



# Unlikely Story

A FINE SELECTION OF UNLIKELY JOURNALS



ISSUE 7 - NOVEMBER 2013

## THE JOURNAL OF UNLIKELY ENTOMOLOGY



Edited by  
Bernie Mojzes and A.C. Wise

With Stories by

Helen Anderson, Sarah Brooks, Darren O. Godfrey,  
Maria Dahvana Headley, Mark Rigney, Dennis Tafoya,  
Nghì Vo, and Alvaro Zinos-Amaro

inside front cover  
intentionally left blank



ISSUE 7 - NOVEMBER 2013

## THE JOURNAL OF UNLIKELY ENTOMOLOGY

Edited by

Bernie Mojzes and A.C. Wise

Art Direction and Web Site Design

Linda Saboe

Cover Art

Maarten Wydooghe

Unlikely Story, LLC

Berwyn, PA

Unlikely Story presents:

Issue 7, The Journal of Unlikely Entomology

Copyright © 2013 by Unlikely Story, LLC

All Stories copyright their respective authors.

All Art copyright their respective artists.

Editors: Bernie Mojzes and A.C. Wise

Art Direction & Web Site: Linda Saboe

Print/PDF layout: Bernie Mojzes

Proofreader: Cynthia Baumann

Published by Unlikely Story, LLC

46 Eastwood Road

Berwyn, PA 19312

<http://www.unlikely-story.com>

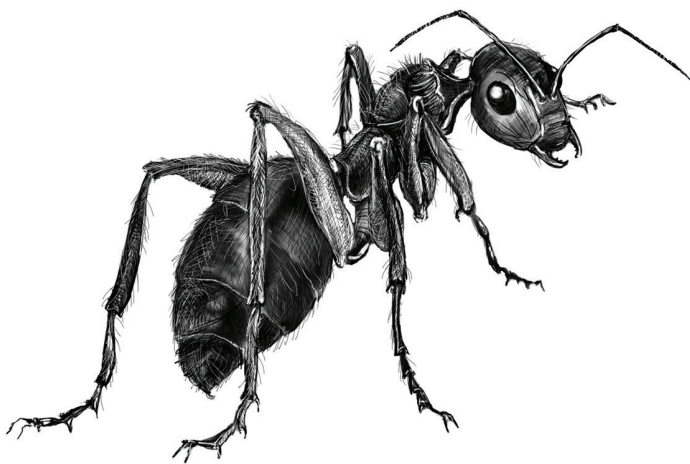
Exerpts of up to 200 words can be used for purposes of review. All other rights reserved. No reproduction without expressed written consent of the publisher and authors.

Unlikely Story is published (roughly) tri-annually by Unlikely Story, LLC. Unsolicited submissions welcome:

<http://www.unlikely-story.com/submission-guidelines/>

# Table of Contents

Editors' Note	3
The Psammophile - Maria Dahvana Headley	5
The Years of the Tarantella - Sarah Brooks	13
Strange Invasion - Darren O. Godfrey	25
The Wall Garden - Alvaro Zinos-Amaro	35
A Note About Our Sponsor	55
A Superfluity - Helen Anderson	57
Pompilid - Nghi Vo	65
A Taste of Things To Come	71
The New World - Dennis Tafoya	73
Found Items–Notes And Tapes (Evidence Bag Two) - Mark Rigney	81
Contributors	100
About Us	104
Submission Guidelines	105



## Editors' Note

Welcome, Dear Readers, to another issue of *The Journal of Unlikely Entomology*. That's right — after our brief foray into the realm of *Unlikely Architecture*, we return to the land of things that skitter and crawl. Are you comforted to find yourself on familiar ground? Don't get too comfortable; we mean to instill at least a little unease. After all, isn't that what good art is meant to do?

Fear not, Gentle Reader, it isn't all unsettling. There's humor to be found in our pages, in the form of a very strange invasion indeed. There's beauty in the catalogued artifacts of improbable civilizations, and in the slow-unfolding dreams of wasps and nuns. But there is also darkness. Of course, there is always darkness. Unseen shadows lurk behind rapturous music, and the world just might come to an end — or worse yet, a beginning. History extends behind us in elaborate, repeating patterns of violence and beauty and love and death, casting shadows into the future. It's the circle of life, and often something must die in order for something else to live. And while they say hell is other people, people don't always remain human.

As in life, our pixilated pages mix darkness and light in this issue, one always sweetening and tempering the other. We leave it to you to determine which does which.

Whatever your tastes, for the shadows or that which casts them, we hope you enjoy these tales. 



TEA TIME BY LINDA SABOE



# The Psammophile

by Maria Dahvana Headley

Art by Linda Saboe

My Dearest Sir,

With all thanks I return to you today your illuminated *Catalogue of Entomological Oddities* along with its accompanying and *Explanatory Catalogue of Oddities, Etymological*, which Intriguing Document contains several surprises regarding the nature of psammophilic insects, and the naming procedures required when encountering same. It was a novel notion to me, though perhaps it is not to you, that arthropods are named not with impunity by the scientists who first describe them, but according to the natural laws and wishes of the insects themselves. In this case, dictated by the quantity of quartz particulate in said psammophile's blood, as well as the speed and savagery with which said particulate, combined with Venom, degrades parchment, most especially when used as ink in encrypted and poisonous correspondence. (I hasten to note: we've no such poison here, between us two!)

As well, I enjoyed the lithophilic insects detailed in the Catalogue, those crack-dwellers diving in drops welled up from the depths, and the procedure of their naming, according to the type of gemstone preferred — (and oh, My Dear Sir! the footnoted section regarding the lithophile's caverns in that Great Ruby, the notion that such rock dwellers continued to colonize the stone even as it dangled, pigeon-egged from the throat of She, that Queen of No Country, that Bride of Never, that Woman Who Refused All, With Pinched Mouth and Diamond-Inset

Fang, and the notorious morning those insects swarmed from her jewel, and delved into the new caverns of her gum-arabic painted pores!) If perchance you've not committed to memory the contents of the *Catalogue's* footnotes on scorpions, sir, you would be well-served to do so, and to climb quietly the library ladders of their nerves, taste with your tongue the glucosinolate chitin of their skeletons. I had, until your generous loan, no notion that a scorpion's skeleton might be used to sweeten my beverage, but now, now.

I shall shortly, Dear Sir, smash a scorpion with my spoon, and dissolve him, in all his magnificence, in my teapot.

I make bold to present you in return with a *List of a Collection*, which I may justly assert you've not viewed before. It is, I say shyly, an account of a rarity, only recently unearthed by my own apprentices, from the shelves of a room buried in a landslide of bone china dishes. It would seem (I tremble to tell you this, in fear that you might, by some mischance, have prodded this hillside with your own walking stick, but I lay that fear to rest. The mountain was inviolate, and had been so since its inception) that a factory devoted to the decoration of plates had, a thousand years before our first correspondence, slipped down a hillside, and shattered itself upon the roof of the building. The mountain of plates became, with time, a hidden hillside of shards planted with the type of moss which gleams with the iridescence of green beetles, and the mountain itself was covered over with a small forest of jagged white trees, each one like the tooth of a monster. It was only by happenstance that my apprentice stumbled upon this miracle of mimesis, his foot snagging on a relic, and there, he found a plate skillfully painted with a set of initials. As he rooted about in the undergrowth, he discovered another, marked with a second monogram. Upon further examination, it became clear to him that the items he'd been convinced were plates marked with the monograms of their commissioners, were in fact, something quite other than plates.

These fragments, were, as I will reveal, only the beginning of the contents of the hill, and upon my summoning to the scene, I brandished my spade, and delicately removed layers of botanicals to reveal the following items of a *Catalogue*, the contents of the room

beneath the mountain, for this hill of beautiful bones was mere smoke blown in the face of the scholar, to obscure the treasure hidden beneath.

My dear Sir, the individuals who amassed the collection detailed below are themselves antiques, as are their treasures. I detail a portion for your pleasure and present to you this:

*DONUM CLAUSUM*

*Or*

*Dies Natalis Absconditus*

1. *A novel in manuscript*, slightly foxed, bound in the laminated skin of a whale, handwritten in squid ink, illustrated with color plates. Said novel purports to be the history of a young girl's journey into a warring world above the clouds, and contains discourses on throat-singing, and the shedding of skin for the purpose of resurrection. Dedication inscribed with an assortment of parentheses and symbols.
2. *A novel in manuscript*, slightly foxed, bound in the skin of a ghost, intermittently invisible, but readable beneath strong light, when the volume is held out into the pouring rain. The full title cannot be read, but shifts, disappearing and reappearing at seeming whim. Novel is indiscriminately lined with slashes of blood-red ink, and said slashes are occasionally accompanied by sequences of x's, thought to be magical symbols.
3. *Large glass tank*, glass wavy with age, containing tremendous articulated wooden fish, 7m in length, with hollow core, missing only its eyes, presumed to be in another collection. The purpose for which this fish (with its astonishing complement of interior benches and oarlocks) was assembled is now unknown.
4. *Slippers*, two. Goatskin, men's. Lined with fleece, golden.
5. *Heart, human, female*, preserved in the classical Egyptian

manner, the interior of which may be viewed through a small window. Containing vast landscape of one set of male eyes of indeterminate and shifting color, staring out at the observer, and blinking.

6. *Pen(s)*, Ivory. Set of ten. Carved of the finger bones of two long-fingered hands, each of which is tipped with a wickedly pointed hollow nib.
7. *Vial*, blown glass, purpled with age, containing a dark, tarry liquid, which, when used to fill the chambers of *Pen(s)* may be used to write permanently in the air.
8. *Photograph*, much faded, of a woman's smiling face, looking up.
9. *Photograph*, much faded, of a man sleeping in a bed, wrapped in white sheets, a lipstick print on his shoulder.
10. Library of books, spines broken, pages folded, and bearing two sets of fingerprints.
11. *Teapot*, scented with bergamot, and stained with the impression of tea leaves.
12. *Tooth*, wisdom, set in necklace of silver, and scrimshawed.
13. *Mattress*, in which there are no indentions for two bodies, but only a large indention in which two people slept on their sides, leaving a hollow, which was then cast into—
14. *Plaque*, two sleeping bodies entwined, cast first in plaster, then in bronze.
15. *Human Skeleton, female*, complete, made of bone china, each bone marked with the afore-noted monogram, excepting the bones of the ribcage, which are marked with the other afore-noted monogram, and which are hinged to open from the center.
  1. Enclosed within ribcage, the skeleton of an *Erithacus rubecula*, wings spread, feathers intact, including red-breast.
  2. Discovered beside left wrist, bracelet of tarnished silver,

containing a hinged box which hides a tiny scroll upon which is drawn a demon.

16. *Human Skeleton, male*, complete, made of bone china, each bone marked with the second afore-noted monogram, with the exception of the bones of the ribcage, which are marked with the first afore-noted monogram, and which are hinged to open from the center.
  1. Enclosed within ribcage, the skeleton of the nectarivore *Panterpe insignis*, wings spread, feathers intact.
  2. Discovered beside skull, several tentacles, cast in metal, of a young cephalopod.
17. *Love letters, collection*, in language now obscure. Upon initial inspection, thought to have been written in an imaginary language, but upon chemical analysis, proven to be constructed in an ink which has encoded itself over centuries. Two distinct hands. Marginalia consists of fingers interlaced, invented insects, and various entwined beasts, all in the act of adoration.
18. *More and various items*, to be revealed upon a physical inspection of collection, in person. Location of collection to be revealed.

My Dear Sir, My Dearest Sir:

I hope that this brief accounting serves to entice you. Consider it repayment for the sweetness of your scorpion, which, even now, I drink, sip by careful sip, having procured a sample from our colleague in Prague. Consider this catalogue a birthday gift, in return for the loan of the catalogues you sent me. I cannot, alas, adequately compensate you for the hourglass you sent with them, filled with foraminifera, the star-shaped sand you knew was necessary to complete my spectrum of the world's most exquisite beaches. I know (of course!) that you collected it yourself in Okinawa, and with it, the magnificent insect that slips from end to end of the hourglass, counting the hours until we meet.

Nor can I repay you properly for the other insect you sent, the tiny lithophile, encased as it is inside a stone, so that I can hear it singing only when I place it tightly against my ear. You sent me, as I am certain you are aware, two insects who are named for the nature of their strange and livelong joy.

Even now, as I compose this gift to you, this brief catalogue of the lost possessions and bones of lovers neither you nor I have ever met, I watch the psammophile making its way from the bottom of the hourglass to the top again, stretching itself through the particles that compose its universe.

I read once, Dearest Sir, of an hourglass filled with powdered eggshell, inside of which the shells realigned themselves one afternoon into an egg, perfect, gleaming. An hour after that, there was heard a cracking, and the shell opened to reveal a singing bird, and an hour after that, the bird cracked open to reveal a bee which flew to the upper chamber. An hour later, the hourglass dripped with honey, and then the hours passed more slowly than they had done before.

An hour passed for an entire day, and as it passed, the orbit of the earth slowed as well, and both night and day were made longer by twenty-four times. The earth gazed in bewilderment at itself, spinning in place, around a sun that looked back, as stunned as the planets that orbited it.

In the room where this hourglass tilted, Dearest Sir, two collectors who had until the dawn of the longest day never met, sat at a desk with their volumes, their pens, their papers, and as the hour passed, they moved closer and closer, until, as the last drop fell to the bottom of the hourglass, they fell into one another's arms.

My Dearest Sir, that was the end of the volume, though I scoured the footnotes and primary sources in a vain attempt to find the moment the world spun back into orbit, or failing that, the moment the hourglass shattered. It was, I concluded — this was in my student days — a case of Fabulism miscategorized as Science. But now, in this room, I watch the glass and your gift, the sand-loving insect, climb, carrying particles in his pinchers. He has no regard for hours already passed, nor

for hours yet to add themselves to the tally of the world. Back he goes, and back again, ferrying his stars from the bottom chamber to the top. As he travels, I feel time moving around him, the lines in my face less, then more, the silver hairs on my head golden one hour, and white the next.

As I write this, I am old and nearing the end of my life, and you are far away and nearing the end of yours. Tonight, when the sand has been brought to the top of the glass, and the little insect you sent me crouches in his habitat, his slender legs folded, his gleaming eyes gazing in satisfaction over his work, I'll be young, and you will be young as well, young enough to board a ship, to sail over an ocean, to join me here, at my desk.

Together, then, at our desk, we may contemplate our catalogue, and perhaps, Dearest Sir, you'll take my hand in your own. Together, we will watch our psammophile, as he ferries his sand back, and back again, so that the moment of our first meeting, and the setting sun, the dawn, the twilight, will all combine into a long day and a still longer night.

And then, Dearest Sir, someday far in the future, long after our little insect has curled himself into his hourglass, and closed his jeweled eyes for the last time, another collector's apprentice may discover us two, here in our collection, our skin become paper. The apprentice may press his ear to our joined hands and hear the lithophile encased inside them, singing still.

By then, there will be in this room a thousand psammophiles. They'll be making their way patiently, in and out the window, carrying our bones to the sea, making sand of us. Beloved Sir, this future catalogue, this trove to be discovered, will then shift swiftly to the bottom of the ocean, battered by elements.

All that will be left, in the end, will be these letters, in which I declare myself utterly Collected, Catalogued, and Your Own.



*The Psammophile* © 2013 Maria Dahvana Headley  
*Tea time* © 2013 Linda Saboe





GIRL WITH GUITAR STUDY BY KIM GAUGE



# The Years of the Tarantella

by Sarah Brooks  
Art by Kim Gauge

They say that the bite of the wolf spider can be cured by dancing. If the victim dances into a frenzy, if the rhythm is fast enough, they say that the poison can be danced from the blood.

I don't believe them.



He was two days dead when I folded his clothes into suitcases and tossed them out into the street. In the weeks to come, I would see children skipping rope with his ties, and beggars in his three-piece suits, his hats at jaunty angles over their eyes.

My Francesco! They are still playing his songs in the record stores, a year later, still phoning the radio stations to request their favourites, the ones that made them lose themselves, the ones that made them feel the lightning on their skin and the comets behind their eyes. They are still trying to find their way back to whatever it was — the madness, the magic. The things we have lost.



In the papers I was all in black, in a little black hat with a lace veil. I was all in black and so very brave. Everyone loves a widow, especially one so pious. I walked to the church every day and knelt in the pews at the front and when I came out the photographers caught me. Behind my veil my skin appeared unlined.

They thought I was praying for my husband's immortal soul. They thought I was imagining him up there in heaven, that my eyes were raised to God to beg him to guide his loyal son, his son who he blessed with such gifts, such marvellous, marvellous gifts.

They were wrong. I did not pray for Francesco Camini's immortal soul. I did not care what became of it. I prayed for my own. I prayed for the strength not to listen to what waited in the darkness.



We met in a piazza in Genua, far to the north of here. He sat on the edge of a fountain, a battered guitar in his arms and a sad, romantic song beneath his fingers. At seventeen I was much taken with romance and with melancholic, brown-eyed boys, so I went and perched next to him (I was bold, in those days! With my dark hair that hung all the way down to my waist, and my long eyelashes and my full lips that I bit down on to make them bloom further).

When the song ended, he held his guitar closer and stared down at the strings.

'Can you play a happier song this time?' I asked him.

He looked up at me through his hair, in that shy way he used to have. 'I can play anything you want,' he said, which I chose to take as encouragement, and asked him for song after song, hour after hour, from the fountain in the piazza to the evening's crowded bars, and all the way down to the hot, dusty south.



Santa Marta, the birthplace of Calabria's most famous son, is a town on a cliff-top, overlooking a sea as blue as a child's painting. There is a hill above the town, and on the hill a cross. At night it lights up and appears suspended in the sky, miraculous, looking down upon all us sinners, looking down, all that time ago, at Francesco and I and our dark apartment where mould bloomed above the bed.

