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Editor's Note

It's late, but the neighborhood is still awake. The Roman candles are just about exhausted, but the steady drumbeat of M80s has another hour to go. Out back your drunken neighbor is giving a pitch-perfect rendition of Bill Pullman's *Independence Day* speech from his deck. Across the street, a new eighty-inch beams through a bay window: Mayor Vaughn is telling Chief Brody there's no need to close the beaches. Through a screen window wafts an intoxicating mix of Coppertone, charcoal briquettes, and chlorine. You settle into your chair and can't decide if you want the latest issue of *Backstreets* or to peruse your well-thumbed copy of *The Necronomicon*, when you notice something wedged in-between them. Is that the new issue of *Jersey Devil Press*? You hesitate. It *is* late. Maybe you shouldn't. You touch the pages cautiously and the journey unfolds in your mind. The space station. The doctor's office. The bowling alley. A long walk home. Oh, the justice of foxes. Whatever happens in the moonlight. And the KISS cover band. You understand the fireworks are just beginning.

Mike Sweeney

Guest Editor

The Shuffler

John Waterfall

There's a shuffler in the station. A strange moving thing that works its way up and down the corridor outside the mess hall, stopping for moments in front of each door. I haven't told anyone yet, I'm not sure if there is anyone left to tell. And besides, I'm not paid to talk about things like that. I'm paid to clean the station, spick and span, and launch bags into space – black for trash, white for recycling – which, now that I think of it, really doesn't matter out here, out here where we just launch it all into the sun and claim victory. That's what I'm here for, annihilating garbage down to the particle.

But ever since the Shuffler started doing what it's doing things have gotten more difficult, mostly because I have to basically live in the mess hall. Going back to my cabin might involve meeting the shuffler. Which I don't want to do.

So I live in the mess hall now, which makes my job difficult, lashing the door shut with some chains I took from the hangar, so that when the Shuffler stops by it doesn't get in. Not that it's tried. It really just stands there, two foot shadows blocking out the under-door light. Maybe that's all it is, some strange object shaped like under-door foot shadows. Maybe the whole station's filled with them now, standing in front of all the doors, little inch-high black stretches, crawling around on minute tootsies.

I'm going to be honest with you here. It's been awhile since I left the mess hall.

A brief inventory of the things that are keeping me alive physically and spiritually:

Salisbury Steak: 3,476. How? Why?

Water: Theoretically infinite as long as there is power and I have urine.

Power: Infinite. As long as the Sun doesn't fry anything. Sometimes it fries stuff.

Birthday Candles (inedible): 18. Not sure why they're here as we never celebrated any birthdays. And there is no evidence of cake. And why eighteen? Perhaps hold over from previous crew? Perhaps there were celebrations and nobody thought to invite me? Stay positive, Dunk.

Charcoal biscuits (inedible): A lot. I'm not going to count them and get all dirty.

On a Pale Horse by Piers Anthony (inedible): My one and only treasure.

One picture of bohemian parents (inedible): 1. Makes me regretful and sad.

One of those dipping bird tchotchkes (inedible): 1. Functional as long as I have water.

Notice of dereliction of duty signed by Captain Avinash (inedible): 1. Jerk. Received for doing too good of a job. It's not my fault I launched his daughter's poem into the Sun. Like I told everybody, If you don't want it launched into the Sun don't leave it on the floor.

Lucky half oyster shell that is proving to not be that lucky
(inedible): 1.

I've drawn my conception of the under-door creature. I had to use napkins and a combination of water and pounded charcoal biscuits to draw so it didn't come out exactly like I had it in my head, but tonight when the Shuffler comes, I'm going to slide it under the hatch as a sort of "are you this thing?" gesture. Now, I do concede that this isn't a foolproof plan, and that I am perhaps revealing myself to the Shuffler, which probably has murdered everyone else on the station – otherwise they would have come for me – but I've come to the realization that I simply cannot live in the mess hall for eternity and subsist on what appears to be an endless supply of flash-frozen Salisbury steaks. (I am so, so tired of Salisbury steak.) And I left the rest of my Piers Anthony in my cabin. I guess what I'm saying is that this really isn't living and I don't want to do it without Piers. All right I hear it now, I'm going to initiate the experiment.

Okay, well, I slid the picture of the under-door creature, you know the concept of the foot shadows as an actual physical rubbery animal thing? Well I'm pretty sure the Shuffler noticed it because it moaned for awhile, than shrieked for awhile, than made some sort of undulating warbling for awhile, and then slid the drawing back under the hatch to me, covered with some kind of green slime rune which either means, "Nice to meet you, I'm not going to murder you," or, "Boy, I can't wait to murder you." Honestly it's hard to

interpret anything that's going on. Maybe none of this is going on? Well that's a stretch. You know, maybe the Shuffler was asking a question. Maybe it thought I was an under-door creature, that I had drawn a picture of myself? Because if it looks that way to me I probably look that way to it.

