JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

Issue 107 January 2020

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS
January 2020, Issue 107

ISSN 2152-2162

www.jerseydevilpress.com

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Editor's Note

Here is Issue 107, complete with unusual house paint, corpses in space, moths, an airport diner, a very old woman, and a spiritual journey.

Because dark times call for good art.

– Laura Garrison

People Who Live in Invisible Houses

Robert P. Kaye

Unable to impel herself out the front door, Stevie climbed the spiral staircase to the widow's walk. The InvisiCoat on the roof deck reflected cumulonimbus and flaming sunset such that exiting the stairwell looked equivalent to plunging into a volcano. A blotch of berry-colored bird poop gave shape to the far rail. She launched before she could talk herself into retreat, staggering across the void, which proved solid underfoot after all. Her heart banged death metal double bass against ribs as fingers grasped the top rail. She took a deep breath and glanced down.

The tacky purple splotch beside her hand wasn't bird crap after all. It was paint, and not the invisible kind. Still tacky. More purple adhered to the side of the house below her toes, refracted in the dissimulated surfaces of surrounding houses also clad in InvisiCoat. A view that left her nauseated.

Fighting vertigo, she looked over the side of the house to where a two-dimensional face the size of a billboard levitated beneath her toes. The squashed ellipse of a mouth howled in existential agony. The horrified eyes rolled upward. Hands covered ears to block out the infinite scream passing through all nature. A purple watch cap the same shade as the paint on the rail crowned Bruce's self-portrait homage to Munch's *The Scream*.

The implications were clear. Bruce would be headed to jail for violating his parole, earned for similar crimes. As the only normal one in the family, she had an obligation to save him, but she had failed.

Confronted with yet another twist in the downward spiral of her life, Stevie laughed. The echo bounced back from the coruscated buildings of the Starlite Gated Community.

Hinges creaked across the void. A rectangle of light opened and someone stepped onto a balcony suspended in midair. A camera clicked. A glass circle inside a black rectangle lowered to reveal a familiar face.

Arcadia. They'd lived next door to each other most of their lives and gone to school together, but were never friends.

Stevie forced a smile. "Looks like we got graffiti bombed," she said, sweeping a hand toward her feet.

"We assume this won't be a problem?" Arcadia said.

'We' had to mean the Starlite Gated Community, which mandated cladding all structures in InvisiCoat, the visual judo of refractive metamaterials that warped ambient light, offending the visual cortex into a state of denial. A world of spray-on funhouse mirrors, as Uncle Mel, inventor of InvisiCoat, used to say.

"Guess we're overdue for a paint job anyway," Stevie said. They'd been getting letters from the Neighborhood Council for years, but a new application of InvisiCoat was something Dad apparently could not afford. He had not practiced law since before Uncle Mel died.

"Great," Arcadia said. "Because invisible paint only works if everybody maintains their investment." She pivoted and the pane of light from the door vanished into refracted blood red sunset.

Stevie rapped yet again on the Fortress door. "Dad, you in there?" she called. He hadn't emerged from his basement cave in over a year. "It's about paint."

She had agreed to not disturb him except for emergencies and a narrow list of subjects, which included paint.

The door sucked open and a great bear of a man filled the space, beard halfway down his chest, ropes of greying hair to his shoulders. The ghost of Uncle Mel. He wore a headset mic, like a ground control flight director. "Make it fast. I'm busy," he said.

Busy? She had lost hope that the door would open. The speech she'd intended to shout through the barrier was replaced by the memory of the call from Martha, Wife III, saying she was going on a little vacation and could Stevie come stay with her father and cousin Bruce? Discovering on arrival that Dad had holed up in his Fortress, Bruce had been arrested and Martha wasn't coming back. Stevie needed a place to hide, but this was more than she expected.

"Boss?" echoed a voice from inside. "The guide says we're going to have to double the bribes."

"Just a sec," he said into the mic, swinging it away from his mouth. "What's the problem?" He dangled a game controller by the miniature steering wheel.

This online multiplayer game, or whatever, seemed to have consumed him. At least it involved other people. An overpowering miasma migrated from room to corridor.

"Bruce painted a huge self portrait on the side of the house," she said, striving to project enough calm to prop the door open.

"Okay. And?"

"He's on probation. We can't let him go to jail. Not after what he's been through."

"Boss?" somebody said.

Dad turned back to the flat screen on the far wall. Two men wearing baseball caps and ear pieces stared up the hood of a jeep-like vehicle. The landscape behind could have been Mars. It looked so real.

Dad swiveled the mic back into place. “Just get us to Lake Baikal,” he said. The room was a mess of couch/bed and takeout containers evolving into terrariums. He turned back to Stevie. “We’re at the Mongolian-Siberian border. Are we done here?”

“No.” Stevie glanced at the hood of the vehicle approaching low buildings, a striped barrier and a soldier with an automatic weapon. She wondered why the shooting hadn’t started. “What are we going to tell the police? And the Neighborhood Association?”

“Tell them to piss up a rope. That’s my legal opinion. Are we done here?”

The vein in his temple throbbed. If she pushed too hard he wouldn’t answer the door next time. “I’ll let you think it over,” she said. “Just don’t leave town.”

“Very funny,” he said.

The door shut. She charged upstairs to Bruce’s room and pounded on the door. No answer, but it was unlocked. The room looked spartan as ever, redolent of teenage boy. A computer screen cycled through early twentieth century masterpieces. Crumpled sketches littered the floor. No Bruce.

Ten thirty-seven pm and the Waffle Shack remained frozen in time. Same pitted linoleum tables, deformed counter stools, depopulated pie case. Same ageless waitress behind the counter chatting with a couple of uniforms. Stevie glanced into the corner that used to serve as the stage for the open mic, echoes of panic making her fingers itch.

Bruce sat in a booth next to the windows with a cup of coffee and a plate of naked chicken bones, the cartilage gnawed off the ends. His face doppelganged the mural except for the lopsided grin and big ears concealed under the purple watch cap, which she'd spotted through the Waffle Shack's fishbowl windows. Edward Hopper meets Looney Tunes.

"Hey," he said as she slid into the booth.

"At least take off the stupid cap so the cops don't spot you the same way I did," she said.

She'd forced herself behind the wheel of the car, triggering a flashback of Dave slamming on the tour van brakes, her slumped with cheek against the cold window trying to sleep. The whoosh of the loose cymbal hurtling over the bench seat where her neck rested a minute before, the bite of the brass edge embedded in the windshield. Van totaled, tour cancelled, comeback dissolved. Technically not a comeback if you'd never arrived in the first place. She'd cruised the alleys looking for Bruce, hand checking the position of the headrest.

Bruce nodded to the counter where two patrol officers sat with their backs turned. "I could tag their squad car and they wouldn't notice as long as my jewelry doesn't ping." He plucked up a pant leg to show the ankle bracelet.

"So why doesn't it?" She knew he'd been going out at night, but figured he was too smart to do anything that would further circumscribe his freedom. Another bad guess on her part.

"Works on GPS." Bruce took a small black box from his pocket. "Never leave home without home."

The kid was a tech wizard, but what thrilled him were Impressionism, Expressionism and Fauvism. He absorbed all the art history she'd learned in college inside a month, inspired to hack the creative side himself. They negotiated a laissez-faire approach to education that bordered on neglect.

"You've got to cover that thing before they haul your ass off to jail," she said.

"No way am I buffing out my burner. Besides, InvisiCorp applies every ounce of InvisiCoat. It's not like you can get it at Home Depot. Jail is a small price to pay. You have to suffer for your art."

"Don't you think you've suffered enough?" she said.