How we were happy, those first, long years! Just me and him and the music. On days when thunder crashed overhead and the sky turned green, he would play me the songs of his childhood on his battered guitar, his eyes closed as though he were listening to something beyond the storm.

But it didn't burn him, not then. In those first days he was yet to be incandescent.



You can't blame the guitar-maker. Gentle Gennaro Fonesca, who had known Francesco since he was a child, and liked to boast that he'd always seen him destined for big things. He made the guitar out of the best wood he had left over from his paying customers and he brought it round to our apartment with a big red ribbon tied around its neck.

It was a beautiful thing, made of warm, reddish wood. Francesco was like a little boy, taking it into a corner, sitting hunched over it, his hands possessive, leaving Gennaro and I to stand by and watch indulgently.

If I said that at Francesco's touch the strings hummed as if in anticipation, or that when he picked the first notes, a mystic light came into his eyes, it would be the story the faithful expect. The story they want.

But he picked those first notes, and the sound was a fine sound. Just that. Remembering our presence, he swept Gennaro up into a hug that nearly crushed the poor man. 'Thank you,' he said, tears in his eyes, 'Thank you.'

And if something crawled from the shadows one day, we did not see it. If something dropped from our high ceiling on a fine, fine thread, we were too late to catch it.

Something found the warm hollow of that guitar, and crouched there, like a black heart, beating.



He played for hour after hour, endlessly. The same tune, the same phrase. He wouldn't stop until it was right. Until it was perfect. Our neighbours complained. I shut all the doors and stuffed cotton in my ears. But the more he played, the quicker his fingers moved. The more the strings responded to his touch. The more marvellous the sound.

He played the tarantella in the piazza and in the bars and he played at weddings and feast days and on long warm evenings when there was nothing else to do, when I would bring out dishes of bread and olives and pour glass after glass of wine for our friends who gathered to listen and dance. He began to earn money, real money, even my mama, who

had never liked him, couldn't deny it. I was so, so proud of my husband. Of his talent and his fame in our little town.

'For you,' he would say, his arms around me, his chin resting on my head, 'For our family.'

And yes, I would not be human if I didn't admit I was also perplexed, by all those endless hours, by all that effort expended on just one thing. If I didn't admit that I was angry, at times, at what it meant that he missed. That I missed. But then he would come to sit behind me, and place my hands on the strings, curve my fingers into the shapes of the chords. And afterwards, as we stumbled to our creaky, sagging bed, I would tell him about the kind of mama I would be, the kind of papa he would be. 'The kind who listen to everything their children say, that's what we'll be,' I said. The kind who hug them tight and tell them they are clever and lovely and good. And he'd say, 'Yes, *bella mia*, yes.'



In Calabria, they call the tarantella *sonu a ballu*, music for dancing. Dancing like there's poison in their blood, like it's the only thing keeping them alive. At parties, at weddings, in piazzas and bars.

But it was at Carnival where the tarantella really lived. Where music made the whole town mad. And it was at Carnival that I began to be afraid.

It was hot in Santa Marta that year, much hotter than usual. People crowded the pavements and the piazza, hanging off lampposts, climbing up trees, squeezed onto balconies and in bars, voices too loud, sweat on their skin. And the *carre*, the floats, huge and grotesque with their bulbous politicians and their bright, fake flowers, travelling through the crowds, through the shouting and the confetti and coloured string, like huge beasts through a slow moving river, unstoppable, though the tide of people crashed against their sides.

We turned alien, our hair and clothes full of paper and string. I got confetti in my eyes. I could barely see Francesco, alone and small on a rickety stage at the far end of the piazza, his guitar in his hand.

He began to play.

Slowly, quietly at first, plucking the strings as if careful that each sound should hang alone on the air. Then faster, his foot beginning to stamp time, his fingers beginning to dance. And the crowd, the crowd began to listen. Conversations stopped. Heads turned.

It is hard to write music on the page if you do not write in crotchets and semiquavers, in fat black bubbles and thin, scratchy lines. So all I can say is that it came up through our feet, the music, it came into our bones. It lifted our arms to the sky, it made us stamp and turn and we were skin to skin, all of us, dancing with strangers, dancing steps we never knew, faster and faster as he played on and on, his eyes closed, his hair stuck to his forehead, dark stains blooming beneath his arms. We never wanted him to stop. The paving stones of the piazza cracked beneath our feet, the palm trees trembled and the tarantella made us mad, as though the spider had crept to us in the night, gifting us its poison like a kiss.

When it was over darkness had fallen. I looked around me at faces flushed and sweating, blinking as though they stumbled from sleep. I looked at the figure on the stage, cradling his guitar like a child.



They began to play Francesco Camini on the radio. A music producer came to our door, sat sipping coffee in our living room and said that talent like this should be heard, that folk music was the future. ‘Out of the piazzas and into the charts’, he said, though I couldn’t take my eyes off the dribble of coffee on his chin.

Photographers began to wait outside our new house, with its high ceilings and wrought-iron balconies, and they called to me to ‘*Smile, bellezza!*’ I smiled for them, and wore my fine new clothes, and sent all his press clippings to my mama, who never spoke of him on the telephone.

And the tarantella started to seep into all our lives.



Ask anyone. Ask them how you could hear the radio from all the open windows along the street, playing Francesco’s songs. Ask them how the coffee on the stove smelled and they’ll tell you — like warm

midnight and good darkness. Ask them how the tomato sauce tasted, when all they'd added was garlic and basil and they'll close their eyes and remember and say — like magic, like music. Like fire and love and endless evenings.

The priests spoke of miracles. The papers said a blind girl fell to her knees and sobbed, 'the sky is blue, such blue!' Wounds were healed. Old bones gained new life. Summer flowers bloomed all winter. And I, I waited for the music to work its magic, for new life to stir inside me, to make us into the family we longed for. That I longed for.

Walking home from church, my friends told me they kept the radio on all night, they told me, 'The songs, those songs, how they keep us from sleeping!'

How our skin was alive, in those days and those nights.



'Are you happy?' I asked him, when we lay beneath the slow ceiling fan, the music still dancing behind my eyes, lizards silhouetted on the wall and a spider spinning its web high above us. 'Is this what you want?'

And Francesco said, 'I just want the music. That's all,' his hands on my skin as though I, too, could sound notes clear and strong. 'The music. And you.' He tilted my head towards him, 'I'm happy if you are,' he said, and although he was looking right into my eyes, he never saw the untruth when I told him I couldn't be happier.

He looked up, and smiled. 'Look,' he said, 'A new friend wants to see us.'

The spider seemed unsupported in the air, tracing a lazy path towards us, blown gently by the fan. Francesco reached up his hand, and eight black legs curled around his fingers.

'He likes you,' I said.

'Who doesn't?' said Francesco, with a grin, as he let the creature run off his hand and onto the floor.

I hit him. 'Just because they're playing you on the radio doesn't mean you're any more charming than you used to be.'

Later, when I curled up, Francesco's arms around me, I saw the black shape of the spider on the floor beside the bed. I stretched out my hand but it ran away from me, into the shadows by the wall.



When the guitar-maker died, Gennaro's family asked Francesco to play at his wake. They said he had been so proud that Francesco played his guitar, that he still played it, even after seven years. And how well it had lasted! Barely a scratch on its fine wood. How well Francesco had cared for it, loved it.

The day of the wake, I sat on the floor of our bathroom and mourned again, my horrible, monthly ritual. I had stopped crying, by then. Francesco knocked on the door, softly.

'You go ahead,' I called, trying to make my voice sound normal, though the effort made me tired. 'I'll come later.'

I knew that he stood there, his forehead and his palms pressed against the door. And I knew that he would leave, soon, because the guitar called to him louder than I did. Because the tarantella wanted him more.

Later, I danced barefoot in a small apartment in Via San Rocco, and forgot the things I didn't have. Francesco played for Gennaro and I danced the poison of loss from my blood. You couldn't dance to Francesco's tarantella and be sad. You couldn't remember why you were crying.

The apartment was full of all the people from a long, good life. In the middle of the afternoon, the windows smashed, raining glass down on the street below. By nightfall cracks had appeared on the walls. The apartment was evacuated at midnight, and the dance went on in the dark streets until morning.



Should I have known, earlier? Miracles are a dangerous thing. Once I thought I saw something reaching up through the strings of the guitar. Black and thin and delicate. I thought I saw it touch Francesco's fingers, for just a moment.

When he wasn't looking, I ran my fingers over the strings, put my ear to the smooth wood. There was nothing there. Of course. But the guitar had begun to scare me. I had begun to see it for what it was. A malign thing, a wondrous, terrible thing. We were wrong to think that gifts were uncomplicated, foolish and wrong. So I took it from him when he slept, crept down in bare feet into the garden and lit a fire.

But the flames would not consume it. They danced around the wood and made its richness even brighter, they held it and made it stronger.

I say this before God.

I walked away, left it burning but not burning. In the morning the fire had died but the guitar sat untouched in the ashes, triumphant, mocking. I watched from the kitchen window, coffee brewing on the stove behind me.

When Francesco woke he walked into the garden and he took the guitar without a word, without a glance at me.



After a concert in Rome, the police were called to prevent a riot. The saints in the church of Santo Spirito began to weep, said the papers, real salt tears.

In Naples, the bells in every tower and steeple began to chime at once.

In Venice, the waters rose around the dancers' waists but could not stop the dance.

Night after night he played. City after city. I listened on the radio, in our empty, echoing house. I listened to the miracles and I was the only one who was afraid. Though he always came back to Calabria, he came back a shadow. A man who was only half in the world.

I told him I wished he would find another woman, that he would go down to the docks and find one there. Take a long-haired, big-hipped beauty to a bed in a shabby house and lose himself in her smell and the feel of her skin. I wanted it to be a woman he burned for. Not a thing. I



wanted it to be something I could understand.



The day after he came home for the last time, I saw a spider crawling on the guitar. A tiny thing, and very black. I brushed it off, sent it scuttling under the sofa. Later, when I passed again, there were more, very small and very black, all crawling over the white tiled floor. I took an old postcard down from the wall and nudged them onto it. Then I took them out into the garden and shook them off onto the flowerbeds underneath the kitchen window.

When we woke the next morning, there were webs covering the windows, like the frost you get in the north. All the way across the glass, so that the light turned greyish and pale.

And Francesco burned. I put my hand to his forehead and the heat scared me. He lay in bed for days, the sheets soaked. He shouted things I didn't understand, and other things I did. Bad things, shameful things. He burned and there was nothing I could do, nothing but sweep away the black spiders that crept towards his pillow, nothing but tear down the beautiful, fragile webs that hung like lace shawls from the bedposts and crush the tiny bodies between my fingers.



Of the end, of the last tarantella, accounts differ. Some say he fell to his knees and looked to the night sky. God called him, they say. Others swear that he took a last bow and danced off with a shadow that appeared at his shoulder. Still more say that blood trickled from his ears, that it stained his white shirt but he played on and on, to the end.



It was a concert for the church of San Rocco, crumbling for years. The priest himself had asked Francesco, and of course, he couldn't say no.

'Got to keep the saints on your side,' he said, though where were the saints these last years, I thought, where were the relics to protect my Francesco, whose lips were cracked and eyes sunken, whose hands shook but for when they held his guitar.

The church of San Rocco, protector against plagues.

‘You’ll be there, won’t you?’ he said, unsteadily, taking my hand in his, and those familiar calluses, those hard grooves on the tips of his fingers, made me want to throw my arms around his thin shoulders and tell him not to go, to throw away that terrible thing and stay here forever with me.

‘I’ll be there,’ I said, ‘You’ll see me in the crowd.’



That night, I sat on our balcony, a shawl around my shoulders, a book unread on my lap. I heard the music from the piazza, heard the roar of the worshippers. I drank glass after glass of red wine. I heard the music end.

Soon the doorbell rang, and the doctor stood in the doorway, his collar undone and his tie askew. ‘Signora,’ he said. ‘Signora.’ His voice broke. Tears dripped onto his shirt. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, again and again, ‘I’m sorry, Signora.’



The country fell to its knees with grief. I put on my black suit and my black stockings and my black high heels. The country wept. I lowered my black veil over my face so they could not see that my eyes were dry.

Candles burned night after night at the shrines that they built for him, made out of flowers and photographs, out of tambourines and old, much loved guitars.

I closed the door to all callers, tore up the condolence cards, unread. The guitar I wrapped up and stowed away in a trunk in the attic, hidden from view, hidden with all of my fury and all of my sickening grief.

There in the darkness I sometimes thought I could feel it, as though the floors and the walls pulsed with its strange, impossible, life.



Life continued. Coffees were drunk, shuttered windows opened and closed, the church bells called their congregations together on

Sundays. Francesco Camini was played on the radio, day after day. Carnival came around again.

But when the confetti was thrown and the *carre* rolled along the streets and the men with guitars came to play the tarantella, the magic was all gone. Francesco Camini was dead and nothing could ever be the same again, nothing would ever taste or smell or feel like it did in those years of the tarantella, those years of the magic coming up through our bones, breathing out through our skin.

The days went on, one much like the other, the weeks, and the months. A year passed.

And I woke one morning to tiny black spiders, spinning their webs above me.



Beside me on the white sheets of a bed that is far, far too big, I have placed Francesco's guitar, as warm and red and alive as the day it was made. I run my fingers over the strings, and the notes they sound are clear and true. I curl up against the pillows, cradle the guitar and close my eyes. Francesco's arms are around me, his hands over mine. 'Like this,' he whispers. And my fingers curl around its neck, they find the places I thought they'd forgotten.

I play. The chords, and the half-remembered songs. Soft bodies brush against my skin, delicate legs scuttle over my hands. I leave them be.

And from within the guitar, something hungers.

Something promises lightning and magic.

Something turns and turns in its web.



*The Years of the Tarantella* © 2013 Sarah Brooks  
*Girl with Guitar Study* © Kim Gauge



UNNATURAL HAZARD BY BRYAN PRINDIVILLE

# Strange Invasion

by Darren O. Godfrey  
Art by Bryan Prindiville

Here I sit, exhausted in the extreme, and wondering which came first, the gravy boat or the scorpions.

My partner yesterday (wow, it was just *yesterday*, so hard to believe) was Ted Wilson (who sliced every other shot, it seemed, poor guy), and *he* thought it was a *saucer* up there in the air and *spiders* down on the ground, but Ted was blind as a bat, bless his soul.

*My* eyes, on the other hand, are those of an eagle, and what I perceived was this:

1. The hovering thing in the sky was gravy boat-shaped (though its base may have been circular, suppose), and,

2. What erupted out of the hole on the 11th green of the Preston Country Club were scorpions. And what's worse, the little fuckers kept my ball from going in the hole after I'd hit one of the best chip shots of my entire life.



I'd assumed the gravy boat arrived first, you see, because it made sense (after a fashion) that the alien craft might have come down and *summoned* the scorpions up out of the ground, but later I wasn't so sure. I'm also not sure why it's important, but my mind just won't leave it alone.



A beautiful day, it'd been. Perfect for golf, not too hot, not too cold, and not windy at all. The noon whistle (more a siren, really) from over Preston way had sounded as I approached my Titleist 4 where it lay some thirty yards in front of the green. Ted was off in the brush searching for his wayward second shot, and I thought the next town siren call — the 10 pm one — might sound before he'd likely find his Pinnacle. I was also in a bit of a marvel over how good my 62-year-old legs felt. They hadn't moved with such strength and purpose in more than a year and I had the new exercise and diet regimen to thank for it. And, I had my persistent wife, Myrna, to thank for that.

Irritating as that could be, at times.

Pitching wedge in hand, I addressed the ball. "Hi, ball," I said (yes, I really did). I widened my stance a little, opened the face of the club, drew it back, swept it forward, and up she went. That ball dropped on the green exactly where I'd targeted it about six feet above the hole, spun backward, broke slightly to the left and made straight for home.

Then a sudden looming presence pressed down overhead (felt more than heard, really) just as a flood of scorpions erupted out of the hole.

I close my eyes now and I can see it all again, clear as day — it *wasn't* my imagination, *wasn't* a hallucination, scorpions came up out of a golf hole, no shit.

Some of those brown-black fuckers went for my ball, wrestled it to a stop, while some went up right up the flagstick and swung by the little white flag. Most, though, spread out evenly over the green in a noisy dark wave. It looked like gallons and gallons of spilling, spreading coffee. Lumpy coffee. Chittering coffee.

I kinda ducked my head down and pulled my feet up simultaneously, if you can picture that. I moved backwards in a big fucking hurry, anyway, my club held out in front of me.

"Ted!" I shouted, or at least tried to, but it sounded more like a croak. I tried a few more times.

Meanwhile, the neatly trimmed green had disappeared completely

under the tide of scorpions; there were millions of the little buggers. Though I still felt the presence of something huge over my head, I couldn't take my eyes off that multitude of skittering, seething creatures.

*"Ted, come here!"*

I could hear him, way off to my right, tromping through the big-leafed stuff that divided the 11th hole from the 13th, panting.

*"What is it, Jake? What do— holy moley!"*

*"Yeah, look at all them buggers!"*

But I guess that's not what he was remarking upon, because he said, *"All of them? It's just one great big—"* I suppose he'd first looked up, and then, finally, where I was looking. *"Jeeze Marie! Look at all those spiders!"*

I took that opportunity to look up, finally, but what I said was, *"They ain't spiders, Ted. Spiders don't have curled up tails like that!"*

And there: a white gravy boat the size of an East River tugboat hung in the summer sky. A barely audible thrumming noise came from it.

Ted sucked air and then let out a scream. Upon the intake of his next lungful, I looked from the ship to him. His baby-blues, goggling behind his Coke-bottle glasses, went from critters to craft, craft to critters, his neck fairly becoming rubberized, and screaming all the while.

I wanted to do some screaming myself, felt the need not just in my throat but in every pore of my skin, but I noticed, then, that with each screech, more scorpions turned our way.

*"Ted, shut your trap!"*

Another scream.

So I stepped over to him and slapped him.