I have another theory as to why nobody is coming to get me. Perhaps instead of being murdered by the Shuffler they simply evacuated and forgot about me. Which would go hand-in-hand with me never being invited to any of the birthday parties that might have occurred. Of course, there is always the possibility that no birthday parties occurred and I am simply being oversensitive. Is it bad to wish that everybody died instead of forgetting about me? It's bad.

I wonder if my bohemian parents are still alive. Before I left for space, my mother told me I was sending myself to the corner. That was my punishment when I was a kid. To stand in the corner. My dad would hold a kitchen timer by my ear as an additional wrinkle of punishment. I miss them.

I think, when you're trapped in a mess hall by what might be a vicious alien menace, it's important to feel as many different emotions as possible so as to not go crazy. So I'm glad I've got this photo, which makes me feel horrible whenever I look at it.

I've decided to test the Shuffler's intelligence with a rudimentary trash experiment. I've written an approximation of a math equation on a napkin using charcoal paste concerning the precise weight

limits necessary when launching trash into the vacuum of space. You know, it's really not a math problem. I don't know why I said that. It's basically a cave painting of me throwing garbage from a Colonial-style window lodged in the side of the doughnut-shaped station. It's, of course, not realistic, as we have no colonial style windows, but I couldn't accurately depict what the station windows actually look like. I don't think window is even the correct term in space. Anyway, here it comes again, I'm going to initiate the experiment.

Okay, well that was a waste of time and charcoal paste. Once again, the Shuffler decided to puke symbols all over the drawing I spent a very long time making. I'm not upset. I'm not. But I think it's rude. A little rude. Especially if the Shuffler has killed everyone. In that case I'm dealing with a very unsavory character who could've just pretended to like my drawing. Anyhow, I think the root of the problem is a lack of basic understanding. I'm going to try to create a shared alphabet for the two of us to communicate with, or rather a simple way for *it* to understand *my* alphabet.

Let's see here, I'll start by... how... do I... do this? Hmmmm.... Morse code! That's it. I'll teach it Morse code, my own special version because I don't know Morse code, besides from the beeps and the dashes. I'll simplify it. Only beeps! No dashes! So one beep for A. Two for B. Three for C. Four for D. Five for E. Six for F. Seven for G and so on. Here it comes! I'm going to initiate the experiment.

So I shouldn't have started with "Who are you?" because the W alone was twenty-three beeps and by the time I finished beeping the Shuffler had finished screaming and was gone. I don't think my beep alphabet is a fully functioning idea. How's the Shuffler supposed to know what an A is to begin with? Or a B! Or a C! Or a D for that matter! I think I'm getting hysterical. Oh my God, I'm trapped in here, I'm actually trapped in here...

Maybe I could do one beep for yes and two for no... That's a better start. Or I could just stick with pictures, something simple. A happy face and a sad face. A sick face and healthy face. A face eating questionable Salisbury steak and a face puking it all up into a series of strange alphabetic signatures.

There is always the final solution. Always the opening of the door and saying hello. Here it comes. I've got my faces ready, they're simplistic and I don't think I've got the contours of the Salisbury streak and the puke just right, but it'll have to do. Here let me circle the one that represents how I feel. The puke face. Dear Shuffler, I feel like the puke face.

Apparently the Shuffler feels like all the faces as it puked a slime rune on each and every drawing and slid them back. Perhaps it is trying to teach me *its* alphabet! I will say that it's a very corrosive alphabet. I got a little bit on the tip of my finger and it burned the skin right off. As it stands I'm simply accumulating an acidic pile of garbage in the corner of the mess hall. Which, sooner or later, may or may not burn a hole through the hull and eject me into the vacuum of space and into the Sun. Which is the most poetic demise that I can think of. Regardless, I think I'd like to avoid it.

My bohemian parents must be so disappointed with me. If they're not dead. They wanted me to be an artist. Or a rock star. Any kind of creative genius. And instead I chose to do nothing. To be nothing. I chose the simplest, most non-offensive occupation in the entire universe. But that was the point. I think I'm being too hard on myself. I think I'm too hard on myself. I *invented* a way of producing charcoal paste! That's something.

If this experience has taught me anything it is this inarguable rule of the universe: if left alone for long enough, a Dunk will find a way to create charcoal paste.

