

# Inscribed

A Magazine For Writers





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1986

We would like to thank everyone for their overwhelming response to our efforts at inscribed. Thanks to all the great submissions we received, we've been able to put together a fascinating anthology of various styles of writing. Each piece provides the reader with the author's unique point of view, and each piece confronts the reader with the author's unique voice.

When inscribed was inspired, our goal was to showcase original, entertaining, and real perspectives through fiction, poetry, essays, and art work - through all the things of human expression that can comfortably fit within the format of a magazine. We've met that goal and set the bar even though it was not an easy thing to do. There was grueling labour; there was breaking of bones and gnashing of teeth. But when it was all over, what emerged were the following pages...

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# The Afterlife

by *Steve Morris*

The old man stares into the fading, sulphurous sky through rheumy eyes. He wrings his hands, as dry and grey as the pages in an old book, continuously, unconsciously. A threadbare piece of fabric, that might have once been called a blanket, rests in his lap and hangs flaccidly down over his skeletally thin legs.

The room behind him is as worn out as the man himself. Mouldering in the corner, encased in tatty grey sheets, lies a mattress on a frame. A hot plate, a plate, a dented kettle and a chipped mug perch on a stained oilcloth covered table. A bare light bulb hangs from a cord in the centre of the room, its dim light barely perceptible in the rays that pour in through the window. The corner by the washstand is in dark shadow.

The old man's breathing can scarcely be heard against the scream of the shells passing overhead.

Down the line, the whistle blows shrilly.

"Over the top, boys!"

Yelling and screaming, the men claw their way up the walls of the trenches. As the bullets whiz by, the ground erupts from the artillery shells – the good earth torn asunder. The roars of ten thousand demons released from the maws of hell assail your brain. No time to think, simply react and pray that God has not forsaken you this day. The smoke and dust make it hard to see twenty feet in front of you, let alone the quarter mile to the enemy trenches.

There to the East! That yellow. Is that the sun?

Time slows. The ballet of death carries on around the young man.

The sun! The sun!

It's been three weeks since it last shone. Three weeks of rain and cold and mud and lice and you can't tell

the day from the night hardly. There was green here at one time – in an era long gone.

Whistles all around.

"Gas masks! Get your masks! The bastards have used mustard gas! Get you masks on now!"

The old man coughs, deep and wet, bringing him back from the front. His rheumy eyes slowly focus on the slowly setting sun as it wends its way toward umber. He picks up a cigarette in his yellowed, palsied fingers and strikes a match. The brief flare of light reflects of his parchment like skin.

Pushing himself off the chair, the old man struggles to his feet, his blanket end in a heap on the floor. Painfully he shuffles to the table and picks up the kettle. Good, he thinks, enough for one cup.

The ticking of the clock, his constant and only companion for more years than he wants to, or perhaps can, remember, permeates the room while he waits for the kettle to boil. And in the world beyond his window, the sun has flared to scarlet and disappeared below the horizon.

As the kettle comes to a boil it begins shrieking, driving ice picks of sound through the room. The light bulb hanging from the ceiling flashes to magnesium white, driving all shadow before it. The old man falls to his knees trying to cover eyes and ears at the same time.

The sound invades his body; the light invades his mind.

Together they invade his soul.

The sound and light increase in intensity, becoming omnipresent. White noise, white light.

It stops.

Silence crashes down around the old man's ears. Afterburn chases his vision.

The old man finds himself in the middle of a track in a trackless demesne. There is no sun, yet it is bright.

There is no noise, yet there is sound. Nothing lives, yet there is life. The sky and the ground are virtually the same dark mustard yellow colour; the horizon gets lost in the sky and the sky becomes the horizon.

The track runs, arrow straight before him, as far as he can see. The track runs, arrow straight behind him, as far as he can see.

He stands confused, alone, afraid, unsure. Do I stand here and wait for something to happen, or do I walk towards the distance? Walk. Better than standing and doing nothing.

The track offered a choice – go forward or go back – but which was which. The light offered no answer. There were no shadows. No north or south, nor east nor west. Did it matter?

And so he walked. Interestingly, he was moving much better than he had in a number of years, not quite spryly but more comfortably.

With no sun by which to gauge the passage of time, it was as if time stood still. For all he knew, he could have been on a treadmill, for there was nothing by which to judge his position.

He paused, some time later, to rest. As he prepared to sit in the middle of the track, a table and chair appeared in front of him. Better than the ground, he thought, and so he sat. He turned around to see if anything had appeared on the horizon behind him, and when he turned back he found a meal on the table, not just any meal, but a sumptuous three-course meal.

With not a little bit of trepidation, he tried the food. It seemed all right, in fact it was better than all right, it was magnificent. Not in many, many years had he eaten so well. And there was wine, also.

He took his time eating, for who knew when more food would present itself, or be presented to him.

Soon after he had eaten and drank his fill, lethargy overcame him. Unable to resist, he slumped to the ground and fell into a deep slumber.

“Time to rise.”

The old man stirred, not sure if he had heard a sound or not, and quickly fell back to sleep.

“Time to rise,” again.

The voice came from an indeterminate direction, or was it in his head? He opened his eyes, sat up and scrutinized his surroundings. All seemed as it had been. Rising to his feet, he looked in both directions along the track. Which was the way he had been travelling? He looked for footprints he may have left on his arrival, but the track was immaculately empty of all marks.

I could just stay here, he thought to himself. If food appeared before, maybe it will appear again. Better to stay in one place than to retrace my steps, sort of like getting lost in the woods.

“You can never see the forest for the trees.”

The old man looked quickly about. Nothing.

Fearful, he shouted, “Who’s there?”

“Follow the sign.”

He turned around again. Floating in the air some twenty-five feet off the ground was a billboard which read “Afterlife” and an arrow pointing along the track.

“Who are you?” quivered the old man’s voice.

The sign flashed off then on again. “Afterlife” and an arrow pointing down the track.



The old man looked down the track in the direction the arrow pointed. He had nothing to lose and so he walked and as he walked the sign moved with him.

Even though he had slept on the ground, the old man felt, again, that he was moving better than in the past, better even than before he slept.

No wind moved the air as he walked. No dust kicked up from his footfall. No sound, other than that of his breath and tread of his feet on the track broke the silence.

“Are you still there?” he called. Nothing.

Another table appeared. Another meal. Another sleep. The same sign. The same track.

“Time to rise.”

This time he got up quickly, much quicker than he could remember in a long time. Again, he set off down the track. As he walked he remembered.

He remembered the long, dreary years sitting in the chair in the room, looking out the window at a world that didn't know he existed. He remembered years of working in the factory trying to scrape together a life. He remembered sitting in the hospital watching his wife waste away before him with a disease brought on by the toxic waste spewed out by the factory. He remembered the sunny days, the moonlit nights, the endless hours of conversation with the only woman he had ever loved. He remembered the initial intoxication of love when they met. He remembered the gas and the mud and the noise and the fear and the loss of innocence.

And he cried. Tears welling up in his eyes at first, then heartrending sobs, tears of joy and bliss and, finally, tears of loss.

He stopped and fell down to his knees. He moaned, his body racked by spasms. He wailed, his cries torn from his soul. He wept until he was empty. Then he slept.

“Time to rise.”

The old man's eyes opened slowly. The sun shone down softly through the leaves of a large oak tree, like the one in the front yard of the house he had lived in with his wife. He lay on lush green grass, like that in the front yard of the house he had lived in with his wife. Birds sang sweetly, as they had in the tree in the front of the house he had shared with his wife.

The old man sat up and looked at the house he had shared with his wife. And sitting on the veranda was his wife, as she had always sat, waiting for him to come home, a pitcher of iced tea on the table between the two chairs.

She smiled and waved at the young man. He walked up to the house and up the stairs to the veranda, where he took the only woman he had ever loved into his arms and he cried.

“Shush, my darling,” she whispered in his ear. “Welcome to the afterlife.”

# Epiphany Horse: Divorce

*By Olivia Dorata*

## **Aneorexic**

It is Sunday again, and a passing car makes a jailcell out of my ceiling when its headlights filter through the blinds. A breeze blows, and somewhere outside my open bedroom window, I can hear a windchime's tinkle. In the distance, an engine roars. Probably no hood, that's why it sounds so loud.

I stare at the ceiling. Just like last night. And the night before. And the night before that.

Four days and counting with no sleep.

I drift ...

