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Refugio

by Mark A. Curtis

High in the Sierra Madres in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico, Refugio pondered his fate. He sat on the steps of the steep, narrow street where his now dead mother and father used to live in 1920. The Buendias lived there now. His father had mortgaged the house and when he died, he and David could not pay the debt. David, the eldest, was twenty-one, Refugio was nineteen; it had been a year. Refugio lifted his head from his gaze at the pebbles in the street and looked to the mountains; his crucifix settled close to his bosom. The mighty peaks loomed above the city, cutting into the heavens. In the mountains of Concepcion del Oro there was gold.

The dust of the silver mines caked everything but his eyes; still, a little flaked off and made him blink and rub them to see clearly. He rubbed hard, but he knew that only water would cleanse them. His right leg twitched as he swept the dust off with a hard downward stroke of hand; it raised more dust. He spat in the dust.

A raven landed on the precipice of his father's roof. It cawed loudly like a crier heralding the message of a King. Be quiet raven, Refugio thought, you are only a bird. The raven would not cease. Its hardened, yellow feet gripped the roof's edge while it leaned over the street below crying out more, while maintaining a look of indifference in its eye. Refugio's face hardened like flint, its carved surface set only for a spark. I despise you, bird. Be gone before I take your life. The raven's voice rested. The black bird paused on the ledge, then took flight without another word.

David strode down to Refugio. His collarless work shirt was tucked in. Every button was fastened except the top, exposing a firm neck. No jewelry hung about his neck: instead, he saved his few pesos. He kept the money

in a gold pottery jar his father purchased from the Indians. He had washed his face and hands and put on his watch, which was in his pocket.

“We should go,” David said.

“What must it be like to live there?” Refugio said.

“Same as here, only they mine gold.”

“God has blessed Conception del Oro.”

“No. The conditions are right for gold to be there, so it is.”

“I’m going with Carlos and the others.”

“That’s foolish. You could be shot.”

“They’ve never been, so why should I?”

David massaged his wrinkling forehead, then placed both hands in his pockets.

“Please come. We’ll be rich” Refugio said.

“I shouldn’t risk jail or my life for a few nuggets,” David replied. “An honest man is rich.”

“Have you seen the house Carlos lives in now? He attends Mass.”

“The priests do not care for the landowners.”

Refugio threw a pebble against the house. It bounced back into the street and wedged in a crack between two stones.

“I need you to come,” Refugio said.

“It is foolish.”

“For me, brother.”

David rubbed his smooth chin, and his eyes fixed on his parent’s home: “For you, brother . . . then, will you come home?”

Refugio’s clown grin flooded across his face, and his brown eyes widened.

“We must celebrate our good fortune.”

“No. We have no fortune. I will rest for the journey.”

The cantina celebrated. No birthday, no Holy day, simply a fiesta of another day, alive, alive to celebrate. Mariachi’s shouted out their joy—joy like seeing your child’s face for the first time after all that travail, and the dancers danced, and some who weren’t dancers. And Refugio danced. His boots cracked up the hard earth

causing dust to settle on the bottom of his pants. His face, lit up by the lights, caused a smile to creep up on an old man's face—the man had lost his son to a collapsed roof in the mine. Refugio's smile, like the hyena's, appeared permanent.

"Silly boy," said Carlos, his friend. "Come, let us drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

Carlos' smile was thin, unlike his belly which wasn't as large as a melon, but it was well fed. His eyes, planted in his pock-marked face, were shallow—they were like mirrors hiding two deep holes. His hands were strong. He sat leaning against the chair's back with his head slightly tilted.

"I am merry," Refugio said as he took a seat at the table. "To my family," he said and raised his beer above his head.

"Why do you always visit their old home?"

"It is my past and my future."

"You still want to go to Concepcion del Oro? The only way to get gold is to rob it. From the earth or from the landowner, it does not matter."

Refugio's head bent down with the weight: the hour, the darkness, the liquor, the life, it was all heavy. "Thou shall not steal," he said.

"Thou shall not commit fornication. Thou shall not be a drunkard. Thou shall not prosper. What does it matter?"

"I confess," Refugio stated.

"But you violate the commandments. You should listen to your brother."

"He does not believe in God. He is moral."

"Yes, but he does not rely on any saint. He does it for himself."

Refugio glared at Carlos. His hand rested on the handle of his pistol hid beneath his coat tucked into his belt—his inheritance.

