

On·Spec

The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing

SPRING 1995

(\$4.50 US) \$4.95

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**SPECIAL
THEME
ISSUE:
HORROR &
DARK FANTASY**

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ON·SPEC

The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing

Special Theme Issue: HORROR & DARK FANTASY

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Printed in Canada

ON SPEC Volume 7, Issue 1 (#20), Spring 1995. ©1995 The Copper Pig Writers' Society. All rights reserved by contributors. Nothing may be reprinted without written permission. ISSN 0843-476X. 1-year subscription in Canada \$19.95 including GST. See pages 95-96 for complete subscription rates. Publication mail #10418. All mail: ON SPEC, P.O. Box 4727, Edmonton, AB, Canada, T6E 5G6. Include self-addressed, stamped envelope for reply.

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Special Thanks to:

Jane Bisbee, *femme savante*; Hugette Turcotte of the Canada Council; Catherine Keachie of the CMPA; Kerry Dawson of City of Edmonton, Parks and Recreation; Candas Jane Dorsey and Tesseract Books; Sara and Matt of Bunch o'Bamseys Ink; Andris Taskans and *Prairie Fire*; Amber Hayward and the Black Cat Guest Ranch; The Novel Coffee House; the lovely and talented Steve Fahnstalk; Michelle Wilson of Farrago Productions; Teryn Campbell, Chris and Josie Hammond-Thrasher; Chris Jackel; Mary Woodbury; Sam Woodbury; and Bill Williams of Alpine Printing Ltd.

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ON Horror:

THE BEAT OF BLACK WINGS

Barry Hammond

"I busied myself to think of a story—a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart..."

With these words Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley recalled her original intention in the preface to the 1831 edition of her classic tale, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*, written when she was just nineteen. They could, I think, apply to any writer who attempts to write horror or dark fantasy, including the fine writers included in this special issue of *ON SPEC*.

It's not an easy task.

Sometimes I hear genre writers disparaged as hacks who slap stock plots and characters together to make an easy dollar. Well, let's face it, the same can be said of any profession: doctors, lawyers, plumbers, carpenters, or writers. There are always sloppy practitioners in any field of human endeavor. However, the mark of a professional *anything* is to practice at the highest standards of the job and, if possible, go beyond what came before to make your own mark. In my opinion, genre writing, when it's practiced at this level, is even more difficult than so-called "mainstream" writing because in addition to mastering the standard tools of writing—grammar, spelling, punctuation, plot, dramatic tension, atmosphere, character, and so on, the genre writer also has to know the *history* of the genre so they can place their work within or beyond that history.

What makes a great horror story? Well, once again, there is a body of historical opinion to draw from. One of the first people who comes to mind is one of this century's masters: Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

Although many modern readers find the prose style of his fiction somewhat antique, in his critical writing Lovecraft was far less cluttered and much more direct. His long essay, "Supernatural Horror in Literature,"¹ is still one of the best. Reading it again for this article I was struck by how relevant his thoughts on the

subject still are in 1995. In Lovecraft's opinion, to have true horror in literature a number of conditions must be met:

"... a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer and unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos..."

Of course, these days, chaos seems to be an integral component of the universe but perhaps that's even more terrifying than our old Newtonian image of an ordered clockwork.

Lovecraft also makes one of the more astute remarks I've ever read on genre, that: *"Atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation ... a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim..."*

It was certainly true of his own fiction and for most of the people leading up to his time, from Matthew "Monk" Lewis, through Henry James, J.S. LeFanu, Algernon Blackwood, Ambrose Bierce, Edith Wharton, Edgar Allen Poe, and into this century with the likes of Arthur Machen and dozens of others.

¹ written in 1927, but revised by Lovecraft and republished after his death by editors August Derleth and Donald Wandrei

He rightly identifies the genre's primary feature as FEAR, specifically fear of the unknown.

Science, of course, tries to throw light on these unknowns and perhaps that's where horror differs from other speculative fiction. Science fiction and even fantasy or magic realism seem to try to fill these unknown voids with speculation on what might be there and what such unknowns might mean. Horror, on the other hand, revels in the dark. If it does speculate, it populates that dark with your worst nightmares.

Dreams and all kind of sleeping states are naturals for horror as these are the times in every person's life where they actually enter another world.

Lovecraft talks about this parallel and also the closeness of horror historically with religion. Sacred writings, religious rituals, and elaborate ceremonial magic all seem designed to evoke a cosmic terror, and sometimes specific specters or demons. It's always struck me as laughable that when horror artists (either on the page or lately in film or television) push the limits of what's considered acceptable by society, the first outcries are always from the church. Where do they think mankind's first fears were embodied, if not in religion? Perhaps, like politicians, they want a monopoly on fear?

I don't think they're likely to ever get it. They haven't the imagination.

So, has much changed since Lovecraft's time? Well, the 1950s were an interesting period. Writers like Richard Matheson in 1954's *I Am Legend* and Robert Bloch in 1959's *Psycho* moved the terrors out of the moors, swamps, gothic mansions and into your local neighborhood.

It's that placement of horror next to

the everyday routine that today's horror writers like Stephen King, Peter Straub, Dean Koontz, Anne Rivers Siddons, Michael McDowell, Robert R. McCammon, Anne Rice, David Morrell and many others have honed to a fine science.

Stephen King, whatever you think of his fiction, has also proved to be articulate on the process of writing and has given critics in *Danse Macabre* (his study of the horror phenomenon) the now famous three levels of horror:

"...the genre exists on three more or less separate levels, each one a little less fine than the one before it. The first emotion is **terror**...we actually see nothing outright...it's what the mind sees..." And so on down: "...**horror** also invites a physical reaction by showing us something which is physically wrong...but there is a third level—that of **revulsion**...the gag reflex..."

Both King's and Lovecraft's criticism are required reading for anyone who wants to understand the power that the literature of fear holds over us. Both are written by informed practitioners and both have lengthy studies of the individual works that highlight the genre.

And what of the future? There's still plenty to choose from. Horror isn't going away. It's been around forever and always will be—as long as fear exists. The latest authors I've seen emerge: Clive Barker, Katherine Dunn,

Eric McCormack, Kathe Koja, Poppy Z. Brite and many others, while firmly grounded in the definitions above, are even now pushing the rules and limits of horror in new and interesting directions.

So, too, are the authors we've got in the pages which follow. **Eileen Kernaghan** takes us on a magical journey into the depths of dark fantasy, as does **Marie Jakober**. **Tanis MacDonald** raises a nasty little horror in one story and gives us dark poetic mythology in another. **David Nickle** gives us a different take on vampires while **Peter Darbyshire** explores the war between nature and civilization. **L.R. Morrison** drives into a bad memory and **Lyle Weis** and **Peter Watts** show us that sometimes everyday humans are more frightening than any of our imagined bogeymen. This is modern horror and dark fantasy, Canadian style. Not that these genres respect any boundaries of space or time: they're universal. They breed wherever and whenever fears exist.

But I don't have to tell you this, since you're reading this special issue. I assume you're already a connoisseur. If not, when you're finished here, check out some of the other places and times mentioned above. Explore past, present, and future fear. Enjoy. And remember, don't look round, listen to the quickened beating of your heart and that other sound—the beat of black wings... •

BARRY HAMMOND has been an editor with *ON SPEC* since 1991. His novel, *Cold Front* (New American Library), was published in 1982, and his poetry collection, *moral kiosk* (Underpass Press), in 1986. Short fiction has appeared in *Horizons SF* and poetry in *Transversions*, *Printed Matter* and *The Plaza* (both from Japan), *ON SPEC*, *Barbed Lyres* (Key Porter anthology) and others.

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ON SPEC

is published quarterly through
the volunteer efforts of the
Copper Pig Writers' Society, a
nonprofit society. Editorial
address: The Editors, *ON SPEC*,
Box 4727, Edmonton, AB,
Canada, T6E 5G6. *ON SPEC* is
a member of, and is distributed
by, the Canadian Magazine
Publishers' Association.

PUBLISHER

Copper Pig Writers' Society

EDITORS

Barry Hammond
Jena Snyder
Diane L. Walton

ART DIRECTION

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

PRODUCTION EDITOR

Jena Snyder

ADMINISTRATION

Cath Jackel

COORDINATOR

Michelle Wilson

PUBLISHER'S ASSISTANTS

Chris Hammond-Thrasher
Josie Hammond-Thrasher

ON this Issue

CHANGES

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk,
ON SPEC Art Director

ON SPEC is now in its seventh year of publication. Over the years there have been many changes in the magazine: wider distribution, page increases, design changes and logo upgrades, easier to read column formats, and more. Amidst all this growing and changing, the strictest attention has always been paid to the look and feel of the magazine as well as the literary content.

We feel that change is positive if it enhances the quality of the product, and would therefore like to welcome three new additions to our magazine, two in art, and one in writing:

- *ON the Wall*: From time to time, we will be including a gallery section in the magazine entitled *ON the Wall*. This feature will showcase extensively one particular Canadian artist, giving our readers a better chance to explore in depth the enormous range of Canadian speculative art. This issue features the work of PETER FRANCIS, beginning on page 10.
- *ON the Edge*: We also welcome JOHN DAVIES to our pages. John has been a professional cartoonist for many years and has graciously agreed to do a panel for us each issue. John's cartoons are often hilarious, always brilliant, and definitely *ON the Edge* (page 92). This feature will replace *The Inner Mind* (so skillfully rendered by Tim Hammell for many issues). Tim's artistic commitments have made it necessary for him to discontinue *The Inner Mind*. We've all enjoyed his panel and look forward to his contributions to the magazine in other areas.
- Last, but certainly never least, ROBERT. J. SAWYER joins the pages of *ON SPEC* with his column, *ON Writing*. His first column, "Great Beginnings," can be found on page 28. Future columns will be devoted to such topics as world building; characterization in SF; keeping a Canadian identity when writing for an international marketplace; narrative techniques and point of view choices; and more.

We hope you enjoy these new features. 🍷

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"Cthulhu" ©1993 Peter Francis

ON the Wall

GALLERY FEATURE:

Peter Francis

Peter Francis lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with his wife Luisa, and an insane cat. At an early age, he began reading all sorts of supernatural fiction ranging from Victorian tales of terror to the cosmic horrors of Lovecraft. Around the same time, he was exposed to the works of Bosch, Dürer, and Dali, thus beginning his love for horrific/fantastic art.

Since then, he has been creating works of his own, primarily in pen and ink, but with the occasional foray into color. He particularly loves the effects that can be created with just black ink on white paper. Artists who influenced him most in this style are Berni Wrightson, Virgil Finlay, William Stout, and Ian Millar.

He has been displaying his work at conventions for over 10 years, winning many awards, including Best Amateur Black and White at the Boston Worldcon in 1989, and the Judges Choice Award at the Orlando Worldcon in 1992. Becoming Quarter Finalist in L. Ron Hubbard's Writers/Illustrators of the Future (Vol. VII) inspired him to submit work to magazines. Since then, he has contributed to several magazines, including ON SPEC, Tomorrow, The Scream Factory, Tekeli-li, and Into the Darkness.

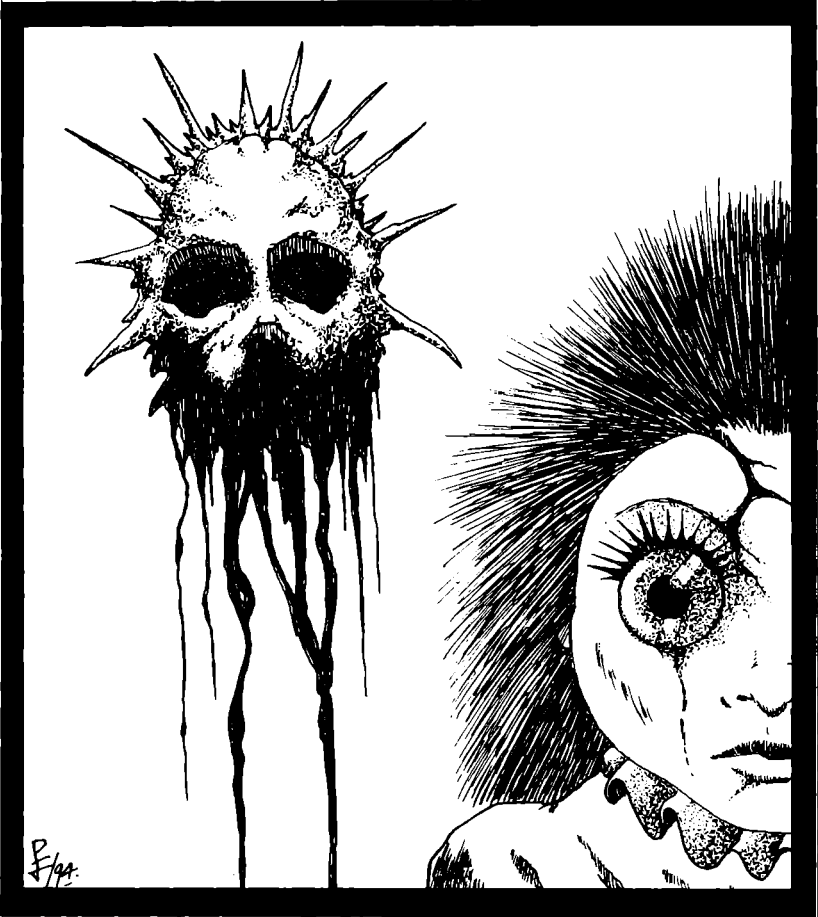
Currently, he is working on magazines, commissions, promo work, and preparing work for the World Horror Convention in Atlanta. •



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CHASTITY

Lyle Weis

...taking time to put on his work gloves, the same gloves she'd fixed by hand, and stalking towards her... "Because I don't like hurting you, baby, but when you do things like that...other guys... DON'T TELL ME I'M IMAGINING IT!!! Fuck you, bitch, I can SEE inside your head..."

"Will you try to relax?"

The words, spoken irritably, jerked Alice back to the present. Her friend Joan glared out over the steering wheel, then turned from the clogged traffic to look at Alice.

"Cars up ahead are starting to move," Joan added, her tone softening. "I know you're worried, but there's nothing we can do. Surely he'll understand that much."

Alice forced her hands, one gripping the door handle and the other digging its nails into the side of her bucket seat, to loosen. She folded them in her lap, fingers entwined.

The dashboard clock said 5:47. She was usually home from work by this time.

"Sorry." She stared into her lap.

"And don't apologize so much! He's got you—" Joan bit her words off. "I'm sorry. God, now I'm doing it to you."

The car in front pulled ahead, slowly, ever so slowly. Derek would be home, waiting, waiting, waiting. He'd be pacing, a beer in hand. Or sitting in the kitchen, staring at the door. Waiting. And when she walked in... Alice touched her cheekbone gently, the purple from the last one barely visible now.

"He's crazy, you see that, don't you?" Joan slammed the gearshift from first into second. "Jeez, what do you know? We're actually moving." The Honda lurched once, before rolling along at a walking pace.

"Leave him, Alice. He'll never change—except maybe to get worse. And someday, he's really going to hurt you."

Joan's balled fist stuck the dashboard. Alice recoiled from the sudden movement.

"It makes me so damned mad!" Joan said. "How many times have we gone over this? He's sick, and you're his prisoner." She sighed. "I give up. You'll never leave him."

Alice stared ahead for a moment. Her body ached, it was so tense, and her head felt tight. She would not say anything, she could not tell anyone. A secret, it had to be a sec—

"I am," she blurted. "I'm doing it. Tonight. Derek's driving tonight to work on a rig south of the city. He'll be gone almost a week, and by that time—"

Her mouth quivered, and she began to cry. Little girl tears, filled with exhaustion and fear.

Joan turned to look in amazement at her, taking her eyes off the road. A movement ahead pulled her eyes back again, and she jammed her foot down on the brake. The Honda nosedived to a halt only inches from the bumper in front of them.

"What? Tonight!" Joan swivelled her head back and forth from the road to Alice. "You serious?"

Alice nodded.

"Hey, that's great!" Joan reached out and squeezed her hand. Then, concern creased her forehead. "But, where will you go? You're welcome to stay with me, you know."

Alice shook her head violently. "He knows where you live. No, thanks. There's a women's shelter over on 85th Avenue. I'll stay there for a while."

And afterwards? She wondered. Derek always said he would find her if she ran from him. Her body trembled.

"Alice, I'm so glad. You won't be sorry." And the traffic, mercifully, was moving now, much more quickly.

Alice ran to the elevator, punched the buttons once inside. The sleeve of her outstretched arm fell back to reveal her wristwatch. 6:03. Hurry, she urged the elevator. Oh please God, hurry.

She could smell it as soon as she opened the door, and she stood, puzzled for a moment. Pizza. The aroma mingled crazily with the dry, metallic taste of fear in her mouth, making her stomach roll.

"Derek?"

He wasn't in the kitchen. She moved cautiously down the short hallway to the living room. "Honey?"

Faintly, the sound of the television. And now, she saw him. Derek, seated on the sofa in front of the tv, with a pizza box opened on the coffee table. Handsome, as always, his blond hair swept back off his forehead. Wearing denim, and an expression as blank as an empty road. Pale blue eyes staring at her now.

"Derek, honey, I'm sorry, there was an accident on the freeway, and we came as fast as we could, but—"

He patted a spot on the sofa beside him. Here. Sit down.

Heart pounding, she crossed the floor, and stood by him.

"Sit."

She sat. Her body clenched, tensing for the blow. She stared, unseeing, at the screen. Waiting.

His hand settled on her thigh. She flinched, ready to cry out.

"I know, baby, I know," he said in a neutral, but not unkind, tone. "I saw it all on the news." He pointed at the set, where a man was announcing football scores. "I knew you'd be late, and so I ordered something to eat."

He reached out, picked up a slice of pizza and took a bite. He chewed in

silence for a moment, then stopped.

"I don't know why you look so guilty, if you haven't done anything." He paused. "Who was the guy in the station wagon?" he asked suddenly.

"Station wagon?"

"Yeah, on the freeway. While you were stopped once, a guy in the next lane, in a station wagon. What'd he say to you?"

"There wasn't anybody in a—" She saw the look in his eyes, and stopped herself. *I know everything*, he told her often enough. *Never lie to me, because I'll know. I can see it in your face.*

Don't even suggest he's wrong. Worse, don't even look guilty. He'll see you packing your suitcase in your eyes, he'll know tonight is... Stop. Stop right now. Don't even think about anything.

He turned away. In a moment he told her to eat. While she nibbled a piece he turned and kissed her. As he did so, his hand slipped between her legs, up to her crotch. Testing, as he always did after she came back from being out. To see if she was dry.

After they had finished eating, he reached out and turned off the television. The apartment was dead quiet, save for the humming of the fridge. Standing, he took her by the hand and led her into the bedroom. Wordlessly, he unbuttoned her dress, pulled it over her head. His movements, as he jerked down her panties and nylons, and twisted loose her bra snap, became quicker, rougher.

When she was naked, he pushed her down on the bed. She lay rigid as he took a deep breath and then turned to the night table beside the bed.

"Derek—" she began to plead.

He held the leather thongs up, untangling them. Swiftly, he tied one of her ankles to the foot of the bed, then the other. He repeated the operation with her wrists. She moaned.

One last time. Just one last time, so don't say anything. Just close your eyes and let him do it. One last time.

"You want it, don't you?" He was standing again, looking down on her. He was still fully clothed.

"Yes. Please." She forced her mouth into a smile, and twisted her hips as best she could.

"So," he bent even closer, hovering over her, "you gonna miss me? I'll be away for days. What're you going to do while I'm gone? Ball that kid at the next desk?"

She froze. Her mouth could not even form words. A part of her flew to the bank, to the desks behind the tellers' cages. What kid?

"I was there today," he continued. "I drove out to the bank. I stood outside and watched through that big window. The tall kid, the one with the desk next to yours, he was practically hanging over you all day."

His hand flicked out, struck her cheek. "You think I don't know what's going on between you two?"

"Derek, no, I—"

He leaped onto the bed, straddling her. With his open hand, he whipped her face, once, twice. Three times.

She gasped, but didn't cry out. She steeled herself against more blows: *The last time*. She could taste blood inside her mouth.

Panting from the exertion, he rested on his hands, bringing his face close to hers. His eyes were wide, excited. She read loathing there.

"You bitch. I'm working my ass off

in the boonies, and you figure you'll go out and hump that skinny bastard from the bank, hunh? Isn't that right? Think I'm some kinda moron, don't you?"

As he snarled the words at her, spittle flew into her face. His hands closed over her neck, squeezed then released. He stared at her, then dismounted and sat on the edge of the bed. He breathed in sobs.

"Derek. Derek, please, untie me, let me up."

He gave no sign he'd heard her.

"I'm sorry I upset you. Please untie the straps." Anything. Say anything. He'll kiss, make up. And go. "Please."

He turned around to her. Shaking his head, he whispered, "No. You're lying. You're not telling me everything. I've warned you about this before."

Abruptly, he stood. "I should kill you," he said simply.

Her skin chilled immediately.

"I should kill you, but I won't." He stared at her intently. "We need each other. It's just that you're bad. You al-

ways have been, and you always will be. You can't be trusted."

He walked from the room, went to the next, smaller bedroom next door. It was the room they used for storage and she had her sewing things set up there. She could hear him rummaging around in the room, overturning things. Her lip began to puff and throb.

When he entered the room again, he held something in his hand.

"You're just like a little girl. I can't trust you, I can't watch you while I'm gone. I want to make it easier for both of us."

He approached the bed. By the light of the bedside table, she could see the object in his hand. A long, thick darned needle, and some thread. The strong black thread she used to repair his work gloves.

Suddenly, she knew. And managed only part of a scream before he stuffed a corner of the sheet into her mouth.

He began to thread the needle. •

LYLE WEIS, a refugee from various classrooms and boardrooms, now makes his living as a freelance writer and speaker. His name appears on three published books of fiction and one of poetry. Edmonton, Alberta, is his home.

Exhumed Magazine

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One year subscription (4 issues) costs \$15 Can., \$17 U.S.

Please include SASE for info responses and for guidelines.

P.O. Box 924, Kingston, ON, K7L 4X8, Canada

Fidonet: 1:249/99.7 Internet: exhumed.magazine@kosone.com

NIGHT MUSIC

Eileen Kernaghan

The elevator plunges into the depths of nightside. The floor signs flip past—level beneath level of offices, apartment blocks, service areas, hydroponics plants. The guard shifts his weight, pressing his hand into the small of his back and arching his spine around it. He's an old man—eighty, ninety?—gaunt and sour-faced. A livid radiation tumor covers part of his jawbone, creeping towards his throat.

Mall level. Arcades, boutiques, amusement palaces; the green fluorescent glow of hothouse parks. This is where you get off.

A woman sits by the fountain just outside the elevator, watching the shift and play of lights in the tinted water. She is dressed in black. Her lips and eyelids and long artificial nails are sprayed with silver glitter; her face is a pale, perfect oval under elaborately puffed and lacquered hair. One hand grasps the leash of a mutant albino dog: a grotesque, red-eyed, impossibly attenuated creature, its hairless skin covered with pale spongy excrescences. They breed them dayside, where the ozone-starved sunlight twists the genes into phantasmagoric shapes.

