

# jersey devil press

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## **Editor's Note:** Secrets & Demons

In one of those coincidences that makes you wonder if maybe there's a memo being passed around to all the writers in the world, all of our stories this month seem to deal with secrets and demons of one sort or another. Secrets we keep, secrets kept from us, and, sometimes, the ones we keep from ourselves. Demons raised from the depths and devils of our own that we just can't shake. It's almost an epidemic.

We start things off with Caitlin Campbell's brilliant "Honesty Spree," and then immediately get pounded by Ezra Fox's "The Socratic Method." After a quick clean-up, we take a walk on the dark side, making a deal with devil in Ally Malinenko's "The Bargain" and cuddling up with Ash Krafon's creepily tender "The Downside to Undying Love." Then it's time to pop in on P.G. Edwards' necromancer in "Demons and a Dead Duke." And we close with the beautiful, strange "The New Mercury Ghost Dancers" by Carl Fuerst.

It's no secret we're incredibly proud of this one. It's almost like we made a deal with the devil ourselves.

-- Eirik Gumeny

# Honesty Spree

Caitlin Campbell

Helen was a constant and scrupulous keeper of secrets. Doctors could have found them all over her insides, had they known what to look for, but the proper identification and extraction of secrets is almost never covered in medical school. She stored cheating on a third grade spelling test under her left eyebrow, crying at night because she was good at many things but great at none in the circles under her eyes, a brief flirtation with narcotics in the follicles of her hair, her first kiss at an eighth grade dance at the place where the lower teeth emerged from the gums, furtive eating binges in the inner flesh of her cheek, a 2:00 a.m. shriek for help that she had chosen to ignore up against her right eardrum.

It was not so bad as you might imagine. Some secrets even helped, providing a second skeleton. Her ongoing theft of lip glosses and hand sanitizers from the local pharmacy kept her spine straight. The kiss she had taken from Billy Stevens at last year's Christmas party, in direct defiance of office policy, rolled her hunching shoulders back.

That said, anything done in excess carries with it consequences, and this was no exception. After twenty-six years, the oldest secrets had staled and soured. The ones in her stomach made her queasy and sour-breathed, the ones in her sinuses crushed in on her skull. The expanding secrets in her joints caused her to walk with back bent and fingers clawed, like a scuba diver who has surfaced too quickly. Eventually, they started to make her feel bloated, not so much great with secrets as gassy with them.

For several months, she endured this pain, but eventually the truth became unavoidable: some of the secrets would have to come out. She decided to start with just one, to see how it felt and what its side effects would be.

One four a.m., after several restless hours spent selecting the perfect secret (not too shocking, not too dark, but substantial all the same), she shook Jeremy awake.

“Mmmmm?” he said.

The secret was lodged just above her bottom rib. She stretched her spine out as tall as she could to give the secret space, then dug her fingers in, prying at it with her nails. When it refused to yield, she curled her right hand into a fist. She raised and lowered it slowly over the back of her left hand.

“One, two, and THREE,” she whispered, slamming the fist down with all of her strength. The secret popped out, shooting through her vocal cords and out her lips on a bed of stale air: “Some days, I prefer women to men.”

“Mmmmm?” Jeremy replied, having drifted back to sleep.

So she repeated herself.

“Y’ mean,” he slurred, “you love guys, but you don’t always like us?”

“No, no, I think I might *prefer* women.” A stunned and uncomfortable silence overtook the room. “Well, I just wanted to say so. Now, go back to sleep.” And, much to Helen’s surprise, she drifted off almost immediately. Poor Jeremy had somewhat more trouble.

The next morning, Helen sprang from bed with a lightness she had never felt before. She danced around the kitchen while the coffee brewed. She hummed old show tunes while she washed her hair. On the bus, a total stranger asked what Helen used to make her skin so radiant. Helen’s first impulse was to keep the secret of secret-telling, but of course, that would wholly undermine her new approach to life.

After explaining, she caught her reflection in the bus window and was surprised to see herself glowing even more.

Helen and Jeremy had been invited to a dinner party with new friends, and when Jeremy was held up at work, Helen decided to go alone, even though she'd always been a bit of a wallflower. But telling a rapt audience about wandering drunk at 2:00 a.m. through Paris in search of her hotel, Helen felt the heaviness that had borne down on the corners of her mouth slip away and smiled more fully than she had in years.

The next morning, Helen released a secret she kept in the knuckle of her right pinky finger. She told the postman about a love letter she had almost mailed but destroyed instead, reciting from memory especially lyrical and lurid passages. On her lunch break, she told a teenage dog walker about running over and killing a golden retriever without a collar. The dog walker cried at the story, and Helen did, too, her tears washing the gritty secret from her left eye. That evening over dinner, she told Jeremy about her high school crush, the captain of the football team, who laughed in her face when she confessed her adoration. Her heart fluttered, panicked to relive that dread combination of longing and shame, then let go its burden. That night, she and Jeremy enjoyed the best sex they'd had in months.

Secret-telling made Helen giddy, lightheaded even. Secret-telling proved so potent that she could only tell them at a rate of one an hour during evenings on the town, unless she had a designated driver. They gushed from her, marking the first time in her life that she might be deemed "effusive" rather than "taciturn" or "shy" or "aloof." They fizzed forth with great brays of laughter or were spat with a vengeance or poured out with tears during boozy confessions, but one way or another, she disgorged more and more.

Helen felt lighter, freer, and more connected with the world around her. Not everyone, however, shared her enthusiasm for these changes. Jeremy had preferred things before, but did still make an effort. One evening, Helen burst into the apartment, her eyes overbright and slightly manic laughter still rolling in her mouth, to find a ring of friends and relatives in her living room.

“Helen, please sit down,” Jeremy said, gesturing to a chair. “Now, we don’t want you to feel like we’re lecturing you, or punishing you. We’re just doing this because we care.”

“Of course, sweetie,” Helen said. She sat down, took a deep breath, and tried to calm herself, but it was no use. She felt a secret wriggle free of her tonsils. It careened repeatedly into the backs of her clenched teeth like a trapped housefly, then shot out through the gap between a lateral incisor and a canine. “I had a woman here when you were on your last work trip!”

“Helen, dear,” her mother said, “We are very concerned.”

“I lost my virginity with Adam Scott in the eleventh grade!” Helen replied, experiencing a delicious tickle as the secret wriggled free of her nether regions. “Even though you said I couldn’t date him.”

“That’s enough now, Helen,” her father said. “This really needs to stop.”

She snorted a secret clear of her sinuses and shrieked, “Uncle Leon sold me my first ever line of coke.” No longer able to contain herself, Helen ricocheted out of her chair. “I was twenty-two. He gave it to me at a very good rate. He’s a dealer, did you know?” And, while her father glared at his brother Leon, and Uncle Leon stared at his shoes, Helen zipped around the room with secrets for each friend and family member.

Helen was kept up late that night by a stomach ache. Acting on a hunch, she pulled up her shirt in front of the bathroom mirror. Her stomach was no more toned



than it had been, but it swooped in aggressively, as if she'd sucked her belly in hard. She poked it and rubbed it, to no effect. Resolved to get to the bottom of it soon, if not quite right then, she tossed and turned restlessly in front of late night TV.

