

BLACK MARKET REVIEW

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BLACK MARKET RE-VIEW



Online Literary Journal

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JL Higgs

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There are people who make a lasting impression regardless of how long or short you know them. For me, that was Robin. Things familiar to me now, the city, apartment living, etc... were new back then. But life's a journey filled with constant discoveries.

When Jules submitted her resume for the job in New York City, we had no expectations. She'd been job hunting for months without any luck. But, after nailing her phone interview and flying to New York City to interview in person, she got the offer. So, we swapped the unpredictable winters of Michigan for that of an East Coast cousin.

I had contacted my old college roommate, Bill, about helping me land a job in the city. We both had journalism degrees. But the day before our move, he called and told me his company had canceled all its open positions. Staffing reductions. That meant money was going to be tight. So, instead of taking a couple of days to settle in, Jules decided to start her new job the day after the move.

I was on the front stoop of our new apartment building, wrestling with grocery bags while trying to unlock the front door when someone said, "It looks like you could use some help."

And that's how I met Robin. My friends thought Jules was attractive and that I was one lucky dog. But this girl? Hazel eyes, shoulder-length black hair, and an endearing dimpled smile? Stunning didn't begin to describe her. Bouncing

past me, she unlocked the building's outer door and held it open so I could enter.

'You're the new neighbor,' she said, keying in the code to the inner door in the vestibule. 'I saw you and your wife moving in yesterday.'

'Jim,' I said, slipping into the lobby.

'Robin,' she replied, smiling. 'No need to shake. Your hands seem rather occupied at the moment.'

'Girlfriend,' I said. 'Jules and I aren't married.'

'Jules and Jim,' she repeated. 'Cute, like the film. Let me help.'

Before I could say that I could handle it, she'd taken two bags and was leading the way up the stairs. She moved with the confidence of a woman accustomed to being admired and desired. Upon reaching the third floor, she stood aside while I dug out my key to the apartment.

'You guys could use a decorator,' she said, eyeing the disheveled mattress and open suitcases laying on our scratched and stained bedroom floor.

'Post-college chic,' I replied, leading the way to the kitchen. I hated to imagine what she'd think of the floor lamp, TV tray tables and folding metal chairs in our front room.

'You're cute.' For a moment she seemed pensive, then those dimples appeared. 'You guys should come to my party tonight.'

'On a Monday?'

'Yeah. Why not? I say, never pass on an opportunity to have fun.'

Turning to leave, she breezed through the apartment's narrow hallway.

'See you tonight,' she called out, closing the front door behind her.

When Jules got home from work, she went straight to the bedroom and collapsed on our mattress. I propped myself up on an elbow beside her,

leaned over and kissed each of her closed eyelids. She pulled me down on top of her and kissed me deeply.

‘How was your first day?’ I asked.

She shrugged.

‘I bet you could use a nice relaxing bath.’

While Jules stripped off her clothes, I filled the tub. After checking the water’s temperature, I called her. When she saw the three scented candles, I’d lit and placed on the shelf at the foot of the tub, she smiled. Then she stepped into the water. I shed my clothes, slid in behind her and wrapped my arms around her. With the candlelight reflecting off the bathroom walls, she laid her head on my chest and snuggled against me.

Over dinner, I told Jules I’d met a neighbor who invited us to a party.

‘But she doesn’t even know us. I’m beat. Why don’t you go without me?’

Under other circumstances, I’d have said OK. But going to this party without Jules made little sense to me.

‘All right,’ she said, breaking the silence. ‘But only for a little while.’

Given the noise in the stairwell and all the people milling around it was easy to know the location of the party. Jules and I were easing our way through the crowd on the fourth floor when I heard Robin scream, ‘You made it!’

She squeezed her way over to us, threw her arms around my neck and kissed me.

‘You must be Jules,’ she said, swaying as she held out her hand.

‘Julia,’ replied Jules, giving me a look as she shook Robin’s hand.

‘Jules and Jimmie,’ said Robin, her eyes swimming. ‘Just like the movie.’ She laughed, then began hiccuping. ‘Everybody!’ she yelled between

hiccup. 'This here's Jules and Jimmie.' She pointed at us. 'They're my new best friends!'

With everyone's attention turned to us I gave an embarrassed wave. Jules glared at me, her eyes pinpricks.

'You need a drink, Jimmie,' Robin said, slurring my name. She grabbed my hand and plunged into the crowd. Stopping, she turned and gestured toward Jules. 'Well, come on.'

As Robin towed me across the threshold to her apartment, I saw it was less crowded in there, though still wall-to-wall people.

'Mai, Jimmie. Jimmie, Mai,' Robin called out, dragging me past an Asian looking girl with straight jet black hair.

When we reached the kitchen, she waved a hand at the large assortment of liquor, beer and wine bottles lining the counter.

'What'll you have?' she asked, scooping up a plastic cup and downing whatever it contained in a single gulp.

'Well,...' I said, a look passing between Jules and me.

'Bernie! BEEERNIEEEEE!' yelled Robin, while stomping her feet. A guy with shoulder length curly hair and a beard broke off the conversation he was having. As Robin gestured come here with both hands, he sauntered over.

When he reached her side, she leaned in and whispered in his ear. He smiled, palmed something to her, then winked as he did the thumb firing a gun move as he walked away.

'We're good to go,' she said, opening her hand, showing a joint. She lit up, took a solid hit, then offered it to Jules.

The next morning I was awakened by the sound of someone pounding on the apartment door. In my pajama bottoms and bare feet, I got up and staggered forth, thinking Jules may have forgotten her key. But when I opened the door, Robin was there in a tank top and gym shorts.

‘C’mon sleepy head. Time to get up and go,’ she announced.

‘Go?’ I turned and shuffled toward the kitchen like a condemned man.

‘We’ve got places to go,’ she said following me. ‘Things to do.’

‘You’re kidding,’ I said, dropping onto one of our metal folding chairs.

‘No. No. No,’ she said, grabbing my hands and pulling me to my feet. Then she marched me to the bedroom and with a firm shove in the back, ordered me to get dressed.

That day, I got introduced to the neighborhood kiddie playground. We hit the slides, climbed on the monkey bars, and spun on the merry-go-round until we were dizzy. After a short break, she led me to the swings and commanded me to sit. As I sat down, she grabbed the chains and hoisted herself up, placing a foot on each side of the seat beside my thighs. With us facing in opposite directions, her standing and me seated, she leaned back and bent her knees. Then she drove her legs forward while pulling hard with her arms. As I felt myself swing backward, I folded my legs, then pulled on the chains while kicking out my legs. The swing’s momentum reversed and as we double pumped it flowed back and forth like a pendulum. On each sweep, Robin’s tank top and shorts billowed like a sail, then fluttered back to press against her body. Later, our tired bodies draping over-sized molded animals anchored to the ground by industrial-sized springs, I asked her what she did for work.

‘I’m a model/actress,’ she replied, tossing her weight to one side. The pink and white unicorn she was sitting on dipped low, then righted itself, swaying from side to side. ‘You?’

‘An unemployed person with a degree in journalism,’ I responded, pretending to giddy-up the aqua seahorse I was on with my heels.

‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ she asked.

I shrugged.

‘Same here,’ she responded.

The next day passed without a word from Robin. I spent it searching newspapers and online databases for job openings. Most either wanted almost ten years of experience, which I didn't have or looked like loss leaders.

That evening, after dinner, Jules and I wandered around the neighborhood. I pointed out the playground where Robin and I had spent the prior day. She seemed less than impressed and had no interest in trying out the equipment.

Thursday, like Wednesday, passed without me seeing hide nor hair of Robin. Though we barely knew each other, I felt somewhat abandoned. Still, given Jules and my financial situation, finding a job was priority one. So I kept busy updating my resume and submitting it for a few jobs I was grossly under-qualified for.

