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Table of Contents:

Editor’s Note	3
The Incident at Ong’s Hat , Jill Hand	4
Yoel the Chickenkeeper , Michael Díaz Feito	18
Transition , Taylor Putorti	19
Spawn , Susan Kaempfer	24
Scorpion Midnight , Allina Nunley	29
Western Dark , William Ables	31

Editor's Note

We originally hoped to find a few stories featuring *la petite mort* for issue sixty-nine, because our sense of humor is highly sophisticated. What we present here is less *petite*, more *la mort*. Ah, well; *c'est la vie*. Or, you know, not. However, what we actually ended up with is better than what we thought we wanted, as is so often the case.

Jill Hand's "Incident at Ong's Hat" is a thoroughly Jersey story. Michael Díaz Feito's "Yoel the Chickenkeeper," uses vivid imagery to tell a brief, sad tale. Taylor Putorti's "Transition" guides you through liminal space, and Susan Kaempfer's "Spawn" explores unusual life choices and their effects. Allina Nunley's "Scorpion Midnight" soothes with death's sweet sting. Lastly, William Ables' "Western Dark" lets you ride along on a supernatural road trip.

If you feel an icy cold hand on your shoulder while you read, just slip a mitten on it and keep going.

— Laura Garrison

The Incident at Ong's Hat

Jill Hand

I was invited to come to Ong's Hat by an innocuous-looking man in a grey suit who took me to lunch at the best steakhouse in Georgetown. The innocuous-looking man (who had personally engineered two coups in Latin America) warned me that Ong's Hat was a dangerous place. I reminded him that I'd been in lots of dangerous places. That's not bragging; it's a fact.

"Not like this one," he said. He ordered the prime rib from the waiter who had silently appeared at his elbow.

I said I'd have the filet mignon, medium rare.

"Get the fiddleheads. They're only in season for a short time and I know how much you like them," the innocuous-looking man urged.

This was one of his little games. There was seemingly no way he could have known that I have a fondness for the tender young fronds of the edible ferns that look like the scroll on the neck of a violin, but somehow he did. Maybe it was in my dossier, along with dozens of other seemingly inconsequential details about me, including the fact that my thumbs are double-jointed and that I'd once owned a hamster named Meatball.

I decided not to give him the satisfaction of asking him how he knew I like fiddleheads. Instead I asked him where Ong's Hat was. He said it was in New Jersey, way down in the southern part of the state where there are towns with odd names like Bivalve and Ship Bottom. I said I'd go; it would probably be my last posting before I retired.

Anyone watching us, a pleasant-faced man in his late forties and a dignified, grey-haired woman perhaps a decade older, sedately enjoying a convivial meal together, might have taken us for coworkers at some government agency. In that they would have been correct. They wouldn't have heard of the agency that we worked for (very few people have) and they would have been highly surprised to learn what kind of work goes on there.

The Outfit is what we call our agency, although it has another, boring-sounding name in the records of the Government Accounting Office, which lists us as being part of the Department of Agriculture, of all things. We kept our existence on the down low. Not more than two dozen people outside the Outfit know it exists. The current president is not one of them.

Much of our work fell under the description of what is loosely called "intelligence" but what you'd call espionage. I'd been with the Outfit for over three decades. In East Berlin I was known as Frederika Chamov. I worked in a tobacconist's on Ernst Thälmann Platz, selling packs of Inka, Karo and Juwel cigarettes that practically flew off the shelves. (The East Germans were enthusiastic smokers, bless their oppressed little hearts.) I also did a little bit of this and a little bit of that for Uncle Sam while I was there and got shot in the back as a result. Twice.

In London I was known as Millicent Fenton. I worked in the Barbican Library and had a nice little flat above a stationer's on Chiswell Street. Nobody shot me during my time there, although I did make two people permanently disappear. I spent time in other places where I had other names but now I go by Mamie Outwater, the name my parents gave me when I was born, way back in 1954.

Not many people who do what I did for as many years as I did it live to enjoy their sunset years. I planned to make Ong's Hat my last stop before collecting my pension and retiring to my condominium in Puerto Rico.

What's in Ong's Hat? On the surface, not much. It's located deep in the Pine Barrens, the heavily forested, largely uninhabited area that is the stomping grounds of the legendary Jersey Devil. There are a few ramshackle houses and a squalid little convenience store out on Route 72 where you can buy lottery tickets and the kind of food that you eat only if you're desperate. The Donner party might have thought long and hard before consuming the shriveled, bright red hot dogs that were sold there.

Six different kinds of snakes make their homes in the vicinity, including the venomous timber rattler. There are black bears and a thriving population of wolf spiders. Those look a lot like tarantulas. If you shine a flashlight on a cluster of them at night, their eyes light up like eldritch candles.

There's also a secret underground government base staffed by scientists who monitor the periodic strangeness that occurs in Ong's Hat. Most of them were perfectly nice people, but as the innocuous-looking man in the grey suit pointed out, they were eggheads, and eggheads generally have no idea how to react when the shit hits the fan. They tend to stand there like statues, rooted in horror as all hell breaks loose around them. People like me know instinctively what to do when TSHTF. That's why I was there, as a safeguard, just in case things suddenly went sideways.

