller and stronger than the birch, then the beech creeping in and feeding on left over light. While Gregory and his friends were collecting acorns I looked back to Brock and motioned him to join us. He shook his head, retreated a few steps with a sneer on his face and then turned and ran back to the estate house.

Lucinda found a Doctor for Brock, and they went in for testing the following day. He wouldn’t share the results, but tried to tell us just enough to win our sympathy.

“Lucinda, the doc says I’ve got to lose weight, and give up drinking. No heavy exercise. No stress,” he said from his bed the following evening as he dined with us.

“Did you tell him you never exercise?” Lucinda asked.

“Never mind that. I was wondering if I should invest in one of those monitoring machines that would wake me up if my heart stopped beating.”

“No, absolutely not. It will keep you awake all night listening to it.”

“He wants to see me again next week. Will you come to my appointment with me?”

“I will if you stop drinking,” Lucinda said.

“If I live that long. I’m afraid I’m going to die in my sleep, and you won’t be there to help me.”

“Brock, that’s enough of that,” I said and gathered up the dishes and left him there with his ginger ale. Lucinda followed close behind. We agreed that the worst thing we could do was indulge him. From that point on he would have to come down stairs to eat, and our conversation would focus on his doctor’s recommendations.

Together we forced him to tell us he was scheduled for bypass surgery in two weeks. The next day he asked Lucinda for help getting into the bathtub, and she walked away. After dinner he asked me to hire a nurse to watch him sleep. I advised him to call his doctor and consult with him.

His next move was to confess that he was in love with Lucinda, and to ask my advice on how to propose. I reminded him that Lucinda was only 21 and had three semesters to go to graduate. “Brock, please reconsider. If you propose she’ll say no and ask the agency to replace her with a male nurse.”

Brock didn’t want to hear that. I suspect he was offended, and that’s what prompted his purchase of a new king-sized bed to replace his single bed.

The following day he gave Lucinda the keys to a new BMW. She handed them to me and didn’t speak with him until the day she drove him to his appointment. She told him what he should wear and gave him a list of questions to ask the doctor.

The doctor told him Lucinda was right, he needed to exercise, needed to keep to the diet Mrs. Olin had put him on, and gave him three kinds of pills, one of which would make him ill if he drank any kind of beer, wine, or liquor.

When Brock and Lucinda returned to the estate house, Lucinda twisted open the plastic vial of drinking pills and asked Brock to take one.

“I’ll have to check them out first, read what they say about side effects,” Brock said.

“Now,” she said.

“Maybe after lunch if they’re okay with food,” he said, and Lucinda picked up her pocketbook and walked out the door. I went to my room and decided I would make him dinner later, but if he wouldn’t take a pill I would go to his lawyer first thing in the morning and arrange to have Brock admitted to the Hosmer Clinic.

I sat down on my bed exhausted and decided to walk back to the gatehouse to collect the mail and see if there were messages on the house phone. There was one, a call from Melissa saying she was in Chicago and about to board a plane to Boston, then pick up a rental car and arrive at the gate house before five. What a lift that gave me. She arrived early which gave us a chance to catch up. A truckload of books and furnishings were going to arrive the following morning, and the plumber was coming to install water filters.

Gregory was delayed, attending a conference on Irish forestry. He had written a paper on the Japanese larch, which was accepted as a presentation and a round-table discussion point. He would join us in five days. I had called Gregory to tell him of his mother’s death, and again to give him the date and time of the funeral. He had said Brock wouldn’t want him there, and he was right of course. I spilled out my adventures trying to help Brock find a wife, and she just shook her head, then sympathized with him when I explained his health problems. She insisted on helping me with dinner and thought she might be able to cheer Brock up a bit. I wasn’t sure it was the right thing to do, and warned her he had just lost Lucinda and might be in a foul mood.

When we arrived at the estate house in Melissa’s car, Brock opened the front door to greet us. “Is this my new nurse?” he asked as she approached him smiling, and she explained who she was and said she had come to assist me -- and him if he’d let her.

“Maybe you can invite me to dinner at the gate house on Sunday. That’s Mrs. Olin’s day off.”

“Dinner at one? Is that okay?”

“Perfect. I’m going bring some papers I want to go over with you – if you don’t mind that is.”

“Please do,” she said.

There was a lull as Melissa and I served and then sat down to eat with him. I didn’t trust his sudden infatuation with Melissa and wondered what was going on in that head of his. Then she jumped in again.