The next morning, Helen weighed herself. She had lost three pounds, even though she had not been working out.

"Everything OK?" Jeremy asked, seeing the concern on her face.

"I'm losing a little weight, is all," Helen told him.

"Are you eating enough?"

"Yeah. I couldn't starve myself if I tried. I could, back in high school, but then I stopped being able to do that and was eating a whole ton and wanted to throw it up only I couldn't figure out how to get my gag reflex --"

At that, Helen heaved over. Something was escaping, and though she tried to choke it down, up and up and up it came. She retched once, twice, and then the secret surged out on a stream of stomach bile and partially digested food.

"-- to work," she started to say, but Jeremy held up one finger, urging silence. He closed his eyes and counted to ten, then, without a word, left the apartment and did not return.

Cleaning up the mess, Helen berated herself for driving Jeremy away and for the pain that she had caused him. She could not stay sad for long, however. She was ever more fascinated with the act of turning herself inside out, offering up her inner life for strange communion with the world at large, never doubting its eagerness to partake. She was having too much fun to worry about the sudden pangs that afflicted her, or her continuous, increasingly dramatic weight loss. The more she told, the giddier and emptier she felt. Finally, the pressure within her became too slight relative to that outside of her, and her body collapsed like a soda can with the air vacuumed out. One

moment, she was voicing her opinions on the oedipal complex, using her own life as an example, and then with a pop and a crunch, she crushed in, bent, contorted, beyond help.

The most eminent doctors were called in. Unfortunately, no authoritative medical guide had enlightened them on the interplay of secrets and the skeletal system, and so they did not know what to say. They chalked it up to spontaneous implosion, and several would go on to write academically rigorous, if wholly fallacious, articles on the topic for the country's top medical journals.

The funeral was an awkward affair, with the guests searching for properly dignified, consoling words when they all knew much more than they would have liked about Helen and, from Helen, about one another. Jeremy grieved guiltily, unable to fully suppress a sense of vindication. The break-up now appeared to fit into the trajectory of Helen's self-destruction and so did not hint at any insufficiency on his part. The casket, child-sized, was lowered in silence, as Helen had managed to offend beyond redemption every priest in the county during her glorious but brief honesty spree. After an interlude of quiet contemplation, the mourners went their separate ways, each resolved to avoid Helen's unpleasant fate and each fighting a dirty, secret envy at what she had achieved.

This story first appeared in Podium, an online literary magazine of the Unterberg Poetry Center at New York's 92nd Street Y, 2009.

**CAITLIN CAMPBELL** grew up in Minnesota and graduated in 2007 from Columbia University. She now lives and works in New York City. She has participated in advanced fiction workshops at the Unterberg Poetry Center with Christopher Sorrentino, Fiona Maazel, Sigrid Nunez and Katherine Mosby, and in a master class with Colum McCann. Her work was twice selected to appear in the Center's online journal, *Podium*. While studying abroad at the University of Edinburgh, she received the Lewis Edwards Memorial Prize for a work of short fiction.

# The Socratic Method

Ezra Fox

Socrates is one ugly mother fucker. He's got bug eyes and a snub nose, but confidence goes a long way. He strolls over to me, I'm at the bar, waiting for a friend, and he says, "Yes, I actually am Socrates."

Before anything else, he just comes out and says it. And yeah, I was curious, if it was him or not, but it takes some balls, doesn't it, to come right out and say it? But I've read the Symposium and I know where this is going, so I put a stop to it before it gets any further.

"I'm not gay. If you want to talk, that's cool, but we're not going to bone."

"How do you know you're not gay?"

"Because I'm not attracted to guys. And you're one ugly mother fucker. No offense."

"None taken. So you're attracted to girls?"

"Yep."

"All of them?"

"Well, no, not all of them. Just the attractive ones."

"What are they like? Point them out to me," Socrates says. And I pick up on a pale-skinned Russian girl in a black top, rolling a tooth pick between her lips as she waits for another dirty martini.

"Her," I say. "I'd hit that. Twice."

"But she's a man," Socrates says. "I thought you said you weren't gay. If you were trying to convince me of your heterosexuality you didn't do very well."

"She's not a man, is she?"

"Could be, could be. It seems possible, then, that you might be attracted to a man," Socrates says, carelessly grazing my elbow with his hand.

"Yeah, but that doesn't make me gay."

"No? Then what would?"

"If I was attracted to guys a lot," I say. "And I'm not. Just the ones that look like hot Russian girls, apparently."

"Then let's have an exercise," he says, eyeing my half-finished pint of Guinness. "Do you like beer?"

"Sure," I say, raising the glass. "It's great."

"And did you like it the first time you tried it?"

My mind shot back to a sip of my dad's Pabst when I was ten.

"No," I say. "No, I didn't."

"But you kept on trying it, because you wanted to like it. Like coffee. Like modern art. Like..."

"Gay sex?"

"Could be, could be," says Socrates, smiling slowly.

Socrates continues clutching at my hips and rhythmically pressing against the backs of my thighs.

"It's not terrible," I say, "but it's not what I'd call pleasurable."

"What is pleasure?" he asks, placing one hand on my back to steady himself.

"It's an irreducible phenomenological experience," I say, as Socrates breaks a

sweat. "I feel it immediately."

"But is that the only kind of pleasure?" he asks, moving his hand up to my hair and tussling it.

"Well, no," I say. "Doing community service is different than eating chocolate. One kind of pleasure you feel right away and the other you feel later."

"So something could be pleasurable later that wasn't pleasurable in the moment," he gasps, quickening his gait.

"So... that could be this?" I ask.

"Could be," Socrates exhales, stroking my head. "Could be."

**EZRA FOX** is an MFA fiction student at San Francisco State University. He and his friends make fun of the worst books in the world at <http://read-weep.com>.

# The Bargain

Ally Malinenko

The devil looks exactly as you imagine. That is the first thing you should know.

“Right here,” he said, pointing a long fingernail at the paper in front of him.

“And then that’s it?” she asked.

“That’s it.”

“And I get whatever I want?”

She wiped a few stray hairs from her warm forehead. He tapped his finger again and though she wasn’t entirely sure she thought she saw him roll his eyes as if this was a daily occurrence. And then it dawned on her, to him, it was.

“What happens afterwards?”

“After what?” he asked.

“After I die.”

“I own your soul. Look, I will give you everything you will ever want in life. Anything. You want it, it’s yours. Material possessions; new house, new car. Done. Physical changes; bigger boobs, smaller waist. Done. Fantasies; being the envy of all your friends; amassing power and wealth. Done. Honestly,” he said with a slight chuckle. “And when you die your soul belongs to me.”

“What happens then?”

“It’s like a great big pleasure cruise. Lots of laying around, doing nothing, being waited on by my servants, occasionally be forced into banal conversations with other

passengers and listening to over enthusiastic conductors slaughter classic doo-wop tunes.”

She couldn't tell if he was joking.

