

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS



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Editor's Note:

Sometimes being the indie lit community's Isle of Misfit Toys isn't easy. Or pretty.

Even for us, though, this month has some pretty rough stuff.

Asking your stepfather to behead a prophet because you're bored? Check.

Self-mutilation in pursuit of your art? We've got that.

Meeting your future wife by discovering her father's corpse? Uh-huh.

A blind woman doing something seriously unpleasant with a hot melon scoop? Unfortunately.

Honestly, when the nicest story concerns two guys beating the crap out of each other with oboes, you know you're in for a dark ride.

And that's before we even get to Aaron Frigard's contribution, which probably warrants its own black box warning.

So brace yourself, this one isn't for the faint of heart. But we think you can handle it. After all, you're a dedicated JDP reader and that means your middle name is "highly inappropriate."

(Or Robert. Maybe Beatrice. Very possibly Tiberius)

Anyway, welcome to Issue 32 of Jersey Devil Press.

Text a friend before and after reading just so they know you're alright.

– Mike Sweeney

Night of the Living Thespians

Max Booth III

I stumble into the waiting room with whiskey on my breath. I haven't shaved in over a week and it's showing. It's darker in here than outside—cooler, too—and if nothing else comes of this interview, at least I can find solace in beating the sun's bastard glare for an hour or so.

Scanning the other actors, I can't help but smile: they're pathetic. All their sad, depressing business suits, their hair slicked back, teeth brushed, fingernails cut. This is a movie audition, not a courthouse for Christ's sake. Compared to everyone here, I might as well be a shoe-in: my ripped, crusty blue jeans; my sleeveless T-shirt covered in spaghetti stains; the hole in my Chuck Taylor's specially modified to allow breathing room for my big toe. The casting director is going to absolutely love me. This is what they want: this grimy scumbag look, this piece-of-shit, no-good-hobo look. Not some business man, prudish asshole look.

This is going to be easy, I tell myself. This is going to be great.

There's a clipboard hanging predictably at the door and I sign my name at the bottom of the list in capital letters: GORY FELDMAN. Obviously it's not my real name but in the zombie business, you don't use real names. Real names are boring. If you think about it, it's rather similar to porn. You have your Demi Morgues, your Toby Magores, your Melt Gibsons, even your Arnold Corpseneggers. Of course I picked "Gory Feldman" when I first came down here; I have always been of the opinion that *The Lost Boys* is the greatest movie on earth. However, I have no comments on its sequel.

I walk down the line of chairs and sit at the very end, giving my feeble competitors another stare down. They have nothing on me.

All these poor bastards, these yuppie assholes with their cell phones and wristwatches and health insurance and other things I can't afford, they're despicable. They think they'll get along just fine and do a little acting on the side. Where is their commitment? Where is their *soul*?

Me, I'm committed. I'm in it for the long haul. Back in Seattle, I had lost my apartment, my job, and my girlfriend. Of course, it didn't help that my girlfriend had been my landlord, and I was working as a maintenance man for the apartment complex. So it all kind of came down at once. Not to mention that my father died around then, too. Plus the local bookies kept going after my legs. It was high time to get the hell out of there, and what better place to go than Los Angeles? So I had hitchhiked from Washington with the clothes on my back, a pocketful of change and an acoustic guitar I have no knowledge of playing whatsoever. And boy, do I strum the shit out of that instrument on every random street corner I come across. Sure, I don't know how to play, but I can certainly fake it enough to con the good, ignorant folks of L.A. into handing over their Starbucks change.

I'm leaning back in the plastic little chair, tapping my foot on the rug and contemplating stepping outside for a quick smoke break when the door to outside opens. My foot stops tapping immediately. Three tall, buff-as-hell men come shambling in, their faces covered with incredibly expensive looking zombie masks. The red corn syrup on them is like pus dripping from recently popped boils. These aren't the kind of masks you buy at your average Halloween costume shop. Nah, these are top quality, Tom Savini-crafted masterpieces.

Of course I know who they are. Around these parts, everybody does. The Three Bloody Tears are only the most notorious zombie cameo group in the entirety of Hollywood. If you needed a couple ghouls to do your movie dirty work, then you went to them. They are the best. Or so it was known. Personally, I thought they were

just three assholes who didn't know when to stop. These bastards have been taking jobs out from under me since I moved down here.

I watch in disbelief as two of the zombies sit down while the remaining one prances toward the clipboard, merrily signing their names as crimson slobber spills down his mouth. Half the waiting room gets up and leaves almost immediately, sighing and cursing.

I might as well give up before I humiliate myself, too. There's no way I'm getting the job now. Son of a bitch. It just isn't fair. How many more times will these bastards steal work from me? It's never going to end. With them around, I'll have to finally buckle down and get an actual job.

No. Hell no. I can't let that happen. Not if I want to eat next week. Not if I want a bed to sleep in.

I leap to my feet and storm over to them. They're just sitting there all nonchalant and decomposing.

"What the hell's wrong with you guys?" I shout at them. "Are you really so selfish that you have to hog every single goddamn movie? Don't you realize there are other people trying to make an undead living out here? You fucking assholes!"

The middle zombie just cocks his head to the side like a confused dog and responds in the most empathetic tone:

"Whhrraaallg?"

"Jesus Christ," I mutter. "It's like talking to a fucking zombie."

"Awwrrooog!" the one on the left exclaims.

"No!" I yell at them, pointing my index finger as if I'm the master and they've just defecated on the carpet. "You sons of bitches are *not* doing this to me again! You think you're so funny, don't you? Well, I've had enough! Rent is due in a week and GUESS WHAT? I'm going to be able to pay it this time! You are not taking this from me again, you bastards!"

"Herroouugrrr!" the one on the right laughs.

Laughs! I can't believe this. Here I am, telling them what's what and this fucker just stares into my face and *laughs*. I know then that there's only one option left, one way of beating these bastards once

and for all. Somehow, someday, I'll have to out zombie them. Then we'll see who's laughing.

"THEN WE'LL SEE!" I scream manically and stomp off into the public bathroom.

God, I'm so angry, so pissed, I could just kill something! Storming back and forth in the lavatory, I tell myself I don't have much time before they call my name; if I'm going to do something, I better do it now.

But what?

My current attire doesn't even come close in comparing to those damn gory glory hogs. I'm screwed. So screwed. How am I supposed to zombify myself in a goddamn public bathroom without even any makeup?

The only answer I can think of is I'll go for gritty realism. I'll have to be experimental. I'll have to be edgy. This is the new way and I'm going to embrace it hardcore.

So what do zombies look like? Well, their throats are usually torn out, but that's out of the question. So what else? Blood. Gore. Violence.

Running my hands through my hair in front of the bathroom mirror, I notice the dirt crusted under my fingernails and I get a beautiful, insane idea. I smile and immediately frown. I must really be desperate. Jesus.