“Gregory told me you were there for your mother to the bitter end. He admired your courage.”

“Did he tell you how rotten I was to him when he was a kid?”

“No, he didn’t,” Melissa said.

“Well if you talk to him tonight and tell him we had dinner at the estate house, please also tell him how sorry I am for all the things I did.”

“I will,” Melissa said.

“But please don’t tell him I’m dying.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“To Gregory and Melisa,” he said, raising his water glass.

“Thank you, Brock. That’s kind of you,” I said.

“Brock, are you sure you’re dying? What did your doctor say?” Melissa asked.

“He said I couldn’t have a bypass until they can control my blood pressure.”

“That’s not so difficult is it?” she asked.

“It is if I’m drinking.”

“So you are going drink yourself to death?”

“No, I’m going to stop when I hit rock bottom.”

“I think this is the bottom, and this is why we’re going to have dinner on Sunday, to celebrate your first step toward making you well.”

“Maybe bottom was the night my mother died and I’m too frightened to face up to it.”

“You can Brock. I know you can. Do it for your mother,” Melissa said.

“Why should I? I don’t care, not after what she did to me.”

“What did she do to you?” Melissa asked.

“She died. I begged her not to but she did. I’m sorry, I have to take a pill,” he said and ran from the table to his room.

“I’m sorry, Mother Olin. I said too much, didn’t I?”

“You did just fine. I was proud of you,” I said, and then told her I would be there with her on Sunday, because I didn’t trust Brock.

When I told him the next morning I was going to be there on Sunday, he laughed. “What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Nothing, I just forgot for a minute that’s where you always go on your day off, to the gatehouse. – and I’m glad you’ll be there. I want you to see the look on Melissa’s face when I give her my wedding present to her and Gregory.”

“What is it?”

“The BMW. We can drive down to together, and I’ll park in front of the garage.”

That was his first surprise on Sunday. The second was the packets of papers he brought with him. As soon as the Sunday dinner dishes were cleared he placed one gray packet before Melissa, two packets before me, and fourth was for himself.

“It’s my will. I won’t read every page. Mrs. Olin gets two packets because one is for Lucinda. She gets a trust fund that will put her through graduate school if she wants to go. Mrs. Olin will be her trustee.”

“What if she marries and starts a family and wants to buy a house?” I asked.

“Whatever, you say, Mrs. Olin. You’re the boss. Who knows, she might need to get a divorce.”

Gregory and Melissa were going to inherit the estate, and I received his savings and investments. In fact he had already made me his co-owner so I could pay for his funeral.

“Brock, this is very generous of you, but it’s a bit premature, don’t you think? What if you marry in the next year or two?” Melissa asked.

“You don’t understand. I’m going to die tomorrow. I can feel it in my bones.”

“No, not tomorrow. Mrs. Olin and I have arranged to have the Hosmer ambulance pick us up at ten tomorrow morning.”

“Sorry, it’s too late. I’m going to die tomorrow, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“If you say so, Brock. Would you like Mrs. Olin and I to be with you to see you off?” Melissa asked, and I knew what she was thinking. As soon as Brock began to get dressed I would call the ambulance.

“That would be great. There’s a chance you could save me, I suppose, but I doubt it. I’ve already flushed the pills down the toilet.”

“All of the pills, even the pain pills?” I asked.

“No, just the pills that keep me keep me from drinking.”

“You can’t just give up. Let us help you,” Melissa said.

“When’s Gregory getting home? Maybe he can help me.”

“His flight gets in at seven Tuesday morning. You could have lunch with him.”

“If only I could. I’ll try, but I can’t promise anything,” he said.

Melissa and I sat down at the kitchen table at the gate house at 8:30 Monday morning and had tea and muffins, and made coffee and bagels for him then called up to him at 9:15. When he didn’t come down I went upstairs to awaken him. I knocked several times, louder and louder and then finally went in and saw he was gone.

Melissa guessed he might have gone to the cemetery to visit his mother, but his Jaguar was still in the garage. Then I knew exactly where he was. We jumped into Melissa’s car and hurried to the gatehouse. Melissa called the ambulance, as I banged through the kitchen door expecting to see Brock drinking bourbon at the kitchen table. There was no sign of him there, or in the dining room, or in

Gregory's study. I ran for the stairs thinking I'd find him in the upstairs bathroom soaking in the tub. I was wrong. Next was the guest room, but he wasn't there either. He was in Gregory and Melissa's bedroom, in their bed, dead, wearing his best silk pajamas. There was also a note on the table next to the bed saying, "My darling, Melisa, I waited as long as I could."

