



CHANDELIER

GUTTERING

A BULB CULTURE COLLECTIVE ZINE

OCTOBER 31 2023



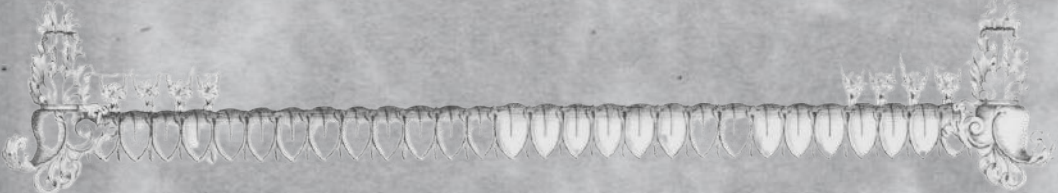
FROM THE EDITORS:

We here at Bulb Culture are masochists, so we made a zine. A Halloween zine. The first in what we hope will be a series of occasional themed issues. Contained in its pages are creepy short stories, haunting flash fictions, and petrifying poems by six incredible writers unafraid of delving into the devilish and dastardly dark. We created **Guttering** to celebrate that time of year when things go bump in the night. When a creak on the stairs isn't *just* a creak.

When you read this incredible selection of writing, we hope you'll shiver at the cold bite of ominous wind, hear the crisp sound of autumn leaves crushed beneath a boot, and feel the ever-present need to look over your shoulder. Of course, if you do, you never know what may be looking back.

Enjoy the terrifying offerings we have compiled here—maybe while sipping a hot spiced cider in front of a toasty fire—but if the lights start to flicker as you read, don't say we didn't warn you.

L.M. and Jared



THE MINNESOTA TIP

MELISSA E. JORDAN

Her grandfather dug a dozen graves by the time we left for the bus stop
and the aunts burned the skins of three mice.
In the keeping room a pail of slugs and red sage leaves were fermenting,
started the night
Moon entered
Cancer.

That was business.

It was nothing to do with
hallowtide, with the
Long skirts and the orange cookies we carried in D&L bags,
wiry handles
Cutting our
palms. Our ankles reared and bucked
On the rutted hill road.—

The mouse ash, I meant to say,
and the slug slurry were for scaring
pest foragers from the fall crops --
farmerspeak for behold your foolish brothers, beware
Medieval stakes, impaled heads. Then too
her grandfather swore by the old Minnesota Tip practice

for guarding the rosebushes lining his farmstand lot.
He swathed his roses in burlap shrouds
against frost heaves and
Winterkill. Then he made

a trench for each of the twelve --
loosened all but a few perimeter roots.
(In those fragile moments the shrubs pivoted
meekly upright like
Baby teeth clinging to gums) --

And he eased his wraiths into their cryogenic pens;
he covered them with soil and straw.

RANEY'S IMAGINARY FRIEND

JACQUELINE DOYLE

“Be nice, or next thing you know Raney will be in the closet talking to her imaginary friend.” Glen howled with laughter at his own joke. There was a thin sheen of perspiration on his red face, which he mopped with a napkin.

So far Thanksgiving had been pretty much what Raney had expected. Noisy children, forced joviality, too much alcohol, too much food, a lot of it lukewarm. The men gathered to watch football in the basement rec room, while the women gathered in the overheated kitchen, basting the 25-pound turkey and checking the Virginia ham, lifting lids off steaming pots, stirring gravy, gossiping about whoever wasn't in the room. Kids ran in and out of the kitchen, shrieking as they snatched marshmallows out of the bag next to the yams.

Raney hovered uneasily on the outskirts of both groups of adults, talking in an undertone to her husband David when he came up the basement stairs in search of a free bathroom, slipping into the chair next to his when the twelve of them sat down at the dinner table. She was the youngest in her generation—her burly brother Glen and sister Jenna and cousins all almost ten years older than her thirty-two—and frequently the butt of family humor. It didn't help that she was the one who'd gone to college, and then graduate school. They made remarks about how they'd have to mind their grammar around her, about all the books she'd read, about all the money she was probably making as a college student with no kids to support.



“Not as much as you might think, Glen. Probably less than Biddy’s making teaching elementary school.” “Right,” he snorted, winking at his wife, as if to say she was holding out on them. “No bun in the oven yet?” Raney felt a flash of annoyance as Glen nudged David, though she knew Glen or someone was going to say it.

She could predict every topic of conversation. But the imaginary friend was new.

“What imaginary friend?” Raney asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Whatshe name. The one you were always talking to when you were a kid.” Glen turned to Jenna. “You remember, don’t you? Jeez, she was a weird kid.”

“Sort of,” Jenna said. “I haven’t thought about that for years. I remember Raney was always going into the closet in Mom and Dad’s room. Wasn’t she talking to herself?”

“Nah. It was a friend.”

“Who was she? What was her name?” Raney asked. But they were already talking about something else and nobody heard her.

The thought consumed her. Had she really had an imaginary friend? Could she have forgotten such a thing? Her grad school friend Priscilla suggested that she should ask her mother, but when Raney called, her mother was absorbed in the grandchildren’s colds, her upcoming cruise to Alaska, her bridge club. “I’m sure I don’t know. It can’t be important now, can it?”

She couldn't shrug it off. One late afternoon in the library, a few weeks after Thanksgiving, Raney had the oddest feeling that she was being observed. The stacks were dimly lit, with timed switches at intervals on the rows of shelves that kept shutting off, plunging the second story into semidarkness. Someone seemed to be hovering in her vicinity, their footsteps muffled by the carpet. She turned the page in the Norton Anthology she was using for class, and happened on an Emily Dickinson poem she'd barely noticed before. "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—," it opened, "One need not be a House— / The Brain has Corridors—surpassing / Material Place—." She wondered if she'd always been unconsciously haunted by the disappearance of her imaginary friend. "Ourself, behind ourself concealed." Had the two of them been constant companions? Was her friend a protector, or a mischief-maker? A leader, or a follower? What was her name? Did she just vanish as Raney got older, or did they have a falling out?

"I think she was there watching me," she told David over grilled cheese sandwiches later that night. "I mean, don't you think it's weird?"

David worked with facts and numbers at the bank. He wasn't the curious type, and usually she appreciated that. He checked her wilder speculations. But tonight she was impatient with his grave good sense.

"No one was watching you. Little kids are always walking around talking to themselves, having little tea parties with invisible guests, stuff like that. It's a kid thing. Imaginary friends don't come back."

She wasn't looking for generalizations about how common it all was. She was looking for specifics about her lost friend.

"I can't help wondering. Do you think I visualized her, actually saw her, or just heard her? Do you think I did most of the talking, or she did?"



What did she say?"

"Jeez, who knows? One question with you turns into twenty. You get obsessed."

When the spring semester started in January, she spent the first week of her American literature survey on Poe, and was startled by the whispering double in "William Wilson," though she'd taught the story before. The ghosts in James' "Turn of the Screw" took on new emotional urgency. Were they supernatural, or all in the governess's mind? Was the doppelgänger in James' "The Jolly Corner" real?

Raney kept thinking that she might turn a corner in her mental wanderings and encounter her old companion. She was sure she'd recognize her. They'd known each other so intimately, been closer than sisters once. She could almost picture them crouched on the floor of her mother's closet, whispering in the dim light that came in under the closed door. The floor would have been crowded with shoes. Dusty shoe boxes were stacked against the wall on one side. The hems of her mother's dresses fluttered, soft on her cheeks, smelling intensely of her mother's perfume. Sometimes when they were alone the two of them ventured out of the closet, prancing around the bedroom in her mother's high heels and striking poses in front of the full-length mirror. Cool gray light filtered through the white drapes, always closed, reflecting off the mirror, the only bright spot in the room. Except for their giggles, the room was hushed. She'd been so happy! She was sure she could remember that much at least, the deep happiness of their companionship.