Sliding the nail of my left index finger in between the faucet knob, I hold my breath and close my eyes, thinking a short prayer before slamming my right fist down upon my other hand, snapping the nail off the lunula in one rough instantaneous motion. Tiny drops of blood squirt from my finger as I jerk back in pain.

Progress. No matter how stupid and painful it might be, it's still progress. But it's nowhere near enough. What else? Think, man, think!

"Gory Feldman? Calling a 'Gory Feldman'...?"

The voice outside is calling me. They won't wait long. Another thirty seconds tops before they move on to the next name. Before they move on to the Three Bloody Tears. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I'm out of time. God, just do something! Don't think, just act! Looking down at the sink, I sigh. Aw, to hell with it. This might be the most idiotic thing that has ever crossed my mind, and boy is that saying a lot.

"Gory Feldman ...?"

Goddammit.

My brain turns off. My mouth opens wide. Eyes closed, I strike my face down with immense intensity, my teeth shattering against the porcelain sink, my mouth exploding at once.

Jesus Jesus Jesus oh Jesus Jesus what the fuck what the fuck

My vision is too blurred by tears to see at first, but as it clears I'm able to make out a pile of blood and tears in the sink. My head in convulsing. Jesus. Oh Christ, what is wrong with me? I slowly back away from the mirror, refusing to look at my reflection; globs of blood drop down from my mouth and splatter against the piss-stained linoleum at my feet.

"Fak!" I cry out, praying I don't choke on my own teeth. Oh, why would I do this? Why the fuck would I do this?

"Gory Feldman! Last call for a Gory Feldman ..."

Well there's no reason to let my stupidity go to waste. I sure look the part. This is real blood falling from my face! They'd be fools to not hire me!

But why does it have to hurt so much?

I exit the bathroom and bump into a small plump woman with glasses; she leaps back and screams at the sight of me.

"You ... you Gory ...?" she asks.

"Ya, 'hat's 'ee," I reply, a string of blood dripping down my chin.

"Well. Uh. Follow me."

"Eh!" I exclaim, grabbing the woman by the shoulder and nearly scaring the literal shit out of her.

"What!?"

"Ow or 'ast 'ombi?"

"Huh?"

I spit out a chunk of blood into a rectangular aquarium placed on the waiting desk and very carefully ask, "Slow or fast zombie?"

The woman nods. "Fast, of course. This is the remake of *Dawn of the Dead*, after all."

"Eeake? Uh?"

"Yes, you heard me. We're remaking the remake of *Dawn of the Dead*. Personally, I'm not for the idea, but it is the season of remakes, unfortunately. Oh what the hell!? Please don't spit teeth at me, sir. That's highly uncalled for!"

I apologize as she leads me toward the door, noticing the Three Bloody Tears slumped in their chairs, waiting for their own turn. You really couldn't ask for a more challenging competition. They're the bee's knees of Zombiwood. The sight of my "costume" makes their blood-crusting jaws drop. They can't believe it. Neither can I. They know that for once they're not going to get the role. They know they've finally lost. I'm the winner here, not them. To further prove it, I make a quick jacking off gesture at them and smile as their jaws drop even further.

I enter the auditioning room. Nothing unique about it, really, just an average size room with a desk at the far end, occupied by a couple of casting directors. The woman sits down with them and, wiping my spit off her, tells me to go ahead.

"Otivaon?" I ask. *Motivation*.

"You're a zombie," the man next to her says. "Act like one."

"Oh ... 'ight," I mumble, and elevate my arms even with my chest. Just like Frankenstein's monster. "Raaaiissssss ..."

"Zombies don't talk!" the man bellows at me, quite upset.

"'Ight, 'ight ..." I struggle back my nerves. *Man, don't blow this now. You've already done too much. Come on, you can do this!*

Clearing my plasmatic throat, I begin to perform a series of quick dashes back and forth—suicides—along the carpet. As I move, my cheeks shake crazily like some sort of retarded Saint Bernard, particles of blood splashing against various locations among the auditioning room. My confidence is returning. I mime biting an invisible pedestrian on the neck, eating their phantom flesh and enjoying every taste. I sprint around the room like a rabid animal, growling ferociously and showing off my horrendous grin. The judges must be really digging me. The movie role is mine!

But I'm nearly out of breath when I notice their faces: disappointment, pure disappointment. I stop in my tracks and attempt to ask what's wrong.

"Well..." the man starts, "I don't think you're what we're looking for."

"Hat!?" I shriek.

"Well, you see, uh, Susan here has just informed me that the Three Bloody Tears are outside waiting on us, and, uh, well, you've seen them before. They're the best. I'm afraid we just can't afford to pass on these fellas. Your performance was solid, though. Nice makeup. Maybe next time, yeah?"

"NO! NO! NO!" I grimace. This can't be happening. It can't!

I punch the wall next to me and let out a groan. What a bullshit day this has turned out to be. There's no way I'm going to be able to pay off the hospital bills that I will undoubtedly receive for my jaw. God, what an idiot. What a stupid, no-good piece of shit moron.

Then it hits me.

What if this is some sort of test? A test to see how compassionate I am. It's a tough call, that's for sure, but I'm almost willing to bet that this is a test. It all makes sense. There's no way any sane man would reject my amazingly zombified face.

So the question is, what would a zombie do next?

The answer, well, is obvious.

“Rrraaaaa!” I roar and charge toward the table, leaping over it and tackling the casting director to the ground.

“Ahh, what the hell!?” he screams. “Susan, call the goddamn police!”

I begin to wonder if maybe this isn’t that good of an idea after all.

I tear my grizzly face away from the director and look down at his mangled throat. Gore and blood’s spraying everywhere, all over my own face. The man is crying his eyes out, making it all the more obvious that I haven’t done what he intended, and I decide to get the hell out of here before I do anymore damage.

Somehow, I don’t think I’ve gotten the job.

Hightailing it out of the building, I make sure to give those zombie bastards the middle finger before leaving.

Wobbling along the sidewalk, trying to retrieve some sense of normal balance, I hear the sound of sirens. Police sirens. How did they get here so fast?

“Hey, stop right there!” someone behind me screams. No doubt a cop. “Put your hands up goddammit!”

Ha-ha, yeah, like I’m going to do that.

Blood is still leaking steadily out of my mouth as I sprint across the road, thinking, *I gotta get to the hospital*. Thinking, *I don’t want to go to jail, either*.

Then I find myself turning a corner and colliding right into some woman pushing a stroller, sending both of us sprawling along the pavement. I watch in horror as the baby comes tumbling out, falling toward the hard ground.

Fortunately, I use my super quick zombie speed and catch the baby literally centimeters from the ground. I stand up, cradling it in my arms as it screams its little precious head off. The mother still lies on the ground, muscles tensed and nervous as all hell, staring at me with such fright. “Give me back my baby,” she says. “Please, I’ll do whatever you want.”

