

# Chantwood Magazine



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The logo for Chantwood Magazine is enclosed in a double-line black rectangular border. The word "Chantwood" is written in a large, elegant, black cursive script. Below it, the word "Magazine" is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

*Chantwood*  
Magazine

November 2016 • Issue 5

Edited By:

Kristi Rathbun-Nimmo • Betty Darnall  
Jackie Havens • David Jensen

*Chantwood Magazine*  
*November 2016 • Issue 5*

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*“There was a song and story: an aged Scylding, widely learned, told of  
the old days; at times the fighter struck the harp to joy, sung  
against chant-wood, or made a lay both true and sorrowful; the great-  
hearted king fittingly told a marvelous tale...”*

Unknown, *Beowulf*

# Letter from the Editors

*From all of us here at Chantwood, we wish you the happiest of holidays  
and hope that you have a bright start to the new year!*

*Best Wishes,*

*The Chantwood Editing Staff*

*Ryan Dodge*  
Resilience

Dry dead dirt,  
a place of bareness;  
yet this is not true.

Despite bleached bones  
and piles of stones,  
life finds a way.

Resilient plants prosper;  
cacti still make their roots  
where others can't.

Growing thick skin  
and spikes to protect,  
survive in the wilderness.

Assaulted by sun rays  
blinded by sandstorms  
scarred, but still there.

Still breathing,  
enduring with water  
stored inside.

Prepared for this eventuality  
of not a single drop  
for years.

# Fireflies

Michael Kulp

One night, an old man with a young heart dreamed deeply. The next day, he arose thinking that something important had been revealed during the night. He did not recall all of it, and that bothered him more than usual.

Little flashes of the dream would come throughout his waking day, and he would remember just a bit more than he had remembered the last time. It was like walking through an unfamiliar, dark house with a flickering candle, allowing him brief glimpses into some of the rooms.

In his dream, it was evening, and he was sitting on a log by a modest campfire, sizzling and popping, on a dark hillside. The air was still and warm, and the deep indigo sky was still just barely light enough to contrast with the treetops around him. An owl sang faintly in the distance. Or maybe it was two owls conversing across the gathering dark in a language that men had forgotten.

In the flickering firelight, he could see a length of brown hemp rope in his hands. He could feel its rough diameter, about thumb-sized. It was a three-strand twisted rope, a timeless creation used by ages of woodsmen and mariners.

The three strands had parted on the end, leaving three separate corkscrews of foot-long hemp. He sensed that this was no accident. The unraveling had a purpose.

And this is when he was startled to see a young boy sitting near him. His dream self somehow knew that this was his own son. The boy had long black hair and wore a simple breech clout and soft moccasins. His

face was dirty but his eyes were bright.

The boy was also holding a section of brown rope with a trio of foot-long hemp corkscrews hanging loose.

Only now, the old man perceived his dream body, seeing his own bare feet, soft buckskin leggings, and the fringed edges of a beaded leather shirt. The two eagle feathers in his braided gray hair brushed against his neck.

The scene shifted in the unquestioned way of all dreams. Now the old man was holding two unfurled ropes: one end was his and one end was his son's. Without conscious effort, his fingers began expertly splicing the two ropes together. The work was unhurried and natural, almost hypnotic. Relaxing.

The boy sat farther from him now, holding the other end of his rope. As the old man worked, he was also telling stories. Sometimes the boy laughed, sometimes he looked serious with knitted brows. But, always, the boy with the bright eyes had questions. Endless questions.

The boy asked about animals and the sky. He asked about fire and lightning. He asked about the ocean. The old man knew all of the answers. Each strand slid easily into its place.

Another shift. Now the boy was a teenager. He wore a turkey feather in his long hair. Two metal hoops adorned the top of one ear, just like the old man. The boy prowled restlessly along the edge of the campsite. And the questions, though changed, kept coming.

He asked about fish hooks and pretty girls. He asked about integrity and truth. He asked about the Great Spirit. The old man knew fewer of the answers. His fingers moved faster now. Urgently, the strands found their places.

Sooner than he expected, the splice was done. It was the best splice

the old man had ever completed, leaving an almost invisible boundary between his rope and his son's. It was his grand masterpiece. He smiled at his boy.

A grown man with a painted face and two eagle feathers smiled back. The man was tall and lean. He was energetic and strong. He had a few scars, but none were too deep. He had fewer questions and many answers. And his eyes were still bright.

The fire sizzled and popped, casting fitful shadows on the trees that encircled his camp. The old man stood and watched his boy stride purposefully into the great darkness, his unfamiliar man-shape fading, vanishing.

Alone.

The owls sang again. The old man's fire sizzled. He ignored it.

An immense, ponderous sadness fell across the old man's young heart. It felt like the weight of finality, of eternity. He peered intently into the benighted forest, eagerly striving to catch a glimpse of the boy wearing a man's shape. He hoped that his boy would return, but, at the same time, he hoped he would not. It was a strange new feeling, wanting two opposite things at the same time.

The owls sang again. The old man's fire popped. He ignored it.

Alone.

Then, he felt the rope tug in his hand. The old man's young heart jumped. Was his boy coming back?

The rope tugged again. Three thundering heartbeats later, he saw a spark in the darkness. Another spark. Another. It was an arrow shot away, maybe less.

The old man stared intently, holding his breath, fists clenched. Another spark. Then a flicker. A vague shape moved expertly around the flicker, bending, rising, kneeling. Creating.

Suddenly, the faint light flared up, revealing a man standing beside the other campfire. And dreamlight filtered through the intervening forest, perfectly lighting the length of rope that connected the two fires. The old man released a long breath. The glowing rope showed that the distance was not far between the two fires. Maybe he would go visit the other fire one day. When the time was right.

He sat on his log again, a calm sense of satisfaction slowly evaporating the ponderous sadness. He tended his own modest fire, feeding it a little. And his eyes turned often to that other nearby fire. Sometimes it blazed brightly, sometimes it seemed low.

Once, he couldn't find it at all. He sprang to his feet, ready to rush to the other campsite. But, then he saw a spark. Then another. Then another small flame. Soon, the other fire was burning steadily, and the size was more modest this time.

He sat back down, noticing that now two shapes moved around the other fire. One was tall and one was small. They seemed to be talking. Laughing. Creating.

The old man felt a tug on his rope. He had almost forgotten it, though he had never once let it go. He had a devilish notion and grinned. He stood and tugged back. Twice.

He saw the two shapes stop and turn his way. He felt two tugs in return. He heard them laugh. The smaller shape waved, holding up part of the glowing rope in his other hand. The old man waved back. Maybe he would go visit the other fire one day. When the time was right.

Here, the old man remembered no more. For many days he pondered the meaning of this dream, finding and losing pieces of it, finding meanings and losing them again. Once, he passed a mirror, and saw his

brow knitted in deep thought.

And, for three thundering heartbeats, he thought he could see two eagle feathers hanging from his silver hair. But it was just a trick of the setting sun. A sudden urge to feel the grass on his bare fend sent him outside, and he walked a familiar grassy path toward some nearby woods.

As the sky turned to indigo, he saw two fireflies at the edge of the woods, and a peace that surpassed all understanding fell over him. He had a vague memory of two dreamy campfires, then a few more fireflies winked on farther away. Then more, even farther. The forest was full of countless little fires, going on forever.

A sweet voice called from the house. “Come back,” she said. “The children are all here.”

# Rebel Umbrella

## Antonina Mareglia

They are never late. It would not do to be late, and the bearers know this. They arrive at the door early, and even if there is a downpour, they do not use it to stay dry.

The umbrella that is delivered is meant for the patron, the person whose door is being knocked on and upon whose step the bearer is standing. An umbrella delivery is very quiet and polite. Everyone knows this and adheres to this.

This calm niceness is the major point of umbrella deliveries. Society was becoming too disconnected, every person in their living quarters, so focused on their own troubles and affairs and tasks that they did not often meet new people; they did not often and truly, honestly, communicate. And society was acting cruelly, too. Acts of kindness and consideration had become too few. The sparse number of people who did communicate and who still believed in the strength of kind acts saw this near-silence and this lack of thoughtfulness, and they believed it to be a problem. So, they acted. They implemented a program—who knows from which directions the funding came—that had qualified individuals called bearers to deliver umbrellas to a patron's door.

People spent more time online than anywhere else, and it was often when tucked behind a glowing screen that people were mean and rude by action, their furiously typed words harsh and aggressive. It was only in person, on streets and sidewalks and in shops, that people were unkind by inaction. Each to their own, no one helped another or even made gestures of acknowledgement.

This gave need for the program, and the program was a small

counterattack on the way things were, and it was gentle. The hope of the program was that patrons would ask for an umbrella delivery, and as the bearer opened the umbrella for the patron and walked the patron to their job or their car or wherever it was they wished to go, the patron and the bearer would experience a rarely known kindness, a symbiotic moment. It was a strange setup and initially ignored.

However, now the program was working well. Everyone involved behaved, and things were slowly improving. Everything was as it should be, functioning as it should, and staying where it should.

The day when things shifted was when Mr. Willem Marsden waited for an umbrella. He was halfway to retirement and accepting the silver-gray he imagined was appearing more and more at his temples. Today, he wore a hat as he sat in his chair, doing the crossword, waiting for the umbrella to be delivered. Today, the rain pelted at his windows and on his porch, and if the wind occasionally exhibited fiendish excitement, the rain would even charge at his door. He was almost done with the crossword.

The house was small and peaceful. There were no creaking floorboards in his house. He liked to traverse it in silence. He enjoyed how still the air was and how immovable every stick of furniture was and every texture, every cloth, barely stirred. He penciled another answer for the crossword.

This was not his first time waiting for an umbrella. His house was a moderate walk away from his work and he owned a car, but it broke down sometimes and sometimes he preferred to walk anyway. His car was old, a relic of his so-called younger days from which he would not part. Today, the car was in the shop and the rain was coming down relentlessly. He didn't like the rain.

So he sat and waited.

His crossword was almost finished when there was a staccato knock. He set aside his pencil and paper and fixed his hat. He gingerly bent down

and grabbed his briefcase. He knew what he would find upon opening the door. He would see a bearer holding a closed umbrella at their side. The bearer would nod politely, smile, and open the umbrella. It was the proper procedure for the bearer to wait for Marsden before opening the umbrella. This small gesture let Marsden know that he was being waited for, that the journey—however short—would only begin once Marsden was ready.

Then, the bearer would hold out the umbrella for him to step underneath and the two of them would walk under its cover, making minimal and polite conversation, but only if Marsden wished it. He never wished it.

The umbrella would be black or a very dark blue. It would be large enough to cover both of them, with enough space under it that the bearer and Marsden could keep a respectful distance.

Marsden opened the door.

The bearer had just opened the umbrella and was swinging it up into position above her head. This was inappropriate.