Raney disliked the apartment they'd found in Genesee, the paper-thin walls, water-stained ceiling tiles, crooked venetian blinds, mirrored sliding doors on the closets in both bedrooms. She could smell carpet-cleaning chemicals and long ago cigarette smoke, though David said she was imagining it. It was bigger than their Wisconsin apartment, much cheaper, only temporary. They were saving money for a condo. She took the small second bedroom for her study, and taped posters and postcards of authors on the closet doors. Slivers of mirror were still visible, reflecting bits of her body when she entered the room—a shoulder here, a leg there, a glimpse of her profile. She positioned the desk so her back was to the closet, but she was aware of the mirrors, and of the authors staring over her shoulder—the oversized posters of Dickinson and Whitman, the neatly aligned army of postcards, mostly of women writers, Woolf, Jewett, Stein, Wharton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

She'd been working on an article on "The Yellow Wallpaper" for some time. The tenure requirements at Genesee State weren't stringent, but she'd almost finished her third year without a publication, bound to be a black mark on her annual pre-tenure review. The topic she'd come up with seemed easy: she would use Gilman's novel *Herland* as a basis for arguing that the world beyond the wallpaper was a feminist utopian alternative to the dystopia of the patriarchal medical establishment of the day. The woman who emerged from the wallpaper was not a symptom of the narrator's insanity, then, but rather an emissary welcoming her into a better world.

There was a journal affiliated with the Gilman Society that probably wouldn't be too competitive. But the article was giving her more trouble than she'd expected. There had been so much criticism on "The Yellow

Wallpaper” that she found herself endlessly slogging through arguments and counter-arguments. She’d concluded that no one had come up with her idea, not because it was so striking and original, but because it was untenable. After all, the narrator was crawling in circles on the floor at the end of the story, not walking confidently through some portal into the unknown. Raney was determined to finish the article anyway, to satisfy the tenure committee. At this point her desk was piled high with books and photocopied articles, as well as with Freshman English and American Literature papers that needed grading, and she found herself working far into the night to get everything done.

Usually David was asleep, the light already out by the time she got to bed, but she was bothered by the closet doors, which reflected and magnified the faint light in the corridor. She’d planned to cover them with fabric, but David liked them, and had made jokes when they first moved in about mirrored ceilings in Las Vegas honeymoon suites. She’d laughed too, as they’d watched themselves in the mirror, but she was getting tired of it. Their sex life was starting to feel like a bad porno flick. David wanted the lights on. She wanted the lights off, and no longer enjoyed sex in the afternoon the way she used to, unless it was on the living room couch, away from the mirrors.

“Do you think it’s the governess’s sexual hysteria that conjures the ghosts in James?” she asked Priscilla on the phone.

“God yes. Don’t you?” she answered. “No one in James is ever getting enough! They all need to get laid.”



Raney missed Priscilla, their long walks in Madison when both of them went stir-crazy in the library, their lively conversations over coffee after seminars. She couldn't talk about "The Turn of the Screw" with David like this, or any of her colleagues really, all busy with their suburban lives, their kids' report cards and athletic trophies. Priscilla and her husband were in Pittsburgh now, where Duff had landed a job as an adjunct, and Priscilla was still working on her dissertation. Raney knew she'd done well, finishing her degree and landing a tenure-track job, but she envied Priscilla the freedom of her days and the cultural life of a city. Genesee was dull.

"Speaking of sex, how's it going with David?" Priscilla added.

"I don't know. Not so great. Maybe it happens to everyone when they get older, but we're barely in our thirties. I think it's the apartment. We really need to get out of here."

"Your sex life wasn't ever all that hot, was it?"

Raney was taken aback. Priscilla's remark sounded more like a comment than a question. She didn't remember telling Priscilla that her sex life wasn't so hot. In fact she'd been fine with her sex life with David.

"Did I say that?"

"Oh, um, I thought you did." Priscilla gave a nervous laugh. "I mean I thought you said it was kind of bland or something. No surprises, something like that?"

Raney didn't look for surprises in bed. Unless it was David who'd said that to Priscilla, David who wanted to spice things up, as he'd once suggested. Raney had laughed at the pink plastic handcuffs and gadgets he'd brought home from a sex shop, but she was sure she hadn't told Priscilla about that. It was embarrassing and she didn't want David to

look foolish to their friends.

“We had a pretty healthy sex life,” Raney said, cutting Priscilla short.

“Oh. Healthy,” Priscilla said. Was there a faint sneer in her tone? After she hung up, Raney thought about it, but she was sure she must be wrong. Priscilla and Duff were their best friends.

That night she and David sat on the futon couch eating pepperoni pizza out of the box, wiping their fingers with paper napkins. She waited for the right moment and couldn't find one.

“Did you and Priscilla ever talk about sex?” she finally asked, trying to keep her tone casual. She dabbed at a grease stain on the futon with her napkin, and took a sip of her wine.

“Sex?”

“Did you ever talk about our sex life with Priscilla?” She put down her wine glass and wrapped herself in the yellow and gold afghan at the end of the sofa.

“Of course not. What gave you that idea?”

“Something she said today on the phone.”

“What did she say?”

Raney thought he sounded wary.

“I can't remember. It was just something she said ...”

“I mean maybe we talked in general. You know, we were always gabbing about something with Duff and Priscilla.” David poured himself more wine. He seemed to be avoiding her gaze.

“I don't remember talking about sex,” Raney said.



“Well maybe you weren’t there. It’s not really something you like to talk about.” He swirled the wine in his glass and gulped most of it down.

“I mean we don’t really talk about it, do we?”

Raney looked at him, his solid torso, the familiar blue sweater and gray sweats. For a moment he looked like someone she didn’t know at all. She suppressed a glimmer of panic. Of course she knew David.

“Do you think there’s something we need to talk about?”

“No, I’m not saying that. You’re just not the type to talk dirty, or go into that stuff.”

“Like Priscilla?”

“Listen, I’m beat, and I’ve got an early meeting tomorrow. I’m going to bed.”

“Maybe I should ask Priscilla, then.”

“Don’t do that. What’s the point of stirring up the past? She probably won’t remember either.”

Remember what? Raney wondered. She felt queasy from too much pizza. David hadn’t exactly answered her questions the way she expected him to.

She’d never thought of Priscilla as a competitor. Large-breasted and heavy-thighed, Priscilla was always on a diet. “You’re so skinny,” she frequently told Raney. “I wish I was a size 8.” She was a friend. She was married. Priscilla and Duff hadn’t ever cheated on each other, as far as Raney knew. Priscilla never kept secrets. She would have told her.

David was asleep by the time Raney got to bed, and she lay awake watching the red numbers change on the digital clock, rubbing her neck.

Bits of memory floated in and out of her consciousness. Once when they were all at Smitty's David had made a joke about wife swapping, but it was just a stupid joke, wasn't it? That was something dumb rich people in suburbia did, right? He'd been drunk. And there was the time when she and Duff had both been late meeting David and Priscilla at the Hofbrau. Had Priscilla given David a meaningful look when she spotted Raney on the way to their table? Of course not.

When she sat up to go to the bathroom she thought she saw a glimmering female figure in the mirror crossing the bedroom ahead of her. She blinked, and the apparition was gone.

"Do you want five pages with the bibliography, or five pages plus the bibliography?" The girl in the front row stared at her earnestly, and for a long moment Raney couldn't process the question or remember the girl's name. She thought about explaining that length wasn't really the point, but the student was waiting, pen poised, for an easy answer. "Plus the bibliography," she said. "And please, all of you, read the website on avoiding plagiarism." She raised her voice over the sudden chatter and laughter and scraping of chairs as the students gathered their books and backpacks for departure.

She wasn't looking forward to reading thirty papers with titles like "Is the double in 'William Wilson' real?," "Are the ghosts in 'Turn of the Screw' real?," "Is young Goodman Brown awake or asleep?," "Is the governess in 'Turn of the Screw' crazy?" Simplistic answers to simplistic questions.