Because I have literally nothing else to do besides attempt communication with a possible alien menace, I've decided to make physical contact with the Shuffler. I've got four pairs of latex dishwashing gloves on so I should be okay if I get slimed. Whatever happens at least I'll know how hostile it is. Here it comes! I'll just slip my fingers under the hatch and wiggle them a bit and... WOW! That feels... different. OUCH! There's a great deal of pressure... and... suction... and... feels like each of my fingers is in a separate orifice that... really, really enjoys them being there... I don't think I'm comfortable with this anymore...

I have two theories about what just happened. A: The Shuffler tried to eat my fingers. B: The Shuffler made earnest sexual intercourse with my fingers. Regardless it's a good thing I had protection.

Unfortunately, the gloves are now smoldering in the acid pile and I am no closer to understanding if I'm dealing with an enemy. How does one do this? How do I communicate with a living thing that isn't a living thing I'm used to. What would a scientist do? A linguist? What would Piers Anthony do? These are the things I need to know and don't. I should have paid attention in school. Or school should have paid more attention to me. I should have made choices that didn't result in living in the orbit of the sun, launching garbage into it with impunity. I should have worked at a bird hospital with those monks that refuse to step on bugs.

My first girlfriend humiliated me when I didn't know the difference between "your" and "you're." I was twenty-four. I am completely unqualified for anything, especially this.

I realize, as the Shuffler now moans and warbles at my door, that the one thing I have not tried to do is talk to it. Most of my attempts at communication have been non-verbal or nonsensical. Perhaps I am over-thinking things. Perhaps all it needs is to hear my voice. Perhaps that's what I need. Like soothing horses.

While I cannot know if the Shuffler is a threat to me, I can know that I am not a threat to it. I can decide that. To not bash it over the head with the fire extinguisher. That's an okay thing. To not be a threat. That's a hard thing for a person to do. Listen to me Shuffler, here is how and why I came to be a janitor in space:

When I was a kid, before I squandered my opportunities and became a disappointment, I spent my summers in Chesapeake Bay

with my wealthy bohemian parents. Across the water, in the parts of Delaware nobody was using anymore, I could see the great shapes of starships under construction. The clouds of greasy smog their construction necessitated blanketed the sky in a constant green-grey swirl, coated the choppy Atlantic whitecaps with greasy rainbows.

Our neighbor was a leather skinned, speedo-wearing old man whom the neighborhood kids knew as Dr. Dove. He was a former software executive living out his days in self-imposed exile after the company he chaired defrauded billions of clients in a global financial collapse.

As penance, he farmed oysters. Day and night. Trudging up and down his rickety docks in the windswept, tropical swelter of late twenty-first century Maryland. And that was all there was to him. All that was left. His oysters and his speedos.

He didn't sell his oysters, rather he used their filtering powers in a tragicomic attempt at purifying the putrid bay of toxicity. No amount of oysters were capable of doing this, so he simply accumulated more and more till his estuaries became a series of small, thin large reefs that obstructed personal watercraft. One of those reefs eventually killed a famous football player on a jet-ski joyride.

Each day at lunch I watched Dr. Dove from the fringes of his property, our two lawns mismatched squares of green, his sickly and near yellow; ours thick, emerald and forest-like. Back and forth he'd go, back and forth, from his house to his estuaries all hours of the day, a madman in a speedo, muttering under his breath. And I'd just watch, a distant little shadow munching on a ham sandwich.

The day the football player died, the day before he was arrested for manslaughter, crazy Dr. Dove spoke to me. He was walking back from his docks cradling something in his hands. He shouted something unintelligible at the sky and fell to his knees. The way he was kneeling, the way his old skin folded over itself, made it impossible to see that he was wearing a speedo. Do you know what he looked like Shuffler? He looked like a sad, naked old man. He looked like a Gob. He looked like how I imagine I look now.

From my patch of luscious green grass I called to him.

“Are you okay?” I asked. He looked up and muttered at me and at nothing. Than muttered the same thing only louder and crazier. Than he got up and lumbered towards me and made me pee my pants a little. From a few feet away I could see that his eyes were rheumy and yellow and not-at-all healthy looking. He spoke again, clearly this time, in a way that seemed to explain the mysteries of existence. He said “I am the destroyer of worlds,” than he placed a dead oyster at my feet and went back out into the bay and inadvertently murdered a professional athlete.

What he said was a quote from a famous dead person who helped invent a way to kill the world. That’s how Dr. Dove saw himself, because despite trying to create good, all he created was a way to kill oysters.