"Sure," I mumble, blood spilling out of my mouth and landing on the baby's little blue onesie.

She screams. "You freak! You monster! You fucking zombie freak!" Then she shoots to her feet and skedaddles across the street into a doughnut shop, abandoning her baby altogether, making me wonder if perhaps she isn't the greatest mother in the world.

Zombie.

She had called me a zombie.

I raise the baby up at eyelevel and grin stupidly. "Didjer 'ear 'hat? See 'ad I's a 'ombie!" I exclaim, dripping more blood on the baby's cheeks. It's okay though, it's not like I have some kind of disease or anything. Still, I probably should avoid doing that again.

A zombie ...

Then it hits me.

The woman screaming I'm a zombie, the cop chasing me, the frightened cast directors. This is all still my audition! The moviemakers have set all of this up to determine whether or not I was zombie enough for the big leagues. And boy, I'm thinking I sure proved I am.

I tilt my head and discover a camera attached to the side of a red traffic light. Bingo! They're watching me right now, those sly bastards. Boy, they really scared me.

But it's going to be worth it. Oh, yes.

I carefully place the blood-spattered baby back in its stroller, give it a few tickles under its adorable red chin, and turn around. I know I've gotten the part now; there's no doubt about it this time.

Then it hits me.

There's still one final test. One that I've maybe already failed. What zombie in their right dead mind would flee from a police officer? Hell no, that's not the zombie way! A real zombie would attack! It would stand its ground!

Lowering my head in a very similar fashion of a rhino (a *zombie* rhino!), I charge down the street toward the approaching police officer. His threats of firing his weapon are very impressive; he's

quite believable. He's so convincing I can't help but wonder if he's going to be in the actual movie. God, it's such a rarity to audition alongside another actor. They must really see great things in me!

"Goddammit, you zombie punk, stop right now!" the cop screams.

Then it hits me.

Having recently moved to Texas, **MAX BOOTH** is really trying his best not to make fun of the redneck agenda that surrounds the state. He instead spends his time writing stories and burning his hand on his toaster oven, which he secretly believes is just playing hard to get. You may contact him at madd_maxxx3@yahoo.com.

Love I Get So Lost

Manuel Royal

Melanie's eyes, as ever, hold me immobile in their manifold gaze. Manifold. Well, they aren't all looking right at me, but a lot of them are. Melanie's green eyes are sunshine through new Spring leaves, so clear and fresh-minted; hopeful, somehow.

Her blue eyes are, say, fathomless crystalline lagoons. Or shards of ice, I don't know. Blue is blue.

Melanie's brown eyes, now, those are something. Sanguine, dreamy, rich and lively in a dozen shades from weak tea to black tar. Wise. They cheer me up on days like this. Every day is like this.

Melanie's voice scrapes those thoughts away like a wire brush. "Enough loafing." She's come up on my right side, my blind side. "Don't touch the jar." Hard, lustrous, like polished rosewood, that voice.

How does she move around the house without a sound? Never stumbles, never has so much as a bruise on her perfect white, perfect smooth skin.

I tell her, "One of them is mine." (It is: the lone hazel eyeball, always drifting to the bottom of the jar.)

My own voice sounds like a cranky child. I know Melanie's little ears, her goddamn batlike ears can detect every little note of failure and inadequacy.

"Mine now." That's all she says. She's already walking away, no hurry, giving me plenty of time to turn and watch. Her silk gown is so sheer I can see the two eyes tattooed on her buttocks. They're copied off the lady's eyes in that Rossetti painting, *Regina Cordium*, and they're mysterious because they're veiled, and because they're a little wall-eyed so you can't tell where they're looking. But also comical, I think anyway, because they go up and down and they

just about describe an infinity symbol as she shifts her weight from the ball of one dainty bare foot to the other and those bountiful hips roll. Oh, and the vertical line between them makes it look like her ass is frowning.

She had those tats done some years back, when she could still see. Her husband called her “Four-Eyes.” His own eyes were brown with green flecks. Cheer-me-up-please eyes, I call them. Currently drifting in the jar, a reminder of more normal times.

How many eyes does one woman need? She’s got her tattooed ass-eyes, plus thirty-three eyes in the jar, plus the two unsleeping golden eyes tattooed on her eyelids, stitched flat across her empty sockets. Those two are a masterpiece. So thirty-seven eyes all told, I guess. The only reason it’s an odd number is because I’m more useful to her if I can see to work. In this kingdom, the one-eyed man is a slave. Guess I save some money not going to those 3-D movies.

(Oh, the guy that did those eyelid tattoos was reputedly the best skin artist in the Valley. Nice easygoing man, always humming to himself. His eyes are clear, grey. In the jar. To me, they look somehow startled. He did not see it coming.)

She drifts off, now, down the long hallway, a willowy pale shape enclosed by four hard planes. All the interior surfaces of the house are stone, floor, walls and ceiling. Little inset lights in odd places. As per her design specs. We live in a tomb. I imagine it helps her find her way around by echoes, and she always seems to know where I am; but her little feet don’t make a sound. No music allowed.

She’s right, anyway, I was loafing, and my chores won’t do themselves. Most of my day is taken up with household repairs, dusting, tending the herb garden. I go out in the afternoon to shop and surreptitiously photograph prospects. I try to pick people who won’t be missed. Some people, their absence might even benefit

society. Just two a year, one in January, one in July. The Earth's perihelion and aphelion, don't ask me why. She's got her quirks.

It's Thursday, so I make grilled lamb cutlets, on watercress with mashed sweet potato and fresh rosemary. Purple Peeps for dessert, as always. Nine months ago, I could only find yellow Peeps, and that was a bad day. I don't know how she knows the difference, but she does.

Same thing with the white tablecloth. She requires it be spotless, and I'm sure as hell not going to question her ability to detect a stain.

"Come cut up my meat." Cut her meat, right – considering what Melanie can do in five seconds with a hot melon scoop, assistance with utensils is the last thing she needs, but it's one of my duties.

I take my time, enjoying the aroma of real food, lamb and asparagus, rising from her gold-rimmed platter. She hears my deep inhalation, snaps: "The blinds." I go open them, let in the amber evening light. I can't even remember how much I paid to provide this ocean sunset for her every evening; building this house on this hill for this view cost almost all I had in my old life.

Behind me I hear the soft expensive clink of gold-plated dinnerware. She loves her dinner. Seriously; it's one of three things she loves. My clay bowl is waiting for me, at the other end of the table, I'm not going to forget to eat, but she reminds me every time. "Enjoy your kibble."

I do. She diminished me to that level practically without effort, the second weekend. I enjoy my kibble.

"Love I Get So Lost" originally appeared online at *Dark Valentine*.

MANUEL ROYAL was born, like Tristram Shandy, with a broken nose. He will die. In between, he lives and writes in Atlanta.

