

# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 7 Number 4

Page 1 – TREATISE ON THE WOLFGOD by Antino Art Alesna. Mr. Alesna writes, “I’m a Raleigh-based pen-for-hire who writes for a marketing agency to pay the rent and poetry for inner peace.”

Page 5 – THE LOLLIPOP MAN by Dan Richardson. Dan Richardson has previously been published in *Typeslash Review*, has been writing fiction and poetry for several years and has studied creative writing at Strathclyde University. He lives and works on the Isle of Arran with his wife and dog.

Page 8 – THE NIGHT OF THE SHADOW GHAST by Michael Roche. Michael Roche is originally from Boston, Massachusetts, and now lives in Raleigh, NC. In addition to writing poetry and fiction, he also enjoys playing in bands, drawing, teaching English, and spending time with his delightful family.

Page 11 – WHISPERS by Catherine J. Link. Living in Hamilton, Texas, Ms Link is a retired art teacher who for many years worked out of her home teaching adults to paint. During that time, she was a certified judge for the Visual Arts Scholastic Events in Texas. One of her paintings was published in the *Rotarian Magazine*. Participating in a writers’ group challenge, she entered an on-line journal contest and won second place. That story, *Dead of Winter*, was published by *Toasted Cheese*, in 2017. Previously in *Corner Bar*, she has also been published in *Bewildering Stories*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Dragon Poet Review* and *The Writing Disorder*.

Page 18 – THE NEW HIRE by Trevor Lancon. Mr. Lancon grew up in the swampy, eastern part of Texas where he didn't know anyone else who liked *Dragonlance*. Now he lives near Houston with his family where he carves out as much time as he can to write when he is not birding with his wife or "wrasslin" with his toddler.

Page 20 – DARK HORSES by Thomas Koperwas. Mr. Koperwas is a retired teacher living in Windsor, Ontario, Canada who writes short stories of horror, crime, fantasy, and science fiction. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming in: *Anotherealm*; *Jakob’s Horror Box*; *Literally Stories*; *The Literary Hatchet*; *Literary Veganism*; *Bombfire*; *Pulp Modern Flash*; *Savage Planets*; *Dark Fire Fiction*; *The Sirens Call*; *Blood Moon Rising Magazine*; *Corner Bar Magazine*; *Free Bundle Magazine*; and *The Chamber Magazine*.



# “TREATISE ON THE WOLFGOD”

by ANTINO ART ALESNA

## October, Round I: Beware of Wolfgod

There are a few places in downtown  
Raleigh where Lone Wolfgod sightings have  
been reported.

Ask the Merchant. A big, bad  
shadow sped past their shop like a car,  
splashed mud on the door.

It had the mark of the beast tattooed under  
its eyes.

“Only couples drink here,” you’re told.

They act like you’ve seen a ghost.

*I’ve seen plenty, you think.*

“Check Lake Lynn on Halloween night. If  
the wind howls right, you can hear voices.”

You jet to the cola machine for  
a can of cold brew to stay awake.

It’s not like it’s fled  
to Hong Kong or a distant land in the East.

It’s here,  
a vengeful spirit who waits  
in the mirror

to embrace you in its jaws  
as soon as you’re cornered by the  
darkness of being alone.

Hold onto your swords. There will be  
blood.

## November, Round II: The Wolfgod Duel

*This is the Law of the Jungle  
As old and as true as the sky  
The Wolf that keeps it shall prosper  
The Wolf that breaks it*

I had no choice, master

survival instinct  
kicks the doors down

just as age  
turns the hair silver  
and bullet  
-shaped pills turn in  
my gut.

I was sick  
of watching you work like  
a dog for every crumb  
after another 51 hour week

she pours you another blood colored shot

But does she throw a  
bone with her name  
on it to strays who don't  
wait for a blue moon  
to holler

No. She lets you  
lap up your  
independence,  
dance the solitudes  
for the nth time  
like smoke curling  
under the lamps

You stagger outside  
into the evening's darkness  
with a number – no, an email  
address – scribbled on the back  
of a drink napkin

*An email address. Hahahahaha  
you think she she is going  
to reply to your spam?*

*How long are you willing  
to wait on an empty stomach  
for the promise of table scraps?*

the way those jeans hung  
at a tilt  
off the bare flesh  
of her waist had  
you licking your chops

bread rots in  
the tabernacle of  
a bakeshop window

And you will still go home hungry,  
and that is very hard to do.

In feudal Japan, the wolf spirit known as  
*okami*  
was believed to escort travelers walking  
alone through the woods, but tear them  
to shreds as soon as one lost their footing.

I'd like to believe that's how  
you got back to the hotel.  
There, the dull ache in your side  
has morphed into a burning throb.

*That's what you get for not feeding me*

You check the mirror. No scratch marks.  
Just my unshaven grin, swallowed by  
a mane of hermit dreads.

*Not again,  
you think.*

I greet you with that same  
ember eyed stare that watched the  
carcass of a 10-year marriage burn  
in a dumpster for the sake of a racoon-  
faced lover, while the few dates  
that came after turned into ghosts

*How painful it is to change  
How necessary it is to survive  
This is the law of the jungle*

You got this, just

*PUT THE RAZOR DOWN*

and don't shave.