A bland psyche-music oozes like whipped cream from hidden speakers. It's almost midnight. The corridors are filled with night-workers on their way to stores and offices. In this fashionable section of the Mall they all look young, well-dressed, self-confident. They window-shop, buy coffee-flavored drinks and exotic pastries. In half an hour the tide will turn, as the afternoon shift surges out of the elevators.

You mingle with the crowd, glancing in the windows of boutiques where mannequins posture in mock-furs, designer plastic dresses, astonishing paper wigs. The designs—brilliant in conception, shoddy in execution—are too bizarre for dayside tastes.

This is not what you came for. You drift away from the crowd, away from the bland fashionable core into the dim sidestreets where the real nightworld begins:

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where the speakers blast out psychesounds like a scraping and clawing at raw nerve-ends—music from the dark side of the soul.

You find your way to a street lined with clubs and bars, cybersex parlors, dingy shops selling hardcore holoporn. Nothing here belongs to its own time. The club across the street is early hi-tek, Vancouver circa 2000; this one is seedy mid-twentieth century. This section of the Mall has defied successive waves of redevelopment; inevitably, its true nature reasserts itself, as layers of paint and plastic peel away from the expensive period facades.

You choose the 1950s, and find yourself in a depressing barnlike room, uncarpeted, noisy, littered with small round tables covered in cheap red toweling.

In the murky light your hip brushes against one of the tables; it wobbles dangerously on its pedestal. "Sorry," you tell the vague female shape sitting with its back against the grimy wall.

The voice that answers is low-pitched and musical. "It's quite all right."

As your eyes adjust to the gloom you can see that she is strikingly attractive, in that languid hothouse fashion nightside women cultivate. She has long black hair, worn loose and straight, and the wax-smooth skin of the hereditary night-worker. Against her dark hair and the black fabric of her dress, her pallor is startling.

"Sit down," she says, and you pull up one of the rickety ice-cream parlor chairs.

She asks the usual question—"Are you from dayside?"—and you nod.

Coolly she assesses your haircut,

your wrist-computer, your carefully chosen suit. "What kind of work do you do?"

"Import-export," you tell her. "Housewares. Designer fabrics. Holoporn. And you?"

She laughs. "The same. I have a little shop. I sell expensive trash."

You make the usual noises about chance meetings, the workings of coincidence. Then—less expectedly—she says, "Do you ever go outside? I mean really outside—past the sunshields?"

"I did once. That was enough."

"What it was like?" Her curiosity seems genuine.

"Empty. Dry. A lot of wind and blowing dust. There are some trees, still, but they don't look much like the trees in holoparks. The shapes are wrong—like those weird animals they breed for pet shops." You're imagining, as you speak, what an hour outside could do to that white camellia skin, those huge light-absorbing pupils.

The place is getting noisier. She leans forward to make herself heard. "When I get tired of the Mall I go down, right to the bottom level."

"What's down there?" You've never thought about it—never realized there was anything beneath Mall Level but a labyrinth of service ducts and storage depots.

"That's where they have the mushroom farms. These." She pokes her fork at the plate by her elbow. She's been eating tempura. "*Pleurotus*—thirty percent protein, very nourishing. Haven't you noticed? Everything we eat down here has mushrooms in it." She smiles. Her teeth are small, milk-white, perfect. "I like to look at the growing

rooms. Hectare upon hectare of little white fans, like shells on a holograph beach. All our organic waste gets powdered up and sterilized to feed the mushrooms. It's a perfect, unbroken circle."

Restless, you drum your fingers on the tabletop. This conversation is leading nowhere. Then you notice the music-box set into the wall behind her head. You say, half-seriously, "Shall we see what kind of music we can make together?"

She gives you the look that this tired gambit deserves. "And suppose we don't harmonize?"

You shrug. What does it matter? The Mall is for casual encounters, one-night affairs, spiced with a flavor of the exotic and subtly perverse and ever-so-slightly dangerous. A chance to explore smooth, white, unblemished skin and unfamiliar, unpredictable flesh. Diurnals and nocturnals don't marry, seldom interbreed. Is it only because their circadian rhythms are different? Or is it because there is always that small taint of prejudice too deeply ingrained, too instinctive to be silenced—the small voice that whispers, "Day rules, and night must serve."

"Anyway," she says, "this is the wrong place. Let's get out of here." She is on her feet before you have a chance to argue.

As you come out into the neon-lit arcade you see that her dress is real silk velvet—the kind you only find in expensive vintage shops. The fabric is crushed and water-marked, rusty-looking, with shiny patches under the arms; but still, in this light, as sleek and rich as the coat of a plush-haired cat.

A man in a business suit ap-

proaches along a narrow passageway joining two arcades. He could be a banker, an accountant, a computer tech. You carefully avoid one another's eyes. Nightside, one maintains a strict anonymity.

The country was a long time dragging itself up out of the slough of the Great Recession. Now the only gods it worships are production, efficiency, full employment. Its offices and factories never close; the conveyor belts roll day and night, the wheels of commerce perpetually revolve. The human metabolism was never designed to handle swing-shifts; but now that your shifts are assigned to you for life, and for the lives of your descendants, your bio-rhythms are in perfect tune, your circadian clocks run smoothly.

And yet, as this woman strolls beside you, cat-sleek and mysterious in her shabby velvet, you know that your guilty fascination with the night is too deep in the genes to be erased.

The club she chooses is tiny, low-ceilinged, frowzy with gilt tassels and dusty purple hangings—neglected *fin de siècle* elegance. The light is hazy and faintly pinkish-colored. As you enter, the steward greets the woman by name. Selena, he calls her. It has not occurred to you to ask.

She orders drinks—cloying fruit flavors that mask the raw bite of ethyl alcohol.

At the next table a woman is stroking a large white cat. Subdued, it curls in her lap and allows her to attach a music-box electrode to a shaved patch behind its ears. Presently a kind of feline psyche-music curls out into the room: languorous, self-absorbed, complacent. Then someone drops a wine-

glass. There is concrete under the carpet, the glass shatters, and the music shatters with it—disintegrating into a thousand ice-brittle shards of sound, as warning impulses quiver along the hair-fine filigree of nerves.

“She has no imagination,” Selena says. “Always it’s cats, dogs, little warm-blooded animals. They’re too predictable—too much attuned to human beings. One tires of it.” She sips her cherry-colored drink, adds thoughtfully, “A jaguar might be interesting. Or a cheetah. Once,” she tells you, “a man brought in a python. It made the coldest, most remote, most utterly alien sounds I’ve ever heard.”

Selena leans forward. Her hair slips across her cheeks like watered silk. “Would you like to see my shop? It’s not far from here.”

She leads you through back lanes, blind alleys, passageways, into a large square courtyard. It’s ringed with art galleries, antique shops, stores full of old books—or more likely reproductions of old books—with faded gilt and leather spines. “The Mews,” says the sign at the entrance. There are carriage-lamps, a great deal of ersatz brick and stone; a gaslit mid-Victorian ambiance.

“Here’s my shop,” Selena says. Beside the door, a hand-painted sign swings from a wrought-iron stand. “*Fleurs du mal*,” it says, in *art nouveau* lettering.

Inside is an incredible jumble of *objets d’art*, regalia, paraphernalia. Selena closes the door behind you.

The walls are covered with old-fashioned pictures in crumbling gesso frames, hung randomly among plastic-sandwiched modern prints. Some of work you recognize: Bosch, Munch,

Francis Bacon, the nightmare visions of Ludwig Meidner and Alfred Kubin. There are a few holographs—not many. In one, you see a pair of hideously mutated figures, scarcely recognizable as human. They are locked, like flies in amber, in bizarre conjunction.

There are stacks of books with garish paper covers—reprints of works by half-forgotten authors: De Sade, Poe, Huysmans, Lovecraft, Wilde, Petronius Arbiter. You riffle through them, fascinated.

In a corner you stumble on an antique record-player, and a pile of large flat plastic discs in faded cardboard envelopes. The selection, like everything else in Selena’s shop, is idiosyncratic—Scriabin, Messiaen, Peter Maxwell Davies; and that mad soldier-musician of the Second Grain War, August Theroux.

It takes you a moment to realize that there is a pattern, a theme, a marrow thread of logic that runs through this arcane and apparently haphazard collection. What Selena has created is a kind of museum of the night side, a grandly eclectic exhibition of the gothic and grotesque, of art that dances on the razor edge of madness. Here—gleaned from who knows what storerooms, junk shops, estate sales, recycling centres—are a thousand inventions of the overwrought imagination, works of exquisite evil and elegant despair.

“Now you must see my garden,” Selena says, and she leads you through narrow cluttered aisles into another dim low-ceilinged room. You can hear the quiet hum of a humidifier; the air smells rancid, moldering. The walls are lined with shelves. In growing-trays on these

shelves, bedded in cellulose fiber, displayed like rare orchids or Chinese jade, is Selena's fungus-garden.

Selena points out her special treasures: coral fungi, rose-tipped and many-branched; grotesquely convoluted false morels; *Cantherellus multiplex*—masses of densely clustered fans and cones, like a bouquet of purple flowers. ("It's very rare," Selena says, with a hint of vanity.) Drifts of tiny psilocybes; and dead branches covered with crisp delicate shell-clusters of *Trogia*.

"*Fleurs du mal*," you say; but Selena shakes her head, and you feel, somehow, that you have disappointed her.

"For beauty to spring out of death, decay—there's nothing evil in that," she tells you. "That's the simple nature of existence—the wheel of life and death."

Her face, in the halflit room, has an almost luminous pallor. She is like one of her ghost-flowers, flourishing in light's absence, drawing its sustenance from decay. It occurs to you that they are all parasites, these night-dwellers. So many of them are poets, artists, psyche-musicians, entertainers—sustained by the efforts of others, producing nothing more useful than a brief illusion of beauty.

Selena invites you into her living room. It's almost as cluttered as the shop with pictures, books, pieces of sculpture, curios. But it is a beautiful room all the same, full of polished wood surfaces, rich dark fabrics and old-fashioned upholstered furniture. On the floor is a glowing, jewel-colored Indian rug.

Selena opens a lacquered Chinese

cabinet, brings out a wine decanter—a delicate elongated bubble of glass. As she holds it up to the lamplight the liquor inside glows crimson, like the heart of a blood-red flower. She fills two slender long-stemmed glasses. Leaf tendrils like attenuated fingers cup the flawless bowls.

The wine has a rich, dark, flowery bouquet. It reminds you of some heavy antique fabric—brocade, or tapestry. Damascene, you think, the word drifting up out of some remote corner of your mind.

"It's a claret," Selena tells you. She is watching you closely beneath her long mauve-colored lids. "I've only the one bottle left, and I've been saving it for the right occasion." Now, from somewhere under that rich compost of objects, she produces a music-box.

She has chosen the moment with finesse. You are relaxed, content, in this warm airless room smelling of dust, incense, old books, old wood. The claret-fumes curl gently into the recesses of your mind.

You perform the small ritual of attaching the electrodes. Your nerve-impulses flow through the electronic circuitry, are ordered, rationalized and synthesized—in some mysterious way transmuted into music.

You have played these courting duets with other women. Sometimes there is a fleeting, accidental-seeming harmony, a bar or two of tentative melody that makes a relationship seem worth pursuing. But more often what emerges from the box is atonal, dissonant, a joyless, tuneless noise. At best there is a raw communication of excitement, lust, like a sudden jolt of electricity.

But Selena—you realize this with the first slow, sweet opening chords—Selena is an artist. The input is skilled, controlled, the output a finished, fully-realized composition, a concert-piece. Whatever formless emotions, what lightning flashes of anguish, despair, delight may flicker at the nerve-roots, when it reaches the surface all is shaped, orchestrated, made subtle and melodic.

You give Selena a single note—a thought, a fleeting impulse—and she gives you back a chord, a complex harmony, a glittering arpeggio; effortlessly improvising melodic line and counterpoint. Flutes soar like bright birds over cool green forests of cellos; a lute plays, an arras of sound, pearls suspended in a net of silence. Bright showers of harp-notes tease and beckon. She leads you up and up to dizzy heights at the high end of the scale, to impossible precipices; and leaps with you into the blue dazzle of the upper air.

Selena's long hand reaches out and switches off the box.

"Yes," she says with quiet satisfaction. "We harmonize well." She sighs, and stretches like a cat. "Now I want to show you something.

"Of all the things in this shop, only this has any real value. The rest are curiosities, reproductions—interesting trash." She holds out a tiny antique box. It looks old—nineteenth, early twentieth century; it might once have been a pill-case, or a snuff-box. She flips it open with a damson-colored fingernail; inside it is lined with black velvet, like the stuff of her dress. Nestled into the fabric, like a jewel, is a single music-disc.

She tips it out into her palm, slides it into the machine. A lush, deep-timbered psyche-music insinuates itself into the room: music of moonlight, torchlight, mysterious midnight gardens. And against the rich, strange setting of the music, a sweet, husky voice—Selena's voice—speaks lines of antique poetry:

*Endlessly at my side the Demon
writhes.*

*He swims around me like impalpable
air.*

*I breathe him and he burns my
lungs like fever.*

*Filling me with eternal guilt,
eternal desire.*

The music abruptly changes, takes on an hallucinatory quality, the melody dissolving in a succession of weird, nerve-jangling dissonances. This is a music of drugged, skewed perceptions, of a mind drifting into the hinterlands of madness. The hair on your nape lifts. "Turn it off," you tell Selena.

She flips the switch, and looks at you with a kind of perverse delight. "You'd be amazed how much money I can ask for one of those discs. Down here they know my work, they recognize my artistry. But I can see you're not impressed... Never mind. Have some claret." She refills your glass. "And then we'll make some more music. Together."

You are beginning to feel a nervous excitement, a quick tingling along the synapses. You can remember drinking very little, but clearly, you are getting drunk. Selena smiles indulgently as you begin to slur your words, and the logic of what you are saying slips away

from you. You hardly notice when she switches on the music-box.

This time you are more confident. You offer her a theme, she dazzles you with variations. She weaves a delicate contrapuntal lace around your tentative melodies. Together you begin to build a small, adroitly balanced chamber-music.

But gradually the music loses its tension, its precision. Something is wrong, something is changing. The colors of the room, the rich brown of polished woods, the jewel-colors of cushions and hangings, the deep red of the wine in the decanter, the white oval of Selena's face—they are shifting, running together into a rainbow shimmer, like oil on water.

The room stops whirling for a moment. You cannot move—you are caught in the grip of an inexplicable paralysis—but for an instant everything has become preternaturally vivid and sharp-edged.

You notice how cloudy the wine looks in the bottom of your glass. You think, some of the dregs must have found their way into the decanter. Speaking with difficulty, you point this

out to Selena.

"Not wine-dregs," she contradicts you gently. "*Amanita pantherina*. A fatal dose."

The drug whirls you out into a storm-wracked neural sea. There are visions: a face that is all screaming mouth, primordial anguish, expands to monstrous size and threatens to engulf you. Snakes creep down from the walls, become a writhing Medusa-wig that frames Selena's gently smiling face. The music-box has a bat's jaws, fanged and hideous; you feel it sucking the marrow from your soul.

You hear no more music, only the lines of poetry that Selena has chosen to read, for this latest and perhaps most gothic of her compositions:

*Darkling I listen; and, for many
a time*

*I have been half in love with
easeful Death...*

The music-box is set to record, and Selena has switched off the monitor. You cannot hear the fading music your soul makes, as the black waves wash it out to sea. •

EILEEN KERNAGHAN lives in New Westminster, BC. Her latest book is *Dance of the Snow Dragon* (Thistle-down Press, April 1995), a young adult fantasy with a Tibetan Buddhist background.

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ON Writing:

GREAT BEGINNINGS

Robert J. Sawyer

BOO!

Scared you, didn't I? But I also got you to read on to this second sentence. So, even though it was only four characters long, that first line did its job: it served as a hook to bring you into this piece of writing. In that sense, it was a great beginning—and "great beginnings" are the topic of this, the first installment of the "On Writing" column that I will be contributing to each issue of ON SPEC.

A Canadian horror writer I know said something very intriguing recently: he was looking forward to the day when he was well known, so that he wouldn't have to start off with a grabby first sentence. He wanted to be able to begin subtly, with the reader trusting that the story would be worth his or her time just on the strength of the author's name.

But even the lions of literature still go for the snappy start. Consider this opening line from Robertson Davies' *Murder & Walking Spirits*: "I was never so amazed in my life as when the Sniffer drew his concealed weapon from its case and struck me to the ground, stone dead."

In a short story, you really do have to hook the audience with the very first sentence. With a novel, you probably have the luxury of using an entire paragraph to snare the reader. But no matter which one you're writing, there are only four major ways to start your tale.

First, there's evocative description. In some ways, this is the hardest, because *nothing is happening*. And yet, if you do it well, the reader will not be able to resist continuing: "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (William Gibson's *Neuromancer*); "Halifax Harbor at night is a

beautiful sight, and June often finds the MacDonald Bridge lined with lovers and other appreciators. But in Halifax even June can turn on one with icy claws" (Spider Robinson's *Mindkiller*). Note what these two examples have in common: beautiful use of the language. If you are going to start off with static description, then you must dazzle with your imagery or poetry.

A second approach is to start by introducing an intriguing character: "Mrs. Sloan had only three fingers on her left hand, but when she drummed them against the countertop, the tiny polished bones at the end of the fourth and fifth stumps clattered like fingernails" ("The Sloan Men" by David Nickle, in *Northern Frights 2*, edited by Don Hutchison); "My name is Robinette Broadhead, in spite of which I am male" (*Gateway* by Frederik Pohl). The reader immediately wants to know more about Mrs. Sloan and Robinette, and so forges ahead.

The third—and trickiest—approach is to start off with a news clipping, or journal entry, or something else that isn't actually the main narrative of the story. It can be done effectively: the horror novels *Carrie* by Stephen King and *The Night Stalker* by Jeff Rice begin just this way. Be careful of this technique: you might think that by using such a device to tell the reader that the following story is significant, you'll be forgiven for an otherwise slow start. But *Carrie* immediately goes into its famous gym-class shower scene, and *The Night Stalker* launches right into the first of the vampire murders. Really, this kind of beginning just postpones the inevitable—you'll have

to follow up your news clipping, or whatever, with one of the other four classic narrative-hook techniques.

The fourth, and most versatile way, is to start off in the middle of the action. Sometimes a single sentence is all it takes: "Because he thought that he would have problems taking the child over the border into Canada, he drove south, skirting the cities whenever they came and taking the anonymous free-ways which were like a separate country" (Peter Straub's *Ghost Story*). All the explanation can come later—for a hook, all you need to know is that someone is on the run. Immediately, you began asking questions: Who is running? What's he running from? Is it his child, or has he kidnapped one? And suddenly you're reading along, wanting to know the answers.

Another example: "The Dracon's three-fingered hands flexed. In the thing's yellow eyes I could read the desire to either have those fingers around a weapon or my throat" (Barry B. Longyear's Hugo-winning novella "Enemy Mine"). We want to dig in and find out what a Dracon is and how the narrator ended up in a life-or-death confrontation with it.

A variation on starting in the middle is leading off with dialog: "Eddie wants to see you." / "What's he want?" Nita asked. "Another blowjob?" (Charles de Lint's "In this Soul of a Woman," from *Love in Vein* edited by Poppy Z. Brite). People love overhearing other people's fascinating conversations, and you can snare them easily as long as your characters are saying interesting things.

But if you're going to start some-

where other than the natural beginning of the tale, you have to choose carefully.

I often take an exciting scene from near the end, move it to the beginning, and then tell most of the rest of the tale as a flashback leading up to that scene. An extreme example is my novel *The Terminal Experiment*, which starts out with a female police detective dying in hospital. The scene in which she is fatally wounded doesn't occur until

ninety percent of the way through the book.

Whatever you choose, give it a lot of thought. Most people I know try to write the beginnings of their stories first. Although that seems sensible, I suggest you wait until you've got everything else finished—then work out the best possible start. It really is the most important element of your story—because it's the part that determines whether the rest gets read at all. •

Toronto's ROBERT J. SAWYER has won two Aurora Awards and the Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis Award. His sixth novel just completed serialization in *Analog* as *Hobson's Choice*, and will be out in April from HarperPrism under the title *The Terminal Experiment*.



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FRACTALS

OR: REAGAN ASSURED GORBACHEV OF HELP AGAINST SPACE ALIENS

Peter Watts

*Trespassing? **Trespassing?** You arrogant slant-eyed alien motherfucker,
I used to **live** here!*

How long have I wanted to do that? How many years have I hated them, dreamt that my fists were smashing those faces into shapes even less human? I can't remember. The anger is chronic. The anger has always been chronic. And impotent, until now. The pain in my knuckles throbs like a distant badge of honor.

It's cold.

My rage is gone; absorbed somehow by the mud and the unlit piles of lumber and masonry scattered around me. I can barely focus on my surroundings. The shapes keep changing, hulking angular monstrosities shifting on all sides. Only the sign at the front of the lot, the sign he kept pointing at, stands firm.

I can barely see him in the dark. He's just a few meters away, but the shadows are so black and he doesn't move at all. What if I killed him? What if I—

There. He moved a bit. It's okay, I didn't kill him, he's not dead—

Yet. What if he dies here in the mud?

(So what if he does? Lots more where he came from.)

No. I don't mean that. I can't believe I ever did, I mean, what if I, what if he dies here, what if—

What if he lives, and identifies me?

A couple of steps forward. A couple more. Okay, this is about where he was when he saw me, and then he moved over here and started shouting—

He couldn't have seen my face. Even when he came closer, it's so *black* here he'd only see a silhouette, and then he was right in front of me and—

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I can get away. I can get away. Oh Jesus God I can't believe I did this—

Okay. This is a construction site, after all; my car will only leave one set of tracks in a muddle of hundreds. He couldn't have noticed it from the direction he came. And the nearest house is over a block away, this whole end of the road is unlit. Lucky me: no witnesses.

The car starts smoothly, without a moment's hesitation. Nothing like the movies at all.

I descend toward the city.

It was as though I had planned it all, somehow. In a way I feel as though I've been rehearsing this forever. I have been purged. It's such a relief not to burn, to unclench my teeth, to feel the hard knot of tension in my stomach easing away. Somehow, I'm free. Not happy, perhaps. But I have acted, at last, from the heart, and in some strange way I'm finally at peace.

(What if he dies up there?)

I'll stop at the next phone booth. Ambulances respond to anonymous tips, don't they? In the meantime, I've got to be careful to keep my shoes on the mudmat. Just in case. Joanne might still be awake when I get home. I'll stop off at a gas station and rinse everything clean on the way.

It's a nice window; nice scenery. I've always liked forests, though I've never seen so many squirrels and deer and birds crammed into such a small area before. But hey, who am I to complain about realism; I'm twenty floors over Robson Street looking at a rainforest so why worry about details? Besides, it's not a rainforest any more. It's an alpine meadow. She touches a

button on the windowsill and the whole world changes.