On the day that things went sideways, I was working in the Ding Dong Deli, the wretched little convenience store on Route 72 that's owned and operated by the Outfit. The Ding Dong is a

horrible deli but it's a good lookout post. If any strangers come into Ong's Hat, the only paved road takes them right past our door. They either stop in to buy something or we send somebody to discretely follow them to make sure they don't go poking their noses where they don't belong.

I was restocking the air freshener display up by the checkout counter. The air fresheners we sold weren't the kind that are shaped like little pine trees. We sold an off-brand called Scent-U-Al that were imprinted with the outline of a recumbent, well-endowed woman. The best you could say about them was that they were cheap and pungent.

"Smell this one," I said to Kurt Grau, who was helping me.

"Disgusting," said Kurt, taking a sniff and wrinkling his nose.

"It's called Big Pimpin'," I told him. I dug through the box and unearthed one called After Party. "This one smells even worse. Smell it," I invited Kurt.

"No thank you. I do not wish to smell it," he replied. Kurt has a heavy German accent and speaks in a slow, deliberate way reminiscent of Arnold Schwarzenegger in his role as the Terminator.

"These air fresheners all have names that sound like brands of heroin," I said.

Kurt replied that he did not take heroin. "It is a bad drug. I drink the beer. I smoke the tobacco, but I do not take the drugs," he rumbled.

I said that was very wise of him. If you're thinking that Kurt sounds like he's not the cleverest mouse in the maze, you're wrong. Kurt is plenty smart. He's been around Ong's Hat longer than anyone, longer even than Bill Lightner, who was in charge of the

team of scientists and had been there since 1994. Kurt has been at Ong's Hat (in a manner of speaking) since 1778, when he was a Hessian soldier fighting in the Revolutionary War.

Kurt's story of what happened to him one night in September of 1778 is weird, even for Ong's Hat. He woke up in the tent that he shared with six other soldiers feeling an urgent need to urinate. He quietly crept outside so as not to disturb his sleeping comrades and walked a little way into the woods. The next thing he knew, he was stepping out of the woods, buttoning up his breeches, but everything had changed. The Hessian encampment was gone. There was nobody around, nobody that he could see, anyway. He stood there in shock, looking wildly around, trying to figure out what had happened.

"Uh-oh," said Pierce Morrison, the young man who was seated in our underground base, watching the surveillance monitors. He thumbed the intercom and buzzed me where I was catching forty winks in the bunkroom in the back. "Mamie, get out here. We've got a visitor and you won't believe what he's wearing."

I came out and leaned over Pierce's shoulder to look at the monitor. The man in the clearing was turning around in circles, a confused expression on his big, broad face. He wore a pointy hat, a blue coat with some sort of military insignia on it, and white knee breeches. "He's dressed like a Hessian," I said, surprised. My father was a Revolutionary War enthusiast. He insisted on sharing his hobby with the rest of the family, relentlessly dragging us all over the Eastern Seaboard to look at battlegrounds and museums, where the most exciting item on display might be a rusted cannonball, or a dented pewter tankard.

Thanks to Dad, I knew a Hessian when I saw one.

I told Pierce I'd go out and talk to him. I went up the winding metal staircase, popped the hatch that led to the surface, and climbed out. I could see the man about thirty paces in front of me. I cleared my throat when I was about six feet behind him.

"Guten Abend," I said. *"Wie geht es Ihnen?"*

He spun around. *"Es geht mir schlecht,"* he said, looking absolutely miserable. (I'm not doing well.) "Please," he said, "tell me please where am I? My name is Kurt Grau, fusilier of the Second Regiment, Ansbach-Bayreuth. I am lost, but I cannot see how that can be. I went a little way only into the forest to make water. Now my encampment is gone. My friends all are gone. What has happened?"

He was in for a rude awakening, poor guy. I told him to come with me and I'd explain. Down through the hatch we went. Kurt looked around in amazement. It was quite an extensive place there, underground. It had capacious rooms filled with computer monitors and surveillance equipment and scientific devices whose uses I didn't remotely begin to understand. Kurt took in all the video screens and the banks of multi-colored flashing lights and Pierce, who was seated in a black leather Aeron desk chair drinking a Red Bull, and gasped.

"Mein Gott!" he said.

Pierce pushed a rolling chair in his direction. He said, "Sit down, buddy."

I told Kurt the truth, as far as I understood it. Science is not my forté and the science behind what went on at Ong's Hat was completely incomprehensible to me. To put it simply, Ong's Hat contains openings to other places, some of which are nowhere on earth. The scientists called them gates. The underground base was

established to keep watch on these gates and to try and keep nasty things from slithering out by using the scientific equipment to slam the gates shut whenever one popped open. In a way, it was like the arcade game called Whac-A-Mole.