I make you drop and do  
prisoner situps on  
the cold bathroom floor  
until you can't breathe,  
then rip  
the shirt off your back

*While you're at it, how  
about a half-naked  
selfie for the dating apps?*

Click...Post...  
no matter how many times  
you repeat, the endless feed  
leaves you starving

to where  
your stomach caves in  
like a greyhound's,

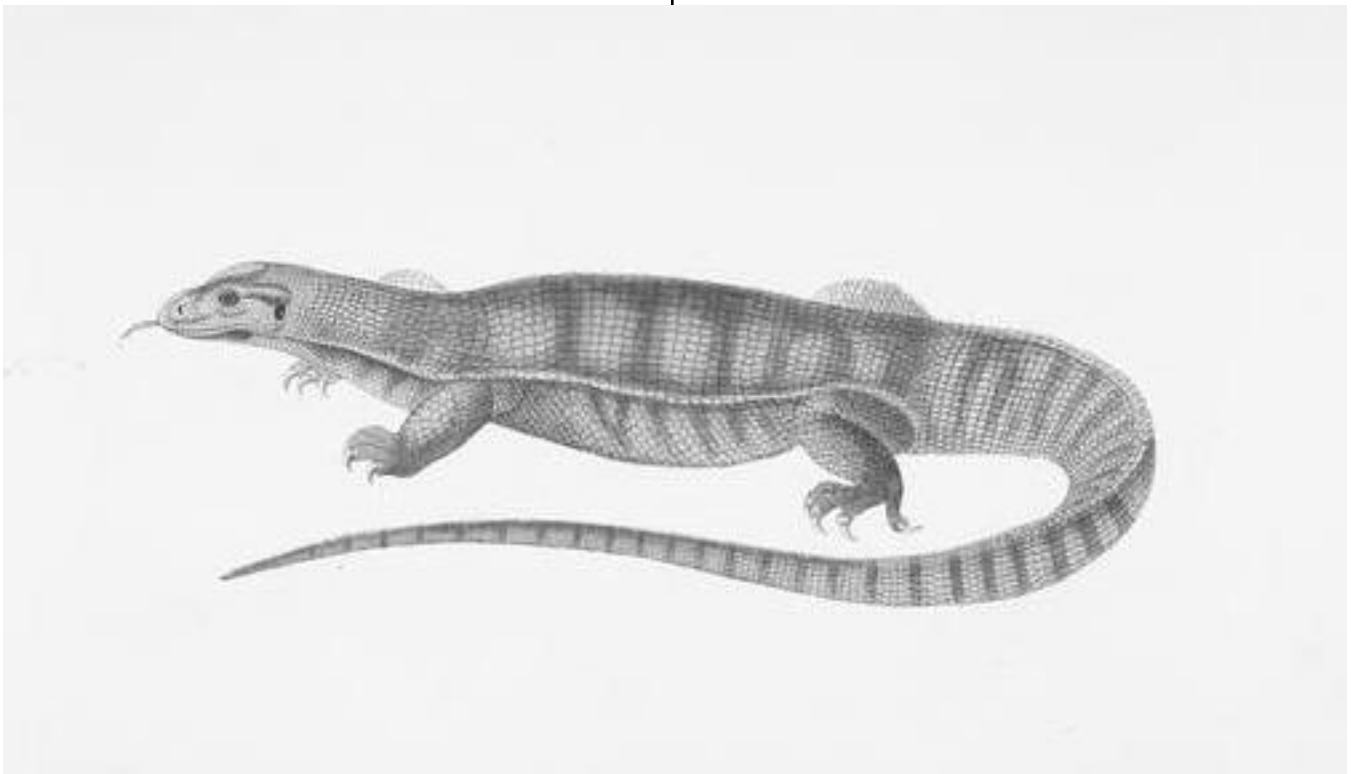
abs jutting out in  
serrated rows  
as a boxer-grade adaptation  
for taking a punch.

*Hit me as hard as you can*

Hammered, we  
throw up in feral groans,  
heaving  
on all fours over the sink.  
Then, we howl:

*My wolfgod, why  
have you  
forsaken  
me!*

When we open our eyes,  
blood on the walls and  
wet fur



perfume the air with a familiar scent.

There's a web of fractals where  
I smashed your face into the mirror:

*Look at that handsome devil  
Heh, and everything is bigger*

*(than the above average size it was  
before)*

How long will this altered beast  
strength and armored  
hide keep the  
temple of our true body from  
being overrun by the hellhounds  
of our mind

*this is the law of the jungle*

Either you polish my  
fangs with a  
toothbrush, or the  
lonely nights  
eat you alive

### **December, Round III: Ronin's Best Friend**

I confronted you at the dinner table about  
your animalistic ways.

*No sipping on the sweet poison tonight, furball.*  
The chalkboard menu on the wall of the  
lowlit diner was filled with fare too upscale  
for your palate.

It's decided. You're getting apple slices,

almonds, and avocados marinated in  
sorghum dijon vinaigrette, if you know  
what's good for ya.

One bite, and you've already questioned  
your blood-thirsty priorities for dead meat.

*You are no beast*, I said. The Lone Wolfgod  
known as *Okami* is revered as ronin's best  
friend: benevolent, loyal, fearless.

I fed you well by candlelight, in awe of the  
strength I felt in your presence. ❖

# “THE LOLLIPOP MAN”

by DAN RICHARDSON

The traffic lights appeared on Monday.

I was out of a job on Tuesday.

I had no warning, no sign that this would happen. I arrived at my post at eight sharp for the start of the school run. There it was, right at my spot. Brand new and shiny, blasting the air with its peeps, sending children scurrying across the road between freshly painted white lines.

