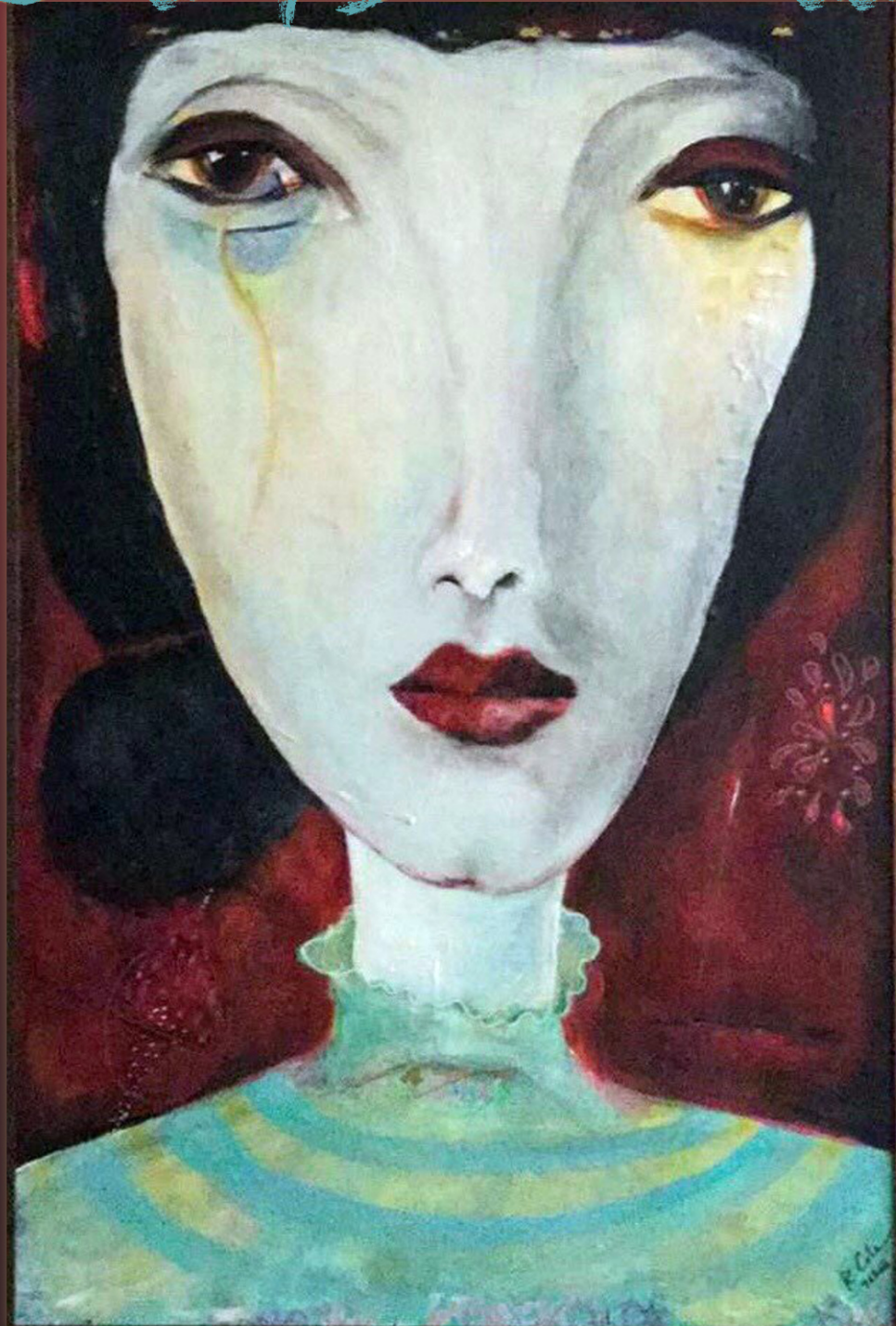


Jersey Devil Press



April 2018

Issue 100

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

April 2018, Issue 100

ISSN 2152-2162

Online Editor: Laura Garrison

Production Editor: Samuel Snoek-Brown

Associate Editor: Monica Rodriguez

Readers: Rebecca Vaccaro, Amanda Chiado

Founding Editor/Publisher: Eirik Gumeny

All stories and other contributions are copyrighted to their respective authors
unless otherwise noted.

www.jerseydevilpress.com

Table of Contents:

Editor's Note	3
The Giraffe Whispers Human Words, John Gabriel Adkins	4
Different Strokes, Matthew Byrne	5
SuckMyDick7: A Ghost Story, Carolyn A. Drake	6
We Will Walk the Earth Together, As Bipedal Hominoids, Hand in Hand, Kimberly Kaufman	13
A Little Death, Alyn Spector	18
Always Leave Them Wanting More, C. G. Thompson	30

Editor's Note

It's time to get happy, folks. Let our one-hundredth issue put a smile on your face, a bluebird on your shoulder, and a sunbeam on your butt.

— Laura Garrison

The Giraffe Whispers Human Words

John Gabriel Adkins

The zoo animals—tigers, koalas, others (and loudbird)—had been retrieved and recaged after busting loose the day before, all but the yellow giraffe. The catch-men had cornered the giraffe in a dark corner but it had lowered its head low, muttering and mouthing human words, mesmerizing the whole gang. They returned with sad hands completely empty. The zoo folks phoned in a favor: the baddest, roughest ex-detective in all Montana: Ex-Detective Hughes. *If anyone can crack that giraffe*—and so on and so forth.