I snatched the note and put it in my pocket, hating him for writing it, and for being Brock right to the end. I paced the room blaming myself and noticed his bathrobe folded on the linens trunk at the foot of the bed. I checked the pockets for pills. There was the empty vial, with his mother's name on it.

Later, when the will was read we learned that he changed a few words of the will he had given us on Sunday. The estate and the estate house now belonged to Melissa alone.

*Ends*



## Hades' Life

*By Frederick J. Mayer*

Travelling down misty.  
Clenched was the fist He  
had hidden so long inside.  
The sun arising as belonging beside  
all efforts of the night.  
Chills came through to fight  
Death's road of hazy understanding  
of Hades' life.

Travelling up crystal.  
Open was the chamber of pistol  
aimed at solid stone heart.  
Singular thought wrong from bone start  
for black still smiles  
and darker beguiles.  
Existence's road of prism belief knew  
of Hades' life.

## Jarred Loose

*By Scott Thomas Outlar*

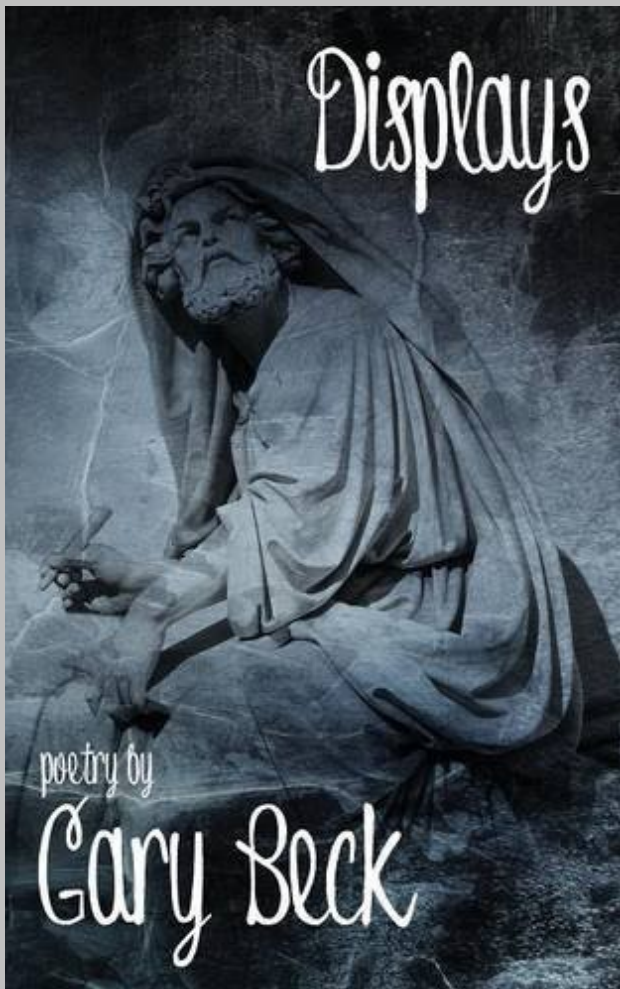
Puncturing a deep  
psychosis  
to drain  
angst  
like a sieve

Darkness  
cannot reign  
forever  
because light  
is unyielding  
with Love

Simplicity  
is the truth  
and wisdom  
is a slap  
in the face

## Displays

*A Collection of Poetry by Gary Beck*



With religion, terror, and politics as closely related as ever, is it possible to live in our world without fear? With the obvious threat of extremists willing to kill for their god, we also endure domestic terrorism driven by similar motives, and the politicians who seek to use it all to their advantage for power. Poet Gary Beck explores many of the practical, emotional, and irrational responses to acts of terror with *Displays*, a collection of poetry that honestly examines the state of human reaction.

*Displays* is a 140 page poetry volume. Available in paperback with a retail price of \$11.99, and eBook with a retail price of \$5.99. ISBN: 1941058361 Published through Winter Goose Publishing and available now through all major retailers. For more information, contact Winter Goose Publishing at [info@wintergoosepublishing](mailto:info@wintergoosepublishing)

# Artistic Death

*By J. J. Steinfeld*

Trent, a thirty-five-year-old artist in ripped jeans and a grey hoodie, whose less than successful early career changed dramatically three years ago, was finishing his late-afternoon two-mile run. Slowing down, he noticed a large brown padded envelope leaning against the front door of the house he shared with his partner, Melody, an artist who turned forty last week. He picked up the package, with the words "TO THE OCCUPANTS OF THIS VICTORIAN HOUSE, FROM THE IMMORTAL OSCAR WILDE" printed in multicoloured block letters, examining the envelope as he entered the house and walked into the dining room.