Salome

Laura Canon

Afterwards, we sit in the ruins of the temple gardens. The wild ducks who fly north every summer have returned and whether they are surprised or not by what has come upon the city in their absence, by the ruins and the smell of death, they've settled back on the grounds around the ornamental lake. They nibble the dead grass along the paths, quacking softly, as if content with such small things.

Herod follows them with his eyes. To his mind they're not ducks but white peacocks, shining and pure, with jeweled collars and crimson feet and terrible cries which bring rain down from the clouds.

It had seemed a wonderful joke, at first. That my mother, who wore too much make-up and was silly in a way that could only have been attractive when she was much younger, should marry such a man as Herod! My mother, that they should fight a war over her! It was exquisite. Herod was much too young for her and not the type to be soothed by a woman who liked to talk about why mangoes don't taste the same anymore and how hot the summers were now and how much she enjoyed her last trip to Egypt. (Eleven years ago, and in every one of those eleven years I'd had to hear about the temple crocodiles and the Nubian boys riding donkeys.)

One day I said to Herod: "Why don't you send her to Egypt again – for a long time?"

He just smiled and stretched out and asked me to dance for him again.

He had gray eyes and curling hair and he never spoke his thoughts. He'd had people killed, but then so had my father. It

takes some nerve to point to a man, any man, and say, *kill him* – but after all that's what having royal blood means.

It was another joke to call what I did dancing. I'd tuck up my robes so they wouldn't catch my feet and hop around, twirling and clapping my hands. Once I saw one of the dancing girls – the real ones, who entertained at banquets – watching me and laughing out loud. But Herod didn't mind. He'd watch my bare feet kicking the dust up and smile lazily, ignoring my mother and the fact that everyone else was bored already.

How should I know what I wanted? Staring off into the air he'd list things – things he'd had once maybe, or things he thought we ought to have, if our luck turned. Dishes shaped like cranes and fish; painted bowls that turned your hands blood-red while you washed them; salt from distant lands, less brittle than our local salt, with the taste of the sea and tints of purple; little potted trees, that we might plant and see if they would thrive; the bones of ancient giants – collecting such things was a craze in Rome; tiny grains of rice, with all the wisdom of the world written on them by blind men. Also jewels, of course – but after Mama no one could be impressed with jewels – and every kind of clothing and scent and headdresses.

Herod believed in these things. If I'd named just one, he'd have found a way to manage it.

Around that time a fad took the court for a new kind of drum that had been invented to the south, in the marshlands. It was a tiny thing, stretched with ostrich skin, but played right anyone could dance to it, they said. I found this to be true. Somehow I could catch the rhythm and then I hardly knew the hours passed, even as drummer after drummer stumbled away with swollen hands.

I wanted no more than to dance for the sun, outside, in the morning and again in the evening.

Now I like the city. I like the streets in the evening, when people come out to walk and boys and girls look at each other as they go by. But in those days I never went into the streets of the city. It wasn't permitted. So I don't know where the prophet came from. His name was John, and I believe he was arrested first for sleeping in the streets. Later they said he had insulted Mama, but I never believed that. Any real prophet could have seen that she wasn't worth it.

I thought maybe the real reason was that he wanted to be arrested, to get inside the palace and see what we looked like.

I laughed every time he opened his mouth. No one ever wore clothes, it was always "raiment." Every snake was a "viper." When it thundered he foretold the future from it. He was scared of all birds but particularly the tame ducks and would circle away, muttering incantations, if one came near him.

Herod thought he must be very holy.

You see what I mean? If I'd chosen anything off that list perhaps Herod wouldn't have wanted to keep the prophet. Now at last he had something worthy of the glory of our court. A holy man – a seer – who shook his fists and called down the wrath of heaven, who spoke in riddles, who bathed in the ornamental lake more often than any normal person would have thought necessary.

Perhaps the prophet would have liked me more if I'd bathed more. Perhaps he'd have noticed me if my feet weren't dusty and my hair didn't hang in rat-tails after I'd been dancing. It's well-known that prophets don't understand women unless they're beautiful.

He was in the ornamental lake and I thought he wouldn't come out because of my presence. But he did. He strode out without shivering, water running from his long hair. His body was brown

and twisted, his legs like the legs of the beggars and cripples outside the temple. I had to shut my eyes. It was terrible to think of such a twisted body being permitted in Herod's presence.

I knew then what I wanted.

"Why not myrrh?" Herod said. "I can get you myrrh anytime."

We hadn't had myrrh in months, truly.

"A water clock," he said. "A white rabbit with pink eyes. A room full of finches."

After that when Herod saw me coming he would turn aside. Even at dinner he ignored me. So I waited, and when Mama came back from Caesarea I asked again.

"But what do you have against this man?"

"A dead holy man is worth more than a live one," I said.

"People will come to see where he died. They might build a shrine and leave offerings."

"Ha!" Mama muttered. "Nothing of value. Just flowers and such."

"But if I put him to death..." Herod said, making a face.

"Besides," I told them, "I think the holy man is unhappy. I think he's going to run away."

At this Herod jabbed his spoon into the air. "If he runs away, I'll have him brought right back."

I looked over at Mama. "And when I dance the holy man looks up at the ceiling, just like those philosophers from Rome used to, Mama, at father's court, when they came to visit and laughed at us."

"What a memory you have!" Mama said.

"Ah, I see it now," Herod said. "Spiteful!"

Let him think that. Sooner or later the prophet would run away. Already he sighed in the mornings, by the lake.

"Has it been enough?" he would say. "I called out to them, I called them, I warned them... Is it my fault if...? What was I supposed to do, then? Wasn't it enough?"

He was looking at me but not looking at me. I danced away from him and turned a flip or two.

"You'll never get what you want," I said. "But I will."

Then his eyes, gold-brown, his thick eyebrows with their coarse strands of white hair here and there, rested on me, as if he'd never seen me before.

"Why, what could you want, child?"

What could I want? Better to ask, what could I have? All those things Herod had spoken of bringing me, and yet I knew if he moved heaven and earth he might only produce a droopy yellow-white peahen to peck in the gardens, or a single bowl or bag of salt, to be given to the care of the servants. And in time I would forget about them, or the peahen would die, and there would always be something else, a new craze from Rome, perhaps, a new drum, a new dance.

But the head of a prophet, a holy man...

It would cost us nothing and no one else would ever have one. I knew it would please Herod, to be able to give me a gift like that.

They used the last silver tray, the one we always passed after dinner, with nuts piled on it. The neck part was horrible, so I didn't look at it. The eyes were open. They looked like my father's eyes, after he was stabbed.

It wasn't that different from the way I had imagined it. Still, I understood at once that it would be impractical to put the prophet's head on display. I ordered the servants to preserve it in brine and place it in a storeroom. Perhaps in time I'd know what to do with it.