I walk across the room; rocks and heather come into view, cross the window, fall into eclipse at the other side. I move closer and the field of view expands. Nose against glass I can see one hundred and eighty, three-dimensional degrees along all axes. Just outside, an explosion of flowers stirs in a sudden breeze.

But now she fingers a switch and the world stops, there's no window at all any more, just a flat grey screen and a fake window sill.

"That's incredible," I say, distantly amazed.

She can't quite keep the pride out of her voice. "It's a breakthrough all right. There are other flat monitors around, but you can see the difference."

"How do you do it? Is this some sort of 3-D videotape or something?"

Her smile widens. "Not even close. We use fractals."

"Fractals."

"You know, those psychedelic patterns you see on calendars and computer posters."

Right. Something to do with chaos, if I remember. "But what exactly are—"

She laughs. "Actually, I just demonstrate the stuff. We got a guy at the university to hack the software for us, he'd be able to tell you about that sort of thing. If you think your readers would be interested."

"I'm interested. If I can't get them interested too, I'm not much of a journalist, am I?"

"Well then, let me give you his name," she says. "I'll tell him to expect

you. He should be able to set something up within the next week or so."

She jots something on the back of her card and hands it to me. Roy Cheung, it says. I feel a sudden brief constriction in my throat.

"One last question," I say to her. "Who's going to be able to afford something like this?"

"Bottom-line models will retail at around thirty thousand," she tells me. "A lot of businesses want to hang one in their lobbies and so forth. And we also hope to sell to upper income individuals."

"If you can find any nowadays."

"You'd be surprised, actually. Since the Hong Kong influx started there's been a real surge in the number of people who could afford this sort of product."

You poor dear. You haven't done your market research, have you? Or you'd know exactly what your wealthy clientele think of nature. It's abstract art to them. There probably isn't a blade of grass left in all of Hong Kong. Most of those people wouldn't know what a tree was if one grew through their penthouse windows and spat oxygen all over the walls.

No matter. In another few years, neither will we.

"Emergency Admissions."

"Uh, yes. I was wondering if you've had—if there was an assault victim admitted over the past day or so."

"I'm sorry sir, you'll have to be more specific. Assault victim?"

"Yes, um, has someone been admitted suffering head injuries, an oriental—"

"Why?" The voice acquires a sudden sharp edge. "Do you know something about an unreported assault?"

"Uh—" Hang up, you idiot! This isn't getting you anywhere!

"Actually, it must have been reported, they were loading him into an ambulance. He looked pretty bad, I was just wondering how he was doing."

Yeah. Right. Very credible.

"I see. And where did this happen?"

"North Van. Up around, um, Cumberland I think."

"And I don't suppose you know the name of the victim?"

"Uh no, like I said I just saw them taking him away, I was just wondering—"

"That's very...kind of you, sir," her words say. "But we're not allowed to disclose such information except to family—"

Jesus Christ, woman, I just want to find out how he's doing, I'm not interested in stealing national secrets for Chrissake! "I understand that, but—"

"And in any event, nobody answering your description has been admitted to this hospital. Cumberland, you said?"

Maybe they're tracing the call. It would make sense, maybe they've got a standing trace on emergency hospital lines, I bet a lot of people do what I'm doing, I bet—

"Sir? You said Cumberland?"

I disconnect.

Joanne stirs as I slip into the darkened bedroom. "Anything interesting on the news?"

"Not really." No reports of

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unknown assailants on the north shore, anyway. That's probably just as well. Wouldn't a dead body at least warrant mention?

I feel my way to the bed and climb in. "Oh, The Musqueam Indians are planning this massive demonstration over land claims. Roadblocks and everything." I mold myself against Joanne's back.

"They must hate our guts," I say into her nape.

She turns around to face me. "Who? The Musqueam?"

"They must. I would."

She makes a wry sound. "No offense, lover, but I'd be very worried if too many other people thought the way you did."

I've learned to take such remarks as compliments, although that's almost never the way she means them. "Well, if getting home and culture stolen out from under you isn't grounds for hatred, I don't know what is." I hold back a moment, decide to risk it. "I wonder if that makes them racists."

"Ooh. Shame on you." She wags a finger that I can barely make out in the darkness. "Victims of racism can't possibly be *guilty* of racism. Why, you'd have to be a racist to even suggest such a thing. Excuse me while I call the Rights Police." Instead, she kisses me. "Actually, I'm too tired. I'll let you off with a warning. G'night." She settles down with her back to me.

But I don't want to sleep, not yet. There are things I have to say aloud, things I can't even think about without invoking some subtle, chronic dread. I don't like keeping things from Joanne. Three days now and the silence spreads through me like gangrene.

But I can't tell her. It could ruin everything. How much am I supposed to gamble on the hope she'd grant absolution?

"I saw some graffiti today on Denman," I try aloud. "It said *White man out of Vancouver. Canada now for Asian Peoples.*"

Her back moves in a gentle respiratory rhythm. She mumbles something into her pillow.

I ask: "What did you say?"

"I said, there's assholes on all sides. Go to sleep."

"Maybe it's true."

She groans, defeated: if she wants any sleep tonight she'll have to hear me out. "What's true?" she sighs.

"Maybe there isn't room for all of us. I was on the bus today, it was full of all these Chinese and I couldn't understand what any of them were saying—"

"Don't sweat it. They probably weren't talking to you."

No, I want to say, they don't have to. We don't matter to them. Our quaint values and esthetics can be bought as easily as the North Shore. Don't I have a right to be afraid of that? Can't we fear for our own way of life without being racist? Aren't we even allowed to—

—*beat the fuckers to death with our bare hands*—

There's something else here.

It's lying in the dark between us and it's invisible, Joanne could roll over right now and she wouldn't see it any more than I can, but somehow I know it's looking right at me and *grinning*...

Joanne sits up without a word. It's as though my own inadvertent thoughts have triggered her. She turns to look at

me, she leans right through the thing between us without even pausing, her face breaks through that invisible grin and replaces it with one of her own.

"If you wasn't livin' with a black woman," she says in her best Aunt Jemima drawl, "I'd say you was sho' 'nuff a racist honky sumbitch." She nips me on the nose. "As it is, I think you just need a good night's sleep." She settles back down with one arm draped over my chest.

We're alone again. In the next room, Sean coughs softly in her sleep.

My knuckles sting with faint remembrance.

I wonder if he had a family.

Whoever you were. I'm—

—sorry—

It's almost time to meet Roy Cheung. For two hours now I've been wandering downtown streets, watching morning traffic congeal in thin slushy snow. I've been counting invaders. They hurry past the rest of us, mixed but not mixing, heads down against the chill of this alien climate. Sometimes they speak to each other. Sometimes they even use our language. More often they say nothing at all.

They never look at me.

I didn't always feel this way. I'm almost sure of it. There was a time when we were all just people, and I knew exactly what racism looked like: it drove a Ford pickup with a gun rack in the rear window. It threw beer bottles out the window at stop signs, and it didn't think; it gibbered.

But now statistics and xenophobia are in bed together. Every day the planes touch down and the balance shifts a little more. Asian wealth rises

around us, flashing invisibly bank-to-bank, ricocheting down from comsats high over the Pacific rim. Burying us. Who wouldn't be afraid? My whole world is listing to the east.

But nobody taught me to hate like this. It just happened.

Is this what it's like to discover you're a werewolf?

There's a poster commemorating the 1993 International Computer Graphics Conference hanging on one wall of Roy Cheung's office. Below it, a transistor radio emits country and western; it's partially eclipsed by a huge, luxuriant Boston fern in a hanging pot. I wonder how he does it. Every time I buy one of those bloody plants it's dead within a week.

His desk is barely visible under a mass of printouts and the biggest color monitor I've ever seen. There is a spiral galaxy rotating on the screen. It seems to be made of iridescent soap bubbles, each arranged with unimaginable precision.

"That," says Cheung, "is a fractal. Beautiful, isn't it?"

He speaks without a trace of accent. He sounds just like I do.

Cheung sits down at the keyboard. "Watch closely. I'm increasing the magnification so we're only looking at one of these nodes. One star in the galaxy, if you will."

The image blurs, then refocuses. There is a spiral galaxy rotating on the screen.

"That's the same image," I say.

"Not quite. There are a number of differences, but overall it's pretty similar. Except, like I said, we're only looking at one star in the galaxy."

"But that's a whole—"

"Now let's zoom in on a single star in *this* galaxy."

There is a spiral galaxy rotating on the screen.

Something clicks. "Isn't this what you call infinite regression?"

He nods. "Actually, the term is *scale-invariance*. You can look at this thing with a microscope or a telescope, it doesn't matter; at every scale, the pattern is essentially the same."

"So at what scale do we get nature scenes?" There isn't the slightest hint of tension in my voice. I even smile.

"All of them. This fractal comes from a very simple equation; the trick is it keeps repeating itself. Uses the output from one iteration as the input for the next. You don't have to store a complete image at all. You just store a few equations and let the computer draw the picture step-by-step. You get incredibly detailed output with hardly any memory cost."

"You're saying you can duplicate nature on a screen with a bunch of simple equations?"

"No. I'm saying nature *is* a bunch of simple equations."

"Prove it," I tell him, still smiling. For an instant I see him shrouded in darkness, arms thrown up in a vain attempt to ward off judgment, face bleeding and pulpy.

I shake my head to dislodge the image. It sticks.

"—shape of a tree," he's saying. "The trunk splits into branches. Then the branches split into smaller branches. Then those divide into twigs. And at each scale, the pattern is the same."

I imagine a tree. It doesn't seem

very mathematical.

"Or your own lungs," Cheung continues. "Windpipe to bronchi, to bronchioles to alveoli. Or your circulatory system. Or the growth of a crystal. Incrementally simple, the same thing happening at a dozen different scales simultaneously."

"So you're saying trees are fractal? Crystals are fractal?"

He shakes his head, grinning from ear to ear. "*Nature is fractal. Life is fractal. You're fractal.*" He wears the look of a religious convert. "And the image compression stuff is nothing. There are implications for meteorology, or—wait a second, let me show you what I'm working on for the medical center."

I wait while Cheung fiddles with his machine. Voices from his radio fill the lull. A phone-in show; some woman is complaining to the host about a three-car pile-up in her front yard. Her neighbor up the hill used a garden hose to wash the snow off his driveway this morning; the water slid downhill and froze the road into a skating rink, tilted twenty degrees.

"They come in from Hong Kong, they think the climate is just the same the world over," the caller complains.

The host doesn't say anything. How can he? How can he sympathize without being branded a racist? Maybe he will anyway. Maybe he'll call a spade a spade, maybe the editors and the censors haven't quite crushed him yet. Go for it, asshole, it's what we're all thinking, why don't you just say it—

"What an idiot," Roy Cheung remarks.

I blink, involuntarily. "What?"

"That's actually pretty minor," he

tells me. "That's just some moron who never saw ice outside of a scotch on the rocks. We've got these neighbors, a whole bloody family came over from Hong Kong a couple of years back and we've had nothing but trouble. Last summer they cut down our hedge."

"What?" It's very strange, hearing Cheung betray his own kind like this.

"My wife's into horticulture, she'd spent ages growing this hedge on our property. It was gorgeous, about fifteen feet high, perfectly sculpted. Came home one day and these guys had paid someone to come over on our property and chainsaw the whole thing. They said the hedge was a home for evil spirits."

"Didn't you sue them or something?"

Cheung shrugs. "I wanted to. Lana wouldn't let me. She didn't want any more trouble. You ask me, I'd gladly ship the whole lot of 'em back overseas."

I collect my thoughts. "But didn't you, um, come from—"

"Born here. Fifth generation," he says.

I'm only third.

And suddenly I recognize the kinship behind those strange eyes, the shared resentment. How must it feel to go through life wearing that skin, that hair, these artifacts of a heritage left behind decades ago? Roy Cheung, guilty by association, probably hates them more than I do. He is almost an ally.

"Anyway," he says, "here's what I wanted to show you."

The moment passes. There is something new on the monitor, something reddish and amorphous and

somehow threatening. It's growing; a misshapen blob, sprouting random pseudopods, now covers half the screen.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Carcinoma."

It doesn't surprise me.

"Cancer is fractal too," Cheung says. "This is a model of a liver tumor, but the growth patterns are the same no matter what kind you're talking about. We're finding out how it grows; you gotta know that before you can kill it."

I watch it spread.

Baboons. There are baboons running around in the TV, courtesy of National Geographic and PBS. We more civilized primates sit and watch at a discreet distance. Sean, hyperactively four, bounces around on the carpet; Joanne and I opt for the couch. We peer over a coffee table laden with Szechuan take-out, into what's left of the real world.

There's just been a treetop coup somewhere in the forests of central Africa; a new alpha male is strutting around. He goes through the troop, checking out the females, checking out their kids. Especially the kids. He goes to each one in turn, running his big hairy hand over their heads, sniffing their bodies with that gentle paternalism, looking for some sign of familiarity, some telltale scent that speaks of his ancestry in those tiny bodies—but no, none of my genes in *this* one, and WHAP the infant's head snaps back and forth like a bolo-ball and SNAP those matchstick arms bend in entirely new places and the Big Man on Campus tears the little carcass away from its screaming mother and pitches it out,

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out and down to the forest floor twenty meters below.

Sean is suddenly entranced. Joanne looks at me doubtfully. "I don't know if we really want to be watching this during, er, mealtime..."

But life isn't always so intolerant, the narrator hastens to tell us. That same male would die defending those bastard children against an outside threat, against a predator or a rival troop, against anything that was less related to him than they were. Loyalties are concentric. Defend your kind against others. Defend your kin against your kind. Defend your genes against your kin. In absence of the greater threat, destroy the lesser.

And suddenly, with an almost audible click, the whole world drops into focus. I look around, surprised; nobody else seems to have noticed the change. On the surface, nothing *has* changed. My family is blissfully unaware of the epiphany that has just occurred.

But I understand something now. It wasn't really my fault.

Go down far enough, and we're all running the same program. Each cell holds the complete design; the framework, the plumbing, the wiring diagrams, all jammed into a spiral thread of sugars and bases that tells us what to be. What blind stupid arrogance, to think that a few campfire songs could undo four million years of evolution. Morally wrong, we chant; politically incorrect, socially unacceptable. But our genes aren't fooled. They're so much wiser than we are. They know: we have met the enemy, and he is *not* us. Evolution, ever patient, inspires us to self-defense.

My enmity is hardwired. Am I to

blame if the plan calls for something that hates?

What's this? They've changed the bait again?

It can't be an easy job, trying to bribe us into literacy. Each week they put a new display in the lobby, easily visible through the glass to passers-by, some colorful new production meant to lure the great unwashed into the library.

Wasted on me; I'm in here for something else entirely. Although, what the hell, the newspaper section doesn't close for hours. And today's offering is a tad more colorful than usual. Let's see...

A crayon drawing of crude stick figures, red and yellow, black and white, holding hands in a ring. Posters, professionally crafted but no less blatant, showing Chinese and Caucasians wearing hard hats and smiling at each other. The air is thick with sugary sweetness and light; I feel the first stirrings of diabetes.

I move closer to the display. A sign, prominently displayed: "Sponsored by the B.C. Human Rights Commission."

They know. They have their polls, their barometers, they can feel the backlash building and they're fighting it any way they can.

I wander the exhibit. I feel a bit like a vampire at church. But the symbols here are weak; the garlic and the holy signs have an air of desperation about them. They're losing, and they know it. This feeble propaganda can't change how we feel.

Besides, why should they care what we think? In another few years we

won't matter any more.

There's a newspaper clipping tacked up in one corner of the nearest board. From an old 1986 edition of the *Globe and Mail*: "Reagan Assured Gorbachev of Help Against Space Aliens," the headline says.

Is this for real?

Yes indeed. Then-president Reagan, briefly inspired, actually told Gorbachev that if the Earth were ever threatened by aliens, all countries would pull together and forget their ideological differences. Apparently he thought there was a moral there somewhere.

"One of the few intelligent things Reagan ever said," someone says at my elbow. I turn. She's overdressed; wears a BC government pin on one lapel and a button on the other. The button shows planet Earth encircled by the words "We're all in this together."

But at least she's one of us.

"But he was right," I reply. "Threaten the whole human race and our international squabbling seems so petty."

She nods, smiling. "That's why I put it up. It's not really part of the presentation, but I thought it fit."

"Of course, we don't have space aliens to hate. But not to worry. There's always an enemy, somewhere."

Her smile falters a bit. "What do you mean?"

"If not space aliens, the Russians. If not the Russians, the local ethnics. I stayed on an island once where the lobstermen on the south end all hated the herring fishermen on the north. They all seemed the same to me, a lot of them were even related, but they had to be able to hate someone some-

where."

She clucks and shakes her head in cynical accord.

"Of course, both sides banded together to hate all off-islanders," I add.

"Of course."

"A single human being, the whole damn species, or any level in between, and the pattern's the same, isn't it? It's like hatred is—"

I see galaxies within galaxies.

"—scale-invariant," I finish slowly.

She looks at me, a bit strangely. "Uhhh—"

"But of course, there are also a lot of positive things happening. People can cooperate when they have to."

Her smile reinflates. "Exactly."

"Like the natives. Banding together to save their cultures, forgetting their differences. The Haidas even stopped taking slaves from other tribes."

She isn't smiling at all now. "The Haidas," she says, "haven't taken slaves for generations."

"Oh, that's right. We put a stop to that about—I guess it was even before we banned the potlatch, wasn't it? But eventually they'll want to start up again. I mean, slavery was integral to their culture, and we wouldn't want to destroy anyone's culture here, would we?"

"I don't think you've got all your facts straight," she says slowly.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought we were multicultural. I thought Canadians were supposed to—" I spy some bold print a few boards down— "*to allow different cultures to flourish side by side without imposing our own moral and ethical standards on them.*"

"Within the law," she says. I wait,

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but she's wary now, unwilling to speak further.

So I do. "Then as a woman, I'm sure you're pleased that Muslim men won't have to stop the traditional subjugation of their wives when they come here. As long as they keep it in the home, of course."

"Excuse me." She turns her back to me, takes a step along the display.

"You're lying to us," I say, raising my voice. A couple of bystanders turn their heads.

She faces me, mouth open to speak. I pre-empt her: "Or perhaps you're lying to *them*. But you can't have it both ways, and you can't change the facts no matter how many bad classroom cartoons you force on us."

There's a part of me that hasn't enjoyed provoking the anger in her face. A few days ago, it might even have been the biggest part. But it's only a few thousand years old, tops, and the rest of me really doesn't give a shit.

I lift my arm in a gesture that takes in the whole display. "If I were a racist," I tell her, "this wouldn't begin to convince me." I bare my teeth in a way that might be mistaken for a smile.

I turn and walk deeper into the building.

Here it is: on the back page of Section C, in a newspaper almost two weeks old. Didn't even make it to the airwaves, I guess. What difference does one more battered Asian make, after all the gang warfare going down in Chinatown? No wonder I missed it.

He had a name. Wai Chan. Found unconscious at a North Van housing development owned by Balthree Prop-

erties, where he was—

(Balthree Properties?)

—where he was employed as a night watchman. In stable condition after being attacked by an unknown assailant. No motive. No suspects.

Bullshit. Half the fucking city is suspect, we've all got motive, and they know it.

Or maybe they don't. Maybe they believe all the stories they feed us that say Hey, High-Density Living Good For You, Crime Rate Unconnected To Population Size, Massive Immigration Keeps Us Safe From America, hurrah hurrah! Nothing like giving yourself a mild case of cancer to cure the measles, and every time somebody projects that the lower mainland will be sixty percent Chinese by 2010 the news is buried in a wave of stories about international goodwill and the cultural mosaic. Maybe they don't know what it's like to go back to the place you grew up and find it ripped to the ground, some offshore conglomerate's turned it into another hive crammed with pulsing yellow grubs, perhaps Balthree Properties *isn't* Hong Kong based but I didn't know that *then*, did I? That used to be my home, there were trees there once, and childhood friends, and now just mud and lumber and this ugly little Chink yammering at me, barely even speaks the fucking language and he's kicking me out of *my own back yard*—

Once I felt guilty about what I did to him. I was sick with remorse. That was stupid, woolly thinking. My guilt doesn't spring from the one time I let the monster out. No sirree.

It springs from all the other times I didn't.

The Indians are on the warpath. From the endowment lands on east, they're blocking us. We're on their land, they say. They want justice. They want retribution. They want autonomy.

Don't tell me, noble savage. So do I.

Traffic moves nose-to-bumper like a procession of slugs. At this rate it'll be hours before I even get out of town, let alone home. There was a time when I could afford to live *in* town. There was even a time when I wanted to. Now, all I want to do is scream.

There's a group of Indian kids at the roadside, enjoying the chaos their parents have wrought. I bear them no ill will; the natives are a conquered people, drunk and unemployed, no threat to anyone. I sympathize. I honk my horn in support.

Thunk! A spiderweb explodes across my windshield, glassy cracks dividing and redividing into a network too fine for my eyes to follow, I can barely see through—

Jesus! That sonofabitch threw a rock at me! There he is, winding up for another—no, he's after someone else this time, our ancestors weren't nice to their ancestors and this brat thinks that gives him some God-given moral right to trash other people's property—

I don't have to take this. *I* didn't take their fucking land away from

them. Get off to the side, onto the shoulder—now floor it! Watch the skid, watch the skid—and look at those punks scrambling out of the way! One of them isn't quite fast enough; catches my eye as he rolls off the hood, and holy shit did his sneer vanish in a hurry! I do believe he already regrets the rashness of his actions, and we've barely started dancing yet.

I turn off the ignition. I pocket the keys.

I get out of the car.

There are people shouting somewhere very far away, and horns honking. They sound almost the same. Someone gets up off the pavement in front of me, nursing his leg. Hé doesn't look so tough now, does he? Like it's just dawned on him that they lost Oka years ago. Where did all your friends go, fucker? Where's Lasagna when you need him?

Okay, you want to wail about oppression? I'll show you oppression, you greasy Indian brat. I'm going to teach you a lesson you won't ever forget.

My muscles are knotted so tightly I wonder why my own ligaments haven't been torn out at the roots. I'm dimly aware that this is more or less normal for me now.

But I know that I'll feel better soon. •

PETER WATTS no longer works at the University of B.C. He is presently in hiding somewhere in British Columbia. On the off chance that a few readers remain unoffended by his work, he is hard at work on a story exploring the genetic roots of sexism entitled "So, What Are You Doing After the Vigil?"

ASK MR. SCIENCE

Do you have a question concerning life or the true nature of the universe? Mr. Science can answer it! Send your question to: Ask Mr. Science, c/o ON SPEC Magazine, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6

Mr. SB of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q : Why is one heavier after swimming than before?

A : This is not generally true, and is the reason that chlorine must be used in swimming pools. In your case, however, you have never learned to swim with your mouth closed!

Ms. LG of Crawford Bay, BC, asks:

Q : Why don't ducks get cold feet?

A : They do. That is why they are quacking all the time and have such bad tempers.

Ms. DM, of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q : I want pure drinking water but cannot afford an expensive water filter. What can I do?