Marsden flinched.

The bearer grinned at Marsden. “Ready?”

Quickly, he recovered. He cleared his throat and locked his door behind him.

She held out the umbrella, waiting for him to step under its shelter.

Seeing the shiny golden handle that curved around her hand, he hesitated. It was so unlike the standard handle: a straight, matte gray.

She kept grinning at him.

He tried to ignore that. He continued to scrutinize the umbrella. It was

wrong in color, too. It was stormy, purple and gray, and the two hues were swirling together. He wanted to say something, but he didn't want to be late for work, so he moved forward.

His seeming acceptance made her cheerful grin look impish.

As they walked, he let his eyes dart in her direction, but he wouldn't fully turn his face to hers. He didn't want to seem too curious, too rude.

She was rude, however. She kept looking over at him. She didn't look inquisitive; she looked like she wanted to say something. This was one of the reasons he did his best not to return the look. It would seem like encouragement, and encouraging things was a dangerous business. Instead, he focused on the sound of the raindrops hitting the pavement and the umbrella. He imagined he could hear the droplets hitting the blades of grass, too, and see them bending the blades as they hit.

The force of the wind and rain was lessening as they walked. Now it was a steady rainfall and not mimicking a gale as it had been.

To give himself something else to look at, he glanced upward. Silly, because the umbrella blocked his view of the tumultuous sky, but looking up, he was startled. The interior of the umbrella was not the normal black. It was a beautiful blue, like on a clear day, and there were cumulous clouds smattered throughout.

He stopped walking.

She halted a step or two ahead of him then swiftly returned to his side. Only a few drops of rain had settled on his shoulders and hat, sinking into the fabric, turning it shades darker. Only a few drops; that was not too unacceptable.

“What's wrong?”

He pointed up to the umbrella. “It's not standard.”

“Thank you.”

“Why isn’t it?”

“Standard, you mean?” she asked.

“Yes,” He said shortly.

“If it’s not standard, then what is it, would you say?” She stared up at the puffy clouds on cloth.

He did, too. He wasn’t going to answer; he was going to keep walking just to end this pointlessness sooner.

“If you’re not willing to talk about something, then don’t ask questions about it,” she said. “That’s my motto.” Her voice wasn’t obnoxious. She said it with the perfect mixture of kindness and good humor.

He sighed and kept walking. “It’s against the usual,” he said. “Ideally, it’s supposed to be gray or black.”

“Ideally...” She exhaled. “I like to see a blue sky, even on a rainy day.”

All pretenses were fading. Curiosity was taking over, and now he assessed her as she assessed him. He was truly looking at the umbrella, at her, and he noticed how she held the umbrella like it was a banner of rebellion.

It was.

His brow furrowed. “Don’t you get in trouble?”

“Not yet,” she said. She lifted the umbrella higher and began twirling the handle. The blue sky spun over their heads. Marsden looked away.

“Rainy day service,” she said cheerfully, “for those who ask, I guess.”

“I asked,” Marsden admitted. “But I asked for what I expected. Not this.” He readjusted his grip on his briefcase.

“Kind of feel gypped, huh?” she asked, her head tilting to one side, like she was deeply considering the situation. “It’s interesting, though.”

Marsden spoke before he could stop himself. “What is?” he asked, almost cringing as the words sprung out of him. “What’s interesting?”

“What you said: you asked for what you expected. I like that. It’s so obvious and true.” She let out a light chuckle. “I mean what’s expected. We think we know it. It should happen, but so often it doesn’t, and yet we just keep going. We think, ‘this will happen because it will, it should; it’s expected.’ It doesn’t matter how many times we’re wrong. We still think we know what to expect.”

“I,” Marsden began, “was referring to the customs of politeness, the procedures of a service.”

“I don’t know why people think an umbrella service would be predictable. Umbrellas have a mind of their own.”

Marsden was silent. He had already let his curiosity take over, and he had encouraged her too much. This conversation had begun ridiculously and it would end so. He wanted to take back all of the question marks he had let slip onto the ends of his sentences.

However, it was much too late for that.

She, the bearer, was content and friendly, a combination that leads to familiarity. Marsden still had a portion to walk before reaching his work. He had to remain quiet so she would know not to push conversation.

“Oh look,” she said. “Look at those little kids playing in the puddles. Brother and sister, no doubt. Very small and energetic, aren’t they?” She smiled and laughed. “That was a very good splash. I think even the

hems of their shorts got drenched. Did you ever puddle jump when you were tiny?"

"I was never tiny, I was little," Marsden said. He didn't know why he said it. He didn't know anything right now. The whole morning was peculiar.

"Well, what's the difference?"

"Tiny is smaller than little."

She didn't say anything. She nodded.

Marsden waited for another question from her or a bizarre comment. None came. She was peacefully silent.

He cleared his throat.

\*\*\*

"So," she asked, "what's one of your favorite sounds?"

Marsden blinked at her.

"Because I've been giving it some thought. It's been so rainy and all, and how can anyone fully tune out the sounds of the rain? It falls differently each day. Seems that way to me." She sighed, a happy and small exhalation. "So I was just thinking about it. I really enjoy the sound, and it got me thinking about other sounds I like."

Marsden coughed. He readjusted his coat collar, folding it cleanly in half.

She laughed. "Okay then, I'll go first. I like...footsteps on cobblestones. Your turn."

"No, thank you."

“Now it’s your turn.”

“No, thank you,” he repeated.

“I also like the snap of a crisp cookie. Like a lacy oatmeal with plenty of spice.” She looked over at him expectantly.

Marsden huffed. “I like silence.”

“Isn’t that really just the absence of sound?” she asked.

“Whatever it is, whatever you want to call it, I like it.”

“But if you had to give an answer...”

“Whatever sound is the quietest and most unobtrusive, that is what I like.”

“Hmm, a hummingbird’s wings maybe,” she began, “or maybe the quiet before a storm?”

“Yes.”

“Yes to which one?”

“The second. Yes, to the storm.”

She laughed. It was mellow and had hiccups on the end.

“What’s so funny?” Marsden asked, readjusting his perfectly straight coat collar.

“I just think it’s funny,” she smiled, “you liking all things to be just so, but your favorite sound comes before a storm. Storms kind of shake things up, don’t you think?” She nudged him playfully.

\*\*\*

“This is the last time I’ll umbrella you.” She said to Marsden.

He did not reply, though his raised eyebrows were reply enough. They were standing on his porch, facing each other. She was cuddled under her stormy, rebellion umbrella, both hands clutching the handle. He was holding his keys in his right hand and his hat in his left, staring at her.

“The last time.” She repeated. Her eyebrows were knit as she frowned.

Marsden didn’t look at her. He locked his front door and they began their walk. Marsden put his hat on and tapped it into place, the tip of his index finger hitting the brim.

It had been three weeks since they had first met. It had rained thirteen of twenty-one days, and Marsden had called for a bearer ten of those days.

It was raining today of course, sprinkling. Marsden had requested a bearer the night before as soon as the television had emitted the rainy weather forecast in a static hiccup.

She sighed and twirled her umbrella, the same rebellious gray and purple one, but it was a slow spin, and halfhearted.

Marsden led the way across the street. They were once more making a trek in the rain.

“Is it really the last time?” Marsden asked, his voice perfectly neutral.

“I suppose, yes, well, I mean yes.” She said. Every word was a sigh; every breath a bracing intake and expulsion.

“What’s happening?”

Today the rain favored them and was not pounding down around them, but instead it was tapping along with their footsteps.

“My umbrella was too much.” She said. “Snitch. Just one.”

“Who?”

“One complaint was all it took. The power of one I guess.”

“Who?” He asked again.

“No idea.” She smiled. “Doesn’t matter, this job was just for fun anyway. So what’ll you do now Marsden?”

“What do you mean what’ll I do? I’m not the one who lost my job.”

“I suppose not.” She kept smiling.

\*\*\*

She came every time it rained.

Marsden wondered if she was in denial but he didn’t say anything the first few times. He walked with her. He enjoyed the rain.

“We don’t know much about each other.” She shrugged. “It’s nice in some ways.”

“Well, I’d like to know one thing,” Marsden said.

She gave her umbrella a twirl; the blue and cloud cloth spun above their hair.

“I thought you got fired,” Marsden said. He stopped walking and gazed at her steadily.

“What?” she asked, standing up straight and meeting his look. “No

question? Just a comment that trails away...” She laughed. “Some things can’t be explained.”

“They can be if you try,” Marsden pressed.

She continued to walk and Marsden followed, keeping pace in order to stay under the umbrella with her. He didn’t want to be pelted by the rain.

“You never requested another bearer.” She said. “My last day...I told you it was the last time. You should have requested another bearer.”

“How do you know I didn’t?”

“The next time it rained, I came to you and you didn’t cancel a bearer, you didn’t tell me to leave because someone else was coming for you. Were you planning on walking in the rain by yourself, without an umbrella?” She grinned.

Marsden watched the rain slosh down the street and into the gutter.

They kept walking.

Finally, “Every time it rains...”

“Yes.” She said, and nodded up at her umbrella. “Is that OK?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad.” She said.

Coolness washed over them as the wind picked up.

“What’s your name?” Marsden asked. He felt relief in asking.

“Holiday.” She said.

*Rebel Umbrella*

Raindrops slid to the bottom edge of the umbrella. They made a trail of shadows from underneath. Then, one final moment of suspension, before the raindrops released, descending into freefall.

*Seth Jani*

## Air Raid

The head fills-up with hauntings.  
The murmurous voice of summer's deities  
Seeking a well-lit refuge,  
A calcified shrine.  
Near the river, the last oar  
Drips black water onto stone.  
It fills the cracks like the heavy rain  
That subsumes villages.  
A single dragonfly skims the surface  
Searching for survivors.  
All day the scent of wine  
Blows through sleep, through dreams.  
It's dangerous to be so happy.  
The jealous crows dive down  
Like windborne snipers.

*Seth Jani*

## The Crash of Atoms

In my life there are days  
That are a kind of harvest,  
Opening facilities, the logician's palace,  
To the slant of wind and music,  
Big hearts the size of Cairo,  
Great dramas on a meaningful  
Blue planet.  
On these days I believe in love,  
I believe in death, that bearer  
Of future journeys.  
As fierce as every heartbreak  
Has ever been  
I believe they were a place  
For blood and honey,  
The wound become a jar,  
Become the solace of water.  
When I pass the meridian  
Of all these exquisite changes  
Let me not ask for stable structures,  
I want to taste the flavor  
Of eons tuning into dust,  
The unknowable shape  
Of all these atoms  
Crashing through the dark.

# The Leather Jacket

Robert Boucheron

Still in his work clothes from the hardware store, which closed at noon on Saturday, Ernie Watkins stood at the kitchen sink and munched an apple. Five foot eight inches tall, brown hair, with rounded shoulders and a sturdy frame, he looked rough-hewn, as though carved in wood some thirty years before and left unfinished.