“Okay,” she said. She held the pen over the line and just before touching the paper it dawned on her how quickly she was willing to sign away her immortal soul. She had often been accused of not being a believer. You know those people who wait outside of grocery stores to convert someone in the summer heat while their tub of coffee ice cream slowly melts into the same oblivion the believers won't stop talking about. She was that person you always see stuck talking to them taking handfuls of leaflets as you skirt by thinking, *Thank God that wasn't me*, your ice cream soon to be safely tucked into your freezer at home. But though she had never been a believer per se, she often let her mind wander to the potential of life after death, as any creature capable of foreseeing their own demise. And not once did it ever dawn on her that she would wind up in Hell. Yet here she was, on a perfectly average night, fantasizing about how her life could change if she signed on the dotted line.

“Wait,” she said, pulling the pen away again, eliciting another groan from the Devil. “But during my life, you know before I die, will you be needing anything? I mean, am I going to have to do your bidding?” she asked, her pen wavering over the line.

The devil sighed. “How did they all figure out this question?” he asked, to no one in particular. He concluded, correctly, that there must be some sort of leak from the inside that he would have to undoubtedly get to the bottom of. Someone needed to keep their little demon mouth shut. He looked at her. “Yes, on occasion, I might ask a favor or so from you.”

“What kind of favor?”

“Oh, the usual. New recruits, creation of bridges, that sort of thing.”

“Creation of bridges?”

“Yeah, it was sort of necessary in the past but I haven’t needed any in a while.

Look, I wouldn’t really worry about it, okay?”

“What would you need a bridge for? To get to the world of the living?”

The devil held up his hands in exasperation.

“Do you really think I need a bridge? I mean, here I am. No bridge in sight,” he said. She looked around the sparse landscape. She did not stand at a crossroads, as is often considered a popular place to parse out one’s soul. Nor was she at a carnival fairground, where seedy characters of every nature might seduce a distraught young woman. Not that she was distraught, technically speaking. Or for that matter, young. They were not near a cemetery or a potential gateway of any sort. Instead she was in the parking lot of the mall that she worked at. Nor was it the first or last day of the month, or during the waxing or waning moon or midnight or 3:00 am, a purportedly known witching hour. It was a Tuesday. And it was nearly 7:10 which meant she was going to be late visiting her elderly mother at the retirement home which would lead to the inevitable accusation her mother always made that the woman didn’t even love her enough to visit her in the hell-hole that she had put her in nearly five years ago.

“The bridge,” the devil continued, “is a rather easy way to set up a toll.”

“A toll?” she said.

“Yes. Like a tax. For instance, I believe it is common around here to pay a fee of some sort in order to get to the other side of a bridge or tunnel. Is that not still the case?”

“No, I mean, yeah, we pay tolls.”

“Well exactly.”



“So you collect money?”

“No darling, I collect souls,” he said again tapping at the paper in her hand.

“As a toll?”

“Pretty much. In the past, I used to have my faithful create bridges and whomever passed would forfeit their soul.”

“Wait a second. So anyone who went over this bridge automatically gave up their eternal soul without even knowing it?”

“Pretty much.”

“That seems a little unfair.”

“Well it was a rather difficult bridge to create and quite breathtaking to behold. Anyone worth their salt might have taken a look around and said to themselves, you know, this seems to go against the very nature of physics. Maybe I should think twice before crossing it.”

“That’s just wrong.”

“Be that as it may, I have the right to not play *fairly*. That is sort of my thing.”

“So do I have to build a bridge?” she asked. The woman didn’t have the foggiest idea how to build a bridge. She imagined there would be engineers involved. And zoning permits. The whole thing was starting to give her a headache. Maybe this wasn’t a good idea. Maybe there were going to be a million little loopholes and she would wind up doing way more work than just giving up her soul. She put the pen in her mouth and chewed nervously.

The Devil reached over, removed the pen from her mouth, and wiped it on her sleeve. He put the pen back in her hand.

“You will not have to create a bridge. It seems that in the end it was determined that the relative unfairness was too great and I was getting greedy, which let’s be

honest, is sort of a joke, and collecting too many souls without doing any work, so, now, it's all gotten a bit more complicated."

"Complicated, how?"

"Complicated in that I'm standing in a bloody parking lot in a bloody mall explaining the whole thing to you!" he roared, dropping his voice to such a decibel that the woman could feel it in her very bones, in every cell of her being, in the very fibers of whatever her soul was made of and she shook from the intensity of it.

"My apologies," the Devil continued. "I will not have you build me a bridge or steal babies or any of those other rumors you have heard."

"Steal babies?"

"Yes, it's too easy. Their souls come right out. There is no challenge. Even I can admit to that as a sort of cheating."

The woman swallowed. She felt the weight of the contract in her hand. In stories it was always a single sheet of paper. This felt like a phone book and was covered in a degree of legalese.

And then a thought hit her.

"What if I wanted to?"

"Wanted to what?"

"Build the bridge."

"Excellent. By all means, build a bridge."

"I mean for you," she said.

"I figured as much."

"Okay," she said and, with a quick movement, as if her body had to move faster than her brain, she signed the paper.

“Thank you,” the devil said snatching it out of her hand. “Now the fun part. I think we should start with all this,” he said waving his hand over her body.

Twenty years later, she stood at the center for a bridge on the outskirts of town, waiting for her brother. As she gazed around the familiar landscape she knew she had picked the ideal location. There were trees, craggy mountains, a steep gorge, a small bubbling stream fifty feet below. And the bridge itself, stone arched, like a woman’s back mid-tumble. Every season was breathtaking. It was perfect. It was romantic. And it was hers.

The first person had been the hardest decision. It took her a while to track him down. She had not seen him since high school but when they finally met up for coffee she was amazed that he smelled the same as she remembered. It was like going back in time. He still had the easy laugh, only this time when he laughed it was *with* her. She frowned about his divorce and rubbed his hand that he left on the table. Every hour, he told her how amazing she looked and she smiled a sheepish smile. Indeed, she had changed, hadn’t she? Blossomed, if you will. Her face no longer pale and pockmarked. Her hair shiny. Her waist thinner than it was in high school.

She waited awhile before bringing him to her bridge. She wanted it to be a special night. The stone echoed under his shoes.

“It’s absolutely gorgeous,” he said. “I can’t believe I grew up in this town and never knew this was here.”

“It’s easy not to notice things,” she said looking down over her hands at the drop below them.

“When was it built?” he wondered running his hands over the smooth stone work.

“Oh, I have no idea,” she said. “Probably a long time ago.”

“Doesn’t it seem like it was built by monks? I heard there was a monastery around here a long time ago.”

The woman chuckled at this and grabbed his hand. “Come on, let’s go,” she said leading him across.

She was nervous. She had no idea what would happen. Would it be immediate? When he got to the other side, would he vanish? Would he shrivel up and die? Would the devil show up? Would there be screaming and pain and misery?

But instead, to her mild disappointment, they just crossed, continued down the path, toward the waterfall. He seemed fine. As if nothing had happened. She worried that it didn’t work.

Later that night, as he slept next to her, she removed the heavy band of papers from the nightstand, flipped through to the back and saw, underneath her own name, his. She smiled, and snuggled down into bed.