That night, around the time Jules normally got home, my cell rang. She said she was going to be home late. I told her I'd have dinner waiting for her, then asked if everything was all right. She responded, 'Why wouldn't it be?'

When Jules arrived home, I was in the front room playing my umpteenth game of solitaire. She declared herself tired and in need of a relaxing bath. Assessing her mood, I decided to give her some space and went to warm up dinner. Next thing I knew, she was screaming my name.

I ran down the hallway and burst into the bathroom. Jules was standing at the head of the tub and pointing toward its far end yelling, 'Kill it, Jim! Kill it!'

On the wall above the foot of the tub was the most humongous cockroach I'd ever seen. Its antennae wiggled in delight over the chaos it was causing.

'Kill it! Kill it!' she yelled, water streaming down her shaking body.

I scanned the room. Loofah, sponges, washcloths, towels, her clothes balled up on the floor. There was nothing for me to smash this thing with. Resigned to using my bare hand, I suddenly grabbed my sneaker, ripped it off my foot, and smacked it against the wall.

When I lifted the sneaker away, part of the bug's crushed carcass came with the sole. The rest of the disgusting creature remained splattered on the wall. I grabbed some TP, wiped the wall clean, my shoe, then tossed the fouled tissue into the toilet and flushed. Still standing in the water and shivering, Jules whispered thank you.

After telling her I'd be right back, I took the steps up to the fourth floor two at a time and knocked on Robin's door. It opened, and I stood face-to-face with Mai, the girl I'd been quasi-introduced to at the party.

'Robin, here?'

'LA. She's working for a few days. Come on in. I just got home.'

Shoving the door shut with her foot, she scooped up an orange cat a split second before it could escape. Holding the cat belly side up in her arms, she scratched it between the ears. It purred, eyes closed and lips curled in ecstasy.

'We've got roaches,' I said. 'Do you?'

'Mrs. Boots,' she replied, snuggling the cat.

'Great. I think Jules may be allergic.'

Not having had a chance to see their apartment the night of the party, I looked around. It was at least twice the size of ours and took up the entire fourth floor. The front room's furnishings were ultra-modern, chrome, glass, and black leather with clean straight lines. Whereas the walls throughout our apartment were flaking and cracked plaster, theirs were exposed brick painted stark white contrasted by a ceiling of exposed wood beams.

Each wall held a poster-sized headshot of Robin. In a front-facing photo, she had straight black shoulder length hair with bangs reminiscent of Liz Taylor as Cleopatra. On another wall, in a three-quarter pose, she resembled Farrah Fawcett with long flowing wavy blond locks and a sparkling toothy smile. There was even one of Robin in profile with short slicked back red hair. That

one reminded me of Tilda Swinton. Each photo was so distinctive, she was like a chameleon.

Continuing to scratch the cat's head, Mai turned and started toward their kitchen. 'She's beautiful, isn't she? Did you know she'd won a number of beauty pageants?'

I trailed Mai down the hallway. It was also dominated by large portrait photos of Robin with her hair in varying lengths and colors.

'Why only pictures of Robin?' I asked, passing two bedrooms. The first held a bentwood rocker, dresser, a king-sized cherry wood bed covered with an afghan, and a luxurious Persian Rug. The other only had a small gooseneck reading lamp and a mattress on the floor covered with an orange and red batik bedspread.

'It's her apartment,' said Mai, putting down the cat. 'Tea?'

'Sure.' I slid a chair out from the kitchen table while Mai filled the kettle and set it on the stove's front burner.

'But you live here, too.'

'Yeah. Thanks to Robin's sister, Mandy. We're BFFs. We all went to school together.'

'Here in New York?'

'No,' she said, laughing. 'Wisconsin. Robin was a few years ahead of her sister and me. She was head cheerleader, homecoming queen, and prom queen. When I got accepted to school in New York, Mandy put us in touch. Robin was already living here.'

I kept silent and let my mind absorb this information.

'Water's hot,' Mai said, removing the kettle from the burner. 'What kind of tea would you like?'

Late that night, while sleeping, there was a soft tapping sound that went on and on in my dream. The incessant sound pushed me toward consciousness

until I realized it was coming from our front door. Bleary-eyed, I slipped out of bed quietly so as not to awaken Jules, and tiptoed to the door. When I cracked it open, Robin was there in a strange French Maid outfit with a canvas bag slung over her shoulder.

‘What time is it?’ I whispered, rubbing my eyes.

‘After midnight,’ she answered, her eyes as large as quarters and glowing like a cat’s in the dark. ‘Get dressed. The show starts in about twenty minutes.’

‘What are...’

‘Hurry. Hurry,’ she said, her voice louder and authoritative.

I placed a finger to my lips and shushed her. Then, my mind still foggy, I staggered back to the bedroom, pulled on a pair of pants, a t-shirt, and sneakers.

‘What took so long?’ asked Robin when I returned.

‘I left Jules a note in case she woke up while I was gone.’

‘C’mon,’ she said, grabbing my hand as she took off running, dragging me behind her.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Rocky Horror,’ she announced with glee.

I’d never been to the Rocky Horror Picture Show, but I’d heard about it. The movie was usually shown after midnight and some people showed up dressed as characters in the film. At points during the movie, the audience yelled lines from the script, hurled insults at the characters, and deployed props; toast, newspapers, water pistols, etc... One highlight of each showing involved the audience members dressed as characters rushing to the screen to do a musical number with their on-screen counterparts.

Robin and I arrived just before the film started. The air inside the packed theater was heavy with the pungent smell of pot. Luckily, Robin’s friend Bernie, and a few other people she knew had saved us seats.

As a pair of ruby lips appeared on the screen, Robin dug into her canvas bag and distributed its contents. I soon caught on to my role as an audience member. Tossing toast, rice, squirting my water pistol, etc... I got swept up in the energy of the crowd.

When the show ended, and we left the theater, it was still dark. Robin, dressed as Magenta, Bernie, dressed as Frank N Furter, and I said goodbye to their friends. As we reached the street corner, Robin and Bernie dashed into the middle of the multi-lane avenue and started singing and dancing.

‘What are you doing?’ I yelled from the safety of the sidewalk.

‘The Time Warp,’ they replied in unison.

Suddenly, I spotted car headlights racing toward them. I ran into the street, grabbed Robin, and continued on until we reached the other side of the street. There, I set her on her feet.

‘Who knew Speed Racer would be out tonight,’ said Bernie, laughing while gasping for breath beside me.

The cars screamed past and one of the drivers’ leaned on his horn. Robin gave him the finger. Then she turned, curtsied, and said, ‘my hero,’ smiling at me.

After that night, Robin disappeared again for a couple of days. The next time I saw her I was returning from an early morning run and almost collided with a short haired blonde.

‘Miss me?’ asked the blonde, standing in front of an open mailbox, her back to me.

‘What did you do to your hair?’ tumbled out of my mouth as I recognized Robin.

‘Surprise,’ she said. Holding up both hands, she turned in a complete circle, modeling her new look for me. ‘What are you doing later today?’

‘Job hunting,’ I replied.

‘Booring,’ she said.

Boring. Dull. Too serious. Too safe. Too cautious. Afraid to let loose. I'd heard them all millions of times. The only person who'd always accepted me as I was had been Jules. Granted, our life together lacked the constant excitement I'd experienced with Robin, but I hadn't ever questioned its solid stability.

'I've got two express tickets to the Empire State Building.'

Though I had yet to do anything touristy in New York, I hesitated. I needed to find a job. Still, what good was living in New York City if you didn't take advantage of being there? And how could I possibly say no to Robin?