After the brothers fell out over licensing InvisiCoat to InvisiCorp, Uncle Mel found Emily on the internet. They had Bruce, a late-in-life surprise. There were happy for years out at Mel's desert compound before glioblastoma killed Emily in a matter of months. Uncle Mel died a couple years later from exposure to all those chemicals, or an aneurysm or heartbreak, or all of the above. They found Bruce out there alone, eating the survival rations and living through a computer screen. He'd buried his father next to his mother. He was twelve.

"What suffering?" Bruce said.

Time to change the subject. "What's in the backpack?' She tapped the lumpy bag with her foot, generating the singular hollow chime of spray cans.

The young guy cop at the counter barely turned around, but the older female officer gave them a hard scan. The waitress placed a couple of to-go cups on the counter with the check and said something to the cops and they laughed, then settled up. They headed out the door without looking back.

"That was close," Stevie said.

A whistle came from outside. Bruce peered through the dark window. Stevie saw nothing beyond the reflection of her own face, stressed and old. When had she given up wearing makeup?

"Gotta go," Bruce said. "Crew's here."

"You've got a crew?" She'd assumed he was like Mel. Like Dad. Like her.

"Hell yeah," Bruce said. "It sucks to be alone." He scooped up his backpack and slipped out the door, fast as a lizard.

The little shit.

The waitress sauntered over with the coffee pot to make sure the check got covered, a maneuver Stevie had employed many times when waiting tables. Carol, the name tag said.

"You want anything?" Carol said.

"No," Stevie said. "I used to play here at the open mic. Like ten years ago?"

"There was an open mic?" Carol lay the check on the table and walked away.

"Good morning." Arcadia said. She wore a skirt and matching jacket. Business casual to walk next door. The tight ponytail made her look like a movie velociraptor, upthrust chin indicating she expected an invitation to enter.

No police, no warrant. "It's under control," Stevie said, operating on too little sleep and too much coffee. "We're handling it." No way was she coming inside. The place was a mess. At least Stevie wasn't in gym shorts and a t-shirt.

Arcadia tilted her head. "Didn't you used to do music or something? You won the talent contest."

"Second place," Stevie said. First went to the captain of the football team for his crappy juggling act, because he was popular. That still stung, but then Arcadia probably knew that. "Weren't you into all that CSI stuff? You were going to be a crime scene investigator or something?"

"An overcrowded field thanks to TV," Arcadia said. "I worked for Child Protective Services for a while. My parents have health issues, so I moved back to help them out. You know how it is."

Stevie saw the parents riding bikes and loading golf clubs into their car, tanned and healthy. The opposite of shut-ins. She recognized the smell of burnt dreams. "Sure," she said.

"I'm working with the Neighborhood Association while applying to law school," Arcadia said. "As I'm sure you know, the CCRs mandate a consistent appearance of invisibility. Invisible paint only works if—"

"Everybody does it," Stevie said. "CCRs?"

"Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions. I sent pictures of the vandalism to my contacts at the police department. Is the kid with the rap sheet still living here, by the way? Bruce?"

"We'll handle it," Stevie said. Bruce did his early work down in the flats where nobody much cared if graffiti paid homage to Cézanne or Kandinsky. He'd been busted as soon as he did something in the Starlite Gated Community where they took such things seriously because InvisiCoat cost a small fortune.

"Maybe this is best for all concerned," Arcadia said. "You're way overdue on repainting and Bruce could benefit from professional help in the appropriate institution. His crimes are an obvious cry for help. Maybe you need to think about yourself."

Arcadia reached out and touched Stevie's elbow.

Stevie had a compulsion to shove her down the stairs, but wasn't convinced it would kill her before she cried out for help. "Thanks so much," Stevie said. "You've been unbelievably helpful. We'll take care of the problem."

"It's already solved," Arcadia said. "Under the terms of the CCRs we've arranged for InvisiCorp to send a crew out tomorrow."

She executed an upthrust chin smile and pivoted down the steps before Stevie could reconsider the shove.

Dad flung the Fortress door open, a grizzly with a buzz cut, stubble a uniform length except for the bald spot and wispy locks behind the ears missed by the clippers. Shorn, he looked thinner, and older. The food containers were cleared away, a small mountain of black trash bags tucked into one corner. He smelled better. He still wore the headset. "What is it?" he said. "Were almost at Lake Baikal. It contains a fifth of all the freshwater in the world."

"Cool," Stevie said. She recapped the conversation with Arcadia, wondering if she could block the door with her body if he tried to shut it. Whether she would someday have to bury him in the weed jungle of the backyard.

"You've got makeup on," he said.

"You cut your hair," Stevie said. "Badly."

"Really?" He looked crushed. "There's a delegation coming to welcome us. I wanted to look good."

"You don't have to look good to play a fantasy game," she said.

"What game?" he said. "This is virtual tourism. I'm doing pioneering work here. A remote expedition around Lake Baikal. It's the deepest rift lake in the world, with more than thirty unique species. Don't you read my blog?"

The flat screen contained men in baseball caps, others with fur hats. A church with a gold onion dome. It looked very real. "Are you driving from here?" she said.

"Don't be absurd." He held up the game controller. "This aims the cameras. It's the culmination of years of planning."

"Boss?" said a voice.

Half a head filled the screen. Dad turned the wheel. After a short lag, the picture centered on a man in a baseball cap. "The Mayor's expecting you. There will be vodka."

"I have an appointment," Dad said. "Just so you know, after this we're going to New York to give a talk on Lake Baikal and how internet tourism can help people like us."

"People like us?"

"A predisposition to panic disorders like agoraphobia can be triggered by a traumatic event," he said. "Getting out more might help you."

"Help *me*?" She didn't fear open spaces. Not as much as walking out on stage. Or driving. Or leaving the house. "New York?"

"Yeah." He inhaled sharply. "After Lake Baikal. It's thirty million years old, the oldest lake in the world. An inland sea. Read the blog."

"Maybe later," she said. "Bruce is going to jail if we don't do something."

"Not while I'm still a lawyer."

"Are you still a lawyer?" Stevie said.

"I think so."

"Then you'd better read the CCRs," Stevie said.

"I wrote the CCRs." He looked back into the room like a wild animal about bolt, but he did not shut the door.

His enormous body draped over the rail of the widow's walk like some inland Siberian sea lion suspended in midair. Stevie fought off vertigo and tried not to think about falling through the mostly invisible deck flecked with droplets of aquamarine. "Dad, these people want to talk about paint," she said.

When she'd answered the door, Arcadia stood on the top step, the cop from the Waffle Shack on the walkway, thumbs in her utility belt. A truck with an InvisiCorp logo and ladders idled at the curb. Stevie had spent hours cleaning the house, pointless since they had all trudged straight up the spiral staircase to the roof.

"You need to cease and desist," Arcadia said, breathless and shriller for the climb.

Dad undraped from the rail, caterpillar fur on face and head studded with diamonds of sweat. Blue-green paint streaked overstuffed coveralls. Ropes and pieces of equipment festooned the railing, all spattered in ellipses of sea and sky. "I don't think so," he said, drawing himself up to grizzly height.

"What's going on?" the cop said, hand on her Taser.

"I'm painting my property," Dad said.

"More paint," came Bruce's voice from over the side of the house.

Dad hauled up a bucket, empty except for a roller and a paint screen of blue diamonds.

"It's great you're covering that eyesore," Arcadia said. "But the CCRs stipulate the use of InvisiCoat to maintain consistent privacy."

"Yeah, but it's not really invisible, is it?" Dad said. "More like car sick camouflage. You might not know this, but I drew up the CRRs and the Starlite Gated Community articles of incorporation, which is the relevant authority here."

"I didn't know that," Arcadia said.

"We're not covering the face," Bruce said, his purple watch cap gophering above the mostly invisible plane of the deck edge as he ratcheted himself up with mountaineering ascenders. "We're using a background to create an outline effect. Like Manet and Velázquez."

"Really makes it pop," called another voice below the edge. One of Bruce's crew.