## **I have a Job**

I have a Job with a capital J. It is a Big Job, in a Big Office, with Big People who like to say Big Buzzwords. They all puff out chests, and pretend they know things, and most of them like to look down on me. Little me. Little me with the mousey brown hair and the glasses, and the deliberate looking-down when someone happens to glance my way.

I do it all on purpose. They don't need to know I know things. They don't need to

know I'm smart. It's like dying your hair blonde. They all think you're stupid, and then you have a one-up on them.

Laughter is ill-advisable. I have secrets and I know how to use them.

"Did you finish the reconciliation on the one-one-one-oh-five?"

The needle on the record scratches, and I look up. It's my boss. He has a combover. Today, like so many days, his hair stands straight up. It dawns on me that I can't remember the ride here. I can't remember the ride home the night before ... oh wait, that was Sunday. This is Monday. I think.

"Ye-- er. No. Almost."

I fumble for my mouse to click my screen around from THE OFFICIAL G.M. WEBSITE back to the Excel spreadsheet I had been working on. I save before I scroll as habit. The network is down again, and Excel freezes, then crashes. Tears. Reconciling that four million dollar account by hand has taken me over six hours. I have lost every bit of it.

"Might want to save it to your desktop then."

I can see his one-sided mohawk bobbing in peripheral and I take a deep breath. Won't do to have someone see me cry here. They'll think I'm unstable. I'll lose my job.

"I'll do that," comes out after an abnormal period of silence, but it doesn't matter, as he has already left.

### **Realization**

#### **Tuesday Wee**

It is five a.m., and I will have to get up soon. There's an ethereal, other-worldly quality about my bedroom this morning. Objects have eyes, but I do not. Everything is loagy.

Windchimes function as my alarm clock.

I pray for a swarm of locusts. Grasshoppers turn into locusts, don't they? Or was that crickets. I can't remember, but something turns into locusts.

After swinging my legs over the edge of the bed, I fold myself in half and rest my chest upon my knees.

#### **It Is Midnight Again**

It is midnight again.

I sit in this place, this maze, this compendium of lies and beasts who hide beneath masks with no horns watch me and midnight has rolled around again. It is not surprising as midnight always comes.

I smell of leather tinged with apples. It is a good smell. It is a healthy smell. It is a morning smell that reminds me of October. I smell of apples and midnight.

Down the tunnel, the light fades.

I'm online for escapism. I recognize and revel in that.

I'm not here for you. I was never here for you.

#### **Contemplating the Wee**

Random thoughts in a somewhat cognizant pattern.

There is a forge somewhere, which contains the hammer of cliché. I intend to break it.

#### **Truth**

The day the flatsoids took over Delaware was indeed a horrible day. One of them had a bullhorn and another had a tank; one had a parasol and another had a bicycle stamped with 'USED. MADE IN CHINA. 12 AND UNDER HALF PRICE. DO NOT USE AS A FLOTATION DEVICE.'

#### **whispering**

it's a quarter to one in the morning, and i have just realized there is nothing really to life but trying. there's no reason to live, no reason to go on, no reason to do anything at all save for trying. i thought at one time that life was about happiness, but oh how wrong i was. life is nothing but a series of cruel jokes, and happiness is so much flickering nothing on a black canvas of hatred.

love. let's talk about love. wait, no, let's talk about emotion, period. what is emotion.

emotion is ...



emotion is nothing but a series of electrical pulses through synapses. it is amazing that we see changes in body functions as emotion. maybe other species don't. in fact, i don't think they do. dogs don't see happiness. or sadness. they just react with snapping teeth or wagging tail, depending on the circumstance.

**uh oh**

there's no easy way to end this.

**epiphany**

it happens that i find myself alone and lonely. it happens that i find myself in a limbo of thought and evolution. nowhere to grow. nowhere to hide. can't run. can't sit. can only stagnate and skip the needle.

i found my epiphany in cigarette cellophane and it is as clear as its host.

i hear footsteps.

# Free, To One Good Home

by Ryan Bird

Litters of women would ignore the sign.  
Litters of women would unfurl their manicures,  
and sharply tickle them down the thick panes of glass  
which surrounded his bedroom.  
They would make cooing noises.  
They would make kissing noises.  
They would make both noises, all at once,  
whenever he stretched or yawned.  
It was difficult for him to get any rest.  
It was difficult for him to get a hold of reality.  
It was difficult for him to get adopted.  
For you see, sooner or later, the women realized  
that behind the glass, these were not just stumbling puppies  
who stretched and yawned,  
but that they were actually a single grown man  
with puppies for fingers.  
Perhaps these women could take one finger home.  
Perhaps these women could take two fingers home.  
But when they finally read the sign,  
*All Puppies FREE, to one good home*  
the manicures retracted, the coos retracted,  
and the man with puppies for hands was left  
to yawn and stretch, in complete silence.  
Late at night, his cardboard bed would crumple.  
Late at night, his bad dreams would come.  
Late at night, his leg would twitch like a shaking fist  
cursing the heavens, cursing the women  
and cursing the thick panes of glass.



# YELLOW CAKE

*By Zdravka Evitmová*

Ice was everywhere –blue, gray, even black in the valleys. Ice was a part of my job, I had to calculate when avalanches would start and when the surface would crack, engulfing the spacecraft, the traffic-control towers, the pilots and passengers, prisoners, soldiers and police officers in charge of the planet’s security. It was my responsibility to organize search and rescue teams to dig and delve in the ice for survivors. Usually no one survived in the fathomless cracks of the ice on Mafa. I was the only survivor. I had graduated poetry writing from the University of Sofia on the Earth, and I wasn’t a brilliant student, actually I was among the worst students that had ever set foot in the University, but I was convinced poetry was an easy-going affair. A dirge one critic would call downright sloppy doggerel, another expert in the trade proclaimed to be experimental and sophisticated verse. So I reckoned poetry was a quiet shelter a young woman could call her profession while she ran no risk to be labeled slothful. My professors said I was a sheltered person, sensitive, too, and it seemed to them I could live well perfectly alone, so they wondered why my poetry was so weak.

I didn’t have friends on the Earth, my parents were divorced and I grew up on J5 – the planet which was transformed into a boarding house for children whose parents weren’t so keen to take care of their offspring. The air on J5 had a particular quality to it. It gave you the feeling your family was waiting for at the table eager to have lunch at 1 PM. The whole planet loved you.

There were no predators on J5, no poisonous organisms or plants, and all the time you felt like your caring nurse was by your side. In fact, J5 was your loving grandma.

I was not a particularly industrious person and the leisure of J5 made me even more indolent. The other children thought my parents’ divorce was a blessing for me. Your parents earned a one-way ticket to J5 for you, they said. I majored in poetry writing because it was the easiest thing in universe. You didn’t need to study much. These days no one really wanted poetry. Some crazy foundations paid you to go and study how to produce rhymes, concoct metaphors and spew similes about a fact as simple as breaking with your boyfriend. I didn’t mind that.

I was good at breaking with my boyfriends. My professors seemed to encourage that: they said it was good for my poetry. I couldn’t care less about stanzas, sonnets and dithyrambs – I cared about the money they paid me to study how to write them. I knew very well I had no talent at all. Art left me perfectly unperturbed. Unfortunately, I hated natural sciences, I hated history too, and I was not particularly interested in making a lot of money either. I guessed I had to work somewhere like everybody else and the diploma of a poetess or shall I put it an expert in poetry would at least secure a position of a tourist guide on Mafa for me - Mafa, the ice planet that had become a hit among the tourist destinations. It was the most fashionable thing to get married amidst the ugly mountains and gorges of ice. The fools believed their marriage would be spotless if they tied the knot on the black glacier crescents of the Twin Hills – an abhorrent canyon near my office:

a small, gloomy place, dug out in a hill of black ice.

I was one of the passengers on the list of Flight S123, from Sofia, a totally uninteresting town on the Earth where I graduated poetry, and as I said, I was the poorest student of my group. I flew to Twin Hills on Mafa, the place where young fools rushed to get married. I was the only single person on board of the spacecraft. I had broken with four boyfriends so far, and I abandoned my love number five without batting an eyelid. I didn't tell him I wouldn't return to the flat we rented in a cheap suburb of the totally boring town of Sofia. I said I was going to buy a packet of dried dill for the soup I was cooking for him. The guy loved dill soup. I left the water and the meat boiling on the cooking stove.