'All right,' I said.

Late that afternoon, Robin came by and picked me up. At the Empire State Building, she presented our tickets, and security whisked us to the head of the lines. I felt slight pressure in my head on the elevator ride up to the 86th floor, but the views of the city from the open observation deck were spectacular.

'It's amazing isn't it,' Robin said, wrapping her arms around mine and leaning her head against my shoulder.

A million thoughts began running through my mind. She was unlike anyone I'd ever known.

'C'mon,' she said, letting go of my arm, breaking the spell. She grabbed my hand and led me toward the other side of the deck.

Separated from the crowd, she reached in her canvas shoulder bag and pulled out two paper airplanes.

'Here,' she said, handing me one.

Holding the other plane with her fingers, she cocked her arm, then snapped it forward, launching it. Then I threw mine.

The planes drifted downward, floating slowly before being buoyed up by an invisible force. They stalled, their wings rippling. Then an updraft pointed their noses upward. They soared through the sky high above the rooftops and dove toward the alleyways. Sweeping and slicing through the air, they moved

like ballet dancers executing an intricate series of dips and turns. Often on the verge of touching, they'd draw ever so close to one another, before parting, each continuing to seek its own separate path to its journey's end.

Once again, after we'd gone to the Empire State Building together, I didn't see or hear from Robin for days. Though we'd known each other less than two weeks, I'd grown accustomed to her sudden disappearances.

Jules and I spent Saturday evening bar hopping with a group of her co-workers, so she slept in on Sunday morning. I went out to scrounge up bagels, coffee, and a newspaper. When I got back, bounty in hand, someone with short red hair was climbing the staircase. Despite the hair color, the sway of the hips was a dead giveaway. Robin.

'Hey stranger,' I called, bounding up the steps to catch up to her.

'Hey,' she said, stopping and turning to face me.

Her eyes held none of their normal mischievousness. Instead, they were empty and sunk deep in their sockets. Shadowy circles covered the skin around them as if she hadn't slept in weeks. I started to speak but her forearms, bandaged from wrist to elbow with a thick gauze, rendered me mute.

'My mother's coming. I've got to go,' she said, turning away and dashing up the stairs.

Rooted to the step we'd both been standing on a moment before, I called out, 'What happened?' The sound of a closing door was the only reply.

My mind couldn't shed the image of Robin with her forearms bandaged. It haunted me, gripping and squeezing so tightly I felt it would never let me go. Days passed without any Robin sightings. I was on edge. Jules asked if something was going on, but I didn't know what to say or do. Robin and I were friends, weren't we? Or something else? What the hell had happened?

Finally, I couldn't wait any longer, I went upstairs to check on her. When I knocked, Mai opened the door, holding Mrs. Boots. When I asked if Robin was around. Mai shook her head and said she'd left.

‘You mean for work? A job?’

‘No,’ she said softly.

‘I don’t understand,’ I said, following her toward the kitchen.

Mai handed me Mrs. Boots, and I leaned against a countertop.

‘Mrs. Winters took Robin with her, back to Wisconsin.’

‘Wait, a minute. Who’s Mrs. Winters? Is that her mother?’

‘Yes,’ answered Mai, slumping into one of the kitchen chairs.

‘What about her acting and modeling careers? Her life’s here. You guys have a nice apartment and...’

‘Robin tried to kill herself.’

‘Nah,’ I said setting down Mrs. Boots. ‘That doesn’t make any sense.’

Mai sighed. ‘Robin had been lying to her mother. About everything. Her life. Her career. Mandy alerted me that Mrs. Winters was planning a surprise visit, and I told Robin. I never imagined she’d try to kill herself. It’s my fault.’ Mai began to cry.

‘No,’ I said. My mind told me to comfort her, give her a reassuring touch. But my body was wooden. I kept my distance and did nothing.

‘Back home, Robin was the girl we all wanted to be. Beautiful, popular, always a winner. But things didn’t work out here. She tried modeling. She joined a small local theater group. But New York is full of beautiful looking girls and aspiring actors. In the end, she joined an escort service and ended up meeting some people who hired her to be a fluffer. That’s why her work and travel schedule was so erratic.’ Mai leaned forward on the table, put her head in her hands and shook it from side to side.

For a moment, I just froze. Then everything Mai had said fully registered with me. Left speechless, I could only stare at her.

A few days later, I was on my laptop looking at job postings and heard a soft tap on my door. When I opened it, Mai was there with Mrs. Boots.

'I can't afford the apartment on my own, so I'm moving in with some kids from school,' she said. 'No pets allowed, except tropical fish. Here.' She handed me Mrs. Boots. 'She'll definitely resolve your roach problem.'

That was the last time I saw Mai. And Robin? I never saw or heard from her again. The landlord listed their apartment for rent, but it languished on the market. Too expensive for people who typically live in this part of the city. I ended up landing a job with a marketing firm where I still work. Jules? We're together. She's changed jobs a few times over the past couple of years, moving up the corporate ladder. We still have Mrs. Boots and we're in the same apartment building, except now we live in the furnished apartment on the fourth floor.

William Doreski

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He previously taught writing and literature at Keene State College. He has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in many journals and several small-press books.

Skipping Stones

If I stand on the shore long enough, I can see the water fold over itself, thickening into strata tougher than stone. The islands drift in haze the color of old wool socks. The beach-pebbles, mostly granite, quartz, and basalt, gnash with grave intent. You hesitate on the grassy bank above the beach. You long for the lighthouse, for its eloquence and companionship. It's too formal for me, but you'd wrap your arms around it, uproot it and take it home, if you could. Don't try it. Even if you succeed in lifting a hundred tons of stone, brick, and plaster you have no place to site it. Come down to the edge of the bay and watch me skip stones. One, two five, seven skips. I'm getting better at it. If I live to a hundred I'll have skipped enough stones to circumnavigate the planet. Each splash is a tiny word. If you come closer you can hear them. If you listen hard and long enough you can learn to speak water, water, water in every known tongue.

Incestuous Landscapes

Incestuous landscapes resist
painterly or prose depiction.
The yellow light of autumn woods
erodes our final innocence
and leaves us breathless in the leaves.
No birdsong, not even a croak.
Wordsworth is too much with us,
you complain with wrought iron
metaphor tweaking the geese
flocking south in ragged vees.

The agony of tended gardens
no longer matters. Catalogued
in a dozen periodicals, style
clashes gladly with the zeitgeist.
Textiles adrift in the ether
rarely swoop low enough to drape
your infallible grayish form.
You no longer read away long
and graceful evenings sketched
by old masters long departed.

You no longer believe that Keats
the boy-poet would love you
more than he loved Fanny Brawne.
You no longer resist the pastels
that erase distinctions among
the flora and fauna you choose
to represent your little desires.
How did you manage to gather
so many day-stars keening
for a greater sense of depth?

The landscapes overlap and sigh
that sigh that only siblings
share in their first great passion.
You want to expose whatever
Wordsworth forgot to expose.
But you don't want to bother
with all that sly textuality,
although this autumn dance lacks
choreography precise enough
to distinguish converging genders

Of the Social Fabric

All night the cats fuss and scratch
in their litterbox. They ignore
the grisly chrome yellow moon
peeled from an amateur painting
and pasted on the bedroom window.
You don't ignore it, though, your face
mirroring the purest lunar fact,
although the painter failed to catch it.

Devious moments pass, drowsy
with a cunning drift into dream.
Who knows how authentic your smile
becomes when you discuss the fate
of women in political updrafts?
Their summer dresses flutter
and drop like whole trees of leaves.
They expose their secret metaphors

without a hint of consequence,
but the men in power smirk and sneer
with upper lips warped to conform
to horizons concealed in mist.
You observe this shadow play
deforming the local landscape,
and sigh at the counterfeit moon
with sighs the color of silage.