"The Homeowner's Association kept sending those letters saying I had to paint," Dad said. "So I told my nephew to go for it."

"You have to use InvisiCoat," Arcadia said. "Or incur substantial penalties."

The vein in Dad's temple throbbed. It looked like he might charge, or try to escape off the edge of the building. Or make a break for the Fortress. The cop flicked off the strap holstering her pistol and drew her Taser.

"What about the legal description of the property?" Stevie said. They'd had a chat while she tidied up his haircut.

"Right," Dad said. "Basically, the Starlite Gated Community is over there." He described an invisible boundary with a flat hand. "And we're over here. So I can do whatever the hell I want. Feel free to look it up."

"I will," Arcadia said. "In the meantime, that kid is going to jail."

"He's supposed to be wearing an ankle monitor," the cop said.

Laying back in his harness, Bruce hiked his leg onto the edge of the deck and peeled back skinny jeans to display the bracelet.

"He hasn't left the premises," Stevie said. "He's just dangling from them."

The cop's twisted grin suggested she remembered the Waffle Shack but considered the point not worth making, perhaps because cops couldn't afford to live in the Starlite Gated Community. She holstered the Taser and re-snapped the pistol strap.

"You can't paint the whole house blue," Arcadia said.

"Aquamarine. But, you're right," Dad said. "It won't go with the winter part of the Lake Baikal mural."

Stevie smiled. Arcadia didn't know she was getting off easy. Bruce and his crew were currently into Hieronymus Bosch.

* * *

After returning from New York, Arcadia took to going up on the azure widow's walk with the crappy pawn shop guitar she'd had as a girl, thrashing out chords against lines transcribed from napkins and PostIt notes stuffed into purses and backpacks over the years. One evening she received a text message from Arcadia. "Drinks?" it said.

They took an Uber to a dive bar down in the flats. Arcadia wore jeans and a t-shirt. She drank beer, then switched to rye.

"The weird thing is," she said. "My parents like the murals. They say it's a break from all that isolation, even if the fish do look like goblins."

"Weird," Stevie said.

Arcadia unburdened about the cost of working at Child Protective Services and bombing the LSATs, terrified she'd never get married and have kids the way she'd expected. Also terrified she would, because she'd seen how horribly it could turn out. Afraid she might never have the courage to move out of her parents' house.

Stevie told Arcadia about Dad at the presentation in the hotel ballroom, film of the expedition projected onto the screen as he explained assistive internet tourism and Lake Baikal, which really is an inland sea. He seemed to forget the audience, but then he had a fear of open spaces, not public speaking. How Bruce had roamed NYC until three in the morning while Stevie got sick smoking half a pack of cigarettes, unable to go beyond the hotel taxi stand to see the band she loved perform in Brooklyn.

They drank far too much. They pledged to sign up for a spin class together and support each other.

Stevie awoke the next morning with a crushing headache in an empty house. After returning from New York, Dad announced that he was going

on a trip in actual meatspace to pursue a theory about the Nazca Lines, something about land use agreements writ large. He took off in the care of the guys in baseball caps. Bruce's confinement had expired and he'd begun attending public high school down in the flats. His drawing skills improved with the great art teacher who demanded original work derived from life experience. Bruce rarely came home.

Nursing the hangover, Stevie skimmed the labyrinthine archeology of Dad's blog, peering at pictures of the dark compartment of the Land Rover for a glimpse of Dracula prowling the high desert. She searched for clues he might be coming home.

Money wasn't an issue. Apparently the licensing deal with InvisiCorp had been very lucrative. Dad had suggested she buy a better guitar. Or a music studio. She still had trouble leaving the house.

That evening, she managed to drive to the Waffle Shack, hoping to run into Bruce and his crew. She was that desperate. No Bruce. Just Carol, the waitress.

"Hey," Carol said. "What would you like?"

"Coffee and wings," she said. "And a job." She didn't know why she said it. It seemed like rock bottom.

Carol pointed to a sign on the door. Help wanted. "You got experience?"

She could already see it. Starting up the old open mic. Trading shifts to accommodate band practice. Heartbreak and disappointment and suffering. Paralyzing fear until the instant she started to play.

It made her fingers itch. The trick not looking down.

"Yeah. I got experience," she said.

ROBERT P. KAYE's stories have appeared in *Penn Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Hobart, Juked, Fiction Southeast, The Los Angeles Review* and elsewhere, with details available at www.RobertPKaye.com. He facilitates the Works in Progress open mic at Hugo House and is a fiction editor at *Pacifica Literary Review*.

Ferryman

Laura Parker

Our second moon, Acheron, is not made of cheese like the first moon. Quite the opposite, in fact—it's made of dead bodies.

I wonder how I'll explain this to my future daughter as the space shuttle departs. I take Dramamine—takeoff makes me queasy, and I can't afford to throw up on the job again. I put my headphones in to drown out the sound of frozen corpses shifting in the back, and shut my eyes to the shrinking of the Earth.

Overcrowding is a bitch. We barely have enough room to breathe, but they still let people choose not to be cremated because of religious rights. Then when the government finally let the Deceased Management Organization start sending new corpses to Acheron, the "Dead Rights Activists" picketed until the DMO agreed to have someone stay with them at all times. Something about their souls, I guess.

The shuttle lands.

"Back for more?" Jones is waiting for me on the base. He's a sitter—he stays on Acheron with the bodies for a month at a time, sends the money home to his wife and kids. It's not a bad gig if you don't mind the solitude.

"You know I can't stay away."

We met at training camp when he caught me throwing up and I made him promise not to tell management that I'm pregnant. It's a competitive market, so they can afford to not hire someone just to get out of paying maternity leave. By the time they found out, they'd already signed my contract. I'll have to take some time off

once this pregnancy thing gets further along, but for now, my bills are paid.

As a runner, I do the transport. In this economy, it's a good job—$450 a run, no health insurance benefits but I get to control my schedule, and each run only takes two days so I can still make my prenatal visits. I can usually fit in about two runs a week, which leaves me three days off to work on painting the spare room in my apartment and baby-proofing the place.

Jones and I spend a few hours unloading the bodies onto the platform. This is my least favorite part of the job. The stench of slightly defrosted meat fills my nose, and I'm reminded of anatomy lab in high school when the girl next to me cried because she didn't want to dissect a cat.

We chat for a bit afterwards, then Jones gives me a gift wrapped in newspaper.

It's a onesie. A cartoon spaceship, aimed at the moon:

Future astronaut!

LAURA PARKER is a fourth-year nursing student from South Jersey, with a minor in writing and a concentration in sitting in on as many classes as possible before graduation hits and the free ride ends. She has been published in *Glass Mountain Magazine's Shards 2.5*, and *Prairie Margins Magazine*. She also won second place in the Mimi Schwartz Creative Nonfiction Contest and recently had a piece nominated for the Kennedy-Gregg Writing Award. She enjoys DIY projects, buying and then ignoring plants, and (sometimes) writing.

Recalling the Creation Account

L.R. Harvey

‘And let them all be lovers of the light,
and throw themselves against all sources of

it, searching for a fix—and when they hit
the chilly concrete stoop, all jumbled up

in disarray, let them forget their past
mistakes and try again, again, till they lay

in little furry lumps, their little arms crossed,
scattered around the faded Welcome mat.’

It’s something like this—I just can’t remember if
this was the day when God created men or moths—

or maybe it was possums, like the one
my front-left tire just kissed goodnight, tucked in

to sleep between
the curving yellow lines.

L.R. HARVEY lives in Chattanooga, TN., where teaches English and writes poetry. He has been widely published, and his most recent work appears in *The Write Launch*, *The Tennessee Magazine*, and *After the Pause*.