Ex-Detective Hughes cottoned-up his ears and approached the cornered shadowy giraffe, still headlow, still muttering human. *I'm here to bargain. Nod if you understand.*

The giraffe nodded.

Back to Ex-Detective Hughes. *I get what this is. Okay? I've crossed the line before, I've done time before. I've been in a cage. I don't want that for you. Do you understand?*

The giraffe nodded.

Ex-Detective Hughes held out his hand. *Then come with me. We'll hit the road. We'll lose the cages. Just you and me on the freeway. What do you say?*

The giraffe nodded, raised its head, trotted out, got into Ex-Detective Hughes' 1976 Cadillac Eldorado convertible with 14,000 miles and the top down, and Ex-Detective Hughes took the wheel, and they just went.

To this day, the giraffe exhibit languishes completely empty.

JOHN GABRIEL ADKINS is a Pushcart-nominated writer of anti-stories, microfiction and other oddities, and is a member of the Still Eating Oranges arts collective. His work has appeared in *Squawk Back*, *Literary Orphans*, *Sick Lit Magazine*, *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, *The Sleep Aquarium* and more.

Different Strokes

Matthew Byrne

I commissioned my artist friend to paint
a starlit evening on our nursery ceiling.
He struggled at first, pacing the room,
obsessively scaling his ladder. The job
was beneath him, but he needed the money.
Something had to be done, so I burned
his obscure punk cds into my computer,
so he could listen to his music randomly
shuffling and without interruption.
He finished the very next day, but instead
of the tranquil twilight I envisioned, I got
a maelstrom brewing around a moon more
menacing than an axe-wielding lunatic.
I paid up, made the nursery our bedroom,
and my wife and I have never slept better.

MATTHEW BYRNE's poems have been published in known and obscure journals. He won the Sow's Ear Chapbook award in 2013 and was included in the Heather-McHugh-edited 2007 *Best American Poetry* anthology. He sells insurance for a living in Chicago, Illinois.

SuckMyDick7: A Ghost Story

Carolyn A. Drake

Incorrect password.

The whisper of an eerie, ethereal giggle drifts like a cold sigh through the air.

Ass sinking into my garage sale couch, I scowl at the thin wall separating my apartment from Mrs. Next Door's place before returning my tired eyes to the Netflix login page on the television screen. The television—a simultaneous Christmas present and bribe to call my mother more often—is easily the most valuable object in my threadbare apartment, aside from the six-year PharmD degree framed and hanging above the toilet. No one calls pharmacists 'Doctors,' but that does not stop my mother from explaining to her bridge group how her son, Sam—you know, *the doctor*—moved across the country after graduation, and he has a one-bedroom, one-bathroom bachelor pad in New Brunswick, New Jersey, that is sparsely furnished due to 'minimalism,' which is a funny way to say 'student loans.'

Still wearing my white lab coat and the dead-eyed, thousand-yard stare associated with an eleven-hour shift in a popular retail pharmacy chain, my brain is moving ultraslow. I want nothing more than to down a beer or four while binging mind-numbing cooking shows, but my go-to password since I was twelve—SparkyGoodBoy2—is not working.

I twiddle the knobs to the PS4 controller, retyping the password out.

Incorrect password.

"What the hell?" I mutter.

Another unnerving giggle echoes and wafts throughout my apartment. This time, though, the sound originates from above me.

All at once, I understand. Letting my blonde head fall back on my shoulders, I heave a sigh. I really should have guessed.

“Jerk,” I call, glaring up at the ceiling.

For a moment, all I notice are ancient stains of water damage.

Then, the ghost that came with this dump swoops down through the ceiling and hovers over the television.

Dex and I met five months ago on the weekend I moved my few belongings out of my college dorm into this damp deathtrap. We had both been surprised to find that not only could I *see* him when he was watching me shower, I could also *hear* him making lax observations about my beer gut and *feel* his ice-cold skin when I screamed and slapped his undead ass backwards through the shower curtain.

Seeing, hearing, and feeling ghosts is new to me; Haley Joel Osment I am not, nor have I ever been.

While I did fear for my sanity those first few nights, the continued presence of a chatty deceased college kid stopped being terrifying after a while and became more or less a minor nuisance, no worse than the flickering lights or leaky faucet. Adding that to the fact that breaking my lease would cost the same as four months of student loan payments and I decided to accept Dex as a temporary fixture in my life, choosing to stay in my haunted apartment for the foreseeable future.

Besides . . . he’s kind of cute.

In life, Dex was a lanky Rutgers University sophomore. He stood at six-foot-two, so now, the vibrant pink high-tops he perished in dangle through the top of the television.

“Guess the new password,” Dex grins, his ghostly impish voice resonating in a way my living one never could. The specter tosses his head to flip his bangs away from his face, although I know the movement is only out of habit. Dex’s thick dark hair and Ramones tee-shirt float around him, caught in an otherworldly current.

“SuckMyDick7,” I snarl through my teeth.

“Well, if you insist,” Dex shrugs and glides downwards towards the couch.

“Come on,” I double-up and swat Dex’s translucent form away, guarding my loins as heat rises to my cheeks. “Knock it off!”

“Whaaaaat?” The roguish voice in my ear is equal parts mischievous and coquettish, and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end when he floats back into my line of vision and leans in for an exaggerated smooch. I recoil and he laughs.

“I thought you were a hard Kinsey three,” Dex smirks.

Cursing myself for getting so drunk last week that I came out to a dead guy, I give his cold skin a hard shove away and pray that my ruddy complexion will be misconstrued as exertion.