But the next week another one of my uncles declared war on Herod and brought Roman legions with him. Mama and I went to the seashore, until Herod signed a peace treaty. Then we didn't have the countryside anymore, just the city, and the city was in ruins.

The Romans had destroyed the palace and the temple gardens. The city was empty, for the citizens had been sold as slaves, but gradually those who fled came back. The servants who'd hidden and survived said that some of the other servants had taken the prophet's head and buried it in the gardens. They thought it would protect them from the Romans. I made them dig for days but they said they couldn't find the spot again.

Later I thought that maybe they were lying. Maybe the Romans had taken my prophet's head. They took my little drum, after all, and, tell me, what would those big Roman soldiers want with a little drum like that?

So I lost the prophet's head, before I even knew what I wanted to do with it.

Herod tells me I'll marry his son. I'll be Queen of Armenia and I'll have peacocks and myrrh and golden lyres and all the horses in my stables will be shod with silver horseshoes.

But I want what I've always wanted. Nothing more than to dance for the sun, outside, in the morning and the evening.

LAURA CANON lives in Henderson, Nevada and writes historical fiction, primarily young adult. She has been previously published in *The Waterhouse Review*.

Longing to Play the Oboe

James Bambury

The oboe players across the street were in the midst of a blistering ecumenical argument. Their voices were muted by the glass but I caught enough words to figure out they had severely divergent views on the Book of Job.

I took another forkful of pumpkin cheesecake but I didn't take my eye off the men. Getting the pieces of cake using only the side of my fork was a bit awkward, but I was getting used to using my left hand for such things.

Outside, the fight escalated as they shoved and exchanged blows. There was a whistling sound followed by the sickening crack of an oboe being struck against a musician's head.

I took another sip of coffee and stabbed at the leftover crust with my fork, disappointed at the way that it broke apart instead of letting itself be impaled upon the tips.

The shouting and fighting drew a crowd around the two older men and I cracked a smile. Their busking had gone unnoticed before, but now they were the object of at least half a dozen camera phones.

I drained the last of the chilling coffee and waited to see how the melee unfolded.

The crowd stepped back. The musicians had stopped their arguing, their differences apparently resolved and resumed their performance. The oboes had slight buzzing sounds after the fracas but hit all the notes to "How Great Thou Art" to great applause from the crowd.

I stared down at my hand, not the still-good-for-pie-eating one but the one with stiff paralyzed fingers in a talon-like grasp. I wore short sleeves for the first time in a while that day and anyone could

see the scars from the incisions on the inside of my wrists, the series of jabs and punctures deep enough to cut all the nerves necessary for making music. The waitress caught me staring outside as she came to clear my plate and I covered my wrists. Not so much because of the scars but I was suddenly afraid she could read the Gujarati script tattooed like a bracelet around my wrist: "Longing to play the oboe."

JAMES BAMBURY writes from Brampton, Ontario. Visit his website at <http://jamesbambury.blogspot.com>.

Wide Right Game

Ryan Werner

There's an apartment building I used to steal from when I was old enough to know better but young enough to be forgiven. The people who lived there were described as lower middle class, but bullshit aside they were poor people who owned a few small things like CD players and deep fryers. Often enough they hoarded comic books and sports memorabilia that they refused to part with. Mostly they just buried all their stuff in a pile somewhere and forgot about it.

In addition to the noises of the structure itself—broken gutters clattering against the side of the building, every hinge a rusty, symphonic mess—everyone drank and slept heavily. I'd sneak in during the middle of the night through the fire escape and leave through the front door with stuff to pawn a few towns over. I sold a six-pack of Billy Beer for \$35, a 1970's Aerosmith tour shirt for \$50.

One night I crawled through the window of someone's apartment at three in the morning and saw a man on the couch, an old football game on the television. I was startled at first, but he was definitely out, bottle of whiskey still in his hand and a glass of something spilled and pooled into a ballooned-out shape on the rug. I looked back at the television. Bills vs. Giants. Super Bowl XXV. The game was in its final moments: the Bills are down by one and placekicker Scott Norwood needs to make the 47-yard field goal with eight seconds left. He fucks it. The announcer yells No good! Wide right! The Giants are jumping up and down into each other's arms, lifting Bill Parcells onto their shoulders and walking the sidelines. MVP Ottis Anderson grabs a mini American flag and dedicates the game to the Gulf War troops. The deep voiceover

calls it the Wide Right Game. Scott Norwood walks off the field with his head up.

I began rooting through the man's possessions and not finding much. His apartment was a two bedroom, but one room was empty except bottles of booze and beer, some of them half full with a film congealing on top, dead gnats stuck to it. I found nothing in there. In the room with a bed, there was a dresser that was empty, all the clothes in piles on the floor, almost sorted and leaking into one another like watercolors. His white shirts turned into his navy pants turned into his underwear and socks. I went back to the kitchen, and though I was usually nimble, quick and sharp with my hands, the bottom fell out of a box I lifted, scattering metal spatulas and beaters into a huddle and then out, like a wave.

When I looked into the living room, the man was still on the couch, unmoved, the current-day in-studio announce team talking about Scott Norwood's career paralleling the decline and restructuring of the city of Buffalo itself. I had never seen a dead man up close before. His skin was yellowed and thin except around his nose and eyes where capillaries had burst like a rash.

I began cleaning his apartment, arranging his magazines and video tapes. I threw away the dirty ones. I moved back to his room and put the laundry into garbage bags to be cleaned and folded later. I went through his fridge and cupboards and threw out the junk food. I swept the floor, dusted his end-tables and television. In the spare bedroom I began placing the bottles into bags of their own, two at a time, not spilling or making a sound.

I grabbed a bowl and filled it with warm water and soap and began cleaning him. I used a bath towel and went all over his body, lifting up his belly and wiping off a moist, sun-colored layer of filth the consistency of paste. I put him in a fresh change of clothes and threw the stained shorts and shirt he was wearing into the garbage before twisting the top of the garbage itself and setting it by the front door. There were dozens of bags of trash. I took all the remaining alcohol in the house and dumped it down the sink,

bottles of cheap Mr. Boston's gun and vodka, shitty light beer from gas stations and convenience marts.

I went back into his room again to make his bed and saw a Polaroid of two women tucked into the mirror of the dresser. On the bottom it said Nancy and Jacqueline and a recent date, only the previous summer. Nancy was motioning toward the camera, trying to shake away whoever was taking the picture, but Jacqueline was beautiful, glowing sheepishly and looking to be my age, though incapable of thievery and probably on track to graduate high school. I grabbed the picture and shoved it too hard, too fast into my back pocket and crinkled it along the V-shaped bottom.