Heliophobes at Night

Christopher X. Ryan

Midnight. I'm hungry. Flipjacks at the North Gaslin Airport is open until two in the morning. Even though their pancakes taste like silicone and the maple syrup is fake, I like the atmosphere. I like watching the little planes bouncing on the tarmac in the dark. The bent old men hauling crates from one end of the terminal to the other. Occasionally a bunch of people connecting with a flight to a place that doesn't smell like bacon dipped in paint.

I get on my jacket and lock up my house and climb into my truck. The tires up front slip and skip as I get up to speed. They're baby spares. I put them on months ago when I got one flat and then another and just left them there. I feather the pedals, let the engine belch a few times. The gas was stolen off the back of a landscaping truck, might be dirty. Then I switch on the radio. Immediately I land on a song by Knock Knock and The Funny Bones called "Basketball Helmet." It's fun, happy.

At the first stoplight I count the dimes and nickels in the console. Four bucks and seventy-five cents. Enough for the short stack with coffee.

Driving, driving. Then the airport rises up. A plane crash would be terrible. But a spectacle I find myself pining for.

I park. The lot is nearly empty. So is the airport itself. The gift shop recently went out of business. They used to sell little toys that look like oil-digging machines and also fuzzy mascots called Gassy Gary. My dream as a kid was to work in the tower here. I'd tell the captains where to drop their planes and where to park them and

which chute to take back to the sky. Maybe it's not much of a dream but sometimes dreams are normal, like you're walking down a blue sidewalk or washing pennies in the sink. And now there is talk of knocking down the airport and putting in a cardboard box factory. No one dreams of making boxes all day. Cardboard planes maybe. Real planes for sure. But not squares made from tree powder.

My feetslaps echo across the empty linoleum floor and carry to the far end of the airport. Flipjacks is across the way. It's lit up with pink and blue neon lights on the outside. The insides are plain though. Brown tables. Beige chairs. Yellow placemats. Only one other customer is there, a goofy baldy who keeps calling the waitress Mrs. Love.

"Mm?" she says when it's my turn to order.

I point to the menu: Short stack. Coffee.

"Coupla minutes."

Across the airport a door opens and a golf cart zips past, then disappears behind another door.

The radio is belting out some scratchy country music by John Boy and the Truck Robbers. *You polished my saddle and then you said skedaddle. Baby, love don't have to be such a battle.* The server walks past, dropping off my coffee along the way. Her butt is shaped like a lemon that's been stepped on but her legs make sense.

I sip, trying not to slurp.

One time two floor polishers got into a fistfight. No one saw it but me. They were evenly matched but at the end one lay slumped on the floor and the other guy went on polishing.

Mrs. Love arrives with the short stack. Turns out her name really is Mrs. Love. Says *K. Love* on a pin near her boob. I leave the pile of coins for her, apologize in my head.

I'm happy at Flipjacks. No one can find me. And I'm halfway toward being somewhere else. I also like to draw on the napkins. I have ideas for things. Creatures, fighters, worlds. I dig into the short stack, try not to moan with joy as syrup dribbles down my chin. This goes on for a while until a phlegmy shadow says, "Ahem" as it overtakes my table.

I look up to see the baldy who was sitting at the counter. He's got his own plateful of pancakes and a cup of generic Coke with flaky ice floating around in it. "Didn't mean to scare you, buddy," he says, rocking on his heels. His camouflage belt is at my eye height, holding up saggy jeans. His belly is pushing out a flannel shirt. The feet down low are inside chunky white sneakers. "Mind if I join?" he barks.

I have a decision to make. Awkward chatter or awkward distance. I shrug. As he sits down the sharp stink of his minty skin overtakes the pleasantry of my woodsy maple syrup. In the background Mrs. Love leans against the counter doing those games where you circle real words in a jumble of fake words. *ILLICIT. BOOTY. DIGEST*.

"The name's Carl Jake," baldy says.

I look at him, unsure what I'm being told. He detects the question mark on my face.

"Carl Jake Dunham," he says. "Pleased to greet you." He offers a hand.

I nod, ignore the sticky digits.

"And you?"

I present to him another question mark.

"Got a name?"

I nod and continue my work but very slowly. I like it when the pancakes reach the edge of staleness but don't fully commit.

"I see. The quiet type. A lone wolf, like me." He laughs long and hard. I look around and study the cafe. The faded old airline posters. Mrs. Love's scrunched up face as she erases a circle. *PROBOSCIS*. *WARPER.* The cook drinking a beer in the dark hallway. I know I'll never come back here. It's ruined for me now. I'll find someplace else. A bowling alley maybe. A train station perhaps. Or an arcade that still has Qua-Babliconicus or Devil Donkey. A place where people arrive and do something and then leave.

"I get it, believe me," the guy Carl Jake continues. "You can't find places like this anymore, where some blathering idiot doesn't corner you and ask what you do for a living. So, what do you do for a living, Mr. Silent?"

His face is serious. He expects me to talk. I set down my fork. It's not a rude enough sound though. Just sounds like I'm finished with the pancakes. Which I'm not. A yellow quarter moon remains to be consumed. I run a napkin around my mouth, take a sip of coffee, and loosen my tongue. "*Fuh fuh* fuck *aw aw* off."

This guy Carl Jake stares at me like I just shit in my hand and showed it to him, then pitches forward and lets out a hiccuppy laugh that goes on forever. Mrs. Love and the cook look over. I start sweating and use my right foot to push down the Velcro straps on my left shoe, then the other side.

"Is that Chinese?" Carl Jake says, slapping the table. "Fukoo. Hello, I Fukoo. Who you? I Fukoo." His is face is so red it might explode and tomato the whole place.

I get back to work on the sliver. Carl Jake eventually comes back to Earth and sucks on some flat soda, saying, "Good stuff, good stuff." Doesn't get it. Just sits there like we were in the War together. Soon he's vacuuming the bottom of his cup dry and Mrs. Love swings by to replenish it.

He goes on.

"I like to sit here and think, you know? You ever do that? It's like, imagine something, anything. A cow. A refrigerator. Or better yet, a Swiss Army knife. Who was the guy who decided to cram all those gadgets and junk in there? So now every time you need the stab someone, first you have to uncork a champagne bottle or pick your teeth or saw off some poor schmuck's limb, right?" He laughs, then starts draining his new soda, but the fizziness gets to him and he coughs up another thought. "Or think about language, you know? Our stupid words. You can relate to this. I'm sure of it. Me, I'm Polish, dumb as a rock, so I'm a Pole. Why aren't people from Holland called Holes? Ha ha. What crock. Language. *Thppt. Thppt*. Hello, I Fukoo." He snorts. "Man, I wish they had something stronger to drink here. It'd make this dreck go down easier. That reminds me, why do my feet smell and my nose runs?"

He sets off another epic giggle jag. I scratch at some dried syrup on the table. I'm done but not full. I think about heading back to the truck to dig around in the seats for some more change, then coming back for a Onesie, a pancake roughly the size of a planet but cheaper than a short stack for some reason. But I know I won't. Not with this invader breathing onto my plate.

"So, who died?" Carl Jake says. "Or is this your standard state of mind?"

I shrug.

"Look, if it's about the *spee—spee—speeth impediment*, don't worry about it. I've got a son whose face looks like a pizza that got thrown into a volcano. Every time I hand over his lunch money I want to fold him up and stuff him into the toaster. We've all got issues, you know?"

I nod, though I don't know.

"I'm all ears if you want to lay it on me. I mean, I'm a blubberbutt with a healthy smile, but to you I'm just one big wax-filled ear. Tell me what's up. Give me the rundown. Tell me your life story. Tell me your dreams. What do you love?"

I ponder his inquiry. The answers would be my beagle Bugle. Comic books. Drawing. And a girl named Elinor who had a locker three doors down from mine in high school and once let me borrow a pen with tassels. She said I could keep it. Probably because I'd chewed on it.