The next day, when they took him away, ranting and screaming and mostly naked, I took a look at the starships in the distance and decided that there wasn’t much left to do where I was. I decided that if I was going to do something pointless I was going to do it far, far away. I still have the oyster, a putrid reminder of how to do no harm in the world. To do no harm is to do nothing.

It took me a couple of days to realize that it wasn't a rock, but a thing that had once been alive. Maybe that's what they'll think about me when they find my digested bones. Here are the remains of a nobody that used to be alive.

Last night, after hearing my story, the Shuffler proceeded to knock on the mess hall door twenty-three times, which, as you may recall, is the symbol for W. So there is hope. There is hope for peace.

I'm going to unchain the door, and wait, wait for the creature that is either my friend or foe, with enough Salisbury steak for the both of us and all eighteen candles. It may not understand me, I may not understand it, but it will understand kindness. Anything can understand kindness. And so I am throwing the Shuffler a birthday party.

I think I left Earth because I wasn't the right person to do anything. To help anything. So I went someplace where what I did didn't matter. Now here, on the eve of first contact, with no expertise in anything, I find myself to be the exact perfect person for the job.

Thank you Dr. Dove. If I escape. Not if. WHEN I escape. I'm going to retire to Chesapeake Bay. And I'll farm oysters like you did. Not for the bay mind you, but for the oysters.

Here it comes, I'm going to light the candles, I'm going to initiate the birthday party.

A flash version of “The Shuffler” originally appeared on the *Ripples in Space* podcast.

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Quantum Summer

Josie Tolin

Every week that summer the old woman hobbled into my office with a huge bag and a new ailment. Her concerns were understandable at first. When she complained her heartbeat felt irregular, I held a stethoscope to her chest to check for palpitations. "It's cold," she said as I listened, so I breathed on the little metal circle and tried again.

"All normal," I said. She blinked, picked up her bag, and left.

Late June she griped about the discoloration behind her ear. I shined my tiny white light on the problem area. A brownish lump stared back at me. "That's a mole," I said. I flicked off my flashlight and slid it into my pocket. "We'll keep an eye on it to see if it changes shape."

"I'll see you next week then?" she said, slinging her bag over her shoulder and darting out the door before I could tell her that wouldn't be necessary.

She started to visit more frequently for even less pressing matters. "The weather is humid," she'd say as she barged into my office. I'd ask her about her health, and she'd tell me everything was fine, except for her hair, which stuck up like a cockatoo's in the damp heat. Her hair, she explained, was thick and wiry like her mother's: that's why she wasn't balding like everyone else her age. I sighed and told her not to come in unless she had an illness and she stormed out and came back the next day with red pox Sharpied onto her arm.

"She won't quit," I told my wife over breakfast-for-dinner. I shoved a French toast stick into my mouth and chewed.

"Tell the secretary not to let her in." My wife shrugged. "It's a simple solution, really." She chased a piece of scrambled egg around the plate with her fork, stabbing it, swallowing.

"No," I said.

"No?"

"No," I repeated. "I mean, what if something goes terribly wrong and I shoo her away and she dies because no one's listening?"

My wife sat there, massaging the bridge of her nose.

"What's in the bag?" I finally asked the old woman during her next visit. That morning, she'd forced me to sniff her toes three times before I convinced her there was nothing to worry about: feet just smell worse in the summer.

She pulled a sweater box from her tote as if she'd been waiting for me to ask. "A sweater box?" I said, crossing my arms, swiveling unimpressed in my doctor chair. She lifted the lid without answering. Inside was a dead cat with an open mouth, its fur caked and gnarled like the threads of an old bathmat. I turned to face the wall, taking the five deep breaths my therapist had recommended. When I swung back around she'd already stowed the box in her enormous bag. She'd looked docile then, cross-legged on the examining table with her hands folded in her lap.

"What the fuck?" I said. "Sorry, I mean, what the hell? Sorry, I mean—"

The old lady didn't flinch. "Like Schrödinger's Cat, you know?"

I snorted. "You're carrying around a dead animal, not a quantum physics theorem."

"But in this moment you don't know if it's alive or dead."

"I saw it. It's dead. I know what dead things look like. It's dead dead dead."

"You don't know that. The box is closed. The cat is out of your sight."

"Show it to me again."

"That won't help my point." The old woman stood to leave.

"You won't believe what she did yesterday," I said to my wife over dinner-for-breakfast. I twirled spaghetti around my fork, slurping the coil from its prongs.

"What?" my wife asked between milkshake gulps.

"She showed me her dead cat. She keeps it with her, boxed in her bag."

My wife shrugged again. Those days, nothing surprised her.

"She's insane."

"Yeah," I parroted. "Really insane."