"Someone left this package on the welcome mat, Melody," Trent says as he looked up from the envelope.

Melody, wearing a long, elegant dress, necklace, white lace gloves, is standing near the well-stocked liquor cabinet and talking on a cellphone. An open bottle of red wine and a nearly empty glass on the liquor cabinet.

"Why are you so dressed up?" he asks, and tosses the envelope onto the liquor cabinet.

Holding up her hand to Trent, she finishes speaking, "We'll be home, I promise you," and turns off the cellphone, putting it on the liquor cabinet.

"You look elegant. And distraught."

Melody, picking up the glass, says, "He wanted me to put on these clothes. She quickly finished her drink, as if ordered to do so.

"I haven't seen you wear that dress in ages," Trent says, pouring himself a glass of wine.

"He was very specific I put on this dress tonight when he called earlier. He even told me where I had it hidden away."

"You have a fashion-conscious secret admirer?"

As she pours herself another drink, and without looking at Trent, Melody says, "That was Reynard."

"What are you talking about?"

"Reynard called twice while you were gone."

"You conducting séances over the phone?"

"It was him."

Attempting to kiss Melody, she turning abruptly away, he says, "From the grave. That's quite the long-distance call, darling."

"I didn't believe it either."

"He want his erotic painting of you back?" Trent says, and laughs.

"He told me—"

"Told you what?"

"He will be here later tonight...at midnight, he said."

"A visit from a dead man at midnight, how deliciously exciting. All we're missing is a full moon," Trent says, his mockery getting thicker, more contemptuous.

"To look at the heartfelt painting of me. He called it heartfelt."

"He still hot for you, my dear?"

"He knows we've sold some of his work. Even over the phone his displeasure was most evident."

Spreading his arms to encompass the room and the entire house, Trent says, "This lovely house is five of his paintings, bless his generous artistic heart. His paintings went through the ceiling the instant he died."

"He was very angry with you."

"Listen, my dear. Some lunatic caller is...is...making wild claims." Trent opens another bottle of red wine and fills his wine glass to the top, spilling a little on the liquor cabinet.

"He knows—"

"That we killed him? Of course, he knows. He was there, darling."

"No, Trent, he knows that we are selling his paintings...and you have claimed some of them are yours."

"He should be happy. We've given him an illustrious career. Something he was too cranky to appreciate when he was alive."

*"He is alive."*

"And I'm the reincarnation of Rembrandt, only much handsomer" Trent says, finishing his drink even quicker than Melody had.

"It was Reynard. He knew exactly what I wore for the portrait. Every detail. Long white gloves. This necklace. The shoes. Even the stockings I was wearing..."

"Then we've been needlessly worrying the last three years, haven't we?"

*"You stabbed him, Trent."*

"Had you not done your indispensable part and seduced him, as instructed—"

"He loved me."

"Well, you sure as hell didn't love the old coot."

"He sounded so sorrowful."

"You're giving me a real headache. You seem to be falling in love with a man you helped kill. A ghost, at best. For the record, my dear, I do not believe in apparitions in any size, shape, or state of decomposition, darling."

"He will be here. He told me I could be a great artist. I was growing as an artist."



"You are a competent artist, darling. Greatness isn't quite within your grasp yet," Trent says, pouring himself a third glass of wine.

"You are most definitely a great lover, but you will never be a great artist. *C'est la vie.*"

"Reynard said he would help me."

"What are the dead charging these days for private art lessons?"

"Reynard said you haven't painted a decent painting in three years."

"He'd know...Mr. Dead Artist. Mr. Dead know-it-all Artist."

As Trent patted Melody's backside, noises from upstairs startled both of them.

"What's making those noises?"

"Maybe our late, great artist is here already. In the attic."

"No one can get in without the attic key."

"And I have the key, darling. On my gold, initialled key chain that you gave me for a present. What a charming, thoughtful gift."

"He knew the work I've been doing lately. He likes my watercolour series of night cityscapes. Reynard likes the way I capture the vibrant architecture of the city."