"*Puh puh* pancakes," I say instead.

He smiles so wide I can see his gums. "Keep going. Now what do you hate?"

I think about that while studying his expectant face. Like he's Jesus and I'm a fish. "*Yuh yuh* you."

His mug is as blank as a movie screen when you show up too early. His shoulders rise like he's going to sneeze or hurl, but then the guffawing erupts again. He goes on for so long that his face puffs like a medicine ball.

Mrs. Love turns up the music. Now we're listening to Gangrene Lunchmeat, which is just guys on surfboards playing guitar noise over and over. *Bwooonnngg, bwoooong.*

"That's a good one, friendo." His throat makes a dry sucking sound and he wipes away tears. Then he leans in. He's sober now, his bubble of a face haunting me like a math teacher. "Look, I see you here late at night and I assume you're just like me. Round. Pale. Soft. Disturbed from crown to your big toes. What you're feeling is sunlight sucking life out of your body and skin. You feel destroyed by that thing in the sky. The sun. The giver of life. But also the thing that will end us. When it dies we die. Not today. Not tomorrow. But eventually. *Whoosh*. Or *bzzzt.* Who can say what sound it will make. I see the sun-repellent goop on your nose. I see your big old floppy hat on the seat. And look at your jacket. How long does it go? Past the knee? I assume you've got some alpine goggles at home or the kind old folks use, with the little windows on the side."

I shrug. He laughs but it's not unkind. He's also not wrong.

"You're a heliophobe, just like me. Just like my friends."

I look at him. Through him. Like it's a superpower. He relaxes, sitting back and sucking at his genericoke. "It's a hell of a disease, this heliophobia. We are less than human because of this fear. That's why I go to Heli-Non. And you should too."

"*Hee—hee*—Heli-Non?"

"For folks like us to discuss our fear and help each other out. You'll never meet a more authentic group of people."

I don't like groups. Or people. They always expect something. Like money.

"I—"

"Don't make a decision now. Just come to a meeting. We meet at the old schoolhouse on Winton Ave. every Wednesday evening at six. Go around back, up the ramp. And take this." From a magic place he produces a wine-red book with gold lettering on the cover. Like a bible but less weird. *Rays of Hope – Living With Heliophobia.* "Read it. Take it in one lesson at a time."

I look at it. I touch the gold letters. Then I flip open the cover and see all the words squiggling on the pages like bacteria. It sells lessons. Information. People telling me how to think, be, act. I close the cover. Slide it back.

"*Nuh* no *th—th*—thanks." I dab my chin. Take my last sip. Put on my floppy hat. Get ready to stand up.

"Woah, woah, woah," Carl Jake says, his hands buffeting the air between us. This time his eyes turn into little bloody moons. There's no guffawing. The smile drops. "Just like that? You reject this wisdom in this book?" He taps on the cover.

I shrug. Time to go. "*Sss—sss*—stupid *stuh—stuh*—stuff."

"Hey, hey. Look, you can insult me. You can insult my wife—hell, I do it just breathing—but you can't insult the organization that saved me."

I toss my crumpled-up napkin onto my plate.

"Come on, pal. You don't got to be like that."

I dig around in my pockets for a few more coins. I come up with two nickels and three pennies. I slap them on the counter and nod to the cook. He salutes me with his spatula. Doesn't know I'll never see him again. Doesn't know that one time I saw him fondle a cockroach. That's life I guess.

"Bye, hon'," Mrs. Love says as I sweep past.

The fake maple syrup has a metallic aftertaste. I would like a candy bar to follow up the meal with. If the cushion coin situation will allow for such. I cut through the silent airport along polished corridors. The place is so quiet I wonder if the planes' computers will be able to find it.

I push open the big doors and step out into the night air. Only a few cars sit in the parking lot. When I reach my truck I get out my keys but my hands are shaking and they vanish from my fingers like it's a magic trick. I drop to my hands and knees and molest the grimy pavement beneath the truck, slapping around in the shadows until my pinky catches them. I drag them back. I stand up.

"Hey, you big jerk."

Carl Jake is slapfooting toward me, his belly bouncing in the moonlight.

"Listen. Hey, listen to me. I'm a nice guy. People like me. Look, I talk, but you're not the conversational type. I get it. But that—that was something else, embarrassing me like that in front of a lady and—and—and rejecting my life's work."

I unlock the door, study all the junk heaped on the seat. Behind me Carl Jake's sneakers slow down.

"If you'd given me a chance, you'd see that I have thoughts, man. I have feelings. I like connecting with people. Hell, I got money too. I would have bought your pancakes and coffee, maybe a refill. All I ask is that you open yourself up to the wisdom in this—"

I grab hold of a phone book from three years ago, spin around, and drive the spine into his face. He reels backwards. When he's done staggering he looks up at me with those bright red eyes.

"Why, you—"

He lunges but I jerk the door toward me and the edge smashes into his elbow.

"Aw, fuck!"

While he rubs his bones back to life I bring the phone book down on the back of his skull. It's not that hard or anything but I guess harder than I thought because he drops straight down and his chin pops on the pavement. He bellows and spins on his knees and punches the air. Then he produces the red book with gold lettering and hurls it at my head. It bounces off the tender spot between my eyes. I see stars. Above us. Inside me. Everywhere. Maybe he's right.

Mrs. Love appears from nowhere, yells, "You're animals!" then hops into a car, disappears.

Carl Jake catches me as I'm climbing in behind the wheel. He drags me out. I pop him on the ear with the book and punch him in the gut and he shoves me against the truck and knees me in the thigh. We tangle and grapple and push and scrapple. It's nothing like the fights Chuck Rollins and my other heroes have on TV. Ours is a battle of rubbing bellies and soft fists and kicks and stomps and spitting and panting until finally I catch him square in the eye. He blinks exactly eleven times, grabs his face, then falls onto the pavement in a heap.

He doesn't move.

I dig around in his pockets. Take his driver's license. His cash, thirty-seven bucks. Stand up. Spit sticky spit all over him.

"*Mm mmm* Murray. *Duh duh* don't *ff ff* forget it."

I wipe blood from my mouth and get in the truck, hit the gas so hard the baby spares judder and swerve. Soon I'm up to speed though and I roll down the window. The radio's playing a song

called ‘Pedophilia is a Touchy Subject’ by The Retardants. It’s punk, the lyrics like *Fuck you! Fuck you! Blah blah blah. Fuck you!*

Driving, driving. There’s another Flipjacks on the far side of town. It’s open all night. If I drive fast enough I’ll get there before dawn.

CHRISTOPHER X. RYAN was born on the island of Martha’s Vineyard. He now lives in Helsinki, Finland, where he works as a writer, editor, and ghostwriter. So far in 2019 his stories have appeared (or will appear) in 15 journals, and he earned second place in the 2019 *Baltimore Review* winter contest. In past years his work has appeared in journals such as *PANK*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Matter*, among many others. He can be found at TheWordPunk.com.

Admission to the Burning Ruins—10 Cents

Daniel Galef

—Sign posted on the gate of Steeplechase Park in Coney Island by the owner, George C. Tilyou, the morning after the attraction burned to the ground in 1907.

"A hundred-and-fucking-six. Fuck. She must see the world in brown like an old photo or something," Marc said.

"Sepia, yeah." I was checking my makeup in the car mirror. Marc drove because the rental place wouldn't let me. "You think we'll get a decent couple minutes on this?"

"Fuck no. We'll get a sound bite—'That darling Mr. Hitler had such a charming laugh'—and then Lenny will say 'Thanks, Viv, what a story! The Oldest Living Woman in the County. Golly. Now to other boring shit.'"

Marc's impression was flawless, while also sounding exactly like Walter Mondale like all his other impressions. He was my cameraman. When we were on assignment like this we shared beer and hotel rooms and secrets that could have destroyed us.