The others had been easier.

She checked her watch again. Her brother was nowhere in sight. She glanced over at the gazebo on the other side of the bridge. Everything was set up. A giant banquet table, the food was waiting. The tables decorated with the same flowers she had used on her wedding day, ten years ago.

She heard the crunch of gravel on the road and the chatter of voices, bickering, exhausted-sounding voices growing. Her brother arrived, with his wife and their three kids. In front of him they pushed their elderly mother, now wheelchair bound.

“How did you find this place?” he said gruffly.

“A friend told me about it,” she answered. “It’s wonderful to see you.”

“Yeah, you too, sis. I mean, it was a pain in the ass to get out here, but hey, I’m glad to see you.”

She smiled. That was typical of him. She kissed each of them on the cheek, thanked them for coming, and she ushered them over the bridge.

One by one.

Next came her father.

Then her stepmother.

Her sister and her sister’s family.

Two aunts and six cousins.

Then the long line of friends that she had only in the last ten years been able to accumulate. Good friends. Who loved her for her kindness, her tact. Friends who weren’t jealous even though she had everything they could possibly want. They loved her too much to envy her.

And she thought about each name that was being added to that list.

Her husband made a toast. It was touching, about family and love being the things you can count on. The things that go on forever. About how lucky he was. About how lucky they all were.

“Happy anniversary to the love of my life,” he said as she felt the tears gather.

Everyone smiled, clinked glasses and drank. And she thought to herself how beautiful it is that they would always, always be together. Not even death would take a single loved one at this table. Not from her. They would all be reunited. She had made sure of that.

**ALLY MALINENKO** has been lucky to be published in numerous online and print journals. Her first book of poems, entitled *The Wanting Bone* was published by Six Gallery Press. She currently lives in the part of Brooklyn the tour buses don’t go to.

# The Downside to Undying Love

Ash Krafton

We don't talk much. I suppose not having functioning vocal cords is a big part of that but, honey, I don't blame you for our lack of communication. I just wish our relationship was a little different.

Even if you blinked once in a while to make me feel like we were connecting. Some tiny affirmation that you know I'm here. I love you to the point of incineration, to the point where I can't breathe because the conflagration steals the oxygen from my lungs. It's why I did this all for you.

Stealing your body was no easy feat. You know I'm a good person, wouldn't hurt a fly (never mind commit a felony) but I did it. I had to. You lived a stony life, chasing death and begging for release but I know you didn't want to die. Not permanently--

So hiring a zombie priest wasn't as big a deal as I might have once thought. It was no different than finding a lawyer or a mechanic or some other necessary evil.

Maybe if I knew you were going to die, I could have interviewed a couple zombie raisers. You know, look into their portfolio, ask about their zombie philosophy, their success rate and refund policies. Stuff like that. Maybe I could have found someone capable of actually putting some animation in the animating. But I was in a bit of a rush and had a limited window of opportunity. It had to be done while you were still fresh. Not that I'm complaining--

Because you're here. I really do like that suit on you and you look so handsome with your hair combed like that. Today we'll do all your favorite things -- we'll go for a drive and we'll sit on the front porch and we'll go for a slow walk in the moonlight. I'll even put in that Three Stooges DVD I found in your coffin.

That way you won't mind so much when I change your embalming fluid and scrape the mold from the back of your neck. Curly makes you laugh. I think it's laughing, anyway, that long hollow rasp like a splintering tree. You make that sound whenever the Stooges slap each other. I don't know why that sound upsets the dog so much because laughter is such a beautiful thing in and of itself--

We don't talk much. But I suppose that's still better than not being able to talk at all.

Pushcart Prize nominee **ASH KRAFTON** is a speculative fiction writer whose work has appeared in several journals, including *Niteblade*, *Ghostlight*, and *Silver Blade*. Ms. Krafton resides in the heart of the Pennsylvania coal region and is an active member of Pennwriters, a national writers group. She's co-editor of the Pennwriters Area 6 blog at [pennwritersarea6.wordpress.com](http://pennwritersarea6.wordpress.com) and maintains her own at [ash-krafton.livejournal.com](http://ash-krafton.livejournal.com).

## **Demons and a Dead Duke**

P.G. Edwards

The office was cramped, dark and smelt like rotten meat. A handful of half-melted burning candles were scattered about the room and thick, acrid smoke poisoned the air. There were no windows; ancient, mismatched furniture cluttered the already claustrophobic room. Any respectable professional would have been ashamed to meet prospective clients in such an inhospitable dump.

Luckily, Vannevar's profession was well beyond the realm of respectability. People that chose to procure Vannevar's services were not expecting a clean, well-presented and sanitary experience. If they were, they were seriously delusional. There were only two types of client in Vannevar's profession, the desperate and the depraved. Vannevar was a necromancer, the darkest of all the dark sorcerers, and a ceaseless pest of the souls of the dead. A necromancer was a figure whom society shunned, and who shunned society right back. A necromancer could, for the right fee, make deals with demons and summon spirits, even resurrect the dead.

Vannevar was a very good necromancer. Unfortunately, he was also a terrible poker player.

"My full house beats your three Queens," the disembodied voice said calmly but intensely, "pay up." Vannevar huffed irritably as he leant over and plucked three fingers from a large gory bucket that stood on the floor to his right. Random body parts of various states of decomposition filled the bucket to its brim. The necromancer flicked the fingers into the centre of the table, where a rotting severed hand (that



possessed only a thumb and a forefinger) crawled across the grimy table cloth and collected them.

“Look at that! You’ve only been playing a few hours and you’ve already got yourself a whole hand!”

The second voice was far more jovial than the first, although it carried the same echo to it as the first, and came from a headless, one-armed torso that was propped up in a chair to Vannevar’s left at the table. What appeared to be a grey mist hung around the area where the body’s head should have been.

“You know, Moss, I’d greatly appreciate it if you didn’t spread the news of these poker games to the entire spiritual plane,” Vannevar remarked to the one-armed torso. “It really hampers my ability to intimidate the spirits of the dead if they all think of me as a glorified body part dispenser.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Vannevar, there’s nothing glorified about you. And as I’ve told you before, only a precious few souls know about this little arrangement. I’m very strict with my selection process,” the semi-bodied spirit named Moss protested unconvincingly.

“Good, keep it that way. I want only the most useful souls to know about the game.”

In truth, Vannevar didn’t much care which spirits knew about his poker habit; however he had to give the impression that he was playing against his better judgement.

The principle law of the ignoble profession of necromancy went thus: Knowledge is power, more so than in any other vocation; a necromancer must always have some information or connection that those he deals with do not have, but do desire.

Vannevar had links all over the spiritual plane of existence, or more accurately non-existence. The spirits knew well that a word from Vannevar in the right metaphysical ear could either deliver them to the glory above, or damn them to the pits below. Therefore many of those lost souls that lingered in the purgatory of the Void were more than willing to deal with the necromancer.

The angels of the heavens and the demons of the hellfire were much tougher to bargain with. Vannevar had to make use of every scrap of information that he could glean to get what he needed. He also took full advantage of the competitive hierarchical systems of heaven and hell, both of which Vannevar had found to be more ludicrous and dishonest than any political environment on the physical plane.