I walked towards them, lollipop limp in my hand. I had heard nothing to tell me that a button and three coloured lights had put me out of work. I bristled at the very thought; that this soulless lump of plastic and metal could ever understand the subtleties of my job. Regardless of the people staring, the drivers who leaned forward to look from me to the lights, I pulled on my high-viz jacket and brandished my lollipop for all to see.

The children started coming. Ones and twos at first, then larger gaggles as nine o'clock beckoned. I stood at my post, right at the traffic lights, and banged my lollipop on the ground.

The first car almost took out my legs; the brakes squealed and I leaned over the bonnet as a child scurried across the road behind me.

“Can’t you see I told you stop? This not high-viz enough for you?” I shouted at the

driver, plucking at my jacket.

The driver gestured to the traffic light and mouthed, “but it’s green...”

I scoffed and stormed off the road.

The drivers weren’t the only bewildered ones. The children hung back on seeing me at the traffic lights, confused as to who was the higher authority; me or the traffic light. “You crossing the road, or not?” I barked. They hurried over, schoolbags bouncing on their backs, each refusing to look at me. One smaller girl had tears in her eyes. “Have a - have a nice day, now,” I said, trying to repair the damage.

I must confess, after a certain point I lost sight of the situation. Some of the kids pressed the button before I could shepherd them across. “Oi! Don’t think I can do the job, do you?”

A mousy boy with a backpack bigger than him jumped. “N-No, I -”

“Well I’m stopping traffic for you, aren’t I? Are you going to stand there all day?”

The boy twisted his fingers together. “But there is still the red man, my mummy says - “

“Your mummy isn’t here, is she! Get across the road, boy! Go, go, go!”

The boy jumped a foot in the air and hurtled across the road. “Time-waster,” I

muttered. I crossed back to the pavement just as the green man flashed on. The high-pitched peeping covered my muttered oaths.

The rest of the shift was just as fractured and confusing. I got into arguments with two drivers, three children and an old woman, and at one point brandished my lollipop at a girl with pigtails. When the distant school bell rang, I tore off my jacket, shouldered my lollipop and slouched home.

I got the phone call just as I closed the door.

“Jim? Hi. You saw the - yeah. Thanks for your work, anyway,” the boss said.

“But - you can’t just replace me with a machine. It’s more complicated than that. There’s no way a robot can do my job.”

A pause.

“It can do it pretty well, Jim. Sorry.”

I decided then that the traffic lights would not beat me.

In the small hours, I slipped into my car and crept along the road. The red light cast a demonic light through the haze of my exhaust. I looped the rope around the base and knotted it to my car. One tug, two tugs. No, that wasn’t coming off. I chuckled as I got back into my car. One big pull, and problem gone.

I eased the car into it. Low revs at first, the more, then more. The engine was screaming, wheels howling, smoke billowing over the road. Then, headlights behind me. Is that - yes, another car - I couldn’t have a witness - I gunned the car, pedal to the floor. There was a tearing wrenching

sound, and I laughed in triumph as my car was catapulted away. Victory! No robot would take my job. I looked in the mirror, and the laughter died. My bumper was lying in the road, the rope still knotted tightly around it.

The traffic light, still standing, changed to green.

The next day, with time on my hands, I went for a walk. Without planning it, my feet took me by the old route to work. There it was, not a mark on it. Functioning as efficient as ever. To top it off, the boss was standing beneath it, gazing up lovingly.

“Jim, hi,” he said when I approached.

“How’s your new employee doing?” I said, with as much savagery as I could muster.

He spared me a quick glance. “Come on, Jim, no hard feelings. Got to move with the times, don’t we? Do you have any idea how much money we will save with this thing?”

“Yes,” I said, “I’m aware of how much I was paid, and it wasn’t very much. You honestly think this can do the job better than I can?”

My boss shot me apologetic look. “Jim... it’s stopping traffic. It’s not that complicated.”

I point dramatically at him. “Ah - ah - this shows how little you understand the job. How many times a day is traffic held up for too long, when the red light is on, but there are no children to cross?”

My boss smiled. “Not with these traffic lights. Chock-a-block with... computer stuff, aren’t they? Chips and that. If there

are no pedestrians waiting, it's straight back to green."

"Well," I blustered, "what about the kids? I don't just get them across the road. I know their names, I know if something is wrong, I make sure they are on their way to school, safe on their journey, day in, day out."

The boss shook his head, and, like a proud father, pointed to the child approaching the traffic light. Seven or eight years old, he pushed the button and waited. A little camera I hadn't noticed, right next to the button, blinked at the child.

"Good morning... Timothy," said a smooth, metallic voice. "Good luck on your..." - a short whirring noise - "algebra test, today."

"Thanks!" said young Timothy as he skipped across the road.

"Didn't I tell you these are the best?" The boss said.

I stared at it. "Well, that - but - "

"Jim, sorry, I need to go." He shook my hand. "Going that way, are you?" He pressed the button for me, gave me a nudge towards the traffic light.

I ignored the whirring of the camera next to me.

"Good morning... Jim. Would you like to hear some... job listings?"

"Go to hell," I growled. ❖



# “THE NIGHT OF THE SHADOW GHAST”

by MICHAEL ROCHE

Beware the night of the Shadow Ghast

When serpents stir

And shadows lunge for their prey

And the Osolisks howl

From their shadowy lairs

And strange fires burn

Outside the gates

Of the Palace of Neptune.