"Here's the place," I said.

There was no question which house. It was like something out of Scooby-Doo. I said. Marc hopped on it off the bat. "Ruh-roh, Raggy. It might be huh-huh-huh-*haunted*!" A nurse answered the door, and she led us back through the shotgun hallway so it felt we were climbing down into a cave.

She looked a hundred and six. She looked a million and six. The

segment was fake-real-time, a prerecorded interview that would get Frankensteined into whatever thirty-second snippet Len needed to fill space, but she seemed to think we were live. Or a newspaper, sometimes. I stopped correcting her. Then I stopped asking questions.

It was a matter of will. The only time I could wedge in was when she breathed from the glass of sickly-sweet tea the nurse brought out a pitcher of for all of us, though I prefer coffee and Marc doesn't do sugar.

She had lived a whole stack of living. She'd been in Texas for the worst years of it and in California for some. Minneapolis. Long Island. She had a daughter who didn't respect who died on the haul to California. Now she was presenting an infinite progression of deceased husbands, picking them out invisible in photographs of television snow and telling how they died. "This is Milt. Wonderful cook. He was crushed between two trolleycars. Harry. Voice like an angel when he wasn't drinking. Spanish Flu. Gavin. Plumber. U-boat."

I noticed all the deaths were period-specific. They were cartoons, but I imagined them all as me so not to smile. Marc was too professional to ruin a shoot, but everyone has a breaking point. I saw he was tight-lipped, with his free hand in his pocket.

"Have you got a husband? Or is that an old-fashioned question? You're young. You have time."

My eyes flickered to Marc, but shouldn't have. Len thought Marc and I were Going, which I guess was a thing people did when Len did, if Len did. But Marc knew about Lorelei. And I knew about Vance. Hell, we'd all snuck into the studio after midnight and filmed a guerilla program together. We were more mature

now. I only looked to him to see if he was going to laugh.

It was a blink—nothing at all in a century-and-six of the A-Bomb and the Charleston. But old people see things. They've had all the time in the world to figure people out, the great psychological mysteries like What They're Hiding and Why Don't You Eat Something. I said "No." Her eyes changed. If I'd expected followup, I found none. She steamed on.

"When I was your age I was married, of course. But I can remember before that, being a child. Once we went to a brand new city the railroad had built just to crash two trains together and sell tickets. I sat on my brother Newt's shoulders, and I saw the beautiful flying fire and metal. It was a sensation. A few people even died. The only thing like it was Coney Island. True spectacle or lie spectacle, I loved it the same.

"That was only a couple years before Spain, which is what killed Newt. 'Remember the Maine' and all that. I think I knew it was all the same trick, even then. All spectacle. And now me. I expect everyone in the county would like a ticket to this collision."

She took a sip of her tea but otherwise didn't pause for a second. "That's a lie, by the way. All of it. You'll very much want to print this. I'm eighty-four. My mother died on the way to California, and she was always so pretty, and I smoked. You couldn't hardly tell the difference. Daddy didn't mind. My oldest memory, I mean one I didn't steal, is him telling me so. Do you want more tea?"

Marc took the tape out of the camera on the way to the car and looked at it like it would crumble to sand. We'd been in that

Scooby-Doo house for an hour and a half. And all of it her talking. You could've chopped that tape into anything, Methuselah, Munchausen, or Marilyn Monroe.

"And this is my eighty-eighth husband Jehosephat," Walter Mondale said, but Marc's heart wasn't there. "He poisoned himself with Al Capone's bathtub gin when he found out I'm a fucking fraud. Why, I'm only *this many* years old!" He held up his fingers. "Why don't you print that in your radio show?"

The car was farther than we parked it.

"Have you got a husband?" Mondale persisted, "Or am I being old-fashioned?"

I thought about changing my age so next time I could drive the rental. Or maybe everything else but my age. I didn't notice Marc until I was already round the side of the car. The ring was tiny, of course, but considering what he made weekly it was a monument.

"So," he asked in the voice of the vice-president. "Which kind of spectacle do you want to be?"

DANIEL GALEF has written a gaggle of short stories, a gallimaufry of poems, four and a half plays (including a musical), crossword puzzles, comic strips, ransom notes, a dictionary definition (Merriam-Webster, "interfaculty," adj.[2]), and the only true fortune cookie in the world which happens to be the fortune you're going to get the next time you get a fortune cookie. His most recent fiction appears in the *American Bystander*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Barnhouse*, and *Bull & Cross*.

Beyond the Bardo

Jessica Powers

The valley of Kathmandu was no stranger to Americans, and it was almost a relief to find myself unremarkable in such a foreign land. Every few weeks a horde of windowless buses would appear with fresh visitors wearing denim, and flower crowns, and a strange sort of Bowie-esque ferocity. Most seemed in no hurry, despite the many hillside temples, to leave the mystic charms and comforts of the city in search of enlightenment.

Sabir, my Newari host, affectionately called them pilgrims. Amidst their quests for self-actualization or draft evasion the pilgrims spent a lot of time congregating around market stalls and showing off their hallucinogen-induced smiles. Some did venture into the mountains in tribes and returned bathed in holy water and clarity and conviction. I hated those pilgrims. They knew what they had come to find.

As I was exempt from the draft, I had spent the past seven years living with my parents and working as a doctor for the municipal hospital. Joining the Red Cross was a decision that had been building for the last seven years and my parents were amused to discover I would be stationed in the "Mecca of hippiedom". I think they thought it would help me focus on something other than Cassidy. Maybe they thought I'd take up Tibetan Buddhism like the rest of the pilgrims, start walking around barefoot, and shave my head. Kathmandu was just a word to me then, and all that mattered was that I wouldn't be at home.

* * *

Sabir was a devout man who lived in a house with a four-foot doorway. A dyed purple cloth hung over it in lieu of an actual door. I asked him about this the day I arrived in Nepal.

"The low doorway keeps ghosts from coming in," he told me in surprisingly good English. "Ghosts can't lean forward to duck beneath it. They will hit their heads instead and decide to leave me alone."

"What about short ghosts?" I asked him, chuckling. As a doctor and an atheist I took a great deal of pride in my skepticism.

"If a ghost that short gets in I will fight it," said Sabir, rising to his impressive stature of perhaps four and half feet.

"As much as I'd like to see you fight a ghost, there aren't too many people under four feet tall," I said, setting down my knapsack and supply bag.

"Ah, my friend," he said gently, "but you are forgetting the children."

Coming to Nepal had done what I suppose I'd intended: it had made me forget, just for a moment. A surge of guilt overwhelmed me and I sunk into the woven cot where I would sleep.

"Oh." I buried my face in my hands.

Sabir seemed very concerned by this. He kept offering me tea and saying, "I have not meant to offend you." I took the tea because it was hot, and reassured him he'd done nothing wrong.

"How tall did you say the door was?" I managed to ask.

"One and a quarter meters."

I did the math in my head and nodded gravely. And, even though I had laughed at the superstition only moments before, I found myself turning to Sabir, a stranger, with desperation. “One and a quarter meters. That’s four feet.” The tea cup rattled in my hand. “My daughter, Cassidy, was four feet and two inches.”

We both glanced to the purple hanging on the door.

“Could we . . . ?”

“Certainly, my friend.”

“Not that I . . . you know.”

“Of course not.”

“Just in case.”

“I understand.”

That night, we borrowed a saw from Sabir’s neighbors and cut three inches out of the doorway.

Sabir pretended not to see me swiping at my eyes. I kept glancing to the doorway, trying to convince myself I was still a man of science and medicine and facts.

“If Buddhists believe in reincarnation,” I said later, “How can you be afraid of ghosts?”

Sabir looked at me as if I were a child demanding why the sky is blue.

“Why not both?”