*"Let's go!"* I said, and when he went on screaming, I shouted, *"If you don't shut up, Ted, and get a move on, I'm going to smack you with*

this *club!*"

That got him moving.

We made for the cart, which had been parked closer to my game than that of Ted-the-Perpetual-Slicer, and jumped aboard just as dozens of scorpions had found its front wheels. I floored it, and discovered what it might be like to glide through a bowl of Rice Crispies. Problem was, it wasn't happening *fast* enough. The cart, like most its kind, was a gutless wonder.

Though my hands clutched the steering wheel, one still held the pitching wedge — it was a Ping; very nice. Its grip smacked me in the side every time I turned right and Ted in the arm whenever I turned left. He didn't seem to notice, though; he was screaming again.

Finally realizing I had to have somewhere to actually go, I angled us back in the direction of the clubhouse (west, I remember thinking *Go west, old man!*), knowing it was somewhere over hill, over dale, across a creek and behind some trees. And from there: the car. Yes, it was Ted's Lincoln (*why do I let the blind bumbler drive?*) but I, the calm-headed one, could drive us out of here.

I snuck a look back. The gravy boat still hovered over the 11th hole, but now a long, dark string wavered from its bottom. It looked as if gravy had been poured and a runner was now dripping from it.

But the *scorpions*...

That whole end of the 11th fairway was a stirring, chittering, brown-black mass of the fuckers: the rise where the green lay, the first- and second-cuts of rough, the brush, even the trees, all were positively *blanketed*.

Then the white ship tilted and began moving our way, that dark line still dangling from it.

That's when I started to laugh, I think, happy in the knowledge that I was going to wake up from this crazy goddamn dream at any second, and won't Myrna chuckle when I tell her all about it?

But I kept not waking up.





I got us across the creek that bisected the 10th fairway and started down the slope to the cart path (Ted now clutching the roof-to-body support bar of the cart in one hand, the back of the seat in the other, and staring, slack-faced, behind us, while our strapped-in bags of clubs clattered and complained), which would, after a graceful upslope, take us to the clubhouse.

Then I saw.

And slammed on the brakes.

If Ted hadn't had a good grip at that second, he'd have been Superman, laid out flat and flying, though only my hindmost brain cells registered that. The rest were taken up by what my eyes beheld.



The clubhouse roof was covered, not with scorpions, but with people (several golfers; Jim, the owner and clubhouse Pro; and all the maintenance guys). Above the clubhouse another gravy boat hovered, identical to the one coming out of the east. Like ours, it too had a line descending from it, but this one had people climbing up it.

It appeared they were being rescued.

I brought us a little closer and saw that what had been a parking lot half-full of vehicles was now a sea of scorpions with large humps in it. I also noticed the inside of the clubhouse was acrawl with scorpions, as well, blanketing everything.

And even in light of all these bizarre happenings, I felt something else wasn't right.

Look, I'm no whiz kid — got C's in school, mostly — but I *do* like to think I have at least a *lick* of sense. It occurred to me, you see: *what would space ships need ropes for?* Wouldn't it be more likely that they'd have some sort of tractor beams, or Star Trek-like transporters, or even big vacuum tubes that could suck folks up like lint balls?

Hell, even a rope *ladder* would be more sophisticated than just a rope.

More reason to think I was dreaming, right? Right. But the waking up thing just kept not happening.

“Go!” Ted shouted.

“Go? Go *where*?”

“To the *clubhouse*, Jake; I’ve got to go to the bathroom!”

“*Look*, you idiot! There are scorp— what? The *bathroom*? Are you serious, Ted?”

Still goggle-eyed (those glasses were most definitely not becoming on such an already goggly face), he said, “As a heart—” And I’m sure he meant to finish with: “attack.” As in, “Serious as a heart attack,” which was something he said often at the office. By all appearances, though, Ted now seemed to be *having* one.

Grimacing, he clutched his chest and fell out of the cart. (As he hit the ground, I noticed the spreading wet spot on the crotch of his plaid pants, so I guess he had indeed been serious about the need to pee.)

I slid across the cart seat, images of CPR being administered on plastic dummies running through my head, wondering where to start, and suddenly the feeling of large presence was overhead again.

I looked up. Saw the ship. And the rope.

Only it *wasn’t* a rope, not exactly.



Before Myrna, the best wife ever, there’d been Ruth, the incredibly selfish bitch. The day after I returned home from serving (Army, Master Sergeant) in what was being called the Korean Conflict, Ruth and I were married, and the day after that we were in Rio de Janeiro. Her idea. She’d wanted to go to Rio ever since her Poppa told her it was the most beautiful place on earth, and if we couldn’t go there for our honeymoon, then, well, she supposed I oughta just get back on that plane and find another war to fight.

To Rio we went.

Some of the days Ruth basked on the beach, and while she did, I

went exploring. Not in Brazil's jungles, but in its restaurants and bars, its churches and zoos. And it was there, in a South American zoo, where I first saw an anteater.

Beautiful creature, even when sticking out its tongue.

Thin, black, and extremely sticky, was that tongue.

And so was this one.

I looked back over at the clubhouse and saw that I'd been wrong — those people weren't climbing that thing, they were *stuck* to it. That *whatever* it was up there had evidently come along and just *licked* across the panicking group of folks, and now I saw that a kidney-shaped hole had opened up in the ship and *up* the tongue was going. Retracting.

The ones glued to the tongue were screaming only slightly more than those still on the roof. A couple (one of them was Jim, who'd taken my greens fees not all that long ago, with his usual charismatic smile) jumped from the roof to the asphalt below. Painful landing, by the sound of it.

And at the moment of pause over who needed my help more, the man at my feet (Ted) or the men over by the building (Jim and some white-haired fellow), a sticky slab fell across my face. I leapt backward into the cart, reflexively swinging my pitching wedge up and over onto the tongue, and as I fell back onto the cart seat, I pushed (both hands gripping the club now) down and away. The tongue stretched my cheek out farther than even my Aunt Darlene used to when she pinched it.

It tore away, taking some of my cheek skin and my right sideburn with it. The tip of the tongue swung upward, sticking to itself, the pitching wedge now in its grip. I let it go (it was a nice club, but not *that* nice) and scrambled back behind the wheel of the cart — those gentlemen were just going to have to cope without me, you understand — and slammed the accelerator to the floor.

Gutless. *Gutless piece of upper middle-class means of transportation for gutless middle-aged duffers like me.*

Time to use my legs, then; hell, hadn't I been marveling over their

vigor just a short while ago?

I ran. Neither toward the clubhouse and Ted's car, nor back the way we'd come, but north, into an open field. I remembered Jim telling me he'd been trying to purchase this field from a farmer in order to put in a driving range. I don't know what kind of field it was (potatoes? alfalfa?), but the bit of low green growth there was easy to run through.

Hard to hide in, though.

I spotted a shack, but decided against it. Wouldn't do to get cornered, would it? I wondered if it might not have been a good idea to snatch up another club from my bag before bailing on the golf course (and my friend) as I was feeling pretty vulnerable without *some* sort of weapon. I wondered why the fuck this was happening. I wondered how Myrna was, and was this going on where she's at — our home in Downey — and was this going on *everywhere*?

If so, were fighter jets scrambling from Air Force bases? Were exterminators scrambling from their shops in vans with plastic bugs on top of them, backpack tanks loaded with poison?

But for now: where to go, what to do?

*Think*: when you're being attacked from above and below, where do you go? In a straight line? And when I spotted a large, skittering brown patch off to my left, I veered to the right; and later, when a gravy boat with a sticky tongue swung up on my right (is that Ted, stuck there on the end?), I veered left.

Eventually, I came here.

To this house. Empty. Where I somehow, someway, was allowed to rest, which I did. And then I put some hydrogen peroxide on my cheek, and then found this notebook on the coffee table along with some textbooks: some kid's homework.

Where's the kid, I don't know. Parents? Ditto.

I feel positively fucking spoiled — I got the chance to rest, while Ted, all he got the chance to do was relieve himself into his favorite golf pants. I wonder *why*, as I see an ocean of scorpions on the ground

outside and an armada of long-tongued ships hovering in the air, *why* am I still alive? Why are they letting me—

Oops. Spoke too soon.

I hear massive scuttling in the floor below, and the crunch of roof beams overhead.

To my lovely but unremitting Myrna: Thank you. *You* are the reason I had these few extra minutes.

A hope, a wish, and a thought: I *hope* you're all right, safe and sound. I *wish* that ball would've dropped, and I *think* that, no matter how crazy the world gets — and obviously it gets pretty fucking crazy — that love is



*Strange Invasion* © 2013 Darren O. Godfrey  
*Unnatural Hazard* © 2013 Bryan Prindiville



NIGHTMARE OF VIOLENCE BY KATERINA APOLSTOLAKOU

# The Wall Garden

by Alvaro Zinos-Amaro  
Art by Katerina Apostolakou

*There is no having, only a being, only a state of being  
that craves the last breath, craves suffocation.*  
— Franz Kafka

Searing pain brands him, as though the world were a cigarette trying to put itself out on his body. Kevin Gostend tries to wrench himself free from the fiery agony, but that merely tightens its grip.

Then the burning transforms into a crushing force, the universe pushing in from all sides. After tremendous effort a muted gargle emerges from his lips. He's blind; he can't move; he doesn't recognize his own voice. He feels hot slime, or perhaps blood, drool from his mouth and ears as his insides turn to jelly.

Kevin Gostend goes somewhere else.



Two weeks earlier, Kevin, whose driver's license picture — flattering compared to the real deal — showed a doughy forty-eight year old with a wide forehead, big ears, a small angular nose, and a cold gaping smile married to an unattractive overbite, had landed in

Weaverville, CA, the town where he'd grown up.

"You look awful," said Dolores, owner of the house where he was crashing and divorced mother of one of his high-school drug buddies, now in jail. "And good morning. I'm sure that crappy mattress isn't helping." She set a cup on a nearby dresser. "Here's some coffee."

He looked away. "I remember my life as it once was," he said, and threw himself back on the mattress. "Snapshots of a kiss, a car, a graduation. Melissa. Raymond. Ray again. Oh, and this one unbelievable blowjob, pardon my French."

"Kevin," Dolores began. He stared at her. He hated the way his name sounded when she spoke it. Maybe he hated the way it sounded, period.

"Kevin," she said again.

He closed his eyes. "I remember getting married and thinking to myself, I have a future. I remember thoughts like *I love Melissa*, or *I love Raymond*, or *It's good to be alive*. That was my life before the war took him from me."

Dolores' face drew itself into tight lines. She puckered her lips and spoke in a low voice. "Grow up. Chrissakes. You can't blame the government for how your life's turned out," she said. "I won't pretend to know what it's like to lose a son ... in the way you lost yours. But Ray was an adult. He knew the risks. It's not anyone's fault."

He shot her a quizzical look, the meaning of her words light-years away. He studied the skin that sagged on her chin and neck. A thin neck. He wondered what his hands would feel like on that old over-tanned skin, how hard his fingers would have to press, how far his thumbs would have to push down into her flesh before the veins in her neck burst, before she stopped breathing.

Dolores glanced at the coffee.

He shook his head. "Not anyone's fault. I suppose that means Melissa was blameless. Not *her* fault. Depressed, cheating bitch, who worked through her pain by fucking other men. You're good at this



therapy shit. Charge by the hour?”

Dolores crossed her arms. Then she grabbed the coffee and downed it herself in short, urgent draughts.

“You need to leave,” she said. “Get help, Kevin. Professional help. I have to pick up some groceries. Be gone when I’m back.”

He smiled and nodded. She left.

That morning in Weaverville, while he imagined Dolores down at the supermarket shopping for toilet paper and hair spray, he thought about shooting himself in the face. It was a weirdly humid morning and the sky was a tumult of gray. He lay there on his old pal’s rickety bed and stared out the window.

As he watched the heavy embankments of cloud press down on the world, a surge of willfulness arose within, a desire not to succumb to a cliché of darkness and despair. *If I’m going to kill myself*, he thought, *I’ll do it when it’s a beautiful day. Let the sun shine down on my corpse for all the world to see.*

He packed up and within the hour he was gone.

The next four days, as it turned out, were overcast.

He studied the sky with ironic bemusement every couple of hours and decided to stay alive, connected to this world by a mere thread of meteorological happenstance.

And on the fifth day, as the sun began to peel away the mantle of melancholy off-whites and he resolved to make good on his commitment, he met the woman who would change everything.



Kevin, squeezed between two walls, feels consciousness return like tar, heavy and non-porous. He opens what he thinks of as his eyes, which feel more like slits, and attempts to move his limbs, which he fails to locate. Instead, his body is tube-like, bulbous, a distended mess without extremities or gripping appendages. He pulls in his grotesque gut (is that all that he is now, gut?) and heaves, and little by little he inches forward by undulating and writhing.

Exhaustion comes soon. A putrid liquid bubbles up to his mouth. It dribbles out of him and with it, small, hard things, bitter and pungent, maybe pebbles, or twigs, or dead animal parts.

He forces himself to continue.

*Drug-induced hallucination*, he tells himself. *Hang in there.*

In the penumbra, as he continues writhing up or down that seemingly infinite space, *something* brushes up against him. A carapace rebounds from him and comes back for a second pass. This time Kevin feels the creature's many cilia-like legs as it crawls over him.

"Can you hear me?" Kevin asks. "Can you understand what I'm saying?"

The caterpillar says, "You're new here, aren't you?"

"Yes," Kevin replies. "Help me get out. I need to find a hospital. Someone's done something to me."

He isn't sure how he's speaking. No distinct words emanate from his blubbery mouth, only a low rumbling interspersed with chirps and clicks.

"Out?" the caterpillar asks. "You mean you don't like it here?"

"I can hardly move," Kevin said. "I can't see because it's so fucking dark. And it stinks like a hog house."

"We're inside a wall. Maybe you're just hungry. You might feel better if you eat something," the caterpillar suggests. "Try me."

After a few moments Kevin says, "I can't eat you."

The caterpillar inches away.

"Help me," Kevin says, to no one in particular. He tries to project himself more loudly. "HELP ME! HELP ME! PLEASE!"

Desperation proves exhausting, specially when it goes on and on and on without results. In the enclosure, completely without energy or purpose, starving, unable to tolerate the stench, Kevin decides to stop moving and die. Maybe *that's* the way out of the dream and back into

real life. Maybe he'll wake up in an emergency room and a doctor will lean forward and say, "Close call, son."

But he doesn't die. And he doesn't sleep. Hunger comes and goes in bouts, and at times he feels himself digesting parts of his own body. This makes him regurgitate again.

Then something else bumps into him — no carapace this time.

The snake swiftly coils itself around Kevin's body and squeezes the air out of his lungs, if that's what they are.

"Stop doing that," Kevin wheezes. "You're choking me!"

"Just restoring your circulation," the snake replies and unspools itself.

Kevin feels a prickling heat spread all over his body.

"A little longer and you would have gotten stuck for good," the snake chides.

"I'm already stuck."

"Don't be obtuse. You know what I mean."

"What color are these walls?"

"It's a single wall, in case no one told you," the snake said. "And we're inside it. Quite commodious, if you ask me. Plenty of room for exploration and meditation. Some of us who've been here a while think of this place as a garden. A wall garden."

The snake recedes from him.

Kevin's mind remains fixated on the two bumpy, smelly surfaces that define his world right and left, or up and down, or whatever direction he's in. He's inside a wall, made of two walls. That's all there is.

"Is there a ceiling?" Kevin calls out.

"Afraid not."

"Then how come it's so dark in here?"

"We're so deep inside the wall that light wearies on its journey

here. And if you ever got to the floor you'd just reappear somewhere else inside the wall." With that, the snake is gone.



Her name was Clara. Kevin met her at a convenience store. He was buying cigarettes while she waited in line behind him, carrying two bottles. She wasn't particularly attractive — short, pale, small and beady brown eyes, grungy shoulder-length hair that could use styling or a ponytail — but she was lithe, and possessed a nervous energy that he immediately responded to.

While the clerk fetched his smokes he turned to her and said, "The sun's really coming out today, isn't it? Seems like it's been cloudy for weeks."

She nodded absently, right hand rummaging through her purse, small lopsided smile but little eye contact.

The clerk brought out his cigarettes. He paid and stepped aside, pretending to examine his change.

In his peripheral vision he saw her place the bottles on the counter and heard the clerk ring her up. Her purse antics grew more frenzied until she finally said, "I'm so sorry, I seem to have misplaced my wallet."

The clerk sighed loudly. "Have you reported it lost or stolen, ma'am?"

"It's not lost or stolen," she replied. "I've just misplaced it."

The clerk shrugged. "We take card or cash. If you can't pay for these items, please make room for the next customer."

The woman glanced behind her. There was no one in line.

"Is there any way you can do me a favor? I promised my sister I'd bring wine to the luncheon she's giving, and I hate to let her down. Let me take the wine — I'll leave the whisky — and then she and I can drive back here later and we'll pay for everything. Promise."

The clerk's eyes narrowed. "Ma'am—"

"It's okay," Kevin interrupted, and reached into his pocket. "Here,

on me. How much is it?”

The woman seemed taken aback by his intrusion, but not as taken aback as someone who had received no such favors in the past.

“Really, there’s no need,” she said half-heartedly, her words undermined by her strong smile.

“Not a problem.”

The clerk, with a disapproving look and a second shrug, passed the receipt on to him, and he plopped the cash down on the counter.

Kevin tucked the brown bag with her purchases under his arm. “Let me carry it out to your car for you.”

She said, “Be my guest.”

She pulled a key from the right pocket of her tight jeans as they reached her rusted-out black Hyundai Excel and opened the passenger side. He hadn’t seen a car this old in years. He leaned forward and was about to place the bag on the seat when she said, “Need a lift?”

Bag still under his arm, he said, “My Ford’s right over there.” He pointed to his truck, five spots from her car.

“The world might look different if you ride with me,” she said. “More grounded.”

He smirked. “Why not.”