What terrors await her,

Anne Marie, the Wise and Vigilant,

As she dreams away the night,

Floating on her back down a river of bitumen black?

The stones of the creek bed stir and slip,  
ever slowly

A storm rumbles through the sky

The stone walls echo the low chorus of the  
wind

Branches snap!

. . .All the night birds go quiet

And the magician's hound growls behind  
the iron fence,

Its black fur is glossy in the gaslight.

She awakens in the dark forest,

Recalling the tales of the Shadow Ghast.

What terrors await the young girl?

What terrors await her as she strolls into  
the magician's garden?

Behind her something stirs in the hedges

Behind her looms the shadow ghast,

With his long wispy fingers pausing, so  
close, to her pretty neck.

She stumbles but does not fall, pin-wheel-  
ing, on the edge of the stone wall

The fingers of the shadow ghast clutch, and

Suddenly she tumbles like a cat, choking,  
yet uncertain why

For she smells his sulphureous scent but  
cannot see his shadowy form.

The shadow ghast looms closer.

Closer still!

Beware,  
For in this garden there are terrors beyond  
all reckoning,  
Night Glyphs and Glaring Owls,  
Moon Lizards and Fox-Headed Toads.  
Beside the garden shimmers an ambling  
brook.  
The stones along its center  
Are the scales of a sea serpent that stirs so  
very slightly that he appears still.  
The serpent is older than the sun.  
Yet it waits, very still.  
Anna Marie rises and dusts herself off,  
And proceeds to make her way through the  
garden.  
The ghost studies her every move  
His fingers lift her hair as easily as the  
night breeze.  
When he sees her neck, his fingers curl and  
clutch  
He crouches, ready to pounce like a pan-  
ther upon its prey,  
She shakes her head, choking, gasping  
She leaps over an overturned gravestone,  
and tumbles down the dank, mossy hill.  
The shadow ghost slithers off,  
For the moment, he is denied his prize.

In this garden there are terrors she will  
never know,  
The Osolisks and Octoglyphs,  
The Dark Crested Raydles,  
And Crawling Egg Snatchers.  
But all manner of nightmare and beast  
held its breath when she walked past  
In this place, it is best not to be taken  
unawares.  
In this place, a young girl is best off if the  
ghost is denied his prize.  
  
She stops at the edge of the water, and  
there,  
Lurking beneath the surface,  
With the collective patience of eons,  
The ancient serpent winds its endless tail.  
It is older than the sun,  
And will outlive the moon and all her mad,  
spinning sisters.  
It waits for the shadow ghost to claim its  
pretty prize.  
For when it has, the ghost will mount the  
serpent's back, and  
Together they will soar back to their foun-  
tain in the Palace of Neptune.  
  
On the night of the Shadow Ghost  
When serpents stir

And shadows lunge for their prey  
And the Osolisks howl  
From their shadowy lairs  
And strange fires burn  
Outside the gates  
Of the Palace of Neptune  
The girl stands,  
Peering down  
Into the ebon darkness  
Of the poisoned waters. ❖



# “WHISPERS”

by CATHERINE J. LINK

She was lost, and all she could remember was her name. Nell explored the grounds of what had once been a red brick mansion. It lay crumbling into the earth around it, bricks scattered and part of the roof was gone. Many small clapboard structures surrounding the mansion had suffered a similar fate, though a few remained untouched by the devastation. Often, Nell would wander through the nearby graveyard, looking for familiar names on headstones, but none of them jogged her memory.

Nell felt a connection with the mansion, exploring the many rooms. Some were small chambers, and some were expansive rooms. Nell wondered what had become of the people who once worked and lived within these dilapidated walls. Occasionally faces of people would come to her, and there were other bits of memory in the form of murmuring voices and shadowy images. A girl with a scar down one cheek. She never smiled. A bossy woman who stood erect and carried a ledger, writing in it often and telling people what to do. A fat cook who always had sweat on her face. She let the children do chores in the kitchen, rewarding them with leftovers from breakfast.

“Everyone is gone,” she whispered,

wondering where they went.

Meandering down a corridor, she tread lightly over remnants of a maroon carpet runner, worn down to the floorboards. Rodents had chewed away the wool, exposing thick jute fibers, frayed and ripped apart. Curled strips of wallpaper cascaded downward here and there, yet the oak wainscoting, like a stalwart sentry, still protected the walls beneath from scratches and dents.

One small chamber was very much like another—cozy, with a window for light and a transom over the door for ventilation. A clothes closet and another doorway leading to a commode that was shared with a neighbor completed the floor-plan. All usable furniture and goods had been removed years ago, but Nell’s compulsion to look in every room proved insatiable, so she continued going from room to room and floor to floor, whispering as she went, “Mama?”

This time, Nell started her explorations on the second floor, going down similarly dilapidated corridors, past chambers occupied by rodents, cats, and an occasional stray dog. She’d try to play with the animals, but they ran from her, frightened.

Suddenly, a memory came to her, and it stayed with her this time. She remembered the day in great detail. Mama packed

everything they owned into one camel-back trunk and a leather purse. Then Mama put a rag doll that had belonged to grandmama in Nell's arms and talked about where they were going.

"It's a haven for women who have lost their homes and have no families to take them in. Victims of the war, and bad things that sometimes happen when the war is over." Mama's eyes were sad.

"People like us?" Nell asked. She was sad, too, remembering their house going up in flames. They watched it burn for a long time before going away.