"Hey," he said. "Take more money and buy a bar of chocolate for me."

I guessed he was very disappointed he didn't get his chocolate. I didn't make the dill soup either. I took Flight S123 to Mafa instead. I had signed a contract and I had to become the poet laureate who would write love hymns for the young nitwits that married on the Twin Hills.

The ice surface cracked when we landed on the planet. The bad thing about Mafa was you never knew when the ice would break. It could open up under your feet even though a minute before the black frozen wasteland was as immobile as a dead man.

I was the only survivor among the 57 passengers. The crew, a happily married couple, was never found in the ice. The search

and rescue team had found me frozen, my arms, legs and ribs broken, their captain said. It was a wonder, the doctors exclaimed. No one could live so long without food and clothes on Mafa. The ice seemed to like you. The search and rescue guys told me I was on top of a jagged icy outcrop. The other passengers were torn to frozen pieces in frozen pools of blood. I was the only one that had remained whole – not alive and kicking, but whole. It is impossible, it just couldn't happen, the doctors said. It's a wonder you are still alive.

Then it turned out I had a talent: I could predict when the ice would crack. I didn't know how it happened. I often thought about the guy I left in my shabby Sofia flat waiting for his bar of chocolate, and I felt like making love to him. Then the ice cracked. It just did. Even the slightest hint I wanted that guy – he was not handsome, and he was not even clever- made the ice toss and split. My boyfriend was a knowledgeable and peaceful sissy who constantly said he loved me. All my previous boyfriends used to say that, and it was a sign the time was ripe: I had to leave. Dad used to declare he loved mom, then he walked away on her and she landed in a psychiatric ward. Love was something dark and deleterious. The only good thing about love was its absence from my life. I'd better break with a boyfriend who complained he loved me too much than land in a lunatic asylum. Making love was a different thing.

I thought about it, about the dill soup I left boiling on the cooking stove, and I saw the guy, waiting for his bar of chocolate. I wanted him. The ice cracked. The expert teams established the depth and width of the chasm using complex electronic equip-

ment. I thought it would sound sensible if I told them the ice would kick and split. I started warning the experts and they cancelled the flights.

Gradually my reputation of a unique talent who had a particular feeling for Mafa and its killing ice turned into a legend. The love hymns I composed were of a shamefully inferior quality but young couples paid fortunes to have me dedicate a lyric song or a slap-dash piece of writing I called a sonnet to their wedding day. How vainly men themselves amazed! I was called the ice queen, the mistress of ice, Lady Sovereign of survival and many other idiotic things I hated to repeat. I stood and stared at the ice and that was what I did all day long. I hated the poems I wrote: they were flat, dumb, and completely lacking in inspiration. It was not necessary even to be awake to know when the ice would hit: if I had an erotic dream I knew that the surface of Mafa would rent and lacerate its icy skin. The flights to Mafa were cancelled, human lives were saved and people on the Earth, inhabitants of the totally drab town of Sofia built an edifice, a palace of culture, they named after me. The Mayor invited me to come and deliver a speech on the day of its inauguration, an honor I declined. It was not so much the absence of vanity in my thoughts that made me shut up. I had to rise to the occasion and write a poem about Sofia, a thing I hated to do. Another component was added to the legend woven around my name: my phenomenal modesty. Modesty my foot! I was the most vainglorious person you could imagine. I wished my father twisted and turned in his bed, gnashing his teeth after he heard about me. I wished my mother writhed and squirmed. After she remarried she never phoned or

asked how I was doing on J5, that bland idiotic boarding house of a planet, where all abandoned children in our part of the universe scraped a living.

Mafa got on my nerves. There was ice everywhere. It was blue, green, gray and black. I was the guardian of the rifts and the icy precipices on Mafa. I hated to be a guardian. Sometimes I wanted my boyfriend so much that the ice on Mafa cracked from pole to pole. Once I enticed a young man away from his fiancée. You couldn't imagine how she screamed and hollered and cried. Anyway, the search and rescue team found me almost dead, both my arms broken. I lay in a frozen lake of blood. They could not find the guy who was with me.

"It's a miracle you survived," the doctor who examined me told me later. "It all seems impossible to me. Maybe the ice loves you."

I hated the glaciers, and the menacing height of the icy mountains gave me the creeps. I could feel, more sharply than before, the surface of Mafa kick and crack, and I constantly thought of the dill soup I had left on the cooking stove. I dreamed my boyfriend in the kitchen, naked. All the flights to Mafa were cancelled, I lived in a fury of memories and blurred visions, in my sleep I talked to him, and I dreamt I came back to the shabby apartment in Sofia, and got lost in the rumbling city I couldn't stand. It was a nightmare, I was the only human being on the planet and I choked in my nest of ice, my small room. I noticed the color of the icy wasteland around me had changed: it became black everywhere. No honeymoon flights to Mafa were cancelled, and no more spacecrafts

came to the planet any more. I dreamt of the shabby apartment, I saw the bar of chocolate I never bought for my boyfriend. He was constantly before my eyes. His skin was smooth and sparkling. I loved it. The ice broke and whined. The mountains of ice collapsed, whirred, buzzed, and peeled. The whole planet split and writhed, the hills tumbled and shattered. Fountains of black ice spurted from the gorges, and I lay exhausted, unable to think of my boyfriend any more. The four spaceships that came to extricate me from the freezing nightmare were engulfed by the gray abysses of crackling ice. The remote-controlled shuttles which brought food for me from the earth landed unscathed.

*What happens on Mafa should be impossible*, I read in the messages I received from the Earth. Mafa wants you. It wants nobody else. Try to describe how you feel, what you think about when the ice breaks. Of course I didn't tell them I saw Slav naked. I called all my boyfriends Slav. It was a name I hated. My father's name was Slav. Do you see any connection between your actions and the *rebellion* of the ice on Mafa? I had established a connection, but I was not an idiot to tell them about it. I had my pride. I was an expert in poetry, a poor expert, it was true. But I was an expert all the same.

One day the shuttle brought me only some disgusting yellow cake to eat, a large baking tin of yellowish rubbish. I hated cakes. On J5, they always gave us cakes for breakfast, cakes on Christmas, and cakes on Mother's day, too. I was alone in my office with the ugly lump of hard-baked dough. The walls of the room were all transparent, of course, and I had the feeling nothing

separated me from the black crackling ice. It felt like my skin cracked. I was hungry and I had nothing else to eat, so I ate the sinister looking cake.

I am convinced that even the most brilliant student in my poetry class – I hear he became quite famous for his "*Cosmic Ballads*" series – I bet even he couldn't describe truly and fully the bliss and pleasure I enjoyed that evening. It all felt so real I couldn't breathe.

I was in my old apartment in Sofia. There was no ice there, it was a spring day. I never liked spring: it was wet and windy, and the blossoms of the trees made me allergic and sour. The apartment was a sorry sight, the faded wallpapers, the greasy staircase, the smell of mould: it all looked and felt the same. The man who lived in my flat was not Slav. He looked very confused when he saw me standing at his front door. I had put on the black suit I wore on Mafa, amidst the black heaps of ice.

"You look like her," he stammered. "You look like her... Is it some trick?"

"Can I come in?" I asked. "I'll explain everything to you."

I didn't utter a word, though, I kissed him instead. He was astounded.

"Slav," I said. "It's the craziest thing I've ever gone through... It can't be. It's a hallucination."

We made love. It was too warm and too wet in the room, but I didn't care. I was sorry I was a third-rate poet and I couldn't write a

eulogy to hands, a ballad for his mouth, an ode to his flat stomach, a hymn to every square inch of his wonderful skin. It was such a vivid hallucination I wished it would last for ever. I kissed and kissed him. I loved him and my hunger left him dry and exhausted, smiling happily in the moist, smelly air. Was it the yellow cake that gave me that happiness? No doubt, it had some drug in it. What a fool I was. I should have kept a piece of it for the next time.

“Slav,” I said to the man. “Slav... I love your name.”

“I’m not Slav. I’m Ivan. You... You look like the girl on Mafa... the famous poetess who saves people in the ice,” he whispered. “You look so much like her... But you are more beautiful than her. I want you to know that. You are the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.”

“Slav, I am hungry...” I said.

He brought a jar of yellow honey. There was a label “*Sunflower Honey from Sofia*” on it and a picture of sunlit field covered with yellow blazing sunflowers. I knew sunflower honey was the cheapest thing one could buy from the local supermarket. I kissed Slav. My hallucination and his lips tasted sweet.