"Do you mock my father, and my mother?"

Carlos spilled beer on his chin, and some on the table.

"Of course not, my friend. I loved them." His

head turned, and while still watching Refugio, he spoke to a man close to them, "Do you have a cigarette, my friend?"

The light shone on Refugio's face again. "I'll buy you one."

Quickly, Carlos asked, "What?"

"I'll buy you a pack, and I'll buy you a beer. I'll buy everything."

"Not so loud, Refugio. Besides, you can do that tomorrow."

Refugio stood. His height cast a large shadow across the hard earth. The dance floor parted, and most said "Vaya con Dios." His broad, right shoulder opened the dusty, wood door, and he stumbled into the thick night and wandered to his shack.

Before dawn, the next morning, Refugio, David, Carlos, and three others began the trek. David gave Refugio a shot of tequila for his headache. It would take all day to reach Concepcion del Oro. At night they would sneak into the empty mine, guarded by a few unskilled guards, and rape its treasure. Carlos told them the mine was new so the owner wouldn't be as wary since only a few knew where it was. One of those few was Carlos' cousin, one of the guards. Carlos brought burlap sacks for each. Half his mouth curled as he handed out the sacks. Refugio snatched his and marched ahead.

When the sun beat directly above them they stopped and lunched. David carefully unwrapped four burritos from his handkerchief: it was a mixture of eggs, potatoes, and beans. Refugio stood and ate. David sat, staring blankly at the earth. No one spoke.

"The Virgin awaits, my friends," Carlos spoke.

Each man sucked long on his canteen of water, then departed. Refugio allowed Carlos to pass him this time. Carlos knew the way without being conspicuous, off the road, among the cactus and sand.

Vultures appeared near dusk. Can't be for us, Refugio thought. Can't think like that now. In a few hours we will rest, and then procure our gold. As they followed Carlos they passed a small ravine, not very deep,

only about ten feet to the bottom. There lay the vultures prey—a jack rabbit. Such long, soft ears, Refugio wondered. He noticed coyote tracks around the edge. Must have chased him right off. The things we do to save ourselves. The rabbit still kicked around a bit. It wouldn't be long.

The darkness arrived like a blessing: unnoticed and when needed. Carlos had climbed down the ravine, picked up the rabbit, and smashed its head against the rocks. The blood seeped through and dried on his back during the journey. The smoke from the fire filled Refugio's nostrils; rabbit is better than steak out in this desert, he thought.

“See, God is with us,” he said to David.

David glanced at him, walked to the fire and pulled a leg from the rabbit.

“It's not done, David,” Carlos said.

“It is for me.”

At two in the morning they entered the mouth of the mine. They had spotted the guard shack fifteen feet above the entrance. It had no windows and was made of scrap boards; light and laughter filtered through the cracks. Earlier, each man had picked up the thickest piece of wood that he could find, which Carlos lit once everyone was deep inside. He left a man called Juan at the entrance.

They arrived at the pit after walking one hundred feet. Carlos pulled up the bucket to measure the depth; about twelve feet. Refugio and one of the men with Carlos climbed down while the others illuminated the pit with their fires. Refugio's partner busted out the gold with slow, deliberate strokes of the pick. Refugio rubbed his hand across the vein, a mother lode, he thought, then, after hesitation, broke open the vessel like an unskilled surgeon. Sweat streaked the face of Carlos. After filling the bucket, Carlos alone lifted it up. He worked like he did not need to sweat; each piece of gold ore which he picked up he held up into the light. He turned the nugget round and round watching it sparkle. David held the torches while the other men filled the sacks half-full,

Carlos said to take any more would be foolish, greed must not overtake them at this point.

With the gold slung over their backs, the men began their exodus. Each stone that Refugio crunched beneath his feet amplified in his ears. His chest heaved with oxygen brought in thickly through his open mouth. He lifted his wet crucifix and kissed it. They reached the mouth of the mine; Refugio stopped for a moment and breathed deeply.

“We must hurry,” Carlos whispered. “But if the guards spot us they will only fire warning shots. They don’t care, their boss is rich enough.”

Each man accelerated his pace. Then shots were fired. More shots fired still. Every man ran except Refugio, a bullet had broke his leg. He fell. His hands strangled the sack’s neck, not letting any gold spill out. He put his left hand upon a large rock and lifted himself back up. He fell again before he regained his balance.

When the shots began, David ran, then looked back to see if his brother was behind him. He saw him on the ground. He dropped his sack and ran back to him.