"I remember," Nell whispered. "Mama told me."

And so, she continued her search of the second floor with a surrealistic patience, all the while whispering, "Mama?"

Sometime later, in the course of Nell's wanderings, she came upon the conservatory, an enormous room with ceiling-to-floor windowpanes. Glass had been busted out from most of the windows and it littered the floor in dangerous shards, along with crumbled putty and splintered wood.

Limbs from volunteer Pecan trees had grown in through empty spaces, melding with the framework, rearranging segments of a compromised roof.

Bright sunlight seemed to be sapping Nell's strength. She fled the conservatory and went to find shade. Instead, she found a magnificent spiral staircase. Circle after circle of stairs invited her to float down, and she did, laughing as she went. How fun, she thought, as she scampered down the stairs with the grace of a handkerchief

floating on a breeze. As she approached the bottom, she was overwhelmed by the enormity of a cobalt blue sky dotted with thunderheads.

A faint "Ohhhhh" escaped her lips.

Hot wind swirled the dust around her. Walls had long ago fallen away lay in scattered heaps of wood and brick at the base of the staircase. As it will, nature took advantage of the opportunity to invade. Cat's Claw was twining around the banister. Morning glories framed what was left of window sills. Wild red bud trees and native grasses cracked and buckled the floor. Squirrels nested in nooks and cranies. Nell watched them darting about, quarreling with the birds during their constant search for food. Today they seemed to be undisturbed by her presence, which made her giggle with delight. At the sound of her soft laughter the animals stopped their activities. Ears and noses twitched, squirrels waved their tails and barked a warning. Sensing no threat, they went about their business.

Nell's wandering seemed endless and it worried her. She had only limited strength these days and she didn't know why. Now, she had vague memories of her life before this place. Memories of running through the woods, of climbing a levee behind a big house as sure-footed as a mountain goat and riding her horse. But lately fatigue made her search efforts difficult, and so very tedious.

Resting on the steps of the spiral staircase, she gazed at the sun in the eastern sky feeling neither heat nor rejuvenation from

its rays. The sun makes me tired, she realized. I have more energy at night. She did not question why, she just knew.

“Rest during the day, and search at night.”

She would go about her search as usual today. Tomorrow would be different. She would forgo the pleasures of daylight for the shelter of night forever after. She let out a sigh of sorrow. She would miss the sun.

Much of the third floor had long ago collapsed, but there were still a few chambers left to search. Those doors were closed so she would have to force them open. This, her final day of sunlight, would be grueling. She would need to rest often, taking shelter in a closet.

Pushing heavy doors open, one after the other, Nell’s strength was depleted with every exertion.

“Mama? Mama? Mama?” The call became a chant that helped her fight fatigue.

“Just one more,” she whispered, focusing her will.

“Mama? Mama? Mama?” Chanting as she shoved against the door, fighting the warped floor beneath it every inch of the way, the door finally creaked open and she was stunned. Bed, chest, vanity, mirror, even framed photographs were still on the wall. Not only that, but everything in this particular bedroom was white. Not pure white, like the white sunlight now blazing overhead. The room and everything within was dingey, an unclean fish-belly white.

“Ohhhh,” she gasped. A shudder of

dread went through her. Something bad had happened in this room; she could sense it. She resisted the urge to run away from this place, to leave and never come back. The only thing she wanted more, was to find her mother, and so she stayed. Nell stepped over the threshold and entered the white room.

Deteriorating walls were streaked with purple shadows from exposed wood beams in the attic above Nell. They gave her little shelter from the hot Texas sun overhead and she was feeling drained, but she continued her search. There was a highboy chest with whitewashed drawers and filigree drawer-pulls, suggesting that the woman who had lived here may have been one of the Cajun French who’d fled the blood-soaked battlefield of Baton Rouge. That gave Nell hope. She looked at the photographs, but the images had faded. She could not see faces.

The chest appeared to be in good condition beneath its veneer of grime and Nell wondered why it had not been stolen. There was no one around to prevent ransacking by intruders. People often trespassed in spite of posted warning signs, interrupting Nell’s search for her mother. Sometimes she would throw bits of rubble at them to scare them away.

The white room was different. It had never been breached by human-kind since the day of the Cajun woman’s death over a century ago. An unseen, yet broadly maligned and misunderstood sort of voodoo protected this place, and discouraged visitors from entering, allowing the

things within to decay slowly, naturally, from the passage of time.

Nell opened the chest. It was empty, except for a small cloth doll. She recognized it. "Mine...that used to be my doll," she whispered. She closed the chest, leaving the old doll inside.

Nell discovered a vanity table and stool stationed before a dust-encrusted mirror. Cracked from top to bottom, it reflected the room at odd angles that frightened Nell, causing her to gasp and quickly avert her eyes. The mirror's distortion brought to mind a game that she used to play when they lived at the big house where she was born. A game she had forgotten, until now.

She would hold a mirror flat on the palms of her hands and gaze into it as she walked about the house, pretending she was walking on the ceiling, bumping into crystal chandeliers, crashing wildly into the cane blades of long handled fans waved about by servants to keep the air moving and flies off the dinner table. After coming to the shelter, she still played the game, but it was not the same. At first, she enjoyed the dizzying sensations and otherworldly landscape of the new ceiling, until one day she realized that she was not having fun at all. The exhilaration she was feeling was actually terror. She could not remember why, and it worried her.