I opened the jar.

Then I was again in my office with the transparent walls, amidst the black wasteland of dead ice.

“Slav!” I shouted.

For a flitting moment, I saw him, I heard him say I was the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen. Then the black ice cracked so powerfully that the walls of my office shook and my bed shattered into uncanny sharp pieces on the floor. I stared. There were rifts, fissures, crevices everywhere around me, all gaping gray and black in the thick jumping ice. The planet roared and shuddered triumphantly, closing in on all sides around me. It felt like making love. It was dreadful and it was fabulous.

I searched for my black suit I wore when I trudged the last two miles to my office through the desert of ice. I couldn’t find the suit. I was naked.

Enormous edgy fragments of ice pushed their way into the office. Mafa wanted me.

Then I saw something on the table that made me freeze in my tracks. There was a jar and the label on it read “*Sunflower Honey from Sofia*”.

The ice that touched my skin was smooth and warm like Slav’s hands.

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# A LOS ANGELES PARTING.

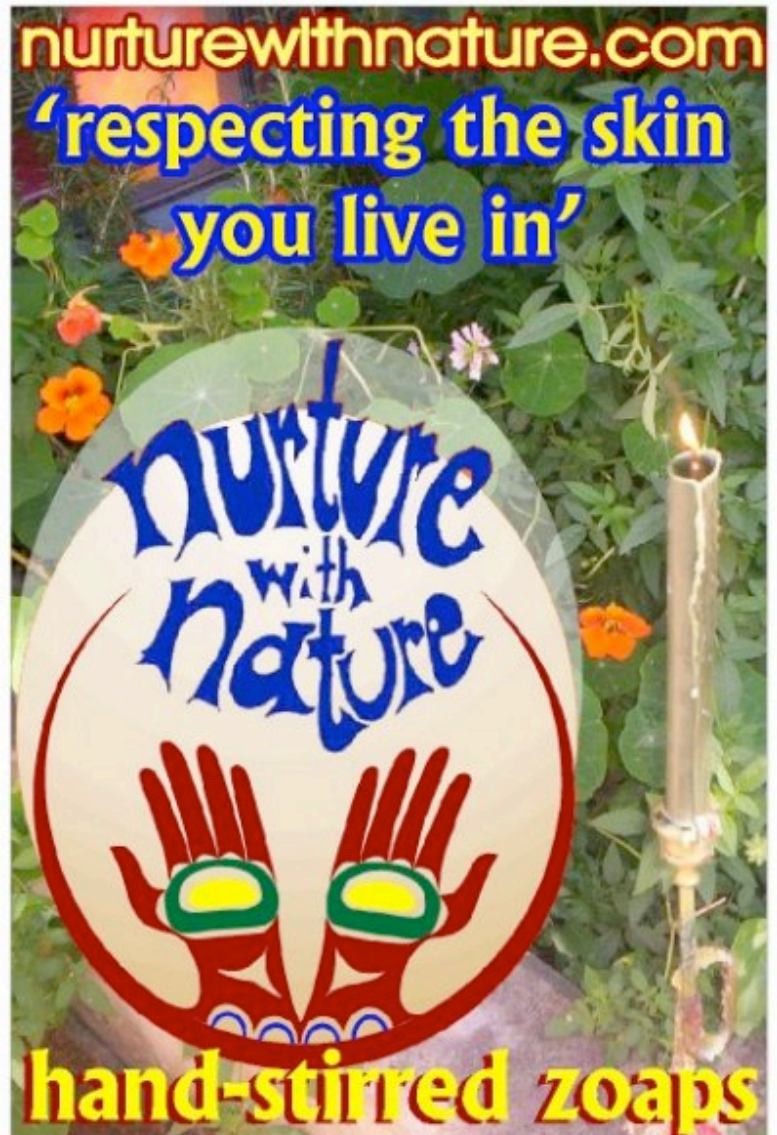
*by John Grey*

Plates can rock and roll beneath us,  
but you wonder how feelings can change  
between people.

Earthquakes can happen any time,  
knock down a bridge,  
topple a house,  
cleave the earth in two  
and you think something  
on an infinitely smaller scale  
is flat out impossible.

This earth starts shaking honey,  
and I'll be reaching  
for my most precious possession.

So, for your own safety,  
either be a vase  
or leave.





# The Valley

by Salvatore Difulco

As he whirled through the sky there was a lake in Zero's mind. It shone like a blue gem. In a short time it would be a reality. There was no turning back. With a gentle tilt his hover-vessel shot forward, rolled twice in a bright flash and stabilized itself. He gazed down the long black roadway that led to the silos and the dome, a faithful witness, resolute in the testimony which he held. They had brought it upon themselves, the valley-dwellers. Given every opportunity to succeed, they had failed. They had more than failed. Floating above a granite slab at the end of a steep overhang, Zero felt inexplicably apprehensive, half-expecting to be ambushed or blasted from one of the concrete pill-boxes. He had been candid to the people about his plans, but thus far had met no resistance and at this late hour likely wouldn't. He could see it now: the lake under pale blue clouds at sunset, still.

Against the mountain peaks, almost invisible in the grey of twilight, Zero's vessel hovered like a ghost. Leaning on the control shaft in his silver outfit, his silver hair roped severely, at one instant he bespoke grace and menace. He veered into the wind and traversed the bridge crossing the river. How reassuring to hear the soft whine of the engine. It defined him, gave him presence. The sound hummed inside his human heart like a lullaby.

The vessel slowly descended, then sped forward, inches above the asphalt. Giant sunflowers drooped like sleepy monsters against the steel plates fencing the orchards. Blooms with phosphorescent red and purple petals flared in the meadows. He'd heard about the vegetation before he arrived. Things are strange in the valley, he was told. He had not imagined how strange.

He slowed down near the apple trees. Silky black fruit studded the branches. From it came *black-juice*, poison of choice among the locals. It had made them all insane. Coppery flies clustered at the prow of the vessel. Zero leaned forward and sped away from them. Maybe the flies would survive the flood, reemerge elsewhere, in a saner place, invigorated by their trials. Zero wondered where he would reemerge when all was said and done. He had no choice but to believe he would—somewhere, in some form. He tried not to think of that now. Zipping toward the dome past the viscid river streaming to the south, he felt a wave of sadness for the valley-dwellers. Things could have gone differently for them, perhaps. Then again, you are what you are in this life. How many remained? He didn't know. None had fled, or even tried to flee. Heat rippled from the dome into the darkening, cloudless sky. A chalky moon appeared to the north. Weight on the front, Zero pushed toward a ramp at the base of the dome. He pressed down the balls of his feet. The vessel landed with a soft thud. He switched off the engine, unhooked the restraints, and chained the vessel to an iron post. Before entering the dome he stood for a minute in the cool breeze and scanned the valley. Alarmed by mounting evidence of anarchy and mayhem, the Regional Council decided to halt what had been a costly, failed experiment. They summoned Zero. "You know what needs to be done," he was told. Their decision was final. He readied the vessel. The lake would be heart-stopping.

"Beautiful," he said, skirting a knife-edged metal table in the dome entrance. It was typical of the disorder that had befallen the valley.

"Don't mind the mess," cried the Commissar, standing by a faux window ribbed by Venetian blinds. "You know how it is." Rubbing his palms together, he leaned against the wall beside the window and poked at his gums with a nickel toothpick. He must have been juiced. His cheeks fluttered. He

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reminded Zero of a huge catfish, soft and pale, whiskered and foul.

“Set me up.” Zero said.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“You were talking some shit the other day.”

“I don’t talk shit.”

“You’re right about that.” The Commissar poured blackjuice from a chrome canister, dumped out the first glass. “That one had a devil in it.”

“Got a problem with devils?” Zero asked.

“Just one,” smiled the Commissar, “just the one.”

The Commissar would have to stay put; he had no choice. His contract lacked loopholes and escape clauses, even in the event of a flood. Zero pitied him as much as he loathed him. True, forces beyond his control had corrupted the valley and deranged its people. But he had played his part. Studies admonishing consumption of the fruit never saw the light of the day. Foreseeing unimaginable profit, the Commissar assured the growers that the apples were benign, and green-lighted full-scale production. The valley-dwellers quickly fell under the spell of the blackjuice. Far from manufacturing a transportable and profitable narcotic, they barely produced enough to satisfy their own addiction. Even the Commissar was hooked. But he was paying a heavy price for his corruption: he was dying, his liver destroyed. The Commissar turned the cuffs of his stiff black shirt up over his hairless forearms. His soft, yellow hands looked like sea anemones.