Clouds like puffs of cotton floated high overhead in a sky as blue as the glaze on a bowl. Reach up and tap the rim of the horizon, and it would surely ring. Ernie flicked the core out the window and pulled down the sash. There was nothing for it but to jump in his pickup and drive through the autumn landscape.

The road wound through fields and woods, and glare alternated with shadow. There was no traffic and few people to be seen. In this part of the Valley of Virginia, the soil was too stony and thin to cultivate. At best, it could pasture sheep and goats, or a stalwart herd of dairy cows.

After an hour of aimless driving on gravel roads where he left a plume of dust, Ernie was lost. He crossed another brook and rattled the boards of a one-lane bridge. The road turned sharp and became the single street of a village. The place was deserted on this sun-struck afternoon. Tilted and faded, engulfed by weeds, a metal sign bore the word "Endeavor."

Ernie parked, flung open the door of the cab, and hopped down to stretch his legs. There were no sidewalks. The ditch to either side of the asphalt was dry. The village was a huddle of small cottages and one-room shops, built of gray block and wood clapboard from which the paint had peeled. Shop windows were dusty. Posters taped to the inner face of the glass were faded to shades of blue and yellow. They touted events that happened long ago. He passed a drugstore, a bank, a law office, and a beauty salon, all closed.

At a shop labeled "Antiques," Ernie paused to peer through the

grimy glass. Broken furniture, tattered books, chipped china plates, sentimental prints in crumbling frames, rusty farm tools—it was sad what some people left behind.

A bulb hung from the pressed tin ceiling. It was a long shot, but the shop might have an old toaster. Ernie collected antique toasters and kitchen appliances. He tried the latch, and the door swung open. A bell jingled sharply overhead.

An old man sat just inside the door. He looked up from a newspaper spread on a countertop. He was pale, with eyes of watery blue or gray, sunken cheeks, and sparse hair on a mottled scalp. A threadbare shirt draped his wasted body. He uttered a low rumble—a greeting or a warning?

Ernie made his way to the back, glancing left and right. Shelves were piled helter-skelter, with a layer of dust over all. The shop was a mess, with nothing of value, sorely in need of a good sweep. He saw a few kitchen wares, but none that called to him. Except for the man bent over his newspaper, the shop was as deserted as the street.

He ambled back to the front. A leather jacket draped the back of a chair. He must have walked right past it. Black and scuffed, the jacket had seen hard use. Casually thrown on the wooden chair rail, it looked like someone would soon return to claim it. In a place so forlorn, filled with things that nobody would ever want, the leather jacket was strangely compelling.

Ernie searched for a sticker, a label, a price tag. A red patch sewn on the right shoulder bore the legend: “Town of Endeavor, Motor Patrol.”

“Go ahead, try it on for size.” The old man’s voice boomed from behind. “You’ll be the first, yes, sir! The reason you get first crack at it is that leather jacket just came in the shop. Who knows, this may be your lucky day!”

Ernie lifted the jacket from the chair, slipped his arms into the sleeves, and shrugged the weight across his back. He tried the zipper. It ran smoothly up and down. He sucked in his stomach and puffed out his chest. The jacket required a manly posture.

“A perfect fit,” the old man said. “Yes, sir, like it was custom-made for you. Over there’s a mirror on the wall, if you don’t believe me.”

Ernie found the mirror and gazed at his reflection. The battered

jacket fit well. Stiff yet pliable, the leather was creased in just the right ways.

“Broken in like an old shoe. The previous owner must have had exactly the same upper body shape as you. A remarkable coincidence, if you ask me. Who would have thought? A highly personal article of clothing, and you wander in here purely by chance, and it’s a match!”

Warmed by his body, the jacket released a perfume compounded of animal hide, tannin, leather polish, and a hint of motor oil. It went to Ernie’s head. His heart pounded.

“So... ” Ernie struggled to find his voice. “You don’t know who brought it in?”

“No, sir.”

The old man was lying. Ernie flexed his arms and strutted a few paces.

“You don’t know who owned it? Anything about him?”

“Not a clue.”

“What about the shoulder patch?”

“Will you be arrested for impersonating an officer? Don’t worry about that, my friend. The town police department disbanded years ago when the county took over everything—schools, taxes, roads, courthouse, and jail. They wear a different uniform today, one that doesn’t have that red patch. Yes, sir, that leather jacket is a genuine collector’s item, one of a kind, an authentic relic of days gone by. They don’t make them like that anymore, quality cowhide. The police badge is missing. It went in that little reinforced hole in the front, right over your heart.”

Ernie looked down at his chest. His hand rose, and a finger sought the hole, which had a metal rim, a grommet. The old man chuckled.

“It’s not a bullet hole, young man. You won’t find any bloodstains, either. I checked it out. There’s plenty of wear left in that jacket. It’ll keep you warm on the road and protect you in case of a spill. When you ride, that is. You have a motorcycle?”

“Just my pickup.”

“Maybe this will inspire you. Yes, sir, that jacket fits you like a glove!”

“How much do you want for it?” Ernie’s mouth was dry.

The old man’s face narrowed, and his garrulous warmth chilled.

His pale eyes glittered in the shadowy interior.

“That depends on how much you want it.”

Ernie disliked haggling. In the hardware store, he always cut off a customer who tried. Mr. Shakewell set the prices. Builders kept a tab, and they got a discount. Apart from that, nothing doing. Here Ernie was on the other end of the deal. He had no idea what it ought to cost, but he was unable to take off the leather jacket. He picked a round number and hoped it was low.

“A hundred dollars.”

“Sold!” the old man shouted, as though awarding a bid at auction.

Ernie reached in his pocket, anxious to complete the transaction before he lost his nerve, or before the old man changed his mind.

“Like I said, that leather jacket was meant for you.” The old man resumed his patter. “What are the odds that someone would walk in with exactly the right build and with an eye for police memorabilia?”

“So . . .” Ernie made one last try. “You don’t have any idea where it came from?”

“Sorry, my friend. Someone could have been cleaning out an attic, winding up an estate, getting a house ready to put on the market. These things happen, you know. We all have to go some day.”

“Sure enough.”

“Hold on a minute! Now that you got me on the subject, some other things came in with that leather jacket that might be of interest.”

The old man reached under the counter, produced a white helmet, and handed it to Ernie. “It’s a standard police helmet, adjustable.” Ernie lowered it over his head, with the visor tilted up. “Practically new, I would say, the same type they wear today. How does it feel?”

“Okay,” Ernie said. He had never worn a helmet. A hard hat, but that was different. His ears buzzed from excitement. Covered by the white shell, they could barely hear the old man. His own voice sounded as if he were underwater. “How much is . . .”

“At no additional cost—special today only! And while you’re at it, check out these beauties.”

Animated despite his decrepitude, the old man rummaged behind the counter. He brought up a pair of black leather riding boots, tall and slender, with a buckle to cinch them over the calf.

“Somewhat the worse for wear, but you can replace the heels and

shine them up like new. Here, try them on. No charge! The boots go with the jacket—if they fit you.”

Ernie never rode a horse, and he had no experience with riding gear, but he suspected the pair of boots was worth as much as the leather jacket. Hurriedly, he untied his shoes and kicked them aside. Folding the khaki cloth over his shin, he shoved one foot into the cylindrical shaft. It was tight, but he got in. He fiddled with the buckle. The second boot went on easier.

Ernie wiggled his toes. He rocked from side to side. He strode a few paces on the board floor, which made a hollow, theatrical sound. Like the jacket, the boots felt as comfortable as if he had worn them for years. He caught his reflection in the mirror—a patrol officer, a member of an elite squad. He imagined himself on a speeding motorcycle.

“Do you want a bag?”

Abruptly, Ernie returned to the present. He was in a dusty junk shop in a deserted country village. He pulled off the helmet.

“No, thanks. I’ll wear the jacket to go.”

“What about your shoes? Because if you’re going to wear the boots, which it looks like you fully intend to do, my friend, you might look a little awkward clutching a pair of shoes, like a girl slipping away from a dance at midnight.”

Ernie stooped, scabbled for his shoes amid the trash-strewn floor, and plunked them on the counter. The old man dropped them in a brown paper bag. He extended the bag with a wink.

“Go in peace, officer. Come back to see us some day, when the spirit moves.”

Jacketed and booted, as though dressed for a costume ball, Ernie exited the shop. He blinked in the dazzling sunlight. Poised over the mountains to the southwest, the sun would soon set. The air was getting cold. With the helmet under one leather sleeve and the paper bag in hand, he strode to his pickup. The riding boots forced a swagger. He threw things in the passenger seat.

He paused for directions to Hapsburg at the next inhabited place, a gas station. The sleepy-eyed attendant sat in a booth full of snacks, cough drops, lottery tickets, and packs of cigarettes. He barely looked away from his miniature screen. Without a word, he typed a few letters. He rotated the screen which displayed a map. Ernie paid for his fuel.

Then he drove home through the flaming countryside.

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The weather turned and winter set in. Ernie wore the leather jacket, not to his job at the hardware store, but off-hours. As promised, the thick black cowhide lined with quilted padding kept him warm. The thrill he felt when putting it on mellowed, and like a boy who fills out a new suit of clothes, he grew into it.

Toward the end of the year, a time when Hapsburgers settle accounts and clear space for the year to come, it occurred to Ernie to search the leather jacket. There were flaps and snaps and zippers galore. In a secret pocket inside the breast, he found a small photograph. Black-and-white, it showed a man standing beside a motorcycle.

The man was thirty to forty years old, of average height. He wore the same leather jacket and riding boots. Instead of a helmet, he wore a dark service cap with a bill and a raised crown. A silver star shone on his chest, where the hole declared it ought to be. He stood upright and confident, one arm extended to grasp the handlebar. The photograph bore no name or date. The background could be anywhere box bushes grew and a mailbox perched on a post.

The officer wore a pair of riding breeches. Tailored snug at the calf to slip into boots, the breeches flared at the thigh as if inflated. It was a picturesque style, one that went out of fashion around 1950. The riding breeches were dark in color with areas of sheen. Were they made of black leather like the jacket? He tossed the photograph in the top dresser drawer.

Who was this man? In physical aspect they were twins. Unusual for Virginia, Ernie grew up without a brother or a cousin his age. What did the man like to eat? Did he smoke and drink? Ernie did neither, other than a glass of beer now and then. Was the man married?

In January, Ernie looked at motorcycles parked in the street. He read classified ads for used motorcycles. He noted the model year, make and price. What type did his officer ride? What would a small-town police department have?

A motorcycle appeared in the yard next door with a sign: "For

Sale.” The bike—by now he had learned to call it that—looked like the one in the photograph. Wearing his leather jacket against the chill, he knocked at the neighbor’s door that evening.