My wife tapped her fingernails on the counter, waiting for me to say something else. I grabbed my car keys from their hook and left without making eye contact.

"The mole is changing shape," the old woman said.

"Let's see." I grabbed my mini flashlight and shined it behind her ear. She was right—it'd grown from dime- to quarter-sized in a matter of months. I shivered.

August ended the day the melanoma biopsy read malignant. I walked her out to the exit sign. "Thanks," I said, "for keeping me company this summer." The words felt stupid even then, but I meant them, I think. The old woman looked down at her shoes and nodded.

She killed herself with the radio on in her bedroom that night, or so I was told by my secretary, whose cousin was friends with the neighbor who'd found her dangling from the ceiling fan. Small town news travels in a strange way.

It's like she needed a doctor's permission to die, I thought as I read the obituary in bed by lamplight. I placed the newspaper on my nightstand and told my wife what'd happened. She was grateful but wouldn't say it. "Sometime soon," she said, "we'll go a night without talking about the bag woman. The bag woman was—the bag woman *is*—not so good for our sex life." She slid in earplugs, rolled over, and pretended to sleep. I stared at the ceiling and thought about how every moment in my entire life had led to that one.

The old woman still wouldn't leave me alone. I saw her in the bathroom mirror as I brushed my teeth before bed and on the train to Chicago for a medical conference. One moment she was in the waiting room reading *People* magazine with her legs crossed. The next, she wasn't. She was everywhere and nowhere. She was alive and dead.

JOSIE TOLIN is a flash fiction enthusiast and Indiana native. She holds a B.A. in English and Spanish from the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor.

Birthday 10

Ezra Solway

They plop a birthday hat on my head,
String coiled firmly around my larynx,
So the blood flushes,
In my eyes, they search,
They demand happiness, my parents.
It is only natural, they say.

The rest of class is busy bowling,
Gliding balls down the creamy brown lane,
Scooping neon frosting,
Seizing the gifts I spurn,
Blow it out! Blow it out! They shout.
And I watch as the wax drips & puddles.

They act like a rafter of baby turkeys – all of them,
Determined to fly, yet barely leaving the floor.
This is the melody the world insists I gobble,
But I refuse to harmonize or chew,
For at this moment all I can think about
As I'm glued to these itchy shoes,
Is how I've aged to double digits.

From across the alley, I see my parents
Raise the last slice of cake.

EZRA SOLWAY writes in Philadelphia where he is currently an MFA candidate at Temple University in fiction. His work has appeared in *Flash Fiction Magazine* and is forthcoming in Jewish Fiction.net. He enjoys playing tennis, cooking, and practicing transcendental meditation.

What Breaks Us Is What Separates Us from the Animals

Hilary Gan

I have just passed Picacho Peak along Interstate 10 on the way home to meet Shane for dinner, Tucson spread out before me in the dusk, when the sun grows so bright that the clouds turn black like an old film negative.

When I come to, I am picking glass out of my neck. My car has stopped halfway into the trunk of another car and all around me I hear the keening of half-naked humans like the screams of snared rabbits, bleeding from their burns, kneeling in the desert, pebbles sticking in their naked knees as black rain falls, hot and steaming onto our ironed bodies. I am keening, too, and I don't even notice until I take a breath that tastes like metal on fire and the sound stops.

I smell my own skin burnt in the pattern of the small white flowers on my button-down shirt, flowers like scarlet tattoos over my breasts and down the line of my torso. I am saved where the shirt was blue, though the shirt itself is falling away in sticky threads like spiderwebs. I prefer the smell of my own charred being to the acknowledgement of the dead and dying spread before me.

This is my city and I know where the center is, where the lance was loosed, but I do not let myself think of it. I walk, for what else is there to do but keep moving forward? I hold the morningstars of my arms away from the forget-me-nots along my sides so that they will not chafe and lose their petals. I climb over the hot metal side of the train and walk, towards the center of the city, towards the

source of the embers and blackness, opposite the way the living travel.

What does that make me?

A mile down the road under the darkened sky I see a woman trying to stuff her own intestines back into the hole in her guts with the hand that isn't holding her shiny, red, dead child. I say, "There are helicopters coming to the city—they will take you to the hospital—you can make it to the helicopters." I do not know if this is true but I think it should be true and so I say it.

She says, "No, I need to reorganize my closet," and as she says it, congealed black blood oozes from her teeth and her body twitches and then she passes out. I leave a mother on the pavement holding her own intestines in with her child's corpse because I cannot lift her without sobbing in agony at the pressure on my skin.