Jacqueline doesn't ask me about her father often, and I don't press my luck with it, either. I don't look for sympathy or try to weasel my way out of an argument by saying It's like your father told me once. I told her when I met her—the pretty Irish girl with bad eyes squinting back and forth between the preacher and the urn—that I had been helping her father get back on track for the past few months before he died. He was almost there, almost ready to call her and show him what he had accomplished.

We're watching television one day and she's flipping through the channels. The kids are sleeping and the sound's down low. She pauses on a sports channel for a second and I recognize it, Bills vs. Giants, Super Bowl XXV. I reach out my hand like I'm warning a car to a halt. I say, It's the game and then I stop. She flips back to it and then squints at me a bit, still pretty, still going blind. We finish watching until the end and she comments on poor Scott Norwood. I watch the replay closer this time. From one camera angle, the distance is long and painful. From another, the laces on the ball are clearly facing Norwood. He didn't have a chance. I think of Jacqueline's father, bloated and glorious.

“Wide Right Game” appears in *Shake Away These Constant Days*, a collection of short stories by Ryan Werner, forthcoming this fall from Jersey Devil Press.

RYAN WERNER has got a body built for sin and an appetite for passion. He practices shameless self-promotion at his blog, Ryan Werner Writes Stuff (www.ryanwernerwritestuff.com).

You Know What To Do

Aaron Frigard

“You know what to do,” she said.

This is what I told the fetus in the red cooler. I might have been crazy, but I felt like all the time I was talking, it was listening.

And so it was me and it that night, driving in the Nova on the 86.

I just wanted to help.

“My name is Dave, by the way,” I said. “You would’ve been my brother- or sister-in-law, I guess. Your sister Janine would’ve made a good sister. She’s made a helluva wife.”

The cooler remained silent.

“You know what to do, Doc,” I said. “That used to be a saying of ours in our battalion. Whether it was serious or just a spider bite, whenever someone in our battalion got into trouble, we’d say the same thing. ‘You know what to do, Doc.’ Funny that it didn’t matter if the guy you were talking to was a medic or not. Mind if I call you Doc?”

Whiskey was on my teeth as I wound up the road, the engine slightly laboring. The yellow stripes brightened by my headlights. I turned down the radio. Jazz. The signal faded the further I drove. My right hand on the wheel, the empty sleeve of my other arm gently flapping in the wind. Whenever I drive I can feel my left arm still there, a tingling right down to my fingers. I lost it all up to the shoulder after high school. Da Nang.

“Anyways, Doc. Janine’s in human resources now. You can’t run a business these days without good human resources.”

“Then there’s your mother,” I sighed. “Her name was Alice, but she made me—only me—call her Mrs. Parker. Parker would’ve been your last name. That’s an odd behavior, asking grown men to

use surnames. At the shop everyone calls me Dave. Not sure anyone even knows my last name.”

The cooler gently rocked, tears of condensation rolling down its side.

“But your father, Mr. Parker. He was a good man. He died three years ago and we still miss him. He was like a father to me. And he let everyone—including me—call him Carl.”

The road was dotted with dead squirrels and raccoons and other animals or pieces of animals I couldn’t think the names of. And if there weren’t the carcasses lit up by my headlights, it was the crimson color of their blood that streaked the highway.

“She didn’t want to come,” I said, putting the napkin back on the dashboard. “Janine that is. We didn’t expect to find you the way we did. You were in the freezer.”

The red cooler sweat in the passenger seat. Quiet. As if contemplating how it got there or perhaps transfixed by the vibration of tires on the road. Either way it would be a prisoner no more.

In the war I knew a lot of guys who spoke to corpses. But that’s so much other history.

Still, I felt a strange obligation to fill the empty chalice of history. The latest from the front. I have these experiences whenever I meet veterans in line at the gas station or Food Club. We’re all compelled to relay the latest, like we’re still brothers.

The vibration of the chassis rose through the floor. The steering wheel as smooth as my wife’s arms. The warm, soothing odor of gasoline.

“Me?” I said. “I work on cars now. This thing we’re in now is what we call an automobile. Some call this century the Century of the Automobile, which makes it a good business to be in. Even though I know you’re probably thinking that a mechanic can’t work with one arm.” I explained how this Nova was left at my shop by a customer who got drafted and never returned to claim it.

How I'd waited on him for three-and-a-half years before his niece called. All it needed was a muffler and new calipers.

"Janine doesn't like to drive but she likes this car. She says it feels safe, and it is. Especially compared with these Japanese cars flooding the market."

When I approached the yellow deer crossing sign I flipped on the ceiling light and steered with my knee, reading the directions to the lake scribbled on the napkin. The deer crossing sign was right where Lonnie said it would be, which meant the lake was only five miles away.

Earlier that day, Janine and I had returned from Mrs. Parker's funeral. I was in my black suit and my brown shoes. She was in a black dress, her arms bare and tan.

She helped me out of my jacket and hung it on the back of the chair. She unpinned the empty sleeve of my white shirt and refolded it and pinned it close where I liked it, just below my shoulder.

We sat in the kitchen where the midday light came through the window above Mrs. Parker's sink. On another wall hung a crinkled movie poster featuring our newly re-elected president, Ronald Reagan. The movie was *Bedtime for Bonzo*, with the president posing with his arm dangling around an orangutan.

Janine cut the limes on the counter and was mixing the drinks with the knife. The sunlight through the kitchen window turned her brown eyes gold. There was a building next door, a twin to Mrs. Parker's. Five stories of concrete pocked with rectangular glass windows. Laundry hanging on the fire escapes. You could always tell where the bathrooms were because those windows were smaller.

"Do you want ice with this?" she said. Then she looked away, knowing it had slipped from her, momentarily, what else was in

the freezer. Two days before, as we had begun cleaning out the apartment, I discovered the fetus there. It had been wrapped in a blue plastic bag and stashed under a pile of batteries. When I offered to show it to her, Janine sat Indian style on the floor and reached for her cigarettes. Then she said we'd talk about it later.

"So now it's later," I said, taking up the knife to twirl in my warm drink.

She took a pull from her cigarette, looked away. "For the love of shit."

"Who do you think it was?"

"Who? The thing in the freezer?" She set her cigarette in the ash tray and sipped her drink. "I don't know," she said. "Probably an older brother or something."

"Why older?"

"Because I was an only child. Because that bitch thought I was a devil. I don't know." She leaned back in the chair. The light from the window was catching the gold earrings I had given her for our tenth anniversary.

I looked around the apartment, which despite our efforts was still littered with stuff. Dusty vases. Plastic flowers, fruits. Trunks of clothes, shoes. Dolls, their paint peeling, sat on shelves. Two rugs that had been rolled up and were stacked against the wall.

"What do we do?" I said. "Call the hospital?"

"About the thing?" She was staring glassy eyed at her mother's cheap bottle of gin. "Leave it to Alice to drop this in my lap."

For as long as I had known her, she only referred to her mother by her first name.

"I don't think we can just bury it in the courtyard," I said. "Or flush it down the toilet."