A young man answered with an open bottle of beer in his hand. He offered one to Ernie. To refuse would be impolite. They stood on the porch.

“I’m your neighbor, Ernie Watkins.”

“Brian Rhoades. I’m an engineer-geologist. I’m leaving town to take up a job out west in mineral extraction.”

In his twenties, slightly younger than Ernie, Brian was not as serious as an engineer-geologist ought to be, though he did wear horn-rimmed glasses. Swigging from their bottles, the two men descended to gaze at the machine.

“It only has a few thousand miles,” Brian said. “I bought it new and never had much time to ride, what with travel for work and long hours at the office. There’s always a deadline.”

“What kind of bike would you call it?”

“This is a sport rider. Somewhere between a touring bike, which has a heavy frame and a big-ass seat, and a racer, which has a cut-down body and too much power to be safe.”

“That sounds good. I’m a middle-of-the-road kind of guy. Why are you selling?”

“Too expensive to move it across the country. And I can’t take a week off to ride it there. The new job starts right after I leave the old one. So here we are. Sorry to let the bike go, but you have to do what you have to do.” He patted the seat.

“I know zero about bikes and maintenance,” Ernie said. “I don’t even know how to ride one. Can you teach me?”

“Sure, no problem. One or two weekends, and you’ll be rolling. If you don’t mind getting dirty and greasy, you can maintain it. Or you can take it to the garage on Metzger Road.”

“I can go either way.”

“You have a jacket. Do you need any other gear? Boots, helmet?”

“I got that covered.”

“Then you’re all set, Watson. Cash or direct transfer?”

“Cash is okay.”

They agreed on a price with little haggling, which made Ernie feel

better. They arranged for a lesson before Brian left town. They clinked their bottles, upended them, and threw the empties in a recycling bin. Ernie pulled out a wad of bills and counted. Surprised to see that Ernie carried so much, Brian stuffed the money in his pocket and went back inside.

As Ernie trundled his purchase home, the upstairs landlady Hazel Lampwick emerged on the front porch. Had she been watching the transaction from inside? Ernie imagined her standing behind the door, peering around the edge of the lace curtain. Why have a glass door if you hang a curtain on it?

“Evening, Ms. Lampwick.” Ernie paused proudly, holding the handlebars.

“Good evening, Mr. Watkins.” Hazel smiled, revealing a face that was capable of mockery. Not that she was a sourpuss, but had Ernie weighed all the options? She ran the public library, where he never set foot.

“Look what I just bought.”

“Indeed, Mr. Watkins. What are you going to do with it?”

“Can I park it behind the house?”

“I don’t see why not. The back yard is yours to command.”

“Thank you.” Ernie gazed up at Hazel on the porch. In the twilight, she looked slender and pretty, her hair backlit from the hall chandelier. She folded her arms over her apron, ready to confide a deep dark secret.

“You know,” she said, “I always wanted to hitch a ride on one of those things.”

“It’s never too late.”

“Do you think so?”

“If you can wait another week, I’ll know how to steer. Then you can hitch a ride with me.”

“That would be a pleasure, Mr. Watkins.” She giggled.

“Call me Ernie. We can’t stay strangers forever.”

“I suppose you’re right. A ridiculous pretense, when we live so close. If you like, Ernie, you can call me Hazel.”

“Okay, Hazel.”

Neither budged. Each searched for a way to prolong the conversation, the first they had dared. Hazel shivered in the cold.

“Good night . . . Ernie.” She turned. Then over her shoulder like a

Parthian shot she flung: “Sweet dreams.”

She was through the door before Ernie could retort. Just as well, he reflected. I’m already in water over my head.

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Brian Rhoades was as good as his word. He taught Ernie the basics and departed soon after. The end of winter brought little snow, so Ernie was able to get out on weekends. He wore his leather jacket, boots and helmet, and a pair of jeans. After freezing his hands numb the first time out, he bought a pair of black leather gloves. Gauntlets, like something a knight would fling in challenge.

Ernie watched for traffic, went slow to prevent skids, and got a feel for the throttle. He sat bolt upright, then learned that a crouch, like a jockey on horseback, improved maneuverability. He leaned into a turn and accelerated out of it. The bike was quick to respond. Mindful of the accidents people described in gruesome detail, Ernie was a cautious rider.

A tattooed bruiser on a Harley-Davidson watched him. “Candy ass.” What did that mean? Ernie didn’t stop to ask.

Hazel invited Ernie to dinner. A rash thing to do, she thought, as she hurried home from the library. She had no time to shop for food and spend hours preparing it, the way her mother did. The skills involved in cooking for one were useless in the current situation. The apartment lacked a dining room, let alone a proper table. No china and candles. They would eat in the kitchen, at the chrome-leg table with the crazy pattern Formica top. Retro style was in.

Hazel kept staples on hand, neatly stored, sealed and dated. If you open enough cans and boxes, heat some rolls in the oven, and make liberal use of the spice rack, nobody can tell the difference. She tied on her apron and got busy. Half an hour later, she felt a glow of pride. Then she walked into the living room.

Piled here and there were books she might get around to reading. Shriveled flowers stood in a hideous vase, a gift from whom? She drew a blank. A haze of cat hair clung to the sofa, where Ignatius sprawled in indolent abandon. She forgot to mention the cat. What if Ernie was allergic?

Too late! Footsteps clomped up the stair. A tentative knock. Hazel opened the door to find Ernie, wearing his leather jacket and a bashful smile. He thrust a bunch of carnations at her.

“For you,” he said.

“You didn’t have to wear a jacket to walk upstairs.”

Ernie followed Hazel to the kitchen, where he slipped off the jacket and draped it over a chair.

“Could you do me a favor?” she said. “Go in the living room and fetch the vase. I’ll give it a quick wash and put these lovely flowers in it.”

Ignatius apparently made no impression. A minute later, the big ginger cat wandered into the kitchen. He sniffed the leather jacket. He rubbed against Ernie’s leg.

“I guess that means I can stay,” he said. Ignatius purred and lay on the floor at Ernie’s feet, as Hazel dished.

“We don’t get much company,” she said. “He’s curious.”

They sat at the table, where the carnations wafted their peppery aroma. The vase did not look so bad, she thought, nor did the table.

Ernie ate without comment. At the library, Hazel hushed talkative people, broke up tête-à-têtes, answered questions as briefly as possible, and cut off book-borrowers eager to tell her how much they enjoyed a previous title by the same author. Here, she faced the opposite problem. As hostess, she had to draw out her guest, ask easy questions, keep the ball in the air.

Ernie talked about the hardware store. He had not found a toaster recently.

“What about your life during the past ten years?”

“After high school, I served on a navy aircraft carrier. It’s a floating military base, acres of steel plate and rivets. If you like the color gray, then that’s your place. We never saw combat, but we scrambled at all hours. That’s navy speak for drill. Then I was a carpenter’s helper, outside in all weather, cuts and scrapes on my hands. A building site sees more bloodshed than a ship. Retail has its dull spots, but the hardware store beats those by a mile.”

“Won’t you have more?” Hazel refilled Ernie’s plate.

“It’s nice to have some real home cooking.”

The dinner looked to be a success. Then the subject of politics

reared its head, in the shape of the town council and Cecelia Gross. Without pausing to consider his audience, Ernie said what he thought.

“Mrs. Gross should stay home.”

“Your notions on women are a little out of date,” Hazel said. “Advances have taken place. We do not all behave the way your mother’s generation did.”

“My mother? What does she have to do with it?”

“Exactly my point. We are facing an educational challenge.”

“By which you mean me.”

“Not you, your attitude,” she said.

“Are you up to the challenge?” He sounded contrite.

Hazel reached across the table and took Ernie’s hand.

“Yes,” she said. “Are you?”

He gave her hand a squeeze. Their eyes misted.

“I’ll work on it,” he said.

“So will I,” she said.

“This was wonderful.”

“Thank you kindly.”

“I want to return the favor. Can I take you out on a date? Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow is Saturday.”

“We could dress up and go to a restaurant.”

“I work all day at the library. In the evening, that would be delightful.”

“I’ll pick you up at six,” Ernie put on his jacket to leave.

“On your motorcycle?” That teasing smile again.

“Anything your little heart desires.”

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Saturday morning, Ernie worked his stint at the hardware store. The afternoon was fine. It was April. Leaves opened, the sun shone, birds warbled, and the temperature climbed. In the back yard, he pulled the tarp off his motorcycle. He ran through a checklist in a rider’s manual he had found in a used book bin. He set off for a ride in the greening countryside.

The road wound through fields and woods, and glare alternated

with shadow. After an hour of narrow lanes and bare pastures, the road became familiar. He rattled across a one-lane bridge, made a sharp turn, and again found himself in the village of Endeavor.

Ernie cruised down the middle of the street, glancing right and left. Not much had changed. The café boasted a new awning, a round table, and two wire chairs on a patio. There were people inside, and a chrome machine, an imported Italian espresso maker that gurgled and hissed like a bomb about to explode.

Ernie reached the end of the pavement, halted, and braced himself with one leg. Where was the shop where he found the leather jacket?

He turned around and cruised in the opposite direction, slower this time. He still could not find the sign for “Antiques.” He parked near the café. He pulled off his helmet, hung it on the handlebar, and scratched his head. In the calm air and sunshine, the street was dead. The trees and fields that lay so near lent a sense of peace.

Was that it? Where the shop ought to be was a steel-and-glass storefront, a combination art gallery and custom frame shop, open for business. Ernie strode to the door. He entered.

A young man with long black hair and a beard stood up. He had eyes as brown as chocolate drops, and the whitest teeth Ernie ever saw outside a toothpaste ad.

“How may I improve your day?”

“Just browsing, thanks.”

“My name is Jason. Let me know if I can help. All our artists are local residents, and you can find lots of information about them online. Just reference the URL on the label.”

The young man went back to cutting a mat, or whatever he was doing with a razor blade. Ernie moved through the gallery. The only thing that might be the same was the wood floor. He gazed at paintings of dark blobs on white walls, at abstract sculptures perched on pedestals, and at handmade pottery that alluded to objects like teapots and bowls. In a drawing, a nude woman lay beside a cactus. If he were going to buy a gift for Hazel, which was unlikely at these prices, what would appeal to her? Would she take one look at this place and laugh?

Soft music played in the background—a mournful flute, a rattle, and a drum. Ernie drifted back to the front and cleared his throat. Jason looked up from his task.

“I was here a while ago. Last fall, I mean. There was a shop that sold old furniture, pictures, housewares and such. An old man sold me this leather jacket. But the junk shop seems like it disappeared.”

Jason looked at Ernie from head to toe, then raised an index finger. “Wait here. I’ll be back in a moment.”