A : Obtain from your nearby hardware store a PVC pipe 25 cm. long and 6 cm. in diameter, along with end caps and the fittings necessary to attach a piece of 12 mm. plastic tubing to each end. Insert a fine mesh plastic filter disk in each end cap and fill the cylinder with compressed burned toast, unbuttered. This home-made activated charcoal filter is as effective as the commercial variety, but costs much less. If you change the burned toast once a week your water will taste fresh and clean, with just a hint of whole wheat.

Mr. ST, of Vancouver, BC, asks:

Q : Does the recently announced Pentium computer CPU error require Mr. Science to repeat all of his calculations?

A : No. Mr. Science cannot use a CPU as puny as the Pentium. For quite a long time now all of his calculations have been performed by the Mark III model of the Massively Parallel Commodore 64 computer, which consists of 4096 Commodore 64 computers connected together and mounted with velcro onto a very large wall.

SCIENCE NEWS OF GREAT IMPORTANCE

By means of a very complex multi-dimensional mapping program, Mr. Science has proven conclusively that the universe is closed. The old folk-saying "what goes up must come down" transforms to "what goes out must come back. •

THE LADY OF THE WOLVES

Marie Jakober

There was no road to the witch's place. The boy seemed to find his way by memory, or else by signs which were not visible to an ordinary, untrained eye. Sometimes he bent very close to the ground, and Astrid thought he might actually be sniffing. At such times she shuddered, and clung more tightly to the horse's reins, and murmured small invocations to Jesus and His Holy Mother. Once she crossed herself. The boy, looking back, happened to see her do so, and he smiled mockingly.

She hated him, quietly and desperately. She hated the dark woods all around her, which grew darker and more alien as they climbed. Everything here whispered, and huddled, and then suddenly disappeared in bewildering patches of fog. There was no trace of human habitation. Even the bandits who wandered and camped sometimes in the forests above the valley—even they did not come this far. No one came here except the damned.

For this was where *she* lived: the witch of the mountains, the one they called the lady of the wolves. She had an ancient fortress here, and an ancient, terrifying power to serve or to destroy those who came to seek her.

Or so the villagers and farmers of Dhagar believed.

Her stronghold, they said, had been built long ago by the Romans. The Romans built it square and sturdy, the way they built everything; the walls were made of stone and were twenty feet thick. But, like its builders, the fortress was an invader in the land, and in time the land took its revenge. The empire collapsed, the legions went home, the roads vanished in tanglewood and mist. Weeds and bracken filled the courtyards, the wells turned stagnant, the wooden gates rotted on their hinges. Only the walls themselves remained, crumbling and grown over with scrub.

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When she came, or where she came from, no one could say with certainty. Indeed, no one would admit to knowing anything about her at all, other than the stories which were told over ale in the taverns, or late at night beside dying fires. The stories, of course, were always about someone else: someone from another village, or a stranger, or someone who was dead.

But three things were believed of her by everyone. She would readily help women, especially in the bearing and protecting of their children. She kept wolves for her familiars. And she could be found, if a person really wanted to find her, and if that person had both gold and courage.

For a long time, Astrid of Dhagar would think about finding her only because it was unthinkable. She would lie awake until the foul noises stopped, and she would tell herself: I could go to the witch on the mountain. I could find out where she is, and I could go to her. They say she's always willing to help women. Maybe she would help me.

It was comforting to think about it, since she knew she would never do it. She was a good Christian. Nothing could justify such a risk to her immortal soul—nothing, not even this. Besides, wherever the witch's fortress was, it was far away. The journey would be dangerous, and she could not possibly take anyone with her. No, it was quite out of the question. But she thought about it nonetheless. She thought about it at night, listening to them do it. She thought about it by day, watching Hagen stride across a hallway or a field. He was beautiful, hard-bodied and powerful as his horses—but not

gelded like they were; quite the opposite.

She had been the envy of the valley when she married him, so lusty and fine-looking a man, with horses and cattle and a fine manor house, all on his own land. And he had been pleased with her, too, until she failed him. Until she bore him only daughters, and he, weary of plowing a fallow field, took his seed elsewhere. God knew he never lacked for opportunities, not even in his own house. All the servants looked at him with more than proper interest, even the older ones. And then there was Mira: stupid, bird-bodied little Mira—not even a woman yet, and already a whore.

When Astrid looked at that one, at Mira, she truly needed comfort. She needed something to hold on to, even if it was just a fantasy: I'll go to the witch woman, just see if I won't. I'll go to her, and she will put an end to this...!

She had not realized how easily the comforts of fantasy could slide into the dark temptations of possibility. She began to think of it more often. She began to think of reasons why it might not be evil. Oh, it was a sin, certainly, but not a terrible sin, not like adultery or murder. She was not going to the witch to ask for something wicked.

It's my duty, really, she would tell herself. I can't let this go on. Anyway, it won't do any harm to ask a few questions...

Almost a year passed in this manner, and during that year she would whisper by times to a servant, and the servant whispered to someone else, and he whispered to his kinsman from Trev, and after much money had

changed hands, and many lies had been told, she was given the following information:

There was an oak tree in the woods, near the old bridge of Krael. It was a very large oak, set back a little from the road. Sometimes, on the thirteenth day of the month, the witch would send one of her slaves to wait there for those who might seek her services. The slave might be anyone, even a snake or a bird. He ... or she, or it ... might not even come at all. Or he or she or it might not like the look of the supplicant, and go quietly away. Or the whole thing might be just a story. The man from Trev had never been there, after all. He was only repeating what he had been told, and some people would say anything for money.

Once it became possible, Astrid no longer found it comforting. For a long time she tucked the information away in the back of her mind. Witchcraft was wicked, and shameful, and dangerous; she would have nothing to do with it. She listened to the sounds in the night, and tried to comfort herself with prayer.

Then Mira began to bleed, and it was no longer possible to comfort herself with anything. Once a month, for three months, the small, girlish body spilled out its promise of womanhood. Once a month, for three months, the witch's slave came to the oak tree. And now Astrid thought of nothing else. To see Mira bear the son she herself could not bear, to see it thrive and grow, here, in her own house...no, that could not be endured. Not even for the sake of her immortal soul.

Early in the fourth month, she announced that she would make yet an-

other pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Anne at Krael. She would stay in the convent for three days, she told her family. She would pray and fast in silence and seclusion, and perhaps the saint would intercede for her, and grant her a son.

She took with her a servant who understood her despair, and who was sympathetic. In her cell, they changed garments. The maid remained in her mistress's place, and the mistress, dressed as the servant, rode away from the convent unheeded by anyone. So it was that she came to the bridge, and to the oak tree. A boy sat there, leaning his back against the tree. He was nine, perhaps, or an underfed eleven. Ragged black hair hung to his shoulders and dangled into his eyes. He did not get up. He looked at her, idly but carefully, saying nothing.

She dismounted, and moved closer to him. He continued to sit; his small, bony hands played indifferently with a stick.

At the manor house someone would have dragged him to his feet by his hair, and slapped him silly, for such insolence as this. But she was in demon country now. She stood still, and tried to keep her voice very calm.

"Do you know why I'm here?"

He met her eyes. He smiled a little, as if to say: They always ask me that. They always want me to say it first.

"Perhaps you're tired," he said, "and you want to rest."

"I'm not tired. I was told there would be someone here. Someone from—" She made a vague gesture to the east—"up there."

He glanced idly where she had pointed. "It's wolf country," he said.

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"Up there."

He was a rather sullen, long-toothed looking creature himself, she thought grimly. And he was clearly playing games with her.

Astrid of Dhagar had never been a timid woman. She stepped closer, and lowered her voice, but she spoke very directly:

"There is one they call the lady of the wolves. They say she has a castle in those mountains. Do you know the way?"

"Do you have five marks?"

She was surprised, and she allowed it to show. Five marks, to a woman like herself, was a trifle. The boy smiled again.

"Five marks for me," he said. "What you will pay ... there ... will be decided by others. Yes?"

Her stomach knotted, and the hair quivered on her neck. If she went with this creature, who could say where he might lead her, and to what? There were bandits in the mountains. Perhaps they had heard rumours of the witch, and laughed at them, and sent their own hirelings to lure fools like her away, to be slaughtered for their garments and their gold.

"You may go back, if you wish," he said scornfully. "If you hurry, you won't even be missed."

She might have done just that, if he had not spoken, if he had not mocked her.

"I'll go with you," she said, "if you swear to take me where I wish to go, and nowhere else, and bring me safely back again."

He laughed. When he spoke again, she realized that he was not a child.

"And by whom should I swear, Christian? Your gods, who are only men to me? Or my gods, who are only fiends to you? Which oath would seem to you more...trustworthy?"

She did not know what to say.

"Mount your horse," he said. "We'll have to hurry, if we want to be there before dark."

One more time, she hesitated. One more time, she made the choice to go on. She wondered, with a flash of terror, how many sins she had now accumulated. Then she put it out of her mind. She had survived a great many things, thus far in her life, by putting them out of her mind.

They climbed for hours, sometimes through dense woodland, sometimes along narrow edges of cliffs, where there were remnants of the old Roman road which had mostly crumbled away. The guide did not speak to her again. He would look back from time to time, to make sure she was still following. As they drew further and further away from the ordinary world, his face and manner seemed to grow more feral. At times, just for a moment, she would have sworn that he was running on all fours.

But finally, after they had climbed a long distance above the valley, he stopped, and gave her one last command.

"From here," he said, "you will walk."

"Walk?" She stared at him. She was a woman of good family, the lady of a manor. She did not walk when there was a good horse at hand.

"There are wolves ahead," he told her calmly. "They will not attack us,

but your horse doesn't know that. He will bolt, and throw you, and run all the way home to your husband. Yes?"

He smiled faintly, as if it amused him to be small and thin and dirty and always right.

She dismounted. He took the reins, and tied them firmly around the trunk of a tree. Then, without another word, he began to climb again.

She was astonished at the difference it made, being on foot. They climbed for more than an hour, yet the valley looked as close as ever. She began to tire, and physical exhaustion heightened all her fears; she existed now in a permanent state of terror. She found it more and more difficult to believe that she was actually here, following this evil creature into the wilderness. She no longer wanted to go on, but now, without the horse, it was quite impossible to go back.

Why have I been brought to this? Why, sweet Jesus, why? I never deserved it. I prayed so hard. I did everything I was supposed to do. I was a proper wife; I was faithful, and I was always good to him. Good to her, too, the worthless, wicked little thing...!

Under all the fear, her anger smouldered and stung. And it grew as she climbed, as the forest grew darker and thing before her loomed ever more terrible. She was risking her life—risking her immortal soul, sweet Jesus—because of that creature. That creature who should never have been born...!

She looked up sharply, suddenly realizing that she was walking on a cobbled path. There was no sign of her guide. There was nothing but forest and mist, and this bit of broken road. She

followed it with her eyes, and saw the abandoned fortress, still some distance away. It was a massive thing: half human work, with stark, jutting towers, and half mountain, growing vine and scrub and flowers from its bones.

Oh, God, it is real...!

She swallowed, and made herself go on, up to the open gate and through it, into an empty courtyard scattered with broken stone and bracken and dead leaves. She felt almost proud of herself, just for a moment, because she had actually succeeded in getting here. Then she saw the wolves, and the great, bottomless cavern of fear opened in front of her again.

There were perhaps twenty of them in the courtyard. They were not doing anything remarkable. They were simply there, lying against the walls asleep, or licking their paws, or drifting about in search of food. One of them watched her—exactly as a well-trained dog might watch a stranger—carefully, but without showing any sign of hostility. It was a young wolf, ill-nourished and small.

She thought about the boy at the oak tree, and all her blood turned to ice. For it was he. It had his eyes; it had his lean and straggly look. If wolves could smile, it would have had his smile.

She tried to pray, but it was no longer possible. God would not listen to her here. Perhaps God could not even hear her. Slowly, step by careful step, she edged forward. There was ruin and rubble everywhere, and a great many bones from the feeding of the wolves. She did not look too closely at the bones, or allow herself to wonder what manner of animals they might

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once have been. She went up a set of crumbling stone steps and shoved open a heavy door.

Inside was a huge stone chamber—the barracks hall, perhaps, of the old Roman legions. She stood motionless for a time, frozen with dread, and barely able to see until her eyes adjusted to the dim light. Unlike the courtyard, the chamber was swept clean. But it was gloomy as a cavern, and absolutely bare, except for a single table and two chairs. A candle flickered on the table, weakly, and before it sat a hooded, dark-clad figure. It sat patiently, its elbows on the table, its face too deep within the hood to identify, even as belonging to a woman or a man.

Astrid crept closer. Something moved beside the chair. A head lifted, and caught the shifting candlelight. It was another wolf, a very large one, very black, getting slowly to its feet beside its demon keeper.

Astrid froze. It was strange, after so many dangers, so many sins, that one more danger would matter, yet she could hardly breathe, much less take another step.

“Come,” the voice said. It was a woman’s voice. “They defend me, but they do not attack. Come and sit.”

Astrid moved carefully to the table, and sat. The witch threw back her hood, and they looked into each other’s faces.

Astrid knew what the witch would see, and drew some confidence from it. This supplicant was no fragile, simpering girl, no bewildered peasant. Astrid was a woman over thirty, still very handsome. Though she wore a servant’s clothing, no one would have

mistaken her for a servant. She carried herself like a pillar, and whatever her eyes chose to look at, they rarely looked away.

As for the witch herself, she was younger than Astrid had expected— younger, but also older. She was neither a hag nor a siren, but an ordinary woman of middle age. Her hair was gray, and bound in a snood; her nails were trimmed short. She looked somewhat motherly, and the image was both reassuring and particularly awful.

“Why have you come to seek me, Astrid of Dhagar?”

“You know my name?” Astrid whispered.

The witch did not reply, but her look said very plainly: Really, my dear, just who is it you think you’re dealing with? Some long-legged, giggling wood nymph?

“They speak of you in the valley,” Astrid said. “They say you’re very powerful. They say you never refuse a woman in distress. I’ve come to ask a favour.” She paused, and added pointedly: “If you know my name, then you also know that I can pay you very well.”

The witch looked only mildly interested. She reached down to scratch the ears of her familiar.

“And what is it that you want?” she asked.

“I want to have a son.”

“A son? You’ve come through all these dangers, and are willing to risk the fury of your god, for something as easy to come by as a son?” She shook her head, as a matron might shake it at a foolish child.

“There are already too many sons in the land,” she went on. “They have

nothing to inherit. They have nowhere to go except to war. No one in Dhagar needs a son, Astrid."

Astrid stared at her. She could barely believe what she had heard.

"I need a son!" she said desperately. "And he'll have plenty to inherit! My husband is a rich man." She leaned forward across the table. "You know the world, lady. You know how men are. They want sons. One son at least, to carry on the name! I have only three useless daughters, and my husband despises me for it. Please, lady! I've prayed. I've made pilgrimages! I've taken potions from the midwives, and paid them handsomely for it, and still I can't bear a son! Help me! I don't care how! I'll do anything you say! I'll even serve him—"

"Him?" the witch cut in sharply.

"Your master. Lucifer, or Woden, or whoever it is you serve. I don't care! I'll do what I must!"

"My master? Did you hear that, Rainer?" she murmured to the wolf. "My master, indeed."

She looked up. "It's not you who wants this son. It's your husband. Isn't that so?"

"No," Astrid said grimly. "I want a son."

"Why? You have children to love. You have daughters. Let one of them inherit your husband's land, and share it with some youth who has no prospects. What can they look forward to, otherwise? Landless girls of good family must find young men with land, and there aren't enough of those to go around."

"That isn't my affair," Astrid said bitterly. "I don't arrange things in the world. I want a son."

"Then get yourself one in the usual fashion. I'm not going to help you." The witch braced her hands on the table, and began to heave herself to her feet.

"Wait!" Astrid cried. "Please wait! There's something else! There's something I haven't told you!"

"There's something else?" The witch did not seem surprised, only scornful. "Do you know how foolish it is, trying to deceive the likes of me?"

"I didn't deceive you! Really, I didn't! I just thought... I thought you'd help me without my having to talk about...that."

"Yes? And what can you find so hard to talk about, in such a world as ours? I am waiting."

"My husband...Hagen...when I gave him no sons he...he turned away from me. He began to go to others. To...my daughter. The oldest one. Mira. He...uses her. He says if the mare is no good, a man has no choice but breed the filly. For more than a year now, he's been doing it. I have to listen to them, night after night—"

"You've told no one?"

"Only the parish priest."

"And what did he say?"

"He said that I must pray for my husband. That his soul was in mortal danger—as it is, lady. It's a great sin, what Hagen is doing."

"You didn't go to your lord? Or to the bailiff, or the bishop?"

"No, lady. They wouldn't believe me, and if they did, they would throw him in prison."

The witch looked at her hands, and turned a ring briefly on her finger. It was a flat ring, wide and decorated with many strange markings.

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She spoke again, very softly:

"And if they threw him in prison, Astrid, what would be wrong with that?"

Astrid stared at her. "He's my husband!"

"I see."

"We'd all be disgraced! I've endured enough already; shall I endure that, too? Besides, it's not really his fault. He has a right to sons, and so he's angry with me. It hurts, but I can see the right of it. And God knows she was always laughing and running to him, and making herself pretty, and giggling like a tavern wench! He'd have never done it otherwise! He's a good man, lady; he goes to church, he pays his tithes. He'd have never done it if she was decent. And he'd come back to me in a minute, I know he would, except that I'm barren. He doesn't even like her any more. She's no good to him. She doesn't know anything; she just cries.

"Don't you understand, lady? He used to love me! He was drunk with happiness when he married me, he loved me so much. And then I failed him! But I can make it right. He still beds me, sometimes, and every time he comes to me, he says the same thing: Give me a son. Just one son, and I'll forgive you everything."

She reached under her cloak and pulled out her purse, frantically, emptying its contents onto the table.

"A hundred marks, lady. You can have it all. You can have more. You can send one of your servants to the oak tree again, and I'll pay you that much more."

"You're besotted," the witch said. "Do you really imagine he'll stop, now

that he knows you won't do anything about it—that no one will do anything about it? Now that you have two other pretty daughters just coming into flower?"

"He's not like that! He will stop."

"And if he doesn't?"

"He will!"

"And if he doesn't?"

Astrid glared at her. She was stupid, this witch. She understood nothing about the world.

"He'll think better of me for giving him a son. Everyone will think better of me for giving him a son. Surely I've earned that, lady? Surely I've earned something all these years?"

There was a long silence. Outside, the day was almost gone, and the light had begun to fail. Here, except for the candle, there was no light at all.

The witch rose. It was impossible now to see the contours of her face, or to read the expression in her eyes.

"You must understand this, Astrid of Dhagar: when once I cast such a spell, it cannot be undone. If, later on, you change your mind, you will find yourself like a rabbit in a snare. The harder you struggle to escape what has been set, the tighter it will close around your bones. You are warned. Do you still wish to bear your husband's boy-child?"

"Yes! More than anything in the world!"

"Then it shall be so."

The witch led her into another room, and knelt her down before an unmarked, hollowed-out stone. There the witch kindled a fire, and began a ritual which Astrid neither understood nor afterwards remembered, except for its conclusion. After many prayers and

chantings in some alien tongue, the witch offered her a potion, and when she had drunk it down, the woman spoke again in Astrid's own language.

"It is done. When next you share your husband's bed, Astrid of Dhagar, you will conceive a son. His name will be Wolfgang, one who goes with wolves. He will be strong, and sharp-fanged, and swift. He will have all the gifts he needs to find his way to me."

"To you?" Astrid whispered. "But..."

The ritual fire had burned low, and the room was filled with smoke. Astrid reached forward, stumbling a little. She was dazed with strange chanting and strong drink—very dazed, but still aware enough to feel the slow chill of horror creeping through her veins, a horror more absolute than any she had known or ever imagined.

Strong and sharp-fanged and swift ... with all the gifts he needs to find his way to me...!

"But...but you can't mean...oh, sweet Jesus, no...!"

The witch smiled faintly, almost sadly. The lines of her unyoung, motherly face were sharp now, and strangely angular, and on the back of her lifting hands was the tiniest hint of dark hair. The hands closed on Astrid's cheeks.

"It's too late. You have chosen it, and it is just. He will be born, and he will thrive. And one day he will come to me, Astrid—*after he has avenged the sorrows of his sister!*"

"No!" she screamed. "That

wasn't...! Oh, God, not that, not Hagen, you can't, oh God, no...!"

She screamed, and struck out wildly, but the witch only backed away into the rank darkness. She heard a snarl, and the sound of clawed feet slapping on the the stones. The wolf's jaws snapped shut inches from her hand. She fled then, blindly, still crying No! with all her voice and all her mind, running through the stone hall and down the broken steps, no, sweet Jesus, no! into the fog-wrapped, dissolving day, no, you can't do this, no! stumbling to her knees among the ruins and sobbing like a child, no no no, in God's name, no, not Hagen, no! until the last litany of no's rattled like dead leaves across the courtyard, and crumbled, and fell still. No one was listening. No one was there. No one except the boy from the oak tree, sitting with his arms around his knees, waiting to take her home.

As she looked up and saw him, he got to his feet, and pulled his bit of ragged mantle close around his neck.

"Come on, then," he said. "It'll be dark soon."

He paid no attention to her tear-stained face, or to the fact that she was still huddled on her knees. He started off impatiently, with a single glance towards the lowering sky. She waited until he was almost out of sight, and then, too terrified to do otherwise, she followed him.

All around them, as they descended, the wolves began to howl. •

Calgarian MARIE JAKOBER is fascinated by the working-out of power relationships, both in real-world and speculative situations. In her latest novel, *High Kamilan*, she explores the coming of patriarchy to an ancient realm of the Goddess.

SWEEPING THE CUCKOO'S NEST

Tanis MacDonald

Penny stared at me. When she spoke, only her lips moved. A single muscle high on her left cheek jumped, a ripple beneath translucent skin.

I suppose I'd been waiting for questions all along. When she asked me what love was, I thought, this is it. Three days ago, Penny had turned twelve, just the age when I spent geography class doodling initials on pink notebook covers.

I smiled and said, "Why, sweetie, love is what you feel for me and Ben and Buster and maybe one special boy...hmmm?"

"Buster's a cat. I don't love Buster."

"Well, he sits on your lap and purrs when you pat him. But you're right, honey, I guess we don't love animals in the same way we love people, your parents and friends."

Penny's eyes were bright and hard. "I don't love Ben."

I sighed. Penny knew that Ben wasn't her real dad. Maybe it was a mistake to tell her so young; but I thought it best. She and Ben got on fine, but lately, she spoke to him less and less. Come to think of it, weeks had passed since I had seen them in the same room. I hadn't seen Ben in days myself. Maybe he was on split shift at the plant. I frowned, trying to remember, but my head felt cloudy.

I did remember what Ben had said last month. "Sal, it's not natural. No normal kid is that quiet. She'll be twelve soon, and not a giggle our of her yet. It's getting worse as she gets older. What's next? It's creepy. I'm looking over my shoulder all the time."