The sad fact of the matter was that the Lord Himself was not as powerful, nor as omniscient, as the priests liked to claim. The Lord Himself had to look after the entire physical world, and indeed any other physical worlds. He simply did not have the time to concern himself with the minutiae of everyday afterlife.

That detail was left to his lieutenants, who were powerful, but certainly not omniscient. No matter how much detail they obtained on a person's life there was usually, in at least ninety-six and a half percent of cases, some transgression that had been overlooked.

The Agents of the afterlife obtained their information from the memories of both those that had died, and those that remained alive. Rich men and women with dark secrets often hired mages of ill-repute to remove such dark secrets from the memories of those that knew of them. Thus, when the Agents came looking for the deeds of the deceased, the dark secret remained just so. The ravages of reminiscence wrought by the passing of time had a similar effect.

Vannevar used his contacts, both ethereal and physical, to furnish him with information that would allow him to fulfill the wishes of his clients. Retrieving secrets from the beyond wasn't the only service that Vannevar provided, but it was what the vast majority of his customers required.

Vannevar huffed as he lost another hand to Moss, in more ways than one. He looked around the table at his poker buddies. Moss had been a hitter for a small time gang before he'd died; he'd never killed anyone, so it was unlikely he'd end up in Hell. More than likely a few decades of purgatory awaited him before he was finally allowed into the bottom rung of the Heavens; unless Vannevar helped him of course.

Moss was almost as bad at poker as Vannevar was, but the new one across the table was worryingly good. Octavius was his name; he had been a banker who'd swindled his clients out of hundreds of thousands of crowns. They'd burned him alive when they found out, which is exactly the kind of experience that creates violent poltergeists. The spirit seemed calm enough now, but Vannevar knew he'd have to be careful with this one or he'd end up with another psychotic zombie serial killer on the loose.

The third spirit was also playing with Vannevar for the first time. He had been very important indeed in life, and Vannevar was certain that this spirit would prove to be very valuable to him over the course of the next hour.

There was a conspicuously polite knock at the office door. Vannevar got up wordlessly and carefully picked his way past the numerous cadavers and mouldy textbooks that littered his office floor.

"Oh, now that's poor form, Van, tell 'em to sod off so we can carry on with the game," Moss cried. Vannevar turned and shot a dirty look that silenced the spirit immediately. He then turned and opened the door for his newest client.

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As the former Duchess of Stygg Island, Lady Anne was not accustomed to walking through such squalor. The street that she now found herself in was particularly decrepit, even in relation to the filthiness of the district of Tøv as a whole. She reminded herself of her pressing need to be there and forced her feet along the mud and effluent covered street.

She stopped at an especially disgusting hovel, in front of which was a hideous pile of decaying corpses. She wretched at the abominable sight and rancid smell and somehow found the will to prevent herself from vomiting upon her own shoes. The door of the place had a large V roughly carved into its surface, and this told her she had arrived at the right place. Although, she thought to herself, it was more than a little unsettling that she should consider a place such as this as “the right place.”

Lady Anne took a few moments to muster up all the composure that five decades of life experience had provided her with, and then knocked on the door of the squalid shack that stood before her. She tried vainly to maintain some of her dignity as a thick smudge of grime smeared across the knuckles of her fine white gloves. She brushed a few of the myriad specks of dirt off the front of her long dark blue jacket, and resolved that she would maintain her noble bearing throughout the whole of this grim encounter.

The door opened surprisingly smoothly and out of the interior gloom stepped a tall, thin, pale man with long dark hair and a preposterous goatee. Were it not for the Vandyck-ian monstrosity that clung to his face, along with his general air of uncleanliness, Lady Anne thought that he might have been considered handsome.

“Mister Vannevar, I presume?” she queried icily.

“Your Ladyship, I’ve been expecting you. Come in. Please excuse the mess; I’m afraid that I have misplaced my broom.”

He spoke with an authoritative voice that sounded remarkably educated. Despite herself she chuckled internally at his sarcasm. The man had already confounded Her Ladyship’s expectations somewhat, and she had been caught off guard.

As she walked past him and into his shack, he peered beyond her at the pile of corpses that clogged the street.

“Excellent! The postman’s been,” he chirped. He then turned and called into the gloom, “Gabe, today’s delivery is here. Sort it out will you please, I’m with a client.”

Lady Anne shuddered at being termed a “client” of this man, but made no audible objection.

Just then the musty air in front of her stirred and an outrageous monstrosity shuffled past her and into the street. Its skin was translucent grey and rotting in several places. It was mostly humanoid in shape, except for two extra arms that were grafted onto its chest, and an extra eye that swivelled around seemingly aimlessly in the back of its bald head.

“Ignore him, he’s harmless; and brainless...ish,” remarked Vannevar. Lady Anne looked back at her host in disbelief; sheer shock kept her from screaming. She was swiftly forgetting her sensibilities and felt it was high time to get on with her business for being there, before she lost them altogether.

“Mister Vannevar, could I be so bold as to suggest we move along with my business here?” she said, with as much insistence as she dared.

“Of course! How rude of me,” Vannevar exclaimed cheerily, then he turned and shouted to his thing-servant, “Take them round the side, Gabe, I’m busy in here.” The thing grunted in what Lady Anne guessed was an affirmation.

“Now, follow me Your Ladyship.” Vannevar shut the door and then turned and led Her Ladyship further into the unsettling shadows of his office. As she followed she felt herself stepping in some unknown mushy substance and fought the urge to look down and identify it. In this instance, she reckoned, ignorance was probably bliss.

Ahead of her, Vannevar had stopped at a barely illuminated circular table a short way into the room. Although she couldn’t see the walls of the office through the dark, the layout of the nearby furniture told her that it was a small space.

She stopped just at the edge of the light of the table and gasped as she took in the grotesque tableau before her. To the far left, a grimy naked torso was propped up in a chair. It only possessed its right arm, and both the stitch marks on its shoulder and the wildly differing skin colours told her that the arm had not come from the same body as the torso. A fingerless hand was attempting to perform what looked like a shoulder massage on the torso, without much success.

Across the table from Her Ladyship, a hand full of mismatched digits idly pawed at the tablecloth. She looked, but could see no other body parts attached to the hand. The chair to the right of the table contained nothing but a strange silvery mist, which on closer inspection could be seen lurking around the other three chairs also.

Vannevar noticed the horrified grimace on Her Ladyship’s undeniably attractive face and made to reassure her, “Don’t worry, they can’t hurt you; they’re quite dead.” This didn’t appear to have the desired effect, so he continued, “None of them were violent, just petty criminals, for the most part.”

She could only manage a weak, disbelieving, "Why?"

"Well, it started as a way of getting information, but now I'm mostly just trying to get my body parts back," Vannevar whispered to her sheepishly.

Unfortunately for Vannevar, Moss chose that time to pipe up.

"I don't believe it! Is that a woman you've got there? Haven't seen one of those around here in a while." The necromancer's face had gone a deep crimson, so naturally Moss continued, "Well, fair play, Van, I must admit I've noticed you've seemed a bit lonely recently."