But she wanted easy answers and certainties too. She was never going to find out more about her imaginary friend. She was never going to be

sure about David and Priscilla, what they'd done or said. She winced as she remembered Priscilla asking, early on, whether David was her best lover. She'd told her no. Well he hadn't been, at that stage in their relationship. Duff had been hard at work on his dissertation in those days, and they'd joked about him. Priscilla called him "Once-a-Week-Is-Enough-Duff," and Raney had felt complacent about her sex life with David, livelier and more frequent than Priscilla's, she'd thought. Had Priscilla become interested in David because of Raney's satisfaction? She'd sometimes felt uneasy after talking to Priscilla, as if she'd disclosed too much.

Her whole past was rearranging itself as she scrutinized scenes she'd forgotten. Nothing definitive, but her shoulders and neck hurt all the time now. A weight had settled in her stomach. She could hardly meet David's eyes. He didn't seem to notice.

Her pre-tenure review had arrived in her faculty mailbox, signed by the Chair, Dean, Provost, President, and members of the department, school, and university tenure committees. It concluded with a mild admonition about scholarship. "While Dr. Hillyard's performance in the areas of Teaching and Service has been well above average, her Scholarly Achievements have been below average for a professor at her rank." She knew she had to finish the Gilman article and place it somewhere. She spent her nights buried in "The Yellow Wallpaper," her days in a blur of fatigue.

"David says you're working too hard." Priscilla sounded concerned.

"David?" She couldn't suppress a note of hysteria in her voice. Priscilla and David?

“I called the other night and you weren’t there, so we chatted a bit. I really miss you guys, the four of us getting together. I know I made a lot of jokes about his M.B.A. and business mindset but they were just jokes. David’s a great guy.”

“So you’ve been talking about me.”

“He says you’re really stressed.”

“Did you talk about me before?”

“Before what? You don’t sound like yourself. Are you getting any sleep?”

What had David told her? Did he say they weren’t having sex any more? Raney spent all her time in front of the glowing computer screen in her study, or scribbling comments in the margins of student papers. Her eyes hurt. A tiny muscle next to her left eye sometimes twitched.

“Listen, I’ve got to run. There’s a department meeting in twenty minutes.”

The department meeting was the next day, in fact. Raney wasn’t looking forward to it. If she was assigned to one more committee, she thought she might start screaming right in the conference room. She pictured them staring at her, June all sympathetic, that old fart Mort goggle-eyed, Stanley shaking his head as if that’s what he’d expected all along when they’d hired a female, and a women’s lit scholar at that. She’d become increasingly uncomfortable with the members of the Department Tenure Committee, which Stanley had chaired. Had he drafted the line about her abysmal scholarly achievements? What exactly had they said when they conferred in their meeting? Were they jeering at her?

Raney no longer picked up when Priscilla called, or answered her messages. David had always been her best friend, but they didn't seem to communicate these days either. They talked about what to have for dinner, usually takeout, or repairs on the car and who would take it in. The chemical odor of the carpet and residue of cigarette smoke bothered her more and more.

"The smell is making me nauseous," she told David. "It could be making us sick. We have to leave before it's too late."

"Relax. We won't be here forever," he said, as if that was good enough.

The Gilman article was more or less finished but Raney was reluctant to send it out. She stayed up at night adding to the footnotes, double-checking her quotes and bibliography, straining to imagine how the article would be received. Were the flaws in her interpretation obvious? Would the editors even bother to get scholarly readers' reports? If they sent it out to readers, it could take as long as a year before she heard anything. Would it be in time for the next pre-tenure review? What if the article was rejected? She wondered if she should just quit her job and get pregnant. She and David could move somewhere else, away from Genesee, buy a condo somewhere else. She imagined the excited flutter that their announcement at Thanksgiving would inspire. "A baby. Finally, Raney." After all her efforts, she would end up a homemaker with kids in some suburb like her mother and her sister Jenna. David would move up in the bank. They'd buy a house. She'd collect recipes for casseroles. She'd be sucked back into the humdrum life she thought she'd escaped. She'd go stark raving mad.



“You’re tired. You’ve been worrying too much.” She watched their shadowy reflections in the mirror as David patted her on the back, pulled up the covers, and rolled over.

She knew she was worrying too much, but she couldn’t seem to stop. Her hands prickled. There was a constant buzzing in her ears that made it hard to fall asleep. Often she was short of breath.

Their lovemaking, the first in weeks, had felt perfunctory. Some sleepy groping from David before he mounted her. He’d held back, waiting for her to come, but she hadn’t. Afterwards he’d absent-mindedly murmured, “Did you remember to put the garbage cans out at the curb?” He took her silence for assent, and turned away, and really nothing was his fault, Raney thought. He was tired too. Her chest felt empty. Her eyes burned as she stared at the ceiling.

She got up, naked, and crossed the living room into the kitchen for a glass of water. She could hear David’s jagged snores in the bedroom, the humming of the refrigerator, the sharp clicks of the battery-powered clock on the kitchen wall as the minutes passed. She didn’t switch on the light, preferring the concealment of the dark. The water in Genesee had a metallic aftertaste she disliked. She rinsed the glass and put it in the dishwasher. She couldn’t go back to bed. Despite her fatigue, she felt too wired to sleep. Shivering in the cold, she picked up the afghan on the couch, wrapped it around her, and walked into her study.

The room felt alive. Raney’s nerves thrummed.



"Are you here?" she whispered. She could see her form looming in the slivers of mirror between the posters on the closet door. She stretched out her left arm.

"Are you here?"

There was a ripple in the atmosphere, the faintest of sighs.

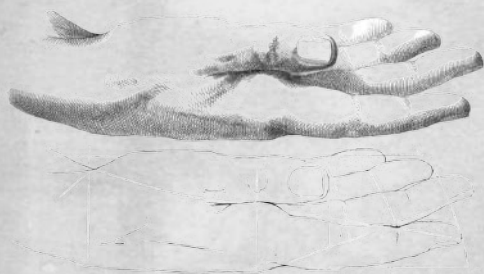
As she struggled to slide the closet door open, Raney could hear one of the posters tearing. Inside the closet were dusty stacks of boxes, old clothes she never wore, a row of empty hangers. They jingled as she moved the clothes to the side. She inhaled the light cloud of dust she'd disturbed as she edged into the closet and turned to slide the door back from the inside. The door rumbled on its tracks.

The closet was darker with the door shut, the quiet profound. Her heart thumped in her chest and beat in her ears as she crouched down on the floor, pulling the afghan around her more securely. She nestled into the corner and rocked herself until she began to drift off. She could hear her breathing beside her. Raney. That was her name. It had always been Raney.

"Hello, Raney," Raney greeted her. "God, it's been a long time."

Some time later Raney found herself trudging beside a highway, hand in hand with her imaginary friend, in an industrial area on the outskirts of Genesee, or a city much like it. Was it days later? Or weeks? She didn't know how she'd gotten there, or where they were going. She was wearing rubber flip flops, threadbare jeans, and a gray sweatshirt she didn't

recognize, the yellow afghan still wrapped around her shoulders, clutched together with one hand in the front, trailing to her ankles in the back. Her feet hurt, and she shivered with the cold. Cars whizzed by, blowing up dirt on the cracked, weedy pavement. The sky stretched on all sides, empty and gray. She was afraid that one of her students might see her, but none of the cars slowed. No one seemed interested in them, two apparently homeless women. She wondered whether David was looking for her, and whether he would find her, and whether she wanted him to. She wondered what Glen and Jenna and the rest of her family would say. Her colleagues at the university. Priscilla and Duff. Would her disappearance be reported in the newspapers? Had she disappeared? She no longer knew what was real and what was imaginary, and didn't care. Her friend tugged on her arm as she strode ahead. Raney kept walking, content to follow after her, though her figure had become indistinct in the swirling clouds of dust that surrounded them, everything was unfamiliar, and there were no landmarks visible in the distance.