“I’m going ahead,” Zero announced. The blackjuice took effect almost instantly. His chest warmed and his face flushed. All the surfaces around him softened, the air sweetened.

The Commissar grinned and fired his toothpick at a cork-board on the wall where it stuck. “You said you would.” He produced a blue laser-rod and waved it with a hum. For a moment Zero braced for an assault, but the Commissar had no issue with him. He accepted Zero’s agency and his mission. The blinds made a creaking sound, as if a wind had played them. The Commissar continued waving, streaking the air with blue light.

Overcome by the blackjuice, Zero rested his head on the counter. He fell into a reverie, envisaging his vessel gently lifting from a cluster of water-lilies and jetting south over the snow-capped mountain range, his muscles taut with anticipation as he cleared the first pale skies, then circled back to behold his handiwork. That he would never see it in his present form made little difference. The world would go forward. The lake would exist. And it would be his handiwork.

The Commissar lowered the rod. “So what do you want?”

“I came to say goodbye” Zero said.

The Commissar blinked his yellowish fish-eyes. “Goodbye?”

Zero didn’t know what else to say. He couldn’t exactly wish him good health. “Where is everyone?”

The Commissar said, “Everyone is sleeping, or dead.”

As if to disprove him, the door flew open. A woman and an android entered, the woman wearing a battered black fedora, stained dungarees, and work-boots of scuffed kangaroo. Her orange hair flared out from under the brim of the fedora like twin burning bushes, and freckles dotted her cheeks. The blue alloy android, square-jawed and big-shouldered in metallic mesh coveralls and a peaked tin cap, kicked aside the metal table in his path, and clanked toward the zinc bar, head swinging from side to side. He mounted a stool and turned to glare up at the bar toward Zero. His attitude and appetites distinguished him from newer machines. The woman continued standing by the open door, hugging herself.

“You going to behave?” the Commissar shouted at the android.

The android reared his head. “We are not good enough?” he cried, his voice pitchy, almost a screech. He dug a blue plastic pouch from his dented utility belt and held up a platinum disk. “We are not good enough?”

“Not when you act the way you do,” the Commissar intoned. “Not when you suck all the music out of the place.”

No music was playing. It never was. Zero smiled. The Commissar had a way with words. His words had led the people to the valley. Come with me and make it green, he urged them. Come with me and make it prosperous. What a waste it had been, then, all his eloquence. He had degenerated, perhaps inevitable given the circumstances. Zero sipped his blackjuice. It tasted like a heavy cider with what could only be described as a smoky edge. But there was more to it than that. The first time Zero tried it he puked his guts out. While it worked like alcohol on the system, it also possessed hallucinogenic properties, inducing euphoric dreamworlds and

sublime visions. But toxins in the blackjuice killed the liver and withdrawal from it led to a violent form of insanity. Murders multiplied during bad harvests. The android grinned down the bar at him, clicking his ceramic teeth. His telescopic eyes winked and whirred. Zero wondered what effects the drink had on him, if it made him dangerous.

The Commissar set the android up a blackjuice. “Close the door,” he said to the woman. “The filtered air is escaping.”

The woman slammed the door shut. She slapped her hands on her hips and tipped her head forward, fixing her stony gaze on Zero.

The android sipped the froth from his blackjuice without touching the glass and smacked his blue lips. A jangling sound issued from his chest.

“You mind him,” the Commissar cautioned the woman.

“He’s all I have,” she said, wringing her hands.

“Cry me a river.”

“No need to be mean.”

“I won’t take any shit from him. I’ll smoke him if he steps out of line.”

The woman looked anguished. “Give me a bottle,” she said.

“A bottle?” said the Commissar. “Are you kidding? I’m not giving you a bottle.”

“I need it. I feel the sickness coming.”

“I’ll give you a bottle but if that tin man so much as giggles the wrong way I’ll smoke him.”

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“He’s harmless,” muttered the woman, taking the stool beside Zero and draping herself on the counter. After a moment she lifted her head. “Eh, you’re the guy they sent here to flood the valley.”

Zero shifted uncomfortably on his stool.

The woman’s upper lip peeled back from a row of long yellow teeth.

The Commissar slid a bottle of blackjuice toward her.

“My name is Peerless,” the woman said. “When I dream I dream of fire, not water.” She drank from the bottle and shut her eyes.

“That’s not your name,” Zero said.

“It is now. I made it up,” she said. “It’s for my other world. In my other world I am Peerless.”

The android screeched.

“Shut the hell up, you bucket of wires!” cried the Commissar.

“Know why I came here?” the woman said, pointing a dirty finger at Zero. “I came here to change your mind.”

Zero sighed. “Change my mind? If I don’t do it someone else will.”

“Lies!” the android cried from the far end of the bar. “Lies!”

“Danton,” the woman said. “Shut up. There’s enough trouble without you.” She touched Zero’s elbow and lowered her head. “Danton,” she said quietly, “can be a handful. And he’s hooked on the juice. They said it couldn’t happen to him but it did. He got hooked. He can’t function without it.

He dreams about Martian landscapes. They say the new models are more human, but I don’t know—I mean, he *dreams*. Anyway, I’m attached to him. He’s special.” The woman squeezed Zero’s forearm. “Do you know he can light fires with his eyes? He started up a bonfire the other night for some folks down yonder. No matches, no butane. Just his eyes. Danton,” the woman barked at the android, “tell Mr. Zero this is true.” The android nodded.

Zero had never heard of such a thing, a flame-throwing android. And what was he supposed to make of it? Was the woman a threat, or were her rantings merely juice-induced? “Why are you telling me this?” he asked.

The woman ignored his question. “Even if I don’t survive,” she said, “Danton might.”

“He might,” Zero conceded. This model couldn’t swim but could tread water.

The Commissar rolled up his right trouser leg and injected himself in the thigh with a blackjuice tincture many times more potent than the beverage. Zero gazed into the glittery pools of his eyes, and saw something there to envy: oblivion. It would come soon enough, even to Zero, but he didn’t have to think about that now.

“Strife is waged daily,” he thought aloud.

“What’s that?” the woman snapped. “*What* did you say?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Zero said. Talking about it would only fire up his doubts. He adjusted his ponytail and swung his head left.

The woman raised a finger. "Hold it right there," she said. "Don't you move. I told you I came here to change your mind." She took another swig from the bottle and walked to the door. She went outside and closed the door behind her.

They waited, the Commissar tapping the canister with his nickel toothpick, the android swilling blackjuice and swinging his head left and right. Zero craned over the counter, hands flat before him, buzzing hard, watching lights and colours blur and bleed into one another. The woman returned, carrying an aluminum canteen.

"This here," she said, "is what I was talking about. A little on my clothes, a little on the floor, maybe a little on your nice silver suit, Mister Zero. Then we charge out in fiery costume. There'll be drums and people will come to watch the blaze."

The android screeched with laughter. The woman lifted the canteen and poured what turned out to be gasoline over her own head, sputtering, eyes closed. "Danton!" she cried.

The android sprang from his stool. He tottered for a moment but pushed off the bar rail to regain his balance. He squared up before the woman and bent his knees. He turned a small knob on his temple and jerked his head, but nothing happened.

The Commissar pulled out his laser-rod.

"Danton!" the woman cried. "Danton!"

But the android's eyes failed to shoot flames. He stood before the woman turning the knob in his temple and jerking his head but something wasn't working. The Commissar also had problems firing up his laser-rod. He fiddled with the charging mechanism and screamed at Zero to do something. Zero snapped out of his delirium and stepped from

his stool, the floor far below him. He misjudged his drop and when his feet hit the tiles his ankles turned. He cried in pain. The woman blinked and rubbed her stinging eyes. The android groped at his temple. The laser-rod throbbed to life in the Commissar's fists. Zero had to get out. He limped for the door but the gasoline-soaked woman blocked the entrance. He cocked his right fist and caught her jaw, the impact pitching her backwards, arms flailing. She gasped and spat gasoline, crying out Danton's name.

The android genuflected before the blue-lit Commissar, screeching for mercy.