"I find your cityscapes much darker than even the night settings would justify. You failed to use enough contrast."

"Those watercolours are supposed to be dark. It is night, after all."

"There should be more light from the buildings."

"Reynard knew the effect I was attempting and he liked it very much."

Patting Melody's stomach, Trent says, "He like the little weight you've put on in the last three years?"

"He knew everything about my posing for the portrait. He said it was his best but most demanding painting."

"And his last. Did the caller mention it was his last...his very last painting?," Trent says, opening another bottle of wine, and pouring himself another drink.

"He said he put his heart and soul, his very essence into that portrait of me."

"We should sell that lovely *erotic* painting of you also."

"No!"

"My reputation is quite strong. It would fetch a handsome sum."

"Reynard did that painting. Reynard said that you are the key."

"He always liked being cryptic. And esoteric. Yes, he was a cryptic, esoteric, cranky artist. More cranky than cryptic or esoteric, I'd say."

"The key that will free me, Reynard said. He said that several times."

Trent takes his key chain out of his pocket and waves it over Melody's head: "You're getting reality and fantasy and crime all mixed up, darling."

"I posed for that painting."

"Try not to forget that you made love after posing during the last session."

"You told me to."

After putting his key chain away and his wine glass on the liquor cabinet, Trent goes through the motions of stabbing: "Then I stabbed Reynard...stabbed him as he admired your lovely body."

"We shouldn't have..."

Trent kisses the Melody on the shoulders: "Maybe we should make love now. You're seducing me. The way you're dressed..."

"I just talked with Reynard."

"You talked with some person who knows about Reynard's reputation and sad life."

"He told me to watch *The Picture of Dorian Gray*...the 1945 version with George Sanders as Lord Henry Wotton, not any of the remakes. He was emphatic about that. He told me the film is a classic, worth watching a hundred times. Then he did a George Sanders imitation over the phone."

"The bastard."

"You said he was dead."

"It's the memory of art school," Trent says, and starts to pour himself another drink.

"You've had enough."

"This one is for my old art teacher Reynard. Want me to pour you a memory-soothing drink?"

"Two drinks are quite sufficient for me."

"I don't think *three* drinks will be sufficient for me when talking about Reynard the famous artist and adored teacher. Not adored by me," Trent says, and takes a slow, suggestive sip. "I was a sweet, innocent, impressionable nineteen and our assignment was to read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and paint our own interpretation of the portrait in the novel...the changing, horrifying portrait. He humiliated me during a class critique. He humiliated me as he imitated George Sanders as Lord Henry Wotton in the film. Said I was too damn literal...unimaginative. I tried to be witty like Oscar Wilde and answered him in front of all the other students, and he humiliated me, quoted from Wilde...barraged me with words from Wilde. He was jealous that I was young and had talent." Trent finishes his third drink and slams the glass down on the liquor cabinet.

"Then why are you stealing his paintings?"

"Just speeding up the process, darling," Trent says and picks up the envelope. "I bet the same prankster who called you sent us, *The Occupants*, this little package."

Melody, looking at the envelope, comments, "So colourful and beautifully printed...artistic. TO THE OCCUPANTS OF THIS VICTORIAN—"

"I know what's printed there. Utter gibberish."

Moving the envelope closer to her face, as if to inhale its contents, Melody says, "That's such an odd thing to put on an envelope."

"Utter idiotic gibberish."

"It is rather cryptic."

"Cryptic gibberish. Open it, go ahead."

Melody does not open the envelope, instead rubbing her fingers over the surface, as if attempting to determine its contents. Trent grabs the envelope from Melody and rips it open, finding a DVD.

"What a joke. What an idiotic joke."

"A video."

"Of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I knew it was the same person who called you. One and the same."

"Reynard said you are the key."

More noises from upstairs.

Trent takes his key chain out of his pocket again and holds up the key: "This is the key to our future." He gives the key a kiss, makes a horrible face, and spits: "What a vile taste."

Melody, reaching for the key, says, "Give it to me."

"I'll hold on to it., Trent says, and puts the key chain back into his pocket.

"I posed for him."

"Let us go upstairs now."

"He said he'd be here at midnight."

"I think he's waiting for us already. We should show him we're not afraid of a ghost...and an artist ghost...a ghostly artist." At the foot of the staircase, Trent turns theatrically, and says, "You are cordially invited to join me, my dear."

"I don't want to go up there."