While she got in he sat down on the passenger side, placed the bag on the floorboard and removed his baseball cap and sunglasses. The car smelled of cigarettes and faded dashboard vinyl.

She turned on the engine and said, “This rickety junk-heap belongs to a friend. Need to return it in a few hours. Only does like eighty, but it sure beats walking or catching the bus.” She applied fresh lipstick and perfume. It wasn’t particularly pleasant, but he felt himself grow excited at the whiff of raw body odor it was covering up.

“Where do you wanna go?” she asked.

“Coffee?”

She glanced at the brown bag by his feet. "I've got a better idea."

She drove to the outskirts of town and pulled onto a dirt road. Forest cropped up on either side, framing them with tall pines and eucalyptus trees. For a moment he felt penned in. She kept going for a few more miles and eventually pulled over. He relaxed. Sunlight mottled the dashboard, bright spots of morning floating down from the tree canopy.

It was quiet here.

Peaceful.

*Dark enough*, he thought.

"So do you really have a sister?"

She blushed a little through her grin. "She died about five years ago. Fucking brain tumor. You believe that shit?"

Kevin pulled out some pills from his pocket.

"Want some?" he asked. "Very calming."

"Fuck yeah."

He dropped two pills into the palm of her hand, careful not to touch her skin. He wanted to prolong the anticipation.

He swallowed two pills himself and closed his eyes.

Within moments he felt himself easing into the now, while the part of himself that was normally in control, the part that was depressed and suicidal, took a hike. Gone with it too the typical questions he would have asked, such as: What's your name? What do you do for a living? Kids? All that bullshit — all the trappings that would lead away from the mystery and excitement of the present moment and back into the labyrinth of quotidian expectations, rote conversations, stereotypes, disappointments — all of that, poof.

He basked in the shared silence.

They sat like this, placid, while the world took care of itself.

After an indefinite period of dozing and beautiful dreams, she

leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Want to taste me?"

He was instantly hard at the closeness of her warm breath against his earlobe.

Slowly, deliberately, her right hand disappeared into the front of her jeans, two forefingers outstretched. He saw the shape of her fingers in her crotch, working their way down and in. She closed her eyes and moaned.

This one imagined what her breasts looked like underneath her gray hoodie, slim and pale like the rest of her. In his mind's eye he saw her nipples hardening, could feel their tips in his lips. Then the two index fingers emerged, gleaming and moist, and she half-reached her hand towards him and stopped, so that he had to lean forward and stretch his neck for his mouth to reach them.

He opened wide and enveloped her fingers with his mouth, wrapping them in his warm tongue, running his tongue down their length, pausing at the knuckles, dwelling on every subtlety of her hot, sticky, tangy taste. She trembled.

Without looking away, he reached down into the grocery bag, opened the bottle of Evan Williams and drew the bottle towards her mouth. She reclined and parted her lips, thrusting out her tongue. He allowed a little to pour into her mouth, spilled some down her chin. It dribbled down her neck and on her hoodie. He smiled and tilted the bottle more heavily, turning the upper part of her hoodie dark. Hungrily, he lowered his head to her chest, and began kissing the stains, tracing the contour of her breasts with his mouth. Her head turned sideways, flushed with excitement. He could smell her salty skin now, as he worked his way up to her neck and back down, and the taste made him even harder. On the way back down to her breasts he teased the hoodie zipper open with his left hand, and parted it just low enough to reveal her black cotton lace bra. Then he spilled more bourbon on her bra and sucked on each breast in turn, passionate and firm, but in control of his lust.

"You know, they lie when they say whiskey is sunlight held together by water," he said.

She stared down at him, eyes wide. He moved up and kissed her on the mouth, long and playful.

“Sunlight and whiskey have come together to make a woman,” he went on, “and that woman is you.”

She grabbed his hand and slipped it inside her jeans. His fingers found her easily, and he teased her by circling a few times before slipping into her warm, tight wetness. He pushed his thumb against the not-so-little bump of her clit and began to drive his other fingers in and out of her, feeling her gushing at his touch. She began to grind on him, squeezing his fingers more and more tightly inside her.

“Make me burn a little brighter,” she said, and he did as instructed.



For the first time in this life or his previous one, Kevin *wants* to cry, longs for the release that will come with such abandon. But his slits-for-eyes are incapable of it, and the more he focuses on triggering the physiological process, the less psychological use he has for it, until the whole thing becomes a joke.

His futility turns to anger. He uses the anger to keep himself moving. That works for a short while, but hunger stymies him. The pangs Kevin experiences tug at his consciousness with an insistent, voracious pull. It is in this state that he encounters a crab. The being's pincers brush against Kevin's blob of a body; that brief contact sends Kevin into a tizzy of ravenous desire.

“I'm sorry,” Kevin says, and bites into it. The crab defends itself with desperate ferocity but Kevin won't relent. His hunger acts as a balm for the pain of the crab's thrusts and cuts. Then the crab abruptly stops fighting. Kevin envelops it with his turgid body and waits to see if its immobility is some kind of trap. But the crab appears to have simply given up. *It has lost the will to live*, Kevin thinks.

Kevin closes his eyes and snaps down as hard as he can on the crab's tough shell. His teeth aren't much to speak of but his jaw is a powerful device, and repeated clenching and unclenching soon gets him places. A cracking sound is followed by the sensation of something warm and



pulpy spilling into Kevin's mouth. Without a doubt, this is the most succulent meat he has ever tasted. Eating is too slow to satisfy his hunger; he aspirates the crab's innards. In his haste, pieces of the crab's shell mix in with the more tender insides, but it makes no difference.



On the drive back to the parking lot they exchanged names. Clara went on to tell him that she was a user who'd tried to clean up twice, and that after losing her job six months ago she'd been raped by a drunken ex-co-worker, about three miles from where they were currently parked.

"Why stay here?" Kevin asked.

"Every place is the same. You only travel in your mind."

*Inspid nonsense*, he thought. Starving, he asked Clara if she wanted to grab a bite to eat. She declined.

As they reached his truck his pulse weakened and his palms became clammy. "I want to see you again," he said.

"You're cute." She had changed from her hoodie into a black sweater that was a size too small, with a visible hole on the right shoulder. The tightness of the fabric and the exposed patch of skin distracted him from her refusal to extend their interaction. All he could think about was how she looked underneath her clothes. How she smelled. How she tasted.

"Please," he said, ashamed of himself. Uncomfortable thoughts arose about the *friend* to whom she had to return the car. "I mean, if..."

Clara's smile faded. "You bought me the booze and gave me that stuff, and—"

"Ketamine."

"—and I thanked you for it, in my own special way. That's it. I'd like to remember you as a friend."

Clara started the engine.

The other one's jaw clenched. He looked outside. The sky was cloudy again. He nodded slowly, opened the door, got out and slammed

it shut. Clara said, “Fuck you, too,” and squealed out of the lot.

He studied her license plate as she left. Once back inside his truck, he examined the cell phone pictures he’d taken of Clara while she had drifted off. He then reached into his pocket to inventory the snatched spoils. He ran his finger over her smooth lipstick case and became hard, saved her driver’s license for last.

Now, to wait.



Devouring the crab infuses Kevin with strength, and he writhes for what seem hours, days. Eventually, his eyes better used to the dimness, he makes out a scorpion, except this one has two upward-curving segmented tails instead of just one. Kevin hesitates.

The scorpion advances, stingers snapping forward.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” Kevin says, retreating as rapidly as his ponderous body allows.

“What makes you think you *could* intrude, even if you wanted to?”

“I—”

“Maybe I’ll intrude on *you*.” The scorpion’s stingers turn on each other for an instant, in a grotesque parody of clapping hands.

“Can we talk for just a minute?” Kevin pleads. “My name’s Kevin.”

“Talk before I kill you? Is that what you mean?”

“If you get to know me—”

“Then I won’t be so bent on poisoning you?” A pause. “Is that what she tried with you? I used to be a she too, you know.”

Kevin feels his brain turn to mush. “She?”

“Yes. The one you liked so much you had to kill.”

“I can’t remember killing anyone.”

“Not remembering is a far cry from not doing.”

Kevin knows that there’s no way, given the scorpion’s speed, that

he can escape.

He thinks of the crab.

“Ever since I arrived in this place I’ve just been trying to stay alive,” Kevin says. “Wake up from this bad trip.”

“Liar. That’s not what you believe this is.”

“What else?”

“You remember her.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Let me help you.” The scorpion pounces on Kevin and the stingers come down hard, piercing Kevin’s fatty middle. But instead of pain the penetration is almost orgasmic, a sudden, vast, dissolution of his control, a surrender and an emptying of himself into something else, new, other.

*The scorpion’s stingers are inside me*, Kevin reflects, surprised by his own calm, by his ability to articulate exactly what is happening.

Then the tips of the stingers release their venom and Kevin remembers.



After bashing in the side of Clara’s head with an ashtray, Kevin felt a flash of euphoria, followed by a migraine, hallucinations of burning and being crushed alive.

The visions passed. Only seconds had elapsed. He sat on the edge of the bed, very still.

He felt... *lighter*.

Something warm flooded the sheets and ran down his legs. He looked down. It took him a few moments to realize it was his own urine.



Kevin chokes for an instant, as though the onrush of recollections is a physical discharge clogging up his mouth.

He sputters, hyperventilates, screams. The two-tailed scorpion

pulls the stingers out.

“You remember now, don’t you?”

Kevin gasps for air. Spittle on his lips, he turns himself upside down so that he won’t have to see the scorpion.

“Yes,” he manages. “Clara was her name. This is some sort of punishment, isn’t it?”

“Reflect upon the walls,” the scorpion says. “Begin your work.”

Kevin twitches. He wants to be free from this place. He’s sick with fear, sick of the darkness and the acrid, foul smell. The walls provoke nausea. His own body makes him want to retch. Enough is enough. “My work is to get the fuck out of here,” he says.

“If you become obsessed with leaving, you’ll never get out. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“What makes you the expert? I mean, why are you even here?”

“Killed my husband and two children,” the scorpion says. “He was thirty four. One of my boys was three, the other five. I tried shooting myself several times. Just couldn’t do it. I think my name was Suzanna.”

The prurient details of the scorpion’s other life console Kevin, at least for now. “How long you been inside this wall?”

“So long I don’t know if anything I just told you is true. I think I arrived as a rat. I killed myself quickly — tore into my own skull with my claws and scooped out my rat brain. Then I came back as a slug. Better-looking than you. For years I fed on the excrement of this one gorgeous, over-sized aphid. Eventually the aphid was eaten by a spider and I starved. Came back a dozen more times after that, but I’ll spare you the gory details.”

Kevin wriggles back.

The scorpion laughs.

Kevin calms himself and says, “So wanting to leave won’t work. Maybe I’ll try the opposite.”

“Sorry, giving up is also a bust. Then you just end up becoming an apathetic zombie. There are thousands of them, maybe even millions, not far from here. A whole colony of numbed-out giant hornets, soldier ants, bot flies that will lay their tasty eggs inside your mouth while you sleep. Good luck.”

“Wanting to leave is useless. Not wanting to leave is useless. You’re helpful.”

“Patience,” the scorpion says. “There’s still some of you left in the world you came from. Living his life, what used to be your life. This other one, the remainder of you, is purer than before. No conscience. No guilt. It’s up to this other one to decide what happens next. He may end up realizing what he’s missing and pull you out by sheer force of will. Or he may never notice what he has become and leave you here to rot forever.”

Kevin imagines this other him going about his business as though nothing has changed. Getting up in the morning, drinking, playing online poker, working some shitty job, jerking off to porn. He hates that creature, has nothing but contempt for that stupid, joyless self-pitying fuck.

“You seem depressed. Poor Kevin.” The scorpion chuckles.

“Fuck you.”

Kevin resumes his travels and leaves the scorpion far behind. In time he encounters a dung beetle who confirms many of the things the scorpion told him.

“So you’re also waiting for the other you, somewhere out there, to pull you out?” Kevin asks. Even the slightest commonality with one of the wall’s other denizens will help keep him from going completely insane.

“Fuck my other one,” the dung beetle says. “I belong here. No way in hell I’m leaving. That would be... dishonest.”

The dung beetle whistles to his friend, a red scarab beetle that has been waiting in hiding above Kevin. The scarab beetle lunges and rips

open Kevin's flesh.

Kevin's last slug thought is, *I wonder if they're going to roll my body up into a ball.*



The other him, the one who remains in the world of greasy late-night diners and neon-lit transience, drives away from Weaverville and thinks about the store where he met Clara, and how video tape will show them together. But he paid cash, and his face was covered by his cap and sunglasses, so they won't easily ID him. Besides, will the world really care that someone like Clara is gone? Who will report her missing?

The other one turns on the radio and keeps driving all night and all day. He relishes his newfound freedom. He can drift through any town he chooses or stay put. He can eat healthy and live clean and or he can get hammered and gorge on junk-food. He can be a model employee or he can sleep in and say "I quit." He can save or max out his credit cards. He can be a good Samaritan or lie and steal and kill. He can do it all at the same time. He can be whatever he *wills* himself to be in the moment — even if that's nothing at all.



Kevin is a centipede now, smaller than his previous slug incarnation, more nimble. "If I'm gone, why would my other one repent and pull me out? He was a sad excuse for a human being when he had me, imagine now."

"You're just as sad," the giant hissing cockroach replies. "Don't forget that you guys were tight once."

"The only thing that's tight is this goddamned wall." As a centipede he's small enough to detach himself from one of the surfaces and plunge down through the crawlspace void. He has tried that several times. He just keeps falling and falling until he tumbles and scrapes his way back to one of the walls.

"Do you think there's any way for me to communicate with him?" Kevin asks.

“I’ve heard of stranger things. But I wouldn’t trust anything I say.” The cockroach blows air out of its spiracles, as though to emphasize the point.

Kevin gets underway once more and eventually reaches a section of the wall festooned with spider-webs. He backtracks. But before he knows it, a female praying mantis has swooped down on him from the opposite wall and hooked him with her raptorial legs.

The mantis begins eating him, her eyes strangely alive. Kevin squeals. A second mantis descends on him and joins in the festivities.

With Kevin’s insides falling out, the first mantis interrupts the feast to savagely copulate with the second one. It then bites the head off its male companion and pushes its still-twitching body into the opening of Kevin’s gutted torso. The female mantis resumes its eating, seeming to relish its new two-body combo.

Kevin comes back as a lizard and resolves to be more aggressive. He stays alive for a long time. But deeper and deeper inside the wall, he discovers more and more creatures like the mantis, ferocious, hungry, who lash out and kill without any provocation. These critters aren’t like the others: their eyes are on fire, they never speak, and their thirst for killing is unquenchable, often causing them to turn on one another.

*Almost as though they’ve come here for the pure sport of it*, Kevin thinks, and scuttles in the opposite direction.



The other one thrives while he explores his new do-whatever-I-please self for two weeks before the depression returns.

One morning he sits in his truck waiting for the sun to rise and when it does, he nods to himself, and ambles to the nearest diner for one final meal.

On his second cup of coffee, but before his hamburger and fries arrive, he glances up as a long-limbed blonde places her hand on his shoulder and says, “Excuse me mister, got a sec?”

*You gotta be shittin’ me.* “Sure.”

The blonde, dressed in form-fitting sportswear, sits across from him in his booth. She's about six-one, trim but with curves where it counts, and her eyes, the color of turquoise diamonds, match her fingernails.

"I never do this," she says.

"Me neither. I always get steak for breakfast."

She chuckles and plays with her two long braids, for a moment making them look like tails growing out of her head. "I never do this, meaning approach strangers and sit in their booths. But I saw you from the bar-stool, and I was convinced I knew you from somewhere."

"Doubt it."

"No, I'm sure." She scrutinizes his features. "Would you mind taking off your glasses and hat?"

*Don't.* He complies.

She smiles. "Yep, I definitely know you from somewhere."

"And where might that be?"

She leans forward conspiratorially. "I'm going to tell you something real strange. Promise not to laugh at me."

He sits back. He likes her perfume. Strong but not cheap — unlike Clara's. The blonde's skin looks soft. Well-cared for. Maybe it needs some roughing up.

"I recently had a dream that I was a scorpion," she says. "Very vivid. Unlike any other dream I've ever had. I have this strange sense that I know you from there. From *inside* the dream. It's a place where you can be free... express who you really are. Give in to all your desires."

She crosses her legs and licks her lower lip.

His food arrives. He offers her some. She half-eats, half-sucks on a few fries. He says, "Tell me more."

"The weirdest thing of all is that I'm convinced that there's a way to get back there."

Several bites into his burger he puts it down and takes a long sip of



coffee.

“Back there. You mean the dream?”

“Well, yeah. Sorta.” She blushes. “Jesus, I sound like a raving lunatic. I swear I took my meds this morning.”

“You do sound a little nuts,” he says calmly, “but as you can see I’m not laughing at you.”

She blinks her long eyelids coquettishly. “*We* could go back into the dream together.”

“Is that so?” He grins, pushes his plate to the side. There are things going on underneath the table he’s happy no-one can see.

“Yep. The only kicker is, to get there we’d have to do something seriously crazy.”

“You seem to excel in that department.”

She reaches forward and plays with his knife, turning it this way and that, studying her reflection in the blade. Then she sits straight, cuts into the middle finger of her left hand. He sees a streak of crimson well to the surface around the still-inserted blade. She removes the knife slowly, making no effort to attend to the cut.

“The question is, am I right about you?”

She turns the knife so that the handle points in his direction. Instead of picking it up and cutting into his own hand in reciprocity, he takes the blade and licks off what remains of her blood.

“How am I doing?” he says, eyes fixed squarely on hers.

Her cheeks dimple. “Not bad.”

He moves his leg under the table until his foot touches her ankle, then traces a slow arc, pushing against her thigh, until he reaches the soft spot where her inner thigh turns into her groin, and there he lingers.

“Better,” she whispers.

He pulls his leg back abruptly. “So what do we need to do to go back to this fantastic world of endless possibilities?”