Zero stepped forward into the cool evening, moving like a tightrope walker, arms outstretched. Over his shoulder a horizon of craggy peaks reached out to the universe. He who *cannot* be delayed may be redeemed, he thought. Heart in his throat, he mounted the vessel. The engine came to life with a fine whine and the vessel rose. Zero steered it into the velvety darkness just as the dome burst into flames. He flew to the edge of the mountains in a trail of stardust, hovered there for a moment, then sped toward the northern end of the valley, aiming the vessel into the heart of the dam.

# Accumulated Grief

By Thomas Aiello

“It was the hand of God,” said a beaming Alvin York, “that guided us all and brought about the victory.” Tennessee’s war hero stood confidently before howling New York reporters, each absorbed by the gravity of the man who single-handedly killed twenty Germans and helped usher in the Allies’ victory in the Great War. He was smiling. “I feel a heap stronger spiritually than when I went away.” It was the twenty-second of May, 1919.

Meanwhile, W.K. Allsup, an unemployed carpet cleaner, lived and died in Birmingham, Alabama. As did his wife. Marion Padgett, a wealthy planter, lived and died in Nashville, Tennessee. As did his wife. “I don’t approve of taking human life unless its necessary,” York said, “but I considered it necessary.” Then he retired to his room in the Waldorf-Astoria. He received the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was a war hero. He was the pride of the South.

It had been some months since the late winter cold of Birmingham saw Allsup’s hand unjustly taken from him. He lost it while working for the Frisco railroad, and ever since, work had been hard to find. Ten-year-old Douglas, eight-year-old Jack, and five-year-old Irene would need food to eat and clothes to wear, but though the Earthquake Carpet Cleaning Company gave the single-handed father a chance, it couldn’t keep him employed. “You need two hands to clean carpets,” they might have told him. “This is the *Earthquake* Carpet Cleaning Company, not just some joes off the street.”

And then there was Fannie. Even before the Earthquake and the Frisco, there was the earthquake of his separation from his wife. There was, it was remarked in hushed tones, domestic trouble. Allsup knew that he had been angry and destitute long before railroad work took his hand, but he remained appalled that he could fall farther down the well while his lawfully wedded wife began dressmaking in the house to support herself and the kids. “This isn’t justice,” he thought. “And now...”

And now he was being sued for divorce on the grounds of cruelty and non-support. Cruelty? Wasn’t he the one trying to make ends meet away from his family? Non-support? “I only have one hand!” he may have screamed into the hot May night. Fannie had the children. She had the house on South 27<sup>th</sup> and had even taken in boarders, J.D. Hayden and his son William, to bring in extra income. “I’m going to end it all,” he told Fannie in one of many fits of desperate rage brought on by the accumulated grief of being working-class without work and being in love without the ability to properly demonstrate it.

Marion Padgett was one of the wealthiest farmers in middle Tennessee. It was that wealth, along with his valiant service to the Union during the Civil War, which gave him the social prominence he retained. It accumulated. It accumulated despite the incidents.

His wife had given him grief for more than his share of harvests. It accumulated, too, and soon a chancellor’s injunction forced him to leave his own home—the home he built for himself with the currency of his prominence. She was the daughter of Hardin McDonald, another prominent farmer,

and Padgett's second wife. Theirs was an alliance early on, but then there was one child seven years ago, and another five years ago, and resentment upon resentment upon resentment. It was early May when the former Miss McDonald sued for divorce.

The litany of reasons only accumulated. Marion treated his wife cruelly and inhumanly. He threatened her life and even attempted once to kill her. "It's best you stay away," said the chancellor in so many words, "at least until we straighten this out. We can't rightly have our war heroes and wealthy citizens killing their wives indiscriminately."

Padgett's farm spanned the borders of Overton and Pickett Counties. Three miles away lived a new generation's war hero, Alvin York.

While Alvin York slept comfortably in his room at the Waldorf-Astoria, 863 miles away W.K. Allsup climbed into a small lattice doorway on the back porch of what used to be his home, into a small pantry just off the dining room. He crept through a serving door, then it was through the dining room and up the stairs with the utmost caution. Caution could have saved his marriage from collapse. Caution could have saved his hand from its untimely death. Nothing could stop the earthquake that was now plowing its way through the topography of his anguished mind.

At the top of the stairs, Allsup found the closet just across from his wife's bedroom—the closet just across from what used to be their bedroom, back when the

children were just ideas, when he had two hands to hold her with, and when the world was more than a compendium of financial and emotional poverty. Before all this grief began to accumulate. He stood silently and stared at the quiet space, seeing it not as a bedroom but as a library of his former bliss, then he removed his shoes to keep the motions that followed equally silent. He placed them behind the door, just as she might have always told him to do.

That morning, he came by in the light of day to beg for reconciliation. "These burdens have accumulated beyond my capacity to contain them," he said in one way or another. And she told him not to return. Fearing the worst, Fannie borrowed a shotgun from her boarder, William. "Just in case," she might have said, with a reassuring half-smile. "I won't need it, but I'd like to have it near me just the same." And William understood.

As Allsup stood there staring at what used to be, the clock spun round to May 23 in the quiet dark of night. He walked into the bedroom the two had shared. He stared at his sleeping wife. Fannie's thin neck and round face belied a peace her waking appearance hadn't shown in months. Her curly brown hair seemed to stay as patiently prepared as it was that troubled morning. And she was beautiful.

And he felt in his pocket for the 38-caliber pistol and the note that could never explain what he was about to do. He fired a bullet into the brain of his sleeping wife, killing her instantly, then pulled the gun to his own neck and fired again.

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The children awoke. The Haydens awoke. “We rushed into the room,” said J.B., “and there was Mrs. Allsup, on her left side, and Mr. Allsup lying on the floor with a bullet through his neck from the right side.” The children, long since innocent, felt the press of the accumulated grief in the room. “I’m glad he is dead,” said Douglas, “but mother—“

The note was still in the pocket of the motionless figure on the floor. It read: “I have found out much about my wife and I have decided to kill her and then myself. I want my brother in Montgomery to have Irene (which is a third child) and do what you think best about the boys. They are better off as it is.”

“We are not better off as it is,” was the message Marion Padgett had been receiving for weeks. Friday, the twenty-third, was to be his day in court and quite possibly the last day for the calm surrender of a familial bond. Surrender, however, was never a real option for a Southerner who fought for the Union and a husband who threatened the life of his spouse. “This grief accumulates,” he may have told himself, “but I won’t let it break me.”

He spent his Thursday afternoon in the company of a son from his first marriage. He felt calm in the midst of an environment not fraught with the complications of I’ve-said-the-wrong-thing-one-too-many-times-and-I-know-it. The burden of status and the burden of family must have melted away as he now saw the full-grown man across from him as a confidant rather than a colonial dependency. “These problems are nothing that squirrel hunting couldn’t cure,” he

said. His son would have nodded knowingly, with a reassuring half-smile. “Yes,” he might have responded, anticipating his father’s next question, “you can take the shotgun.”

And he did.

And he walked to the home he had been enjoined to leave such a short time ago, when all of his grief accumulated in his expulsion from the house that his hard work and reputation had conspired to bring him. His wife was asleep, resting for her day in court, when she would finally find recompense for the amputated plantation life that she never fully realized. She would find recompense for the civility she lost at the hands of her husband’s Civil War ghosts. Her surrender was still haunting the recesses of her sleeping mind when a shadow pulled its way across the bare walls of a bedroom long since devoid of passion. But now there was passion, even as she slept.

Marion may have hesitated just before he moved, as he glared at the womb that provided him two children. He may have thought about his long-gone military service and the sensation of the kill. He shot his wife through the belly. In her terrorized anguish in those waking moments before death, she would have stared up at her husband with empty eyes, her look feigning disdain as she rifled through her catalogue of things-to-do-before-you-die.

And then she died.

Padgett’s exit was swift, as he ran quickly to his makeshift home in another building on the plantation grounds. After closing the



door, he put two pillows at its base. He sat quietly with his back against the door. There was no catalogue for him to consult. The Bible and the War and the press of Southern history declared that he was destined for Hell. “And Hell is where I’ll go,” he may have said, gritting his teeth with the force of Shiloh and the Tennessee State Bank. He was 762 miles from the war hero Alvin York. He put the gun’s muzzle under his chin, then used a stick to finish what all of his accumulated grief began so long before.