I told Kurt he'd inadvertently stepped through a sort of gate back in 1778, when he'd gone into the woods to pee. It led into the year 2012, where we were now. The gate had shut behind him, and unfortunately there would be no going back.

"This man and I work here," I said, indicating Pierce, who smiled cheerfully at him. "His name is Pierce Morrison. My name is Mamie Outwater. We are among the guardians of this place."

"So, I bet you want to know who won the war," Pierce said chummily to Kurt in German.

Kurt morosely replied that he didn't care. He was still taking in the fact that all his friends and family were dead and had been for two centuries.

"The British lost. That's good news, right? You guys didn't like them much, did you?" Pierce said.

No, Kurt said, he didn't like the British. They were smug and bossy. "What is to become of me?" he wailed, completely shaken up. Pierce gave him a granola bar and a bottled water and told him not to worry.

A couple of guys from McGuire Air Force Base in Lakehurst came and got him, accompanied by a guy from the Outfit named Sanjay Patel. Sanjay and I were old friends. Kurt was taken to Langley Air Force Base down in Virginia and given a thorough physical and psychological going-over.

"Do you think they'll let us keep him?" Pierce asked hopefully while we were awaiting word of what was to be done with him. I

told him Kurt wasn't a puppy. He said he knew that. He just felt sorry for him. He was all alone in the world and he seemed like a nice guy. Besides, we could use some extra help at the convenience store.

Bill Lightner made some calls and Kurt was released into our custody. Pierce was there when he was returned, and he asked him how he liked the twenty-first century.

"It is interesting," Kurt said gravely. "I have ridden in the airplane and the automobile. I have eaten the Big Mac."

That was two years before the day in the Ding Dong Deli when we were restocking the air fresheners and the man and woman came in complaining that a unicorn had run across the road in front of their car.

They wore expensive-looking hiking gear and took in their surroundings in distaste. That was the usual reaction of people who entered the deli for the first time. Millions of your tax dollars were spent on making it look and smell revolting. The idea was that visitors would be so put off by the Ding Dong that they'd leave Ong's Hat and never return.

The Ding Dong smelled pretty bad. It's hard to describe the smell, other than to say that it was like rancid grease with undertones of cat urine and cheap, lilac-scented perfume. This horrible odor was cooked up by chemists at International Flavors & Fragrances in Monmouth County and dispensed through a sophisticated ventilation system. It was a smell that lingered in my clothes and hair, but such were the sacrifices I had to make in the line of duty.

The overhead fluorescent lights had been adjusted so that they buzzed and sputtered fitfully, while the red and green linoleum tile

floor was purposely sticky underfoot. The tiles were worn away in places, giving coy glimpses of the stained and pitted concrete subfloor. Fly strips laden with flies swung dispiritedly overhead. As the man and woman looked around, frowning, the coffee maker gurgled like a dying man before grudgingly spitting out a thin stream of foul-tasting brew that no one ever tried twice.

Kurt swung into action upon the arrival of the newcomers. "If you want to use the toilet, you cannot. It is broken," he growled menacingly.

I neglected to describe Kurt's appearance, which was deliberately off-putting. He's big, six-four or six-five, and that day he was dressed in a black leather vest and camouflage pants. He had a way of drawing his brows down over his pale blue eyes and steadily regarding the object of his annoyance from under them that tended to make people uneasy. Various tattoos of flames and skulls and what might be either a surfer's cross or some kind of skinhead symbol completed the picture that said this was a person who should be avoided at all costs.

I didn't look much more appealing. My hair was a wild nest of grey roots and purple ends and I wore a tee-shirt with sparkly lettering that proclaimed me to be the world's sexiest grandma.

I could see the visitors were thinking *Oh, my God! They're Pineys!* Pineys are New Jersey's version of hillbillies.

I told them, "If you need to use the toilet, you can go out back and use the Port-O-John behind the dumpster. Just look out for bears. A bear almost got Kurt, here."

"That is right," Kurt solemnly agreed. "A bear almost got me.

"Jesus Christ," said the man. "Bears, unicorns. This place is crazy."

“Yes,” the woman confirmed. “We almost hit a unicorn just now.”

Kurt and I looked at each other.

I asked, “Was it a big unicorn?”

The woman grimaced and rubbed her temples. “It was pretty big,” she said.

The man drew a trembling hand across his sweating forehead and said he didn’t feel well. In a gentler tone, Kurt said they should probably turn around and go home. “Okay,” the man said dazedly. “Come on, Lisa. Let’s head back.”

Kurt followed them outside and took note of their license plate number as they pulled out of the parking lot and headed back up Route 72, away from Ong’s Hat. We found out later that they were Michael Cormier and Lisa Cormier Hallenbeck, fraternal twins and avid bird watchers. Michael lived in East Brunswick and Lisa lived in Princeton Junction. They’d come down to the Pine Barrens to do some bird watching and had unwittingly stepped into the pocket of weirdness that surrounds Ong’s Hat. Some people register the weirdness as a mild sense of unease or not-quite-rightness. Others—and these are far more rare—are like Michael and Lisa in that they experience visual hallucinations.