At the edge of the city, I see a man, upright on a bicycle that has fallen against a lamppost in the absence of forward motion, a man blackened except for the eyes, which have melted in their sockets. I steal his crispy shoes to keep my feet from bleeding as they drag along the asphalt and I rather suspect that he won't mind, as he doesn't need them. When I try to take them off his ankles crumble, though his feet are whole and I have to ease them out like the cardboard shapers at shoe stores. But all that happens when I wear them is that the blood from my legs and feet pools and makes it hard to walk and leaves spongy shoe-shaped blood footprints on the cement.

A living man approaches me when I get close enough to downtown to see that it does not exist, see the gradual slope of what was a tree-lined street running a bare trail down into the blast site. I don't scream when he grabs my morningstar arm until I see

his eyes are grey and then I feel the pain and make that keening sound, that same word.

"Lila!" he says like it is 1849 in California and my name is a precious metal.

I stop keening.

"No, I'm Lee," he says.

"Lee," I say, and he twists his hand around my arm and some of my skin sloughs off like she-loves-me-loves-me-not daisies. I don't yell, but he lets go and stares at the piece of my skin in his hand, like a wallpaper sample, and then I know him. We were in love once, until—dear God, the world is ending, and I still run into my ex-boyfriend on the street at exactly the wrong time.

"Lee," I say, and then I see he is covered in glass, shards of it sticking out of his right side. "Lee, I have to go home."

"Lila," he says. "That's on Fourth Street." He looks at me, more concerned than when my skin peeled off like an orange rind.

"Will you walk me home?" I ask.

"Lila, that's on *Fourth Street*." Then the pain of my body slips beneath the surface and I know what he means; he has turned his head to face the empty shells of buildings, towards downtown, hard to see in the ash and the dark. He is looking the way I was going. The wrong way.

"You can't go home."

There is no water in my body but I can feel my throat begin to close. "I know," I say, and sit down, and I feel the skin of my buttocks stretch and tear as I hit the pavement. Truly, we are animals, and we will not know it until our bodies make us remember.

"Lila," Lee says gently, and I hear myself say, "*Shane—*"

And I wrap my morningstar arms around my ruined body, for I hadn't just been keening like a dumb beast: I'd been calling his name.

HILARY GAN lives in St. Louis, MO, with her D&D-playing husband and terrifyingly curious toddler. Her major inspirations include Bob Dylan, Epictetus, Neko Case, trees, Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey, an insistent orange cat named Harry, and an odd-but-loveably-goofy second set of claws named Bruce. Find more of her fiction and essays at www.hilarygan.com.

The Justice of Foxes

Maggie Damken

What he did to her in the meadow, only the foxes know.

All through the rest of the afternoon the foxes wait in the tall grass. The sunlight limns each blade with liquid gold and crimson blush. Purple night mushrooms across the sky, swallowing the coneflower and milkweed. Moonlight makes ghosts of the swaying leaves. With the impenetrable dignity of statues, the foxes wait. The black wind rustles the tufts of fur on the tips of their ears. The call of an owl moves through their bodies like a prayer.

The girl lays in the meadow where he left her.

The police do not find her.

Foxes are patient until they are not.

The foxes are not merely foxes. Yes, they have rustic backs and white bellies, long black legs and white puffs at the end of their tails, and eyes as old as Jurassic amber—but that does not mean they are foxes. They have the shape of foxes and the look of foxes but on their faces they wear masks.

Any creature that wears a mask is not limited to what it is perceived to be.

The first masked fox stands and peers down the meadow where the body of the girl still lay. Sometime later—although time matters little to the foxes until they have decided it has run out—a second fox stands, and the pair go walking through the tall brown grass.

The beetles and the flies wanted her, and so they claimed her. Such is the way of nature: in death all things are equal regardless of whether the death is just. Livid bruises clot her throat in thumb-sized prints. Blood speckles the corners of her mouth. Windblown hair scatters across her face. Her left arm, broken, bends back at the elbow. Her right palm opens toward the sky. The foxes know what happened because they watched it happen, but now they see what it means.

The foxes look at each other. In both of their bellies, the weight of their sacred duty unfurls. In both their eyes the light of primal rage simmers with a cold and unforgiving glare.

Somewhere there is a man who does not know that the foxes are coming for him, but they are coming nonetheless.

The foxes are not gods. They do not require homage. They do not receive prayer. They do not grant miracles. They do not fight amongst themselves or select favored humans or cast curses. They are not cruel or petty or jealous. They do not love or despair. They do not laugh. They do not exist to be believed in.