TUESDAY AT THE MONASTERY

AMY BARNES

We reverently chop up Brother Francisco.

Deo Optimo Maximo.

After morning prayers, that's what we do on Tuesday. Laid on the dining room table, our former dining partners resemble dinner chickens we used to eat together, reduced to skeletal bones. We carefully cut away flesh and organs and eyeballs and hair. Stripped of their robes, we leave only skulls covered in skin, brains removed as if we are Egyptian mummy makers, not religious brothers.

I measure a place for my living hands on the arched crypt walls, bits of his skin clinging like gloves. Laid flat. Stretched out. A hand is twenty-seven bones. You can create with a hand. A leg has only two main bones.

On Monday, we make nails that our vows don't allow us to buy; each piece of iron pounded into miniature crucifixion spikes. Nails ready to be pounded into palms and femurs and skulls. We pray over each nail in our teeth and under the heavy hammers, living spit bathing something for the dead.

Wednesday is bone cleaning day. Bones are exhumed from their graves still reeking of death stench. We put them carefully in buckets ready for creating new forms, some left as full skeletons to recline in the crypts, robed as if they are alive. There are never enough bones. I begin to find joy in administering last rites to my brothers.

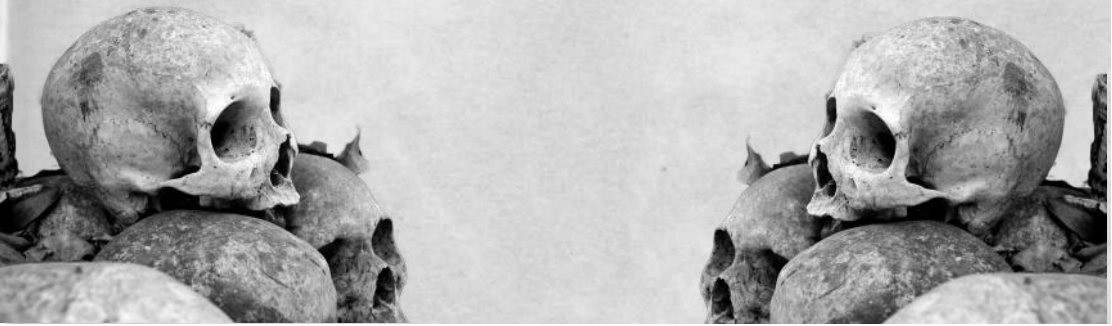
I wonder what I will become. Where will my brothers nail me on Thursday, the day of the walls? A pelvis chandelier, light coming from where urine once flowed? Maybe vertebrae circle-nailed like flowers with finger stems?

We are only one step above putting skulls on sticks to frighten towns into not sinning or not disobeying the king. But it is more than that. We pray over these bones, counting them each like rosary beads. I walk the hallway and pray for my brothers caught in bone purgatory.

Deo Optimo Maximo.

I see myself as more artist than necromanist. My skills as an architect pre-vows gives me the spatial skills to complete these silent tasks. I taste the iron nails and never quite wash the smell of death from my robes. I know they will choose my place carefully, laying out my bone design, my hands creating beauty after I am gone. It will become my penance.

What you are now we used to be; what we are now you will be...



NEVER GOING GREEN

SHERRY MORRIS

In Lesterville, we know the phrase Recycle, Reuse, and Reduce, but we ignore it. Not because we're against saving the planet, or don't understand the plastic problem. We do. But that slogan reminds us of Merin McCallister. And we shiver.

She doesn't live here anymore. The house never sold. Removers came — a yard sale wasn't gonna happen — but there's still stuff inside. I knew Merin, we weren't kin-close, but we walked our babies together and talked like new moms do. She told me it was Martin who found the chair. I'm not saying it's his fault, I'm just saying it started there. Though it must've started somewhere else a long-long time before.

They were the outdoorsy type, Merin and Martin, taking baby Ollie hiking nearly every weekend. She said the chair was a fair distance from the trail, lying on its front, deep in weeds and undergrowth, like someone tried to bury it. Covered in cobwebs, streaked with slime and wet leaves, two of its white plastic legs tilted skywards. The tray laid a short-flung distance away, half-sunk in bog ground. Martin, a handyman, proclaimed the chair in perfect condition.

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wet leaves, two of its white plastic legs tilted skywards. The tray laid a short-flung distance away, half-sunk in bog ground. Martin, a handyman, proclaimed the chair in perfect condition.

If Merin felt uneasy reusing an abandoned highchair dumped miles from roads and homes, she never said. I'd like to think she was unsure. That when Martin said they'd take it home and clean it up, she shivered. But maybe as Martin wiped away a streak of sludge, the baby gurgled. Reached for it and Martin said, "Two against one," and Merin told herself the chill was a passing cloud covering the sun.

She gave me a photo of the three of them. Ollie's strapped in the chair while they stand on either side wearing big, stupid grins. I burned it.

Merin used an entire bottle of disinfectant on the chair, said it sparkled when she finished though plastic doesn't sparkle. They all fell in love with that chair. Preferred it to the wooden one from her parents that cost \$500. Especially Ollie. He cried anytime they lifted him out of it. He didn't want to be in his playpen. Or his car seat. Or his bed. Or held in Merin's arms. He just wanted that highchair.

"Teething," Merin told me, "is rough."

But it seemed like more than teething. Any toy with a face, the boy chewed away.

Then there was the bashing. Ollie with a spoon, or his sippy cup, against the tray. A whack that lasted for hours, gave Merin a headache and made Martin yell, then pound the counter. When Merin took away the spoon or cup, the pure hate on Ollie's face chilled her

blood, made her hands and head shake. He'd shriek the scream of foxes in heat. The sound made Merin think of babies skinned alive. With trembling fingers, she'd give him back his cup and the hammering would start again.

She tried talking to Martin, to whisper-ask as they lay awake if he heard the whack even while Ollie napped. They never slept at all anymore though they were both beyond exhausted. Martin grew brusque. Rarely showered, shaved or changed clothes. Their sex was rough now, painful and barely with consent. When she asked if he remembered to bring home milk, he threw a plate that smashed inches from her head.

The last time I saw Merin, she looked like she'd just come from Hell. Eyes bugged and bloodshot, mascara smudged, lipstick smeared, hair dishevelled. Walking around in slept-in clothes and wearing mismatched slippers.

Swaying on my porch steps, Ollie swaddled in a blanket pressed tight against her chest, words rat-a-tatted from her mouth. Martin was missing. Three days now. He'd lunged at Ollie. Punched her out. She'd woke to find the chair knocked over, empty. Discovered Ollie in his bed, silent, his head a funny shape.

"A Lumpty-Dumpty," she said cry-laughing.

I invited her in. She stayed put. Said she and Ollie were gonna take a little vacation. I leaned in to see Ollie, but she stepped back.

"A bad baby's better than no baby," she said.

A watery cry rose from the bundle. There was an earthy smell. A spider scuttled from the blanket, then another. A cluster burst from beneath the folds and scattered. Merin brushed them all away without blinking an eye.

For a moment, the blanket slipped. I saw Ollie's face. And a forked tongue flick.

Merin saw me see, said it was time for them to go. Added the highchair was on the curb if anyone wanted it, still in perfect condition. It'd comforted Ollie after his fall, she said, but Ollie didn't need it anymore. He was—

I couldn't catch her last word. It didn't sound like 'better'.

She walked to the back of her minivan. Placed Ollie on a pillow inside a sturdy-looking dog crate then drove away.

We found her vehicle in a ditch just outside town. Only her purse and the blanket were inside. We speculated of course. Word went 'round she'd been on my porch. I held back from telling what I saw that day. Maybe I shouldn't have. Nobody heard from Merin again.

The highchair sat outside their house for a week, too big for recycling or curb-side pick-up. Then it started appearing around town in odd spots: the bushes next to the community centre where new moms met. Lined up alongside the park swings. In front of the Goodwill thrift shop. Eventually the chair disappeared. We all knew not to touch it, but out-of-towners often passed through. Not knowing any better, one of them might've picked it up.