Janine uncrossed her legs and tiredly leaned back. "I never told you this," she said, "but there's a reason she made you call her Mrs. Parker. It's because your name is David." She chortled. "Alice thought you were Jewish. She said I would've been better off marrying a milking goat."

“She thought I was Jewish?”

Janine raised her eyebrows and brought the glass to her lips.

A thick summer breeze billowed the sheer white curtains above the sink. The windows had been open for two days and the apartment still smelled of smoke.

“She must have moved it from the old place,” I said. “I remember visiting after she moved in here. I remember we were looking for something to eat and I took hamburgers out of this freezer. What if I had taken that thing out instead?”

“That’s disgusting,” she said. “What the hell is wrong with you?” At the funeral, Janine’s eyes had been stoic, but now they were redder, angrier. Mrs. Parker was a suffocating presence, and now that she was gone it was as if all the onions she had suppressed in my wife were now beginning to burn her eyes.

I sipped my drink and my eyes dropped to the floor where I saw another unsprung mousetrap by the fridge.

We resumed packing, emptying the closets and stuffing everything into oversized garbage bags I had taken from my shop. She held the bags open. The walls were stained yellow by cigarette smoke.

The light from the living room window lit up her silky black locks. Her freckled tan calves flexed as she began to collect a bowling ball from a shelf in the closet.

“Jesus,” I said. “Do you want help?”

“No.”

I curled my right arm around her waist to spot her. I could feel a phantom tingling where my left hand used to be. An instinct. As if it, too, were trying to wrap around her waist.

She wagged her hips, shaking my arm away. On her toes, arms extended. Gold bracelet slipping down her forearm. The green bowling ball slowly rolling off the top shelf.

I felt the urge to lift both of my hands to help her. “You should have let me do this,” I said.

She grunted, ignoring me. With both hands she hoisted the ball perilously over her head and waddled across the room like a penguin. Nostrils flaring. The bracelet now down to her elbow. She dropped the ball from over her head and it landed on the couch where it bounced once and then gently rolled off the cushion and onto the floor.

"For the goddamn love of shit," she said.

This is why I love my wife.

Afterwards, she pulled another cigarette from her pocketbook. She lit it and rose from the couch to inspect the piles on the floor. I had organized them into things to be given away and things to be burned.

"There's too much to do," she coughed. "I'm not sure separating helps. Junk is junk."

She leaned against the wall. We both stared at the floor.

"Honey?" she said. "I want you to take care of it. The thing."

I studied the ceiling fan caked with dust. "Do you have a preference for what I do?"

"You know what to do."

"I do?" I asked her if we should call a doctor.

"A doctor? What's the difference between a doctor and a hospital? I already said I don't want any hospitals. Why would I want a doctor? I just want it gone. Please. I don't even want to know what you do with it. Okay? There's too much to fucking deal with here."

I poured a new, warm gin and tonic and squeezed the pulp of the old lime into the glass. "What if I get caught?"

"You didn't get caught when you buried Oscar in the woods, did you? He was a hell of a lot bigger than that thing."

"That's true," I said. I had forgotten about Oscar.

In the bedroom I found a faded red cooler in the closet behind garbage bags full of wigs, stuffed animals, and god knows what else. My shirt reeked of the stale cigarettes and I stood by the open window. The sun was setting behind the other building and the

September breeze was cool and sweet. Mrs. Parker, I remembered, used to say this afternoon light was the color of the beams that would shoot from God's eyes during the reckoning.

Janine was still in the kitchen going through the mail as I pulled the blue bag out of the freezer. Half a pound. When I had opened it two days earlier the creature inside the bag was a reddish pink color, its hairless shrunken head smaller than the palm of my hand. Its eyes were closed like it was wincing and its arms and legs seemed folded behind its back, all giving it the arched shape and fleshy complexion of a shrimp.

Janine seemed to be trying not to look in my direction as I took it out of the freezer. She was intensely reading a flyer from a Chinese restaurant.

"A little help?" I said, holding the bag up by its neck. "Please."

Cigarette smoldering in the corner of her mouth, she closed her eyes and turned her head away as she tied the bag in a knot.

"Thank you."

I placed it in the cooler and waited for her in the hall, which was dark and smelled like sour milk.

She came out of the apartment a few minutes later.

"You forgot to lock it," I said.

"No, I didn't. People rob dead people's homes all the time. Hopefully someone will rob this place tonight."

I was about to say something about asking friends of her mother to help us, but I remembered the funeral and the embarrassing emptiness of the church. Besides us, the only other souls there were three co-workers from the thrift store, all still wearing their name tags.

The drive back to the motel was silent. Instead of human speech, it was the hardened grays and dull oranges of the evening that filled the Nova.

* * *

At around seven o'clock that evening we arrived at the motel. Janine got into bed and turned on the television. I changed out of my suit and put on blue jeans and a fresh green tee shirt. Fresh socks. Once *Jeopardy* was over I went back to the front desk to ask the attendant if there was another bar he could recommend.

"What was wrong with Harry's?" he said. He was a heavy middle-aged man with a pinky ring.

"Too many kids," I said. "I need a little quiet."

"But did you try the wings? Did you see that blonde with the big knockers? Was she there?"

"They all had big knockers. I just want some place where I can hear myself think."

The attendant leaned back in his chair. There was a *Playboy* on the counter behind the window. "Lonnie's is down the highway a little farther," he said. "Her wings aren't as good but it's quiet."

"How much farther?"

The attendant took off his bifocals and rubbed the ridge of his nose. "It's the last stop on this highway for about three weeks," he said.

At the bar I ordered a whiskey and Lonnie poured it for me. "You look like you just off the 86," she said with a chuckle. She had a bleached, toothy smile and her blond bangs formed a ridge over her saggy eyes. Like most people, she regarded my missing arm like it was its own person. I could feel my old elbow resting on the bar. She gave a solemn nod to it, as if she could see it resting there, too.

The place was mostly empty except for a few boys playing pool in the back. The dark wood and dim lights made the room seem smaller than it was. There was a buck's head mounted over the mirror behind the bar, its antlers glossed by time. We talked about nothing in particular for a while.

"Can I get you anything to eat?" she said.

I dabbed my finger in the empty glass and tasted the whiskey. "If I wanted to bury something like a cat," I said. "Where would I go?"

"Around here? You can't use your back yard?"

"No backyard."

Lonnie towed a mug and put it under the bar. "I suppose you could go to the lake," she said. "Drop it in there."

"Is it close?"

"About fifteen miles up the road."

"But what if the tide takes it to shore?"

"There's no tide in a lake." She put her elbows on the bar and leaned forward. "My cousin once got in a world of trouble for burying his dog in the cemetery next to his father's grave. He might have gotten away with it, but it was too shallow and coyotes dug it up and spread the carcass all over the cemetery."