“Yeah,” I growl, “but I have no desire to find out if necrophilia is a thing I’m into.”

“Chill out, I’m just trying to—”

“You’re just trying to drive me crazy!” I snap with more vitriol than I intended.

To my floating haunter’s credit, Dex does not escalate the situation. He merely props his chin up on his knuckles and fixes me with a sympathetic gaze. Being the grumpy asshole that I am, I despise him for it.

“Bad day again, huh?” Dex asks, bobbing in the air above the couch.

Crossing my arms tight over my chest, I collapse into the cushions, knowing that I look like a sullen little boy but not caring.

“Yes,” I finally reply, and even I can hear the sulk in my own voice. “You want to guess how shitty it is not know a single person in this city?”

Dex raises his eyebrows and gestures to his transparent body.

“You’re dead,” I dismiss him with a wave of my hand. “You don’t count.”

“What every dead person wants to hear,” Dex’s resonating voice is as tight as his translucent jeans, “that I ‘don’t count’. Thanks.”

"You're welcome," I reply briskly. "I just hate how . . . "

Pausing, I grasp my fingers at thin air, struggling to find the words to describe my bitter loneliness without sounding overdramatic. Linguistics is not my strong suit.

"I leapt so quickly at the opportunity to have a job," I finally say, "any job after graduation that I didn't even think how isolating living alone in a city five hundred miles from my hometown would be. My only *living* interactions are fighting with insurance company representatives and getting yelled at by soccer moms with outdated coupons."

"So make some living friends," Dex replies dryly.

"Making new friends is next to impossible when you're a twenty-five-year-old dude who is kind of an asshole, and not good looking enough to get away with it."

"Hey, I offered to blow you," Dex grins, and I can't tell if he's just trying to be nice or flirting again. I won't admit to myself which one I'm hoping for. "Do you wanna talk about it?"

"No," I snip, petulant. "I want the password to my Netflix account."

"That's rough," Dex nods in sympathy, "but it's not happening."

My personal poltergeist has time to stick his tongue out at me before he is forced to dive into the couch to avoid my grasp. He pops up beside me through a ragged cushion to reveal his body from the shoulders up, mirroring a bizarre version of whack-a-mole.

"I've wanted to watch the new *X-Files* for weeks," Dex says, his large, dark eyes on mine.

Goddamn, why does he have to be so cute?

"You keep saying 'tomorrow,'" Dex continues before ducking back into the cushions as my hands come down on the area where his head had been. He reappears a second later with an impish grin. "Honey, it's tomorrow."

“Watch it when I’m at work,” I grunt and grab at Dex’s form once more before he bolts from the couch and floats too high for me to reach.

“I need someone to talk to about it,” Dex all but whines, pouting his spectral lower lip for effect in a way I secretly find adorable. On occasions like these, I wonder if he is aware of how often I steal glances at his perfect cheekbones when he is not paying attention. “And since you’re the only one who can talk to me . . . ”

“I don’t like your sci-fi shit!”

“Then guess,” Dex gestures to the television, drifting backwards to hover over the device once more.

My tired eyes bore into his sightless ones, but my patented retail death glare never yields results with my undead roommate.

If I want to find out who won *Cutthroat Kitchen* without the aid of Google, I will have to play along.

Sighing, I steeple my fingers and think. “BuffyBabe?”

“Nope,” Dex grins, clearly pleased that I have given in and am going to provide him with a few moments of entertainment.

“ScruffyNerfHerder?”

“Why do you keep adding ‘7’ to—”

“It’s your lucky number,” I cut him off. “RidleyScottIsMyGod?”

“Hell yeah he is.”

“Dexter!”

“Samuel?”

I glare up at the annoying, good-looking ghost floating and smirking smugly above me. He is enjoying this too much.

“I’ll destroy *Twin Peaks*,” I blurt out.

His smile falters. Mine widens.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Dex replies at last, sounding more confident than he appears. “You got that for my deathday.”

Keeping my eyes on my deceased roommate, I yank the drawer of the dime store coffee table before me open and rummage through the mess of DVD cases. At last, my fingers land on the newest plastic case, and I pop it open. I place a single finger on the

shining disc, smiling as Dex winces at the thought of smudges from my fingerprints.

“Any last words for your Special Agent?” I ask.

When he does not speak, I remove the disc from its case.

“Don’t!” Dex yelps, hands flying out before him but useless to stop me.

“Password.”

“This is extortion!”

“Laura Palmer’s gonna bite it a second time.”

“Fine! So Say We All.”

“One word, all caps?”

Dex gives a vehement nod.

Grinning in triumph, I slip the disc back into the case and wiggle the knobs of the remote control to enter the password. The Netflix account homepage appears on the screen.

Still beaming, I turn to Dex to gloat.

Slumping his shoulders, Dex hovers in a sitting position over the cushions beside me, but I am struck by the downcast expression on his transparent face. This is no sulking act. This is despair, and the rawness of his pain catches me off guard.

I need someone to talk to, Dex’s voice repeats in my mind. You’re the only one who can talk to me . . .

My eyes are drawn to the vertical gashes on the inside of his ghostly wrist, the ones he is usually so careful not to let me see.

Guilt gnaws at my stomach. How has the realization that Dex has no one else in the world to talk to but me never crossed my mind?

If I’m lonely, then what is he?

Sighing, I direct the cursor on the screen to the pilot episode of the new *X-Files* reboot series and throw myself backwards into the overstuffed couch cushions.