I looked up at Penny. "Now baby, Ben loves you. You know he does. But

maybe you're right; there's no love like mother-daughter love. Blest be the tie that binds. A daughter is a daughter all of her life." I couldn't remember my own mother's face. A patchy darkness blossomed in my head. I pushed it away with thoughts of a clean carpet and tonight's dinner. Penny spoke again.

"I don't love you."

Her face immobile. The muscle by her eye stilled. She didn't blink. She hadn't drawn a breath for three minutes. Of course she didn't love me. She wasn't made for love.

"Well, dear, it's fashionable these days to be mad at Mother, don't think I don't know that. It hasn't been so long since I was your age. When I was twelve, I got so angry with my mother once that I..."

...forgot the story. A booming, rumbling echo soothed my head.

"When I was twelve, there was this boy..." No face.

Three days after I turned twelve, I woke long after midnight to an unheard summons that made the hairs on the back of my neck rise. There was dew on my bare feet standing on the backyard grass. There was a voice bigger than God's, someone taller than a fir tree—

—don't forget who you are, Sallagah, you belong to us. Make more, learn the rules, you are ours, protect ours, wait for the day—

A swelling, a rush of bright fluid, it's hard to remember, but after seconds or months or days, Penny was on my lap, a quiet calm baby, ten little fingers, ten little toes, black hair like mine, shiny silver eyes. Like dimes. But I called her Penny. The

eyes darkened. She got older. Make more.

At twelve, there was no boy.

She shimmered before me, a lake in the wind.

I loved her: I forgot that rule. See, no one wanted to hold my baby, my Penny. They were all afraid of her eyes. But she was so small, and such a good baby, never crying, not once. She would make a dry, crackling sound in the back of her throat if she wanted anything, that was all. A good baby. Sweet as silver. But even my mother was afraid. I remember her in floppy bedroom slippers scrambling away, her own eyes huge and brown, shaking her head, foam spilling from her mouth.

And then I remembered Ben, shouting as he ran towards the phone about Penny turning so shimmery, about needing reinforcements, then backing away from me, tripping over his workboots, a wet thud, the phone falling from his hand, and Ben finally still. I wiped the red off the rolling pin with a teatowel. The feral smell hung in the air, even after I took the towel out to the trash. I was annoyed. I would have to Lysol later.

—protect ours, we protect ours—

"Who do you love, Penny?" I knew she didn't love any boy.

Penny's eyes rolled back, showing the whites. Showing the silver.

"I love them. They've come. I can see them."

I squeezed my eyes tight. No. In my head, only clouds. Loud booms of static. Too old, I thought. I knew the rules.

—wait for the day—

"That's right, honey," I said, my eyes shut against the static, "today's the day."

When I opened my eyes, Penny was gone. She floated over the garage, shimmering like mercury. Her head tilted back, and she called out the old words in a voice I didn't recognize...

A minute later, only a slender silver glimmer remained.

Shepherd's pie for dinner tonight

if I could stretch that ground beef ... In the kitchen by the phone, I stepped over a fleshy thing gathering flies. Dull eyes, scuffed workboots. I sniffed. Cleanliness is next to—something. I straightened my apron.

I diced onions and peered up at the dark trees, wondering about love. Entwined initials. Ivy curlicues. A pretty picture. Romance. Raises a blush to the cheek. Ignites fire in the blood. So human. •

Originally from Winnipeg, TANIS MacDONALD writes, performs and teaches in Toronto. Her work has been published or is upcoming in *Grain*, *Prairie Fire*, *Room of One's Own*, *CV2* and *Women's Education des femmes*. Her poem "Holding Ground" placed second in the 1994 *Dandelion* Annual Poetry Contest.

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THE ROADKILL MAN

Peter Darbyshire

The car passes me by without slowing and, dropping my hand, I turn to watch the red taillights dwindle away into the growing dusk. They shimmer slightly in the heat escaping from the asphalt into the cooling air. Laughing eyes looking back at me as they fade away. A glance over my shoulder shows there is no other car following this one, only night creeping up behind me.

"You're fired," I say to my thumb, and continue walking along the gravel shoulder. A raw spot of pain on either heel continues to grow, announcing large blisters to come. They compete for attention with the pain in my back and shoulders from the weight of my pack.

"What's that now? Twenty or thirty cars?" I stare into the shadows of the forest beside the road. "Would've thought the odds would be better than that. Talking to myself now. Is that bad? Time to rest, get some sleep." I laugh as I regard the woods. "And all my ignorant friends said hitching was roughing it."

When it becomes so dark that only the outer boundary of the forest is visible, I turn to watching the stars form out of the black. The number of them, and the intensity with which they burn, is astonishing and I am almost tempted to comment on them to myself. But the full descent of night stops me; it's as if it's listening to me in a way the day never did. Waiting for me to speak so that it might get a bearing on me and move in closer. I keep my words to myself.

When the moon rises low over the trees before me, it is appropriately full. I cannot restrain a tired smile but the feeling of irony is brief. My body demands a halt to this walking that seems to be taking me nowhere, yet my stubborn will refuses to accept the idea of stopping and sleeping in the ditch. I watch from somewhere inside my tired mind, waiting to see which one will give in first while following the moon's progress across the sky.

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The sounds of the car's engine reach me long before the headlights illuminate the road. It is a deep, growling engine; revved up or supercharged or something. The kind of sound cars make in small towns when they are driven by teenagers who grow old in those same towns. When the lights finally do hit me I stick out my thumb without wasting the energy to turn, hoping that there aren't a couple of clowns in the car ready to use me as target practice for beer bottles.

The engine noises get very loud, almost a roar, and I step closer to the ditch. Then the roar gears down into a cough, the brakes squeal, and the lights swerve all around me as the car stops. A sudden wave of music radiates out into the night. Deep Purple's "Highway Star."

I stop walking and turn to the car, trying to keep the surprise off my face by forcing a smile. It is a muscle car, so once again the smile is only brief. Black with tinted windows and a big silver scoop sticking up through the hood. What are those things for? The back tires at least twice as large as the front ones, and the rear end of the car jacked up high. I wonder if there is a customized name written on the back, or maybe over the driver's door handle.

"Do I want to get into this?" I find myself murmuring. Then the driver guns the engine and I open the door and get in, tossing my pack to the floor. The body wins out.

Even before I've closed the door, we're moving, and not slowly. The tires screech and I'm thrown back into the cracked leather seat. I look over at the driver and begin to wonder if I've made the right choice by getting in.

He's a short man with long greasy hair and a face that looks as if it's all been pushed in. He wears nothing but shorts, and his arms and chest are covered in tattoos, too faded to make out what they once were. Just big blue marks. His head bobs along to the music as he takes us back out onto the road, one hand on the gearshift, the other on a steel-link steering wheel. Must be hell in the wintertime, I think.

"Thanks," I say, but the word doesn't carry over the music. He shakes his head and reaches for the deck in the dash. He turns down the volume enough that he can hear me repeat my thanks and just shrugs, giving me a lingering grin. His teeth are green from the dashboard lights.

"Been walking long?" His voice is hoarse, like he's been singing along to the music all night.

"All day. The only person who stopped was some guy who gave me the finger and took off as soon as I got to his car."

"Heh. Where you headin'?"

"A little town called Lindsay. You know it?"

"I know all the little towns, and all the stretches in between." He begins to tap his hand on the steering wheel in time to the music.

"Right." I shift the pack, trying to give myself some more room, and my foot kicks a pile of crushed beer cans. "You going that way?" I ask, staring down at the cans and trying not to count out loud.

"Sure, why not."

"Great," I say, not meaning it at all.

"You a student?"

"Yeah. In between undergraduate

and graduate. Going into civil engineering."

"What's that?"

I wave my hand at the surrounding woods. "Turning all this forest into city eventually. With public transit so nobody has to hitch. Triumph of technology."

"Heh. So you're going to learn all the forest's secrets, are you? When you go in with machines to turn it into city?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Heh."

"So, ah, where were you going before you picked me up?"

"Cruising." He reaches into the back seat with his gearshift hand and gropes in the darkness there. I have a moment to stare at the tiny skull that adorns the head of the shifter. Squirrel maybe? Then his hand comes back with a can of Bud that he thrusts between his legs. "Beer?"

I shake my head. "No thanks, I don't drink and ride." I force a hollow laugh and wonder if I should ask him to pull over. My body gives a lengthy protest at the consideration and I am once again forced to give in.

He shrugs, pops the can open with one hand, and takes a lengthy swallow. Some of the beer escapes his lips and runs down his chin to drip onto his chest tattoos but he doesn't seem to notice.

Deep Purple ends and Golden Earring's "Radar Love" comes on. Definitive cruising music. I settle deeper into the seat, listening and feeling the music, and keeping an eye out for any gas stations, donut shops, or anyplace else I can spend the night.

Some time later, when the skunk wanders out into the headlights, I'm

drifting off into half-sleep and I'm only partially aware of the animal. I watch it stand there and look into the headlights, seemingly unconcerned.

"WAH-HOO!" My benefactor hammers his foot down on the gas pedal and cranks the steering wheel to the side. I sit up, thinking he's turning it the wrong way, as the skunk disappears under the hood of the car. The car bounces slightly and then we're straightening out again. I stare over at him for a second before the smell gets into the car and doubles me over, forcing my hand to my face as I gag.

"Yee-hah! Smell that? Direct hit!"

He pounds the dash with his hand and then takes another swallow from his beer.

I concentrate on breathing only through my mouth and twist around in the seat, trying to look out the rear window. The tinting makes it a black wall though, and I can see nothing. Then he starts giving the steering wheel short little twists and I'm bouncing around as the car swerves back and forth across the road.

"What're you doing?" I shout.

He straightens the car out and reaches for the gearshift again, shifting down as he grins at me. "Victory dance. You see that sucker go under?" He laughs and bobs his head. "He was done as soon as I got behind the wheel and he knew it. Might as well have stayed home and done himself in."

I stare at him for a moment, not really believing what I'm hearing. "You did that on purpose," I finally manage.

He drinks from his beer with his steering hand and the car drives free for a few seconds. "Damn right," he says after swallowing. "Those little buggers

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don't get away from me. Death on wheels, with the music to match!"

"You, ah, you can let me off anywhere along here."

He shakes his head, still grinning, and finishes off the beer. The can makes sharp cracking noises as he crunches it with his hand and tosses it into the pile at my feet. "You're along for the ride now. Consider it some more education. Just settle in and enjoy."

My hand finds the door handle in the darkness but the outside is rushing past too fast. When he passes me a beer I take it without thinking. I drain half in the first swallow.

"Name's Eddie," he says, reaching under his seat for something. "You?"

"Lanston." I watch him closely.

"Smoke, Lans?" His hand comes up with a package of Marlboros.

"No. Thanks." Testing the air with my nose, I decide to keep breathing only with my mouth until I can get out of this car.

He shrugs and pushes the package open with a finger. Raising it to his lips, he pulls one of the cigarettes out with his teeth and then tosses the package onto the dashboard. "Can't imagine driving without smoking," he says around the cigarette. "Be like screwing without anyone else there." He reaches into the darkness above the tape deck and pulls out the glowing lighter. I drink some more as he lights the cigarette.

When the next song comes on, I don't recognize it, but Eddie begins to bellow along with the chorus. He starts to swerve the car again, trying to somehow keep time with the music. Inside me, there is growing a strange urge to burst into laughter.

"You're going to have to wash your car," I say during one of his silent moments.

"Hah? Why?" He blows a smoke ring.

"The skunk. You're going to have dead skunk plastered all over the bottom of your car." I suppress a giggle, distantly wondering why I have to do so.

"Ah, hell," he laughs, "don't worry about that. I've had far worse on there and I'm going to again. I like to think of it sort of like a trophy, you know?"

"Sure." I finish the beer and wonder briefly what to do with the empty before dropping it into the others.

"More in the back," he says cheerfully. "Help yourself."

I do and when I return my attention to the road, we are approaching an intersection I vaguely recognize. The highway continues to the right, leading eventually to Lindsay. The left branch is a worn, older road I have never followed. A stop sign marks the crossroads and as we approach it, I take a firm grip on the door handle and prepare myself to jump.

Eddie doesn't even shift down, let alone come to a stop. We take the turn at full speed and I can only stare at the line of trees coming towards my window. Then the car is fishtailing away, Eddie is howling, and we're speeding down the left road.

"Hey," I shout, "this isn't the way I'm going! You can let me out! Now!"

"Don't sweat it, Lans. You'll make it home."

"I want to get there alive! Stop the bloody car and let me out!"

"No can do, my friend." He shakes his head and blows smoke at

me. "We're on a runs, Lans. Can't you hear her calling?"

"Who?"

"Mother Nature, man. The animal bitch."

"Mother Nature." I lean away from him until my back is against the door.

"Listen to her. You can always hear her at night but she's afraid to make a peep during the day."

"I don't hear anything but the music."

"Listen." He rolls down the window and cool air floods into the car, along with the sound of the rushing wind. I can hear nothing else but the Ramones song now playing. He looks over at me again and the smile is gone.

"She thinks she can beat me, you know? She doesn't realize me and my baby here—" He thumps the dash.

"—are king and queen." He suddenly thrusts his head out the window and his shout is carried back into the car by the wind. "Make way for progress, bitch! I've got enough muscle here to take on anything that you got!" When he pulls back into the car, he is smiling once more. "You ain't got a car, huh Lans?"

"No." I slide back into the seat and begin to wonder not *how* I'm going to get out, but *if*.

"Too bad, too bad." He flicks the remainder of the cigarette out the window. "No offence, but a man's not really a man unless he's got himself a set of wheels. The meaner, the better."

While I'm considering the answer, a raccoon wanders out onto the road. It freezes in the lights the same way the skunk had and we roll over it the same way. I drink.

"What exactly do you have against small animals?" I ask between his vic-

tory whoops.

"Hell, I don't like the big ones either."

"All right then. What do you have against animals?"

"They got no damned right being on my road!"

"Your road?"

"You got it. I'm the king of the pavement. You step into my world, you better damn well belong there!"

"Animals don't belong in the world?" There had to be logic here somewhere that I could pin down.

"No!" He shakes his head and reaches for another cigarette. "Old world, man, old world."

"Old world?"

"That's right. You and me, Lans, we're the new world. Even if you don't have wheels."

I consider that as he lights up. "I don't follow you," I finally admit.

"It's simple," he declares, blowing smoke rings again. "Machines. Driving machines. City-building machines. That's progress. We're progress. New world."

"Right..."

"There isn't room for both worlds, is there?"

"Well, I'm not sure about..."

"No way, Lans. Too much power here. It's like the electric guitar, you know?"

I drink and consider the road ahead.

"The electric guitar. Came along and bam! It's the way now, isn't it? Everything that came before it, gonzo!"

"Country music's still around," I point out.

"Dying!" He waves his hand around wildly and sparks fly off the

cigarette. "Already dead! And what's replacing it? Power! Loud and noisy and kick-ass!" He slaps the steering wheel hard. "That's what we got here, Lans! In-your-face power. And Mother Nature doesn't like that. She likes country music."

"So you're driving over these animals because they're...not part of progress?"

"Yeah, something like that. But it's not like I started it, you know. They come looking for it."

"Mm."

"They walk out onto the road, right? And you know why?"

"No." I raise the beer can to my face and roll the cool metal across it.

"Kind of like moths. They hear me coming and they're attracted to the sound of the future. To that *sound of power*. It's like...a summons, a dog whistle sort of idea. They come and I smash 'em."

"How long have you been doing this, Eddie?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. Ever since I had a car. First time I took it on the road, I knew, man, I knew I was born to be the hunter." He chuckles. "Bagged me a coon and a groundhog that first time." Then he gazes out the open window for a few seconds. "First time I met her too."

"Her?"

"Yeah." When he turns back to the road, his face has lost all traces of humour. "Surprised her. Rainy night. She was all wet and gleaming. When I saw her, I knew I was born for this hunt."

"So when do you win?" I lower the can to my lips.

"When I get them all. When I cor-

ner her for the last time."

"What if she's not ready to be cornered?"

"She doesn't have a choice in the matter. I just keep coming."

"Uh." I drop the can to the floor, not caring about the beer that spills out onto the floor. "Look, you've got a really interesting philosophy here but I really think that it's time I got out now. Walk off the beer, enjoy the night air and all that."

He grins his crazy grin and shakes his head. "Told you, man, you're along for the ride. Once I start driving, I don't stop. There's no stopping me and my machine. No stopping progress."

"What if you run out of gas?"

"Never happens." He fastens both hands tight on the steering wheel.

"Never?"

"No. The ride's always over before that can happen." The smile pulls back into a snarl and I'm reminded of the raccoon's face just before it disappeared.

"What do you mean, the 'ride'?" Before he can answer, a deer steps out of the forest and onto the road before us.

It walks like it owns the pavement, moving with more grace than any other deer that I've ever seen. A female, and white, pure white except for the eyes reflecting red. It stops and stands there, a sleek statue in the headlights. My breath catches in my throat as it regards us.

Eddie roars and his hand is a blur on the gearstick. "There she is!" I'm suddenly slammed back into the seat and the steady growl of the engine becomes a shriek that drowns out the music. "There she is!" I don't know

whether he's talking to me or to himself.

"Don't!" I cry as the deer grows in the windshield. "Don't!" But my plea is lost in the medley of Eddie and machine and all I can do is watch as we bear down on the deer.

Then it's moving, still graceful, leaving us behind like a bullet leaving the barrel of a gun.

"Bitch!" Eddie screams. "You're not getting away! Not this time!" He hunches over the wheel, hair whipping crazily in the wind and ashes dancing around his head.

The deer glides down the yellow center line, never looking back at us or changing pace. Moving slowly and easily. It can outrun us, I think. And if it can, then why doesn't it? Because it's just playing with us? If so, we shouldn't be hunting it. "Don't chase it! You can't catch it!" I shout but Eddie pays me no attention.

We take a corner without slowing and for a brief second we are fishtailing again, the rear tires biting gravel before Eddie manages to wrench the car straight. At this speed, I keep my hand away from the door handle.

"This is it, Lans!" Eddie screams, pounding the dash briefly with one hand. "She's mine this time! The hunter bags his prey!"

I can't answer, don't know what to say as I watch the deer. Then a rabbit tries to cross the road behind it. There is a thump, and a grey and white mass cartwheels past Eddie's window at the same time a spray of black hits the windshield. Eddie flicks his wipers on with a quick hand snap.

"Ha! They know, they know I've got her this time! They'll be out in force trying to save her ass but it won't do

any good!" He leans his head out the window again and I scramble for the steering wheel, trying to keep us straight. "You hear me, bitch? You're going down this time!" He pulls himself back in and knocks my hands away. I sink back into my seat as we bump over something I don't see.

"The only one I haven't gotten," he yells, face glowing with sweat. "And look at her! It's my road, damn it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I've killed everything else that dared set foot on this road. You name it, it's gone down. Everything but this one. She's playing her last ace up the sleeve. Suckered me the first time and wiped me out, stopped me from chewing up her world. But I've got her this time; the ace is about to be shredded. I'm not going to burn this time, baby. I'm going to claim another trophy and then it's time for a change!"

Something else dies under the wheels of the car and then the deer is turning into the woods. The road continues straight ahead, empty.

Eddie doesn't hesitate; he turns the car to follow. "Running scared now, huh? Know that I can take you anywhere on the road, don't you?"

There is a large jolt as we leave the road and then we are bouncing across the forest floor. Eddie starts laughing and twisting the wheel around. He doesn't take his foot off the gas pedal.

The windshield is a blur of grey trees, patches of blackness, the white of the moon, and the white of the deer flowing through the woods ahead of us. Somehow, Eddie is managing to guide the car between the trees. Both of my hands are on the dash, trying to keep myself in my seat as beer cans bounce

all around me. I can't help but thinking that we've left Eddie's world now and we're in hers. The laugh begins to rise in my throat again and then freezes when I get a clear look at the ground we're driving over.

The floor of the forest is not actually visible. Instead, there is a carpet of animals, all of them moving. Raccoons, skunks, groundhogs, squirrels, rabbits, a porcupine, even a turtle with its shell reflecting the headlights. They're crawling everywhere in this linked mass, with the trees just rising through them. We drive over them, after the deer. I don't think its feet ever touch this strange, impossible ground.

"Look at 'em all!" Eddie laughs. "They've all come back! Every one of them! It's time! It's time!"

I can say nothing in return, cannot even move. My mind distantly registers the sounds of Red Rider's "Lunatic Fringe" whispering through the shrieking and grinding of the car's engine.

Then the animals are gone just as suddenly as they appeared, and then the trees are also left behind. It is just us, the night sky with its stars and bright moon, and the deer. And the sheer, rocky wall of cliff that fades in out of the darkness in front of us.

"Mine, you're mine!" Eddie whoops as I slam myself back in the seat and frantically pump my feet against the floor. "You're all—" His voice breaks off as the deer meets the cliff wall and flows *up* it without changing pace.

"You can't do that!" Eddie screeches. He gapes up, watching the deer disappear from the cones of the headlights.

My hand finds the door handle

and I am pulling it and diving out. The wind catches me and spins me in a rough darkness. Then a wave of heat scorches my face, something hits me hard several times all over, and the darkness is everywhere.

The first light I see is moving, flickering. When my eyes slowly regain focus, the illumination becomes apparent as fire that is dying inside the burned-out wreck of Eddie's car. The vehicle is a folded-up splinter of metal pressed against the cliff, with debris strewn about the ground. I don't look long for any sign of him in the wreck, turning instead to inspect myself.

Somehow, I've managed to escape with only scrapes and bruises, a small cut on my forehead, and a twisted ankle. The dim light of the fire shows patches of thick grass between me and the car; it must have been them which cushioned my roll. I start to rise and the sounds of movement drift down from the top of the cliff. A scraping noise and then pebbles rolling until they bounce off the car with tiny pinging noises.

I freeze, keeping my eyes fixed on the ground before me. "The night's still yours," I breathe. "I've got no interest in taking it from you."

There is another sound of movement, this time away from the clifftop and fading away into the night. I stand, still not looking up high, and turn back the way that we had driven. And freeze once more.

The animals are all there, their eyes reflecting the flames as they watch the car burn. They sit in a large semi-circle around the area, some of them bleeding or even mangled from where

the car has struck them. None of them move except for the breaths that they take. I realize that none of them are paying any attention to me; they are all fixed on watching Eddie and the car burn. I take one step forward, then another, and then begin to walk slowly, stepping carefully through the ranks of the circle.

Once on the other side, I walk as quickly as I can with my damaged ankle, leaving the light of the fire behind and using the moon's for guidance.

When I finally hear the distant sounds of a vehicle, the moon is gone and the sky is grey. The trail of Eddie's car is long since lost and now there is

only the trees and grass that I move through. I stop and listen, tracking the fading-away of the vehicle, and then move in the appropriate direction. When rusted cans and scraps of paper start appearing in the grass, I know the road is near.