The season undresses so slowly
hardly anyone bothers to notice
the moment it's finally naked.
The politicians spill their coffee
in their laps and blame the women
who no longer meet their needs.
The cats scrabble in at the litter,
determined to conceal the mess
everyone makes of their lives.

Srinjay Chakravarti

Srinjay Chakravarti is a writer, editor and translator based in Salt Lake City, Calcutta, India. A former journalist with The *Financial Times* Group, he has worked on the editorial staff of an international online financial news service. His work has appeared in over 100 publications in 30-odd countries, including *Other Poetry*, *Acumen*, *Orbis*, *The Interpreter's House*, *FIRE*, *The Journal*, *In Protest—150 Poems for Human Rights*, *The Dawntreader*, *Lacuna*, and many more. His first book of poems *Occam's Razor* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta: 1994) received the Salt Literary Award from John Kinsella in 1995, and he won the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Memorial Poetry Competition 2007–08.

THE HALL WITH THE TWO MIRRORS

You and I, we enter the hall together.

There is nothing in the hall except two huge full-length mirrors on opposite walls, facing each other. The other walls are blank, whitewashed, like the empty pages of a new journal.

Each mirror reflects the other, in an infinitude of mirrors—we see ourselves replicated in an infinite succession of images in the unblemished glass.

You and I, we bring a large table into the room, and place it at its centre. I sit down and start writing a story: this story. It's all about you reading a story written by me, about a reader who is reading a story by an author who has written about the reader.

So when you pick up this story and start to read it, you find yourself descending into a dizzying vortex: for it is about a reader who reads a story about a writer who has written a story about a reader reading another story about an author who has written a story about a reader who is reading such a story, and so on and on.

And all this is happening in a bare, windowless room with two mirrors facing each other, where an infinitude of reflections reflect each other in a succession of images, and you read this story about me writing about you reading about me. . .

False Dawn

Last evening, a beautification project at our sprawling local park saw the light of day at long last—and in more ways than one.

Our local councillor cut the ribbon at seven o'clock, by which time Calcutta's tropical twilight had deepened into an indigo night. The spectators clapped in bored, polite unison as he concluded his speech. Then a microphone cheerily blared forth a patriotic Bengali song, a few youngsters scattered handfuls of marigold petals and confetti, and the dignitary pressed a switch to inaugurate a musical fountain. Rainbow colours shimmered as jets of sparkling water writhed and whirled in the arc lights, and at last there was some enthusiastic cheering to enliven the listless evening.

The Councillor then pressed the button on the switchboard to light up the new neon and halogen lamps—and they blazed forth in all their golden glory, as pure and brilliant as morning sunshine.

No hyperbole, that. There was a tremendous clamour at once as all the birds in the park woke up to the start of a spurious new day, deceived by the lamps' caricature of morning sunshine. Crows, sparrows, mynahs, pigeons, doves, even woodpeckers, orioles and hummingbirds—all twittering and chirping in choral symphony, ten hours before the winter dawn would actually break—all ready to rise and shine.

We all looked up and around, startled, as the ersatz sunshine of the light-bulbs suddenly woke up our avian neighbours, cheating them of a restful night's sleep into a daylight that never was, that was destined to evaporate into utter darkness just three hours later, by which time the watchman would switch off the lamps and go home. Till then, those of us who lived in this quiet leafy suburban neighbourhood near the park listened to the birds chattering and complaining, puzzled by their garbled circadian rhythms. We had succeeded in upsetting their biorhythm that evening, brilliantly, with our disruptive artificial sunshine and the hubris of our technologism.

As we went to bed last night, we could hear the birds' tumult slowly fade away as they went back to roost for the night yet again on the peepal and banyan and *gulmohur* and eucalyptus trees, till only a faint sleepy sigh lingered in the air amidst the rustle of the leaves.

Jamie Stewart

Jamie Stewart is a Creative Writing graduate with a deep passion for dogs, pizza and perfectly timed Buffy The Vampire Slayer gifs. He received his MA in Creative Writing from the Manchester Writing School.

This one

This one is still. This one is smiling. This one is calm, happy, almost. This one is thinking about what to have for dinner. This one stands out from the others, who are shaking and looking around the room, and, simultaneously, this one slips into the background, blends into the wood-chip walls. Here we have an anomaly. This has almost never happened. This one is almost enjoying himself.

That one has snapped the elastic band that connected the provided pen to the clipboard, and is now looking around the room to see whether anybody heard the snap. Only this one did. Everyone else is too preoccupied with filling in their forms, of which there are two, front and back.

‘Would anybody like a drink?’ a short girl, wearing a volunteer’s t-shirt, addresses the room. They look up and shake their heads in unison, except for this one.

‘What do you have?’ this one says.

‘Tea, coffee, diet-coke, lem-’.

‘Could I get a coffee, please? Black, two sugars.’ The others look at him and then back at their forms. They are too nervous to ask for a drink.

It is a Wednesday morning, and one of them is looking at the clock-face checking the time, or maybe he is counting backwards in months. February, January, December, he scribbles something down and turns over the page. That one is Mediterranean. They are almost always white, sometimes black.

The girl brings in a mug of coffee and sets it down next to this one. The steam rises.

‘Are you finished with that?’ the girl says, looking at the clipboard. He nods and picks up his coffee, blowing.

‘Anyone else?’

There is silence, and, somewhere, even here, hiding, there is shame and there is guilt. This one picks up a magazine. This one looks at the man on the front, who is dressed in only white briefs and whose body is unnaturally golden and bulges at the back of the arms, the chest, the neck, the sides of the legs.

This one flips the page and reads about the man on the cover, and how, despite all, he is living a healthy and fulfilling life as a bodybuilder, and is looking to start a family with his partner, a Digital Media Consultant (28) in Slough. This one looks around the room and for the first time takes in the mood, the feeling of fear. This one is not usually phased by such things, this one is usually safe. This one is almost always safe, this one is so safe he puts on a condom for a hand-job. This one will use that line when he walks into the room and sits down, and this one will watch as the nurse laughs and bares the

back of her throat, and this one will then proceed to tell her about how there was an exception one night a few weeks ago, and while he has been worrying about it, he is sure he has not been exposed to anything, this one is sure that symptoms would have presented themselves by now, and this one will laugh and not consider himself to be another statistic or another face in a room full of fear, because he knows that you can live a healthy and fulfilling life, even as a bodybuilder, and start a family with a Digital Media Consultant in Slough, if you want to.

This one has been confident up until now, up until the nurse said 'Right, okay', and started to swab the tip of his finger and the small of his wrist with an alcohol wipe.

'We'll do the rapid test first, but it's not 100% accurate,' she says.

He nods, and looks out the window, thinking of all of the people he has ever known in one place, his mother, his friends, his family and English teachers, his neighbour with the dreadlocks, the nurse, the volunteer, the man he met in the bar, the bodybuilder. All in one place, all looking at him with expressions of expectation. There are presents in their hands, knives and garden tools, sharp things like the lancet and needle, carpets and rugs, curtains and bedsheets, red like the blood and he watches each drop form a puddle on his finger tip, then fall into the petri-dish below. He says the word petri in his head, and wonders how he knows that word. He feels the nurse squeeze his finger, massaging it harder and harder until she has enough blood. He sees her at the party, she is wearing her uniform and has a plant in her hands. It is a cactus, and she is telling him how they are notoriously hardy,

difficult to kill, she knows how he can neglect, she knows how he can over-love, she has prepared for both situations. She is wearing gloves and fingering the dust on the mantel. She is making a disappointed click-click-clicking noise with her mouth. The bodybuilder takes to the centre of the room, flexing his muscles, unable to stop, and people are looking, they are growing more and more concerned. This one is positive that it will be good news, this one only made one mistake. Yet somewhere, there is doubt. Somewhere, all the mouths of all the people he knows have formed into one mouth, are all saying the same thing, and as the nurse waits for the results she slips the needle into his waiting vein. He hears no warning of a small sharp scratch but instead hears the deafening and collective voice of all the people at the party. He is saying it is such a wonder how they have all managed to fit in such a tiny room, he is making a joke about health and safety regulations, he is glad that they have brought gifts with them and different plates of food covered with foil and cling-film.