The skin on my right cheek bursts into gooseflesh as my phantom roommate plants a small, undead peck there.

“Thanks, babe.”

“Meh,” I grumble as a reply, pretending I do not feel the pleasant flip of my stomach and warm heat rising in my cheeks.

“Oh,” Dex adds, throwing an arm around my shoulders as the opening credits begin to roll, “the password to your *email* is SuckMyDick7.”

CAROLYN A. DRAKE is a Jersey shore native, and she currently resides in Denver, Colorado. In 2016, her story “Pill Pusher” was a winner of the Quarter Life Crisis contest by Three Rooms Press and was published in their anthology, *Songs of my Selfie*. In 2017, her story “The More Things Change” was published in the *Utter Fabrication* anthology by *Mad Scientist Journal*, and a flash fiction entitled “The Marionettes” was published online in the *Trembling With Fear Archives* by The Horror Tree.

We Will Walk the Earth Together, As Bipedal Hominoids, Hand in Hand

Kimberly Kaufman

I cursed under my breath. I didn't want to be louder than the snaps of wood that might eventually lead me to my Sasquatch, but it was the only thing I could do to not fire my rifle in frustration.

Tony Summers had been here. When I saw the hiking boot tracks, my suspicions had grown. But when I found a pink strawberry bubble gum wrapper lying in the middle of the muted colors of the forest, there was no doubt that the Elvis-impersonator-turned-bigfoot-hunter was heading into the heart of the forest, and ahead of me.

I crumpled the wrapper and looked down at the whites of my knuckles. I wanted to turn around and go home. It wasn't that he had pretended to like me. It was that I was stupid enough to believe him. I'd already lost so much clout with the other Society members, that if they knew I was on the same trail as Mr. Fake-Tan, they'd probably revoke my Paranormal Membership Society card for good.

But that wasn't the only thing that mattered to me. There was the enticement of Discovery itself. I rolled my shoulders, in pain from my backpack, and notice the trees' shadows had gotten longer, leering, as the Earth's axis moved away from the sun. There were still the mysteries waiting in the forest. I thought of a "million-dollar" photo, the proceeds I could use to pay off my mortgage, and let Julius go off forever, like he wanted. I thought of respect from the other Society members. I needed to find the wonder in the world again, to know the fabulous Sasquatch was not just a myth for rural men and women to tell around campfires.

I couldn't despair just yet. Tony may have had a silly slicked-back receding hairline, and would be wearing his gold, aviator

sunglasses even as the forest darkened, but he was an experienced hunter, and had ancestors from the Plains Indians. Part Sioux. Or so he said. I'd seen broken branches, disturbed dirt and leaves, orangey-auburn hair fragments, and finally, as I came upon mud from the rain last night, a footprint: mammalian, no hoof, and unless Tony Summer's foot had grown a few sizes since last week, not his. No, clearly not, because I could see the clumsy, boot prints he had left, from walking carefully around the footprint.

Tony had become my hunted as well, then. I snapped pictures of both sets of tracks.

As I traced their steps, I thought about how Julius had laughed at me, comparing my maps and charts tracking sightings to the crazy people who didn't believe in global warming. Whether I was into Bigfoot or not, I wasn't good enough for him. Turned out while I was preparing for our retirement together, planning a long road-trip through Sasquatch country, he had been secretly seeing his teaching assistant. I'd have to delay retirement, now, but decided to go on the trip anyway.

As I continued through the forest, I thought of Tony, pretending to be interested in me, humoring me by asking all about my upcoming trip. It was foolish to think anyone could be interested in my graying hair, crows-feet eyes, and slowly thickening middle, even if I still one of the best sharpshooters I knew. Men were somehow always turned on by a woman who could shoot, so I didn't think it was too weird when he bought me that second bottle of wine. If only I hadn't passed out on the couch when he brought me home. I was sure he had copied my maps.

Thinking about Julius, Tony, and general old age, I was fuming by the time I arrived at the end of the tracks. I stood before jagged lines in the mud, the signs of a struggle.

Despite the foreboding signs in front of me, the air smelled fresh; the smoke from the fires that week had finally moved out of the forest. Maybe my bad luck, like the smoke, was clearing out.

Looking back at the forest floor, I could see the tracks where a body had been rolled around, unwillingly, and then dragged away. I scrunched my face, half not believing that that fucking asshole would think of *killing* one of the rarest animals on earth. It was like that man who shot the last dodo bird, or those beasts who still hunted endangered elephants to turn their feet into ottomans for dictators and oil tyrants. I had thought better of Tony. It was strange the deference we are capable of giving men who look dazzling in white and rhinestones.

I almost walked right into it, just on the other side of a redwood tree. A dead body, hanging upside down. I didn't recognize it, at first, the face was contorted in agony, its mouth hanging wide open and bloody, the blood dripping down its cheeks. I looked around to make sure I was safe.

I had walked into a small clearing and it took my eyes a moment to adjust to the sun. It wasn't until I saw the Sasquatch walking towards me that I realized the body was Tony's—his face looked pale and his sunglasses were gone. And Tony was always smiling and, well, he wasn't anymore. I was almost surprised by the wave of guilt and tragedy that fell over me—I *had* liked him, peanut-butter-and-bacon-breath and all—but I didn't have time.