Curiosity and fatigue prevented Nell from fleeing the white room, in spite of her discomfort with the cracked mirror. She pulled her gaze away from her own translucent reflection and downward to the vanity top. Nell took stock of what lay there

beneath generations of dust.

The vanity was littered with a variety of dainty items. There was a jewelry box with the customary twirling ballerina, but encrusted grime imprisoned the tiny dancer in place. Lip rouge, combs, a silver hairbrush, jars, colorful bottles dulled by dust and spider webs, and even a piece of jewelry—a coral cameo on a silver chain was hidden beneath debris from the ceiling.

"Ooooh. Enchanted things."

Behind her, a mouse leapt from the bed and ran from the room. The bedframe was wrought iron beneath peeling white paint. The mattress, once covered by white sheets and a white bedspread, was now a favored nesting place for rodents. The ceiling over the bed had collapsed during a terrible storm, or perhaps it had taken many such storms to breach the roof and saturate the ceiling.

Compromised by unchecked leaks, roofing materials collapsed one end of the bed, along with an accumulation of dead things, both flora and fauna. Corruption stained everything it touched a brackish amber.

There was no one else but her in the building; Nell was sure. But she felt a presence in this room, nonetheless. Was it the spirit of the woman who had once resided here? Or a malevolent entity that had taken the woman's life? Had murder been done here in the white room? The longer she lingered, the stronger her sense of danger became, until she could almost see what had happened in this room over a hundred years ago. She didn't want to see it.

Fear overtook Nell and she fled the white room, running down those never-ending hallways. Running out the front door and away from what remained of the mansion as fast as she could fly. She vowed never to return, but she would return. She didn't want to, but she knew she would.

For a while, she'd spent her nights in the graveyard, sheltering during the day in the cottages scattered around the grounds. But soon, she found herself outside the main building again. She wasn't sure just why she had to return, but it was more than curiosity. It was that same irresistible compulsion to search for her mother.

Her memories were returning. It had taken a long time, but Nell knew who she was now. Lanelle Ann Calhoun. She remembered things about her home and family. But still, she did not understand what was happening to her. *Why must I spend my days wandering through this place? Mother may be somewhere else. She may have forgotten me by now.* Nell didn't know why, but she knew she no choice in the matter. There was nowhere else for her to go. She pushed a door open and entered the main building once more. Horribly tired, she went to her favorite closet to rest. Rest helped her remember things.

She'd had a dog once. Her name was Clementine. She could not bring the dog here to the shelter, so Mama gave the dog away. Nell missed her dog. She missed her mother; she missed being smothered in kisses and tucked into bed at night, then sniffing the lingering sweetness of her mother's perfume after she left the room.

She missed her father. Her memory of him had returned. He was a tall handsome man with eyes of jade. He was strong, loud, domineering, hard to please and not to be trifled with. A man of iron will, and he adored his baby girl. She was his magnolia blossom; he'd said it so often that he gave her the nick-name Maggie. And only he was allowed to call her that. Everyone else had to call her Nell. A sigh of loneliness escaped her lips.

"Soooooo sad," she moaned, and let out what sounded like a sob. "I'm so lonely."

"Did you hear that?" It was a woman's excited voice.

Startled, Nell let out a sharp cry, then she clapped her hands over her mouth to keep from crying out again. From the closet, she watched the trespassers.

"I did," the man answered. "Do you think it was her?"

"According to this, she still walks here," the woman said, looking at a book in her hands. "Sometimes people hear her whispers."

*Who could they be talking about? I have never see anyone or heard whispers.*

"Too bad they didn't restore this building," the man said. "It would have made a great museum."

"It's such a disaster. Too far gone."

"Worth the effort, I think. The building has good bones, like the skeleton of a beautiful woman," Nell heard the man say. She left her closet and found a dark corner, watching the two trespassers.

"Try to imagine it before the tornado.





It must have been magnificent,” he said.

*Magnificent? Not for us. There was sadness here. But still, I had friends to play with. Cook gave us apples and crackers with jam. My teacher taught me to read. And I had Mama.*

Nell let out another sob. *I was better off not remembering any of that. Memories are terrible things.*

“Listen. I heard her again,” the woman said. Nell drifted away, back toward her closet.

“According to the author, the little girl’s mother killed herself in one of the bedrooms on the third floor,” the woman continued.

“Why did she do that?”

“After losing her husband at Vicksburg, the death of her daughter was too much to bear. Or so the story goes.”

“How did the girl die? The tornado?”

“No, she and her mother died before the tornado. The little girl was playing and fell down the spiral staircase. The mother was so distraught, she put rat poison in her coffee,” the woman replied.

“Tough way to go.”

*What are they talking about?* Nell wondered, then it all came back to her.

“Oh, Mama,” Nell cried out in despair before she could stop herself. The man and woman looked in her direction.

“Listen,” the woman said. “Did you hear it? She’s calling for her mother.”

“It’s the ghost child,” the man said. “The child they called Nell.”

Hearing her name, it all made sense now, but there was no comfort in her understanding. She wanted to weep, but a

ghost has no tears, just moans of longing and whispers of sorrow. She didn’t dare to mourn for her mother now, not until the man and woman were gone.

She hid in the darkness, watching the couple explore. As they exited the building, Nell was sorry to see them go for she was truly alone with nothing to look forward to. Nell returned to the white room and laid herself in the chest, embracing the doll that had once belonged to her grandmother. Since spirits do not truly sleep, Nell fell into the dreamless oblivion of the dead, finding an uneasy peace, for now at least.