It wasn’t a unicorn that ran in front of their car but an ordinary whitetail deer. Something special about the twins made them see the deer as a unicorn. What was disturbing was the fact that they didn’t appear to find anything unusual about encountering a mythological beast running around loose in New Jersey.

Remember how I mentioned the Jersey Devil earlier? Lots of people have reported seeing it over the centuries. It supposedly stands about three or four feet tall and has a head like a horse, a

body like a kangaroo, cloven hooves on its hind legs and bat-like wings. During one week in January 1909, dozens of people reported seeing it flying over their homes or perched on rooftops.

The thing is, the Jersey Devil doesn't exist. Animals with fur and hooves are mammals and with the exception of bats, mammals can't fly. Its wings would be too small for a creature that size to fly, unless the creature is a bird, and that's exactly what it was. What people were seeing were just birds, probably sandhill cranes. They saw an impossible animal because something emanating from Ong's Hat *made* them see it, something malign.

What events took place following the Jersey Devil sightings of 1909? Some very disturbing ones, including the murder of the entire congregation of the Leeds Point Baptist Church by the church's pastor, who served his flock cookies laced with rat poison. Then there was the matron at an orphanage in Burlington County who smothered six of her young charges with a pillow and dozens of stabbings, shootings and acts of arson. None of the people who committed these acts had ever done anything criminal before.

In the years that followed, sightings of the impossible animal in and around the Pine Barrens often portended disaster. And now two people claimed to have seen another impossible animal, this time a unicorn.

I needed to get back to the base and see what was going on. I had an awful feeling that the scientists were monkeying around with those gates that I mentioned earlier and that something bad was about to happen as a result. "Come on," I told Kurt. We locked up the store, got into Kurt's truck and drove as far as we could before the crumbling paved road gave out. We walked the rest of the way, Kurt taking long strides and me hurrying to keep up.

I popped the hatch that led to the underground base using a device that looks like a garage door opener. What we found down there ratcheted up the alarm I was feeling to a whole new level. All the scientific instruments that had lights on them were frantically blinking. A group of Bill Lightner's underlings were standing around, looking puzzled. Bill wasn't there. He was at a conference in Chicago, leaving a guy named Bob Robertson in charge. Bob was a scientist with a Ph.D. in something or other, but he was primarily a bureaucrat. I hate bureaucrats for the reason that they're stubbornly unwilling to do anything until the proper forms have been filled out and then passed on to the proper authority for review. Taking quick action was not in Robertson's nature, which was too bad, because it looked like quick action was exactly what was called for before all hell broke loose.

Bob had chosen to react to the flashing lights by phoning one of the IT people and asking him to come and take a look. The IT guy, he informed me, would be there in about an hour, after he picked his kids up from soccer practice. Bob had a Sudoku puzzle book open on his lap when he said this. I resisted the impulse to hit him over the head with it.

Instead I told him, "Something's happening. You need to close the gate."

"I don't think so," he said mildly. "It's just a glitch in the system. Nothing to get excited about."

That's when I felt the ground shake. A photograph of a red-haired woman hugging a golden retriever on Bob's workstation fell over with a clatter.

"Something's coming. Close the damn gate," I shouted.

Bob just sat there, fiddling with his Sudoku book.

Kurt resolved the situation by pulling a Beretta compact semiautomatic from the pocket of his camo pants and holding to Bob's temple. "Close the gate, Herr Doktor," he ordered. "Do it now."

Bob leaned over and punched in a code on his keyboard. He grumbled, "This is very unorthodox. There's nothing wrong. It was only an earth tremor."

Shooting me a look of intense dislike, he said prissily, "Weeks of work just went down the drain. I'm going to report you for this, you know."

That was two years ago. Bob did indeed report Kurt and me, although nothing came of it, seeing as how we'd prevented whatever was trying to get out from destroying New Jersey, or at least a good chunk of it. I retired to my condo in Puerto Rico, where I pass the time writing spy thrillers.

My old friend from the Outfit, Sanjay Patel, sent me an envelope recently containing something he found at a garage sale while vacationing with his family in Weston, Vermont. It's a bumper sticker from the 2012 presidential election in which Hillary Clinton ran for re-election. Her campaign slogan was Let's Do It Again! Of course she never did it in the first place, not in this version of our world, anyway.

Sometimes when a gate opens in Ong's Hat, things slip into our world from other versions of reality. They're usually not physical objects, like the bumper sticker. Sometimes the things that slip in are memories that feel as if they happened but never did, not in this version of our world, at least. The Talking Heads sing about this particular feeling of bewilderment. "*How did I get here?*" they ask.

That's a good question. Sometimes, when a gate opens or shuts in Ong's Hat, reality shifts to a version of our world that is similar to the one we knew before, but not quite the same. If you've ever looked at your daughter Madison across the breakfast table and thought, *"That's funny. For a moment there, I could have sworn her name was Mason, and that her eyes were green, not brown,"* that's probably because a gate opened or shut in Ong's Hat.