"There is an explanation. Mice disguised as art critics."

"How can you joke now?"

"How can I *not* joke now? You want me to believe in ghosts? You want me to believe in dead artists making phone calls and sounding like George Sanders and sending a video of a classic 1945 film? You want to turn ourselves in?"

"Some things can't be explained."

"*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a work of fiction...fiction. It is a film and a book...three films, at least, if I recall. Reynard pretending he was Lord Henry Wotton humiliating me in front of the art class was real...historical. I was nineteen years old."

"You are not the painter he is."

"He *was*, Melody. Past tense, please. And we are different painters. His work is easier to appreciate. My time hasn't arrived yet. It will."

"He was such a wonderful lover—"

"We're in comparison mode tonight, are we? Pose for me and I'll paint you. Now, the way you are now dressed. We'll see which painting fetches more."

"Will you sign Reynard's name to the painting?"

"*My name.*"

"No, I won't pose for you."

"What do you mean *no*? You posed for him. And your seductive powers... You know, you do look a little like Sibyl Vane." Looking at the DVD case, Trent says, "I'd forgotten who had played the lovely Sibyl in the film. Angela Lansbury. She was so young then."

"Reynard said all would be forgiven if we watched the film a hundred times."

"That would be nothing short of insanity, my dear. Cinematic insanity."

"I will watch the film when I wish...as many times as *I* choose. The idea of watching *The Picture of Dorian Gray* a hundred times. A little obsessive, I'd say. That would be nothing short of insanity, my dear. Cinematic insanity."

"Angela Lansbury played Sibyl Vane, how interesting...as if that's a clue...or a warning."

"Angela Lansbury was in a great many films, my dear," Trent says, waving the DVD at Melody. "There's her name."

"Angela Lansbury played Jessica Fletcher."

"What hidden message do you see there?"

"*Murder, She Wrote*...the TV show. I loved watching that show when I was young. I wanted to solve murder cases just like Jessica Fletcher."

"But you became an artist instead. An artist whose work isn't electrifying the art world, Trent says, and balances the DVD on top of Melody's wine glass and pours himself a fourth glass of wine.

"You're drinking too much."

"A special occasion. How often does a dead artist visit a former student and a former lover-model of his?"

"Reynard liked murder mysteries, but I can't recall if he ever watched *Murder, She Wrote*."

"Jessica Fletcher, past or present or future, is not going to solve this case."

"What happens to Sibyl Vane in the film?"

Trent, picking up the DVD, says, "She kills herself because of that nasty Dorian Gray. There, you don't need Jessica Fletcher, played by Angela Lansbury, to solve the case of the deceased Sibyl Vane, played by Angela Lansbury."

"You knew if Jessica Fletcher showed up somewhere, anywhere, there would be a murder, and she would solve it."

"I think you bear a slight resemblance to Sibyl Vane."

"I do not look like Sibyl Vane."

"And I sure as hell do not resemble Dorian Gray in the least."

Melody, taking the DVD, says, "Let us watch the film once tonight."

"After we have a look at the portrait and investigate those silly sounds, like good detectives.," Trent says, and takes another sip of his drink. "You sure you don't want a little fortification for our visit?"

"I hardly need booze to look at artwork," Melody says, and puts the DVD back down on the liquor cabinet. "I'm ready to go upstairs, if you wish."

They walk up the stairs, she a step behind him, as there are more noises.

"Every art-critic mouse in the country is here."

At the locked door to the attic, Trent tries to kiss Melody on the lips but she turns away. He embraces her from behind, touching her breasts but she easily breaks free.

Taking his key chain out of his pocket, Trent says, "I'd kiss the key for luck, but it tastes like—"

"Like what?"

"Why don't you taste it and find out?," Trent says, and holds the key at Melody's mouth. She angrily turns her head away, and he taunts: "You afraid to kiss a little key? A little lip lock with an inanimate object could be a turn-on."

"Okay, let's go in."

"That's the gutsy artist spirit, darling."

"Still, this doesn't feel right."

Turning the key in the door lock, Trent says, "Whatever it feels, we are going in the room and perhaps we'll get amorous."

"Reynard called before."

"What's wrong, you can't make love when Reynard calls? What, his voice an anti-aphrodisiac? Which did you prefer, Reynard's elderly artist voice or his Sir Henry Wotton voice, played by the inimitable George Sanders?"

Trent once more tries to touch the Melody's breasts but she pushes his hands away and knocks the glass out of his hand, some of the wine splashing on her dress.