Marion Padgett never returned from the grave—never haunted the memory of those who loathed and revered him in life. And yet he spoke. He said, “Look how money didn’t matter when all my plans for myself were disrupted by unrequited love. Or by love whose requite I killed through my inability to demonstrate propriety. I was crushed by all this accumulated grief, as anyone else would be. And my money couldn’t stop it. I could have been an unemployed carpet cleaner in Birmingham, Alabama, for that matter.”

The unemployed carpet cleaner told of similar regrets in his preternatural absence from the world. “Coming to the big city was anathema for all I could have become, if I had just had two hands and a wife whose instincts were more like the South of our bygone days. Poverty is poverty, and it sinks into the fabrics that surround whatever small set of rooms you can find in the industrializing, urbanizing South. These burdens accumulate and make us who we are.”

“And all of my grief,” Padgett responded, “is a product of my fear: of being without,

of change, of self-created loneliness, of not living up to the standards set by my accomplishments of long ago. These burdens accumulate and make us who we are—make us break in half no matter who we are.”

Allsup: “And you don’t have to tell me that justice is simply a fancy word for revenge, because I’ve known it every time it’s crossed my lips. And our fear leads to grief, which carries through generations on the American notion that family is the most stable unit of social measure. It’s given us all an unsteady foundation from the beginning. It has accumulated our grief.”

“We’re crippled by it. We shudder under its weight.”

The next morning, the sun rose on four lifeless bodies and countless others bracing for another day. It rose on Alvin York in the luxury provided for those who kill by the rules laid down by those who have come before us.

At a banquet held in his honor that evening, York beamed to the crowd before him, unaware of the waiting tragedy just down the road from his farm. “I guess you all understand that I’m just a soldier and not a speaker. I’m just a soldier,” he told them, but “I want you all to know that what you all have done for me is highly appreciated and I never shall forget it. Thank you very much.”

\* Sources for this account came from the *Nashville Tennessean*, *Birmingham News*, *Birmingham Age-Herald*, *New Orleans Item*, and *Livingston, Tennessee The Golden Age*, 23-28 May 1919.

# A Night In Warsaw, September 1986

*By Kim Theriault*

Once in a while someone may smile  
from behind their blank and beaten eyes.

The cafe is small and hushed.  
Perhaps they are just tired  
from their days work.  
More likely I look awkward  
and they are afraid that  
I am a KGB agent listening  
for the sounds of  
Solidarity.

It's late when I leave  
and I can feel the Polish winter  
closing in on the mid-night air.  
I'm surprised at the number of people,  
out so late, scurrying past me.  
I watch the dark forms  
rush along the street, then  
realize they are all going  
to the same place.  
so I follow.

I turn into an alley and end up  
joining a long line of people standing,  
waiting for something.  
Their silence tells that  
they shouldn't be here.  
Sunken eyes anxiously  
search shadows.  
Again, they don't know  
what to make of me, even  
though my eyes and hair  
are pale like theirs,  
the presence of my  
blue jeans throws them.

Just then a little cellar window  
opens at the front of the line.  
The scent of fresh baked bread  
slides out with the faint light.  
The line slowly breaks off,  
people hurry away with their bread  
tucked underneath their jackets.  
The little round baker takes my  
pennies worth of zloty in his flour  
covered hand and smiles nervously.  
I know I paid too much,  
it makes him suspicious.  
He is afraid I am an informant.

I take the two hot loaves  
each under one arm,  
thank him in my bad Polish,  
and he is relieved.

The warmth of the fresh bread  
penetrates my coat.  
I eat and let the warmth fill me up.  
I'll visit the baker again  
next time I'm in Warsaw.  
But I'm worried he'll be arrested  
for selling bread without giving  
the communists their cut.  
Maybe one of the others  
was sent to watch and tell.  
I see a soldier on the corner,  
quickly stuff the bread into my jacket,  
and silently pass,  
hands pushed deep into pockets,  
downcast eyes.  
I feel him stare at me.  
He follows for a few  
steps, but stops.

I keep going, not knowing what is to come,  
but knowing that there still is hope

# The Dreaded Yellow Telegram

*by Ryan Bird*

March was almost upon us. In many ways, February was still attentive and stubborn. According to its press-release, February predicted that a strict regiment of proper posture, and a resolute core-principles could indefinitely sustain itself. "Seasonal integrity," said a senior monthly spokesman, "is a top priority for us."

But surely, March wasn't preventable. It had to happen. Things always pass. Months get boring. People eventually misplace press-releases. They will mulch in a pile alongside October's promise to yield more pumpkins and June's vow to never rain on any more weddings. Things always pass. I bet even nighttimes forget how they used to be daytimes. The trick, I suppose, is to go out in a blaze of dignity, or at least with some mild form of recognition. Sometimes, these forms of recognition come unexpected, in the form of song.

Ruffled, Polly sidled away from the mirror. It was that boy again. The loud one. From her new position on the stairs, she tilted her head just soon enough to see some of him coming.

"I'd better hide," she snapped "the rest of him ought to be around the corner soon. Pretty soon." Polly leapt from the staircase, dropping in shifts, like a packet of crackers, towards the landing below. The awkward thud alarmed no one in particular. Mother remained unaffected upon the tattered re-

cliner. The rats also remained oblivious, and busied themselves beneath her elevated feet. The song grew louder. The singing began to linger. Polly could almost make out the usual crude lyrics, plus a couple new ones.

"Why Patrick ever told him what butt-sex was, I'll have no idea! No idea!" She felt that usual intrusive peck in her stomach as Pat's name collided with the floorboards. But luckily, Polly had long since learned how to distract discomfort with unrelenting nosiness, and to be honest, Polly had a lot of nose.

Determined to get a better view she tucked in her arms, stayed low, and waddled across the carpet toward a proper hiding spot. Her bent knees cracked nearly the whole trip. She would remember these cracks the next time it rained.

Here, in this spot, she was safe from the loud boy's snooping eyes. As long as he didn't look down. He never looked down though. The loud boy would only look towards her usual stoop on the stairs, then become hungry and move on.

For the loud boy, consumption and motion were synonymous. No one really wanted his job. No one wanted to be blamed for bad news. They were all afraid of violent retaliation, or worse, depression. So the job was his own, to do his own way. The loud boy turned it into a parade of sorts, a parade of sweets. He led this daily parade with two handfuls of sweets clutched at the extreme ends of his stumpy, pendulous arms. Today the candy was Whoppers. It could have been any other candy. Normally it was other candy. Today it was Whoppers.

As per usual, he belted out variations of the same dirty little ditty, all the while he tossed right-handed handfuls of sweets into his mouth. His other hand however, scattered left-handed handfuls of sweets in front of him. It was on top of these that the loud boy gracefully padded. He imagined himself as a blushing bride upon rose petals. The Whoppers crackled under his girth. To the nearly trance-like Constantino, it sounded as if the frost had a stronger grip on the landscape than March normally allowed. He wasn't far off, of course; Constantino wasn't usually too far away from anything.

The loud boy swallowed his song. This was business. It was new business. This time, it was business at Polly's house. He transferred the remaining Whoppers to his mouth, then reached back with both hands and rifled through the prickly yellow stack stuffed into the back of his pants.

Polly gulped and tugged nervously at her shirt. One of her buttons fell like a padlock onto the carpet. Polly stayed hidden.

The loud boy gathered himself at the mouth of the walkway, licked his hands, and somberly walked in. His box of Whoppers rattled in his pocket. The prickly yellow stack did not rattle at all.

Polly's father had his back to the loud boy. He had his back to Polly too. Above the bushes, she could just make out the perfect slice of her father's hairline. She could, of course, also make out the tangled metallic blur of his ubiquitous shears. Polly's father's name was Constantino. Constantino's passion was for topiary. He had lived,

breathed and became near-catatonic over topiary. He had been this way ever since he could remember needing it. To Polly's father, every problem could be fixed by some minor trim, by some clean little adjustment. He was a good gardener though, the best really, and for the most part he was always able to make things better, simpler.

Constantino contracted his name from his father. His father's name was Al. Al spent most of his time drunk, drunk and wishing he was more exotic. Polly's father never touched a drop. He had however, touched his name. From Constantino, it became Tino. Yesterday, he chopped it again, into Tee.

This was the position in which Polly's father was interrupted. He was interrupted by the loud boy's regal presentation of the yellow telegram. Tee absentmindedly inserted the yellow telegram into his back pocket after two particularly decisive clips of his shears. Taking these snips as both thanks and praise, the loud boy promptly spun upon his heels. He marched onward. His parade was once again directed by a rousing, crunchy burst of song. Polly's father didn't notice. His mind was starboard.