Vannevar's eyes were now clenched shut.

"You fu..." he muttered, before remembering his company and abruptly stifling the curse. Despite her situation, Lady Anne found herself struggling to stifle a chuckle. The necromancer calmly turned to face the table and said, "Dimitto."

Her Ladyship could just hear Moss say, "Oh, you complete pri..." before he and the spirit with the single hand disappeared into the ether. The body parts that they had previously occupied drooped lifelessly, and the torso with one arm tilted precariously in its chair.

The bodiless spirit that remained in the chair to Lady Anne's right was formless, but she could have sworn that she saw it turn to face Vannevar.

"Why am I still here?" it enquired politely, but firmly.

Her Ladyship gasped; even through the echoing distortion of its spiritual form, she still recognised that voice.

Vannevar noticed the wave of recognition across her face.

"I suppose it's time we addressed your business for being here," he said. "I'm sure by now you realise that the spirit in front of you is none other than that of your departed husband, the former Duke Elbert of Stygg Island."

Lady Anne stepped forward into the faint light of the candles that surrounded the table. She gazed intensely at the formless mist before her.

“Hello Elbert,” she whispered softly. The spirit seemed to recoil slightly, as if shocked at being addressed so familiarly.

“Anne? Is that you my love?” The voice that returned from the spirit seemed slightly hollow, but the emotion it carried was almost tangible.

“It’s me, Elbert,” she replied simply. “I hired the necromancer to summon you.”

“Why? You can’t be thinking of bringing me back as an abomination, surely?”

A note of panic inflected the spirit of Elbert’s voice, but Vannevar also detected a hint of longing. This had been no mere marriage for status, the necromancer thought to himself, these two truly loved each other.

“No, Elbert. I miss you sorely, and I will never reclaim the piece of me that died with you; but I have made my peace with your absence, and will not desecrate your legacy by attempting such a deed.”

Vannevar was glad to hear this; full blown resurrection was both laborious and painful, not to mention messy. He had no desire to spend the next week picking ectoplasm out of his moustache.

Lady Anne stiffened then, as if rinsing herself of the emotions that clogged her brain. This was a woman who had had to become extremely tough in the last month since her husband had died.

“Elbert,” she began, “I have a question that I need to ask you, and you must tell me the entire truth.”

“Of course, my love, ask me anything.”

“How did you die?” Her Ladyship asked levelly.

“It was a heart attack, my love.”



Vannevar noticed a hesitation there; in all his years of reading spirits, he could tell when one was not telling the whole truth. He wondered if Lady Anne had noticed it.

“I asked you to tell me the entire truth.” There was a steely determination in Her Ladyship’s voice now.

“I-- I did. Why, what did my brother tell you?” Panic grew in Elbert’s voice.

“He told me nothing!” Anne snapped. “That is what concerns me so. I was told only that you had died and the doctor suspected a heart attack. They would not let me see your body, they would not let me talk to the mortician, and to make matters worse, the doctor who pronounced you dead has mysteriously disappeared!” All the pent up frustration of the last month burst out of the former duchess like steam from a kettle.

“What are you saying? What are you suggesting?” The spirit of the ex-duke was beginning to buckle under the stress of inquisition. Vannevar felt sorry for him, death was a stressful enough experience even without the heartbroken histrionics of your own widow to compound it. Although, during his period of governance over Stygg Island, Elbert had cracked down mercilessly on those of Vannevar’s profession as well as other practitioners of dark magic. Perhaps I will wait a little longer before intervening on his behalf, the necromancer thought to himself.

“Elbert, I know Ivan is your brother and you may feel some bizarre need to protect him, but if he had anything to do with your death then please tell me.” Lady Anne’s voice remained dignified, but Vannevar detected the threat of tears.

“Anne, my love, Ivan had nothing to do with how I died.” Again, Vannevar could tell that Elbert was only telling half of the truth.

“Don’t lie to me! I am, was, your wife. Ivan is a greedy fool but I didn’t think he would stoop as low as to murder his own brother just for the chance to take over this

god-forsaken island!" Anne breathed deeply, and then continued, "And you have the temerity, the sheer asinine blind loyalty to protect him, even from beyond the grave!"

Elbert's spirit squeaked in protestation, but before he could issue a further denial, Lady Anne cut him off.

"I will have him hanged for this! Executed! I knew that no mere heart attack could take Elbert Bendtsson from me."

Her Ladyship rose up to her full, not inconsiderable, height and Vannevar could see in this woman the strength had enabled her to cope with the numerous assassination attempts, slanderous allegations and failed kidnapping plots that had been aimed at her family during her husband's time as Duke of Stygg Island. Elbert had been popular with the people during his reign, but any ruler that was popular with the people was more often than not deeply unpopular with the dangerous criminal underbelly that polluted every major population centre.

Just as Lady Anne was about to speak again, Elbert interjected, and even without an obvious visual expression to draw from, Vannevar could tell that this spirit had been broken by guilt.

"It wasn't Ivan who killed me, my love, but you are correct, it wasn't a heart attack."

Lady Anne stood dumbstruck but, after a brief moment of surprise, she beckoned him to continue.

"I was not killed by any other person or animal, it was infection that took me; that much is true." The spirit sounded heartbroken; Vannevar considered that were this not a weekly occurrence in his professional life, he would probably have shed a tear for these two.

"How?" Anne said simply.

“Syphilis,” Elbert replied.

Her Ladyship collapsed to her knees, heedless of the filth on the floor beneath her. A look of devastation afflicted her previously dignified face.

“I suffered no such blight,” she uttered meekly. Tears welled in the eyes of the shattered former duchess.

“I know, my love,” the spirit then made a noise that, had it possessed a human form, would surely have taken the form of a deep, regretful sigh. It continued, “I am so deeply, deeply sorry for this. I suffered a moment of weakness and will carry my shame with me for the rest of my afterlife.”

“Who?” asked Her Ladyship tearfully.

“She was an office clerk in King Herbert of Franke’s cabinet. I met her on my last diplomatic trip to Franke’s capital, Eiffel,” said Elbert. “I’d been away from you for weeks; I was lonely and the city seduced me. I don’t even remember her name,” he added frantically.

Vannevar considered this information with relish. The Frankish were notoriously promiscuous, and if the office clerk had had the temerity to attempt to seduce a foreign dignitary then she must have been quite the attractive little saucy. The thought of a particularly virulent venereal disease spreading rampantly through the King of Franke’s cabinet was wildly amusing to the necromancer. This thought caused a violent giggle to erupt forth from Vannevar’s throat, which he barely managed to mask with a deeply suspicious bout of coughing. Neither of his clients noticed his dramatics.

“Please say something to me, Anne, my love.” Elbert’s soft words smashed the tense silence.

Her Ladyship said nothing. Instead, she rose to her feet, wiped the tears and smeared make-up from her eyes and turned to leave. On her way to the door she wordlessly deposited Vannevar's payment on a heavily soiled cabinet. Ignoring the viscera under her feet, she walked right up to the door to the street outside and opened it, and then she turned back to her former husband and said, "I loved you to the end... and beyond." Immediately the steel returned to her features and she stepped into the street, slamming the door behind her.