‘Don’t worry about the gifts’, they say.

‘Don’t worry about the food, it was no trouble, it would have only gone in the bin,’ they say.

‘Well?’ they ask.

Their lips are dried and plump and wet and smooth and wrinkled and fringed with facial hair and completely bare and he is glad that he cannot see their eyes, and he is glad they cannot see his, because he is sure, now, above all, that his eyes show the same fear and guilt and sense of punishment as every other one in that room down the hall.

‘All done.’

Joe Albanese

Joe Albanese is a writer from New Jersey, his poetry has been featured issues of *Chronogram*, *Evening Street Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Projectionist's Playground*, and *Straylight Magazine*, among others. His novel *Caina* (Mockingbird Lane Press) and his novella *Smash and Grab* (Books to Go Now) were both published in 2018.

Echo Knives

It echoes,
follows in parentheses, these
lingering fellows—placating
what need not be retained.
Act III is all that
remains of hollow
halls. How it got to those haunts—
redacted, breathing in only
its echoes.
Kindred lacks the
identical; identity
conforms through misinterpretation,
not records.
Knife echoes watered down, (or
aggrandized). Lie
dormant, sweet gutter folly,
return, stirred up, a shadow
of its
former self—an overproduction
of its being.

SF Wright

S.F. Wright received his MFA from Rutgers-Newark, and currently teaches at Hudson County Community College and Union County College. His Work has appeared in publications such as *Chiron Review*, *Fictive Dream*, and *The East Bay Review*.

Vacation

Rill's college didn't give him any summer classes, so he planned on spending his three months off reading and writing. By the third day, though, he found himself sitting around, surfing the internet, and waiting until evening so he could start drinking. On the fourth day, figuring he had the summer off anyway, he began drinking at noon. He got so used to alcohol at midday that soon he was having a drink after his morning cup of coffee. By the second week of June, Rill was making a screwdriver upon waking up.

He realized what he was doing was dangerous. Rill had always been a drinker, but never a twenty-four-seven one. During his more coherent moments, he feared getting so bad that he'd get DTs. He also worried about having to use his car: crashing, getting arrested. But Rill told himself that he'd cut the drinking out before it got too severe. And since he lived up the street from a bodega, bank, and liquor store, he saw no reason to move his car all summer if he didn't want to.

Because Rill was usually too inebriated to get much reading let alone writing done, he spent much time on the internet: Wikipedia, Facebook, Yahoo Sports. Often, though, he was so drunk that he'd forget what he'd been reading or watching just minutes afterwards. Towards the end of the day, when Rill was completely intoxicated, he'd watch Youtube videos of songs that were popular during his adolescence. It wasn't unusual for him to wake up in the middle of the night, still drunk, having to urinate, to find the end of a Metallica, Pearl Jam, or Soul Asylum video stopped on his computer screen.

One morning shortly after Rill made his second screwdriver, he happened upon the dating website truluv.com. A couple of years ago he'd had an account on this site, but apart from messaging women back and forth without its ever leading to anything and one date the woman canceled at the last minute, nothing came of it. But Rill considered that he perhaps hadn't given the website enough of a chance; and since he wasn't doing anything except surfing the internet anyway, he decided to start a new account.

He wrote a brief bio, describing how he was a professor (not specifying that he was a nontenured instructor) at a college (not mentioning that it was community). He then listed some books, TV shows, and films he liked; wrote something hokey about wanting to find a relationship; and uploaded a few photos from Facebook. By this point it was noon and Rill had just finished his sixth drink. Because his stomach told him he was hungry, he ate (a few pieces of ham and cheese rolled up together and microwaved). When he finished, the

hunger was gone but the edge of drunkenness diminishing. Rill made a new drink (vodka and tonic now, the orange juice's acidity starting to bother him) and began messaging women.

The next morning Rill was still so drunk when he woke, it was as if his hangover were buried beneath his inebriation. But he also felt sick: his body was cold, he shivered so much his hands shook. He made a screwdriver, closed his eyes, sipped. After getting a third of the drink down he felt better. "Ah, medicine," he said, and it dawned on him how severe a sign this might be. But he told himself it was just a bad day and anyway, he'd soon stop drinking in the morning. Content with this rationalization, he took another sip and opened his laptop.

After checking his email and Facebook account, Rill logged into truluv. He had two messages. One was from a twenty-nine-year-old woman from Brooklyn who wrote *Not interested* in response to Rill's message: *Btaking Bad 's on of my favorit shows too*. He thought her response rather cold even though his spelling (he was plastered when he wrote it) was abysmal. The other message was from a forty-five-year-old woman whose screenname was enigmagirl22 and who lived a town over from Rill. She wrote, *Thank you. What's your name?* Rill read his original message to her—*You ar absolutely beautiful*—and cringed. He then clicked on the woman's profile. In her sole pic she appeared attractive, but the photo was grainy; she was far from the camera; and she had sunglasses on. Rill could easily imagine why in his

drunken state he'd thought she was gorgeous. She had little information about herself—her age, town, body description (“average”) and what she was looking for (short- or long-term dating).

But because enigmagirl22 had written him back, Rill decided to message her again. After careful thought and consideration, he wrote *You're welcome. My name's Wallace. How are you today?* and hit “send.”

He took a long sip from his drink. Even though he knew nothing about enigmagirl22 and could barely tell what she looked like, Rill felt excitement at the prospect of hearing back from her. He wished she were online now. He took another sip and looked at his other sent messages; he was astonished, mortified: he'd sent messages to fifty-seven women, and they ranged from unassuming and articulate—*Hi, there. I loved The Sheltering Sky. Have you ever read Let It Come Down?*—to bold and incoherent—*Luv ow u look in that photo on the beech. How' u get so beetiful. Pleeze write back.* The latter type of messages Rill erased immediately, as though their deletion would expunge the fact that he'd ever written such godawful things.

By six p.m. Rill was on his twelfth drink and transitioning from functional drunkenness to insensible inebriation. He'd spent most of the day reading biographies of AFL players on Wikipedia and watching porn. When he logged into his truluv account again, Rill saw that enigmagirl22 had sent him a message. His heart beating in anticipation, his receiving this communication providing him with a sudden if fleeting jar of soberness, Rill clicked on the pink flag:

Hi Wallace. What a nice name. Mine's Yvette. I'm doing okay. How are you this evening?

Rill visited enigmagirl22's profile. He studied her picture again. He wished she had more, particularly one in which he could see her better. A photo in that light and style could make anyone look good. Maybe, though, she actually was good looking but just didn't want any recognizable photos on this site—which was understanding yet frustrating. But as no one else was messaging him and Rill felt he had nothing to lose, he replied: *I'm doing fine, thanks. And you? Yvette's a beautiful name by the way. What are you up to tonight?* something which, had he been sober, he never would've had the nerve to write.

A couple of minutes later he got a message from enigmagirl22: *Just sitting around watching TV.* About a photo of Rill in London from a few years ago, she said, *You look cute*, which made Rill's chest stir. He reread the message, made a new drink, and took a long sip. He then composed a response in which he tried tactfully yet flirtatiously to compliment her photo (*I just wish there were more!* he finally wrote, he thought, cleverly).