Polly watched her father's back pocket with a burning curiosity. The loud boy had now marched past the four main hedge-sculptures that decorated their paved walkway. The loud boy was nearly gone. Polly took this moment of freedom to once again appraise each of those green plumes of simplified masterworks.

They really were uncanny. The first, of course captured Patrick, just as he looked the morning he opened his draft letter. The

second topiary was of Polly, only this shrub-based Polly was dressed in some exploding taffeta nightmare. The real Polly tugged at her jogging pants. She lost another button, then she scratched the carpet with her foot. The third figure was of Polly's father. He depicted himself adorned in multi-layered clothing, designed to battle the coming elements. Tee would trim them down whenever seasons dictated. The last sculpture had recently become a bold little schooner. Its hull was radically tilted upward. The odd angle of the boat gave the impression that it had just shaken off some type of unexpected wetness.

Through Polly's eyes, she watched as the yellow telegram squirmed inside her father's ironed blue jeans. Tee, on the other hand started to trim back the bulging sail, yet his thoughts were on his name. "Tee" was neat, surely. But he often fantasized about the two sublime flashes of pen involved in slashing a single "T". The resounding snap of good penmanship gave him chills. The chills came from neither March nor February. He wondered further, whether he could legally sign a check with two bold swishes of his uncanny shears. He'd have to call someone about that.

The schooner soon began to topple under the weight of its new sail. Polly's father had somehow trimmed a gigantic rectangle against the schooner's buckling mast. It looked almost like a, like a--

"Telegram," he said. He blinked himself out of starboard. "Patrick," he mulled.

The shears, which hung at her father's side, soon caught the sun. It beamed straight into Polly's eyes. Her head became cloudy. She

stood bolt up. She stood stock still. "But you can't just be still," she squawked at herself, "things will happen anyway. Go wake up Mother."

Polly gave Mother a two-handed push. Polly's father pushed open the door. His confused murmur announced him like a sleepy butler. He slowly spun, as if perusing the cereal aisle, and came towards Mother. He held out the yellow telegram. It obviously felt lighter than the shears, yet somehow heavy and important. He didn't like that. He clearly wanted to unload it. He offered it up. Mother's eyes rattled open enough to see that oncoming, but wholly avoidable, burden. Mother leaned forward in her recliner. Mother unceremoniously unfolded herself, like a toppled stack of steak, onto the salmon colored carpet. For the first time, Polly noticed how much it looked like butcher paper. Mother had promptly died of shock.

Her death was so sudden, that two of the rats who had diligently stalked her for weeks, were helplessly crushed into blood somewhere beneath her girth.

"Poor little Zed", thought Polly, shaking her head. "Poor little Ariel, too. Never had a chance, never had a chance."

"Nate's fine." Tee pointed at the last remaining rat with his handful of telegram, "he found his chance."

Polly understood. Somehow, Nate the rat was bound to make it. "There was something about his limp," she thought, "something fake. It was never the same way twice, never the same."

---

Polly wished she could just be in front of her mirror again.

Her father wished someone else had the yellow telegram.

At a safe distance from the crash site, Nate the rat massaged his leg, but only out of habit.

The time had come to take that telegram from her father. Polly knew it. She took a deep breath and shook her head. Her father took a measured step over the sprawled slab of Mother and handed Polly the yellow telegram.

It didn't feel like she expected. She tapped the hard paper edges with her fingernails. She could hear it hum, just a little. She brought it up to eye level. Somewhere behind her, Nate the rat scuttled about. He began to paste little yellow post-it notes on all of Mother's stuff. Polly heard him do it. Tee was starboard again. Polly, on the other hand, could wear her determination like plumage.

"It's from the War Department," Polly prefaced.

Nate the rat squeaked an ominous squeak. He then labeled the beanbag chair.

"The War Department," began Polly, "regrets to inform you that we know exactly where your son is. He is not coping very well. Your son, Private Patrick Ethaniel Wane, Aviation Radio Man 2nd class, has disgracefully grown back his hair back and has since become irretrievably saucy. These events appear to have resulted from a forced water landing 2 March 1945, in the

service of his country."

Polly flapped her arms in an attempt to shake some sense into this yellow telegram. "1945?" she asked. "Aren't we at war with a different country now?"

"You women," said Polly's father, in a distracted tone. He calmly clipped at the aura of air the surrounded his daughter. "You never see the big, bushy picture, dear. There and... wait... just a little more." Clip.

"Pat's alive," Polly said with new recognition. "Pat's alive!"

"I should cut his hair," Tee said "I'll trim him down some. Maybe tame his sideburns too, while I'm at it. The last surviving Wane can't look like that. Hippies hate straight lines, everybody knows that."

"Pat's alive, though. Alive."

"Stay here sweetie, this is important," and off went Tee, unceremoniously he went starboard again.

Polly suddenly felt hot. She plucked off her hat. She sidled from couch to couch. Every word she read somehow required a new vantage point. Polly finally settled down at her faithful stoop. Her faithful stoop, on the bottom stair. It was the stoop which faced the mirror. The mirror which was perched upon the closed closet door. Polly continued to read aloud:

"Private Wane went AWOL 1 March 1945, after wetting himself at the base of Battle Hill. At daybreak of 2 March 1945, Private Wane was spotted nude, leading the entire 1064th airborne division against the nearby

stronghold of enemy medical personnel. According to witness accounts, with nothing but a plume of shrubbery in his hand, Private Wane led his siege with a disturbing battle cry. It was reportedly as follows: OH CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN! I SHALL SHOW YOU THE CURES THAT *THEY* DON'T WANT YOU TO KNOW ABOUT."

"Pat led the charge, with cures?," Polly said, in a ruffled tone.

"Cures! Of course!" cried Nate the rat. Obviously, this came out more or less a "squeak, squeak". Nate quickly pushed past Polly, and disappeared upstairs. That was followed by a clamber of rattling prescription bottles hitting the bathroom linoleum. Nate the rat clearly had something specific in mind that he wished to label.

This racket made it difficult for Polly to continue. She tugged off her left earring in sharp frustration. "Someone must go on," she thought. Polly impatiently clawed at the carpet, then read aloud again:

"Exactly who was the *THEM* of which Private Wane spoke? Our human intelligence has not yet been able to ascertain that. Or perhaps we did, and it's classified. Don't you get it? You don't need to know. Didn't your Mother ever teach you to listen and respect to those in uniform? A uniform means we have a job. Simple as that. So we ain't telling."

Polly fluttered her arms again. Her father was still outside, trimming a modicum of respectability into the battle-wary Patrick. Polly was still hot, and removed another earring, then a necklace.

"What information we can tell you is that Private Wane cured nearly as many enemies as allies. He is currently on trial for treason. He has also refused to relinquish his sprig of shrubbery. However, due to his upstanding service to both God and country, we are mailing you his last remaining possession."

Polly flipped the yellow telegram over in her hands, she saw nothing. She read on in search of the new possession:

"Along with Private Wane's battle cry, he had reportedly promised a free gift with the purchase of his NATURAL-CURES package. This free gift shall arrive by post within 6-8 weeks of this telegram's arrival. Sincerely, Vice Admiral Randall Worth, Chief of Naval Personnel."

Polly shrieked twice, and made to run outside to her father. Instead, she bounced off of the locked door. The door was always locked. Polly returned to her mirror, which was now decorated by a small yellow post-it. She began to preen.

All of a sudden, she couldn't wait for the loud boy. She couldn't wait for him to poke around their window again. Sitting on the stair's edge, she waited for the package. Polly stared into the mirror. Polly sang for the first time. Her voice sounded cracked and unused. In her sad attempts at song, Polly repeated this to herself:

"Next time you hear that loud boy singing, make that package the last thing you touch in this house. Make that package the last thing you touch in this house. Make that package the last thing you touch in this house. Make that package the last thing you touch in this house. Make that package the

last thing you touch in this house. Make that package the last thing you touch in this house, before you break out into the wilderness of spring.”

She Still Has Me  
by Jim Nasium





## Contributors

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RYAN BIRD is man of a few words, most of which are dirty. The few clean words have been organized into sentences and dutifully filed into publications such as: Peter F Yacht Club, Quills, Iota, Opium.print, Grimm Magazine and dANDelion.

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