# “THE NEW HIRE”

by TREVOR LANCON

The Delnath town square was busy, which I took for a good sign. Seducing my father would be difficult enough, but in public? The man was a near-emotionless hermit.

I sat on the ledge of a small pool and searched through the throng of milling townsfolk. A woman sold dried meat from a stand near a tavern. Two men played Court at a small table nearby. A judge lounged outside the courthouse in full robes. No sign of a woodsman being wooed. The bet was as good as won. I'd get money, and we wouldn't hire Amy. I stood and turned to take my triumphant leave but froze when I saw the other side of the pool.

There she was, Amy the alchemist, kissing my father.

It had worked! The quiet, stoic presence who barely knew laughter and smiled once per neap tide was pawing at a woman like a teenager in a public courtyard. My shock turned to anger, because Amy had won. My anger turned to disgust, because gross!

I shrunk back, crushed by the embarrassment. No daughter should have to see her father like that, especially with the likes of Amy. It was one thing that she'd been so arrogantly confident in her potion, but she'd taken it a step further by requesting

that my father himself be the one to gather the ingredients.

He should have known better. He'd worked with Ronnic and Formier for years. He'd gathered lilies and cattails and frog slime and everything else in the wetlands but was careful to know the reason for everything he harvested. He was normally a cautious man, so how could he have not known what thirty damselflies were for? It was an apprentice's trick.

As I watched, Amy turned to me and smirked, my father nuzzling her neck without pause.

Winning her bet was one thing, but I'd be damned if I was going to let her gloat. I rounded the pool, bristling, but suddenly one of the men playing Court stepped between us. It was Ronnic, hiding in plain sight! A witness to my shame.

“Henry!” Ronnic bent double under the weight of a guffaw. “Wake up! Someone, push him in the pool and cool him off!” He couldn't stop laughing.

Amy stood, and Ronnic tossed her a small vial of black liquid. She handed it to my father.

“Henry, my dear, do your darling a favor?”

My father gazed up at her with a muddy mixture of worship and confusion. “Yes,

anything!”

“Drink this for me, pretty please?”

He didn’t even hesitate, just uncorked the vial and sucked down the contents. It could have been anything, but I knew it was just the reverse.

“Ha! Couldn’t we just leave him like that? I almost like him better!”

“No, Ronnic! I sure as Hel don’t! Amy,” I gritted my teeth at the name, “how long until he’s... him again?”

Amy wiped her smirk away, her desire to gloat overcome by her desire to condescend. “The Reverse is formulated to start absorbing in the gums, but continues to absorb in the stomach after being swallow-“

“Cut the apothespeak! How long?”

“Just a few minutes! Any minute now.”

Ronnic finally calmed his laughter. “Ah, Sora, I’m sorry. But you must admit, Amy’s results are stunning, no? Just as she said!”

He was right, of course. The results were incredible. Amy had taken a simple love potion recipe and made it startlingly effective. My father was about emotional as stone, which is why I bet against her in this little gamble. But here he was swooning like a dog over a bitch in heat after she snuck him just a few drops.

She’d come to our booth after a show and purchased a few sleeping potions, then downed them all right in front of us. Ronnic had just about fell off our wagon reaching for some black drink to make her vomit so it wouldn’t kill her. She told him not to worry, that she’d suffer no overdose, then drank her own formulation of a reverse. It was a bold move. Our attention

was won, so she calmly explained that she’d accept any alchemical challenge from Ronnic if he would consider it a job interview. Despite my protests, they negotiated and settled on what seemed an unreasonably difficult challenge to me: she would concoct a love potion that would even be able to seduce my father. When Henry returned that night with his gatherings, Ronnic sent him straight afield again to gather the damselflies and wild rose required for the potion that would see him seduced the next day on the ledge around this very pool.

“Sora?” My father leered at me through bleary eyes, then turned back to Amy. “Amy? What...” his voice trailed off, shock registering on his face.

“Don’t worry, darling, I think we’ll be spending a lot more time together.” She winked at him.

“Henry, my friend,” said Ronnic, “please say hello to the newest member of Ronnic’s Tonics. This is Amy, Master Alchemist, and she’ll be joining Formier on the formulations team.”

“Shit,” I muttered. Unfortunately, she’d fit right in. ❖

# “DARK HORSES”

by THOMAS KOPERWAS

Stella stood alone on the roof of the mine lab and waved at the supply ship as it lifted off the craggy surface of Sure Thing. The friendly crew of the supply ship were good company during their 24-hour stopovers, but it would be four months before they returned to the played-out planetoid in The Golden Belt and the small, abandoned mining town that shared its name. Four months of isolation, loneliness, and work. The laws of The Belt required that someone be on hand to maintain the lab’s array of monitoring equipment. That someone was Stella, a qualified technician desperately in need of a job, a job she’d clung to for two long, lonely years.

She entered the lab and, after waiting a moment for her eyes to adjust to the gloom after the pastel ruby brightness of Do It Again, sat down before the dim screen of a large monitoring station. She looked at the plain, oval face reflected in the screen, with its pale, smooth complexion, long brown hair, dark, intelligent eyes, and well-shaped generous mouth: the face of a destitute farm girl from a poor agrarian world. The men on her world were difficult to see, because they lived and laboured on isolated farms a hundred-plus miles away from the settlements. The Golden Belt’s men were impossible to see, because they lived mil-

lions of miles away—miners and prospectors working their claims on the far-flung worlds of The Belt.