Her eyes seem to burn with unnatural brightness. “A suicide pact — just like the ones you see in the movies. I haven’t known you for more than a few minutes, but I think you’re the kind of person I could kill myself with.” She exhales, louder than a sigh, more dramatic.

His heartbeat accelerates and his mouth opens. The words that come out are, “What’s your name, sunshine?”



*The Wall Garden* © 2013 Alvaro Zinos-Amaro  
*Nightmare of Violence* © Katerina Apostolakou

## A Note About Our Sponsor



**I**t is through a most unlikely set of circumstances that Our Humble Bug-zine came to an unlikely alliance with an unlikely tech firm centered on the most improbable country in the world.

But of course, this much improbability made that alliance almost a certainty.

I speak, of course, of Havenco, the data center built atop an aging World War II anti-aircraft emplacement in the North Sea, which happens to also be the Principality of Sealand, a haven for pirate radio in the 1970s, and a haven for data privacy in the 2000s and beyond.

Havenco is dedicated to idea — and the ideal — of data security and online privacy, protecting not only the privacy of your online activities, but also the security of the data you store on the web.

Havenco offers Virtual Private Network (VPN) and web proxy services to help shield you from the ‘dragnets’ invading your privacy on the Internet. Unprotected browsing compromises your privacy by exposing your identity and activities to web site operators, criminals, and blanket Internet monitoring programs.

They also offer online storage with verifiable “hosting proof” security, where all encryption is done on your end and you — and only you — control access to your data.

Secure your Communications! Secure your files!

<https://www.havenco.com>



COMPOSITION OF A HALF DREAM BY JOHANNES AMM

# A Superfluity

by Helen Anderson

Art by Johannes Amm

There's a wasps' nest in the roof. Sarah is almost sure of it. From her bedroom window, she can see wasps flying out from under the slates; and if she presses her ear to the sloping part of the ceiling she can hear them buzzing. They land on the sill outside and gnaw on the wood; they have stripped it back in pale, tigerish stripes.

She has always been afraid of wasps, but she hasn't told anyone they are there. She is fascinated by their sideways mouths. Like a scientist watching her subjects through glass, she wakes up early, and observes the progress of the chewing, and looks down towards the sea in case the nuns are there again.

She first saw the sisters a week ago, on the beach. She came out from under the railway bridge, and found them everywhere, sudden and scattered like beads from a broken necklace. They were facing away from her, out towards the sea; a row of broad backs smothered in cloth. Each one had her shoes and socks in one hand, and her skirts scrunched up in the other, gathered around her legs so no part of her was showing. They waded carefully to keep their hems from trailing in the water, coming forwards in twos and threes to stand at the water's edge; stepping into the cold spring sea, and stepping back. They were like a piece of modern dance; a pattern of movement, wrapped in strange clothes.

Everyone else already seemed to know about them. Half Sarah's class sat on the sea wall, eating Black Jacks and passing opinions around with the bag.

"My dad says he doesn't see why they get that bloody big house just given to them. It's practically a mansion."

"I think it's made of that stuff that gives you cancer. Asbestos? Chris Hughes and that lot said they broke in once and it was full of chest x-rays."

"I thought it was a madhouse."

"Mad people's chest x-rays."

"Well, my mum says they have to go somewhere."

"Did you see on TV? It said they keep happening. Way more than they used to."

"My mum says something ought to be done about them."

"There *are* loads of them."

"Well, they'll get a nice view."

"And really big walls."

"Good."

Sarah sat one stone away, and listened. The rest stuck their blackened tongues out at one another, and flicked balled-up sweet wrappers down onto the sand, and made jokes about penguins. (Why can't penguins fly? Because they don't have enough money for plane tickets.)

One of the nuns wasn't being careful about her clothes. She still had her shoes on. She waded out until the sea was past her knees, up to her thighs, and then lay back in the water. Floating on the surface, drifting like a piece of kelp, her drenched clothes shone like a polished pebble. The other nuns flapped around her, and pulled her out and scolded, and dampened themselves in piebald patches.

They're such freaks, Sarah's class said. Look at that idiot. I pay taxes

for that.

Look, her dress is sticking to her; you can see everything.

Yeah, all right, *my dad* pays taxes for that.

What are they even *for*?

It's not like they do anything useful.

And Sarah thought: but they're people, like anybody else. They are.

So she has brought her Bible home for the Easter holidays and is working her way through it, even the parts that are just lists of names; and she bought a crucifix for ten pence from Matron's end-of-term lost property sale.

When she dug it out from a tangle of scrunchies and neon beads, it looked golden, but close up she can see that Jesus' hands and knees and face are turning grey where the shine has worn off. He has a smell, metallic and insistent like a penny held in your hand on a hot day; it wafts up from under her top at unaccountable moments. She worries that someone will sniff him out, or that he will become entangled in the lace at the edge of her bra.

She goes down to the kitchen for breakfast, carefully. She can't get used to the stairs in Grandma's house. All the places where rooms have been added on join up in a muddle of landings; intersections where the stairs are triangular, or where one step has to be shorter than all the others to make everything come out right. (To get into Mum's room you have to go up two steps and down three.) When there are power cuts, which is often, Sarah is afraid of the stairs, although she knows this is childish; and she has started to have a dream where she is walking down them, but cannot keep going. In the dream, she sits down and clings on to the banisters, and she knows that the stairs go on forever.

The radio is on in the kitchen; two men arguing about money, and population size, and genetics.

"...only based on superstition. As long as we allow this to continue, we're all complicit in this oppressive policy—"

"Would you want one of them to marry your son? Your daughter?"

“I really don’t see—”

“They don’t even have to work. We give them a home where they can be with their own kind — no, no, let me finish —”

Sarah is not allowed to tune the radio to anything interesting, because she can never get the dial back in quite the right place, and Grandma might want to come out of her room to listen to Women’s Hour. So she turns it down, until the voices are only a cross whisper on the windowsill.

“What are you going to do today?” Mum is spreading margarine onto a slice of toast, scraping it thin and right to the edges.

“I might get some more books from the library. Or go for a walk.”

“I think there’s a sports day at the beach. You should go; you’re good at that sort of thing,” Mum says. She is already halfway into her overall, pinning her toast between her teeth while she works her arms into the sleeves.

“Maybe.” Sarah does not say that since the move she always comes last.

“I think it would be good for you to go out and do something. And you could see people from school.”

“Mmmmm.”

“You could ask someone round to tea, if you wanted.”

“Maybe,” she says, but she won’t. In this house, the room by the front door is Grandma’s. It means the first thing you smell when you come in is wee.

“Well, have fun,” says Mum, from the door. “I’ll dash back at lunchtime.”

Sarah had only ever been here in the summer before, a week at a time for holidays; when the whole place felt like a suitcase crammed full of swimsuits and jelly shoes and buckets shaped like castles. She hadn’t thought much about what happens to suitcases for the rest of the year. The town is a single street; a straight line sticking out into the



sea. You can walk from the top-of-town car park to the end of the pier in five minutes, but you drag it out; you linger.

Sarah watches the machines in the penny arcade, shoving endlessly at piles of money. She reads the backs of library books. She goes into the music department of Woolworths and picks through the tapes — she can't afford to buy any of them, but she goes because she likes to look; and because once when she was there, Simon Hobart from the year above said "Hi," and the edge of the shelf gave her an electric shock at the exact same moment.

She doesn't know where the nuns live — according to the map on the wall of the Tourist Information Centre, the world ends at the wild bird sanctuary — so every day she picks a direction and walks. Sometimes she doesn't get very far; the pavement runs out. Sometimes there is something new; a pond, or a holiday park made of old railway carriages, or a haunted-looking house with spikes on the corners.

Today she finds it, on the crest of a hill; a high brick wall that goes on and on. She thinks it's the right place when she sees the old sign carved into the stones: County Pauper Lunatic Asylum; and she is sure when she sees the graffiti. So she pulls her crucifix out from under her clothes and sits it on her chest, next to her Adam Ant badge. This arrangement makes Jesus look much smaller than Adam Ant, which is probably blasphemous, but she would still like the nuns to know he is there.

There are gates in the wall, spiked on top and bolted shut. She can only see the house indistinctly, at the far end of a drive speckled with weeds; but there is a lodge built into the archway. Someone is ducked into the doorway; one hand sticking out through the gate, fingers tracing the iron vines.

She isn't dressed in a habit this time — she has on a baggy-looking sundress the colour of a cloudy day, and nothing covering her hair, and no shoes — but it's the same one; the nun from the sea. She is leaning on the lodge door, with her back pressed against the glass, smoking a cigarette in quick, greedy breaths.

"Hi," says Sarah.

The nun looks up, wary. She's younger than she seemed on the beach; her face is smooth and grubby. Her eyes dart over Sarah, and back towards the house.

There is a mass of dots milling around near the main building, spilling out over the grass. It looks like a video they showed once in biology, of ants getting lost and following one another in a circle; round and round, forever. It takes Sarah some time to realise that the dots are people.

The nun drags the last bit of smoke from the cigarette, and flicks the butt out through the gate, off into the long grass beside the wall. "I like that," she says, pointing at Sarah's badge.

Sarah unpins it and holds it out through the bars, and the nun takes it between her finger and thumb, rolling it from side to side; turning it over and over to examine both sides.

"Why does she have a stripe on her face?" she says, after a while.

"He's a he. And I don't know why," says Sarah. "He just does."

"Oh," says the nun. She has her head down; all of the back of her hair is a giant tangle, matted like a doormat. She is looking at the badge, picking at the pin to get it open.

"You can have it, if you want," says Sarah.

The nun looks up at Sarah with a shine of a smile across her whole face, but it doesn't stay; it breaks and slides away. She shakes her head, and all at once she jabs the pin-point into her hand, into the fleshy part of her palm. A bead of blood grows around it.

"Don't do that," says Sarah. "You'll hurt yourself."

There is a bell ringing in the distance, and Sarah can see the dots that are people, heading into the house in a crush. All of them move slowly, as though the ground is sticky; as though they are tied to it by a great weight. It must be hard, she thinks. To be like them, but have to walk.

"I need to go," says the nun. "Here. This is yours."

Sarah takes the badge; carefully, so she won't get blood on herself. The nun isn't careful; she doesn't ever seem to be careful. She just wipes her palm down the front of her dress, leaving a thin, bright smear from her neck to her hip.

"Bye, then," she says.

When she turns to walk up the drive, Sarah can see her wings.

She'd always assumed nuns' wings would have feathers, but really these are more like moth wings; skin so thin you can see the blood underneath, layered with overlapping softness like patterned dust. They are rubbed raw from being covered. They are broken, and ragged at the edges; one hangs lower than the other. The markings are half worn away, but Sarah can still see them; circles within circles, like huge eyes, looking back as the nun trudges up the path, until all Sarah can see is their stare, and the scarlet words on the wall:

*Ladybirds  
fly Away  
your house  
Will Burn.*



When Sarah gets home, Mum is in the kitchen. Two men in all-over paper suits are sitting at the table, and Mum is making cups of tea and putting biscuits on a plate. Pink wafers, and Garibaldi's.

"I didn't tell you," she says, "because I didn't want to worry you. There was a wasps' nest in the roof. I know you don't like them."

The two men say thank you, and that's just right; that's a proper brew.

"But anyway," says Mum, "it's all taken care of now."



*A Superfluity* © 2013 Helen Anderson  
*Composition of a half dream* © Johannes Amm



WASP BY PAULINE DE HOE

# Pompilid

by Nghi Vo

Art by Pauline De Hoe

“Do you love me?” The question was in the whispery roar of her wings, the sleek blackness of her body, and the direct gaze of her multitude of eyes.

“Do I have a choice?” I responded bitterly, and though her people were infamous for their sternness and their martial temperament, she hummed with humor.

“Of course,” she said. “It is the last choice that you have, after all. I would not take that away from you.”

I could have made some kind of joke about that, but instead I tapped my two front legs restlessly on the ground. My other six legs, whole, hairy and complete down to the final segments, were numbed, and would never move again.

“I don’t love you,” I said, after thinking about it. By the time I spoke, my forelegs had fallen dead as well, and I might as well have been except that I still saw, I still spoke, and I hated her face.

“That is a pity,” she said, and began to drag me over the sand.



She hollowed out a chamber with her powerful forelegs, moving the heavy grains aside until there was a vault perfect for my bristling bulk. I kept a stubborn silence, feeling viciously pleased when the sands shifted underneath her or cascaded back into the hollow. She was almost as long as I was, but she was not large, and she worked until the sun went down.

My silence quailed when she reckoned the chamber large enough, and when she approached in the dim twilight, I finally spoke to her again.

“Have you done this before?” I asked.

“No,” she said, almost tenderly. “You will be the first.

She mounted my body, rustling the stiff hairs of my abdomen, almost nuzzling them aside until she found the perfect place. There was no pain, but there was a sense of pressure and penetration, and then there was stinging warmth inside me where I ought to have felt nothing.

“Are you a male or a female?” she asked, stepping away almost daintily. “I cannot tell.”

“Does it matter?” I sniped, and she shook her wings, a gesture I could not interpret. “I suppose not.”

She grasped one of my legs in her jaws, and dragged me backwards. When we came to the vault, she moved behind me and shoved. Pushing and prodding in a manner I can only call fussy, she tucked my limbs half under my body until I was well inside, and then she started to close the vault up again, sealing the entrance with sand, debris and a small measure of her own spit.

“I am alone,” I called to her plaintively, frightened even under the effect of her venom. It was meant to keep me calm, but only so far as keeping me still so that I could not do her or hers any harm. They are not known for kindness, after all.

“No, you’re not,” she said, and completed her work.



My people hunt because we are restless, and I should have been.

The memory of the last thing I ate, a little sand flea that was less than half the size of my head, echoed in my body, fading every time it passed until I only remembered remembering it.

I wondered if that was a result of her venom or if it was merely that without the hunting restlessness to drive me, my thoughts became unnatural and strange.

Perhaps it was the effect of her grub, growing inside me. Perhaps it would eat the memory of my food the same way it would eat me.

Time meant little enough to me when my body still worked, and in the wasp's hollow, it meant even less. The only thing that changed was the quickening of the egg inside me. It did not grow, but it pulsed, and I could feel when it began to stir.

"Little killer," I murmured without much heat. It was, but so was its mother. So was its entire race, and so, for that matter, was mine.



When it began to move, I was surprised to feel a ghost of the pressure and stinging warmth when the wasp had punched its egg inside me. The grub was growing restless inside its egg, and I knew that even if I could no longer reckon time by the water in the sand or the burn of the sun, it would be soon.

"I hate you," I whispered to it. "I am going to die so that you live."

I felt a vague sense of agreement from the grub, a message secreted from the rubbery shell of its egg and transmitted to my slowly decaying organs through a series of complex chemicals and movements almost too subtle to feel.



The day the egg ruptured to let the grub out, I thought of saltwater, which a colorful butterfly had talked about before I devoured her. She talked about moisture that stung, that fell together into a pool rather than clustering in distinct drops. It had seemed fantastical to me, a flying beast's whimsy, but now I thought about water that could sting, because that was what had opened inside me.

“Hello,” the grub said, twisting free of its shell. It was making room for itself inside me, pushing organs aside in its quest for freedom.

“I’m hungry,” the grub announced, and I stayed silent as it began to eat.



When I hunted, before I was dragged to the vault, I knew I was alive. Now I was not so sure, though I knew I was not yet dead. The grub ate with the voracious appetite of the very young, pushing my viscera back and forth, twisting and turning to find more. I was being hollowed out, but my kind are hard to kill if our hard outer parts are not cracked. I did not die, and I listened mutely as the grub ate. The grub must have sensed some of my confusion, because it paused.

“It is better for me if you stay alive. The longer you live, the greater I will grow.”



It ate, and as it ate, it thrummed with a kind of music, a melody of hunger and growth.

I will grow large, and I will grow dangerous, the song said. I will fly, and I will mate, and there will be more of my kind, and we will eat the world.

My people have songs too, of hunting and hiding, of a world described in shadows and motion. I ate flying things, and sometimes their memories became mine, but it was only with the grub’s song, the song of a creature which had never known life outside of my body before, that I understood what it might be like to gain the still desert air.



I was still alive. The grub ate less frequently now, as it had grown large enough to stretch the bonds of my shell.

“You could be faster,” I told it one night.

“You could be larger,” the grub retorted, turning over restlessly. “I do everything as I am meant to.”



I could not argue with that; as a matter of fact, I lacked the strength to do more than be bitter, something that I hoped soured my viscera for the grub's tearing maw.

"I'm still alive," I said aimlessly.

"I'm glad," the grub replied.



There was a long period of slowness and stillness. My kind only grow larger, but the wasp's child needed to put out limbs and eyes, and its body needed to pinch tight in places and swell in others. I could feel the inside of my body become dry and dusky as the grub began to spin, all of its energy gone towards its body's change.

"Are you frightened?" It took me the better part of an hour to find the words and to use them, and when I did, it seemed an unfitting thing for something dead or nearly so to talk.

"Very," the grub sighed, slipping another thread of silk around its body. "Everything will be different, outside."

"Outside me, you mean," I said.

"Yes. You are the world."



Time passed, and without even the grub's eating to mark it, I drifted. I did not die, even though there were fine cracks through my shell, and the precious little moisture left to me by the grub had long been leached away by the sand.

I wondered if I would always be like this, if where before I had been a hunter, eight limbed and terrifying, now I was a husk that would not move, would not twitch, would not hunt. It did not disturb me like it would have before; now I was something else entirely.

I was a ghost, I realized, and the dreams of the changing thing inside me mingled with my own memories until I could remember both the hopping sand fleas that tumbled in the dunes and a dream of flight that was still to come.



When it broke through me, it was flattened for a moment against the sand before breaking it loose. The air was cool, and the sky was lightening with the rising sun, but I understood these things only distantly, like a secret told to me in confidence long ago.

"I am female," she said in surprise. "You were large enough that I am female."