He walked briskly to a storage room and returned with a large manila envelope. Scrawled on the front was the phrase: “For the man in the leather jacket when he returns.”

Ernie studied the envelope. “How do you know this is for me?”

“The shop you’re looking for was here, this space. I cleared the contents, which went to the county landfill. I renovated, sanded the heart pine floor, gave it a coat of polyurethane, plastered the walls, put in new wiring, lights, and so on. It was a lot of work.”

“I bet.”

“The previous tenant passed away, they said. He left the shop as you saw it. I never met him, a retired police officer, the last of the town’s motorcycle squad. When I took possession, that envelope was lying on a counter near the door. I kept it just in case.”

“What’s inside?”

“I have no idea.”

Ernie lifted the flap of the envelope. Something heavy and pliable slipped out, something made of black leather.

“It looks like a pair of pants,” Jason said.

“Or riding breeches.”

“Awesome! They match your jacket and boots. Do you want to try them on?”

“I don’t need to. They’re exactly my size.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw them in a picture. Trust me.”

“Okay.” The young man turned solemn. “They told me the old man died more than a year ago. How could you have met him here last fall?”

Ernie shrugged, and the leather jacket creaked. He slid the breeches back in the envelope and tucked it under a thick, black sleeve.

“Thanks, kid. Good luck with the gallery.”

Boot heels knocking on the glossy pine boards, Ernie strode to his waiting bike.

*Kevin E. Pittack Jr.*

## Branches

Our river flowed unimpeded,  
Deep and wide,  
Clear as crystal;  
Idly, we floated.

We carved fertile soil and  
Wound through verdant hills,  
We left our imprint upon  
The immaculate heartland.

Together, we were the most powerful  
Force known to man.

Miles and miles downstream,  
Millions of words and phrases removed  
From our origin,  
Our waters split, one branch  
Bleeding to the east,  
The other rushing westward,

Our common destination  
Forever forgotten.

*Uche Ogbuji*

## Mysteries of Harvest III

These carve wind-wash on waves, eyes in hard faces  
Up coring airmass judder for conning stars,  
Straight scanning past sands for fruit after wars,  
Or past provender at rune-posted places.  
Lure-lights bejeweling land charm the water,  
Solace from the dire sea-surge, each mer-mind  
Fond upon green-flecked white shores far behind  
The squared back, bastion of bairn and daughter.

Bearing lone life they've borne the battering foam,  
Nervy, facing fury of natives, numb exile  
And Great Zee's churn. They scout grain with nous not guile  
At shore, shield-sheltered, seizing barns and loam.  
Dragon-heads cant—compass stones for cornucopia.  
Willed vision map-makes discovery from myopia.

# These Border Lights

Hugo Esteban Rodríguez

I've seen some weird shit.

The more people I tell, the less they seem to believe; at least, that's been the on-going pattern. They chalked it up to the desert air playing tricks on me. They chalked it up to the occupational hazard known as boredom. Tio Tino's just trying to scare you, *mijito*, those weird things don't exist.

They were right, for the most part. I never did see a coyote the size of an elephant prowling the border near Columbus. I never did see alien lights over Shiprock. I did not see a strange figure all in white right outside Roswell, and the only reason I was seeing strange sights and sounds in Las Cruces is because I ate some bad tacos after last year's Battle of I-10.

But I swear I'm not kidding about Allen.

Maybe you can believe me. But I think you're going to say I'm kidding.

So, let me tell you about myself first, give myself some credibility. My name is Faustino Diaz, but I go by Tino to my friends and "Sir" to everyone else in the southern part of the state. I was born and raised in Las Cruces, my dad was a builder and my mom still sells tortillas and candy near downtown. I briefly attended New Mexico State before dropping out to get married and support my wife and kid. I'm a third year patrolman in the New Mexico State Police, and my day-to-day job involves a lot of driving, not a lot of tickets, and listening to The Shins and NPR. I know the name and story of every gas station worker on these parts of U.S. 70, and every year I hike with a group of friends through the Organ Mountains. Now, I'm pretty average. I will also grant you that the life of a patrolman can get boring sometimes, but I do love

that I can pull over for lunch breaks at some of the most scenic locations in the American Southwest, and it was on one of those occasions that I met Allen. I had pulled over to one of my favorite rest stops for lunch. It's your standard, non-descript gas station on the highway, but at this particular one, the general manager routinely brings the best homemade tamales to sell at least once a week and the food store makes the best shitty-tasting coffee. Function over style, my dad always said.

As I walked out to sit at the rickety wooden bench that served as a dining area, there was a man sitting there. He didn't look like a trucker or like one of the bored teenagers from the nearby town that I had come to know as the U.S. 70 Seven. He looked, well, different. Like an engineer on his way to work. Brown-skinned, a bit lighter than I was, button-down shirt, jeans, and work boots. I sat down next to him and said hello. It took him a few seconds, but then he saw me. He smiled, straight teeth, clear eyes.

"Hello, officer," he said then, the last bit added haphazardly after glancing at my badge.

"Hot day out, huh?" I said, opening up a cold can of coke with one hand while I pulled out a *tamal*.

"Yes, it sure is."

"You from around here?"

He shook his head.

"I'm from the Midwest," he said, "I'm just traveling around the Southwest. Sight-seeing."

I laughed, told him I pretty much did that for a living. He was very interested, up until I mentioned driving near Columbus and doing some business errands with a buddy I had in Customs and Border Protection.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, I, well, I have heard bad things about the border."

"It's not that bad around here, honestly," I said.

"Where did you say you were from again?" I asked, still-friendly, but a little bit curious now.

"The Midwest."

"Which part?"

"Rock Island, Illinois."

The name rang a bell, but I assumed he was telling the truth. I had no idea where this Rock Island place was.

“Interesting. Well, it’s about an hour and forty from here in Columbus if you’re wanting to stay in the state. If you don’t mind crossing over to Texas, you’re looking at an hour’s drive down I-10 to the border. Have you made it that far south yet?”

The man shook his head.

“Well, El Paso can be quite lovely, couple of good places to eat,” I said, pulling out a notepad from my front pocket and scribbling a few names.

“Here’s a couple of good places I’ve been to. And you have to get the *caldo tlalpeño* at this place, and in Columbus, you have to try quesadillas and the *horchata* from here,” I said, indicating the third and sixth names on the list.

“Thank you,” the man said. “I appreciate your help. My name is Allen. What is your name?”

“Call me Tino,” I replied, quickly drying some grease off my hand and extending it to Allen. He looked at it curiously and then shook it.

So I thought that was it, I mean a little weird but my brother-in-law is a bit weird like that too, and he’s from Iowa, so I thought that was par for the course for these people. Then, I ran into Allen again, a few weeks later, in Columbus. My buddy Rodrigo from high school works for U.S. Customs there and occasionally I end up making the rounds in that area at least once every two months. We end up always having dinner at a tiny restaurant off of Taft Street, which is where this story takes a turn for the weird. So picture me, just having finished my dinner, the quesadillas now a pleasant memory in my stomach, and I just signed the check.

“If it wasn’t for the fact that there’s nothing else to do in this damn town, Brad,” I said, tucking my card back in my pocket. “I’d move down here just for these quesadillas.”

His response was a raised middle finger, and then we both laughed.

“Funny that you mention the quesadillas, for the last week there’s this guy that comes in just before sundown every day and asks for quesadillas and a horchata.”

“I mean, is that so weird? That’s the best thing they have on the menu.”

“Right, but it’s some random *gavacho* from up north. Like, just traveling through the border alone. And that’s not the strangest thing.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, check this, so, I thought he was a bit weird. Polite as all hell, but I don’t know, Margarita told me he just gave her the weirdest feeling. I saw his car leave right before we pulled up, actually, I forgot to mention.”

“Wait, Margarita, as in Margarita the waitress you have been all *apendejado* over for the last six months? Are you sure it isn’t just jealousy?”

“Ha-ha, real funny, *vato*. No, because the dude’s not her type but that’s beside the point. So I got curious. Decided to follow him one evening, just to see where he went.”

“And then what happened?”

“He just took off straight down 11 and I lost him right away. So the next day, I assumed he’d be here, and sure enough he was. This time, I beat him to the punch. Followed him down 11 to the border, and I thought, alright, either this guy is the whitest looking Mexican I have seen in my life or there’s something else. So we get to the border, and there in plain sight of every floodlight, just parks his car off to the side and walks for a mile up and down, and then gets back in his car.”

“So what did you do?”

“Reasonable suspicion, I pulled him over. Asked him what his business was, he said he just wanted to look around. Which, come on, 300 miles of border fence and he’s playing tourist? *Ni madres*,” he said, waving his hand dismissively. “But I can’t hold someone on just that. So I ran his info, it all came back clean, well, mostly, but, I’m still waiting to see if those assholes in ICE have something on him. But you know how it is. So I dropped him back off at his car and let him go. I told him that the area is dangerous, though. He didn’t seem too scared of that, but it looked like he was afraid of even getting too close to the fence.”

“Wait,” I had told Rodrigo, my heart picking up anxiously. “Is he about yea high, looks, I don’t now, looks slightly out of place?”

“Yeah.”

“Was his name Allen?”

“Shit, I think so. Let me check my texts,” Rodrigo said and pulled up his phone and nodded. “Yeah, from Rock Island, Illinois. Look.”

He flipped the phone and I found myself staring into Allen’s beady eyes.

“That’s him. We have to go follow him.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’d call it a hunch but your Margarita might call it women’s intuition.”

“Hey, lower your voice, she’s married.”

I remembered rolling my eyes and then leading the way out the door.

“Your car or mine?”

“Let’s take yours, mine’s safer here.”

So then we both got in his car and sped off down U.S. Highway 11 to the border checkpoint, the night having fallen all over us.

“There’s his car,” Rodrigo said, killing his lights and then rolling his car to a stop right where a beat up old Cutlass was. I jumped off the SUV, shut the door, and followed Rodrigo. Rodrigo, in turn, had taken his radio from his belt and called in.

“HQ, This is Triana, suspicious activity at area seven six three bravo, over.”

A static hiss was his reply, before the voice came in clear.

“We read you, Triana, HSSSS, do you need backup? Over.”

“Stand by, HQ, HSSSS, over and out.”

He placed his radio back on his belt and started moving forward. It wasn’t long before we saw a single orb dancing in the light.

“That’s about where he started to come back,” Rodrigo had said, and as if by magic, the orb started moving again in our direction. We didn’t hear anything but the sound of our breathing in the desert air as the orb came closer and we saw that it had illuminated Allen, who looked at us curiously. He was wearing the same clothes had worn when I first saw him.

“Hello, Tino, hello, officer,” he said, nervously.

I don’t want to admit it now, but I felt my hand slowly fall to my issued Smith and Wesson. I saw that Rodrigo’s hand had done the same.