She replied a few minutes later, and he responded back within a minute.

This continued long into the night.

Rill awoke feeling sick. He hurried to the bathroom, thought he was going to vomit, but just retched hot air. Sweat trickled down his forehead; he breathed

slowly until he felt that he wouldn't be nauseated upon standing. He then made a screwdriver. It was 7:49 a.m.

After finishing half of his drink, Rill felt better. He then logged into truluv. enigmagirl22 had sent him three messages. Rill remembered messaging her last night but couldn't remember what the nature or subject matter of that communication had been. The fact that she'd sent three messages made him excited yet alarmed.

The first message said *Sounds great. I'd love to.* Before looking at the other two, Rill read the exchanged messages presiding that first one and saw that, in surprisingly eloquent, nearly mistake-free prose (considering how drunk he must've been) he'd worked up to asking her out on a date for this weekend. And enigmagirl22 had accepted. Rill was elated, but also apprehensive about the contents of the two other messages. Had he gotten too eager and turned her off? Had he become impertinent, even insulting?

He read her second message:

Still there? Where'd you go? Rill noted the time of this one: 12:34, twenty-two minutes after her previous message (apparently, he'd passed out). Eagerly, if anxiously, he read the third message, which she'd sent at 1:08 am.

I guess you lost interest. . .

Rill was engulfed in anxiety. He quickly wrote a reply in which he apologized for not responding to her last three messages. He said he'd had an exhausting day and had fallen asleep but would still like to meet. He then hit "send," took a long sip from his drink, and waited.

By two o' clock Rill had lost count of how many drinks he'd had, but he wasn't drunk—or he didn't feel drunk. But he'd been drinking so excessively and constantly that unless he consumed an exorbitant amount—i.e., say a quarter gallon of vodka—he didn't feel inebriated. And the only way to counter that was to drink more. Rill was considering this and making a fresh vodka and tonic when the pink flag by his inbox appeared: enigmagirl22 had sent him a message:

Hi, Wallace. Got your message. How are you today?

Rill's heart fluttered. He typed *I'm well. And you? Sorry again for not responding last night—went to sleep. What are you up to today?* and hit “send.”

They messaged each other for the next two hours. enigmagirl22—or Yvette—wasn't, to Rill's relief, mad. She asked about his day and told him about her own, along with other things: her job as a home-aid nurse, the multi-family house she shared with her mother (Yvette lived in one half), her interest in documentary films. And though Rill was capable of talking about this last topic articulately, he found himself bored when she described a recent film she'd seen about Polish migrant workers in Great Britain.

All the time they IM'ed, Rill drank. Like before, he wasn't getting drunker—but he wasn't getting soberer. Sipping his drink, making a new one every twenty minutes or so, he felt coherent and aware, and responded to Yvette's IMs in an articulate, thoughtful, yet judiciously flirtatious manner. But then suddenly his face got numb; Rill felt himself ascend to a higher plane: he didn't believe in or have time for such things as enlightenment or spirituality, yet what

he was experiencing seemed ethereal, unworldly, and beatific. Rill wondered, as he took a long sip, if he'd missed his calling; maybe he should've been a monk.

Then Yvette messaged him *Are you busy today?* and Rill's transcendence was leveled; he felt himself nosediving down from his plane of spiritual discovery.

Although her message elicited delightful alarm (was she making an overture to suggest they meet up today instead of this weekend?), the obvious fact loomed that he was in no condition to leave the house, let alone go on a date. But Rill pushed this thought away, like one shaking his head at an annoying insect, and responded *Not really. What about you?*

Each following message built closer to one of them asking the other to meet up, until Rill, in a moment of drunken boldness, typed: *Want to get together today instead?*

Positive he'd been too forward, he waited for her response.

A minute later she replied: *I'd love to. Would you want to come to my house and hang out? One of my tires is low on air, and I don't want to drive anywhere until I get that checked out.*

Rill stared at the message, reread it. He picked up his glass, brought it to his lips. But without drinking anything he put the glass back down.

On the bus, Rill contemplated his hands. They rested in his lap, and he looked at them as though they weren't his or he were seeing them through a lens through which he'd never looked before. He was fascinated by the hands'

stillness, that they didn't shake. He was mesmerized by their smoothness; for a guy in his mid-thirties, the hands looked youthful, even adolescent. But what Rill was really doing, as he intermittently looked out the window to keep an eye out for the Stop & Shop, was trying to distract himself from the fact that he was drunk.

The bus was a third full. Sometimes Rill was certain that everyone was sneaking glances at him because they knew that he was drunk. Other times he thought he was being paranoid, that no one noticed him. Through it all he breathed slowly through his nose.

The Stop & Shop appeared, Rill stood. Then, even though he should've done this while sitting, he reached over and pressed the button. The bell was loud. Standing in the aisle, unsure if his unsteadiness was due to the bus's movements or his drunkenness, Rill was afraid that the driver hadn't heard the bell or was just ignoring it. Rill thought he'd have to press the button again, but then the bus slowed down. Rill, nearly falling as the bus stopped—people definitely looking at him now—walked up the aisle. He felt like a criminal. He nodded to the driver, said thank you. The driver didn't answer. Rill walked outside into an early evening softly lit by a reddish sun and onto a busy road he'd driven on countless times but on which he had never before set foot.

Forty-five minutes later Rill was walking down the driveway of 53 Greenview Lane. The house, as Yvette said, was only a five-minute walk from the bus stop, but Rill had gone in the wrong direction, confusing east and west. He'd traipsed for fifteen minutes down a road called Greene Street until he realized

he was going the wrong way. He then backtracked and—tired, dehydrated, and sweating—stopped at a Buy-Rite Liquors to ask for directions. The guy behind the register didn't know what street Rill was talking about or didn't want to help him (Rill suspected the latter, as he figured his pores were emitting toxic fumes of vodka). Rill bought a sixteen-ounce Gatorade Citrus Cooler. Then, since he was there, he got five airplane bottles of vodka.

Outside, the cars sped past, the setting sun turned the sky into a melting firmament of purplish carmine. Rill took a long sip of Gatorade, finishing half of it. Then he walked to the back of the Buy-Rite and slugged two of the mini bottles of vodka, chasing them with the rest of the Gatorade. The vodka hit him immediately; he was vaguely aware that it made him feel more normal than drunk.

He walked east this time and soon saw, to his chagrin, that Greenview Lane was just two blocks away. As Rill turned down the quiet, blue collar suburban block, he checked his phone. Yvette had sent him three texts.

Everything okay?

Still coming?

It's almost 8. You change your mind. . . ?

Hurriedly, Rill texted *I'm here! Down the block!* and then walked quickly until he reached house number 53.

As he walked up the front steps his head felt light. Feeling both drunk and sober, he rang the bell on the left, as he was told to.

Rill recognized her as the woman from the photo, and even in his drunken state, was acutely reminded of how much photography can manipulate a person's appearance.

Yvette was short. She could've lost twenty-five pounds. Her small chin disappeared into a larger chin. She had big, spacey—even creepy—eyes. She did have nice breasts, which Rill noted through the contours of her sweater. He was processing all of this and thinking, if she weren't so heavy, if she were only taller, if her chin were a bit more pronounced—when Yvette stepped close.

“Wallace?” Her voice was mellifluous and cheery but too much so, like a telemarketer's. Her arm grazed his wrist, and Rill breathed in a waft of shampoo and a lavender fragrance; at least she smells decent, he thought.

“Hi—”

Before he could say more Yvette had her arms around him and was kissing him as though her life depended on it.