“Help him, he’s been shot,” he shouted to the others.

They continued running with their sacks of gold, not looking back. David wrapped Refugio’s left arm around his neck.

“Drop that damn bag, you fool,” David shouted.

Refugio’s wet eyes bulged. He opened his right hand, and the bag fell to the ground. His hand remained open near his shoulder, as David dragged him.

“This is no time to pray,” David said.

Refugio stiffened his face like he was in church. His eyelids lowered, covering half of his dull eyes, and his mouth neither smiled nor frowned, like Carlos’ face in the bar: fear mixed with indifference.

David dragged him out of reach of the inaccurate guards and used his handkerchief as a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. It was a clean wound. They stumbled away for an hour, then rested until dawn.

In the cold, mountain air Refugio lay without

dreams—at least he did not know he was dreaming. When he awoke, the earth was still in shadow, and David was building a fire. It would be small, but warm. An acute pain summoned the memory of the night that had just passed.

“Why did He allow this?” Refugio asked out loud.

David looked up from his labor.

“Maybe He wasn’t involved,” David answered.

“I thought you didn’t believe in Him.”

“Not the way you do.”

“How should I believe?”

“Honestly.”

When the sun revealed the new day, Refugio saw David’s face illumined as an angel’s. David’s few wrinkles were steady, unmoving, like the valleys of these mountains, Refugio thought. They were the borders he stayed within. And his eyes—deep as the sea, its depths unmoved by the storm above—were filled with a strange calm. Refugio caught his breath and held his eyes shut for a moment. He felt hungry but not for food. He opened his eyes, and the sun’s heat ran over his body like a liquid fire. Then he jerked the string that held his ornament and put it in his pocket. His hunger abated.

They reached town late in the evening. After he healed, Refugio went back to work in the silver mines and sold his crucifix. He never spoke of his journey and began to save his money in the gold pottery jar at home. A slight limp remained with him until his death.



Untitled Dream

by Eric Sutton



Woman (Charcoal)

by Christine Anne Lyons

Symphony

by Jamie Ward Key

I remember Solomon, my husband's only friend.

I did not fully understand their relationship.

Solomon would come to visit, usually unexpected, always sitting on my love seat, the one I don't have anymore, the dark blue one with pastel floral patterns, and talk to us. I invariably prepared French Vanilla coffee, my favorite. John would listen stolidly, eyes closed, legs outstretched, but inhaling Solomon's words like they were breath. I could never sit, though, while Solomon spoke. Rather, I would travel upon his words as if they were great sailing ships, always behind him, where he couldn't see me, but his power stirred me, aroused me to acquiescence.

I love my husband. I love him like I could no other man. He remembers days special to me, my favorite fragrances and foods. He holds me at night while I dream and he protects me. When he kisses me, I know he loves me and I feel his passions in my heart. When I make love to him, it is only to him. My name is Mary.

But Solomon . . . it was the quiet moments, when the silence was like the ebb and flow of orgasm—that was when I found him most desirable.

Solomon had a man's body. He was more than six feet, but not too tall. His hair was dark, not black, but dark and he wore it long. He combed it straight back, but cut so not to hang over his ears. He kept his beard cut close.

His eyes were peculiar and wonderful. He said they were defective, but to me he appeared capable of seeing more than normal people. At parties, during conversations (in which he rarely participated), I imagined him visualizing words—not printed words but the emotions and thoughts and buried essences of those words. His eyes were a common brown, but sometimes when I spoke to

him, I would hesitate meeting his eyes with my own because it frightened me that I might be cut by them and bleed my passion into the room.

He was the most observant person I had ever met. Once the three of us were at a restaurant, an Italian one (Solomon loved the food). I remarked on how much I liked a print hanging near our table. It was a downtown scene, walks crowded with people, the streets still used for carriages drawn by horses. He looked at it and said there were no black people in the picture.

I knew from the beginning that he found me alluring.

I could sometimes sense him watching me as I walked about my home, his gaze caressing my buttocks or nuzzling my breasts or brushing across my lips. He would never allow me to catch him doing so, but Solomon would know that I knew.

I enjoyed his glances, taking pleasure from them, looking forward to the next.

My husband was aware, but never spoke of it. His faith was like a slab of iron, solid and real.