"It was no wish of my own that you are large or female," I said. Now my voice was just a whisper, and soon enough, I thought I would rise from my own body to go scuttling across the sands.

She moved away, testing her sodden wings that I knew would dry stiff and splendid in the last of the day's light.

"I'm beautiful," she said solemnly flicking her wings across her back. "I am beautiful, and it is because of you."

"I do not love you," I said stubbornly. It was an echo of something I had said to someone, but I no longer remembered who.

"That's fine," she said with the confidence of a hunter, a venom-bearer. "I love you, and I will always remember you."

Soon enough, she would fly away to hunt, to mate, and, if she was lucky, to find someone whose size and color matched her memories of me.

For now, however, she merely sat on my ruined bulk, watching the sun rise through her multitude of shining dark eyes, and together, we waited for her world to begin.



*Pompilid* © 2013 Nghi Vo  
*Wasp* © Pauline De Hoe


## A Taste of Things To Come

Fancy a little taste of what *Unlikely Story* has in store for next year? Look no further. Here's what we have lined up for 2014.

*Unlikely Story #8: The Journal of Unlikely Cryptography* will be the first in a series of annual issues about information technology. These cryptographic stories will focus on ciphers, data privacy, surveillance, and hacking/cracking, some with a cyber-punk feel just for good measure. Publication date: January/February 2014.

*Unlikely Story #8.5: The Journal of Unlikely Story Acceptances* started as a joke, as so many things do around here. So what better day to publish it than April Fool's Day? This mini-issue will feature three deliberately terrible flash fiction stories penned by SWFA-qualifying authors. Anyone can write bad fiction, but how many good authors can write it well? Publication date: April 1, 2014.

*Unlikely Story #9: The Journal of Unlikely Cartography* is all about maps – unlikely maps leading to imaginary places, pirate maps to buried treasure, rogue GPS systems sending drivers into territory unknown, and all the monsters that lurk just beyond the borders where the ink ends and the undiscovered countries begin. Publication date: June 2014.

*Unlikely Story #10: The Journal of Unlikely Entomology* brings us back to where it all began: bugs. Being the perverse folks that we are, we define bugs loosely to include true bugs, arthropods, and bug-like aliens. Essentially if it creeps and crawls, has a crunchy outside and a gooey inside, too-many eyes and too many limbs, then there's a good chance you'll find it in our pages. Publication date: November 2014. 



MON EGLISE AU LIT BY MAARTEN WYDOOGHE

# The New World

by Dennis Tafoya  
Art by Maarten Wydooghe

There are about six of them hiding under the wreckage of a building that might have been a church, and she's trying to tell them about the dreams. She's not making any sense and anyway they're all exhausted and terrified and some of them are hurt. A little girl wriggles in through a small gap between the collapsed roof and the ground and when an older woman brushes the dust off the little girl, Dora can see she's wearing a green backpack. On the back it sports a face, a red face with yellow and green eyes and a blue button nose, and Dora remembers it, vaguely; it's from a children's book her nieces loved. She begins to say it, *the very hungry caterpillar*, but when the woman helps the child squirm free of the pack the two antennae flex as if it were alive and Dora starts to scream. A man in the uniform of a bus driver has to hold his hand over her mouth. Up close she can smell the man and he smells like ash and sewage and sweat and his coat is streaked with something foul.

Dora feels something digging into her ribs and has to shift her position to move off the hard object, which is a sign that reads, "Please turn off cell phones," and there is a diagram of the church that has collapsed into the rubble where they're now hiding. Periodically there's

a rushing, rumbling sound and dust pours through the holes in their shelter and the bus driver says, *there goes another one*, meaning another building coming down.

The little girl asks, “What *are* they?” but no one knows what to say except Dora, and they’re all pointedly ignoring her because of the screaming, even though she’s quiet now. She looks at the diagram with its antique terms — Nave, Sacristy, Apse, Chancel — and remembers when she had visited Seville during her semester abroad and the Cathedral where Christopher Columbus was buried. The guide told the group about the 15th century diocesan bishops who drew up the plans, who said *we shall have a church so great and of such a kind that those who see it built will think we were mad*.

Later the nice woman who helped the little girl is sitting next to Dora. Somebody had gone out and found water bottles, so the woman wets a bit of rag (Dora can see it’s a piece of a blue jacket and retains two brass buttons) and cleans Dora’s face gently, smiling, or trying to, but her eyes are wet and her lips tremble. Now that she’s sitting close, Dora can see she’s not old, really, it’s just the dust coating them all has made her appear decrepit, dirt caught in every fold so they are exaggerated, like wrinkles on kids trying to make themselves look older for a high school play. When the woman dumps a bottle of water over her head the gray streams out of her hair and leaves streaks on her white cheeks so that to Dora she looks like a stone angel in a cemetery.



Mrs. Carlucci had lived in the next apartment down the hall, but she got sick and her kids moved her out. She had lived in 4A and Dora was in 4C. There was no 4B, though she and Peter used to joke about an apparitional room, so that 4B became their shorthand for any remote place, the home of lost socks and misplaced keys. Dora was there the day Mrs. Carlucci left and helped her family carry boxes down to the car and she got a good look at the apartment, which was smaller than hers but very nice, with a better view of the city and the river. She even thought of asking about changing places, moving her stuff in and getting the change of scenery and the fireplace but the very next day the new tenant was in place and she missed her chance. She saw him from

a distance, turned away from her, a small man cocooned in an oversize coat. She barely caught his profile but came away with the impression that he was dark, Mediterranean or maybe Asian, not Chinese or Japanese but something else. She thought of the designation she'd seen on census forms, 'Pacific Islander,' and wondered if people from Pacific islands thought of themselves that way or only with the very specific identity of whatever island they were actually from.

For a few minutes there were some battered crates propping the door of 4A open, a wooden and metal machine that looked like one of those old projection TVs, something her father had in the den at home. Then the door was closed and the hallway was empty. She came home from work and saw him in the hall that once, but never spoke to him. How close did she ever get to him? Not very, catching him as he disappeared around corners or watching him cross the street toward the river from her window. The coat, a hat, dark complexion. Glasses? Yes, maybe. And that first night (as she remembered it) the dreams started.



In the first dream, Dora is standing back in the shadows under dark mangroves looking out at white sand and that blue sea you only get in the islands. A pale blue tinged with green, clear and still so that you can see things gliding in the water, giant shapes that might be turtles or rays. She's not alone, there are other people hiding around her in the heat, people like her, and they're all intent on a three-masted galleon anchored beyond the desultory breakers. They watch, muttering to each other, whispering in the crude language of fears and wants that is the language of her people. A small boat is making its way to the shore, oars moving in a broken rhythm that reminds her of something scuttling, and she gets a glimpse of the blue steel helmet of a conquistador catching the sun like the carapace of a beetle, and she wakes up.

She thought she knew what it was about; it wasn't mysterious. She was months late in picking her dissertation topic and the guilt pricked at the back of her neck all day and kept her awake at night. So it was no great stretch to think of a PhD candidate, trying and failing for months to come up with some new angle on the clash of civilizations

now having nightmares about exactly that. Her brain, unfocused, was picking things up and dropping them all day long. Her intellect betraying her at the moment of her greatest need, failing to grasp firmly the right straw and hold on, come up with something, anything that will hold her interest for the months of research ahead.

Her life was falling apart, and that was to be expected, too. Peter had finally moved out, off to an internship in San Diego, but (they both knew) he wouldn't be back. It was the time in their lives when they had to start committing: to jobs, to people, to living in one place and thinking about next steps. Student life was losing its appeal, the feeling that she was pitching a tent instead of inhabiting a space. Dora had become aware that she was the oldest hostess at the diner down on Second Street. Now that the apartment was hers alone it felt strange, the scale of things off, the gaps where Peter's furniture had been throwing off the geometry of the rooms. He had left two framed butterflies, a blue Ulysses and a Common Leopard that she'd loved when he first hung them, but that now looked to her like dead bugs under dusty glass.

She spent her days reading about the 16th century Americas, the *encomenderos* and *caciques*, the enslavement of millions as the Spanish and Portuguese flailed at the Taino and Maya and Aztec, driving them into the fields and mines. She saw that it all turned on the words, the definitions of humanity and legality and the interpretation of God's will in the world. Gentle De Las Casas, preaching against the tyranny and cruelty of colonialism was no match for Juan Sepúlvedas and Diego De Landa braying about idolatry and greasing the wheels of torture at the auto-da-fé. And the news every night, so full of torture and ongoing exploitation just remote enough to seem unreal? She saw it all flowing out of the causes for just war ordered up by the children of Ysabella as plain as if a map had been drawn, a diagram laying out how the centuries would go. From God to the civilized man to the lesser, darker men who crouched in the fields and hid in the dripping forest. Could she write that? Was there a way to make that new?



The next night a sound woke her, something that ended as she



came into consciousness. She had the impression of a kind of electrical snap and a flash of light and when she sat up she swore she could smell something like scorched metal, the kind of deep pungent tang that was more taste than odor, as if she'd had a hot electrode on her tongue. The room was silent, the building quiet except for its usual ticks and raps, the city beyond mostly asleep. It had taken her a year to get used to the night noises of the city, the cars, the midnight drunks, the sirens, but now she was so used to a constant hum that she found it difficult to sleep when she spent the night at her parents in Mays Landing. She heard voices, muted, coming from 4A, the new tenant. The TV, from the sound of it, the lower registers distorted into a kind of buzz. She dreamed of a hive at the edge of a golden field, a drone like music, low chords tuning and detuning.

Dora tells the beautiful lady with the streaked face that she remembers she went to work, she came home. She made notes, spent hours on the internet. She knows there were the regular things of life, but it was her dreams, vivid and strange and seeming to go on hour after hour that stood out for her. Now, huddled under the dead and burning city, she knows how it must sound, that she's just been driven insane by the things she'd seen, but she needs to tell someone before their crumbling shelter collapses or the things on the street break in.

She dreamed of a line of men with wings and horns emerging from a hole in a stone wall, of ships burning at night, bits of sail carried on the hot updrafts and then dropping into the sea with a hiss. She dreamed of the hives, of a vast blackness and distant, unfamiliar stars. She woke to see the wall of her apartment glowing slightly, a glow that faded from green to black as if something had been projected there, on the common wall with 4A. She began to stop at the door whenever she passed, her head bowed and ears alert. She heard voices, the TV again, something too low to be picked out.



A few weeks after the dreams started Dora woke to find a line of ants moving across the linoleum toward the kitchen. Queasy, irritated, she found an ancient can of bug spray and saturated the trail of dark specs where it crossed onto the matted carpet and along the wall with

4A. The ants scattered and writhed, small brown dots quivering. She wadded up a comically large ball of paper towels and tried to dab the lifeless bodies from the floor and then threw the ball of towels away. She repeated this several times, wasting most of a roll of paper towels, and then cinched the plastic bag and ran it down to the trash chute.

The ants returned, and not just ants. She bought more spray, something harsh that burned the tissues in her nose. When she squatted, rocking on her thin haunches to look closely at the insects, they were nothing she recognized, with multiple segments as if they were assembled from many bodies fused together. Green and red and brown bodies and dots of yellow and white. She called the building superintendent, who promised to have an exterminator come.



The voices from the TV, the dreams, the reclusive tenant, it all meant something, it was all tied together, she knows now. She felt the dreams weren't in her head, or not just in her head, but had been *thrown*, somehow, projected like shadows and light on a wall. Now in the shelter there's a shuddering march, an echoing pulse that grows louder and louder until it's a physical force that resonates in her limbs and chest and shakes dust and bits of wood and plaster onto their heads, the deafening, crushing sound of something gigantic moving through the smashed and burning blocks overhead.

Now a massive foot strikes the pavement outside the hole where they cower and they all make a sound, something more moan than scream, and Dora watches as the foot lifts, a translucent crimson thing the thickness of a tree trunk that ends in a glistening black spike that leaves a perfect, terrible hole that goes down and down. The spiked foot passes out of sight as it lifts, up and up and up, the body it serves far above them in the smoke that blankets everything, the block, the city, the river beyond. She wants to tell them that this isn't the most terrible part, that the real horror will come not as siege and war but when the things on the street try to coax them from their holes and lead them to the new churches they'll build over the dust and crushed stone of the old cities.

As the next leg appears (*the very hungry caterpillar*) she tries to tell them the end, the thing that woke her up on the last night, the last dream that wasn't a dream. The wall of her room that wasn't a wall anymore but a thin screen of light, and as the roof shifts and falls she tries to tell them that it wasn't just the many-legged thing that made her scream as it climbed through from the world beyond 4B, but what she could see over the creature's red shoulder: The small figures in helmets and behind them the smaller ones in robes who brandished not weapons but the crosier and scepter. The ones who would throw them screaming into the pyres, clicking and hissing to summon their teeming, chittering angels and shepherd their souls to heaven.



*The New World* © 2013 Dennis Tafoya  
*Mon Eglise Au Lit* © Maarten Wydooghe



SKULL AND CICADA BY SHAUN BEAUDRY

# Found Items – Notes And Tapes (Evidence Bag Two)

by Mark Rigney  
Art by Shaun Beaudry

## PART ONE

### Handwritten Field Notes (Chronological):

I.

June 16, 2006. Made contact with the perfect subject. Pfc. Melinda Montgomery, black, probably 5'6". Amazing face: Tight. Suspicious. Puffy but no baby-fat. More like immobile. Her jaw opens and shuts, her eyes blink, but if she's got facial muscles beyond these, they appear to this ol' reporter to be disconnected. Melinda's birthplace: Central Memphis. Shipped out with the 101st Airborne Division (1st Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment, 101st Aviation Brigade) from Fort Campbell. Did two consecutive tours. This gal is surly like a punch-drunk hornet. May require hydraulics to pry her open. No surprise. She was part of the 2/17/06 Tikrit patrol, came under fire, took casualties. So I did all the talking. Gave her my spiel about "the dispassionate Fourth Estate." But

## Unlikely Story #7 - November 2013

the wall was up and it stayed up. Sourpuss, that's Melinda Montgomery. But she's got the stuff, got the anger. Got detail she'll share--in time. My guess: The best of the four "willing" subjects I've roped so far.

### II.

Melinda Montgomery: Lives in a squalid little heap at the lowest possible end of what passes for a pre-furnished efficiency. Which in Clarksville is damn near the equivalent of being homeless. It's like she's bivouacked instead of actually moved in: There's a stovetop, but she's using a white-gas portable set up on the "kitchen" linoleum. Doesn't use the fridge, says it's too expensive to run; when she wants something cold, she walks to the 7-11. Still barely talks--but she'd like to or she'd throw me out, and she hasn't. I told her again about how I wasn't out to pin her down, didn't want to vilify either her or her unit: "I just want the truth." Objective, journalistic, professional, that's me. (So says the always-predatory writer, the wolf in a sheepskin cloak). The Pfc.'s grunted response: How much was *The Atlantic* paying me up front, and what kind of a cut would she get? I told her magazine jobs don't work that way. Which I feel bad about, especially sitting here in Starbucks and working up these notes--and yes, here comes the coffee, fresh-brewed, hand-delivered right to my table, and 100% paid by my expense account. And yes, I "get it" that she was out there defending my cosmopolitan, MOMA-loving freedom to write what I like, but. But! We've all gotta put food on the table.

Random thought: Can't wait to finish *A Roomful of Hovings*. Damn book's been out forty years, and

McPhee's still a genius.

III.

My Q. to Pfc. MM is why she's putting up with her apartment, which truly is a hole. Dirt mired in the shoe molding, a stench of alien molds from deep inside the sinks. Test description for later: "Her disregard for the place is total and unforced; she does not hate her surroundings, or even object. Rather, she moves through them as if she and her apartment do not occupy the same plane of existence--and in so doing, she drags her pathetic surroundings still deeper into the proverbial dregs of degradation. Crumbs litter the floor, along with what few clothes she owns--nearly all desert camouflage."

So, back to her answer (which I'd better not forget): "I'm savin' for a place all my own."

I told her I could front a deposit. She's single, no family nearby. My assumption: She had a real apartment in mind, one-bedroom. Wrong. MM: "Thought you hadn't got no advance." I said the offer stood, and she shouldn't worry about where the money was coming from. She almost smiled at that, and went over to the rickety flat-pack wobble-job that her landlord calls a table. Pulled a loose topo map from an out-of-date road atlas.

"Got me a real estate agent," she said. "Thinks he found something back in here someplace."

She jabbed a stubby finger at the map. Kentucky grid--I didn't fix the coordinates, but there was a town down toward the bottom: Slade. Looked it up online a few seconds ago. Just an exit-blip hugging something called the Mountain Parkway. Steep hills, judging by those jammed-up contours--and all green. National



## Unlikely Story #7 - November 2013

Forest hardscrabble.

"Gotta find some peace," was Melinda's explanation. "Been gettin' screwed by people so long...black, white, Sunni Shi'a fuck-all. Enough is enough. I wanna wake up and see nothin' but trees."

And that was the most she spoke for the next hour, until I left--and probably long past that.

These Starbucks napkins suck. How am I 'sposed to work on this crappy cut-rate junk?

IV.

July 11. Melinda disappeared. (Which calls for my stash of 20-lb. bond: Real paper for a situation with real potential.) Landlord let me in when I told her I was worried the Pfc. might have done something to hurt herself. Nope--all she did was split. Didn't take much: The portable stove, her personals, the maps, basic cutlery and bowls. Among the items left behind: Stamps and envelopes, a few unpaid bills, her discharge papers, a delicate bottle of generic wart remover. (Mind the detail and thank you Mr. McPhee for the ongoing inspiration.)

V.

Melinda's CO confirms my vanished subject was not injured at any point during her Iraq tours. "Always down-in-the-mouth, but never one trip to the infirmary that I can recall." Combat? Derision on his part. "*Men* are in combat," he said. "Women are support. No matter what anyone tells you." I dug in, dug like a badger. What kind of trouble did MM's "support" run into? (Did I explain to the CO I already knew the Tikrit details? No. Maybe not fair. I'll see how I



sleep these next few nights.) CO's response: IED's. Told me to go chat up the base support group. Did Pfc. Montgomery lose any close friends? "Everybody's close when they go," he said. (Nice comeback.) "But nobody especially close to her beforehand--so far as I know." I love this guy--prevarication at every turn.