“Hello, Allen,” I said. “What brings you here?”

“I...wanted to look at the fence?”

“What for?” Rodrigo said.

“I can’t tell you,” Allen said, and that’s when his hand fell to his belt.

In a split-second, both my gun and Rodrigo’s were out, both of us in

an isosceles stance, leaning slightly forward, our target illuminated by his own lamplight, which hung from a string around his neck.

“DO NOT MAKE ANY SUDDEN MOVES!” Rodrigo yelled. Allen blinked back in confusion.

“I have to show you something,” Allen said. “Since you are the ones that are interested.”

“I don’t give two shits about what I’m interested in,” Rodrigo snarled.

For what felt like an eternity, no one said anything, then I decided to speak.

“Rodrigo, cover me.”

“Wait, wha?” He said, his stance not wavering as I lowered and holstered my pistol. “What the hell are you doing, Tino?”

“I have a feeling.”

“Jesus. Alright,” he said, and turned back to Allen. “Put your hands up. If you so much as twitch I’ll blow your brains out. Do you understand?”

Allen nodded and slowly raised his hands.

I approached the stranger, who was eight steps away, and I patted him down. Inside the waist, I felt something heavy. I pulled it out and it was...a cellphone.

“A cell phone?” I asked, incredulously.”

“Yes, I cannot tell you why I am here, but I can show you. Entry pen is 1111.”

I raised my eyebrow and punched in the number. A normal phone screen popped up.

“Now, go to the folder icon and press the first file.”

I did, and a video played back. It was politicians, doctors, people on the street, entire rallies of people, all talking about an opposition to...

“What’s going on?” Rodrigo called from behind.

“You’ve got to see this.”

“I have a...fine, I will go,” Rodrigo said and came up to us and stared at the same time at the video I was looking at, holstering his gun as he did so.

“I don’t...I don’t understand,” I remember saying.

Allen pointed in the general direction of the fence, shrouded in darkness.

“Your politicians and all these people are clamoring for an end to illegal aliens, and building a wall.”

I stopped and wasn't sure how to react to that. I have never been very political, you see. Too complex and not really worth my time.

“Uh...” Rodrigo said in his own response. “Yeah...illegal immigration. That is what the fence is for, we have a lot of people coming in from Mexico and Central America that aren't supposed to come in.”

“Wait, this is for other people?”

“Yes...?” I said.

“But, they keep on saying these things about aliens. I want to find where the weak spot in the fence so it doesn't keep on getting higher to form a Hyperaphoxic dome. I know the technology isn't that advanced yet but the Trakion opening should be around here.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Rodrigo had asked then. “It's a goddamn fence. It's not getting any taller than it is, and if it does, it'll be maybe three feet.”

“Three feet?” Allen had asked.

“Yes, three feet, and there's sensors underneath as well.”

“So,” Allen said, his voice flooding with relief. “This is not the first steps into a building process that will turn this into a Hyperaphoxic Dome?”

“I don't know what that is, Tino, do you?”

I shook my head and looked at Allen, who had started to giggle.

“All this time, I am looking for something that is not here at all!”

My hand went back to my gun, and I palmed the grip for reassurance.

“Now is the time for you to start explaining things, Allen,” I said, taking a step back to give myself some room away from him. Rodrigo followed suit, his gun back out of its holster.

“It's nothing you should concern yourself too much about,” he said, his voice confident now.

“Actually, I think it is,” Rodrigo said, and we both drew our guns again.

This time, Allen rolled his eyes and...they didn't go back to where they were supposed to.

“What the---“ was all Rodrigo said before a red string shot out

from the lamp hung around Allen's neck and wrapped itself around our arms. Allen opened his mouth and screamed soundlessly as he slammed Rodrigo and myself against each other, making us both drop our guns. The red string felt like a nylon rope as it started spreading and wrapping itself around my waist and Rodrigo's back until we were both immobilized.

Allen, or whatever he was, appeared to ripple and then tear and then melt into something larger, like one of those prepackaged muffin rolls where a simple pop starts spreading a new mass. Like that, only less tasty and much, much, much more horrifying. The blob kept on growing until it was towering on top of us, around thirteen feet. And then it tore the extra fat with...not hands, but rather, spiny pincers just clawing and chopping until the end result was something that looked like an elephant fucked a lobster after a bender in Tijuana.

"AH! BLARG-KAWRG-BORGK-NANG. BORKAL-NARG-HISS!"

We looked up, horrified and confused, at the creature that had been Allen. It looked back down on us with five black eyes.

"BHARG-TURKAL, TANG-AMME, HISSS NARG-WARK?!"

"Uh...Tino, is it talking to us?"

"I...think so?"

"FORGLE!"

The creature reached into his carapace and pulled something.

"BARGG...ah, there we go. Sorry about that, ahem," the creature said, clearing its throat with a sound that sounded like a wet towel dropping on the floor. "You must be very confused."

"Well, it's not like—" Rodrigo started

"SILENCE!" the thing roared, spraying my friend with flecks of what I hoped were saliva but smelled quite like what my toilet smelled after that bad taco trip I mentioned a little bit ago.

"So impatient," it said. "But I will be brief. See, no one had approached me at all about what I was doing."

"I—" Rodrigo said, but quickly shut up as the creature glared at him. Is it possible to glare with four eyes? If it's not, it happened, and it was followed by a yank from the rope that sent us careening into the dust and knocking out my wind. I thought I felt a rib break.

"You picked me up and asked me what I was doing. You didn't ask anything after I said looking around. If you had asked me from the

beginning, I probably would have told you, and then it probably would have been a little bit more unpleasant for your pathetic two eyes than this,” the creature said, in what I assume was a seven-legged “oh-my-god-Becky-look-at-that-monster” motion.

“I will be brief. So, my fear with all these humans spreading their illegal alien thing fear then. It reminded me of how the Guishear Dominion kept my glorious Pheorbitate from taking its rightful world’s three systems over. It set across a great war that devastated my home planet, and in the end, thanks to those damn domes, we failed. I lost many a great Opterx in the war, Opterx I knew from little Opterlings.”

I was about to say something, but I stopped myself.

“So now, in the search of new homes, we are on the lookout for the Guishears. My fear was that they had reached this planet and had already developed an anti-alien protection that would keep this from us.”

“Wait,” I said. “All this time you’ve thought aliens actually meant not-humans? And despite having the technology to travel across systems, you didn’t bother to look this up?”

“I—” the monster grunted.

“Wait, not only that, but you also haven’t bothered to learn that the furthest we’ve gone is Mars? And that the furthest planet a human has landed on has been our own damned Moon? Is there not some sort of Space Google?” I said, immediately flinching after to avoid a string of shit-spittle thrown at me.

“Wait, is that what you think? Your people have had an interstellar force for five cycles, and have been a nuisance for half that time.”

“And I’m the queen of England,” I said.

“No, you are not. You are Faustino Diaz.”

“It’s a...ah, never mind. What happens now?”

“What happens is I send a message to the Opterx in this system that there are no Hyperaphoxic domes here.”

“And then, what happens after?”

“What has been scheduled to happen for two cycles. What was meant to be.”

I swear to God, I'm not kidding.

I mean, you thought I was because they found Rodrigo and me in a crashed Customs car outside a restaurant in Columbus known for its quesadillas, both of us reeking of alcohol.

You thought I was kidding because Occam's Razor says it's easier to believe we got drunk and made up a bunch of shit just to keep our jobs.

But you thought wrong.

And now instead of believing me, you're hiding with me in the Southwest Occupied Zone, planning the resistance.

*Martins Tomisin*

## The Sun-God at Mount Horeb

Sun god  
sitting still on mount Horeb  
amidst the stark clouds,  
sweeping towards the swept  
open space between trees  
and pawing at white and dark fleshy flesh.

Sun god  
your pale, smirky lemon face  
like the grapefruit in Ago-Iwoye Market  
scribbles dirt patches on my face  
and made my throat to swill water  
enough to fill up a tank-container.

Oh sun god!  
I plead,  
do not douse us all  
from this buzzy day  
only 'dap' softly softly  
into the balmy, cosy night.

*R. David Drucker*

## On the Rocks off Kinsale, Schooner “Astrid” Strikes and Founders

Hull so white you'd hardly guess it's steel plate,  
buoyant as a feather until it's not,  
heading for this rocky ledge charts forgot  
to note though it's been here a million years,  
patiently waiting tonight.

Crew's counting

until eight bells strike, their sign to knock off  
as the watch below grumbles from their berths:  
“Only a sailor works on nights like these.”

Then up the ladder, through the waiting hatch -  
like some gigantic, monster breaking wave  
filling the heaving deck 'til the scuppers  
release Astrid from a watery death,  
the starboard watch swarms to their vague stations  
as the port watch hits the hay - dead tired.

All of a once, Astrid scrapes and crumples,  
tries skittering across the ledge, is stopped  
in her progress by a lack of water  
underneath her graceful, now battered keel.

“Too late to save her, lads. All hands on deck.”

The new roused port watch joins their mates on deck.  
Tissue white, a ragged cloud wipes chill tears  
involuntarily from the full moon's  
silver eye. The captain calls the Coast Guard,

bids the crew don their orange lifejackets,  
lights three flares successively, as the mate  
radios the world that Astrid's sinking –  
sliding off the rocky ledge to her doom  
a scant few miles from Kinsale's storm tossed Head  
just a century to the day a ship,  
turbine powered without a scrap of sail,  
was torpedoed here, Lusitania  
her name. A thousand people lost their lives  
unlike us, the Astrid's crew . . . as surprised,  
yet much safer thanks to orange life rafts  
successfully deployed.

We're more annoyed  
than stunned to know our vessel's now destroyed.

Rest In Peace, schooner Astrid. May we crew  
find predictability by sailing  
new, steadier courses toward calmer lives.

# Unbelievable

Kyle A. Massa

“Hey. Some hicks spotted the Wolfman last night.”

The guy read it casually off his smartphone, his thumb flicking through an article at a leisurely pace.

“No,” said the girl. “They didn’t.” She stared out the half-cracked window, her finger tapping impatiently on the outer frame of the car.

“Says here he was crossing the road down by Bainbridge.” The guy smiled a little to himself. “You think he looked both ways?”

“Shut up, please,” said the girl. “Try to concentrate.”

Outside, the streets were playing the coarse music of the city: honking horns, shrill expletives, the rhythmic beeping that indicated it was supposedly safe to cross the street. The guy and the girl sat within it all, in a parked car in a two-hour zone.

“What about that one?” The girl nodded to a pale woman hustling through the crosswalk. Well-dressed, high heels, designer square-framed glasses, built like a sapling.

“This one dude even got a pic. See?” The guy held up his phone. The girl slapped it away impatiently, then jabbed a finger at the woman.

“Her. That one. What about her?”