The Sasquatch had seen me. I should have tried to make better use of my camouflage jacket, but it was too late for that. It stood nearly seven feet tall, was covered in hair, longer than I had expected, and on its head, it had flowing, long red hair. Like a supermodel. I reached for my gun, for no reason other than instinct. I would never kill it. Instead, I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Please don't kill me," I said. How embarrassing. Now I knew that when I faced death, I was going to be one of those slobbering idiots begging for my life.

It stopped walking towards me, and made a strange face. Was that a smirk? It—no, I could now see from the wide hips and the large, sagging breasts that it was a *she*, and breastfeeding, to boot.

She spoke to me in clear English, with an accent I didn't recognize.

"If you put down the gun, I probably have no reason to kill you."

Later that night, I sat around a campfire with the Sasquatch and her three children, the toddler-sized one sitting in my lap. There was so much left to see and to learn. I wanted to ask her so many questions. How did she learn to speak English, of all languages? What was the language she spoke with her children, which mostly involved clicking and whispers? Was there a father Sasquatch? Were there others? Tony and Julius were now distant memories, as was my fury. The few hours I'd spent with the Sasquatch and her children had seemed like eternity, and I had no problem staying with them until the end of time. If they let me.

I listened to the mother Sasquatch singing in her language, and I looked up to the sky and thought the stars seemed brighter than I remembered. She sung in a low pitch, gazing out into the darkness of the forest, while she grazed her fingers through her nursing baby's orange fluff of hair. It sounded like the mourning song of an unearthly being, sorrowful, yet not without hope.

One of the little ones offered me a piece of meat, which I declined with a smile and shake of my head. I was sticking to my trail mix tonight. I wiped away my tears as the song ended.

"Can you tell me what that song was about?" I asked.

She looked right at me and nodded. "It is about me, and my children, and their children. That we will be here, far beyond this time, and after the icecaps melt, and after that."

She said it with such determination, so matter-of-fact and resolute, that even though I knew her species was nearly extinct, and her habitat was quickly disappearing, I believed her.

If she was trying to convince me to forget about her kind, to leave my camera behind, to give up on hunting the Sasquatch forever, there was no need. I had seen her mysteries and I had time to consider them before I died, however soon that was. As I held the child in my lap, who snuggled into my shoulder, I knew that even if I were to die tomorrow, it would be knowing that I had walked, sat, and eaten with Bigfoot. There was no greater pleasure.

KIMBERLY KAUFMAN lives in San Francisco, California. She's published stories in *Metaphorosis* and San Francisco City College's *Forum*. When not reading, she's probably watching Italian horror movies or walking in the fog with her husband and imaginary dog. Her academic background is in Spanish literature and she dreams in punk.

A Little Death

Alyn Spector

Jeanette's death was a cute little thing that wriggled in her lap like a newborn kitten. It was so small that it could fit in the palm of her hand, where it would gurgle and sputter its last breath in a perpetual exit without an ending. During the day, she kept it in her pocket where she whispered secrets to it and fed it cookies. At night, she cradled it in a shoebox and read it bedtime stories. It was the first friend she ever made.

When she was five, Jeanette's little death got the sniffles, so she made it a pillow fort and sang songs until it felt better. It was hard for Jeanette to be sure what was ailing her death, but the girl's intuition told her it needed a hug and a big bowl of chicken soup. It accepted her affection and greedily devoured the meal.

When Jeanette turned ten she began to study anatomy. She spent long hours in her local library—her lanky brown arms filled with books that were brimming with images of human viscera. She poured over microfiche of obituaries and coroner's reports. She marveled at the root cause of broken noses and shattered eye-sockets. She reveled in her newfound knowledge until one overly restrictive librarian redeposited her in the children's section. But before her curiosity had been stifled by the cruel reins of adult supervision, Jeanette had gained a working knowledge of the human corpse under the conditions of drowning, poison, strangulation, and decapitation. It took her another five weeks, and a stint on a borrowed laptop, before she determined that her little death was likely the result of a lethal combo of blunt force trauma and drowning. Jeanette was elated.

Jeanette's teenage years were a time of fearlessness. While other girls were worried about acne and awkwardness, Jeanette practiced parkour. She flipped off the sides of buildings with a boldness that

terrified her family. But Jeanette knew she had nothing to fear. She had carefully studied her little death. She knew every scar, every bruise, every tear. She understood with unparalleled intimacy every wound and violence that would be inflicted on her body. In turn, she understood all that could not hurt her. The boundaries of her brokenness, of her final release from her earthly existence were clearly defined.

Yet, Jeanette could not shake her sense of loneliness—the invisible veil between her and the rest of the world. Her friends and partners were vulnerable to a fate she couldn't control. Their deaths were unknowable, anonymous strangers lurking in the shadows. She yearned to penetrate the isolation. Her little death, always a sympathetic friend, rummaged through discarded newspapers and left clippings for personal ads under Jeanette's pillow. While the miniature corpse was surprisingly adept at finding potential partners, it failed to find another soul who experienced the world like Jeanette.

Inspired, and frustrated, the young woman decided to take matters into her own hands.

"I can see my own dead body. Can you?"

Jeanette discovered death-positive forums on Reddit at the age of thirty-three. She told her story, posted a few selfies of her and her death, and waited. She could hardly contain her excitement in finally finding a venue in which she could connect with kindred spirits. She saw the pictures of funerals and the tasteful ministrations of morticians and knew she'd be at right at home.

Then the comments began to roll in.

"Inappropriate post. Reported."

"Why are you disrespecting our forum?"

"Quit lying for attention!" said a message from a young man in Colorado. Several followed up to suggest she was in need of medication. One middle-aged woman, thinking she was being

helpful, diagnosed Jeanette as suicidal and reported her post to the authorities.