VI.

July 15. Located Melinda's realtor. Harley Quirk. I'll have to change the name if he makes it to final copy. A major unbelievability factor there, especially on the coast. Alt. possibilities: Harvey Quinn. Haley Turk. Harley Davidson. Joke.

VII.

It is a serious slog from Clarksville to Slade. Pretty, though. I expected more cropland. Mostly pasture or woods. Rich horse farms, long white fences. Quick sprint through the web tells me I'm headed into some of the most "extensive and diverse hardwood forests" on the planet. More macroscopic species per square mile than anyplace outside a rainforest. Hmmm. And the basic shape of an oak leaf is...?

Writing this in Slade, in the rental, parked in front of the general store. Scary. An hour ago, I was in bustling sunny Lexington for a late lunch. Very civilized: Cloth napkins on the table. This burg is all about missing teeth, missing windows and missed opportunity. Whatever Melinda got here property-wise, I bet she got it cheap.

VIII.

## Unlikely Story #7 - November 2013

Back in Slade again, a derelict pimple of North American humanity if ever there was one. Haven't seen worse except on the reservations: Arizona, 2004, my welfare piece. And from both locations, my question remains: Why don't these people simply walk away?

Quirk's a good realtor. The whole Red River Gorge area is stunning: Stunning to see, stunning in its contrasts. Vacation rentals just a mile or so from the dilapidation of Slade. Judging by the woodpiles, the locals heat with wood six months out of the year. Can't imagine. But the college kids and long-hair rock climbers are dropping their greenback dollars. Backpacks and Subarus everywhere--with out-of-state plates. Name-brand catalog clothing, solid hiking boots, kids lounging on their tail-gates stuffing their faces with gorp.

Melinda. Got a place on the north side of the gorge, away from the obvious rocks and trailheads, away from the views. Long driveway--thought it was a road and I'd missed a turn. Major ruts. House: One-story half-decent shack on a rise, propane tank planted like a giant pill in a crabgrass yard. Ext. walls got the "naked wood" look--and it's not half bad. But messy: Packs of shingles all over the place. Melinda's re-doing the roof herself. The armed forces gave her muscles. Arms, shoulders, calves...they're ropes, sleek. Subject on the roof when I showed up, ripping off old shingles with a crowbar, doing real violence with each pull. I was there ten minutes before she bothered to acknowledge my presence. Glared my way, eyes narrowed: "Want to help?"

The place got built two years ago in spring, owner abandoned ship in mid-summer. Old county map names the spot Colony Knob. Quirk told me Pfc. got a major deal and this ol' reporter has to agree.

I stayed into the evening, and it got hotter once it got dark. (Physics suspended in the great state of Kentucky? Have to look into that...) Any-who. Sat with subject on the steps, looking at the night. One floodlight on, mounted above the door under a little inverted V of corrugated aluminum to hold off the rain. Moths like I've never seen batting into the light. At the right angle, what Melinda identified as a luna moth casts a shadow about three feet across. And that forest was never quiet: A constant buzzing, rising and falling, yes, but never dying away. Dog-day bugs, said Melinda, and I got a laugh for asking. Not a very pleasant laugh, but a start--and a question, rhetorical 101: "You don't know much, do you?"

Not much about cicadas, anyway--which, it turns out, are the noisy symphonic assemblage my Pfc. subject referred to as dog-day bugs. (I'm learning!) Quieter here: Staying the night at Natural Bridge State Resort Park, barely a hop, skip and a jump down the hill (and over another) from Slade. Hills everywhere here. Hills. Cliffs. Cicadas. I thought cicadas showed up once every seventeen years. Melinda says there's a different batch every summer. The web confirms: Many variants, *Magicalicada* and *Tibicen* being dominant genera. The former hatches in multi-year cycles; the latter are more or less permanent, like Kentucky humidity, which I have learned to loathe. All hail the web.

I'm betting there are decent, hard-working folks in Slade who've never had their hands on a keyboard, much less a computer. Meanwhile, one mile distant in the State Park Resort Lodge, we've got wireless "Free in Every Room!" What a world.

## Unlikely Story #7 - November 2013

July 19. Pfc. Hollison tried to overdose after beating the living crap out of his wife. So here I am back in Clarksville, the burg that pretty much defines why my friends avoid the flyover states. And they would seriously never believe Slade. Any-who. Before breaking all of KY's speed limits, I left Melinda a mini tape recorder, blank tapes, and instructions to talk whenever. We'll see.

X.

July 30. Pfc. Hollison has a lawyer savvy enough to dislike feature writers, so: Three subjects remain. No word from Melinda. Shocked, I am. Natch: No phone lines up Colony Knob and she denies owning a cell. Mine didn't work anywhere near her place, that's for certain. Other subjects also getting harder to track (cue Ms. Carole King in full-throated lament: "Doesn't anybody stay in one place anymore?"). Hollison's in a twelve-step program--in Jackson, Mississippi. Ashton up and moved his entire family to the far side of Missouri. Got a job on an industrial hog farm. Maybe my next feature? I hear those things are hell on earth. Hell with pigs.

Meantime, Sgt. Bob October. Stable, sane, purple heart--he's like a one-man control group for the other three. Single, but nothing sordid on the side. The private dick I hired says no strip clubs, no gay sex, no child porn, "A big fat nothin'." The dick actually begged to be let off, said he didn't like following the one person in town for whom he was starting to gain, not lose, respect. No problem: I felt bad hiring him in the first place.

Wondering about Melinda, though. Time for a check-up. See if she talks to herself--via cassette tape--better than she talks to me. And better hurry. I've got

the features editors riding my ass like a bull-busting Gilley's cowpoke. Note to self: Next time, take a smaller advance. Second note: No more purple prose about mechanical bulls.

XI.

Okay. Gonna set this down. Fast as I can. Well. With all reasonable speed. August 4. Or 5?

Already did the transcriptions, so let this stand as some sort of prequel. Transcriptions: Always a pain. These were the worst ever. Obviously. But. Had to do Pfc. justice. (And maybe re-write this for *Weird Tales*, if they still exist--which I doubt. Probably gone for decades.)

First, the trip to Red River Gorge. Up to Melinda's cabin. Hadn't been there in about two weeks. Arrived early, 9 a.m. Brought two large bag-loads of basic groceries, plus beer.

First impressions (seriously colored since, so possibly inaccurate): Grass not mown, jeep in usual spot (no garage), puddles from an overnight rain, topsoil the color of pale melted brickle and twice as gooey. No birds. No squirrels. No movement of any kind.

I called Melinda's name. Never sneak up on a vet, right? Especially one who's spent as much time with the post-traumatic shrinks as she has. No response. I tried the door: Unlocked. A dead cicada fell off the screen when I grasped the handle; it dropped like a slow-motion bomb, the kind you see from an aerial perspective in old WW II newsreels. Fell on the toe of my shoe--clack--and bounced into the weeds. I went inside.

Four basic rooms, plus closets. The main door puts

## Unlikely Story #7 - November 2013

you in the kitchen. Kitchen opens to the living room. Bedroom and bathroom doors feed from there. Nobody in sight. Bathroom door open; bedroom door closed. I was thinking Melinda had gone for a walk, but I checked the mat by the door, and there were the boots: Jungle boots plus clumpy rubber waders, both pairs standing neatly at attention, side by side.

“Melinda?”

Probably asleep. I went out back to the rental (this Pontiac Vibe ain’t no Lexus) and scooped up the laptop and the groceries. Added the groceries to the ‘fridge, which was otherwise stocked only with case lots of Milwaukee’s Best Light, several pizza boxes (“Wolfe County’s Finest! We deliver!”), and a decent selection of batteries stowed like bodies in the meat drawer.

I organized a temporary command post at the kitchen table and began making serious (laptop) notes. Mildly florid, passionately descriptive, not especially McPhee. Example: “Remarkable quantities of insect repellants litter the too-small counter, vying with dirty dishes for control of the space. Ammunition boxes, mostly empty, lie scattered on a nearby shelf. The only books in sight are the Bible and an all-purpose home repair guide. Other print matter consists of a dog-eared copy of *Oprah Magazine* together with last week’s *National Enquirer*.”

The ammunition nagged. The more I looked, the more I realized how many boxes there were--empty. “Mostly,” as I’d written, simply wasn’t correct. Pfc. Montgomery evidently owned a rifle, a shotgun, and at least one .32 caliber handgun. And she’d been using them. A lot.

I went back outside. Walked around the house, then around the property line. I stared at the ground, and

the ring of trees stared at me. Shell casings everywhere. Occasional blast marks on bark. Melinda had evidently been shooting up everything in sight.

Tried my cell phone, a random call to an editor at *Harper's*. No signal.

Went back inside.

"Melinda?"

No sign of the tape recorder I'd left--something I hadn't initially realized. It was clearly caution-to-the-winds time: I knocked on the bedroom door, got no response, and cracked it open.

"Melinda?"

No sign of Melinda, but there on the edge of the bed, piled high with pillows and far more blankets than anyone would ever need in summer, lay the portable recorder, together with several cassettes. I'd left her two packs of six, and judging by the jumble of tapes on mattress, nightstand and floor, she'd run through at least three, maybe a fourth. The second pack remained sealed.

The closet door was shut. I slid it open.

Thinking back now, to Bosnia, Iraq and Chiapas (a.k.a., "the not-war"), I wonder: How many corpses have I seen? I used to keep count. Someplace past a hundred, I gave up. But. Maybe tough-guy me, Mr. Manhattan Scrawny--maybe I jumped a little anyway. Jumped at the sight of Melinda, lolling sideways in the closet, her feet, head and one arm all that was visible under a laundry-load of clothes and sleeping bags. She'd put a bullet through her left eye, and what was left of the socket was a nasty mix of crusty and damp. The wall behind and above her head had a puncture and a dark smear of spray: Blood and gray

## Unlikely Story #7 - November 2013

matter. I'm no medical examiner, but my guess is she'd been dead forty-eight hours tops--and in her ears, she'd stuffed homemade ear-plugs: Strips of torn cloth. Camouflage, of course.

I shut the closet, picked up the tapes, and sat down at the kitchen table to play them back. Disturbing a crime scene, that would be a felony--but the tapes are mine, paid for with my money, my advance. Besides, they've got the story. *My* story, my Melinda story. Melinda won't mind if I delay a while before driving out and reporting her as a suicide.

What follows are the transcriptions. Italics mine. Words entirely Melinda.

### PART TWO

#### Transcribed Tape Recordings:

##### TAPE I

A. (Pause of several minutes. Then nearby movement.) Hi. That sounded stupid, huh? "Hi," to a machine. What you think I'm gonna tell you, I got no idea. No idea at all. (Switch off.)

B. (Distant background noise.) You know what I want? A better front door. One with no cracks 'round the edges. This one lets in mosquitoes and all kinds of noise. Tomorrow, I'm gonna drive on into Winchester, get a new one. What do you think of that, huh? Sounds like I'm adjusting. Blending back into civilian life. Thinking about doors and shit. Yeah. (Switch off.)

C. (Distant background noise, vaguely electrical: A susurrant rise and fall, a hum.) Can you hear that?



It's louder tonight, even with the damn door. But it gets better later. After one, maybe. And after I squeeze off a few rounds. They quiet down. They know I mean business. And I guess even bugs gotta sleep. But I gotta sleep, too, you know? I think I'm gonna leave this on for a spell. Let you hear what I hear...  
(The buzzing hum continues to the end of the tape, forty minutes later.)

TAPE II

A. (Immediate cracks of thunder. The cabin shudders, you can hear it even on this tinny miniature.) Yee-haw! You hear that? Wham! Now that's power. I love it. (Thunder.) Right on top of us! Right on top! Man. I love it like nothin' else. This'll calm things down, oh, yeah. This'll calm things right down. (More storm sounds, under the sound of a can top popping, presumably Milwaukee's Best. Switch off.)

B. (Immediate voice.) --at's much better. A good night's sleep, that's all a body needs. Like I never got over there. Like nobody ever got. Patrols all day, patrols all night, no kinda regular showers. Lemme give you an inventory. Officially, Ken, I wasn't never wounded. Not once. But I come home with fungus on my feet, which they won't admit 'cos we weren't in no jungle--or that's what the medics keep sayin'. I got three split nails, and we're talking deep splits, not something you fix with drugstore clippers. The hearing in my left ear is fucked from when that IED went off and took Jo Sinclair with it. And I know I gotta pee like ten times more often than before I shipped out, but nobody wants to even talk about what's up with that. The hearing thing especially sucks, though. I hear a buzzing in there, like doorbells. And it's worse out here in the country. I

## Unlikely Story #7 - November 2013

thought it'd be peaceful out here in the woods. Hell, no. And me with my own personal one-ear amplifier. But I'm stickin'. Where the hell else am I gonna go? (Switch off.)

C. (Minor background noise.) This sucks. No phone line, that I like, that much I asked for. But I drive down to Slade, call for a pizza on the pay phone, and the bastards won't deliver. To Slade, sure. But not door-to-door. Except they do! Them people down the road, the Fitches or whatever, they said so. No, no, says the pizza place: Not up to Colony Knob. Shit. (Switch off.)

D. (Cicadas instantly audible.) Okay, I know you want me talkin' about Iraq. Fuckin' I-raq. I know that's why you give me this, I know it's why you payin' me any mind at all. Right? Admit it, Ken: If I weren't no vet, you'd pass me on the street and wish me right back to the back of the bus.

But. I *am* a vet. And you think I got issues with life or the military or Arabs or myself and you want to hear me spill it. Yeah, okay. But that's not why I switched on your cute little high-class tape deck.

Let's pretend you're a senior officer. Which is kinda funny: You, in the military. In charge of something. From what I seen, you barely in charge of tyin' your own shoes. I'm sorry. That's cold, and you ain't done nothin' to me. Not yet, anyway.

So: Colonel Ken. That's what I'm gonna call you: Colonel Ken. Now listen, listen up: These dog-day bugs, I'm startin' to think this is some kinda whole new breed. Normal thing for them is eatin' trees, milkin' out the sap. Growin' up, you'd see 'em even in the city, they'd be crawlin' up the branches and chew, chew, chew. Here, it's like they're all confused. Got thirty or forty clamped onto my garden hose, and

I got a couple hundred more on the drainpipes--you know, the downspouts. The spouts is green, yeah, but you can't tell me no ordinary bug gonna think that's the trunk of no tree. And now they're gettin' up on things like the screen in my new door. I open the main door--which fits like a glove, I'm real pleased with that--but I open that thing and wham! I got bugs bugs bugs. Rattlin' their wings, all annoyed at me. Makes 'em sound like aluminum foil. And then they start singing. Maybe if they sung somethin' I could recognize. Al Green. Queen Latifah.

So I'm gonna step outta the closet now. Ready?  
(Sounds of motion, shifting items, a door sliding back; the thrumming background noise rises audibly.)  
You can hear the difference, yeah? I know you can, 'cos Colonel Ken, you're a smart boy. One of them university types, right? Probably hang out with movie stars and author-types. And you obviously know things. Not much practical, I bet--but all kinds of other stuff. Thinkin' stuff. Hey, Ken--you ever change a flat tire? Fix a carburetor? Gone under the wire in basic, or maybe cleaned a couple pounds of Iraqi sand outta your rifle?

They got bugs in Iraq, too. Fleas and shit. Flies. But not like this.

(A pause. The soundscape of cicadas is like surf, drifting in and out but steadily growing louder.)

I'm gonna take you outside now. Better cover your ears.

(The sound increases threefold at least. I have to turn down the machine, it's distorting badly. The tape continues for about a minute, then switches off.)

E. Hi, Colonel. Me again. Back in the closet.

## Unlikely Story #7 - November 2013

'Ceptin' that this time, it's 3 a.m. And listen, you can still hear it. Listen. (Long pause. During this, a somewhat distant drone in the background, punctuated by noises like a badly bowed cello, thrum-thrum-thrum.) Well. Just wanted to let you know that sleep for this old soldier is gettin' harder every day.

Got some strange thoughts, Colonel. Got some very strange ideas. One of which is, I'd better not be goin' outside after dark. I know: I'm armed, and they're only bugs, right? Only bugs... (Switch off.)

F. (Noise. The tape recorder hits an object, or is hit. Perhaps it was thrown?) Okay, Colonel. You win. The bugs win. I'm outta here. Cicadas like this, forget it. I don't know what people in Kentucky think they're goddamn doing. Maybe it's just my bad ear, but I don't think so. I truly don't. (Sounds of nearby scuffling, maybe packing, all of it backed by a terrific undercurrent of buzzing.) So Lord, I give up. Full retreat, I'm headin' for a motel, maybe on the highway someplace. Anywhere but here. My little hilltop woodlot goddamn bug-infested paradise. (Switch off.)

G. (Immediate voice.) --n't even leave, except on foot? No way! No fuckin' way. I am not--fuck. (Sound of can top popping.) Might as well ask you. My commanding officer. Colonel Ken! You havin' a good afternoon? Readin' *Playboy* maybe? Feet up, some kinda decaf latte shit right in easy reach? Well, here's a heads-up. They chewed out my radiator hoses! They chewed out my gas line! I got fuel all over the drive, I got antifreeze, I got windshield wiper fluid...I open up the hood, I got no timing belt. What I do got are like five million cicadas crawlin' 'cross my engine. And I swear to God, Ken, I look around, and they're everywhere. The whole entire ground is black and green and Ken, it's moving, like when you

get a little wake on a duckweed pond. They're goin' crunch under my boots, and look--fuck--now they're startin' to crawl up *me*, I got one nursin' on my camo pants like I'm some kinda tree. Fuck. (Sounds of swigging.) You prob'ly think I'm makin' this up. Losing my precious little delicate female mind just 'cos I'm suddenly out livin' on my grown-up own when what I really need is a good long dish with a Fort Campbell headshrinker.