The guy glanced up, studied the woman for a moment, then shook his head. “Nah. Too pale. Mom doesn’t like the pale ones. Nice ass, though.”

The girl snorted, then went back to scanning the crowd. The guy went back to his phone.

“That one,” she said after a moment, indicating a slim, elderly jogger in lime-green spandex. He stood at the street corner, hopping in place, waiting for the signal to cross. “Looks like he’s in good shape.”

The guy tore himself away from his phone for another second, then went right back to it. “You see how old that guy is? We’re looking for youth, sweetheart, youth.”

The girl blew out a sigh. “You could help me a little more actively, you know.”

The guy shrugged. “But you’re doing such a great job.”

They sat there together, the city’s music filling their silence. If anyone were to look at them, they’d see a slim, dark-haired young woman and a bearded, dark-haired young man, both wearing sunglasses and both sharply dressed. If anyone were to look at them, they might assume the guy and the girl were a couple. They were both strikingly attractive, after all; the girl with her blood red lips, the guy with his smooth, almost feminine face. Or maybe they were siblings, or possibly cousins, because they did look a bit like one another.

All would be good guesses. None would be correct.

“You don’t believe in anything,” muttered the guy, at length.

“No, I just don’t believe in bullshit. You probably found that article on conspiracy.com or something. And come on. A wolfman? That’s about as believable as Bigfoot. Or leprechauns.”

“Hey. I met a leprechaun once. His name was Seamus, and he was a good guy.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“And you’re not very nice.”

He went back to his phone. She went back to looking. Another moment dragged by.

“How about that one?”

The guy looked up, followed the girl’s gesture to a young man who was alternately stabbing the crosswalk button with his finger and frantically checking his watch. The kid’s shirt was on inside-out and he was wearing flip-flops, even though it was October. A backpack dangled from one shoulder, unzipped, so that the books and notebooks within were practically spilling out.

“He looks like a mess.”

“Yeah. But he’s young. Nice coloration to his cheeks, too.”

The guy narrowed his eyes, studying the kid closer. “Yeah. Yeah, he’s not bad. Bet mom wouldn’t hate him.”

“Really?” Her straight black eyebrows shot up.

“Sure. Let’s pick him up. Just let me send this tweet.”

The girl rolled her eyes. A few taps on the screen, then the guy stowed the phone.

“Okay. Let’s move.”

The girl and the guy stepped out of their car and strode toward the kid.

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Toby Fripp was late for class for the fifth time that semester. Or was it the sixth?

He stood at the crosswalk and prayed, *prayed* that Briggs wouldn’t notice, or that class would be canceled, or that maybe the world would end, because then at least he wouldn’t have to face the wrath of dear old Mom and Dad after they found out he’d failed History of Cinema due to repeated tardiness.

Also, explaining *why* he was late would be difficult. He was late because he’d awoken late that morning on the roof of a fraternity house, sans clothes. All of them.

Toby Fripp wasn’t *that* guy, though. He was more the kind you’d find playing a video game in his room alone, streaming the latest Tarantino film from a website in Russia, finishing his homework at three in the morning the night before it was due. He’d never even been to a fraternity house before, unless you counted the time he stumbled upon one on accident and was promptly told to “Get the fuck outta here, bro.”

Yet last night, he’d awoken atop a frat house “butt-ass naked,” as the brothers might say, his head thumping like a rumbling bassline.

Whatever he’d done, it must’ve been one hell of a night.

Toby had a vague understanding of the term “walk of shame,” which was when you walked back to your dorm in the morning, alone, after spending the night with a fellow student. Toby’s roommate Mark had done it last weekend, though Mark actually seemed pretty proud of himself. And Mark had still had his clothes on.

What do you call it when you do a walk of shame, only you can’t remember what you did the night before and it’s more like you’re sprinting because you’re naked and don’t want anyone to see?

That sounded like a bad joke. And Toby supposed he was the punchline.

Anyway, he’d thrown on his clothes, some flip-flops, his backpack,

whatever, and he'd dashed out the door. He smelled like his childhood dog Ambrose used to smell after rolling in the mud, but there was no time to care. If he was late again, the honorable professor Simon R. Briggs would fail him. And then probably kill him, just because he had tenure and he could get away with it.

And all that brought Toby Fripp to the crosswalk. He checked his watch, then mashed the button, then back to his watch, then the button. Frantic thoughts thumped around his subconscious: *No. God no. We have a test today. Why did it have to be today? Shit. It's on that black and white movie that's like Dracula but isn't Dracula. Briggs's favorite movie. What the hell is it called?* He stabbed at the button a few more times.

When the little white man appeared on the screen across the street to let him know he could walk, he was approached by a pair of fashion models.

They *had* to be fashion models. That was the first thing that popped into Toby's head when he saw them. A guy and a girl, striding toward him shoulder to shoulder. The guy had black hair that curled around his face delicately, along with a stubble-beard. He wore those skinny jeans that Toby always thought looked terribly uncomfortable, along with a shirt that bore the obnoxiously ironic message, "THIS IS A SHIRT." And he wore sunglasses.

The girl's hair was night-black and fell down around her shoulders in soft waves. She wore pumps, a leather jacket, stained blue jeans, her own pair of aviators. She removed them, and when Toby looked into her eyes—golden, almost amber eyes—he found that he could not look away. She might've been the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

The guy reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet. No, not a wallet—he opened it, revealing a badge and an ID.

"Agent Stone. FBI."

That snapped Toby out of his trance, and fast. Before he had time to say anything, the girl had her badge out, too.

"This is my partner, Agent Johnson," the guy said.

The girl shot an elbow into his ribs and tapped the name on the badge. The guy squinted, then straightened.

"Ahem. Agent *Jackson*."

"What the hell...?" Toby breathed. But by then, the girl was already

behind him, clamping cuffs around his wrists. “What are you—*oww!*” He felt a sharp sting in his side, and then he was being dragged toward a grey sedan. A few people gaped in their direction, but the guy warded them off with the badge.

“Official FBI business, folks. Nothing to see here. Suspected drug kingpin, that’s all...”

The girl was stronger than Toby could’ve imagined. She practically lifted him off the ground before tossing him into the backseat, then slammed the door shut behind him. She and the guy piled in, and they were off.

“Who the hell are you people? What did I do? Where are you taking me?”

The girl opened the glove box and tossed a syringe inside. Was that what had stung him on the street? Come to think of it, he was starting to feel sort of drowsy, sort of woozy. He shook his head, but the world was getting fuzzy.

“FBI agents don’t...wear novelty shirts...” Toby managed to gurgle.

The guy glanced into the rear-view and flashed a flawless grin. “Had you going there, though, didn’t we?” He tossed his badge into the backseat for Toby to see. “Bought that at a Halloween store. Nine ninety nine, baby.”

“Just relax,” said the girl. “We’re not going to hurt you.” At that comment, the guy sputtered with laughter. The girl slapped him on the arm.

“Class...” Toby mumbled. “I need to get to class...”

He closed his eyes for a moment. He felt like he was suspended in a jar some viscous substance, like a dead tissue sample. He could hear the two models-agents-kidnappers as though they were behind a thin wall.

“How come Wolfman can’t be real?” It was the guy speaking.

“Do we really have to talk about this right now?” That from the girl.

“Three guys saw him. *Three*. He was crossing the street and he, like, woofed at them or something.”

The girl said something back, but the rest of the conversation was lost in the drug-haze. Toby thought he might’ve moaned a few times, but he couldn’t be sure. For some reason, all he could think about was Professor Briggs with his grade book, taking a fat red pen and stabbing at Toby’s name over and over and over again, like a knife plunged into a

corpse.

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Toby awoke sometime later—or maybe a second later. Truth be told, he hadn't even realized he'd fallen asleep. The car had stopped, it seemed—or maybe his stomach had only stopped churning. He tried to sit up, but managed only to roll a bit. He felt strong hands on his shoulders.

“Up you get, kid.”

Toby didn't try to fight the hands. They lifted him, then slung him over a hard, bony shoulder like a sack. The shoulder jabbed into his stomach, but he was too numb to feel any pain. From somewhere far away, two voices were still bickering.

“I'm not going to talk about this anymore.”

“You know I'm right. The truth is out there.”

Toby giggled softly to himself. The sheer bizarreness of the whole situation was a bit funny, he supposed—or maybe it was just the drugs making him laugh.

“I thought you said you had enough to put him out.” It was the guy's voice.

The girl answered, “I did. He's out.”

“Then why's he laughing?”

Whoever was carrying him set him down on the pavement, hard. His head bumped the concrete.

“Ouch,” he giggled, because it was more funny than painful.

Now he was staring at a sky, a sky with two faces in it, both of them so beautiful and pale. It was dark out, he realized. When had it gotten so dark out?

“Agent Stone,” Toby whispered blissfully. “And Agent Jackson-not-Johnson.”

The two beautiful faces looked at one another, then back at him.

“You said that was enough to put him out for a day and a half.”

“It *was*. I've never seen anything like it.”

“What if he knows what's going down?”

“He doesn't. Let's just get him inside.”

They pulled something over his eyes, a rag, maybe, and the strong

hands lifted him again.

“What’s...what’s the name of the, the movie on the test today?”

Toby asked them. “I can’t...seem to remember it.”

Nobody answered.

They stopped, maybe on a landing, and someone knocked on a door. They waited. Then Toby heard a creak, and a new voice, this one deep and resonant.

“You found one?” it asked.

“Seems to be a college student,” answered the girl’s voice.

“Good,” said the deep voice. “I was getting thirsty. Mom will be pleased.” Then more shuffling, and they stepped indoors.

It was hard to tell without being able to see, but it felt to Toby like they were walking through a hallway. It was very quiet, all of the sudden, like someone had pressed pause on the city music.

They stopped. Toby heard someone fumbling with keys. Whoever it was slid the key into a lock. Toby heard the click, the turn, and then the squeak of the hinges. Then they were moving again, not across a level surface and not up, but down. Toby’s chin bumped against the shoulder with each descending step. The air seemed to get colder. He smelled burning candles. Step after step after step, and then they stopped again.

“Mom needs to invest in an elevator,” the guy whined. He dumped Toby on the ground, then removed the cuffs. They pulled the blindfold off his eyes. Toby blinked. The space was dimly lit and vast. Very vast. Silvery moonlight filtered in from a small window nearby. He blinked again, and his breath caught in his throat.

*Fashion models*, he thought, disbelieving the notion even as it popped into his mind, *I’ve been abducted by fashion models*.

There had to be at least fifty of them, all staring at him silently. They were tall, perfectly featured, all of them built like dancers that were fasting for Lent.

There was one, however, who was somehow even more gorgeous than the rest.