Jeanette was heartbroken. She knew it was foolish to think that anyone would be able to see her little death, even when captured in photographic evidence. All she had done was make herself vulnerable to a sea of unsympathetic minds.

And then there was "Sleepy," a rando who kept lurking around the forums, replying to her posts with pictures of himself in various states of consciousness. She considered reporting him to someone, but her little death would hiss and shake its head adamantly every time she tried. So instead, Jeanette hit the "ignore" button and plopped face-first onto her bed in a gesture of despondence.

Her death, unconcerned with the opinions of others, flooded the forum with bawdy memes and merrily gored itself on microwave waffles. Every few minutes it would tap her computer screen with a bloody finger, screening messages on her behalf and clicking its tongue until, at last, it found what it was seeking. The little death grinned with a shattered jaw and nudged Jeanette towards several unread replies to her post.

"I don't get why people say they can't see your death in the photo. It's totally right next to you!" The message was from an anonymous poster from Denmark. Jeanette allowed herself to emerge from the funk of her cynicism. Her death grinned at her, victorious as a second message appeared.

"My mom put me on meds as a kid because I told her a little boy who looked like me followed me around the house bleeding everywhere," said a man from Detroit, "He still does."

Others followed. The forum was soon flooded with a parade of carnage. Many users continued to insist that the messages were fake, but those with supernatural companions perched on their shoulders could see her death, and she in turn could see theirs. The newly formed community was ecstatic. Their little deaths, inspired by the excitement, would peek over their shoulders, and dive onto

keyboards, hunt-and-pecking cryptic code with their bloodstained appendages.

And for the first time in her life, Jeanette felt at peace. Her community was her refuge—a perpetual sanity check that let her know she was not alone. Her little death, feeling generous, unblocked Sleepy, and began to upvote the myriad pictures of him slumbering in exotic locales. Jeanette was too distracted to notice.

“We should have a meet-up some time,” the no-longer-lonely woman suggested one stormy afternoon while her death stood outside and caught raindrops in its fractured arms. “Like a conference. It would be great to get my death out of the house and socialize it a little. It gets restless with just me around.”

The others, nudged on by their little deaths, agreed that if they had the money and time, they would get together someday. A few months later, Jeanette met two of her more enthusiastic peers at a Seattle hotel. The three of them went out to the bar while their little deaths stayed in the lobby for a night of poker and charades.

“Being confronted with my death makes me less afraid,” Jeanette confided. “You’d think it would be horrible, but I guess they’re right about knowledge being power . . .”

“Maybe, but I wish I had more knowledge to work with,” Dave, a leather clad biker, said with a sigh. “No matter how many times I’ve ordered my death to quit screwing with me, it never does. It just keeps dying of a heart attack, aging right along with me. It’s a death sentence and I have no idea when the ax is gonna drop.”

“Least you know it won’t be from a motorcycle accident.” Jeanette shrugged. Dave rolled his eyes, unimpressed.

“One day I’m gonna take a bullet,” her friend Joshua declared as he tapped his forehead knowingly. “Right there. But I’ll be damned if I’m gonna let it bother me.” His crinkled Cajun face reminded Jeanette of sunburnt leather. “Just means I need to work a little harder to make sure it’s all worthwhile. And if it brings me a little extra friendship, I’d say that was a good thing too.”

"That may be so," Dave nodded. "But there's a risk to us coming together like this." He let the remnants of his beer whirl around the bottom of his glass.

"What do you mean?" Jeanette squinted her eyes.

"Now that they've met each other, they know our weaknesses," Dave continued. "What if our deaths *want* us to die, but they're too little to do anything about it? What if they just needed help finishing their jobs?"

"Now that's just stupid!" Jeanette scoffed. "Why would our deaths try to kill us? I mean, they need us alive, right?"

"What if they *become* us? What if that's their whole purpose? Maybe they can't really start living until we're gone?"

Dave's words hung heavy in the air as friends exchanged worried glances. After several more minutes of quiet suffering, Jeanette finally spoke. "Look. My little friend's been with me my whole life. And you know what? That crazy little thing ain't plotting shit. If she were up to anything, I'd know. She doesn't hide anything from me."

"You sure about that?" asked a voice at the back of the bar. The four companions turned to see a bearded man with an afro sipping a drink in the corner. "Cause mine seems to always have a mind of its own."

"Can we help you?" Jeanette slid down from her barstool. As she approached, the woman noticed that the stranger looked familiar. On the table in front of him was a small stack of printed-out photographs. She squinted, then snatched a photo of Dave on his motorcycle from the table and waved it in the air. The image showed his little death sprawled red-face in the sidecar. "You've been stalking us. Jesus!"

"Seems so," Dave muttered narrowing his eyes. He turned towards the gentleman with an air of casual menace. "But why?"

"It's not like that! I thought. I just—" The stranger winced and took a deep gulp from his drink. "Damn! I should have known better than to come here! It never works."

“What never works?” Dave asked, leaning in towards the stranger.

“Making friends,” the man replied with a soft sigh. “The pictures were from Reddit. From your forum. I was invited here. By her friend.” He motioned to Jeanette.

“I didn’t invite him,” Jeanette said with a frown.

“No, but your *death* did.” He spoke the last words in a half-whisper. “She’s been networking with the others.”

“Pardon?” Joshua raised a crooked eyebrow.