Then I'm breaking free of the woods and it stretches before me. I fall into the ditch, amid the garbage, and crawl forward until I'm on the gravel shoulder and my hands touch the asphalt. I look to either side but there are no cars, only empty pavement. Slowly, I lower my head to the road and lie there, still and staring down the grey line framed on either side by that dark forest. •

PETER DARBYSHIRE currently lives in London, Ontario where he is completing an Honors English/Drama degree at the University of Western Ontario. He will begin graduate studies in the fall of 1995. Publication of "The Roadkill Man" marks his first Canadian sale. He's looking forward to many more.

Red Rover, Red Rover...

The theme for our Spring 1996 issue will be "X-F," or Cross-Genre SF, a theme we hope will inspire writers to explore some wild new frontiers. From now until the deadline (May 31/95 for the Spring 96 issue), we'll be looking for stories that are *combinations* of common (and uncommon) SF themes. Some, like crime/horror or dark fantasy/romance, are pretty common crossovers. What we'd like to see are some really off-the-wall combinations: crime/hard SF, horror/romance, ghost/magic realism, ET meets King Arthur—okay, okay, I take that one back! What we DON'T want to see is any form of "cute"; any kind of punchline or shaggy-dog story ("Guess what! He's an alien!"); splatter for no good reason; stories with no attention paid to character, motivation, plot (all those things that make a good story good). As always, we ARE looking for tight, well-constructed fiction with an emphasis on character. Oh, and did I mention that the cross-genre aspect has to be intrinsic to the story? It has to *work*.

Come on. I dare you. Take a walk on the wild side...or two. ● ☺

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- **Vol. 5, No. 1** (#12) Spring/93.
Theme: Over the Edge – Erik Jon Spigel, M.A.C. Farrant, Lyle Weis, Robert Boyczuk, Jason Kapalka, John Skaife, Michael Hetherington, Dirk L. Schaeffer, Eileen Kernaghan, Tim Hammell. Cover: Kenneth Scott.
- **Vol. 5, No. 2** (#13) Summer/93.
Robert J. Sawyer, Jason Kapalka, Bill Wren, Marian L. Hughes, Alison Baird, Bruce Barber, Nicholas de Kruyff, Hugh A.D. Spencer, Barry Hammond, Colleen Anderson, Tim Hammell. Cover: Rob Alexander.
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- **Vol. 5, No. 4** (#15) Winter/93
Derryl Murphy, Catherine MacLeod, T. Robert Szekely, Robert Boyczuk, Ivan Dorin, Luke O'Grady, M.A.C. Farrant, A.R. King, Wesley Herbert, Dave Duncan (excerpt from *The Stricken Field*). Cover: Robert Pasternak.
- **Vol. 6, No. 1** (#16) Spring/94
Theme: Hard SF. Karl Schroeder, Leah Silverman, Jean-Louis Trudel, Cory Doctorow, Phillip A. Hawke, Jason Kapalka, Wesley Herbert, Lydia Langstaff, Leslie Gadallah. Cover: James Beveridge.
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ARMOR

Tanis MacDonald

She climbs the rocky slope, grey summer and winter, fogged with rain and altitude. Her chain mail, too big for her, forged for the dead soldier, clanks and shivers on her like rusting birds, hard eyelets of steel rough against her skin, rubbing away remnants of finery.

She can just recall the roan horse that brought her this far, dead almost as long as the soldier, the soldier she saw one day riding between her rows of corn. He was bronze as the sun, she pale and grimy in her farm clothes. He drew his sword as he galloped down the rows, the roan lathered with sweat beneath him, and in a great arc, he cut down the ears of corn, slashed them from the stalks.

They plummeted to the ground like lead children, like dead pheasants, like a rain of stones. And he laughed, reined the roan to wheel down another row, swinging his sword above his head, shearing off ears to hard ribbons, useless on the ground.

And she tore in half—her mother's death, her father's toil, her seven year's hard labor; she went to the cedar chest to get her best clothes. When he rode into the yard, she met him wearing a dress of the lightest gauze; he did what she knew he would—reached an armored hand down to her, and swung her up onto the roan's sturdy back. They galloped away, no words between them, far from the ten acres of hard-scrabble land, measly rat-infested corn, away from the shorn stalks, from her only home.

He twisted in the saddle and smiled at her as they galloped past the abbey. The nuns watched her speeding away with the strange soldier, and said a novena for her. She was ours, they said, raw-knuckled and silent, but ours just the same. Now she is lost to a wastrel, given herself away to the first bold smile and fast horse. The nuns sang and were grateful to be brides of Christ, who rode only a donkey and carried no sword.

She saw her chance crossing a cold stream, hours later. Her arms were wrapped tightly around his waist. When he turned again to grin at her, and opened his mouth to speak for the first time, she gripped the hilt of his sword and pulled it sharply up, pitching him sideways with the blow to the chin. She threw her full weight against his unbalanced body, unseating him from the roan. His own weight and the armor pulled him into the shallow stream. Through the shock of the cold water, he could barely feel his heavy tunic being hauled up, exposing his belly, vulnerable as a fish. She stood over him, clutching the dripping sword in both hands, and still without a word, plunged it through his stomach. He could only stare.

It was mine, she said. You had no right. No right at all.

She watched him die, standing thigh-deep in the freezing water. His eyes rolled back in his head—he didn't grin any more.

It was mine, she whispered to his wet corpse as she struggled his limp limbs out of the chain mail. She donned the drenched armor in mid-stream, pulling it on over her gauzy dress, the rag-tag hems and flounces protruding beneath, then clambered up onto the roan, and turned to the high cliffs.

In the abbey, the nuns grieve for her—the armored woman. She climbs the rocks each foggy day and sometimes remembers the day she ate the horse—it was mercy, really, the poor thing so skinny and crazed by then. The abbess says a special prayer for her each autumn when the corn ripens. A prayer for rash deeds done by people at the moment of breaking.

Three words are scratched into each stone on the spare mountainside. It was mine. It was mine.

Fog covers the mountain and the woman's pale face. She brushes aside the filmy remnant of her skirt, and climbs higher. •



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THE OLD DOG

David Nickle

Flies begin to circle the old dog's bowl, only seconds after Lisa's mother has set it on the porch and turned away. At the smell, the dog's matted fur twitches twice and he huffs. He does not get up immediately.

Lisa lets the drape fall back and sips at her tea; the screen door clatters open and closed again. Lisa's mother Anne comes back into the kitchen.

"Hug," she says and extends her arms.

Lisa sighs and stands. Her mother has been demanding hugs like toll coins, as they pass every minor event through their vigil at Aunt Cheryl's sickbed. This time, Lisa feels her mother's shoulders tremble, while in the small room at the back of the house, Aunt Cheryl begins to snore. The sound is a weak, irregular drone that makes Lisa think of cancer—although Lisa knows full well that cancer is not the thing that is ailing Aunt Cheryl. Lisa feels her mother's face get hotter on her shoulder and then the tears come.

"Listen," whispers Lisa as the snores intermingle with the lapping sound the dog makes outside. "She's sleeping. She's sleeping. Listen."

Lisa's mother steps back from the hug and wipes her eyes. "I'm sorry," she says. "I'll be strong."

"Go to bed, Mother. Get some sleep. I'll keep a watch on things for awhile." She nods. "Watch things..."

"Go to bed," Lisa repeats. The lapping outside has stopped. "Now, Mother."

"I can handle things on my own." Her voice is very small. "I hate to think of all the time you're missing at work. You can go back to the city any time."

"I'm here now, Mother. Here is where I'm staying." Lisa doesn't contradict her mother any further; doesn't say that she can no more go back to the city now than her mother could stay here alone, with Aunt Cheryl. She guides her mother to the stairwell.

When she goes upstairs, Lisa steels her nerves and walks to the porch door.

68 THE OLD DOG

The dog is lying on his side again—if Lisa hadn't known better, she would swear he hadn't moved since she'd last seen him. The black flesh around the dog's toothless gums glistens like an open wound in the afternoon sun.

Lisa steps over the dog and picks up the bowl. He hasn't finished his dinner, she notes.

The chicken's blood, what is left of it, has already begun to congeal in the shallow circular moat at the bowl's base. Lisa hurries back inside and runs the water in the kitchen sink until it is hot enough to scald.

The unfinished dinner steams and pinkens, then spills down the drain.

The tea is cold. Lisa finishes it anyway, and sets the cup in the sink on top of the clean white bowl. Across the house, Aunt Cheryl's snoring undergoes a metamorphosis. The sun sets over the west orchards and Lisa's mother comes downstairs.

"Hug," she says. Lisa goes to her.

The dog is gone in the dark. Lisa is in the back room, beside the bed. Aunt Cheryl raises her eyebrows, as if to say:

Easy, Lisa. Easy, girl. Remember your place.

When Lisa was seven, Aunt Cheryl told her stories about where the dog went at night, the things that it did.

"The dog has always moved better at night. He goes wandering, hunting night things through the orchard and into the neighbours' lot. Jumps in the pond and swims to the bottom and back. Forgets us until sunrise. Then he's ours again."

Aunt Cheryl made Lisa bend down over the dog, and with a finger she touched the animal's fluttering eyelid, drawing it open. "Look," she said, and Lisa saw as the setting sun cast its glow into the eye, making it burn like a coal. "The fire's already starting in him."

Tonight Aunt Cheryl is propped upright in the old hospital bed that the family men set up in the back room after Aunt Cheryl took ill. Dentures, unused for three months, sit in a glass of water thick like formaldehyde on the tiny night table beside Aunt Cheryl's bed. Arrayed across the flower-patterned wallpaper over her is a trio of watercolour paintings. They are remarkably similar to one another, still-life renderings of rotting fruit and murky-green bottles and old stoneware plates, surrounded by kinetic washes of purples and yellows and greens that still look wet—although Aunt Cheryl painted the last of them twenty-three years ago.

Aunt Cheryl does not paint anymore. She does not cook or clean or walk or, as of last week, even speak her thoughts aloud. She raises her eyebrow, though, and smiles at Lisa from beneath the three old paintings, and says with her eyes:

Easy, girl.

The old dog is so different now. He is a mongrel breed, with the thick, curly hair of a poodle, and thin bangs that nearly cover his eyes and suggest a sheep dog in his ancestry.

His hair is black; his legs and body, long and thin. When six-year-old Lisa first met him, his fangs were also long and thin; and hollow, like a rattlesnake's.

"Do you see, Lisa?" Aunt Cheryl moved her hand down from the old dog's eyes, pulling back his lips so the one fang was clearly visible. The bone curved down like a tiny scimitar, its tip seeming broken where the tooth opened into a tube, thin as the veins in Aunt Cheryl's hands. Aunt Cheryl ran her thumb down the length of the tooth and the old dog gave a hopeful whimper. Aunt Cheryl nodded and her thumb stopped at the tooth's point. With a little grimace, she pressed against it, hard.

"You've never seen anything like that before, have you Lisa?"

Now, the dog is as toothless as Aunt Cheryl. He is still a mongrel, his hair is still black. But without his teeth, he is another dog. Lisa does not know where he goes at night, but it cannot be to hunt.

Behind the woodshed, Lisa's mother is killing a chicken. The noise of her struggles carries into the back room; Aunt Cheryl closes her eyes, as though by doing so she could banish the commotion of her sister's inexperienced slaughter. Lisa leans over from her bedside chair and takes Aunt Cheryl's hand. It is like ice to the touch.

"Oh damn!" Her voice carries in with a low, angry tone—the tone she always brings to this particular chore. "Damn damn damn!"

Up until only a few months ago, Aunt Cheryl could take care of the chickens. She was an "expert," everyone agreed; indeed, it would have been surprising had she been anything less. She had looked after the family's needs for years, and over such a span she must have done thousands of

chickens. When Lisa was seven, Aunt Cheryl took her out to the woodshed to show her how it was done.

An early-winter snow frosted the chopping block, and Aunt Cheryl brushed it clear as she set down the axe next to a small detergent bottle that had been sawed off at the neck. The chicken coop was across the driveway, and Aunt Cheryl patted Lisa on the back as they started over.

"You choose," said Aunt Cheryl. The sun was down, so Cheryl turned on the light inside the coop as they went in. The chickens squatted in sluggish rows on their roosts, and Lisa pointed to a small black one high up.

"We'll grab it by the feet," said Cheryl. "If we're quick, the bird won't struggle at all."

Aunt Cheryl was quick: right hand firm on the bird's breast, left hand sliding under, taking the two clawed feet into a firm three-fingered grip. The chicken's tiny head darted left and right, but it was quiet as they walked back across the driveway to the chopping block.

Lisa had heard the expression, "running around like a chicken with its head cut off" at school, and when she asked Aunt Cheryl about it, the older woman nodded.

"If you let them go, that's what happens. But we won't do that tonight. It's messy; the blood goes everywhere." She scratched the chicken under its beak and laid it, breast-down, on the block. The head kept moving, left and right, a puzzled twitch. Still holding tight on the legs, Aunt Cheryl lifted the axe. "That's why we use the bottle. Pick it up, dear."

Lisa lifted the bottle. Its opening, she saw, was just a little wider than the chicken's neck. Lisa remembers feeling afraid that day, but if she is honest with herself, what she really felt was elated: the slaughter of the chicken that night was a crossing for her, an admittance into the substance of the family and its adult world of responsibility, continuity.

When the chicken's head slowed and settled forward on the block, Aunt Cheryl brought the axe down and Lisa didn't hesitate an instant. She leapt forward, holding the bottle tight as Cheryl jammed the chicken's neck, head still attached, into the slightly-wider neck of the bottle. Blood splattered into Lisa's eyes, and she could feel the hot droplets as they sprayed across her face. The chicken head hadn't fit in the bottle—it cricked back on itself, staring over its own spasming wings at Cheryl as she set down the axe and held the bird against the block with her own weight.

The old dog was there when the bird died and the bottle was full. As an indulgence, Aunt Cheryl set the chicken carcass down in the snow, the blood barely trickling now, made black in the dusk. The old dog lowered its head to the open neck as they carried the bottle of blood inside.

Lisa remembers the sound he made not as a lick, but a suck.

"I'm going upstairs!" shouts Lisa's mother as she shuts the screen door. Lisa catches a glimpse of her through the back room's open door. Her mother is carrying the same plastic bottle as Lisa had those long years ago, but she can't have collected much blood: her blouse is streaked and glis-

tening, her face and hair splashed with thick redness. She doesn't even look at Lisa, hurrying into the kitchen with the bottle to set it down before stomping upstairs, to the bathroom where she will no doubt run the shower for a long time.

Lisa shouldn't have let her mother do the chicken; if she'd known her mother was going to, she would have volunteered to do the job herself.

Aunt Cheryl's head has slumped onto her shoulder, her eyes shut in sleep now. The snores resume.

The old copper pipes running behind the pictures rattle and squeal as Lisa's mother turns on the shower faucet upstairs.

From the porch, Lisa can hear a whimpering. When the screen door begins to rattle, Lisa is already on her way.

The dog complains as his claws clatter across the kitchen floor. Lisa follows him into the kitchen, watching him carefully as he sniffs around the base of the refrigerator, where Lisa's mother has presumably put the bottle. He raises his head with a whimper and looks with pleading dog-eyes up at Lisa. She does not move, however: this bottle is not for him, and he has eaten enough today anyway. The hemoglobin is too rich for the dog's stomach to digest very much of at one time. Aunt Cheryl claimed she learned this the hard way not very long after the dog lost his eyeteeth.

"He's got to slow down," Aunt Cheryl had said. "He doesn't know it yet; it'll take years for the lesson to sink in. But he's already starting to show his years."

The dog whimpers once more, but Lisa is firm and the refrigerator door stays closed. Dejected, he turns and slumps back out of the kitchen, snuffling his nose along the floor as he goes.

Upstairs, the shower shuts off, and Lisa can hear her mother's feet as they splash naked against the linoleum floor. As the bathroom door opens, perfumed steam billows out that Lisa can smell in the kitchen.

"Lisa?" Her mother's voice quivers around the name.

"Are you there?"

"Yes, Mother," Lisa calls.

"Come and get the dog," she calls back. "He knows he's not supposed to be up here."

Before Lisa can answer, there is a clatter—claws on linoleum, on porcelain, against metal pipe—then the rubber sound of wet flesh sliding, and Lisa's mother shouts:

"Lisa! *Damn you!* Lisa!"

The old dog growls, in a way that sounds almost human; a noise Lisa has not heard in years. Without another thought, Lisa rushes up the stairs, to her mother's rescue.

"Kill the damn thing."

Lisa was eight years old, and sick. She was in Cheryl's bed, with an ice-pack to drive the fever down and a bucket at her bedside for the vomiting. They didn't think that Lisa was in any state to overhear the conversation in the hall, but they were wrong.

"Don't be ridiculous." Aunt Cheryl's voice was lower than Ann's, but her enunciation was razor-sharp. "The dog is a part of the family."

"That's not what you mean," said Ann. "The dog is the family as far as

you're concerned. More than me, more than Lisa."

"The girl will be fine in a day or so. You know that as well as I."

"Kill it," said Lisa's mother. "If you don't, I will."

"Annie, you can't even kill a chicken properly. Don't make empty threats."

"Look at what it did to her!" she shouted, then dropped back to her half-whisper. "My baby could die, Cheryl!"

Cheryl laughed, a dry sound devoid of kindness. "That's one thing I wouldn't worry about."

"Just kill it. For Lisa if not for me."

"Lisa is for us, now, Annie. The dog chose her, like he chose me. There's nothing for Lisa now but the covenant."

Lisa scratched at the thick bandage around her left forearm and turned over. She must have slept, because she didn't remember hearing anything else after that, for the entire three days it took for the fever to break.

The old dog is on top of Ann. It appears to have launched itself off the edge of the bathtub, hitting her full in the chest and propelling her against the door of the linen closet. Now she is slumped on the floor, her neck bent in a way that at first makes Lisa think it is broken, while the dog licks hungrily at the fresh cut on her scalp. The dog's human growl mixes uneasily with Ann's low, insensate moan.

Lisa nearly falls herself as she crosses the wet bathroom floor. She grabs the old dog's collar and tugs, but the dog is hungry and doesn't move. Her mother's eyes are screwed shut, her mouth pinched in disgust under-

neath the dog's thin chest. Lisa pulls harder, this time actually lifting the dog by his collar so that his paws scrabble for purchase in the air. The old dog's snarl chokes into a whimper as Lisa pushes him out the door, shutting it behind him. Her mother is sobbing now, holding her bleeding scalp with one hand and the folds of her bathrobe with the other.

"Hug," says her mother, looking up with reddened eyes.

Lisa starts toward her mother, arms open, lips curling away. The smell at once draws and warns.

"No." Lisa says back.

"Lisa, honey." Her mother tries to get up but slips and falls again. "I don't know...how much longer..."

Lisa is aware that her own breathing is quickening, her heart beginning to race. She backs towards the door, opens it without turning.

"Clean yourself up, Mother," says Lisa. She turns and steps into the hall. The smell of her mother's blood mingles in the hallway with the perfumed shower-mist—a nearly irresistible combination. Lisa runs downstairs, knocks the screen door against its hinges as she escapes the house and its smells and its sounds.

Lisa does not stop running until she is in the midst of the orchard. She finally falls against the trunk of a tree, holding her side and sucking the fragrant night air in desperate gulps. Although she has spent many an afternoon in the west orchards, Lisa cannot for the life of her think of where she is now. For although Aunt Cheryl taught Lisa many things over their years together, she never properly explained

the night.

Lisa lifts her head, sniffing. There is the perfume of the apple trees; a moist rot, from the pond; whiffs of the chickens, of grass, of wildflower...

And the dog.

As her nose works around the scent, Lisa imagines that she can place the dog from only his smell. He is trotting down the lane from the house, she thinks, shutting her eyes to help form the picture in her mind. The scents describe his tarrying outside the chicken coop—the sudden, prescient panic of the birds inside makes a smell like roasted chestnuts. The old dog doesn't stay long, though. He is coming to Lisa. His scent is swatting at her, growing stronger as it wafts back and forth on the thin breeze between the trees.

In the pitch-black orchard, Lisa waits.

When the fever broke, Aunt Cheryl found Lisa on the porch roof. Somehow, she had managed to propel a chair through the bedroom window, and through the hole had clambered out onto the shallow incline of the shingles. She perched still for a moment, considering her next stratagem. Aunt Cheryl climbed out and sat beside her in the setting sun.

"Feeling better?"

Lisa couldn't answer with anything more than a guttural snarl.

"What were you thinking of, Lisa, smashing my window? If your mother were here, we'd have a real upset on our hands."

Lisa tried to jump, but Aunt Cheryl was quicker and snatched Lisa's shoulder, wrenching her back. She snapped

futilely at Aunt Cheryl's hand.

"Hey!" Aunt Cheryl grappled the other shoulder and brought Lisa around to face her. "Hey! Is that any way for a lady to behave? You're hungry, Lisa...I understand that. I'm hungry too. But what are you going to do with that hunger? Go scabble in the dirt with the dog? Dig up a hare, or maybe a squirrel?"

Lisa lifted her head and shrieked. Tears streamed from her eyes, stinging her raw cheeks like acid.

"Stop it!" Cheryl shook Lisa twice, snapping her head back and forth like a rag doll's. "You're Family, girl! Family! Remember your place!"

Branches snap in the dark as the old dog draws nearer. Lisa squints through the trees—he is close enough to see, nearly.

The old dog stops moving, to the west. Lisa drops to all fours. The dirt is cool between her fingers, and so rich with scent as to nearly obscure the old dog's smell. On the roof those years ago, Aunt Cheryl had picked up Lisa and carried her over her shoulder back inside. The inviting smells of the night had receded as Aunt Cheryl fed her from the bottle, and by degree Lisa calmed herself.

Tonight, the scent of the earth is as strong as it has been since. And something about the way it mingles with the old dog's scent...and the blood...

Lisa's head snaps back, and a diminishing part of her listens to the snarl that forms itself from her mouth.

The old dog steps from the night. He is enormous—as big, thinks Lisa, as he was when she was eight and found him outside the chicken coop. His pelt

is thick again, and his eyes flash like coals as he blinks. The old dog snarls.

Like Lisa, he is hungry, his appetite whetted by a taste of fine blood. But unlike Lisa, the old dog is toothless.

Lisa stands, a fistful of orchard soil in each hand. She brings each one in turn to her face and inhales deeply.

The warren, she concludes, cannot be far.

Aunt Cheryl used to wear her hair in a tight bun behind her head, drawing her features into a waspish mask that made her appear perpetually gaunt, and pallid. On the day of Lisa's Consecration, Aunt Cheryl broke with tradition. She teased the hair out into a tapered halo, letting some of the color back into her features. Lisa scarcely recognized her Aunt as she came to bring her down for the ceremony.

Aunt Cheryl took Lisa by the hand and led her downstairs. The family had assembled on the porch and lawn, and although not everyone was able to make it there were still more family present than Lisa had ever seen.

One by one, Lisa was introduced to cousins, aunts and uncles once and twice removed; Seatons and Simmons and Fields and Hales, mingling in loose clans about Aunt Cheryl's house. Lisa saw almost none of them since that evening, but she made a special effort to memorize their names, and their handsome, fine-featured faces.