No, I'll tell you what I need, Ken. Colonel. Sir. I need this bug off my leg and I need a plan. A plan with some kinda exit strategy.

I don't care what I did over there. I don't deserve this. Nobody deserves this. And whatever I did, I did it for all the right reasons: Democracy. Freedom. Fightin' the good fight. But I sure as fuck didn't do it to protect a bunch of fuckin' dog-day buzz-bugs. (Semi-articulate noise of pain and disgust.) My ear is killin' me. I mean killin' me. I gotta make some kinda ear muffs. Blankets or something. Fu-- (Switch off.)

### Tape III

A. (A fearsome roar of cicadas, buzzing and throbbing and once again distorting the tape player's speakers. Even with the volume near minimum, it cuts through the cabin like a horde of pixie-sized circular saws, each one whining through a rip cut. The noise continues for nearly fifteen painful minutes, punctuated by occasional sniffles and sobbing, then switches off.)

B. (Cicadas again. No surprise--but Pfc.'s tears are choked now; her breathing begins close to the tape deck, then retreats.) Raghead motherfuckers. Mother-

## Unlikely Story #7 - November 2013

fuck. You think you won? Fuck you. (Sound of a door sliding shut--the closet, I presume.) You didn't win, not this time. Not ever. (The sobs very faint now, muffled. A click--and a close-range single gunshot follows. From there to the tape's end, no further sound beyond the zzz-zzz-zzz of the cicadas--which, to this reporter's distinct disbelief, clearly and demonstrably fades.)

### PART THREE

Tape Four, transcribed by Deputy Matt C. Holloway, Menifee County Sheriff's Department, 9/02/06. (Format same as prior; subject presumed to be the deceased, Kenneth A. Voyles.)

(Very faint background noise, nothing unusual. Sound of footsteps, subject presumably in motion. Male voice begins speaking.) I'm outside now, getting ready to leave. The ground is definitely not a swimming sea of cicadas. Mud and gravel and clumpy grass, just like it's supposed to be.

It *is* humid. Muggy like I would never have believed possible outside of a Florida bayou, and I think I hear, yes--definitely a few cicadas in the distance. Listen. (Pause. Cicada-like sounds definitely audible in background.) But are they deafening? No. You know what? I'm going to take a quick peek into Melinda's vehicle. Door open, hood--hang on, I've gotta put this down. (Noise of recorder touching down on object, presumably vehicle.) There. Hood open. Now, just trying to get my fingers in the catch...there we go. And up. Holy fuck.

(Pause. New sound in near background, a rustle; faintly metallic.) Okay. Okay. No problem. Even if

they've done this to my car, which I'm sure they haven't, it's not a long walk. Maybe half a mile to the road. Only a couple of hills. Sunset's not for another, well...Jesus. Time sure flies when you're having fun.

And look, here comes a cicada. It looks as if it just detached itself from someplace under my right wheel well. Flying now: A lazy, looping arc to the right, as if it has no idea what it's doing, has no concept that it's even airborne.

I like that. Save that for later.

I smell gasoline. And I shouldn't. The leaks from Melinda's would have evaporated days ago...

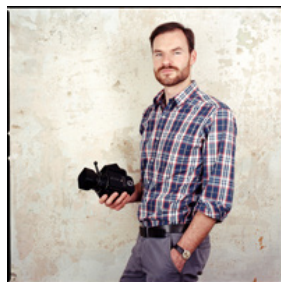
Not good.

(Switch off.)



## Contributors

**Johannes Amm** is a 30-year-old artist from Leipzig, Germany. His artistic and professional focus is as a photographer, something he has been doing for fifteen years, and professionally as a wedding photographer for the last four years. His technique combines the use of old analog cameras and the newest digital equipment to create richly textured images. In addition to the arts, Johannes is interested in good food and travel. He can be found at <http://www.fotograf-in-leipzig.de>.



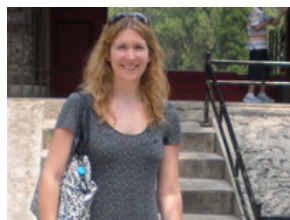
**Helen Anderson** has spent many years working in obscure roles that would one day sound interesting on an author biography — her past jobs include tattoo studio shop assistant; train announcer; play ranger; and napkin-folding workshop facilitator. This is her first published story.

**Katerina Apostolakou** lives in Sparta, Greece, where she was born and raised. She studied law at the University of Athens, and has worked as a lawyer. She is interested in psychology, philosophy, literature, and music. She has been painting for the last ten years. Through her art, Katerina explores elements of the unconscious and subconscious through expressionistic figures, which represent the condition of humanity and of the individual at the same time. The inner and social implications of being are both expressed through the symbolic personification of basic feelings such as fear, angst, desperation, love, need and other psychological categories. You can see more of her artwork here: <http://katioua15.deviantart.com/gallery/>.

**Shaun Beaudry**, A.K.A. “Mister Beaudry”, is an illustrator from Detroit, Michigan, currently residing in historic Savannah, Ga. His paintings and illustrations are highly focused on the natural world, isolation, and cyclical imagery. Lavishly detailed, his work shows a painstaking level of craftsmanship reminiscent European woodcuts, namely the engravings of Albrecht Durer. His mysterious and hauntingly beautiful illustrations bring the timeless motifs of life and death to the modern aesthetic, and rich occult symbolism to a new audience. <http://Shaunbeaudry.com>.



**Sarah Brooks** has lived in China, the far south of Italy, and the far north of Japan, but is now settled in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, and teaches part time in the Chinese department of the University of Leeds. She's a graduate of the 2012 Clarion West Writers' Workshop, and has stories published or forthcoming in *Shimmer* and *Interzone*.



**Pauline De Hoe** was born in Belgium in 1994, into a family of four children. She studied art for 13 years, specializing in black and white drawing and portraits, and has recently started studying digital animation. Her influences include Salvador Dali, Vincent Van Gogh, and Caravaggio, and also Manga (she is an avid cosplayer). She has always been interested in animals, the earth, the universe, and human psychology, and her musical taste runs from Johann Sebastian Bach and Erik Satie to Nine Inch Nails and Rammstein. You can find her on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/TheMadKnightsDrawings>.

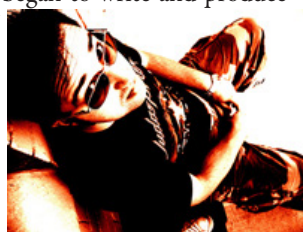
Born and raised in Sydney, Australia, **Kim Gauge's** lifelong passion for art began at the early age of five when he would pick up bits of discarded sandstone dumped outside a foundry near his school, and would sculpt busts of people out of them with a kitchen knife. From there he quickly moved onto drawing portraits of people and animals, and by his mid-teens was painting with oils. Largely self-taught, Kim draws his inspiration from many sources, but his main influences continue to be the great painters such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, William Turner, Francis Bacon and Frank Frazetta, who first sparked his interest in science fiction and fantasy art. In the past, he has exhibited with the Art Society of Parramatta, and won first place for painting and drawing at the University of Technology Sydney in 1991. In the late nineties he taught himself to play the guitar, and began to write and produce his own music that finally culminated in the release of his first single called Control, under the artist name Epitaph Road.

<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/epitaphroad>

<https://twitter.com/kimgauge>

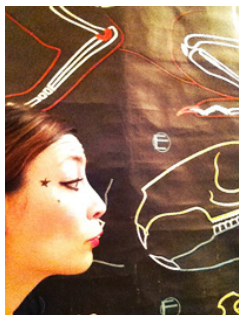
<http://kimgauge.deviantart.com/>

<http://www.kim-gauge.artistwebsites.com>



Formerly an Air Force EOD Technician, **Darren O. Godfrey** is a fifty-something writer from Idaho. His stories can be found in *The Museum of Horrors*, *Borderlands 2*, *Borderlands 5*, *Quietly Now*, *Tales from the Gorezone*, and, most recently, *All-American Horror of the 21st Century*. His first novel, *Jack in the Boxes*, is nearing completion.

**Maria Dahvana Headley** is the author of the dark fantasy/alt-history novel *Queen of Kings*, and the internationally bestselling memoir *The Year of Yes*. Her Nebula-nominated short fiction has recently appeared in *Lightspeed*, *Subterranean*, *Glitter & Mayhem*, and Jurassic London's *The Lowest Heaven* and *The Book of the Dead*, and anthologized in the 2013 editions of Rich Horton's *The Year's Best Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and Paula Guran's *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy & Horror*. Most recently, with Neil Gaiman, she is the New York Times-Bestselling co-editor of the young-adult monster anthology *Unnatural Creatures*, benefitting 826DC. Upcoming are a young adult skyship novel from HarperCollins, and a new novella from Subterra-



nean. She lives in Brooklyn in an apartment full of celestial charts from the 1700's, Victorian toy taxidermy, glass eyeballs, and volcano diagrams. This story owes an inspiration debt to both Thomas Browne's *Musaeum Clausum*, and Rikki Ducornet's gorgeous novel *Phosphor in Dreamland*, as well as to the writer for whom it was written, as a birthday present. Find her on Twitter at @MARIADAHVANA, or on the web at <http://www.mariadahvanaheadley.com>.

**Bryan Prindiville** is currently an Art Director for Catholic Relief Services (CRS) where he has also worked as a designer and illustrator since late 2000. In his free time he has had a hand in a number of webcomics including *Bassetville* and *Hello with Cheese*. Traditionally published work can be found in *Rum and Runestones*, Tee Morris' *All a Twitter*, and others. Less traditionally he can be found as a member of the live art entertainment show Super Art Fight. More information and work are available at his sketch blog, <http://www.bryanprindiville.com>.



**Mark Rigney** is the author of numerous plays, and his work, including *Acts of God*, *Ten Red Kings*, and *Bears*, has been produced in twenty states plus Canada. His short fiction appears in *Betwixt*, *Black Gate*, *Witness*, *The Best of the Bellevue Literary Review*, *Realms Of Fantasy*, and *Black Static*, among nearly fifty other venues. "The Skates," a novella, is now available from Samhain Publishing, and its sequels, "Sleeping Bear" and the novel *Check-Out Time* are forthcoming in 2014. His first tale for *Unlikely Story*, "The Latest Incarnation of Secondhand Johnny," can be found in Issue Six. His website is <http://www.markrigney.net>.



**Linda Saboe** is an artist, grassroots herbalist and nature-lover. When she is not making colorful messes with paints and clay, she volunteers her time feeding and caring for baby and/or injured raccoons, skunks, squirrels and other critters.



Although she rarely feeds insects, she does like them and encourages them in all their endeavors. She resides in the suburbs of Philadelphia with her husband, Bernie Mojzes, and their dog, parrot, iguana, and a couple of cats that suddenly appeared and have decided to stay. To see more of Linda's work, please visit <http://www.lindasaboe.com>.

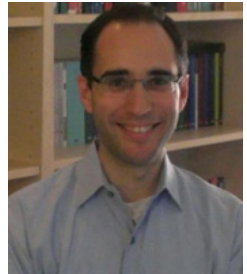
**Dennis Tafoya** is the author of two critically-acclaimed novels, *Dope Thief* and *The Wolves of Fairmount Park*, and numerous short stories appearing in collections such as *Philadelphia Noir* from Akashic Books. His work has been nominated for two Spinetinger awards and his novels have been optioned for film. His third novel, *The Poor Boy's Game*, is due from St. Martin's in 2014.

**Nghi Vo** currently lives on the shores of Lake Michigan, and her fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Expanded Horizons*, *Alyson Books*, and *Alien Skin*. Her current interests include Vietnamese ghosts, Turkish food, unwise decisions, and medieval medicine. She can be contacted at [bridgeofbirds@gmail.com](mailto:bridgeofbirds@gmail.com).



**Maarten Wydooghe** is a professional painter from Lichtervelde, Belgium. His studies include four years of painting in Ghent and Brussels, and he has experience in video, graphic novels, and photography. Fascinated by mystery and fantasy, Wydooghe paints a weird and wonderful world of extraordinary creatures, strange characters and uncanny landscapes. Painting mostly with oils on canvas, his goal is to create images that are open to interpretations and meanings of the viewer. <http://www.jazochromatic.com>.

**Alvaro Zinos-Amaro** is co-author, with Robert Silverberg, of *When the Blue Shift Comes*. Alvaro grew up in Europe, mostly, and despite the advice of his betters earned a BS in Theoretical Physics at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM) in 2003. Alvaro's short fiction has appeared in several markets, including *Galaxy's Edge*, edited by Mike Resnick. Alvaro, a previous Finalist of the Writers of the Future contest, has also published poetry, reviews, essays and interviews in *Star\*Line*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *SF Signal*, *Strange Horizons*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, and other venues. Alvaro and his co-conspirator and sometimes editor (read, girlfriend) currently reside in sunny Irvine, California. His website is Waiting for My Aineko — <http://myaineko.blogspot.com>.



## About Us

**U***nlikely Story* publishes three full-length issues per year and a smattering of mini-issues. Regular issues include: *The Journal of Unlikely Entomology*, *The Journal of Unlikely Cryptography*, and *The Journal of Unlikely Whatever Strikes Our Fancy This Year* (which, for 2014, is *Cartography*). All issues may be found online at: [www.unlikely-story.com](http://www.unlikely-story.com). *Unlikely Story* is edited by Bernie Mojzes and A.C. Wise, with Art Direction by Linda Saboe and Further Corrective Measures advised by Cynthia Baumann.

**Bernie Mojzes** is the author of *The Evil Gazebo* and a passel of short stories in various anthologies and magazines, including *Daily Science Fiction*, *Crossed Genres*, and *Betwixt Magazine*. Although he has on occasion been accused of committing Public Acts of Music and Philosophy, no charges were ever filed. To register a complaint, please visit <http://www.kappamaki.com>.

**A.C. Wise** is the author of numerous short stories appearing in print and online in publications such as *Clarkesworld*, *Apex*, *Lightspeed*, and *The Best Horror of the Year, Vol. 4*, among others. She can be found at <http://www.acwise.net> and on twitter as @ac\_wise.

**Linda Saboe** is an artist, grassroots herbalist and nature-lover. When she is not making colorful messes with paints and clay, she volunteers her time feeding and caring for baby and/or injured raccoons, skunks, squirrels and other critters. Although she rarely feeds insects, she does like them and encourages them in all their endeavors. She resides in the suburbs of Philadelphia with her husband, Bernie Mojzes, and their dog, parrot, iguana, and a couple of cats that suddenly appeared and have decided to stay. To see more of Linda's work, please visit <http://www.lindasaboe.com>.



## Submission Guidelines

**U**nlikely Story publishes three full length issues per year, and is open to all genres of fiction up to 8,000 words as long as it fits our theme. We also publish a number of flash fiction mini-issues, seeking stories up to 1,000 words. We pay 5cents/word for original fiction and 1cent/word for reprints, but original fiction is strongly preferred.

Overall, we're looking for well-developed characters, imaginative interpretations of our given theme, and beautiful prose. Don't be afraid to take risks and push boundaries. We want you to go beyond the ordinary, dig deeper, and give us something truly unlikely.

We accept submissions from anywhere in the world, as long as they are in English, including works translated into English. We're open to stories from new and established writers alike; we've published more than one story by first-time authors. We want stories that represent the full spectrum of human experience, and we're particularly interested in being a venue where typically underrepresented voices are heard. This includes, among other things, writers of all races, genders, sexual orientations, religions, nationalities, classes, and abilities, as well as characters and settings that reflect these experiences.

We don't want stories that are racist, classist, sexist, ableist, or in any way display any negative isms, ists, or phobias. We also don't want stories that ignore our guidelines. Be professional, take a look at our past issues, find out what we're looking for, then send us your best.

As of December 2013, we're currently reading submission for *The Journal of Unlikely Story Acceptances* (horrible flash fiction from SWFA-qualifying authors only, open until December 15, 2013) and *The Journal of Unlikely Cartography* (stories about maps or map-making, open until February 1, 2014). Keep an eye on our guidelines (<http://www.unlikely-story.com/fiction-submissions/>) for additional open reading periods.

Unlikely Story also seeks submission of artwork to accompany our stories. We pay \$10 for pre-existing art and \$25 for original illustrations. See our full art submission guidelines for more details: <http://www.unlikely-story.com/art-submissions/>.



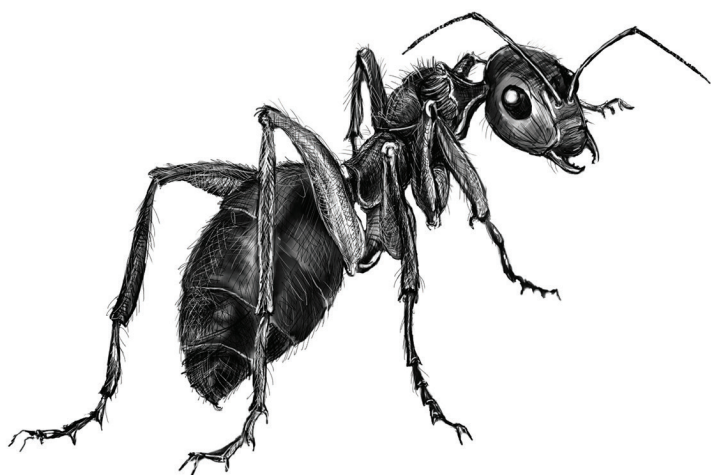
The Journal of Unlikely Architecture is...  
fresh and crisp, surreal and weird, highly  
unlikely indeed.

--Lois Tilton, Locus Online

I thoroughly enjoyed Journal of Unlikely  
Entomology. One wouldn't think you could  
get far with an insect theme, but they do.  
These are really good stories, not novelties.

-- Sam Tomaino, SFRevu

inside back cover  
intentionally left blank



<http://www.unlikely-story.com>