The next morning a loud banging resounded from our neighbor’s house. It was the same neighbor from whom Sabir had borrowed the saw, and I watched him glance to it as he put away the dishes. Two boys were fighting on the porch and had knocked over the flimsy banister in their carelessness.

"Rabten and Michewa," said Sabir, staring intently at the teacup in his hand. "Trouble makers, but they mean well." A slender woman appeared to scold them. She was not classically beautiful, but there was something about the way Sabir looked at her that made our house seem stuffy and overly perfumed. For the first time since arriving I felt like an intruder.

"Their mother, Ditya." Sabir told me. "Her name means answerer of prayers." I glanced between Sabir and the woman on the porch. Her sons, perhaps aged ten and twelve, were walking together in the street, presumably to school.

"I can finish the dishes if you'd like to return her saw," I said carefully. "I'm sure she could use it now."

"Yes, yes," said Sabir. He set down the teacup with a sharp *clank*.

"She could probably use some help fixing the bannister, too." I stood and plucked the dish towel from his hands.

"Of course," Sabir said, like I'd told him a great secret. We traded places at the sink.

Pulling on his shoes, Sabir collected the borrowed saw and straightened. He paused. Facing the doorway and not me he said, "It was an arranged marriage. Ditya and her husband."

I plunged my hands back into the basin.

Sabir said, "Her husband is from the South. He speaks a different dialect than us. They have to talk in English to each other, but Ditya's isn't very good."

I told him, "I'm sure she'd appreciate your help."

Sabir hefted the saw once more and strode away. I heard him call to Ditya in Newari. She came back outside and down the steps to greet him.

I held the teacup Sabir had been washing up to the light. There were spiderwebs in the ceramic. Cracks so small I could barely see them. Absolutely miniscule.

Because of the influx of American tourists, Sabir had quit his old job selling hats and now led tours into the mountains. On weekdays he went to the Bishnu shrine of Budhanilkantha. He left every weekend on an overnight trip to the shrine of Namobuddha. The site was holy because it was the place where a prince once came across a starving lioness and her cubs, and cut off a piece of his own flesh so they might eat it and live. The prince became a Buddha for this act of generosity.

When Sabir invited me to go with him to the shrines I always declined. Despite the three inches of missing wood in his doorway, I remained firm in my position: I had not come here for anything other than a job. I did not believe in ghosts or gods or pilgrimages. The thought of those holy places filled me with terror. Pilgrims returned from those shrines claiming to have felt the presence of Vishnu, to have seen the future, and to know beyond death. I had long since decided not to ask these questions; the answers would never be enough.

There were vagrant children bathing in one of the dirty city canals and I kept my eyes down as I walked past. The city stank of black pepper and standing water and marijuana. I stepped into the phone booth. The dial turned and clicked.

"Hello, Martha Hughes speaking," said the red telephone.

“Hey mom, it’s me,” I said into the receiver. I told her about my work, and about Sabir, aware that a few of the vagrant children had taken notice of me and were eyeing the phone booth with interest.

“We went through some of her things before we left for the summer cabin,” mom said. “I hope you don’t mind. Your dad and I felt it was time.”

“Right,” I swallowed roughly, “Yeah, that’s okay.”

“We kept everything important,” mom said consolingly. I hated this feeling. All of my parents’ pity had gone to Cassidy when she was diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis, and with her gone it seemed to have transferred back onto me.

“The finger paintings?” I asked.

“All here.” A pause. “But we couldn’t find her stuffed horse anywhere.”

“It’s with her,” I swallowed thickly.

“Right, how silly of me to forget.”

“You’ve had other things on your mind.”

My mom had raised Cassidy as much as I had. When I was at the hospital working my parents were at the hospital with her. Cassidy liked my own mom best, and I was too grateful for jealousy. But now, in the aftermath, a sparking guilt seemed to sit with me like a firecracker that hadn’t gone off.

When my daughter was born I’d thought: here it is. Here is my chance to find the inexplicable spectacle of life I had only read of, and did not deem real. To feel love beyond description, or sorrow beyond compare. What I got was the wet rasp of a child’s lungs and her feeble hands shaking in my own. What I got was everything, and then everything was gone. And I was left, my same

old skeptic self, aged and longing for the ember of belief she had given me to come back.

"I haven't thrown anything away yet," said my mom, "Just sorted it into piles. It's all waiting back at the house until Fall. You can go through them when you visit for Thanksgiving."

"Okay."

"I only bring it up because, well, your father and I figured you might want to ask Mary if she wants anything."

Mary did not want anything. Mary had not wanted Cassidy at all. *I'll carry the baby to term, but not after*, she'd told me. *I can live with the shame, but I can't live with the child. It can be put up for adoption.*

And I'd said, *I'll take her.*

"You know I haven't seen Mary in seven years," I told my mom. A lie. I'd spotted her in the back of the funeral wearing a red scarf and a wedding ring. She looked considerably older, and she was alone. She had not joined the line to add dirt to Cassidy's grave, but stood fixed and somber, like those statues of the Virgin in Catholic churches. She left without speaking to me, and I pretended not to have seen.

"I just think it might be helpful to . . . reconnect with some friends from your past," said my mom. "Please, Lewis."

"Yeah okay," I said, "I'll give Mary a call."

My mom sighed in relief. "Thank you." She quickly imparted her love on me and ended the call. Steeling myself, I picked up the phone again and dialed "O" for operator. Why should it matter to me if Mary did, in fact, want a keepsake of Cassidy's? But, just as a voice coughed on the other end, a ball smacked the outside of the phone booth with a mighty *clang*. The ball lay unclaimed outside

the phone booth. The vagrant children were all staring. They wanted me to play with them.

"Operator present," said the red telephone. "Where can I connect you to?"

Under the weight of the children's stares my body seemed to crumble within itself, as if I were made of sand. This wasn't a sign. It wasn't. But I hung up the phone. Walked past the vagrant children with downcast eyes and a hunched posture. Left the ball in the dirt.

Once home, I shoved my way under the four-foot-three doorway, pacing with pent up energy. A noise sounded at the door, and for a second I thought Sabir had returned from Namobuddha a day early. But it was only the purple cloth over the door, rustling, like a young spirit was passing through.

The practical thing was to call Mary in the morning and get rid of the toys. Forget this nonsense and go home to Vermont. But my eyes were drawn to the purple cloth, which seemed to whisper: *What if?*

Ditya had decided to paint the new banister yellow.

Sabir said, "She loves that color," and I knew exactly what he meant. We had taken to sitting in the kitchen after dinner with the windows flung open. Me, watching the doorway. Him, watching her.

Then I said, "Perhaps I could meet her."

Sabir tore his eyes from the window to look at me. "Her English is really quite poor."

"Then you can translate for me."

The walk to Ditya's seemed to take a lifetime. I felt every crunch of sand beneath my shoes, the heat pressing down on me like ocean waves.

"Hello," I said to Ditya, who had noticed us and paused her painting. "My name is Lewis, I'm staying with Sabir." Sabir translated while I roughly explained my job with the Red Cross.

"Wonderful, wonderful," she said. She kept glancing behind, and eventually beckoned us to follow her.

"She says her husband is out back tending the cattle," Sabir translated. "She's invited us in for tea." Inside, there was only one large room, with a few tapestries hung to separate the woven beds. We took our seats around a low dining table. Through the window I could see the gray cattle grazing, their horns forming a curved U.

We spoke for a short while. Ditya kept going in and out to bring us tea, or show me one of her ceramic paintings. Sabir had to translate almost everything she said.

When Ditya asked us to stay for dinner Sabir blurted, "Where are Rabten and Michewa?"

"My boys have dinner with Batsa," she said in English, gesturing to the house across the street.

"Will they be coming home soon?"

"No," Ditya said. There was a finality to it that I didn't understand. Sabir deflated in his seat and did not mention her sons' names again.