This place is never going green. People have it firm in their minds why. At least I think they do — though I've started hearing something at night that sounds an awful lot like foxes.



HOTEL SAMHAIN

CHRISTINA HENNEMANN

The journey

My getaway begins here, in Niemandland,
after an endless journey through the dense pine woods
of frosty October nights; coated in smoky coal
I arrive at a remote castle, once protective
of clans, knights, warrior kings and queens;
now standing mossy, moist, melancholic.

The lobby

Through squeaking metal doors I walk
into a dusty, run-down smell of rotten.
The paint is chipping off the walls,
the chandeliers are tarnished, lightly swinging.
The suited receptionist bows terribly politely.

The restroom

I drop my mask and gaze
at the merciless flickering neon light,
spot hundreds of tiny flies lying dead,
captured in the dull glass of the lamp.
I turn to look at my teething smile in
the misty warped mirror, almost blind.
Red lipstick kisses my canine tooth
as I sway from the bizarre quiet,
haunted only by the sizzling of the flies.

The salon

I step out onto the red velvet carpet
and sit down in a black giant armchair,
observe crumbs on the carpet, the mouldy walls.
With awkward grace, I sip my pumpkin spiced latte,
which grins at me horribly gleefully, and fogs
my tongue with cinnamon, foams my muted mouth.
The glass is bloodstained with my lipstick,
as I look around with caution, I find
the pallid waitress eying me suspiciously.



The castle suite

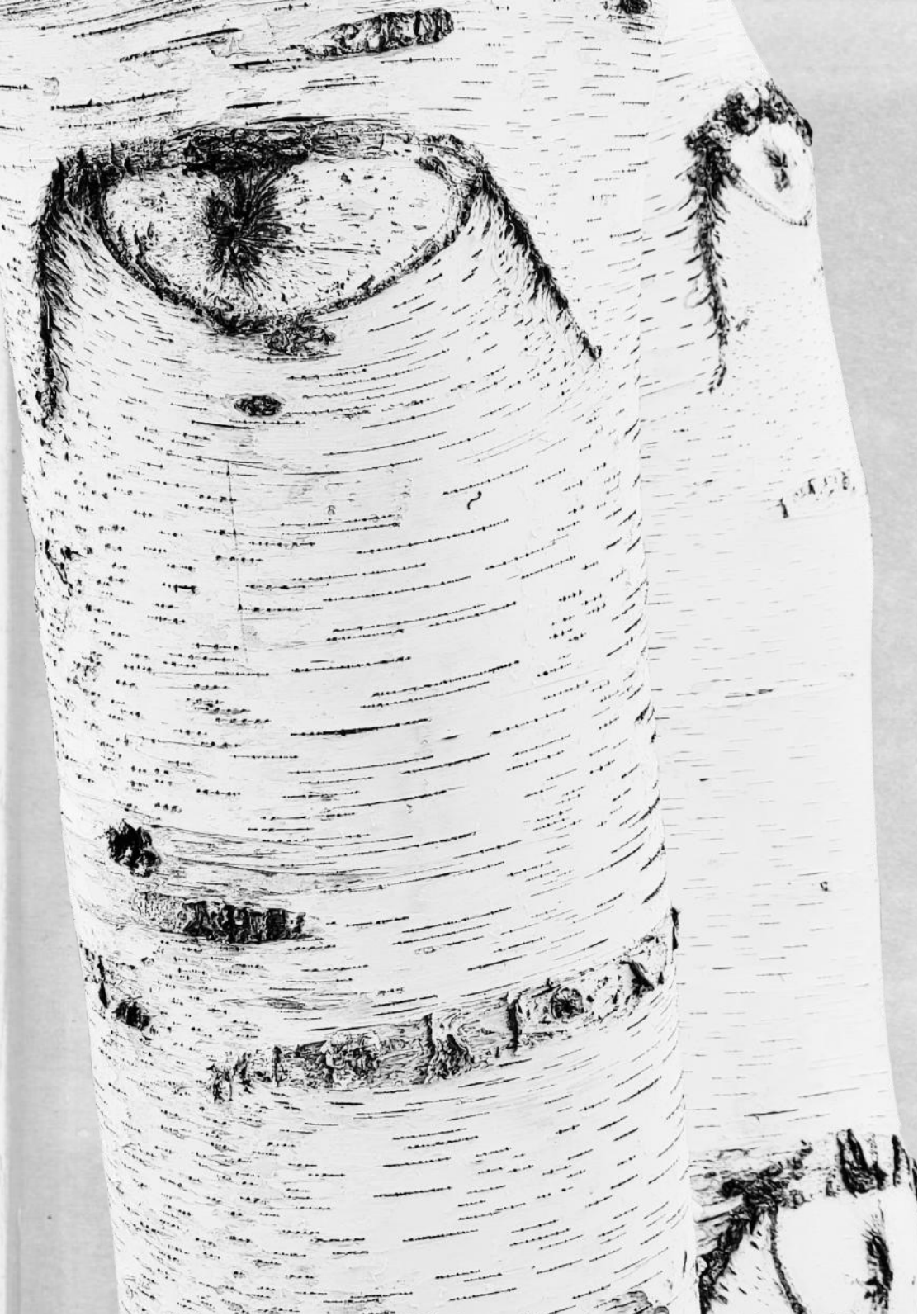
I enter the once lavish bedroom.
A spider is crawling over the bedsheets,
its frail legs I tear apart in horror,
I must perform the exorcism —
before I lie in the smell of chlorine and decay.
I fall asleep with my eyes open, fascinated
by the shadow twigs dancing over the dusty curtains.

The restroom, 3am

I twitch and dream of dead flies, a warped mirror.
I rise and sleepwalk the empty corridors,
until again I stand before the neon-lit looking glass.
I stare at my face and run
from the smiling grimace in horror, but there's —

no escape from the ghosts inside me.





DOLLS FOR ANOTHER DAY

RICK KENNETT

Mr and Mrs Merewether were alone in the dining room of Ilbridge House in the English parish of Coxham. The evening meal was over and only wine and glasses were left on the table. They sat close together, he in blue satin, she in brocade, arranging their plans for later that night.

"So it falls to me to do the deed," said Mrs Merewether in an earnest whisper, her eyes glinting in the light of the single taper burning in its silver candlestick on the sideboard.

"It's your place to give him his medicine," said her husband in a similar low tone. Then, his voice taking on a harder edge, he added, "You don't scruple because he's your father, do you?"

"And the grandfather of my children, which should make him think better of his intentions. Instead he makes it the crux of his claim on them." Her dark ringlets bobbed as she shook her head. "No, James. I don't scruple. We brought this on ourselves, true. Now we must end it while we still can."

"Elizabeth ... do you regret ever marrying me?"

"A young architect with no prospects above a talent in miniatures?"

"But it's the truth, isn't it."

"The truth is that if it weren't for my father's ... workings, who can say where we'd both now be. We could never have afforded all this." She plucked at her rich clothing, then with a gesture indicated the cut crystal glasses, the vintage wine on the solid oak dining table, the silverware on the sideboard, and by extension the white stone mansion they possessed. "We sold ourselves, James. Not that I countenance it, especially now with the price being asked of us."

"Demanded of us," he corrected her.

"The children –" She broke off and turned to the window in an attitude of listening, as did her husband. For a moment they held their breaths. But the silence stretched and they breathed again

“I thought I heard the approach of that infernal man,” she said.

James Merewether flinched at the word his wife had chosen to describe their impending visitor: it had been a little too apt.

“Don't you feel,” she went on, looking out at the night, “that there are eyes out there, looking in at us?”

He glanced through the windows, at the darkness beyond. “There's nobody there. As to our visitor, men who smell of dust and rat-gnawed book bindings are never punctual. We still have time.” All the same he went to the window, opened it and put his head out with his hand to his ear. Nothing was heard but the wind in the trees of the surrounding park and the distant cries of owls and other night birds.