For the first time that Lisa can remember, she was impressed by her own pedigree: lawyers, physicians, scientific researchers and entrepreneurs, they were all to Lisa a concrete example of the things her simple membership in the family empowered her to

accomplish.

The family passed the afternoon together, munching on biscuits and sipping at punch until dark. Lisa spent most of that time with her cousin Philip, who was ten years older than she and studying at Harvard for a degree in business administration. Like many of the others, he was handsome and athletic, and sitting at the picnic table underneath the north oak, he regaled her with funny stories about fraternity life and the Boston subway, and jokes she had not heard. As the sun lengthened their shadows, he noticed her staring at him, and pointed it out.

"I was not." Lisa giggled and averted her eyes.

"It's all right." Philip reached over and rustled his hand through her hair, which Aunt Cheryl had clipped short as a boy's during the fever. Her nostrils flared as his smell came closer. "Look but don't touch, eh Lisa?"

Lisa swallowed and slipped out from under his hand. "I have to go," she whispered.

"Lisa!" Philip stood, a look of dismay on his face. "I'm sorry! Come on back!"

Lisa didn't. She ran to the porch, where Cheryl was talking to Uncle Wallace. Cheryl smiled down, sniffing delicately. "You've chosen," was all she said.

As the sun went down, the family gathered around the porch. Aunt Cheryl summoned Philip, who obediently climbed the stairs and stood beside her.

Lisa's first taste of family blood came less than an hour later. Aunt Cheryl handed her the wine goblet, and when she dipped her canines into the

liquid, the sound was only audible to herself. When she finally handed the glass back to Aunt Cheryl, the family applauded her. Lisa remembers curtsying and excusing herself. Aunt Cheryl took a sip herself then poured the rest into the old dog's bowl.

The rest of the family toasted, with wine, to their continued success in the decades to come. Then Lisa was brought out once more, and they toasted her. Leaning against the oak tree near the back of the crowd, Philip drained his wine glass and dropped it on the ground at his feet.

Lisa is unmindful of the small gashes the hare's hind claws leave on her cheeks as she bites down on the thick artery between its legs. The hare's blood pumps out thicker than her fangs can extract, and fills her mouth with hot brine that runs down her cheeks into the leaves and earth around the warren. It is not like killing a chicken at all—the hare is wild, and even as its life drains away, its struggles are formidable. The stink of its dying fills Lisa's senses in a way that nothing ever has.

"You are a lady," Aunt Cheryl had said. "It's fine for the dog to go hunting at night, but you and I live among the family. We have a measure of self-control the dog doesn't share."

Finally, the hare stops struggling. Although it still is not dead, not empty of blood, Lisa pulls her fangs from the artery and lifts the animal by its ears from her mouth. Its eyes are half-open; its breath, shallow. She sets the hare down beside her, where the old dog crouches waiting. He huffs once, gratefully, and begins licking at the moist punctures Lisa has left for him.

A lady. Torpid with blood, Lisa gazes unblinking into the dark canopy of leaves overhead. She remembers the weeks after her Consecration—her last extended visit to Aunt Cheryl's home, she realizes, until this one—during which time her aunt outlined the behavior that would be expected of her, when she assumed Aunt Cheryl's place decades hence.

"We've achieved great things, as a family and as individuals, since the old dog came. He doesn't ask much of us, not when you look at the fortune he's brought the family as a whole; but he does choose his mistress. He chose me, and now he's chosen you."

"The same way I 'chose' Philip at the Consecration?" asked Lisa.

"Not precisely," replied Aunt Cheryl.

She went on to explain that Philip's blood had been extracted using a hypodermic, his wound sterilized and bandaged using proper medical procedure, so there was no risk of infection. While the natural order of the condition might have been to spread among the family like head lice or measles, it had been decided long ago that containment was the wisest course for all concerned. Only the dog and his chosen mistress would ever contract the disease. Yet through that mistress, explained Aunt Cheryl, the world of advantage opened up before them all.

"The natural order," said Aunt Cheryl, "is for animals. Surely we can do better than animals."

A week later, Lisa's mother came to drive her back to their home in the city.

"Damn!"

The gunshot echoes through the trees, and before that echo dies another shot rings out, jarringly close. Lisa blinks and raises her head.

The dog yelps as his hindquarters collapse underneath him. Ann, wearing rubber boots, a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, works the bolt on the .22 rifle and holds it up to her shoulder. The rabbit twitches listlessly on the ground in front of the old dog, at once alive and not.

"Damn you!" She fires low this time, throwing up leaves and dirt in front of the dog. "Stay away from my baby!" She lowers the rifle, fumbling in her pocket for more bullets.

"What are you doing, Mother?"

Lisa is on her feet. Her mother turns to her, the relief in her expression palpable.

"Honey," she says, "you're all right...I thought...with the blood..."

"I'm fine, Mother." Lisa reaches forward, snatches the gun from her mother's hands. Her face pinches around the new smell of the dog, the stink of his pain. "The blood isn't mine."

Lisa's mother takes a step backwards, staring at her empty hands. "Oh honey, you're not thinking straight..."

Lisa doesn't contradict her. Since before the Consecration, her mother kept herself deliberately apart from the family's activities, even when involvement might have saved her marriage, moved her into a better-positioned career, let her keep her figure a few years longer.

Only as Cheryl lay toothless and dying did she return to the family home. And as far as Lisa could tell, that return was prompted more by an

insect-like compulsion, a worker ant returning to the nest when its queen was in danger. Ann came without any real understanding of exactly what Aunt Cheryl's new condition implied.

Lisa can't find it in herself to blame her mother, though. Until this moment, Lisa realizes, she hasn't fully comprehended that condition herself.

"Give me the bullets," she says.

"Come home, honey," says Ann. "Let's go home. Don't play this game any longer."

Lisa turns away. "There's no game. Why did you kill the dog?"

"The dog's a monster. It always was. I should have killed it years ago, before it..."

The blood in Lisa's belly is still making her slow, but the long silence that her mother leaves is too long even in Lisa's current state. "Before it did what?"

"Before it did everything. Before it took you away from me. Made you into...Oh, God...I hate this damned family. I don't hate you, honey, don't think that..." When Lisa turns, Ann is leaning against a tree, fingers of one hand fanned over her face as the dog whimpers and twitches on the forest floor. "I wish we could have just left it ... moved away, escaped this ... abomination. Before all this started."

"Thank you, Mother."

She looks up, the expression on her fallen face signifying nothing to Lisa. The blood on her scalp has clotted, the cut scabbed over; the smell is not so bad.

"Thank you for what?"

"For pointing out the truth."

Her mother's mouth opens into a wet, grateful smile.

"Oh sweetheart," she says. And their eyes meet, mother and daughter. Lisa does not blink.

"And thank you for giving me the bullets."

Ann doesn't even try to flinch from Lisa's gaze. She pulls her hand out of her pocket and the three remaining bullets clink as she drops them into Lisa's palm. Without looking away, Lisa loads the three bullets into the clip.

"Go back to the house," Lisa tells her mother.

She turns, wordlessly, and clomps through the darkened woods to the orchard, to the house. She does not ask for a hug, and Lisa does not volunteer.

A week ago, Aunt Cheryl spoke to Lisa for the first time about her own childhood.

"We were very poor, as you know," said Aunt Cheryl. "The family had come from Ireland to farm, and we'd sunk every penny we had into this piece of property. But the soil wasn't good; aside from the orchards, a vegetable garden and some peat under the pond that we wouldn't start harvesting for another 40 years, there was nothing here to make a decent living from. I sometimes think we found each other, the dog and me."

Aunt Cheryl's eyes became unfocused as she spoke of the old dog. "He was a sight to behold in the beginning," she said. "I met him at the pond on a summer's evening. He broke the surface in a spray of water, and he was upon me before I knew what he was. He chose me that day; he chose our family, and the covenant began."

It was nearly the same for Lisa, but she let her aunt continue rather than

remark on the fact.

"That same year, the University of Toronto accepted Stephen into their faculty of medicine. The old dog never left my side, and we've never wanted for anything, never gone hungry. Not until now."

Aunt Cheryl placed a hand on Lisa's forearm. Her touch was like ice.

"We thought the old dog would make us live forever, in our little covenant. We thought that's what the disease did; life eternal, dominion over the night...and advantage. Pure advantage over the living, even for our short-lived cousins."

"You've lived a long time," said Lisa.

"But not forever, Lisa. When the old dog loses his teeth, he begins to die. So it is with me. So it is with all of us."

"Our 'short-lived cousins' are still living well."

Cheryl's lips puckered around a toothless smile. "For this year. But in a few weeks, surely not longer than a month...I'll be gone. Starved away. Then it will only be you. Just remember what I've taught you, Lisa. Care for the dog. Care for the family. Remember your place."

One bullet is for the hare; the second, Lisa uses to kill the old dog.

A small part of her is surprised at how dispassionately she is able to destroy the animal she has known since childhood—the creature that has made her. Yet the killing when it comes is quick and, she supposes, merciful. She places the gun's barrel at the back of the old dog's skull, purses her lips, and before the pain smell grows any stronger, pulls the

trigger. The dog falls forward, his brains spread in gobbets across the already-bloodied forest floor. Only after the old dog stops moving does Lisa feel anything—and far from grief or sorrow, the feeling that overcomes Lisa is an almost dizzying sense of release. The old dog is out of his misery: the covenant, finished.

Standing alone outside the chicken coop in the early dawn, Lisa briefly contemplates returning to the house, granting her Aunt Cheryl a similar courtesy with the third bullet in the .22. In the end, Lisa decides against that course. Aunt Cheryl is no animal; she is, by her own choice, a lady, and custodian to the family and its fortunes. A dog's death she would neither appreciate nor deserve.

But Lisa cannot bear the stink of the chicken coop for more than a few minutes. The mingling of excrement, feathers and the chickens' stark, unending terror is like a splash of vinegar against Lisa's heightened senses. She cannot imagine drinking their blood without a knot of revulsion tying her stomach; the taste of fine blood, of wild blood, is so far removed. So hefting the rifle over her shoulder, she crosses the driveway to Aunt Cheryl's house.

The screen door is unlatched, the main door inside still open. Lisa's mother has left muddy tracks up the stairs, and looking to the kitchen, Lisa can see the refrigerator door is ajar. The cool chicken blood forms a slick red circle around the refrigerator's base. The dog, thinks Lisa, would have been in seventh heaven.

Aunt Cheryl is awake in the back room, her own bowl of chicken blood congealing on the night-table. Lisa

circles her bed so she stands between Aunt Cheryl and the window. Cheryl's eyelids twitch as Lisa's shadow blocks out the morning light, and Aunt Cheryl's lips move back.

"Stephen," she says, consonants softened on her gummy palate. "The men have been gone a long time."

Yes, says Lisa. Aunt Cheryl's eyes widen with dawning, childlike concern.

"It's so cold out, Stephen! You must fetch the men some blankets!"

Lisa touches Cheryl's still, cool hands. Cheryl looks up at Lisa, as if for the first time. Her eyes narrow, her head cricks forward with a dry rustle.

"You're not my Stephen." Almost imperceptibly, her hands withdraw from Lisa's. "You're not anybody."

From the front of the house, Lisa can hear the screen door as it clatters open and closed. A moment later, her mother's car starts up and crunches down the driveway, towards the highway, the city. Lisa can think of nothing to say to Aunt Cheryl.

When the family men finally come to bury Aunt Cheryl, Lisa watches them arrive from among the trees. There are three of them—Lisa recognizes them not by face or name, but by their scent and their bearing. All three are tall and handsome, with sculpted, health-club

muscles rippling across tanned forearms and even teeth flashing white in the afternoon sun. Their brows are each creased with the burden of their duty as they quit the rented truck, unload the tarpaulin and shovels from the back onto the porch. Then they enter the house, clattering purposefully towards Aunt Cheryl's deathbed and the business at hand.

Lisa makes a rustling in the underbrush, the leaves sifting fragrantly through her long, hardening nails. The family men are strong enough, she thinks: stronger than Cheryl, certainly, and far stronger than their dog ever was. The anger when it comes is a vague mist of a feeling, a sensation nearly forgotten.

Finally, the family men step back onto the porch, the swath of sheet and bone swaying between them like a summer hammock. They don't talk; it's as though they have rehearsed this dance, this final fulfilment of the covenant, for as long as Lisa has prepared for her duties. Of course she knows that they have not.

Hard times will look good on them, she thinks. It will add some character to their perfect faces, their fine white smiles.

When the family men return from the orchard-plot, Lisa is already gone. •

DAVID NICKLE has published stories in *ON SPEC*, *TransVersions*, *Tesseract's*, *Northern Frights* and *Northern Frights 2*, *Christmas Magic*, and will be appearing in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Eighth Annual Edition* with a story originally published in *Northern Frights 2*. In 1993, his story "The Toy Mill" (co-written with Karl Schroeder) won the Aurora award for best short work in English. He lives and works in Toronto.

LEAVES

L.R. Morrison

I hate this town. It's not even a town, just a scabby little bump beside the road. General store/post office, seasonal café with a few cabins, gas station, district fire garage and several homes. I haven't been back for twenty years, and it hasn't changed except to get dingier. You'd think they could have expanded into a resort or something, with the lake nearby. Not that there weren't always a few tourists, but most of them stayed at the public campground fifteen kilometers from here.

I park in front of the store. Athena, my Doberman, shifts expectantly beside me, anxious to get out. "Just a bit longer, girl," I tell her soothingly. "We're almost there."

My uncle's cabin doesn't have a phone or electricity, and I have to get some supplies. Also, Ryan was supposed to meet me here at noon. I'm an hour late and there's no sign of his red Mazda. Asshole. It was his idea to come here, to do some fishing. When I told him my great-uncle had died and there was a cabin near a lake, he talked me into it. I would have been happy never to see the place again.

The storefront is peeling white paint, the same faded signs in the window: NITE CRAWERS in felt pen on cardboard, the L missing, posters from the dawn of advertising: ORANGE CRUSH, PEPSI, HOLESOME BREAD. I push open the door, clank, clank. Same stupid cowbell.

"Hello, Marie." I couldn't have imagined this place without her. She doesn't look any different either; she was born old, thin-lipped and gimlet-eyed. Staring suspiciously from behind the counter, jaws working in disapproval. She always acted as if every customer was a prospective shoplifter.

"I'm Sophie, Henry's niece, remember? How's Ray doing?"

"Hmmp. I figured that was you. Ray's okay; he's out back working on the

pump." Her mouth clamps shut, the lips disappear completely.

"Have you seen a guy around here this morning, in a red sports car?"

She shakes her head.

"My friend was supposed to meet me here—I told him to stop at your store. He has curly black hair, medium height."

"Nobody like that's been here."

She's looking me over. I feel suddenly self-conscious and overdressed, tight leather pants and vest, streaked hair, makeup. Aren't you the fancy one, her eyes jeer. She averts her head, the sight too much for her.

"I just came from visiting my Dad; he said to say hello and to thank Ray for letting him know about Henry."

"Haven't seen him up here in a long time." It's obvious from her tone we've neglected Uncle Henry.

"Do you know if the cabin's open, or does someone have the key?"

"It's where it always is."

I turn and examine the shelves so I can roll my eyes. "And where would that be?"

"Above the door."

I pick out some groceries, easy stuff, bread, coffee, dusty cans of stew and soup. A small container of milk, ice for the cooler. I hope to God Ryan remembers the booze; it's 25 clicks to the nearest liquor store.

Marie rings up my purchases on the ancient till, studying each price tag with care, possibly checking for tampering.

"Is there a phone I can use?" I pull out my wallet.

She inclines her head at another cardboard sign behind her: Local calls only.

I try to make my voice patient. "I need to make a long distance call, Marie, but I have a calling card." Her mouth begins to chew on itself, her eyes shift back and forth.

"You won't be charged a dime... You can listen to me give the operator my number, okay?"

She gets the phone and plunks it down on the counter.

"Thank you." I want to keep on her good side; I may need the phone again.

Ryan picks up after three rings.

"You haven't even left yet?" I'm not all that surprised, but it comes out more irritated than I intend.

"Sorry, babe, I can't make it up today. We didn't finish the demo yet. First thing in the morning."

"Jesus, you're going to make me stay up here alone?"

Marie is right there hanging on every word. I look pointedly at her and finally she shuffles over to the fridge and starts restocking the pop.

I keep my voice down, trying not to sound bitchy. "Ryan, it's gross up here. I don't want to stay by myself in the old bastard's cabin. I just agreed to come because of you."

"Just for one night. And you've got Athena, she'll protect you."

I sigh, there's no use getting upset. "Yeah, yeah, I guess so. But you'd better be here by noon—I'll drive in to meet you, and I'll throw you in the lake if you're late."

"Okay, love, see you soon."

"Wait, Ryan—I'll give you the number here at the store—just in case. You could leave a message." I lower my voice to a whisper. "You'll have to kiss ass. The owners are pretty strange."

After I've put down the phone and collected my groceries, Marie takes up her position again.

"Thanks, Marie. Oh, I gave your number to someone that might need to get a message to me, okay? I'll be coming in tomorrow."

"A message from your friend?" she says, with strange emphasis and a tight, unpleasant smile.

I pretend not to get it, and leave, but I'm shaking with anger. It's just the same here, they never forget anything. Not in twenty fucking years.

The five kilometer stretch of road to the cabin is treacherous. In some spots it's barely a lane wide, winding along the shoreline, climbing up a sheer drop at one point before it heads back into the trees. Uncle Henry's driveway is about a hundred meters of narrow ruts. I park in front of the old clapboard cabin and get out, Athena scrambling after me. It's no different, just more weathered, and the outhouse looks ready to fall over.

Several fishing poles lean in the corner of the porch. I don't even know if it's fishing season this late in the fall. Dad said that the boat is down at the dock; whoever found it adrift towed it in. They didn't find Henry until a few days later, washed up on the shore with a bash across his forehead. Fell out of the boat and hit his head on the gunwale, was the story. His habit of combining hard drinking and fishing was well known. One of the main memories I have of him is his fetid whiskey breath. Horrid old man. Insect-thin body, no ass in his overalls, just puckered folds of denim. Leathery lizard face bending over me whenever Dad

was out of earshot, toothless gusts of whiskey and dirty jokes and innuendo.

I reach up and run my fingers over the rough frame, find the key and open the door. Rustic would be too kind a word. The cabin is filthy with layers of dirt and mess, stinking of the old man.

"Smells like he died in here," I tell Athena, who cocks her head at me, panting. I open all the windows, pulling back the ragged curtains. The water has to run for a long time before the orange rust color clears. I fill a bowl for Athena and open a can of dog food. Then I peel the sleazy pile of blankets off the bed and throw them out on the porch. I knew enough to bring sleeping bags.

Later, Athena and I walk down to the lake. The ground is covered with leaves, inches deep, all yellow and brownish-orange, softening the contours of the forest floor into gentle swells and mounds. Gray slim trunks, widely spaced, rise naked out of the carpet; our feet sink down with each step.

The lake is the same, too. It's rocky along the edge, sharp pebbles that hurt bare feet. I used to swim off the dock, but I never liked this lake. The water wasn't refreshing; you always felt oily afterwards. Weeds beneath the surface brushed against your legs, giving you the creeps, and you couldn't see down into it, just shafts of sunlight swallowed up in smoky green depths.

Athena declines to swim, so we sit on the rickety dock for a while. I note that there's no gas can in the boat, and remind myself to check at the cabin when I get back. Maybe there won't be one around, and that will be enough to

put Ryan off. I don't think he's had much experience with fishing and outboard motors, he just assumes that as a man he has innate knowledge of such things.

On the way back I find the old path, and kick leaves as I walk in an attempt to clear it. Athena keeps looking over through the trees, and I become aware of a scraping or dragging noise from some distance away. We stop and listen, Athena's ears pricked up. The woods are still, the leaves seem to muffle sound; I can't even hear a bird. The noise is repetitive, soft, mechanical in its regularity. A slope rises up in that direction, blocking the view.

"I think there's another old shack over there, girl," I say, fondling her ears. "Someone's just doing some work. Let's go sneak up and see."

I hold on to Athena's collar while we climb the rise; I don't want her running ahead and scaring anybody. "Be quiet now," I tell her.

When I'm high enough to see over the crest I edge up to a thicket and peer through. Sure enough, there's a shack in about the same shape as Uncle Henry's, and a guy outside, adorned in the county uniform, plaid over flannel. He looks a bit like one of those old toys, Weebles—his weight hangs low and bulbous through his thighs and midsection. He's using a shovel as you would a rake to push leaves into a pile. His actions seem pointless as well as odd, the leaves aren't just around the cabin, they're everywhere. One gust of wind, and he'd have the same thing he started with. I add this to my mental list of weird things to tell Ryan.

The man stops for a moment, leaning on the handle, and turns his profile

to me. His face is doughy white, puffy. He stares off into the woods for a moment, his lower lip hanging, then begins again. Now I notice how limited and repetitious his movements are. He must be simple, or retarded, like that kid—Of course, it's him, whatever his name was; only now he's all grown up. And that's where he used to live with his grandparents; I remember Henry talking about him. Birth canal accident?

I don't want him to see me; there's something eerie about him, scraping away in the heavy silence. I turn and descend the hill as quietly as I can, coaxing Athena with whispers.

When it starts to get dark I manage to light the kerosene lamp, but the propane tank for the stove seems empty, something I didn't consider. I eat the last of the sandwiches I brought and resign myself to no coffee in the morning. After I let Athena out for a last pee, I curl up on the sleeping bag with a magazine. If I hold it just right, I can almost see the print. Closing my eyes, I wait for her scratch on the door.

I come to with a start; the lamp is guttering, flashing shadows across the room. I sit up, checking my watch. I've been asleep for almost an hour, and Athena hasn't come back. I go over and open the door, calling her name softly, worried. The night is completely still, pitch black; the lamp casts an oblong pool of dim light over the leaves in front of the door; the boles of the nearest trees are gray ghosts. Then I hear a shuffling, and see green eyes shining out of the darkness.

"Athena," I whisper, relieved, "Where have you been? Come in right

now!"

She's behaving strangely, hanging back in the trees, whining.

"Athena!" She sidles up into the light, and after some more urging I get her inside, and shut and latch the door.

I sit down and she puts her head on my lap. I rub behind her ears.

"Where were you, girl? What do you mean, scaring your mamma like that?"

Then I feel something wet and warm on my fingers. I move her over by the lamp, a *frisson* of fear running up my spine. There's a wound on her head, a long, blunt line where the skin's been broken, blood welling slowly out. The brown depths of her eyes search mine, filled with the uncomprehending pain of the innocent.

"Oh, Athena." I feel sick to my stomach. Getting up, I dampen a rag, and then sit with her, blotting at the blood until it stops.

The wound doesn't look too serious: fairly wide, but shallow. I want to put something on it, and finally settle on some aloe vera sunburn gel.

"I doubt you'd like Uncle Henry's iodine," I tell her.

I put out the lamp and call her up on the bed with me. After we settle in and stop rustling around, I'm almost certain I hear the scraping again, faint but persistent. I throw my arm over Athena's broad chest. "This'll be the last night we spend alone in this inbred dump, mark my words," I assure her. If Ryan doesn't make it tomorrow, I'm getting the hell out of here.