Twenty minutes later, lying naked in an unfamiliar bed in a strange room that reeked of potpourri, Rill simultaneously experienced a sense of disbelief, disgust, tranquility, and urgency: disbelief because he'd been able to perform; disgust because he'd just had sex with a strange, dumpy woman who now lay against him, caressing his arm; tranquility because he *had* just had sex, which—*with a strange, dumpy woman or not*—compounded with the alcohol, made him feel as if he were floating; and urgency because, despite this buoyant sensation, he had a strong desire to get out of there.

“Wallace?”

Rill didn't move. Yvette's voice sounded faraway even though her head was resting on his chest. Her sing-song, telemarketer voice grated on his ears.

"Uh-huh."

She turned to him, smiling, Rill feeling flattered yet repelled.

"I have to check on my mother."

He nodded.

"I'll be back in a few minutes. Need anything?"

Rill wanted to say a drink but was afraid what kind of answer this might elicit; he vaguely remembered Yvette's saying something disapproving about drinking during one of their IM sessions. But at the same time, he needed a drink badly. He was about just to ask anyway if she had any vodka but then recalled the three airplane bottles in his jacket pocket. Remembering this felt like a step toward emancipation, and Rill shook his head. "I'm okay," he said, looking at her gently and caringly, while inwardly imploring her to go.

Yvette smiled at him again and got up. And even though Rill's aversion was still extant, the warmth of her body's leaving his chest caused him to feel vague regret.

After she shut the door Rill got up and dressed. He was dehydrated again and went into the bathroom and sipped long and greedily from the faucet; the water tasted metallic.

As Rill put on his shoes, he heard footsteps and muted voices. Hurriedly he went down the hall; he could hear Yvette's voice more clearly but it was still unintelligible. Rill opened the door. It creaked, but he paid it no mind and closed it behind him, his heart beating fast. Walking down the driveway so fast

he tripped, Rill suddenly feared that he forgot or dropped his mini bottles. He stuck his hand in his jacket pocket, he felt them; relief swam through him.

As he neared the main avenue, Rill felt dizzy. He paused in the middle of the block, the sky almost all dark now, and took out one of the mini bottles. He opened it, downed it, and dropped the bottle onto the road. He then resumed walking, feeling better.

As he reached the bus stop Rill's phone vibrated. He didn't want to read the text, but he did.

????

He waited for another text. None came. He put his phone back into his pocket.

At the bus stop, Rill discreetly opened the penultimate airplane bottle of vodka, finished it in two hits, and threw the empty bottle under the bench. The night looked better; Rill wished that there were someone at the bus stop to talk to. Cars sped past under the streetlights, the blackish-blue sky reminded him of his youth. Rill touched the last mini bottle in his pocket but told himself he was saving that one. He'd have it on the bus, but after that—

The summer, Rill realized, wasn't half over; he had much to do and accomplish.

Maureen Fielding

Maureen Fielding is an associate professor of English and Women's Studies at Penn State Brandywine. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Pennsylvania English* and *Avalon Literary Review*, and she has a new poem forthcoming in *War, Literature, and the Arts*. She is working on a novel inspired by her experiences as a Russian intercept operator in West Berlin during the Cold War.

VOW

Each time I vow silence,
to ignore Kike Nigger Commie Fag,
to look away, side step, evade
the tossed gauntlet,
the twisted facts,
to love and understand
this old man my father.
Each time I vow and fail.

Brindley Hallam Dennis

Brindley is a writer of short and very short stories. His work has been published by Unbound, Thresholds, and Pewter Rose Press. Writing as Mike Smith, he has published poetry, plays and critical essays, many of which have been features on the International Short Story Forum website.

A Country Wedding

When I met her mother I caught a glimpse of where Nadya had come from. Nadya's mother wasn't at the wedding, but had visited a couple of months before. Nadya must have sent the money for the air-fare. She was thin and old before her time. She wore a headscarf and a dark woollen coat, the headscarf not some chic silk job by Dior or Chanel, but the sort worn by Russian women in grainy photographs from World War Two; the coat like one my Aunty Muriel used to wear.

How Nadya and Colin got together I can't imagine. He farmed sheep, high up on the Derbyshire moors. There are short, stocky, dark-haired people, it was always said, living up there, who go back to the Stone Age.

Nadya had been working at a local holiday park which he'd visited on a rare weekend off. Whether he pursued her or she him, or it was mutual attraction, who knows, but marriage followed. It was a surprise. She was very attractive, but Colin was so shy and self effacing, and had a voice like a gate that needed oiling. I couldn't picture him chatting her up. When he talked to anybody patches of dull red would darken his cheeks.

His parents were relieved, I think, by then. We were invited to the wedding; the only guests apart from his mum and dad, his sister and her husband. We knew her, you see, Nadya. We'd stayed at the park once or twice and got to know her. We'd met in the local pub. She'd even come over and stayed at our place. We weren't best buddies, but I suspect she hadn't many other friends.

So there we were, in a vast baronial hall, on the moors outside Sheffield, eight of us, at a table in the middle of the room, after the ceremony, eating the feast. The table cleared away, four danced to the disco.

She'll find it different up there, I told my wife as we drove home, meaning the farm. She looked so beautiful in her white lace and veil. We didn't see her again for twenty years.

It was at a village show, in the poultry tent. Caged birds, like miniature dinosaurs, slim, colourful, on drumstick legs, one clawed foot clenched; cockerel's combs erect, curved beaks poised; hens placid, comfortable. Rosettes, red for first, blue for second, yellow for third, pinioned to the mesh.

A middle-aged woman in a flower-pot hat, plump, fat in the face, dark hair spilling beneath the floppy brim, fronted us. I didn't recognize her, even after my wife's surprised, Nadya!

The woman burst into tears, and I thought that Colin must have died or the farm gone down, but she was repeating, over and over: There's nothing wrong! There's nothing wrong! Then he bounced up, looking just as I remembered him, and suddenly it struck me that it must be all so much worse than I had first thought.

Seeing To The End of Things

Charlie made a death-bed confession to his wife.

It involved an old girlfriend of hers whom, for the decades of their marriage, Charlie and his wife had lost touch with. He'd always felt guilty that it was he who had broken their friendship. The fact that his wife had accepted it with such understanding, and uninquisitiveness had deepened his guilt, rather than eased it.

All three had continued to live in the same small town, and it was impossible to avoid the odd, unexpected encounter. Such meetings were brief, awkward, silent and uncomfortable. Furtive glances, nods of recognition, the merest of smiles would pass between them, Shrugs of helpless acceptance sometimes passed between the two women. Charlie would look away or pretend he hadn't seen, babble suddenly about some irrelevancy. Regular cafes and favourite places sometimes had to be abandoned, or even deserted permanently, for the girl in question, the woman she became, worked at several places around the town, managing a couple before setting up her own business, which Charlie and his wife did not patronise.

At home they barely mentioned her, and when others did a difficult silence would fall. Charlie's antagonism, though suppressed, would be obvious. Outsiders might have suspected an affair, and some may have raised the possibility, even with Charlie's wife. He carried the secret though, shiftily, guiltily, perhaps even regretfully, almost to the end.

Perhaps he sensed from the beginning that nursing the secret was as damaging to their relationship, to their marriage, as a full revelation would have been. Perhaps, when we see the end more clearly, we see necessities differently. It had been, he whispered to his wife, from his bed in the hospice, when he and the girl in question had been students and working together part-time at a local, family run store. She had caught him, quite unintentionally, pilfering from the gloomy stock-room. It was clear what he was doing, and more than that, it was recorded on the CCTV, which he must have momentarily, or perhaps totally forgotten. As it was, she could hardly cover for him without becoming a similarly recorded accessory to his crime.