“After her last message, my little guy insisted that I drive out here.” The stranger said with a small smile. “He helps me sometimes, whether I want it or not. Likes to send pictures. Usually gets me banned from forums.”

“Wait. Hold on. I know who you are.” Jeanette took a breath and tried not to cringe remembering the relentless stream of spam she had received from the unwelcome stranger. “But if you were one of us, we’d be able to tell—”

“—cause he’d be in the pictures he sent.” The man took a breath and raised a hand. “But he was. I’ll show you.” The stranger reached into the bag next to his chair. Inside was a small figure curled in a blanket. His face was calm. His eyes were closed. He wasn’t breathing. The tiny man was dead. A death with no sign of injury. A death that looked like an ordinary person, asleep.

“Selfies!” Jeanette gasped with understanding.

The man nodded as he scooped his little death into his hand to show them. “No one ever believes me. Then again, I wasn’t sure you were the real deal either. But Sleepy said I could trust ya’ll.”

“Yours *talks* to you?” Dave asked, his body relaxing.

“Types,” the man replied. “Also knows sign language.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Joshua clapped his hands together with a smile. Dave grunted, slapped his new pal on the back and wandered back to the front of the bar for another drink.

"My name is Jeff, by the way." The new friend offered a shy smile, his eyes looking off in the distance. Jeanette extended her hand.

"Jeanette," and this is "Joshua and Dave. But I guess you already know that."

Jeff's little death began to stir. It stretched and made a few quick gestures in ASL. Jeanette extended a finger to shake the little death's miniature hand. "Well hey there, little guy." She grinned. "What happened to you?" Jeff's death offered no reply. Instead it simply winked and curled back onto the table.

"He does that," Jeff confided, wringing his umber hands. "He's friendly enough, but doesn't like answering questions."

"At least he's helpful," Joshua replied with a smile. "Mine ain't bad, but would probably be more useful if it didn't get its head blown off every ten minutes." The others chuckled.

"So where are your little deaths anyway?"

"They're in the lobby playing a round of charades near the coat-check." Jeanette replied. Sleepy opened an eye in curiosity at the conversation. "Hey, you can go out there if you want." The little death stretched its arms and tilted its head cautiously towards Jeff.

"It's okay, I'll be fine."

Sleepy grinned from ear-to-ear. He gave a small salute and shimmied down the chair-leg and out into the lobby.

"Well, I'm turning in for the night," Joshua said. How 'bout you all?"

"Turn in?" Dave scoffed, "This is the first time my death has left me alone for more than five minutes. I'm gonna see what there is to do in this town. You two in?" The pair exchanged a cautious glance at each other.

"No, it's okay," Jeanette replied. "I think we're gonna stay behind and chat, right Jeff?"

The biker rolled his eyes. "Suit yourselves." He paid his tab and wandered out of the bar, towards the street.

“Hey, I owe you an apology,” Jeanette said softly once she and Jeff were alone. “She finished her drink and felt the warmth of it in her stomach. “I shouldn’t have ignored you when you reached out to me.”

“Yeah, well,” Jeff lowered his eyes and fiddled with his keychain. “I had no idea that Sleepy was posting stuff on my behalf till last week.

“Seriously?”

Jeff shrugged. “I never use my Reddit account.” He let out a chuckle. “But apparently Sleepy does. Must be bored out of his mind.”

Jeanette smiled. “Yeah, mine does the same thing sometimes. She thinks she’s being helpful, but I can’t help but wonder if she wants a life outside of me, y’know?”

“Exactly. We both exist, so we’re two different people, right? Different people with different needs.”

“Different needs,” Jeanette repeated, rocking slightly in her chair. “I’m glad you’re here, Jeff. Sorry I thought you were a weirdo.”

“It was perfectly reasonable to assume I was a weirdo.” Jeff grinned.

“No. I should have given you—him the benefit of the doubt.”

Jeff smiled as Jeanette leaned groggily in his direction. “Hey,” he said after a few moments of silence, “it’s been great speaking with you, but I think I better get some sleep.”

Jeanette nodded. She paid her tab and stumbled over to a dusty ottoman in the corner of the lobby where the little deaths were still socializing. She steadied herself against the stonework of the lobby’s fireplace and headed off to bed. That night, her mind conjured images of broken bodies dancing and moaning and flicking bent fingers against floating keyboards. She felt a strange welling in her chest—a bittersweet convergence of empathy and trepidation. Her dreams were filled with sensations of flight

accompanied by the burning of lungs and a pressing, precious submersion.

Jeanette woke at 11:42am the next morning in a cold sweat surrounded by a tangle of bedsheets. She wandered to the sink and shucked the plastic off a hotel cup, filling it four times in an attempt to fight her dehydration headache. Then she stripped off her clothes, stepped into the shower and let the hot water wash off the excesses of the evening before.

“Well, that was an interesting party, wasn’t it, little buddy?” Jeanette chuckled as she tilted her head towards where her little death perched in the mornings. “Buddy?” There was no gurgle, no sputter, no last hiss of air escaping through broken teeth. Jeanette’s hand filled the empty space where her death should have been. “Yo! Where are you?” Jeanette ended her shower.

“Little death?” She searched for her death amongst the blankets. She checked under the bed, and behind the dresser, but her companion was nowhere to be found. In desperation, she checked the mini-fridge. The phone began to ring. She massaged her temples and tried to steady her breathing as she scrambled across the room and lifted the receiver. “Hello?”

“Hi, is this Jeanette Richardson in room 302?” asked the receptionist in the lobby.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“We have a man named Jeff Fischer down here. He says he’s been trying to reach on your cell but it goes to voicemail. He claims he’s a friend of yours?”