If you're driving to work in your Komodo hatchback, the thought might cross your mind that your car is called a Kia. Then you realize that's ridiculous. There is no automobile manufacturer by that name.

Here's what happened to me last week. I was seated at an outdoor café, watching a cruise ship send launches bearing cargoes of sunburned, rum-soaked merry-makers into the harbor. I fell into a conversation with a woman at a nearby table. She said she'd gone on a cruise when she was a little girl with her parents and her grandmother. Her grandmother recalled her father taking her to see the *Titanic* dock in New York. "Of course that's impossible," the woman said. "The *Titanic* hit an iceberg and sank, but she insisted she was there when it came in. That's funny, isn't it?"

I agreed that it was.

JILL HAND lives in New Jersey, where she is a real housewife. She is a former newspaper reporter and editor whose work has appeared in *Aphelion*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *The Oddville Press*, and *Weird N.J.*

Yoel the Chickenkeeper

Michael Díaz Feito

Yoel the Chickenkeeper jostled cherry-red canisters into the coop. His sick chickens jiggled suspiciously. In a cone of their patinated eyes, UV rays flecked like epilepsy. Yoel sighed and said, “You see more of things, Pipa, Claudia, Fea, Loca, and the rest of you. *Pero . . . la gripe, concho.*” If he had read the classics, Yoel might have lamented, *O coffee-sweet chickens, more than my eyeballs I’ve loved you!* But he didn’t. The fire extinguishers frothed the coop, a smothering meringue.

MICHAEL DÍAZ FEITO is a Cuban American writer from Miami, Florida. His work has been published in *Mangrove*, *The Acentos Review*, *Jai-Alai Magazine*, *theEEEL*, and *Axolotl* (forthcoming). He currently dwells in Inwood, Manhattan, with his girlfriend Naomi and their dog Finn.

Transition

Taylor Putorti

When you die, you will open your eyes with your bare feet resting on ground they've never touched before. You will feel the grass between your toes, softer than strips of terry cloth. At first, there is nothing but thick grey fog. But then, a ray of light, not sunlight but perhaps the gleam of some distant, foreign moon, shines down, and you will start to see.

You are standing on a path lined with flowers and smooth, white rocks that remind you of opals or polished skulls. The petals of each flower seem to be an impossible shade between pink and violet, and every time you look away, they change just enough so that you can't pin them down.

Behind you is a stone wall that stretches farther up than can be measured. There is no cement between the pale, yellow boulders. They fit together in a precise, calculated manner, the way you've always imagined the pyramids might look. You reach out to touch them. It's like pressing your palm against sand. The stone moves, enveloping your fingers in its earthy warmth. You get the feeling you could push your entire body into the wall and stay there forever, become a part of its constant, noble structure.

You know without asking that this is the wall between the life you left behind and what lies beyond. Though you could stay here, you cannot go back. So you turn away and begin to walk down the grassy path.

You are wearing a dress from your childhood. It's white cotton that flows to your knees, with a pink ribbon around the waist. It's

the dress you wore to your aunt Matilda's wedding. But even as the memory of her face tries to surface, you feel it slip away into the fog. Your hair is long again. The blonde curls rest halfway down your back. The further you walk down the path, the more you forget.

The first memories to go are of distant relatives and acquaintances. You forget your grandfather's lopsided smile. It slips away on an exhalation of mist. Next to go are the birthdays of your various coworkers, nights spent at bars with strangers, and your second kiss, which happened by a lake in Rhode Island, when you were just fifteen. It was around then that you began to suspect you didn't like kissing boys at all.

Far ahead, you can see a shape attempting to form—a building, or a forest, or perhaps another wall. You can't tell from this distance, but you keep walking, because there doesn't seem to be a better choice.

When the memory of your first pet—Jubee, the black Labrador—surfaces, there's a twinge of discomfort in your chest. You realize you will never see Jubee again, not even in your mind's eye, and it sends a lurch of melancholy through you. But you take another step. You breathe the memory out. Suddenly you're sad and you don't know why.

Your house is next. The house you bought with Eloise. The garden the two of you planted. The swing set she built for your little girl with her own calloused hands. It's like you're standing at the gate, looking at the powder blue front door, and the bay window that lets you glimpse the living room. The stucco walls and red-shingled roof have never been as beautiful as they are in this moment. The stretch of grass in the front yard is where little

Lucy took her first steps. The worn leather couch, on the far left side of the living room, is where you first sat Eloise down to tell her about The Tumor, Your Tumor, Your Inoperable Brain Tumor.

With a breath, it's all gone. There's a sharp throb of pain in your lungs, and you stop walking for a moment. You feel as if you've lost something irreplaceable, but you don't know what.

The flowers oscillate from red to green. The mists ahead grow a little thinner. You take another step, because it seems like the thing to do.

You start to forget all the places you've ever been. They leave you with varying degrees of discomfort at the moment of separation. You forget the Chicago skyline, the coffee shop on Wabash that Eloise used to work at, your mother's house with the pink curtains and hardwood floors, the RV your father used to drive, your childhood bedroom, your bed covered in stuffed animals, and the hospital room that smelled like bleach where Eloise would stroke your hair as monitors beeped and hours slipped by.