He shut the window again and went out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him. Alone now, Elizabeth swept up the burning taper in its silver candlestick and held it aloft as if afraid of the shadows, afraid of the dark, afraid of what events the night would bring. It was clear by her strained expression that she was striving to keep down a fear threatening to master her. The consequences of her actions this night, she knew, were awful to contemplate. But the consequences of doing nothing were unthinkable.

Mr Merewether returned then and gave his wife a vial of some dark liquid, pushing it into her moist hand, folding her fingers over it.

“For their innocent sakes,” he said, and once more left the room to step out through the front door of the mansion. Here he paused to look out into the night, listening.

The bell of the clock in its Gothic cupola above the stables sounded, and he saw that its hands stood at a quarter to eleven. Yes, there was still time. All the same the feeling of being watched, as expressed by his wife a moment before, came to him now from out of the immense quiet, and he shivered. Then Mr Merewether, the practical man of architecture, dismissed the notion. It was nothing but a twinge of conscience; and conscience, he knew, had no place in what was to be done this night.

He turned to glare up at a lighted window in the upper storey of the mansion and shook his fist.



With the taper in one hand and an uncorked wine bottle in the other, Elizabeth entered the bedroom, all smiles and pleasantries to her white-haired father lying awake in his four-poster. He appeared nervous and anxious from the way he shifted about, his fingers drumming on the coverlet. A nurse was asleep in an armchair by the fireside. Elizabeth roused her, giving her the wine bottle. The nurse poured some of its contents into a silver saucepan, adding spices and sugar from casters on the table. While she set it on the fire to warm the old man in the bed beckoned feebly to his daughter.

“If the deal is not struck soon, I fear I may not last the night,” he said in a thin, querulous voice.

She took his wrist, felt his pulse and bit her lip in consternation. Not because it was failing as he feared but because it was as strong as ever. He would last the night. He might last many nights.

“When I sign the pact,” her father continued, “the processes and the rituals will be enacted and by tomorrow we shall all benefit.” Her silence to this and the way she looked at him prompted him to add, “The children, yes. But you were aware of this all those years ago when you agreed.”

She turned away and said in a low voice something that might’ve been, “When you threatened.”

“Do not fret, daughter,” he said, oblivious to her suppressed ire. “They will not suffer. But needs must be done in this desperate hour of my life, and if you and your James are to maintain your fortune. He squandered his talents, such as they were, in the making of these mere models and ...” His lip lifted in a sneer, “dollhouses. Now he is beginning to create real buildings and is gaining respect and recognition amongst his peers. If this is to continue ... truly I am your only hope for a better life, just as your children are my gateway to deliverance from death, and in turn yours. Remember that!”

He asked her then to go to the window and listen for approaching carriage wheels. She did so, opening the casement and, like her husband earlier, putting out her head, hand to ear. The night was as quiet as ever.

By this time the saucepan on the fire was steaming. The nurse poured it into a two-handled silver bowl and brought it to the bedside.

“No,” said the old man, pushing it away. But the women pressed it on him.

“For your health’s sake, sir,” said the nurse soothingly, and he took it in several grudging draughts.

Mr and Mrs Merewether were in the drawing room downstairs when the shrieking began. At once the state of high anxiety they’d been waiting in snapped like a thread, replaced by a coldness in the pit of the stomach and a singing in the heart.

Putting on expressions of alarm like the putting on of masks, they hurried upstairs. By the time they reached the bedroom the old man was already a corpse, collapsing back under the nurse’s hands, foam at his lips, his features contorted with agony and with rage – as if he had known the cause of his passing.

As servants crowded in with much bustle, the master and mistress of the house stepped back into the shadows lest they betray themselves with the sly smiles stealing slowly over their faces.

Outside in the carriage drive a coach with flambeaux drove up to the front door. A white-wigged gentleman dressed in black was swift to alight and swift up the front steps of Ilbridge House, though he smelt of slow time, of dust and rat-gnawed book bindings. Under one arm he carried a small leather case holding papers with curious clauses requiring a signature; also a small knife with a fine blade to aid in its signing. Nestling beside these items were two antique volumes, *The Book of the Toad and Turba Philosophorum*.

At the door he was met by Mr and Mrs Merewether with their sad faces on once more. Bringing him into the dining room, they explained how his haste had all been in vain.

After a thoughtful moment the gentleman in black said, “Yet there is the matter of our agreement.”



“The agreement died with my father,” said Elizabeth Merewether in a voice quiet yet forthright.

“Madam,” the visitor said patiently, “it is clear you do not appreciate that which has been set in train by your father. His mere death cannot—“

“Nevertheless,” Mr Merewether cut in firmly.

Seeing further argument was futile, their visitor bowed, picked up his small leather case containing knife, contract and tomes of necromancy, and returned to his carriage.

The clock in its Gothic cupola above the stables struck the hour.

Laughter rilled from the nursery upstairs, the sound of mother and father at play with their children. James Merewether, dressed in the black of mourning, was in animated and happy talk with his son Roger. Both were seated upon a truckle bed playing with a model of a frontier fort: a wall of miniature sharpened logs, ladders to lookout platforms where stood little figures of delicately fashioned wood in proper uniforms, shouldering musketry. Barracks, stables and an armoury completed the establishment. Two lines of toy soldiers stood at attention in the parade ground, flanked by their officers.

On the other side of the nursery Mrs Merewether, likewise wearing the attire of mourning, was likewise showing little sign of it in her demeanour. With her daughter Bessie she was delightedly arranging the furniture, the fittings and inhabitants of a large dolls' house in Strawberry Hill Gothic; a replica in fact of Ilbridge House itself with a chapel with its coloured windows at one side, stables at the other. The finger-small doll of a gentleman in blue satin sat in the dining room; a lady in brocade and a boy and a girl sat in the drawing room; a nurse, a footman and a cook were in the kitchen, while in the stables stood two grooms and a coachman. In a four-poster in the bedroom little Bessie found a white-haired man in a long white nightshirt. She held the doll up to her mother.

“Grandpapa,” she said in that solemn way only a seven year old can.



Mrs Merewether regarded the doll a moment. Then, taking it gently from the child, she replaced it in the four-poster, sliding the bed curtains shut on their rods all round – and quickly pulled her fingers away as if something had just nipped her.

Out in the park of Ilbridge House, in the deep of the covering night, a lone figure stood watching the lighted windows and the gaiety within. In one hand he held a small mass of shroud linen, crumpled and cunningly fashioned into the shape of a toad; in the other hand, clenched tight, were two rag dolls of a boy and a girl. His gaze moved from the toad to the dolls to the coloured windows of the chapel, to the coffin draped with a black velvet pall lying upon a bier, candles in tall candlesticks flickering at each corner. He raised his hands with what they held as his gaze became a rigid stare and began muttering dire, dread words.

In the chapel the pall slide off the coffin as one tall candlestick toppled on the floor. The lid of the coffin began to open.

A moment more and a grey light not of lamp or of candle but pallid and ugly passed from the chapel as something moved away.

In the nursery, while his son was absorbed in extracting cavalry from the stables of his little fort, Mr Merewether quietly left the room. In passing he took a white garment that hung on a peg by the door.

A minute passed and the door of the nursery opened once more. A muffled head poked around it. A bent form of sinister shape, all in white, advanced on the children with their mouths agape, their eyes wide. It stopped, raised its arms and revealed itself – as their father, laughing. But young Roger was already under the blankets in a shrieking agony of terror, and little Bessie had flown wailing into her mother's arms.



“James! Really!” his wife scolded him, but not without merriment, and swatted ineffectually at him with a pillowslip. Then, taking the children on their laps, mother and father patted and consoled them, showing their terror to be nothing but a white gown. Calmed at last, they were put to bed, their parents bidding them goodnight as they left.

They shut the door and stole quietly away.