He wouldn't confess when confronted by the boss, who was a kindly man and had known difficult times himself, but threw in the job there and then, protesting his innocence. He had told his wife, or rather, fiancée as she had been then, that he had decided to quit following a personality clash with other members of staff.

The lie had lain between them ever since, a vague unacknowledged barrier that each manoeuvred around but neither confronted.

His fall from grace had been a one-off aberration, he said. His inability to confess due to the embarrassment of being so foolish. She'd known, of course. The girl had told her, not with the intention of splitting them up.

I wish, she said to Charlie, as he lay dying, that you had told me sooner.

But which of us would have done differently?

Tim Love

Tim Love has published over 180 poems and more than 40 stories in magazines such as, *Rialto*, *Stand*, *Oxford Poetry*, *Journal of Microliterature*, and *Short Fiction* etc. He's had several articles published, a poetry pamphlet and a collection of short stories. He lives in Cambridge with his wife and two children, working with computers.

Just Visiting

If you drove here then you must of seen the boy who plays by the river. Did you notice anything about him? They all look like that. Now look at me, the tip of my nose. See how well-shaped it is? Hard to believe he's my kid. His mother's the care-taker's wife. She lets him play there all day. None of the schools want him I suppose. I don't have to go out to see him, I just go to the landing upstairs. I don't know his name. Sometimes I watch him playing for ages and when I look up at the sky it's suddenly gone dark without me knowing like when I was at the circus and I was watching the trapeziste so hard I didn't realise they'd put the lion cage up. She was wearing this pink, sparkly costume and I couldn't take my eyes off her because she could've fallen any moment. Mum got me some popcorn, the first I'd ever had. Have you noticed how colour makes things move? Trapezists and kingfishers move but houses don't, because they're dull. I was just thinking about that because pingpong balls go some, but you can get orange ones now, can't you? And lucozade; it used to be in clear glass bottles wrapped in orange cellophane but now it actually comes in orange plastic bottles. When I was a kid I used to put the cellophane up to my eyes and walk around the house like a spaceman. I didn't suffocate; I mean nowadays kids aren't even allowed to have goldfish in polythene bags at the fair. I saw it in the papers. Cruelty they call it. I'll tell you what cruelty is; cruelty is keeping me in here against my will,

polythene or no polythene. It's hell I tell you except that I bet here's got more spiders. And in the caff today I asked for afters first so I wouldn't get left with sweet stuff on my teeth but No Way. They do it deliberately, they want our teeth to drop out so that they won't lose their jobs. And they fill in my crosswords while I'm asleep. And the salt's always clogged up and we're not allowed to stick forks in it in case we bend them.

Look, I know you're only here to soften me up. You're not the first one they've sent, not by a long short. But I could help you out, this lot tell me things. Take old Betsy there; now she's really in the trees. She thinks she's in here because of her laugh so she doesn't laugh any more, she just wets herself instead. She puts out peanut butter sandwiches in the evenings. She says badgers are mad about them, she hears them in the night. I reckon it's the nurses really; they're always eating. She's told me about all the babies she's killed. You'd never believe it looking at her in her wrinkled stockings all innocent but she's done away with dozens. She staples them up in carrier bags and throws them in dustbins. Could be your dustbin next time. I'd go home and check if I was you. And she's told the nurses as well, but they don't care. Course not. I mean, if she was taken to jail they might get laid off. That's why it's so crowded; it's the unions.

Jane over there, she's a bit of alright isn't she? She thought she was in contact with these aliens and the only way to get to them was in cars, so whenever she could, she got out of here and tried car doors. She found a boot unlocked once so she got in. She couldn't close it from the inside so she curled up in there and used an oilcan as a pillow waiting to be whisked away, but when she heard it pour with rain on the boot she toddled back here again. And she was wearing her nightie all the time. The nurses think that if you're wearing a nightie then you can't escape. They've got safety nets now you know, trapezists. They use them at the end because they're too lazy to come down the rope.

My parents? Ok, well when the circus left town, my dad got me to help him collect the dung. He thought it would help his African marigolds. I held the

bag open while he shoveled it in. So we had spectacular rhubarb. You could hear it growing. It was like those cement mixer lorries that have to keep rolling and rolling. We had a big house with lots of windows. My mum had this really silly voice that she used when she answered the phone and she always wore black stockings, they were the first things she put on. She used to put things on the sills; hankies, apple pies, jellies and green tomatoes that always went squidgy before they went red. I wanted to be a soldier but my mum said there wouldn't be any more wars. She said I should go to sea because my eyes were that colour, it's the first thing she noticed when I was born. When I was 5 she gave dad the old heave-ho. She used to give me presents with the money dad sent home. Oh, I don't know what. A kite, a microscope that was no good, some guns and a fishing rod I think. Does it really matter? And she got me a Chad Valley projector. The only place I could do it was on the kitchen ceiling. It never got dark enough in summer so it was always cold, I had to put my coat on just like I was going to a real cinema. You could get long boxes with half a dozen film strips in them. All the films smelt the same; hot and painty. My favourite was Joan of Arc, especially the last picture which was full of bright red and yellow flames and her yellow hair. I've had loads of blondes but I've never had a redhead, not a real one. I wouldn't mind completing the set. Do you know anyone? I'm cheap. Classy mind you. What do you think of this accent? Well anyway, I made tickets for my Action Men so they could get in and watch through their binoculars and listen as I read out the words in a scary voice. When I got fed up I pointed the projector around, seeing what it would look like if everything was on fire. I could even make the water in the sink catch fire. Mum came in and told me off for wasting the batteries. I wanted some films about space but there weren't any because you can't have black light, it wouldn't show up in the dark, but you need the stars to see where you're going, especially when you're at sea, and they're not all white, some are more colourful than they look, some are red giants and they move if you watch them long enough.

I play pingpong with Bert sometimes. He's off his chump but he keeps the score ok. He sees things sometimes you know; the virgin Mary, that sort of thing on walls and that. He sits in front of the tele without switching it on and tries to make all the pictures come up on the screen to make him think he's normal but he ain't. He goes out at night and throws knickers in trees. And he's on 50 millilitres. I ain't on nothing. It's Dr Simpson, he won't let me out because I've had his wife. I wanted to change doctors but I couldn't tell them why because I'm a pro, you see, and if I give my word, I give my word. Want a game? No, you play croquet I suppose. You think you're so clever just because you've got a suit and a flash car. Well I had a suit once too, so put that in your pipe and smoke it. I suppose you're wondering how I got the money. That slut of a caretaker's wife had to spill the beans of course but she said she was on the pill. She liked it rough too, just like the rest of them. Special rates for her because she's got nice tits.

So you don't believe me, uh? Well just go and ask her. She's probably desperate for it by now. And tell her I'm better than ever. I don't swear any more, and I read a lot. I'm educated. You know, every time you sneeze you kill off a thousand brain cells so I breathe out just before. Try it. It's guaranteed. Yeah, that's right, just nod: that's all you can do. You see, I've done a lot of thinking lately. I've seen how the nurses are always watching us to see if they can get us mad. They take a lot of trouble on the small things. The hot and cold taps in the bath are the wrong way round so you've really got to be on the ball every morning or they'll catch you out. Beats me how the others get through the day. They have dancing for the old dears, they end up doing the Charleston, really over the top, must be really knackered. Then they have a rest in the patient's lounge and sing We'll Meet Again around the piano till one of them hears air raid sirens and starts running about all over the place. And then on Sundays they have services there; one moment it's let's all do the tonga, the next they're praying their hearts out. I don't see how they fall for it. I mean, he gave us his only son and all that, right? but he got him back afterwards, he had his cake and ate it. Here's a tip – forget about that God stuff. Sleep so

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