Stella laid her weary head down on the counter before the screen and closed her eyes. In a moment she was asleep, dreaming she was sitting astride a black horse galloping down a dark, oval track. She’d ridden this dark horse before on the same empty track, in the same lonely race. No one was ahead of her, no one behind. Round and round the oval she went, in an endless race to nowhere.

Suddenly, she saw an unexpected sight: a light flashing faintly through the gloom, growing brighter with every second. She urged her horse on.

Stella opened her eyes and looked with disbelief at the telltale flashing on the monitoring station. *That’s odd*, she thought. The ground sensors had detected *movement* inside Sure Thing. But every piece of mining equipment and robot had long since been shut down or removed, and the planetoid was too small and cold for seismic activity. She regarded the light intently. “Must be a defective sensor,” she concluded with a shrug. “I’ll check it tomorrow,” she told herself as she exited the lab and walked down Sure Thing’s main street, past the shadowy rows of abandoned buildings

to the technician's quarters, a big glass cube sitting high atop the old city hall.

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Stella rose early, as was her custom, and returned to the lab.

"Something's moving inside Sure Thing!" she exclaimed, staring at the light shifting on the monitoring station's screen. She spoke to herself often, just to hear the sound of a human voice during the lonely times. "Coming up slowly from the core. Wait... I'm receiving a text message from a miner's lifeline!"

*...surfacing in four days. Request someone be at Borehole 47 to help me out. John Wolfe, Miner ID 447371.*

She confirmed the request immediately, excitedly, and asked if emergency assistance was required. When John Wolfe failed to reply, she turned to the lab computer and searched the employment files of miners registered on Sure Thing. John Wolfe's profile wasn't amongst the corporate workers, so she examined the independents—and sure enough, there it was.

"Independents are subsistence miners," she muttered to herself. "But the file says John Wolfe has a Ph.D. in geology. Interesting." Stella studied his features in the file photo; his strong, determined jaw, flashing green eyes, academic mien. "So this is John Wolfe," she whispered.

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Two days passed before Stella heard John Wolfe's voice. "Good morning," he said cheerfully through the miner's lifeline. "We haven't had a chance to talk until now. I hope you don't mind if we converse

while I'm ingesting my mid-morning repast, minus the sunshine."

"I can be your sunshine," Stella said with a grin. "But let me begin with a question. Are you aware that you're the last miner on Sure Thing? Everyone else left long ago. It's been close to two years. No one even knew you were still here."

"I know that," Wolfe replied. "Luckily I had a nice, big cache of MREs and volatiles hidden away. Have to admit I'm sick to death of self-heating scrambled eggs, Beef Stroganoff, and Chicken a la King, though."

Stella's eyebrows went up. "It seems to me," she said, "that it must take real character and purpose of mind to work alone inside Sure Thing for so long."

"Poverty provided the impetus."

"But you weren't always poor, were you?" asked Stella. "It takes plenty of money to get a Ph.D."

"So you've seen my file," chuckled Wolfe. "Sure. I had money once, until I had an accident and lost it all. That's why I became an artisanal miner. But let's talk about you for a moment. It seems to me that it must take real character and purpose of mind to work alone *outside* Sure Thing, Sunshine."

Stella laughed. "Poverty provided the impetus! Evidently we have something else in common besides being alone."

The lifeline fell silent for a long moment.

"You must have seen my picture in my file," said the miner quietly. "Can I see yours?"

Stella smiled and said, "I'll send it down the lifeline."

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When Stella arrived at the lab the next day, she found a text message from Wolfe's lifeline. *See you at #47 tomorrow, Sunshine, it read. Thanks for the picture. I had no idea you were so attractive. John.*

Flatterer. Stella went to the lab wash-room and picked up her hairbrush. Standing in front of the mirror, she ran it through her hair repeatedly. The recurring dream of the dark horse came to mind. "I wonder if my dark horse is finally coming in?" she asked aloud.

She put down the hairbrush and went back into the lab. When she looked at the monitoring instruments, her eyes widened. "He's so close now the ground sensors can pick up his heartbeat!" she exclaimed. The steady double-thump kept her company the rest of the duty cycle, and most of her evening.

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Stella was up before the pale red light of Do It Again began to shine on Sure Thing. She left the technician's quarters and walked straight out of town past the silent adits, the pitheads, the enormous slagheaps, the motionless drills and ore carriers, until she came to Borehole 47. Then

she sat on her folding seat cane and waited.

Do It Again was high in the sky when John Wolfe's head finally popped up out of the borehole. Taking hold of his arms without a word, Stella helped him up onto the ground. Her eyes went from his handsome face down to where his legs should have been. Shocked, she choked back a tear and looked away.

"Thanks, Sunshine," said the legless miner in a bright voice. "Thank you for caring. I know I'm only half a man, but I've found something precious that will make me whole again. I've worked alone for years, crawling, digging, drilling my way into the core of this cockeyed world. And you know what I found? Something everyone else missed, Stella. Palladium. The mother lode."

Wolfe looked deep into Stella's eyes, his eyes shining with hope and anticipation. "Imagine," he said. "There's enough wealth there to purchase a new pair of legs, a whole new life... for the two of us, if you want it. We're a pair of dark horses that have finally won the race. We'll..."

"Never be alone again," interjected a joyful Stella, embracing her miner fiercely.



**END TRANSMISSION**