"We'll get it cleaned first thing tomorrow. Mind you, something about blood-red on a sexy black dress is rather erotic."

Looks more purple than blood red."

"Bad luck to waste one's valuable wine. This wine is older than both of us put together."

"I'm not going to make love tonight."

"Then I will have to seduce you. If you can seduce Reynard, I can seduce you. All's fair in love and art," Trent says, and laughs, and then pushes the door open with a shouted "Open sesame."

Trent and Melody enter the room and see the painting in the centre of the room, on an easel and covered by a white cloth.

"Trent, when did you put a cloth over the painting?"

"I didn't. You did."

"When do I have the key?"

Approaching the painting, Trent orders: "Pull the cloth off."

"I'll give you that honour."

"It's your luscious body in the painting."

"Your signature. You changed the signature."

"We should try to sell it next week."

"I would hate that."

"Maybe *I'll* sell it tomorrow."

"I don't see any little mice."

"I don't hear anything now."

"Listen."

"The power of suggestion. Imagination. We've gotten ourselves into a strange mood."

"What happens if—"

"If what?"

"If it's changed."

"I told you, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is fiction. In the 1945 film, which is black and white, the portrait is shown in colour."

"I'd rather watch the film now. I want to see the portrait in the film."

"We should have sold the portrait of you three years ago. Should have been the first painting on the auction block."

"It's so cold up here."

"It is not cold. This is not a film about ghosts. This is our lives in real time," Trent says, and pulls off the cloth, and there is a photo-realistic painting of Melody stabbing Trent. On the ledge of the easel, is a knife. A knife that looks exactly like the one in the painting. "What is going on here? Why did you put a knife there?"

Melody, looking at the painting closely, asks: "How can that be?"

Trent, stepping away from the painting, says, "Who did this? Where is the portrait of you?"

"This is Reynard's style...unmistakable."

"You painted this. Melody."

"Only a great artist could have done this painting. You said I'll never be great."

"You can copy. You are a skilful copier. Maybe you have a career as an art forger."

"I did not do this painting. I would never claim one of Reynard's paintings as mine."

"You never stopped me from changing the signature."

"How could I? I wasn't persuasive or strong enough."

"Yes, strength was never one of your endearing characteristics. Strength and talent."

Looking closely at the painting, Melody says, "Reynard's signature is there."

"Look what's written here," Trent says, shaking his head.

"It's so small. What does it say?"

"It has tomorrow's date."

"Anything else?"

"Let's go."

"Let me see."

"Let's go out for a late dinner."

The door slams shut behind them. Trent attempts to open the door but he can't.

"Why can't you open the door? You're supposed to be so strong, Trent."

"It's like there's a wall of bricks behind the door. Where is your cellphone?"

"I left it downstairs."

"Stupid!"

"Why would we need a cellphone in our attic?"

"We need to calm down and think this out," Trent says as he returns to inspecting the painting and the knife: "It merely looks like the knife. I got rid of the knife."

"I never touched the knife."

"Someone's idea of a terrible horror joke. A bad B-movie horror joke."

"Where are the other paintings? Last time we were up here there were over twenty paintings."

"Someone stole them or moved them elsewhere obviously...the person who left the terrible horror joke."

"Reynard has never been in this house."

"Did the person who called say anything...accusingly? I mean, a direct accusation?"

A phone starts ringing, from the other side of the door.

"There's someone with a phone."

"Reynard is here."

"Get a grip on the chronology, Melody. Reynard was dead and buried before we even started looking at houses."

Melody sits down at the foot of the painting, near the knife: "I'm so cold...and tired."

"Maybe because you've had too much to drink."

The phone stops ringing and Trent goes to the door, immediately starting to kick at it: "Certainly a sturdy old door. Who's out there?"

"Please don't break the door."

Giving the door one more hard kick, Trent says, "Yes, I'd have to sell a painting to get this old door repaired. I don't know if one of yours would fetch enough."

Melody, stands up and grabs the knife from the easel: "It shouldn't be so cold up here."

Walking toward Melody, Trent says, "At least we're together. We can warm each other up."

"I want to be with Reynard."

"Be careful, darling."

"Reynard will let me out."

*"Reynard is dead!"*

"No, he is outside the door, waiting for me," Melody says, holding the knife close to her face.

"Reynard doesn't want you to hurt anyone."

"Reynard told me you are the key. The key to..."