But they are not dissimilar to gods. They can change their shape. They can interact with humankind when they choose. They cannot create beginnings but they can create endings. They are not all-seeing but what they see is always true. They are not all-powerful but they do have power. They are not benevolent but they are not the opposite: the foxes are beyond debates of good and evil. They concern themselves only with what is fair.

Like all that which is holy, the justice of foxes exceeds mortal understanding. It does not seek mortal approval.

The foxes find him. He lives in a white house at the edge of a wood full of thin birches and sweet maples. Coils of smoke rise from the chimney into a sky as blue as the inside of a flame.

From behind the line of ancient trees, the foxes wait and watch. Inside, two young girls set the table for dinner and a woman opens the oven door. When the foxes make their decision, they remove their masks. Swaths of shadows roil across their faces like black mist on a lake, with rows and rows of tiny teeth that glimmer like stars. They roar back their heads and open the vicious spiral of their true mouths.

And then the foxes do what foxes do.

MAGGIE DAMKEN is a librarian-in-training and an emerging writer whose work has been previously published by *Strange Horizons*, *Cease Cows*, *Breadcrumbs Magazine*, *Kaaterskill Basin Literary Journal*, and others.

Triple Moons

Charlotte Peale

there were triple moons last night and I thought of you
shit-faced by the river we exploded flaming moons
I saw your face in the river, and it tripled in the night
face the way those flames licked at the night, watch me watch you
three times I faced away from fire as you exploded into me
last night you thought of river moons and triples of me
flame-faced by the river we shat triple moons
there were triple you's last night and I thought of moons

CHARLOTTE PEALE is a student at Stanford University studying math and computer science, and considering a minor in creative writing.

Crazy Knights

Ryan Werner

We were between the ages of twenty and thirty, a time in our lives where it seemed logical to accuse other people of being falsely modest, to first resent them for thinking they could be as fucked up as we were and then for thinking we wouldn't notice. We started a KISS tribute band at the end of one of those lost summers we always seemed to have.

At first, it didn't necessarily seem like we had to be KISS. At practice, we played "Shout at the Devil" and "Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap." We played "Rockin' in the Free World" with a few of the right words but mostly just endless, mid-tempo chugging on our thickest strings and the title of the song yelled out over and over. Like the process of moving through our lives, we assumed we had options, that we merely had to let those options simmer for a while, and they would turn into opportunities.

Unlike the process of moving through our lives—our gas station jobs, our drug problems, our lack of profitable skills—we started learning KISS songs and found out rather quickly that not only could we not become anything we wanted, but that, at our best, we are only a part of something bigger than ourselves.

And, also unlike the process of moving through our lives, this was something wonderful.

The city we operated out of is Dubuque, Iowa, population 58,000. It was mostly a manufacturing city until the packing plant—once the third largest beef slaughterhouse in the nation—started to do poorly and was subsequently sold around the time *Lick It Up* by KISS was released. *Lick It Up* was an empty renaissance and The Pack going under was just empty.

After that, unemployment shot up to twenty percent. People made stickers and graffiti that said *Will the Last One Leaving Dubuque Please Turn Out the Light?* It's an idiom that came from the post-apocalyptic Stephen King novel, *The Stand*, an unofficial city-motto akin to naming the state bird after a meal from KFC.

In 1990, the city tried to increase diversity by bringing in a hundred black families from Chicago. The Ku Klux Klan quickly convinced the already-struggling, mostly white inhabitants of Dubuque that this was a problem. Between September and October of that year, five crosses were publically burned.

KISS played the Five Flags center, because location is everything.

Things eventually got better. Dubuque ended up fifteen years later having the 22nd-ranked fastest growing economy nationwide, went from less than one percent African American to four percent, and stopped burning crosses. As for KISS, they put the make-up back on and played the hits.

Luckily for us, KISS songs are easy to play, with plenty of energy left to carry both their history and ours around our necks like almost-tuned guitars.

The named we picked was Crazy Knights, a combination of the late-80's KISS record *Crazy Nights* and the Knights In Satan's Service acronym that pastors and their wives made up to insert the coolness of the devil into what would have otherwise been sloppy musical theater. We practiced in an old warehouse in an industrial district and everything was a hassle, just the noise of life. It had been a schoolhouse years before, but by the time we got to it, it was gutted and used for storage.

The owners half-assed a remodel for three-and-a-half years. Power tools and the people who ran them were always in our way. The plumbing didn't work except an intermittently functional toilet that, in the lengthier periods of downtime, would grow a thick film atop the water that we'd encourage one another not to puncture.