For some moments all is dark in the nursery, and silent. But now around the door-case there dawns that pallid and ugly grey light. It washes into the room as the door opens and the smell of nine days dead enters, and with it a figure, wrinkled and toad-like, scant white hair about its head. It looms a deliberate moment above the truckle beds so that their occupants may see and cry out before cold and wrinkled hands reach down and work among the pillows.

The clock above the stables tolls one.

Ilbridge House stood in an almost knowing silence, broken only by the sound of weeping. For twelve nights running Elizabeth had retreated to her room alone. Though she never said as much outright, James knew she blamed him for what had happened. And now they wore their mourning raiment without pretence.

The daily inspections of his estate farms James Merewether now carried out in a mechanical way, neither heeding his workers' condolences nor his overseer's reports. At night he lay awake listening to those intermittent stretches of quiet he hated which preceded the sobbing from his wife's own room. It was the anticipation, the waiting that strung out his nerves the most. Not that he hadn't done his own weeping. “We acted for the best,” he would whisper into the dark.

Then on that twelfth night there came another sound to his ears, a softness as of naked feet moving stealthily down the passage outside his room, heard in the silences between the sobs. He realized he'd been hearing the noise approach for several minutes, but had been deigning its existence to himself. As he stared out into the darkness for a moment a

darker shadow crept slowly past his open doorway. He sat up in his bed, heart racing, telling himself it was imagination, that it was a waking dream, that it was anything than what he knew it to be. The smell of death was in the night air.

From the next room he heard his wife say in a small, cracked voice, "He is here."

As James scrambled in the dark for a candle and a tinderbox, managing only to knock them to the floor, he heard his wife continuing to speak, her voice coming intermittent and in rising pitch: "... not let you take ... insidious design ... flesh ... life ... monstrous ..."

Her words crescendoed into a long, loud shriek. James leapt from his bed, catching in the bed curtains, colliding with a cabinet, rushing headlong into something cold and wrinkled in his wife's bedroom doorway. He recoiled an instant and dim candlelight from within the room came into view as something passed by him and into the dark.

Ghastly shadows flickered over his wife's prone body dragged half out of bed. Her mouth gaped open in that last despairing cry now silent in her throat, and her eyes were wide with what they had seen.

As he bent to her, knowing in his heart that she was dead, he realized pale light now streamed from behind. He turned sharp about – to see the footman in his nightshirt standing in the doorway holding a candle in a china candlestick.

"What was it, sir?" he gasped.

"You saw it?"

"I saw ... something," said the man, his face bloodless and white.

"Fool!" said James Merewether in a sudden spasm of passion and, snatching the candlestick from his hand, pushed the man aside to race out into the passage, shielding the flame with his hand as he ran. And as he ran he was dimly aware of running down the wake of some disagreeable odour growing stronger with every flying step he took. He was not surprised to find the trail leading to the nursery.

Its door was firmly shut, as it had been firmly shut since that day twelve nights ago. Yet the odour of death led here. Stepping forward, he threw the door open, then for some moments stood looking narrowly into the interior, holding the candle in one hand, the candlestick upraised and ready in the other. He did not know – or did not want to know – what he expected to confront in there, though he was conscious of surprise at the nursery not smelling as of a charnel house in summer. There was only the mustiness that any room closed off for a prolonged period might produce. Yet for all that it was midnight it was not entirely dark within.

The children's toys, and all of them works of love by their father, lay between the empty truckle beds and were illuminated in a dirty grey glow. It seemed to seep from Rodger's frontier fort, its officers and soldiers standing ready, its sentries still at their posts, looking for the return of their young master. It clung like a visible miasma to Bessie's dolls' house, all Gothic arches and turrets and windows, with its population poised within.

The soldiers in the fort turned stiffly, awakening puppets to face James Merewether. The the people in the dolls' house filed out its front door and regarded him steadfastly. They raised their tiny arms and pointed their tiny fingers at him: the officers and soldiers, the gentleman in blue satin, the lady in brocade, the little boy and the little girl, the nurse, the stable staff, the old man in his white nightshirt who alone of the dolls was laughing silently.

“No!” said James Merewether, staring. “No!”

The dolls' house was not now a four roomed model with a movable front, but a living image of Ilbridge House, to one side its stables with turret clock, to the other its chapel of coloured glass windows. Here the gentleman and the lady talked earnestly in the dining room, though not a word could be heard; now the gentleman stood on the front doorstep, shaking his fist at a lighted upper window; now the lady entered that upstairs bedroom to smile and give poison to the old man anxious in his four-poster.

Now the old man started up in his bed, hands clutching at his heart, uttering a cry unheard. Now the servants rushed in, and with them the gentleman and the lady who then backed into the shadows to hide their expressions of quiet glee.

James gave a gasp of bitter sweet surprise at the sight of his children in happy play with Elizabeth and himself on that fateful night relived itself before him. Then with a groan of he saw into the chapel and to what was now happening there.

With one last look at the nursery within the dolls' house, where a dirty grey light now dawned around the door-case, James Merewether raced from the room, fearful of meeting what he had glimpsed entering it as he ran through that self same door.

Somewhere behind him a clock bell tolled one.

Elizabeth's funeral, much to her husband's surprise and dismay, was attended by the white-wigged gentleman in black, arriving in his coach, its flambeaux burning against the night. Still carrying his small leather case he stood in the dark at a respectful distance from those gathered about the torch-lit gravesite, a smile lurking at his mouth.

Days afterwards James Merewether returned to the nursery – then returned again and again to watch in perverse fascination the re-enactment of his sins, those of his wife, and their awful consequences.

“We acted for the best,” he would say with hot tears rolling down his face, the dolls' house mercilessly replayed the plotting, the poisoning, the joyful play, the vile retribution. Once he stood over it with an axe, but couldn't bring himself to destroy it. What if its destruction should be replicated in reality? Or if in some occult manner the blow kill himself? Was it not his own handiwork, physically and spiritually? No, he could not do it, though he often felt now that his life was not worth living. The punishment enacted on his wife and children had been lenient compared to his own.

Trusting no servant to help him, he carried the dolls' house alone and with much difficulty to the lumber room immediately below the roof, placing it in a far corner, covering it with a sheet. He then locked the door and threw away the key, leaving the dolls' house to tell its tale to the dark and to the dust of the years. But wherever he was throughout those years he could always feel it repeating the deeds done, the crimes committed – a conscience of painted wood and coloured glass and moving shadows best kept hidden.

James Merewether soon afterwards retired to the seclusion of Ilbridge House, a failed and broken man, having never accomplished any real recognition in architecture. Growing pandemoniously fearful of the creeping dirty-grey light of winter sunrises, and firmly convinced all windows were watching, in his later years he became known in Coxham parish as Old Mad Merewether.

John Merewether, heir to the estate on his uncle's decease, could scarce credit the shameful family secret played out by the dolls' house discovered in its place of concealment on the demolition of Ilbridge House. He eventually secreted it away in the lumber room of his own residence where it remained until sold many years later and thankfully by his descendants to a travelling buyer of antiques.

Who, after watching the hideous pantomime one, two, and three nights running, sold it for a quick ten pounds to an antiques dealer named Mr Chittenden.

Who, professing he needn't waste money on the cinema when he and his wife could view a drama of the olden times performing in their own household every one o'clock in the morning, sold it on without warning or explanation to an avid collector, Mr Dillet, the owner of a motor car, a fine house and a keen eye for bargains.

Who, frightened into a disquieting state of nerves requiring sea air medically prescribed, had the dolls' house covered with a sheet and conveyed to the loft.

John Merewether sees his late uncle and aunt in murderous conversation in the dining room, lit by a single candle.

The antiques buyer sees the man in blue satin shake a fist at the upper window.

Mr Chittenden and his wife watch the old man start up in his bed, face flushed, eyes glaring, hands at his heart, foam at his lips.

Mr Dillet sees a coach with flambeaux pulling up before the front door, a white-wigged man all in black alighting.