She sat on a throne in the middle of them, her sharp chin resting on curled, sleek fingers. Her lips were purplish-red and tipped up at the corners in an amused half-smile. Her hair was gossamer silk that hung like a veil around her face. Silver hair, Toby realized, though she couldn’t be a day over twenty. And her eyes...those eyes exuded

sensuality, lust, an enigmatic invitation for something he couldn't understand. Toby could hardly believe it, but he thought her even more attractive than the girl who'd helped kidnap him.

"Hi, Mom," said a voice.

Toby turned to it. It was the guy, and he was speaking to the silver-haired woman on the throne. He strode up to her and kissed her on the hand. She said nothing, only watched him stoop down and plant his lips softly upon her pale skin.

"We thought we'd have a friend for dinner." This from the girl, who pointed directly at Toby. One of the other models licked his lips eagerly.

Toby felt hot blood surging through his veins, and something else. Fear. The jagged, frantic, relentless kind of fear that one only feels when one's life is playing out its last act.

"Cannibals..." It was all he could manage to croak.

The guy let out a guffaw. The silver-haired woman shot him a sharp look, and he fell silent. Then she turned her gaze to Toby.

"Not cannibals, no. We're all quite a bit older than that." Her smile was all dazzling whiteness and perfect alignment. "My name is Valerie."

"Toby Fripp," peeped Toby, not sure why he was introducing himself to one of his captors. And then, stupidly, he added, "I'm just a freshman."

The guy stepped forward and half raised his hand. "Um, Mom? Do you think I could get second bite? I mean, I *did* find him."

"We found him," the girl snapped. "And ladies first, which means I should get first bite. After Mom, of course."

It was rather disconcerting to hear so many people calling this woman "Mom," especially considering that she appeared to be the same age—or even younger—than these others.

"Stop talking. Both of you." Valerie spoke with such quiet acidity that Toby recoiled. She smiled at him again. Such a beautiful smile. "Do not be afraid, child."

She leaned close to him. He could feel her breath on his neck. He could smell her. She smelled like springtime.

"It will only hurt for a moment."

And suddenly, he understood.

"*Nosferatu*," he whispered, remembering the title of Briggs's favorite film and the subject of the test he'd already missed.

“Smart boy,” Valerie whispered. “Close your eyes, now. I’ll make it quick.”

Toby closed his eyes. The last thing he saw before he closed them was the moon in the window. A big fat moon, like an eye clouded by a cataract.

He felt weird, suddenly. But the weirdness had nothing to do with the drugs. No, this was different, and it was not a pleasant feeling. It was like there was something under his skin, something crawling around inside, trying to get out.

“I don’t feel so good,” said Toby, still with his eyes closed.

Something shuddered within him. He ran his tongue over his teeth and wondered absently if they’d always been that sharp. His flip flops felt too small all of the sudden, and his clothes felt tight. His whole body was hot, as if his blood was simmering. His joints and his limbs felt the way they did when he was in 7th grade and he’d had that growth spurt, only this was happening in fast-forward, too fast. He opened his eyes. The floor appeared to be moving away from him.

“What the *hell*...?” That was what he tried to say. But instead, all that came out was a long, piercing howl.

The fashion models stared at Toby Fripp. He stared back at them. He wasn’t Toby Fripp anymore, though. Not tonight.

“I told you so,” the guy said to the girl, breathlessly.

And then things got a bit bloody.

# Of Life, Death, Aliens and Zombies: A Review

by David Jensen

Title: Of Life, Death, Aliens and Zombies

Author: Dario Cannizzaro

Genre: fiction/short stories

Publisher: Pronoun

Brief synopsis from the publisher: “A collection of nine original and quirky stories - a Zombie Apocalypse without zombies; the Vatican announcing contact with Aliens; a heroin junkie that loves poetry; a timeless love, and much more.

Ordinary characters facing extraordinary situations, dry humor, philosophical musing dressed as whimsical, offhand commentary, and a fairy-tale like writing; those are the key elements of the style of this incredible authorial debut...”

*Of Life, Death, Aliens and Zombies* is a collection of fiction and autobiography by Dario Cannizzaro that enjoys constantly reversing expectations. This is immediately apparent in the first story, “Yet Another Zombie Apocalypse,” which focuses on the relationship of two people facing a new reality rather than the monsters outside their door. This is a prevalent focus throughout the entirety of the collection: extraordinary events are quickly accepted as the norm; a moment of deep emotional isolation transforms into a powerful, primal moment between strangers; people in desperate situations circumvent disaster by throwing themselves towards it. These unexpected actions make each story unique and entice the reader to know more about the people within them. In truth, the characters in each of these stories are as much a story in their own right.

Cannizzaro is one of those authors who choose not to use quotations in their work, preferring for the dialogue to blend with the action. While this may be a jarring style for some readers, it allows for the spoken word to feel like an event all its own, a part of the story instead of a reaction to it. He also employs excellent use of stream-of-consciousness. The novelette “Impurità” uses this style to remarkable effect, making the reader question the minds and actions of the characters within the very realistic world that has been crafted around them.

What I find particularly enjoyable is Cannizzaro’s breaking of the fourth wall. He does it early on in “Yet Another Zombie Apocalypse.” The narrator turns to the audience and quips “I know what you’re thinking, I would be thinking the same, oh, here’s another zombie story.” Not only does this serve to make the stories more realistic and add a humorous twist, but in relating to the audience, it provides a unique dynamic in which the reader is welcomed into the tale instead of having it thrust upon them. In this way, the story and the reader are able to have a mutual relationship.

Perhaps the best example of Cannizzaro’s style ties all of these storytelling elements together. In the novelette “Impurità,” the reader is suddenly taken out of the story by the omniscient narrator and told that in fact, the story they’ve been reading is simply the main character’s imagination run wild: “She would create realities, in her mind, better than the ones she was living.” The narrator in essence sits the reader down, saying, “You cannot trust what you’ve read, but not to worry – I am here, and we’ll get through this together.”

Overall, Cannizzaro has produced a wonderfully poignant collection, asking the reader to question the events contained within and the people who live through them. Such incidents may be earth-shattering to one or many, but that doesn’t make them any less real or meaningful.

Get your own copy of *Of Life, Death, Aliens and Zombies* through Amazon, iBooks, Kobo, Google Play Store, and Nook.

For more from Dario Cannizzaro, visit his site at <https://dariowrites.com/>.

## About the Authors

**Ryan Dodge** is a writer currently living in the Los Angeles area. He writes poetry and fiction, specifically science fiction for the later. He enjoys reading in his spare time, as well as hanging out with his cat Athena and playing video games.

**Michael Kulp [Mick]** is a writer and father of two mostly grown children who have survived his shenanigans through smarts they inherited from their mother. His creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry have appeared in numerous consumer magazines, newspapers, and literary journals. His first book, *Random Stones: A book of poetry*, was published in 2016. More at [www.MichaelKulpWriter.blogspot.com](http://www.MichaelKulpWriter.blogspot.com).

**Antonina Mareglia** is a fiction writer interested in creating stories that balance the ordinary and the unusual. Her passion began when at 8 years old she discovered the creativity and freedom of writing. When writing she intertwines fantastic possibility with the world around her.

**Seth Jani** currently resides in Seattle, WA and is the founder of Seven Circle Press ([www.sevencirclepress.com](http://www.sevencirclepress.com)). His own work has been published widely in such places as *The Chiron Review*, *The Hamilton Stone Review*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *VAYAVYA*, *Gingerbread House*, *Gravel* and *Zetetic: A Record of Unusual Inquiry*. More about him and his work can be found at [www.sethjani.com](http://www.sethjani.com).

**Robert Boucheron** is an architect in Charlottesville, Virginia. His short stories and essays appear in *Bangalore Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Fiction International*, *London Journal of Fiction*, *New Haven Review*, *Poydras Review*, *Short Fiction (UK)*. His one-act plays were performed in 2016 in Concord, North Carolina and Detroit, Michigan.

**Kevin E. Pittack Jr.** resides in northeastern Pennsylvania. His poetry has appeared in *Door is a Jar Magazine* and *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*. He loves flannel, Randy Savage impressions, and Robert

Frost. He does not take himself or life too seriously.

**Uche Ogbuji** was born in Calabar, Nigeria and lived, among other places, in Egypt and England before settling near Boulder, Colorado with his wife and four children. He is a computer engineer by trade, but poetry is his passion. His chapbook, *Ndewo, Colorado* is a Colorado Book Award Winner. Among other editorial projects, Uche co-hosts the Poetry Voice podcast. A selection of Uche's poems were included in the Best New African Poets 2015 anthology, and he was a finalist for Nigeria's 2016 Eriata Oribhabor Poetry Prize.

**Hugo Esteban Rodríguez** is a writer, poet, and blogger living and working in Houston, Texas. His work has appeared in *The Aironaut*, *Spirit's Tincture*, *HeART Journal*, *Picaron Poetry*, and the *Texas Poetry Calendar*. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net award and he is currently an assistant editor for Bartleby Snopes. He is a graduate of the University of Texas at Brownsville and the MFA program at the University of Texas at El Paso. He blogs about writing at [www.dosaguilas.org](http://www.dosaguilas.org).

**Martins Tomisin** is a talented budding poet from Nigeria. He is currently studying English at Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye Ogun State, Nigeria. He loves spending his leisure time mostly on writing of poetry or short stories. He embraced the act of writing of literature (literary work) before the age of 18. One of his poems that he wrote before the age of 18 was "My Journey of Life," which rationalises on the journey of MAN till his last breath. His poems have won him awards in school competitions and so on. Some of his poems have served as a muse or inspiration to some writers in discovering new, stylistic ways of handling of poetry.

**R. David Drucker [Dave]** had been versifying for over five decades mostly for special occasions: birthdays, anniversaries, job changes, political events, weddings and funerals. The sudden, unexpected death of his wife, Mary J. Drucker, on January 14 2015 induced in Drucker a fundamental transformation of his versifying to genuine heart-generated poetry. Drucker, a trained anthropologist and archaeologist [Brown University BA, The University of Rochester, MA, PhD] is

completing a book on Mesoamerican calendar systems. He is a singer in three New Hampshire Seacoast choirs, a volunteer crew member on the Portsmouth based gundalow replica *Piscataqua*, a UNH Marine Docent, current president of Dover NH Friendship Force, a board member of South Church in Portsmouth, and a Rotarian. He continues to write poetry daily in his Dover, NH home.

***Kyle A. Massa*** is a writer of some sort living in New York (upstate, not the city) with his girlfriend and two cats. When he isn't writing, you might find him reading, running, or playing with the aforementioned felines. You can find more of Kyle's work at [www.kyleamassa.com](http://www.kyleamassa.com).

## About the Artist



*Heidi Lichtfuss* is a bad ass warrior woman from Northern Colorado. Currently working as a Content Creator for Madwire, Heidi has a vision and big dreams whose fulfillment is looming just over the horizon...