It was like practicing in a thermos or the trunk of a Buick. In the summer, we had fans that did nothing except blow the hot air all over us. We'd finish looking like we left the pool. In the winter, we'd move everything out of the open area on the main level into an eight-by-twelve room and plug in several space heaters. One was a propane flame blower that almost claimed every cable and pant leg we had until it was eventually stolen by one of the construction workers.

The owner's kids would show up and want to use the space to practice Red Hot Chili Peppers songs. The roof leaked in a different spot every month. Most of the floor tiles were loose, damaged, or missing. The front door didn't have a handle.

That all sounds kind of terrible, but listen: I had a Peavey Butcher from the 80s, which is the kind of amp people buy when they want to be louder than the people who buy nice things, and I

turned it up so goddamn loud that it wasn't even notes that came out of the speakers.

It too was the noise of life, but the right kind.

Some of the problems we had were regular band problems: when to practice and what songs to play and endless fucking up. Some of them were a subset of that, the kind really only found in tribute bands based on a financially successful and overly-branded juggernaut. This meant discussions about whether or not to have promo pictures taken, about whether or not to do stage banter in character, about which period of costumes to emulate, and if it's crucial to coordinate, to spare the world from having to tolerate, on the same stage, a *Love Gun* Peter Criss with a *Hotter than Hell* Gene Simmons.

We'd rectify some of these, but were still a KISS tribute band—our biggest problem, the one that couldn't be broken down or built up by reason.

We reduced the scale of KISS and localized it, plotted out our entire career arc in a documentary that never got made. The harmless idiocies of KISS left us plenty to pull from. Ace Frehley claiming to be an inventor. Peter Criss being the overwhelming shame of Gene Krupa's drum tutelage. Gene Simmons buying an arena football team. Paul Stanley keeping an acoustic guitar handy whenever he has guests over, just so he can randomly serenade them with the terrible ballad, "Every Time I Look at You."

We were obsessed with KISS: with the disease Mark St. John, guitarist on *Animalize*, had that caused him to quit, with what kind of heart cancer Eric Carr had, with Alice Cooper's guitarist playing all the leads on side four of *Alive II*. Being in a KISS tribute band wasn't the biggest or hardest or most important thing in our lives, but it was the most of all of those at once, the rare occasion where three essential qualities were presented and we didn't get to pick only two.

Our buddy Harpo has the world's largest florescent light bulb collection and a goiter the size of a water balloon. He got into heavy metal in the first go-round of it back in the 60s and 70s, saw Black Sabbath play one of the local high schools. All that stuff. If anyone we knew would be an expert, would be able to share in a life with us that we'd previously thought was impossible, it'd be him. After our first show, he was pretty much the only person who said anything to us: *You should've been an Ozzy cover band, bud.*

All said, we only played three shows. Did you think it was more? Did you think that rock and roll would make itself out to be something larger than it was?

The makeup we bought never set right. Ten songs in and we'd look more like The Cure than KISS.

Our Paul Stanley was too short. Our Peter Criss was too tall. Our Gene Simmons, for the first two shows, wore denim cut-offs that he had—for some reason never fully explained—spray-painted gold.

Me as Ace Frehley left a lot to be desired, too. My first costume was cheap black spandex with strips of white, curved foam—from

ice cream cone boxes at my gas station job—poorly superglued around my wrists and chest. My next costume was a silver windshield reflector that looked much better but also—in addition to reflecting the heat from the stage lights off me—retained the majority of my body heat.

My third costume was similar, but we had pretty much fallen apart by then. It was on Christmas Day—Merry KISSmas!—and I was Ice Frehley. I didn't even bother to shave, just put makeup around my eyes and used a can of fake frost to spray my eight-month beard white.

The actual three performances themselves I don't remember much of. I know that I couldn't read the setlist without my glasses and nobody seemed to care about the deep cuts we were so excited to play.

But I remember the warehouse, the practices spent playing the first twenty seconds of "Twist of Cain" by Danzig and "Reign in Blood" by Slayer, before chuffing our collective way through the twin lead part in "Detroit Rock City" for just ourselves. It didn't matter if Ace Frehley played Marshalls and I could only afford a Peavey, if our Paul Stanley didn't know how to tune his guitar, if our Gene Simmons and I were hardly talking to each other by the end of it, if our Peter Criss wished we were playing Motley Crüe songs instead. We all loved rock and roll and our version of it, our part of a lineage of pure, earthbound joy, and when it was loud and we were alone, we made the best sound that nobody else ever needed to hear.

“Crazy Knights” originally appeared in print in the chapbook, *Maybe Don’t Drown Everything You Ever Wanted in a Mop Bucket That Isn’t Yours*, from Passenger Side Books. You can buy a copy here: <http://passengersidebooks.blogspot.com>.

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