In the morning I'm awakened by the sound of a small engine starting up. I lie in bed listening to it putt by on the

main road, seeming to take forever. I'm sure it's Shovel-Man; I saw an old motorbike, a Vespa, parked by his cabin. I can picture him riding it, hunched over the handlebars like a fat white grub, tunnel-vision stare, keeping barely enough speed up so it doesn't topple over.

At noon I drive into town. The wind is whipping up white-tops on the lake, and clouds are lowering in. Another excuse not to go fishing.

No sign of Ryan's Mazda. I've been trying to picture it parked in front of the store, but it's hard. I have a sudden strange feeling it won't happen; it wouldn't be right, that car would be a glaring anachronism in this colorless place—I can't even picture Ryan here. I doubt he and Marie exist on the same plane—one look at her and Ryan would dissolve her with laughter, melt her like the Wicked Witch. He's so full of life, he only draws people of the same type around him. Not consciously, but the way a magnet does; attracting the compatible, pushing the discordant away. I wonder if he would see me in a new light, here, against this background...

But I have to follow this through. I enter the store.

"Your friend called. Said he was running late." Marie looks smug.

"Maybe I'd better call him."

"Said he was leaving right then."

"What time was that?"

"'Bout an hour ago."

At least two hours until he can get here. "I guess I'll go wait at the restaurant."

"They're closing today."

"Oh, for the season?"

"Gets pretty slow around here

from now on. Tomorrow we're closing the store up, too."

"Really? I thought you stayed open all year."

"Me and Ray always take our vacation 'bout now. We go to my daughter's, in Toronto. They've got a spa pool," she announces loftily. "It's good for our circulation."

That's something I'd rather not picture. I figure I'd better fill my car up before the gas station decides to close too.

But when I start to pull over to the pumps, I see the Vespa parked beside the garage. Apparently Shovel-Man is in there, hobnobbing with the owner. Maybe now would be a good time to run back out and grab the propane tank I forgot.

Before I leave, I stick my head into the store and tell Marie I'll be back to meet Ryan.

She shrugs. "If you don't make it, I'll tell him how to get there."

The propane tank is beside the porch, and too big to bother with for a couple of meals. I kick through the junk in Henry's shed, looking for a smaller tank, or maybe a Coleman stove. They must have canisters at the store for campers; one of those would do it. I'm just reminding myself to check for extra kerosene when I run into the red gas tank. Why would it be here, instead of on the porch with the fishing stuff?

Rain begins to fall, big drops. A few gusts of wind stir up the leaves, sending the top ones skittering across the others like small skeletal winged creatures. Soon the front is overhead, and rain falls steadily, soaking the first layer down. I still have plenty of time

before Ryan arrives; I'll wait and see if it quits.

When I was here that summer twenty years ago it rained a lot, too. Except for all the leaves, this reminds me of that time more than anything so far. Sitting in the cabin, staring at the rain, bored out of my mind.

Then I met those kids whose families were staying at the campground. Their parents would let them take out one of the speedboats. They'd pick me up, and we'd cruise around on the lake, or go to the town's public dock, and hang out at the restaurant. Tad, he was the cute one. We hit it off right away. It was fun for a while, until Shovel-Man—or I guess he would've been Shovel-Boy, back then—ruined everything.

The wind rises again, pushing the rain slantwise against the windows, lashing the tin roof with an uneven hollow drumming. I keep thinking I hear things, engine noises, from the road, but the swaying pines behind the cabin obscure my view. I close my eyes, listening, but I can almost imagine the sounds at will, embodied within the rushing wind.

To hell with this; I'm going into town. I don't trust Marie to give Ryan the right directions. She'd probably send him somewhere else out of spite. What if she lied about the time he called?

Athena is alert and waiting. I put on my jacket, and we run to the car. The wind makes everything a struggle, blowing my hair over my eyes, repeatedly pushing the car door shut. Inside, the rain sounds like hail on the roof, running in blinding rivulets down the windshield. I start the car and turn the

wipers on top speed.

The driveway is already a sea of mud. I make it out, barely, onto the road and lean forward, squinting through the sheets of rain. The trees bow sideways. Leaves are everywhere; pushed into drifts, hitting my windshield in sodden clumps. I'm almost to the bad part, along the cliff, when I see something big and dark in the road ahead. I hit the brakes and slide into the scraping, madly waving branches of a downed tree.

I lean back in my seat, letting the adrenaline wash through me. My legs are shaking. Athena whines and then starts barking, short, staccato bursts. I stroke her, murmuring reassurances, as much for myself as her. The engine has died. I restart the car, and try pulling slowly backwards, cringing as I hear the paint-job staying on the tree. Easing the door open, I step into the bedlam outside, to see if I can bend or break off any of the branches.

I'm soaked in seconds, struggling in vain with the wiry limbs, which snap back, scratching my hands and wrists. One stinging lash across the face and I give up, getting back in the car, slamming the door and swearing. I rev the motor and screech backwards. The tires skid, the car slides sideways. Athena loses her foothold and comes tumbling at me, slamming me against my door as the car hits the bank with a jarring thud.

I push her off, gasping for air. I feel as if I've been caught between two battering rams. Taking shallow, painful breaths, I wait until the tightness subsides. Then I start the car once more. It won't pull out. I pump the gas again and again; the tires spin sense-

lessly, working in deeper. Finally I become aware of Athena, cowering next to me, and stop, ashamed.

"Oh, I've done it this time, girl," I tell her, leaning my head on the steering wheel. "We're screwed now. No Ryan, no town, what the hell are we going to do?"

I have to go back to the cabin. I don't want to, but it's too far to walk to town, and I don't want to stay in the car all night. I don't even have my flashlight; I left it at the cabin.

I fold an old newspaper over my head and get out of the car, Athena pressing close behind me. We walk along the edge of the road, heads down, the wind pushing us along. My kerchief doesn't make it far, the wind peels it off in wet shreds until I let the last tattered piece go. The woods on either side of us grow shadowy, more impenetrable; the storm has brought an early dusk. We make it to the driveway and I step wrong, sinking up to my ankles in a morass of leaves and mud.

The wind, which has been dropping slightly, gives a furious blast and I hear a sharp crack behind me. Startled, I pitch forward and then turn around, just in time to see an uprooted birch fall against another and hang there, captured in the clinging branches.

I run down the driveway, splashing through the puddles. When I reach the cabin I look around for Athena, but she's not with me; the noise from the tree probably scared her. The wind bangs the door open as I turn the knob, blowing a flurry of leaves and rain inside. With what feels like my last bit of strength I push the door shut, and lean

there for a moment in the sudden calm, exhausted.

My towel hangs by the sink. Reaching for it, I peer out the window into the fading light. My stomach lurches at a peripheral glimpse of a strange white face, then I recognize myself in the cracked shaving mirror. I look like hell, hair a tangled mess, a red weal across my cheek from the branch, mascara and newsprint ink streaking my face like war paint. I rub myself down with the towel, periodically going to the door to call Athena, but my voice is swept away, carried off by the wind.

I'm going to have to go look for her if she's not back soon. I realize I'm starving, and open a can of stew, wolfing it down cold. It smells pretty much like Athena's dog food—I picture myself on hands and knees, eating out of her dish, and hear myself laugh. It sounds weird, and I realize how stressed out I am. I've been trying not to think about it. I'm cut off from Ryan, my car's down the road, stuck, Athena's gone...

I'm alone. Here. I really hate this. I pretend I'm angry, but beneath all that is fear. I don't want to go out, into the darkness. I want Ryan to come, to push aside the tree with his bare hands, to take me away. I want Athena back, so I'm not alone anymore. I don't like being alone.

But I have to go out. She's frightened, running from tree to unfamiliar tree, sniffing, disoriented. Maybe she went back to the car. I feel stiff and sore, every movement an effort. I dress in my leather, tie my head in a scarf, pull on my boots. I get the flashlight,

and step out onto the porch.

The wind has died, the rain reduced to a drizzle. My flashlight hits tenuous ribbons of mist, flowing in from the lake, swirling into the hollows, hanging low. My feet squelch in the pulpy mass as I walk to the road.

And then I hear the Vespa start up, over the rise. I turn off my flashlight and wait. Soon a lone headlight, dim and yellow, approaches slowly through the fog. I step off the driveway and stand behind a tree. I'm not asking him for help. I don't want him anywhere near me. I feel as if I'm thirteen again; the same revulsion I felt back then floods into me, stronger than ever.

"You and your friends weren't being mean to him, were you?"

"No, Dad, but he's so gross, when he eats he—"

"You know better than that, Sophie, you know not to judge someone because they're different. What about your friend Laura, with her artificial leg?"

"But—"

"It's the same thing; it's just that his mind is damaged. That's what prejudice is, Sophie. You disappoint me; I thought I taught you that."

I couldn't bear to disappoint my father. I already looked exactly like my mother, who disappointed him in the worst possible way.

"Of course you did, Dad, you're right. I'm sorry."

I hug him, and kiss his forehead until he smiles and his eyes are happy again.

The Vespa slows to a crawl. What the hell is he doing? Then the headlight

swings, slicing across the trees around me. I press myself tight, standing sideways. The light stops, pointing toward the cabin. For an interminable time I listen to the motor repeatedly idle down, almost die, then rise to an irritating whine as he pulls back on the throttle. Finally the light swings back and the bike chugs off, down the road. I'm shaking with relief; I didn't realize how afraid of him I am. I think of the wound on Athena's head, and suddenly I'm running along the road the other way, to his cabin.

This is my chance, to make sure she's not there, while he's gone. What if he hurt her, or shut her up in his cabin? I don't have much time; it won't take him long to get to the fallen tree and to see my car.

At his driveway I stop and shine the light ahead. Everything's quiet, just the soft dripping of rain. I can see the cabin and a shrunken pile of leaves, the bulk of his work blown into a huge drift against a nearby bank. I walk down, flashing the light around, calling softly.

No movement, no response. My flashlight's beam slides across the decrepit cabin, reflected back in the small dark windows. Everything seems incongruous, unreal. What am I doing here? How did I get here, to this place I've spent my life trying to forget?

I shine the light at the leaf pile. It looks disturbed on one side. I don't like this. I step closer. Something thin and dark extends out from it. A dog's leg, distinctive Doberman markings.

This can't be happening. Nothing seems real, not even my body. I watch it from somewhere. It stands, frozen. Now it retreats, stumbling away, up the

rise. A light from the road, the Vespa returning. I can't get out of this. I want it all to stop. Why won't it stop?

My finger shuts off the switch to the flashlight. Some physical part of me is in control, impelling me forward. I hit trees and branches; tear through bushes, fall, get back up. I feel the ground level out and start to drop as the Vespa pulls in. I turn around, and just before the headlight goes out it shines on the big drift of leaves and I see a patch of bright red, candy-apple, Ryan called it. Then just darkness and dripping rain.

Prejudice can go both ways, Dad; you were too good to understand. Evil can exist anywhere, a damaged mind can hate; diminished choice and understanding don't mitigate emotion. I don't care if he's a victim, I don't care what his parents did, how the taunts of children, the scorn of adults, helped to make him this way...

His hands would be plump and moist, they would grab convulsively, his flesh yielding, like fruit rotted from within... Does his face remain blank, implacable, as he obeys an urge as mindless and insignificant as an itch? Or do sluggish stirrings of joy transform him: a grinning idiocy?

I can still see his face rising up between the pocked granite boulders like a rock come to life. Tad's body writhing over mine, my fingers suddenly digging into his back, as I whisper, "Tad, Tad, he's watching!"

An instant shrinking and withdrawal, Tad jumping up, "Get the fuck out of here, you freak!"

The head remains, frozen, mouth

open, a line of drool quivering in the sunlight. We're both screaming, "Go away, get out of here!" Tad picks up a rock and throws it, the head ducks down and is gone. I'm crying in anger and shame, wrapping myself in my towel, pulling my clothes on beneath it.

The next time I go into the restaurant, the looks are scathing condemnation, heads lean together, whispering their disgust. At the store, Marie's voice, unnatural, within my hearing: "It's amazing how well he can speak sometimes, poor boy." She and Ray fold their arms and stare in self-righteous contempt. The poor boy is in the corner, vacantly mouthing an ice-cream cone; his raisin eyes staring over it seem full of malice. I endure this alone; Tad has gone, back to Barrie with his parents.

"Dad, I want to go home."

"Aren't you happy here?"

"No, I hate it, I want to go home."

He sighs, and puts his arm around me. "Your mother didn't like it here, either... I just thought it might be a better place for kids— But, I guess you can get into trouble anywhere."

Just take me home before somebody tells you, Dad. I can't protect you here.

"I'll tell your father, see if I don't. You're a slut just like your mother, aren't you?"

"You shut up, just shut up—"

"Finally run off with one of her fancy-boys, and good riddance, I say."

"You just keep your mouth shut, Uncle Henry, or I'll tell Dad a few things too, some of the things you say—"

Oh, just like my mother, oh yes; I

knew that from early on, but I made it okay, I kept myself in the right lifestyle, around people like me; never again would anyone make me feel that way, for doing what was as natural to me as breathing...

How does a place become evil? When intolerance and small-mindedness prevail for long enough, does evil slip in through the weakest link? Does it fester and grow, over years, at first content with small things, biding its time, waiting? Maybe, on my own, I could have come and gone. My connection to Uncle Henry might have allowed that, even though he wasn't spared. But I brought the outside world with me, my world, and drew evil's attention.

Far away, somewhere else, I see my father, oblivious, contained in a protective bubble. He is engrossed in some innocent diversion, perhaps getting himself something to eat, or watching TV. Safe, and as always, unreachable.

Fear spreads from within and without, ice in my fingers and veins, fire in my stomach. The cabin walls press close, pushed inward by the weight of the night. The kerosene is almost gone. Everything in the room, each fold of the curtains, the swell of the lamp-globe, the serpentine twist of the faucet, holds knowledge of evil and despair within its contours. Nothing exists beyond this cabin that I would know or recognize—no towns, no counties, no busy highways to bustling cities. What is real is terror, a bleak and unending night. How is it that I never saw this before?

I felt something when I was a child

here; but I wasn't ready, not ready to contain so much fear, to fully understand. Oh, my Athena, and Ryan, sweet, impulsive idiot, I would sacrifice you all over again, just to keep him away from me.

I sit on the bed, my back to the wall. The stock of Uncle Henry's .22 rifle cuts into my chest, balancing on my drawn-up knees, the barrel pointed at the door. Some reflex, a knee-jerk

imperative, compels this last defiance. He has destroyed everything; my loathing for him includes myself, and the boundaries between us grow uncertain. I hold my finger on the trigger, waiting for him to come. It may not even fire. If it does fire, it may not matter. No rules apply anymore, no maxims or adages, no abstracts like faith, or hope. Anything can happen now. Here there exists no mercy. •

L.R. MORRISON, a Canadian living in Washington State, is a rock musician who enjoys working and commiserating with other writers. "Leaves" is her first published story.

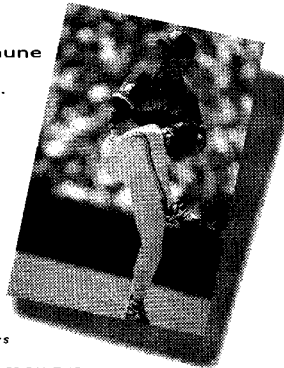
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1565 Carling Avenue
Suite 400
Ottawa, Ontario K1Z 8R1
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ON CONS

Canadian Convention & Reading Calendar

When contacting conventions for more information, include a Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope for their reply. Abbreviation code: GoH = Guest of Honor, TM = Toastmaster, MC = Master of Ceremonies.

CONVENTIONS:

- MAR 31-APR 2 – S.T.CON '95

Marlborough Inn, Calgary. GoH: Mark Lenard. Fan GoH: Nancy Taylor. Art GoH: Chris Bridges. Memb: \$35 to Mar 23 1995, \$40 at the door. Info: S.T. Con Society, PO Box 22188, Bankers Hall, Calgary AB, T2P 4J5.

- MAR 31-APR 2 – CON•CEPT '95

Holiday Inn Crown Plaza Metro Centre, Montreal. GoHs: Spider & Jeanne Robinson. Art GoH: Vincent Difate. Memb: \$24 to Mar 15 1995, \$29 at the door. Info: PO Box 405, Stn "H," Montreal PQ, H3G 2L1.

- MAR 31-APR 2 – FILKONTARIO 5

GoH: Dave Clement. Info: 302 College Ave W, Unit 20, Guelph ON, N1G 4T6.

- MAY 12-14 – CANCON '95

Also Convention for 1995. Talisman Hotel, Ottawa. GoH: Dave Duncan. Memb: \$15 to Mar 31 1995, \$20 at the door. Info: PO Box 5752, Merivale Depot, Nepean ON, K2C 3M1.

- MAY 19-21 – KEYCON '95

Memb: \$30 to Apr 30 1995. Info: PO Box 3178, Winnipeg MB, R3C 4E6.

- MAY 26-29 COSTUME CON 13

First time in Canada. Memb: Supporting \$25, attending \$35. Info: PO Box 784, Adelaide St, Toronto ON, M5C 2K1.

- JUNE 15-18 – AD ASTRA 15

Holiday Inn, Yorkdale. GoHs: Roger Zelazny, Anne Crispin, Shawna McCarthy, Ellen Datlow. Memb: \$28 to Apr 30, \$35 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 7276, Station "A", Toronto ON, M5W 1X9.

- JULY 21-23 – CONVERSION XII

Glenmore Inn, Calgary. GoH: Lois McMaster Bujold. TM: Greg Bear. Comic GoH: Len Wein. Memb: \$35 to July 5, \$40 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 1088, Station M, Calgary AB, T2P 2K9.

Cath Jackel will be attending Ad Astra in Toronto and Conversion in Calgary. All ON SPEC contributors and subscribers are invited to stop by our dealer's table and say "hi."

READINGS:

ROBERT J. SAWYER will be kept busy during the next few months:

- **MARCH 22** Wednesday, 7:00 p.m. Reading at Hart House Library, U of Toronto, Wednesday 22 March, 7:00 p.m.
- **APRIL 8** Saturday, 1:30 p.m. Reading and reception for *The Terminal Experiment* at the Merrill Collection, (a "Friends of the Merrill Collection" event).
- **APRIL 15** Saturday, 1:30 - 3:30 p.m. Rob will be autographing his sixth novel, *The Terminal Experiment*, at Smithbooks in Toronto Eaton Centre.
- **MAY 6** Saturday, 2:00 - 3:30 p.m. Reading at Richmond Hill Central Library, SW corner Yonge Street and Major Mackenzie Drive (Sponsored by Canada Council).
- **MAY 27** Saturday, 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Teaching a one-day SF writing course at Centennial College (Sponsored by the Canadian Authors Association).

ON SPEC would like to print your Canadian convention and author readings information. Send us details of your event at least 5 months in advance (to Box 4727, Edmonton AB, T6E 5G6), and we'll run it free of charge.

The bulk of the information in this column is courtesy of ConTRACT, the Canadian convention newsletter, available from 321 Portage Ave, Winnipeg MB, R3B 2B9 (subscriptions \$7 / 6 issues). Send your convention info directly to them, as well.

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Introducing...

ON THE EDGE John Davies

Edmonton artist and designer JOHN DAVIES received his ACA Diploma in Painting in 1978 from the Alberta College of Art, Calgary. From there, he enrolled in the Fine Arts program at the University of Alberta, and received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Visual Communication Design in 1984.

Since 1974, he has worked in various drafting and technical capacities, and has occasionally exhibited landscape paintings in Edmonton.

His cartoons have been a regular feature in Culture Shock magazine since its inception in 1991, and have also appeared in The Sports Line.

Says Davies: "I think I come by my abilities quite naturally—both my parents draw and paint, and my mother studied at the Ontario College of Art for a time—I would say I was always encouraged. In addition, witty wordplay was standard fare around our household, with puns freely and frequently flying around the room. Sane individuals generally made hasty departures... Sooner or later, one of us was bound to combine the visual image with the literary play, which is the chief content of my cartoons..."

ON the Edge

Tom Cruise...



...Vampire-Le-Status

© John Davies 1994

THE LAST WORD

Jena Snyder, Production Editor

We haven't yet contacted all the authors whose stories qualified for our first Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize. Anyone who published a story in *ON SPEC* in 1994 who is no more than thirty years of age, has published no books, and no more than three short stories in a pro or semi-pro magazine qualifies for the \$100 prize. See "On this Issue" in Winter 1994 for details.

Keep an eye out for our anthology of the best work published in *ON SPEC* from our premiere issue in 1989 until 1994. Published in cooperation with Tesseract Books, *ON SPEC: The First Five Years* will be launched this spring. Contributors include familiar names in Canadian SF such as Eileen Kernaghan, James Alan Gardner, Robert J. Sawyer, Karl Schroeder, Alice Major, and many, many more. See p. 52 for details.

Join us April 7 - 9, 1995 at the Black Cat Guest Ranch for a weekend of round table discussions on SF writing, reading, and publishing. We're offering individual critiques, a Cajun feast, hot tubbing, great blues, hiking in mountain trails, and a Sunday brunch that will send you into another galaxy. See p. 9 for more details.

What's in the future for *ON SPEC*? We have hopes to move into a new office sometime soon, and will be putting out a call for any and all volunteers to help move, lay carpet, haul boxes, stack bookshelves, and assist in general office duties. More details when we know more. Donations of a file cabinet or any office furniture would be appreciated!

Our next theme issue will be "X-F," or Cross-Genre SF. Deadline is May 31/95 for the Spring 1996 issue. Details in "Red Rover, Red Rover," p. 63.

Finally, I'd like everyone to join us in welcoming the newest member of the *ON SPEC* extended family, Erin Christine Victoria MacGregor, who was born to *ON SPEC* editor Susan MacGregor and her husband Mike on February 9, 1995 at 8:02 in the morning. Susan will be taking some much-deserved rest from her editing duties for a while, but will be back at work with us soon. •

GENERAL INFORMATION

ON SPEC is seeking original science fiction, fantasy, horror, ghost or fairy stories, magic realism, etc. Strong preference is given to submissions by Canadians. Send your short stories (max. 6000 words), short short stories (under 1000 words) or poetry (max. 100 lines) to the *ON SPEC* address below.

Do NOT send originals. All submissions **must** include a Self Addressed Stamped Envelope (SASE) with sufficient postage to cover return of manuscript, or for reply if MS is disposable. If submitting from outside Canada, send International Reply Coupons with SAE.

Submissions must be in **competition format** (author's name should NOT appear on manuscript). Enclose separate cover page with your name, address, **phone number**, story title and word count. Submissions in incorrect format will be returned unread.

Please send SASE for complete guidelines before submitting.

Deadlines are May 31/95, August 31/95, November 30/95 and February 29/96. All submissions for Spring/96 issue (theme: "CROSS-GENRE SF") must be in by May 31/95.

Art guidelines and advertising information are available. Please send SASE.

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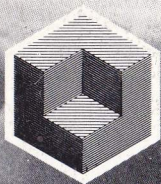
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