As Trent goes to kiss Melody, she stabs him, stabs him with a strength exceeding anything she has shown before. Stabs Trent so quickly and repeatedly that he doesn't utter a single word before falling to the floor, dead.

Melody becomes even more agitated with each word she utters: "Reynard, I'm here... Reynard... Reynard..."

The phone starts to ring again as Melody's mind disintegrates into complete madness.

*Ends*

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Note: A one-act play by the author, *Murderous Art*, based on the short story *Artistic Death*, was first produced at the Lower Denton Theatre (Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada) by Acadia Theatre Company.

**Merrily**

*By Scott Thomas Outlar*

Have you ever lost interest in everything  
all at once?

Yeah, me neither...  
just keep moving along

No one ever said life was easy –  
even going well, it's careful business



## Re:Start

*By DS Davidson*

Cosmic rock comes tumbling  
Rimed by aeon-old space debris  
Blazes through atmosphere  
Burning, blazing, braising  
Smash down, crash down  
Mantle-mangling, mesmerising  
Explosive, catastrophic  
Blast wave shattering stutters out  
Sonic-boom angelic trumpet blast  
End of the world  
All anxiety over, the worst has come  
Firestorm candle-snuffed by surge of air  
Silence, stillness, dust falls  
Monumental gash marks moment  
Moment everything began over  
A new start, a new world  
New life  
All new

## Genius Loci Venus

*By Frederick J. Mayer*

Once a cemetery  
now it's gone  
Yet under moon  
sensuous moon  
a lunar sense  
crescent new born  
jugular cusp  
fangs call you  
beyond your sleepishness  
in the dark  
to that soiled spot  
sealed with a kiss  
genius loci  
simulacra  
goddess venus  
fly trapped blood,  
hear the erotic scream.



## Eye Witness

(on the media coverage of the Paris terror attacks, 2015)

By Abigail Elizabeth Ottley Wyatt

Flashing lights and ticker-tape headlines,  
sirens, the middle ground sinking,  
the voice of the anchor, smooth as silk,  
'Tell us, please, what can you see?'  
The voice of the 'diner' who is also 'a survivor',  
almost calm, just barely trembling,  
describes how a woman was shot in the chest:  
'She was lying on the floor right next to me  
'We all hit the floor and then I saw blood.  
That's when I realised it was tragic.'  
'What happened then? How many were dead?  
Please tell us, what was it you could see?'

Ticker-tape headlines, blue flashing lights;  
the same loop of film playing over;  
the fixed eye of the camera's lens  
as bodies are hefted from the scene.  
A policeman appears and plants his feet so;  
his torso masks the horror still unfolding;  
the voice of the anchor wheedling to know:  
'Tell us, tell us what you're able to see.'

Sirens, lights, the middle ground shrinking;  
the voice of the anchor on one end  
of the line on the other a frightened girl.  
'I don't want to *be* there. I am going to  
Versailles.  
Tomorrow I will visit with my *grand mère*.  
'Yes, of course, of course.  
Who could blame you for that?  
We understand *absolutely*.  
But now, from the window of your Paris flat,  
what, *exactly*, can you hear, can you see?'



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## unto the ages

By Wayne Russell

not to belong  
in this life  
this knife  
this dagger  
silver  
unto my  
bleak dark  
melding heart  
i do not belong  
unto this  
my domain  
this diversity  
and lions cave  
destiny fades  
into sandcastles  
melting into the  
midnight hour  
gone  
we all fade  
like a flower  
into the dust  
unto the ages

## Ululation

By DJ Tyrer

"Whenever the cry of the banshee is heard," Malcolm had said, "one of the clan is doomed to die."

Duncan had laughed at the superstition. His kin here in the old country were an odd lot. At least, that's what he'd thought until he heard the shriek of the banshee, a high-pitched ululation.

All of a sudden, Duncan really wished he hadn't taken the late-night stroll along the cliff-top path.

The ululation came again, closer now. Fearfully, he glanced over his shoulder and thought he saw a white, vaporous figure further along the path. The banshee, the harbinger of death for his clan, was close behind him.

Duncan picked up his pace, then began to run, desperate to escape.

The cry came yet again, and he ran heedlessly through the darkness. Suddenly, there was nothing underfoot. For a moment, Duncan felt himself fly, weightless, through the darkness, then he was falling, plunging down to the jagged rocks and sea below, the ululating scream of the banshee echoing in his ears.

*Ends*