"Geesh," I mumbled as I slid my empty glass back to her.

"Whose cat was it anyways?"

She refilled my glass as I looked at my reflection in the mirror over the bar. Deep circles under my eyes, which looked green instead of blue. My dirty blonde hair was greasy.

"It's a friend's cat," I said.

Lonnie shook her head. "It's a shame with animals. Knowing when to put them down. My mother used to say that it's the privilege of a pet not to suffer. What was the cat's name?"

"Name? I don't know."

I drank down the shot and put money on the bar. As I lifted myself off of the barstool, I could see my reflection beneath the buck's head. Mine looked so small by comparison. "Tell me where you got that buck," I said.

Lonnie affectionately tousled its jowls. "This fella?" she said. "My first husband got him. Anniversary present. That's almost thirty years ago by now."

"He was game?"

"No, he was road kill. About forty miles down on the 86." She glanced up at the big head and then took my money and put it in the cash register.

I stood there looking at the foggy glass eyes of the buck. It had been dead for nearly as long as what was waiting for me in the car.

Lonnie returned. "How about another for the road?"

I sat back down at the barstool. The boys playing pool had stopped their game and were looking at me. "I'll take another," I said. "If you can tell me where this lake is at."

Once I passed the yellow deer crossing sign, the highway merged into one lane.

"I loved your father, Doc," I went on. "We used to talk about things. Carl lost his thumb and two fingers in the war. 'Sitting at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean,' he used to say. Your dad used to joke that he liked the company of a fellow amputee, though neither of us had our parts amputated. But 'amputated' sounds too clean. They were just blown off. Mine by grenade. His by mortar. Really, we weren't sure what to call ourselves. He said Janine must've been attracted to my missing arm because the rest of me wasn't that pretty. That's the kind of humor your dad had. You see, sometimes a woman sees things in her father that she wants in a husband. His fingers, my arm. Does that make sense?"

The cooler let its plastic handle fall forward. It seemed to be relaxing. The moonlight shone on its white lid, turning it a pale blue.

"It's hard to explain."

The black lines of Lonnie's map were clear. The spot was marked only by a wooden post that was leaning against an old, rusted guardrail. Frayed hunting notices; notices for missing dogs,

children. By the faint light of the moon I could make out the tire tracks in the dirt.

"Guess we're here," I said, removing the key from the ignition.

There was an opening in the guard rail, where the metal had been sawed off, leaving its edges jagged. Something resembling a trail head in the opening.

I took my flashlight from the trunk along with the cooler and followed the trail. It wound and sloped downward through the woods. Perhaps it was the whiskey, but I felt a warm and steady braveness in the unfamiliar darkness. The ground was as swollen and tender as Janine's eyes when I left her at the motel.

Owls cooed and there were coyote howls coming from somewhere far off.

After a while my path was brightened by the reflection of the moon on the lake. The smell of mud, leaves.

I wobbled the flashlight on the ground. No beach. Merely a small gooey opening. Hanging over the shore line were the naked branches of a dead tree.

The lake was small enough to make out the blackened tree lines on the other side. This was one of those accidental glacier lakes. A dwarf lake. Something in-between.

"This is it," I said. "You don't know where you are."

The bag crinkled in the breeze.

"I'm putting you in a lake. Janine didn't want to be here. But she's a good person. Know that. She would have made a good sister, too."

Somewhere beyond, the soft discharge of rifle fire echoed over the lake. Barks of dogs.

"There's nothing I can do to fix this," I said. "Wish there was. Fixing is my nature. So this is the best I can do, right?"

"I'm a little drunk, Doc. Sorry. Whoever you are, I promise I'll throw you deep. I'm not sure what else I need to say. Guess there's

a better chance of peace here than in that freezer. I know that's not much of a prayer."

I was feeling antsy. Doubtful. I knelt by the water and cupped a handful and slurped it. Then I did it again. The liquor had made me thirsty.

I stepped away from the shore, beside the trunk of the dead tree. Gathered myself. Whiskey mixed with the taste of seaweed on my gums. Clutching the bag by its neck, the form inside bounced against my thigh, softer than it was before.

I trotted toward the lake, heaving the bag like a discus.

My foot planted into the mud, the suction pulling off my shoe. I lost my balance and tumbled into the water with no arm to break my fall.

It was cold. My jeans and tee shirt soaked through.

I picked up my shoe, sat down on the cooler, and clutched my empty sleeve and squeezed the water out.

The lake was still in the moonlight, its shy currents timidly embracing the shore. The moon over me, glowing through the branches of the dead tree. The shadow of my head visible on the water.

At first I wasn't sure why I hadn't heard the bag make a splash. I didn't think I had thrown it that far.

I shined the flashlight across the mud. Then the lake. On the edge of the water, inside the spotlight of the moon, the faint shadow of a pendulum.

I looked up.

Caught, in the naked branches of the dead tree, the blue bag. Fifteen, twenty feet. A rounded form shaping the bottom of it. It was Doc. Curling.

"Jesus," I shuttered, retreating. "Jesus Christ."

I sat on the cooler and watched it. Ran my fingers through my greasy hair.

In one corner of the forest, there was the looming hum of a rig on the highway. In another were more pops of the hunters' rifles, the echoing barks of their dogs.

Suddenly, I felt a tingling down my old left arm. A bloodflow I hadn't felt in years. But not a phantom bloodflow. A warm throbbing sensation in my fingers. It was as if my old hand was being squeezed and drawn out. Tugged in the direction of the woods. Something calmly telling me it was alright.

I picked up the red cooler and took one last look at the blue bag. Nodded to it. Left.

AARON FRIGARD is in the midst of an MFA program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He has work forthcoming in *Parcel* and *Yemassee*, for which he was awarded the William Richey prize for short fiction.

On the cover:

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"TextureX"

Coyle Parker

Growing up in the dark, wet Pacific NW, **COYLE PARKER** developed many outlets including art, music and dance. He attended a semester of art school at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Ma and was unknowingly blessed with a security job at the Harvard Art Museums. Here he was constantly surrounded and engulfed in the viewing and creative process. Many times seeing work that was tucked away in private rooms. This is where Coyle drastically grew as an individual and an artist. But after a spell of homesickness he stopped making art and moved back to Oregon in an attempt to find himself. He made a few moves around the west coast and eventually found his home in Portland, OR. Here he continued his artistic path with music as his tool. Years later Coyle enrolled at Portland State University where he revisited his passion for the fine arts. Through the experimentation of mixing media, colloquing, scale shifts, and exploring chemicals and inks, Coyle found his love for printmaking. He received his BA in drawing/painting/printmaking in 2010 and resides in Portland, OR where he is currently showing work and dreaming of a sunny landscape. To purchase and view more work from Coyle Parker please visit

www.etsy.com/shop/CoyleParker or check out his blog at coyleparker.blogspot.com.