The spirit of the former duke of Stygg Island addressed Vannevar the necromancer. "I won't feel slighted if you share my transgression with the powers that be. I deserve much worse. I had the memories of everyone who knew shielded."

"I think you've paid enough penance for this particular sin. None of the powers will examine your wife's memory again so long after your death. I will keep your secret." Until somebody offers me a lot of money for it, he added to himself silently.

"Thank you," said Elbert. Vannevar nodded in acknowledgement and uttered the word to dismiss the spirit back to the Void.

He considered Elbert's situation and sighed; the man couldn't have used a reputable physician to treat his disease for fear of his secret being exposed to anyone with a bit of ambition and a lot of coin, and using a black market doctor would have been far too risky considering his reputation amongst the criminal classes.

"How tragic," Vannevar said to himself, not completely disingenuously.

The necromancer retrieved his money from the cabinet and picked up his appointment book, which was perhaps the cleanest thing in his entire office. He opened it up and examined his appointments for the rest of the day. He cursed loudly as he saw that he had booked the Skorpion Gang in an hour, to perform a full

resurrection of their currently deceased leader. Looks like I'll need a wash tonight after all, he thought to himself. Well... maybe.

## DEN ÄNDE

**P.G. EDWARDS** was born just outside London, England on Feb 26th 1989. He has lived in the county of Berkshire for the entirety of his formative years; which included being taught at a convent school by real nuns. Since leaving school he has worked in a variety of laborious jobs (including a stint at a camping shop), and has decided to start early in the pursuit of his ultimate dream of becoming a full-time writer.

# The New Mercury Ghost Dancers

Carl Fuerst

This story starts with Phil trying to drag his only friend in the world down a dark alley. The walls are narrow and they're smeared with sticky ash; the rough-faced bricks scrape his shoulders raw with each lunge. Phil's neck muscles, swollen from too many injections, bulge like a braid of irritated snakes, and, every few seconds, his hands lose their grip, shooting his arms away from his body like snapped circus-tent ropes. Each breath feels like the air is filled with tiny bits of broken glass.

Phil's memory begins only fifteen minutes ago, with the kicking down of a rickety warehouse door -- and even this is less a certainty than a conclusion hazily implied by the six-inch splinters in the bottoms of his feet.

A feeding tube juts from his belly, its soft plastic nub caked with orangish grime. He's wearing a bloody set of women's pajamas, and there's a new set of tattoos scabbed across his ribs.

His only friend is handcuffed and wrapped in a camouflage tarp. Despite her unconscious condition, she's clutching something secret, terrible, and incalculably valuable in her fists.

When his body gives out, he falls to his back to stare up at what is either a featureless night sky, or the point where the walls of this black place eventually meet.

Then, with a burst of energy whose source is strongly suggested by the previously mentioned needle-marks on his neck, he leaps to his feet and renews his efforts with terrific dedication and strength.

Sometimes the distance between the walls affords him space to whip his body back and forth in wild convulsions, stringing together a series of maneuvers that resembles a jog, and sometimes the walls get so close he feels like he's wedged in a crack in the center of the earth; these cracks open up into more wideness; another straightaway; another crack as tight as a grave that suddenly erupts into another wide-open shot.

Just when he's sure that all his effort has done nothing but trap them in a tunnel as wide as a shoebox, he gives one more tug and they pop out into a clean little cul-de-sac with a streetlamp and an empty garbage can, and a hatchback with a duct-tape bumper, a broken back window, and different colored doors.

Phil throws her in the back of the car and climbs over her body into the driver's seat. Once he gets comfortable, he closes his eyes and tries to die. He tries to numb his body piece by piece, starting with his feet and hands, and moving inward towards his heart.

Then something slaps against his knee.

It's a plastic keychain in the shape of a long, drooping penis. It says, "Dirty David's Donkey BBQ. Come and Get a Piece of Ass." It's attached to a key, and the key is snugly inserted into the ignition slot.

He turns the key. The engine whines from the strain of a start. He stomps on the gas and the car bounces off the curb, stumbling gracelessly into the unknown.

The gauges are broken and the lights don't work. The upholstery smells of cat and the steering wheel is coated with something slippery and thick. The cup holders are stuffed with Styrofoam cups one-quarter full of a thick black liquid that Phil wishes was coffee but knows is probably tobacco juice.

The road seems governed by the same agency that built the alley — open stretches that abruptly end in crazy turns, that open up into still more open stretches that end in still more suicidal turns.

He clicks on the radio and the cabin is flooded with the sonic comfort-food of sports radio filler. It's one of those call-in shows where everyday Joes vent about the home team, and, as Phil listens to somebody's argument about a slacking defensive line, he knows that he'd gladly die in five seconds if only he could spend all five of them as one of those Joes; it is suddenly obvious that the best a person could do with his life is spend at least one part of it on a reclining chair, cradling a phone to his ear, and soaking in the fumes of pork-chops from the slow cooker in the kitchen, while his wife and kids play ping pong in the basement.

But the more he listens, the more he realizes that something is wrong. The caller and host speak in the same fake-sounding accent, and they are both clearly trying their hardest not to laugh. Phil has never heard of the Chickapee Chumslingers, Dalworth Foam, or the New Mercury Ghost Dancers, and the host keeps emphasizing the importance of trance points, zone boners, and zigzag passing.

He changes the station, but all he gets is fuzz, and when he goes back to the sports station, well that's fuzz too. He turns the radio off. He looks in the rear view mirror. Black as the inside of your heart. And what he suddenly remembers, and what his mind is suddenly possessed by the memory of, is a family party he attended ten years ago; it was a conformation party for a red-haired cousin who he'd never see again.

This memory of the party isn't related to his current situation in any way, and the event, at least as he remembers it now, wasn't particularly important in his life, but he throws his full weight into reconstructing the scene, because his memory of that



party represents hope that his mind will return, and because it's something to think about besides this endless maze of dark and narrow streets.

Phil remembers standing barefoot in the center of his Aunt Virginia's living room, running his toes through her dust-colored shag. He remembers cradling a plate of cannoli close to his chest and resenting his parents for guilting him into taking the three-hour bus ride from college to attend this event. He remembers coveting the Elvis bust on top of the television because of the ironic splendor it would lend to his shitty apartment, and how he felt superior because his family didn't share his belief that everyone's time would be better spent in low-rent apartments, wading ankle-deep through dirty clothes, listening to obscure rock music, eating boiled eggs, and burying their noses in Norton Anthologies of such-and-such.

An uncle touched Phil's shoulder. "Hey dude," he said. "You still play cards?" He had a toddler on his shoulders.

Phil said nope.

"If you're interested, we'll be in the basement."

Phil was positive his uncle was confusing him with another nephew, because there was never a time when he *did* play cards, and he was thinking of saying so as he stood statue-still and watched his uncle walk away.

To avoid another conversation, Phil feigned intense interest in the television, which was recycling coverage of the Berlin Wall's collapse.