“Yeah, um. Sure. Did he say what he wanted?”

“No.” The woman on the other end of the phone let out a sigh. “He just says it’s urgent that you come down and talk to him. But if you don’t know him, I can tell him to quit hassling you.”

“I know him,” Jeanette replied. She stared down at the eight missed calls on her cell phone. “I’ll be right down.”

Jeanette got dressed and walked the three flights of stairs to the lobby. As she opened the stairwell door, she saw Jeff pacing

nervously in front of the elevators. He fidgeted and stared at his phone, as though he was expecting an urgent message. Jeanette noticed that his little death was missing as well.

“Hey, have you seen—”

“Yes! And everything’s fine, I think. Better now that you’re here!” Jeff shifted his weight from foot-to-foot, barely able to contain the nervous energy coursing through his body. “But something happened. Last night. The note. Did she share one with you?” His tone fluctuated between anxious and manic.

“No. What are you talking about?” Jeanette stared at the man in confusion.

“Our deaths. They’ve been corresponding. Like I told you last night.”

“Right. So?”

Jeff’s eyes grew huge as though he could barely contain his newfound revelation. “So, Sleepy and your little death have a chat history. My little guy printed out the transcript. He left it rolled up in my shoe.” He produced the bundle of papers that had been folded under his arm. “Apparently, they’ve been dating.”

“Pardon?” Jeanette shook her head in confusion.

“Online. The messages they’ve been exchanging. They’re well, kinda...” Jeff blushed and handed her papers.

Jeanette’s eyes darted over words like, “*eternal*,” and “*thirsty*,” and “*caress*.”

“Hot damn!”

“Anyhow,” Jeff coughed, “I found them together this morning. I called you right away, but you weren’t answering.” He paused and took a deep breath, sweat dripping from his nervous, handsome brow. “I didn’t know what to do, so I recorded it. I thought you might know what it means.”

Jeanette took a step backwards as Jeff held out his phone in his trembling fingers. An image of tiny people appeared on the screen. They stood arm-in-arm on the high-dive of the hotel swimming

pool. They jumped together, plummeting into the water over and over as blood, viscera, and mucus trailed behind them. Children played below in their water-wings and innertubes, unaware of the mortal struggle in their midst.

“He’s dying,” Jeff whispered. “In a good way.”

Jeanette nodded and squeezed Jeff’s hand. “And you say they’ve been doing that all morning?”

The duo steadied each other as they walked over to the indoor pool. The little deaths had toweled themselves off and were now sitting on the headrest of plastic lounge chair, gasping and hemorrhaging together in each other’s arms. They turned and beamed at their living counterparts with raw contentment.

Jeanette Richardson and Jeff Fischer eloped the following weekend. The members of their Reddit community sent best wishes, virtual flowers, and pictures of their little deaths in party hats.

On the morning of their fiftieth anniversary, after a long night celebrating their bold and fearless lives, Jeanette and Jeff’s deaths woke to find themselves submerged beneath crystal blue waters. A mountain spring poured over their tiny heads and shoulders as they bobbed to the surface of the lake. The sky was warm and dark with wisps of fog, and hints of light. They weren’t sure how they had gotten to this place, but dreamlike recollection emerged from the shadows of their minds. Onward, onward the elderly couple had traveled, despite their aching backs and ancient frames. The movement of their bodies, gently ascending to the summit of the mountain, had lulled the little deaths into a gentle slumber. Now, as the sun broke through over the cliffs, the two little deaths breached from the water and vanished into vapor in a singular moment of birth.

ALYN SPECTOR is a queer Jersey expat who gave up his spray tan for Birkenstocks and escaped to the Pacific Northwest. He has stories published in *Five2One Magazine*; *The Molotov Cocktail Magazine*; and *Mad Scientist Journal*. He also has work forthcoming with the *Love and Bubbles* Anthology. All of his work can be found at alynspector.com. He's on Twitter @inspectorspectr.

Always Leave Them Wanting More

C. G. Thompson

for Ethan

The cloud dreamed of being a magician, but already was,
gliding on invisible currents across a performance
of sky. Faces turned toward it, self-selected audience,
curious what filigreed cumulus had up its sleeve.
A magic wand was implied, as was sleight of hand,
dexterity spread through fluffs and folds – voila!
Illusionist, its changes proved too subtle to follow,
until they became a fait accompli, water vapor quicker
than the mind, transforming from battleship to rabbit
to seahorse, wind acting as a nimble assistant.
Cloud then disappeared, creating its own smoke,
no mirrors required, the show over before anyone knew,
entertainer skipping a curtain call, time fleeting.

C. G. THOMPSON is a winner of the North Carolina State University Poetry Contest and a three-time finalist for the James Applewhite Poetry Prize. In 2017, two of her poems appeared in downtown Winston-Salem, NC, as part of Poetry in Plain Sight. She also was a runner-up for the 2017 Barry Hannah Prize in Fiction. Her poems and short stories have appeared or are upcoming in *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Yalobusha Review*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Fictive Dream*, *Redheaded Stepchild*, and *Boston Literary Magazine*, among others.

On the cover:

"The Falconer"

KERRY COLE talks to bugs and people she can't see. She thinks trees have feelings and paints what she feels coming from all around us. She dreams of people she has never met who offer advice, or ask for her help. She often ends up painting them as an offering of healing. Her family is tolerant and curious.

Find her work at
kerrycofineart.com.