You forget both of your parents at the same time. Their faces surface, smiling, wrinkled around the eyes, still full of life. Your mother's frizzy red hair seems close enough to touch. You smell your father's spicy cologne, and you start to cry. You don't want to lose them. Not again.

But they disappear all the same. It feels like you've been stabbed in the gut. You scream. The pain slips away with the memory.

Your hands are smooth and soft, the way they haven't been since you were much younger.

You keep walking.

Then you see Eloise, as if she's standing in front of you, with her caramel skin and eyes as vast as space. Her hair is black again, not the wiry grey you're used to. She's young. Like she's still in college. She's wearing that red, polka-dotted skirt she had on the first day you met her. She holds her arms out and you run to her embrace. She pulls you close against her pillowy chest and you fall for her all over again.

"Don't leave," you whisper.

"Darling heart, you're the one that's going away." Her voice is warm and raspy as the whiskey she used to drink. It's comforting and distressing in a strange duality. "I love you. I always will." She smiles.

You repeat that you love her too, over and over, hoping it will change something.

But then she dissolves into the fog. Your heart feels as if it has been ripped from your chest. You crumple to the ground and sob. A minute later, you don't know why your cheeks are wet.

You stand up, and you're shorter. It's a sense you get, that your face is rounder with baby fat. Instead of walking, you skip in zigzags down the path towards the great unknown.

Ahead of you, the scene starts to slip into focus. There is a small house, with one brown door and two windows. The walls are wooden, whitewashed. The roof comes to a perfect triangle with a small brick chimney towards the back. On either side of the house stand tall, thick trees with purple trunks and black leaves.

The last thing you forget is Lucy. She starts to skip along the path with you, holding your chubby hand in hers. You're both only five years old, with your curls up in ponytails and songs on your lips. Her wide brown eyes are full of laughter.

“Don’t be nervous,” she says. “We’re almost there.”

The two of you approach the door. She slips away right before you reach it, but it doesn’t hurt. If anything, you feel relieved. Your mind is empty for the first time since you were born. It’s an incredible sort of peace.

The door opens. A woman is standing there, draped in a piece of cloth that matches the trees. Her skin is so pale, there’s almost a blue tint to it. But she smiles. You smile back at her.

“Come in, child. We’ve been expecting you,” she says in a tongue you’ve never heard before, but recognize just the same. Just behind her, you see other people moving within the house, murmuring to each other. They all look familiar, but you can’t place them.

You step over the threshold. The woman closes the door behind you. The air is warm, humid and comforting. You don’t mind the total darkness. This is where you’re supposed to be.

TAYLOR PUTORTI graduated with honors from Columbia College Chicago, summa cum laude. He is a regular contributor to *Hair Trigger Magazine* and has a column that reviews television shows on a popular geek culture website. He is both an editor and a website-designer for an award-winning literature anthology. He has worked as a Fiction tutor for three years and is fluent in American Sign Language. His current project, besides the various novels and short stories, is a linguistic research paper, studying how the Internet has changed the way we communicate and inflect emotion through text-based exchanges.

Spawn

Susan Kaempfer

People warned her, but she didn't want to be warned. She wanted to be fertilized—coated with warm jelly and kept close. Some laughed at her love's feet, but the skin stretching between his toes didn't repulse her. Together they lay on his island's tiny beach, at the foot of the old lighthouse. He held one foot up to the sky. For her and her alone, he spread his toes against the sun, and she read the capillaries like an illuminated roadmap of her life. He asked her to be his wife. She agreed.

Her friends left for college and jobs. Not even her mother came to the ceremony, nor her sister, put off by the smell of kelp and salt.

On their wedding night, her love infused a pint of his own blood into her veins; enough to make her human ovaries release a thousand eggs at once. She gasped at the rush of unfamiliar feelings, her mouth a frantic, sucking 'O.' She was dizzy with panic and he had to hold her down to keep her from flinging herself into the sea.

I'm sorry, he said.

He hadn't known the instinct would be so strong. He deadlocked the door at the top of the lighthouse stairs and pulled her back to the bed again and again as she clawed at the crack where the door fit the jamb. He replaced instinct with instinct, and they made love until the need for saltwater in her lungs had faded enough that she could control it.

A bare month later, the cramps came like a miscarriage. Her love was tinkering with the old clockwork pivot when she called to

him. It's time.

She laid the eggs in a rockpool near the lighthouse so they could watch over them. She squatted, and he steadied her with an arm around her waist, breathing encouragement into her ear until it was done. Then he took her in his arms and said, they're fragile when they're young, these half-humans. I must tell you now, they will not all survive.

She knew that. She must have known that. Still; she stroked the warm, gelatinous pile of life and wailed for the deaths to come. She protected them with sun-umbrellas and tarpaulins for two weeks until they hatched. Not all could breathe water; they died swiftly. Many would fall prey to fish. But the survivors would return in spring, so when the last of them had wriggled off into the summer sea and scattered, her love unrolled his blueprints. The nurseries twisted like giant nautili. He said it was to make the children more at home, but she did think it was as much for him.