He watched helicopter shots of throbbing crowds. He watched teenagers in Michael Jackson t-shirts, black-market Levis and Government Issue sneakers wave sledgehammers and crowbars and skinny, naked limbs.

Shaky airborne images were interspersed with scenes from a train station, where East Berliners crowded on to westbound trains. Cramped passengers stuck their arms

through the windows, waving at throngs of well-wishers on the platform and emptying their wallets of crumpled East German currency, worthless as a dead leaf dropped from a tree but eagerly scooped up by the types of people who, despite all the evidence, couldn't resist the temptation of heaps of money on the ground.

For ten minutes, Phil had believed he was watching live footage, and he was disgusted with his family for not paying attention to this politically magnificent event. It wasn't until he noticed the date-stamp in the corner of the screen that he realized he was watching a rebroadcast from the week before. During the actual happening of the event, Phil was too occupied with writing unreadable poetry and reading untranslated Beowulf and flirting with cute-girls-with-glasses to care. And now, finally presented with the facts, he *couldn't* care. The Berlin Wall could fall. They could rebuild it a thousand times bigger or they could build another Berlin Wall around the town where he lived. It wouldn't matter to him. Phil realized this then. He realized that, despite all the love he had for himself, he did not love the world.

The room had emptied with the exception of his girlfriend, a scrunchy-faced art major in a thrift-store party dress two sizes too small. She stood up from the couch and said, "Don't over think this." She kissed him. She said, "You can be a good person, too."

Phil stops the car at a fork in the road. The tarp in the back rustles as his only friend in the world climbs into the passenger seat and says, "Don't over think this. Just go."

He stomps the gas and they screech to the left and a lane opens up for what looks like forever. He doesn't speak because she doesn't remind him, in the least bit, of his girlfriend from the conformation party. She doesn't remind him of *anyone*. In fact, he's certain of nothing except that he's never seen this woman before.

He glances at her once. Her head's been hastily shaved. Her cheek is torn. One eye is gone.

"Do you know what happened?" she asks.

"I think we were in a warehouse. Were we in a warehouse?"

"A warehouse."

"Maybe."

"I remember that we went to a movie. We were the only ones in the theater. The movie stopped in the middle. The lights came on. The next thing I remember is waking up in this car."

"How long?"

"Was the movie?"

"How long ago did it happen?"

She looks out the back. "There's someone following us."

There's a dim pair of headlights way back there.

"I stole this car," he says, because that seems like a big deal and he thinks she should know. He's frustrated when she doesn't react.

"Want to hear a joke?" she asks.

"You don't know who I am," he says.

She picks up one of the Styrofoam cups and smells its contents. She puts it back down.

"I remember a lake," she says. "We were in high school. My dad's mom was dying, so my parents drove to Michigan to watch it happen. They left me home because I never met her. My dad hated her and made sure I never would. You know families."

"Do you know who's chasing us? Do you know who we are?"

“I know I was home alone that night and you had just gotten caught stealing cigarettes from 7-Eleven and you were grounded. Even from the phone. I had no hope of seeing you and I was a wreck. We were both just about ready to die. It wasn’t long after midnight, and I was standing in the driveway when you walked up. Bare feet and all. You must have lived ten miles away.”

“I left my shoes by the front door, to avoid suspicion, even though I never, until that night, actually left my shoes by the front door.”

“And we took my Mom’s LeSabre to the lake.”

“Bullfrog Pond.”

Bit by bit they told each other the story of that night. How they drove for an hour to escape the suburbs; they drove out to the forest preserves, to the 150 year old cemetery where time had erased the headstone names and the life-size stone Jesus was missing his nose.

They took a trail into the woods until they found a brackish-scrap of a pond, and they took the trail around it.

They circled the lake in a rainless storm, and she said, “What if lightning strikes us?”

He said, “If I get killed by lightning, that’s how I’m supposed to die.” He was 16; his corny bravado was at full force.

She swooned.

He jumped involuntarily at the sight of something squirming beneath a leaf. It was a baby garter snake, and she picked it up and they let it pass back and forth between their palms, all soft and smooth and new.

They broke up two months later, and though the notes they left in each other’s lockers described complicated reasons, it was more because they were bored with each

other than anything else. She returned everything he'd given her—Black Sabbath albums and a shark-tooth necklace, bad poetry, his jacket. One year later, searching through the liner of that jacket for a lighter, he found the baby snake from that night, curled onto itself like a tiny, fragile wreath.

They stop their story at a four-way intersection, where black-windowed vehicles idle to the left and right. Another pulls up behind. Phil peels off. All the vehicles follow.

“Look at my hands,” she says, laughing like people do when they discover a puppy sleeping in a laundry basket. “Look at these things.” She holds up a disfigured nest of bone and blood attached to her wrists. “Have you ever seen anything like this?”

“Try not to think about it.”

“There’s something in there.”

“Where?”

“In my hands.”

“How do you know?”

“That’s what they wanted. But I grabbed it.”

“Try not to think about it, “ he repeats, but she’s already working at it with what’s left of her teeth, and he’s quickly distracted by a maze of turns that give him hopes of losing whoever is in pursuit.

Those straightaways seem harder to find the farther he goes and the more desperate he gets. Turns reveal more turns, options yield identical options, paths yield onto an exponential increase of more possible paths, and no matter how long he waits to decide, the vehicles behind react as if their drivers knew his decision long ago.

“Wake up,” he says.

“Not sleeping,” she says. “I think I can almost weasel this thing out of there.” She’s still gnawing at her hands. “I’ve definitely got the corner of something.”

“Get ready to run,” he says. “We should run in separate directions. They’ll probably just chase both of us but you never know.”

“Have you seen my feet?”

“Right.”

“You go. I’ll chill here.”

“Not my style.”

“You’re sweet.”

“And we’re fucked,” he says as he slows the car to a stop at a dead end.

“Fucked.”

“You can help me with this,” she says. “I’ve almost got it. Curiosity is *killing* me.”

She’s worked the better part of an envelope from the crippled grip of what used to be her hands. Phil plucks it free and throws it onto her lap.

“We’re fucked,” he says. “And I have no idea who you are.”

“Let’s open it.”

A van slows to a stop behind them. Doors slide open. Boots crack against gravel. Husky voices mumble in the same fake-sounding accent from the sports talk radio station he’d been listening to before.

“I think we’re onto something here,” she says, looking down at the envelope. “I think we’re on the verge of a breakthrough.”

“I don’t think we know each other. I think we’re making this up,” he says. “Out of desperation.”

“Open the fucking envelope.”

The car is surrounded by hulking figures that smell of burning leaves and vapor rub. Phil rips the envelope open. They break the windshield out. A pinky-length, dried up, and flattened out snake falls from the envelope into Phil's palm, curled onto itself like a fragile wreath, and as he holds it up and shows it to her, the shadows gathered around them might as well be throngs of waving well-wishers, eagerly waiting to scoop up piles of crumpled money as it flits soundlessly on the floor, as worthless as a dead leaf dropped from a tree.

**CARL FUERST's** fiction has appeared in Farmhouse Magazine, Dark Sky Review, Our Stories, and more. He teaches college writing and lives in Madison, Wisconsin.