After that they spoke in Newari. I sipped my tea and let the language wash over me. The longer Sabir looked at Ditya the more beautiful she became to me, until I was forced to look away.

Some time passed before Ditya made a sharp noise and rose abruptly to clear the plates. She and Sabir spoke more quickly after

that, and the language became percussive, like the Madal drums I heard in the marketplace.

"Kṛpayā," said Sabir.

Ditya's eyes were shiny and drawn in by tight creases. She still looked beautiful, but it was the sort of beauty meant for thunderstorms and wrathful goddesses. I remembered what her name meant: answerer of prayers.

"Kṛpayā," Sabir said again. *Please*.

"I too tired for talking," said Ditya, clearly trying to bring me back into the conversation. "No time left." She'd raised her voice and a moment later her husband came in from outside. We left soon after.

When we returned to Sabir's home, ducking beneath the four-foot-three doorway, his mouth was set in a grim line. "Lewis," he said into the darkness of the room.

We'd left only a single lamp on and everything glowed pale red.

"I'm listening."

"I waited too long," said Sabir. "The prophets are liars. It really can be too late."

The next time Sabir mentioned Namobuddha, I told him I was ready to see it.

Upon our arrival, bodies pressed against me and the smell of cannabis clung to my coat. The mountain winds were unforgiving, even in summer. The shrine of Namobuddha sat on the cusp of one mountain, but framed by the face of another.

The tour group dispersed to explore and, as I looked at the colorful flags hung in celebration, and the masses of pilgrims kneeling to praise him, I found myself hating the Buddha whose altar of sacrifice we had come to.

"You look angry," said Sabir.

"I think I am angry," I admitted. It felt dirty to lie to him. "I shouldn't have come here."

Sabir crossed his arms and fixed his attention on me. His forehead furrowed with irritation. "Why not go home then? Why drag this out if you don't want to believe?" As if it were that simple to let go.

"This isn't something I can just choose to walk away from," I said. When I took Cassidy in I had imagined myself as the Buddha in the legend: some benevolent saint, some hero. Instead I found myself like the lioness he had saved, helpless to protect my own cub as the sickness starved her tiny body.

Sabir gave a weary sigh. "Lewis," he said, "I've seen how angry you are. I know. But blaming yourself or some Buddha won't help."

Something boiled over inside of me.

"Right, so I'll just walk away. Pretend that it never happened. Move on like I'm some teenager going through a break-up. It's easy for you to say. You never had any children to lose!"

Spittle flew from my mouth and landed on Sabir's forehead. He wiped it off without breaking eye contact. A few of the pilgrims were staring at us.

Very quietly, Sabir spoke. "I never had children to lose?" He gave a hollow laugh. "I would have thought you'd guessed by now

that that isn't true." Sabir turned to look at the shrine, a deep shame in the crease of his mouth.

"Oh," I said eloquently.

He continued looking at the Buddha.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Rabten."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"But maybe?"

"Maybe."

I shuffled my feet.

"There's something tangible," I said, "About blaming myself. About being angry. Something to hold onto."

"It was only once," he said. "Ditya and me. He could be mine. It doesn't matter now."

We stared at the shrine for a long moment.

"Faith is . . . not easy," he said eventually. "But I still believe it's worthwhile."

"I guess I thought I would feel something different," I told him, "Something *more*. But I haven't."

As a doctor, I had believed that medicine would not fail my Cassidy, and taken the apparent lack of godly intervention as a sign that none existed. But I had never thought to ask.

A gust of wind howled over the spine of the mountain and I tried to feel whatever Sabir did, but all I felt was cold.

"I think you and your anger have reached an impasse, Lewis, that you are stuck. In Buddhism we believe in reincarnation," he said. "Your spirit leaves one life and enters another. But there is a

place in between, a gap, called the *Bardo.* I think you are in the *Bardo* now, trapped between one life and the next."

"How do I get out of the *Bardo*?" I asked him, trying to hide my sniffling.

Sabir's hand clasped the crook of my neck and shoulder like a gauntlet.

"I wish I knew."

That night, I snuck away from Sabir and our campsite. I don't know what I expected. The idea of the *Bardo*, and that I was stuck with no way out, had tossed around my head all evening. Maybe I just needed a walk to clear my thoughts. Yes, that was all. I tilted my chin and felt the wind kiss my throat.

Just then, a pitfall in the grass sent a shock through my body and yanked me to the ground. Achingly, I pulled myself to my knees and realized I had tumbled into a sort of cove. A small pool of velvet black water lay before me. Flecks of silver danced across it from the stars. If there was ever a place I could call holy, this would be it.

The air was weighty here, like a presence or a held breath. Like something was waiting. Everything was still. I remained on my knees.

My ears strained for a sound. Anything at all. I jostled at the slightest whisper of wind, jumped at a cricket's chirp. It had to be here. This had to be what all those pilgrims had found. Because of course I wanted it, too. It was ridiculous that I had pretended to give up on anything outside of sharp reality. Of course I still

expected the same thing we all expect: a reason, a sign, a voice of reassurance. Some proof that this is not all there is to have.

So I knelt by the water's edge as the stars flickered in the black depths of the pool. I knelt and listened to the pant of my own breath, the rapid beating of my own heart. And when the sun rose over my holy shrine, I dropped my head to my knees and held it between my hands.

"Have you been out here all night, Lewis?" A tender hand found the crease of my neck and coaxed me out—Sabir. Without my consent, my body began to convulse and I let out a series of guttural sobs. I shoved Sabir away and stood, suddenly furious.

"I did everything right," I shouted, "I played the game, I tried it—I believed!" I ripped up a patch of grass and threw it into the black pool, desecrating it. "I waited all night for your precious Buddha or enlightenment or whatever, and nothing! No sign, no voice from the heavens, no answer, no proof!" I yanked up another fistful of grass.

Sabir regarded me warily. "So you're telling me that you came all the way to Nepal, and to Namobuddha for no reason? That you sat here all night on a whim? That you heard nothing?" He approached me with a tender sadness. "You want to know that there is something more out there, beyond the *Bardo*. Isn't the fact that you are even sitting here proof enough? Why would you have come here if you didn't already believe?"

I released the fistful of grass and it scattered in the wind. "I don't know," I said. My body tingled with cold. Maybe I did believe. Maybe wanting would be enough.

"There is no shame in faith, Lewis. Would you rather believe in nothing?"

Seven years ago I had loved the idea of believing in nothing. I had strutted around like an exoskeleton, weightless of things like anger or love or grief. I was too clever for faith, too liberal for religion, too brilliant for rules. The nothingness seeped into my steps and into my fingers. It spewed from my mouth like bile. There was nothingness in the mechanical way I wrote in lab booklets, in the tasteless meals I ate alone in my dorm, in the passionless slap of skin between Mary and I, as if we were making the love of two unnamed strangers. When people looked into my eyes they saw a gaping black wound for a pupil and false blue irises like technicolor cartoons. I had deluded myself into thinking that my hollow life was filled by absence, until seven years ago—when I finally had something to lose.

Now, in the wake of my loss, I was clinging to the fragments of absence, an utter fool for wanting to go back.

"It was empty," I said, "to believe in nothing."

Sabir nodded. "Then there is your answer."

We stood several feet apart and, though I wanted to embrace him, I held myself back. It seemed important to let him be alone in that moment—two solitary figures, two fathers, and the great expanse of the mountainside. Then the clouds shifted and a dawning light poured down from above.

The shadows Sabir and I cast were short and distorted, as though we were being trailed by the silhouettes of two children. A gust of wind crested over us. Maybe it really was just wind. Maybe it was the spirit of my daughter, or the voice of some Buddha. I gave a wet laugh.

Why not both?

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On the cover:

“Space”

Harry Purnama
is an artist in Bekasi,
Indonesia.