When building started on the nurseries, some mainlanders complained that the modern design clashed with the landscape; it would ruin the tourist trade. In the end, all objections were dropped and they were left alone. Money lubricates. The workmen brought them amusing rumors from the mainland. People were saying it was a B and B, a research laboratory, or, best of all, a commune for retired dot-com computer-geek hippies. Her love always encouraged everyone to believe he earned his money on the web. In truth, he took what they needed from the ocean floor. Lifetimes ago, when the lighthouse was still in use, many ships smashed on the rocks despite the lighthouse keepers' efforts.

In January they traveled to the mainland to order cribs and diapers. When she bought a book of baby names, her love kissed

her forehead and the woman at the check-out said congratulations, when is it due?

Spring, they said.

After the highest spring tide, the watch began in earnest. They haunted the beach until finally, toward the end of April, the babies arrived. Dozens of them, so big! They were as clumsy on land as they were quick in water. Some had dark hair, some light hair, sea-colored hair, no hair. Every family trait in his ancestry and hers cropped up at least once. With shocking ease they adjusted to diapers and carrots and peas and after two weeks she tossed the book because the forty-seven babies named themselves, by action and temperament. She tried not to think of autumn, when they would toddle back down the beach and swim south for the winter. She tried not to know that there would be a few more missing every spring.

On each anniversary, her love gave her another pint of his blood. At the end of each April, the survivors of all ages returned. The little ones played with the hatchlings. The bigger ones, she taught—sums, reading, geography; everything they would hold still for. She told the mainlanders they were running a summer camp for underprivileged children. They bought enough food for an army and paid well; this kept the questions away.

Now is her fiftieth year as a mother. Her eggs are long gone. The shell-shaped nurseries are empty. They got quite crowded until the eldest children began to spawn. The long summer visits got shorter and fewer as visits do when children grow up. Their own children they raise in the sea. Every spring, though, they come by the

hundreds to spawn. One shouldn't have favorites, but she does and they always stop, with their shy mates, for a chat. Others lay in the night and go. As she shoos gulls away from the squirming rockpools, some sigh. Oh, Mama. You can't save them all. You worry too much.

They all call her Mama.

One of her granddaughters is singing to her from the beach. She goes down to her. Granddaughter holds a yearling.

Look, Mama! A ghost of a fin! Granddaughter points to a row of spiny protrusions above his naked tail-bone, her face shining like a lighthouse beacon.

She is happy for her granddaughter and wishes she could remember her name. She has 5000 offspring, and her memory is not what it used to be.

Her love comes down too. He is such a proud Papa. He takes his great-grandson and admires the tiny fin. The infant squirms to return to the water.

Come for a swim, Papa! Granddaughter says.

Her love looks at her.

Yes! Yes, you must go for a swim and visit them. Visit them all, and tell them to visit me. I miss them.

He goes.

Most of the time her love stays with her. He chose his mate and life willingly. They both did. He watches her hair turn grey, she watches the webbing between his toes grow wrinkled. They are happy on their little island, with the lighthouse and the empty shell nurseries. In time she saw that he built them for her, not himself, not the babies. They can crumble. The rockpools are all her children need now.

SUSAN KAEMPFER lives in Switzerland with her beautifully lunatic husband and three nutty children. You can find her work at *Café Irreal*, *Echo Ink Review*, and a few other places around the web.

Scorpion Midnight

Allina Nunley

This is pathetic, the scorpion thought. He didn't think much of the old man, and really, why should he? The old man was on the floor, gushing blood from a bullet wound to the stomach, unable to crawl, only to scream.

But he didn't.

He didn't react to the scorpion, or to the young, barrel-chested peacekeeper at the top of the stairs, the one that had pulled the trigger. The old man didn't even flinch at the bright glint of the sheriff's badge.

The scorpion had seen these displays of bravery before. His sting had been the terror of the west back when you could still call it wild. He had relished the days of fighting with cattle rustlers and bad hombres, but he could feel the age in his stinger and knew that it was time to settle down.

The old man followed the scorpion with his eyes. The scorpion knew that daring look. He examined the man's muscular structure, looking for the right place to strike. The man had to be in his seventies, but his body was lean and firm. The scorpion could read the past that he must have had. He was probably dashing once, uncompromising. He was the kind of man who should never be beaten in a fight. Age was the only enemy a man like this couldn't outgun. This man was a killer, just like the scorpion.

A killer's fearless gaze.

As he looked into the old man's eyes, the scorpion felt that arthritic pain in his stinger again. Age had taken away the only

thing that he loved. He tried to keep his youthful enthusiasm, but each killing strike ate away at him like his own poison ate away at his victims.

The sheriff descended the steps, all boyish exuberance and physical fitness. He knelt next to the old rogue with a chiding smile and put his gun against the man's temple. He was so pleased with himself that he didn't notice the scorpion. Instantly, the scorpion hated him; he hated honest men with their white hats and pristine spurs.