A figure, wrinkled, toad-like with scant white hair about its head, peers into the dolls' house windows as in the nursery a figure, wrinkled, toad-like and with scant white hair about its head, looms a deliberate moment above the truckle beds so that their occupants may see and cry out before cold and wrinkled hands reach down to work among the pillows ...

END



THE PARTY

ROBERT KRUT

1.
You received an invitation.
On the invitation, a blueprint of a building.
On the envelope an insignia of a clock-faced sun,
an arrow through its core.

2.
The building is on the outer rim of the city,
the street with the sinkhole from the last storm.
Above its entrance, a bas relief of a god
assembling the world, or taking it apart in pieces.

3.
In the vestibule, a crate of old fruit,
strawberries now white with fur.
In the lobby, a blue doorman's hat, upside down,
a beetle scurrying along its insides.

4.
On the sixth floor, the top floor,
a block of sun cubes itself through the hallway.
The carpet pattern starts as two thick lines
that turn to lightning bolts further down.

5.
Near the window, the dead end of the hallway,
a one-armed bartender prepares your cocktail.
On his eye patch, mother of pearl circled
by stitching of a solar system.



6.

Speechless, he makes your drink:
water in a mason jar, then six spoonfuls of sugar,
then, from an eye dropper, six tear drops of arsenic,
then more sugar, a thin slice of horizontal lemon.

7.

A chair sits at the hallway window and you take it.
Behind you, the bartender walks away,
picks up the dropped orange, heads down the stairs.
It is silent.

8.

You clutch the armrests, a skull carved into each elbow.
Through the window, you see the sinkhole,
looking like the imprint of a missing boulder,
like the busted mouth of the Earth.

9.

Reaching for your drink, your arm
is a phantom limb.
Looking in the glass,
an iris cups the surface of the liquid.

10.

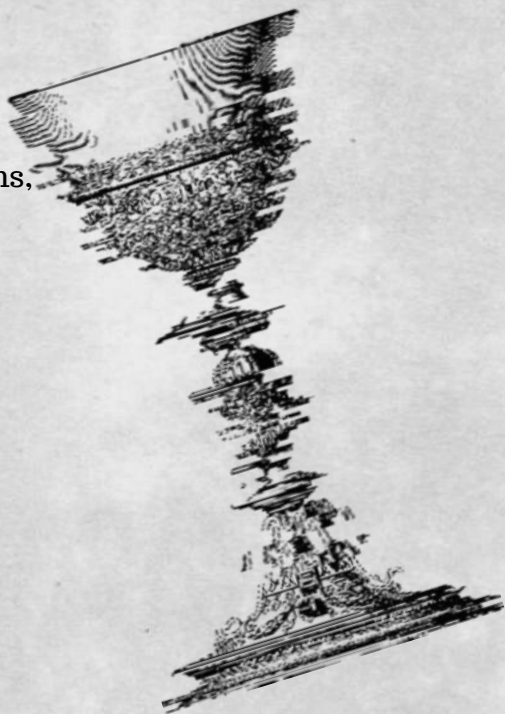
And you can see out the window:
a compass of bodies, from all directions,
walk toward the hole, wordless,
climb in and vanish.

11.

Never even breaking pace,
never hearing you shout
stop at the top of your lungs
through a mouthless face—

12.

—as they disappear, disappear,
disappear.



CONTRIBUTORS



Melissa E. Jordan - The Minnesota Tip



Melissa E. Jordan was primarily raised in Connecticut, and currently lives in the northwestern part of the state. Her recent poetry collection, Red Low Fog/Transcript (Animal Heart Press, 2022) is a hybrid poetry/fiction collection in the form of a documentary transcript. Each interview subject speaks in their own specific category of poetry.

Her previous collection, Bain-Marie (Big Wonderful Press) was published in 2015. Jordan's poems have appeared in The Cossack Review, The Dillydoun Review, Open: Journal of Art & Letters, Word Riot, Otis Nebula, Terrain, Off the Coast, Rat's Ass Review, and elsewhere.

Jordan, who has worked as a newspaper reporter, freelance journalist and as a communications specialist for an anti-hunger agency, is currently working on a graphic verse novel/alternative history project with her husband, the writer/illustrator Michael A.Reilly.

The Minnesota Tip was first published by *Off The Coast* 2013



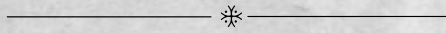
Jacqueline Doyle - Raney's Imaginary Friend



Jacqueline Doyle is the author of the award-winning flash chapbook The Missing Girl (Black Lawrence Press). Her fiction and essays have appeared in The Gettysburg Review, Midway Journal, Post Road, Passages North, Fourth Genre, New World Writing, and elsewhere. Her work has earned numerous Pushcart nominations and Notable Essay citations in Best American Essays. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, and can be found online at www.jacquelinedoyle.com

Raney's Imaginary Friend was first published by *The Ginger Collect* 2018

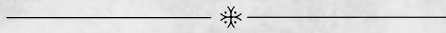
Amy Barnes - Tuesday at the Monastery



Amy Cipolla Barnes has words at many places. Her third collection “Child Craft” was published by Belle Point Press in September 2023.

Tuesday at the Monastery was first published by *X-R-A-Y Lit* 2019

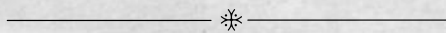
Sherry Morris - Never Going Green



Originally from Missouri, Sherry Morris (@Uksherka) writes prize-winning fiction from a farm in the Scottish Highlands where she pets cows, watches clouds and dabbles in photography. She reads for the wonderfully wacky Taco Bell Quarterly and her first published story was about her Peace Corps experience in 1990s Ukraine. Read more of her work at www.uksherka.com

Never Going Green was first published by *Cranked Anvil* 2020

Christina Hennemann - Hotel Samhain



Christina Hennemann is a poet and prose writer based in Ireland. Her poetry pamphlet “Illuminations at Nightfall” was published by Sunday Mornings at the River in 2022. She’s a recipient of the Irish Arts Council’s Agility Award ’23 and the winner of the Luain Press Prize. She was shortlisted in the Anthology Poetry Award & Dark Winter Contest, and longlisted in the National Poetry Competition. Her work is forthcoming or appears in Poetry Wales, The Iowa Review, Skylight 47, The Moth, York Literary Review, fifth wheel, Ink Sweat & Tears, Moria, National Poetry Month Canada, and elsewhere. www.christinahennemann.com

Hotel Samhain was first published by *orangepeel magazine* 2021

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Rick Kennett - Dolls for Another Day

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Rick Kennett lives in Melbourne, Australia. Recently retired from a 42 year career in the transport industry, he now lives the life of an idler and a ne'er-do-well. His work has appeared in several magazines, anthologies and podcasts. He has five books up on Amazon. A co-authored collection of Edwardian psychical detective stories will be published by Cathaven Press in the UK next year.

Dolls for Another Day was first published by *The Ghosts & Scholars Book of Shadows 2*, Sarob Press

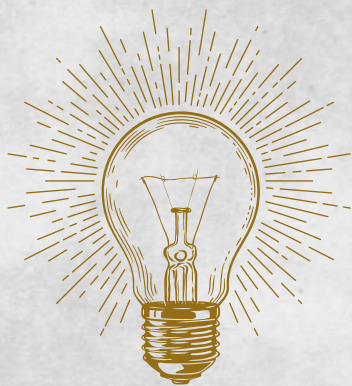
Robert Krut - The Party

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Robert Krut is the author of four books: *Watch Me Trick Ghosts* (Codhill/SUNY Press, 2021); *The Now Dark Sky, Setting Us All On Fire* (Codhill/SUNY Press, 2019), which received the Codhill Poetry Award; *This Is the Ocean* (Bona Fide Books, 2013); and *The Spider Sermons* (BlazeVox, 2009). More information can be found at www.robert-krut.com.

The Party was first published by *The Manhattanville Review* 2018

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