He thought, *what a pathetic way to go*. It wasn't a fair fight. It used to be that law men were worthy opponents, now they're just the clean-up crew, shooting down tired outlaws for sport.

For once in his life, the scorpion felt the urge to do a good deed. He'd only do it for someone as wicked as him.

It was excruciating to embed his stinger into the sheriff's thigh, but it felt better than any kill before. He felt joy when he saw the sheriff hobble away in terror. The coward didn't have long. The old man's eyes met the scorpion's as he bled his last. The scorpion knew that it was finally time to really settle down. He rested next to his dead colleague and embraced the blackness as the shining light of civilization enveloped the west.

ALLINA NUNLEY is a writer and filmmaker. She is currently pursuing an M.A. in English at California State University, Los Angeles, and she holds a B.F.A. in Film from Art Center College of Design. Her work has previously appeared in *Foliate Oak* and *Eunoia Review*.

Western Dark

William Ables

The dead loved Dwight Eisenhower, they went crazy for him back in '56. Had the deceased been registered voters (or had Ike been a Kennedy), they would have cast hordes of ballots to keep the President in office for eternity.

Charles and Anubis were driving across the country. Charles was a middle-aged-looking man, slightly pudgy around the middle with a constant five o'clock shadow that refused to be shaved. Anubis was a rat terrier; Charles had rescued him after the dog had wandered out into the middle of I-40. Anubis was half starved and all mean when Charles managed to calm him with a bit of leftover Quarter Pounder. Anubis had hopped up into the passenger seat of Charles' big-rig and never left. They lived on the open road and they always drove west.

The pickup was waiting for them in the middle of nowhere. It was a young girl. She was a short and skinny thing, dressed in a white christening dress that floated along the roadside. The tall spidery lights in the median winked in and out as she passed by them. Charles pulled to a stop just beside her; the right lane was empty, and there wasn't anyone else on the road yet. He swung open the passenger door and frowned when it creaked ominously. He loathed theatricality.

Vote Ike was practically a motto for the deceased and it was all because of the Eisenhower's National System of Interstate Highways. Before the new sparkling system of roads, the specters of America had been forced to wander, looking for familiar landmarks and wailing for someone to give them reliable directions.

"My name's Charles," he said.

"Where are we going?" she asked as she settled into the big passenger seat. She was already fluctuating in and out of touch, her eyes looked like faded Polaroids.

"West," he said. "Always west."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

He pointed out over the steering wheel, pressing a smudge into the glass of the windshield, "Towards the sun. Don't you think it's wonderful to catch it from over the edge out there?"

The girl was frowning, her face scrunched up in the look of a child who thinks she is being treated like one. "It's night. The sun is gone."

"Not everywhere," he said. Anubis came bounding up off the floorboards and onto the girl's lap. He spun in circles until she started scratching behind his ears; he was sleeping again before he curled up.

"What's his name?" she asked.

Charles smiled like a father. "Anubis."

She nodded and kept petting him; Anubis was murmuring happily. "Like the Egyptian guy?"

He nodded. "You're smart for your age, aren't ya? The old, *old* Egyptians used to believe it was Anubis who weighed a person's soul after they died."

"Why?"

Charles ran a hand along his jaw, an affectation when he was thinking, "Well, to see if they were worthy, I suppose. I've always said any dog can do that. Measure a person, I mean. Don't need no magic god-dog to do that."

Ghosts need to commute, unfinished business travel is the top vocation for a deceased person. The dead need to, have to, get where they are going.

"What are those?" she asked, looking down the road ahead.

Outside Charles' windshield the highway was coming to bustling life. Lights, most of them alone, drifted along the side of the road. Occasionally there were pairs, sometimes there were groups. There might be dozens when something sad had happened, hundreds when something unspeakable. On rare nights there was nothing but the road. Those were the worst, he thought.

"Not everyone can see them," he said.

"You didn't answer my question."

He sighed. "They chose to walk. Mostly it's adults; old folks."

"Old people get to do everything," she said.

"Everyone gets to do everything." He meant it to be comforting.

The first freeway cement was poured in Kansas and Missouri; from the heartland freshly liberated ghosts began to cruise all over the nation. Spectral Cadillacs and Studebakers cased the open roads where they left flesh and bone drivers in their dust, haunted by the experience. The familiar haunts belong to another era.

“How about we see what’s on the radio? I bet that will help.”

Charles spun the radio dial, cruising through rustling static. He twisted it all the way to the right and the two speakers came to life. Waves of rhythm came in low from just over the horizon; the beat sounded like it was skipping along the surface of a lake. Charles wondered what she heard. A lot of them said it was like a heartbeat in the middle of the night.

WILLIAM ABLES is a writer from Tennessee where he currently lives with his wife and their two dogs. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *99 Pine Street*, *Pidgeonholes*, and *Slink Chunk Press*.

On the cover:

**"AN OPEN MIND:
FROG WITH EXPOSED BRAIN
IN FORMALDEHYDE"**
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