Solomon never wanted for women. His appetite for sex was voracious. Although not handsome in the modern sense, he was intense in the classic way; I imagine he devoured his women, consuming their sex in only the way the best lover will. Women unfailingly fell in love with him, and he always returned their love, but not in the marriage way. Some women would go far away from him, loath to continue the affair, unwilling not to hold him fully and exclusively. Most of his true friends were women. He was a sexual man, passionate and earthy.

It is later, the same day. I am sitting on the floor, legs crossed Indian style, by my bedroom window, looking out. John is sleeping quietly behind me.

I had lain close to my husband, hugging his back, unable to sleep but waiting for him to do so. I could feel his cum drying on the flushed skin of my inner thighs, feeling soft like warm soap. Moving to him, I lightly massaged his temple, running my fingertip along the

sturdy lines of his jaw. He smiled in his sleep, and I returned his smile.

This is what happened the first time Solomon and I were alone.

I was painting the walls in the second floor hall, wearing a pair of my husband's boxer shorts over my own panties and a t-shirt of his, an old one beginning to dull and cut across the middle. My belly button was uncovered.

I was working, humming a Beatles tune, yellow paint freckled on my hands and arms. I didn't hear him come into my home or climb the stairs. Startled by a shadow on the wall in front of me, I turned quickly, inhaled deeply, prepared to fight, but it was Solomon so I smiled. I could feel my breasts becoming flushed, my nipples rouse.

He volunteered to help me paint so I directed him to my husband's wardrobe closet. In a few moments he returned wearing a pair of John's old bluejean cut-offs; John's waise-line is larger. I noticed there was enough room for me to fit my hand into the front of the shorts if I so desired. My face felt warm. I turned and picked up my brush and started to paint again.

I continued to feel my gaze tugged toward the front of his shorts as if his maleness were the moon and my passion the tide. He climbed onto the stepladder and began to paint just below the mahogany woodwork, concentrating on his task. However, my obsession with his pubic area continued. I have always considered the penis beautiful, although not too pretty to look at, but Solomon's must blush like flame, and I was a moth. I wanted desperately to hold his cock in my hand, squeezing and stroking, giving him orgasm. I became wet, my face hot, submissive to his sexuality.

Solomon began to speak; I turned my attention to his words and soon I began to cool, my fixation on his sex subsiding.

For a moment I hesitated, then my husband was home early from his office and joined us in the painting.

If he sensed my tensions, he didn't mention it. Soon the three of us were talking and laughing as we painted and in no time we finished. We lunched on oranges and fresh bread.

* * *

Solomon left us after lunch, declining coffee. My husband and I were alone. We went up to our bedroom, he to nap and I to clean myself of newly dried paint. In seconds John was nude, and immediately an image of Solomon came to mind; he too must have been nude for the few moments he'd needed to change. I dismissed that picture.

I watched John, myself now only in cotton panties, as he moved about the room. My husband is 40, seven years older than I. His chest and legs are rich with soft brown hair, his midsection a bit rounded; his work as a minister is not physically demanding. His face reminds me of a teddy bear's. Like a child, he is not conscious of his nakedness—he is wholly comfortable being so unprotected in my presence. I would have it no other way.

Like a warm draft from a furnace on a snowy winter night, the wish to make him happy wafted over me.

John sat on the edge of the bed, stretching, the cream colored comforter bunching under him. I went to him, resting my knees on the rose carpet. Reaching up with my left hand, I touched his cheek. I kissed him. With my right hand, I discovered his penis already erect. I caressed his soft hardness with my cheek, then began to suckle him. The aroma of his sex was aphrodesia. I gently rode his leg, brushing my pussy across his shin.

The intensity of my earlier yearning for Solomon returned with gale force. I wanted to run from the room, but instead I fought. I forced memories of our honeymoon in Italy into the front of my thoughts. In only a few moments, we were sharing orgasms, our breathing quick and rhythmic.

I stayed on my knees beside the bed, resting my head near John's belly until he slept. Shortly, I was able to leave him and walk to the bathroom. I washed my

hands of blood.

Having clenched my fist so tightly, my nails had cut the soft flesh of my palm.

It was then that I decided to make love to Solomon.

I had no choice.

My husband went to Atlanta for a week. As soon as the door closed behind him, my affair began.

I became obsessed with the notion of sex with Solomon. Waiting for that moment when I would lie down with him was torment. Every waking moment flashed with images of passion, sucking on his fingers, cupping his buttocks, kissing the back of his neck. I envisioned mounting him. The taste of his cum, the luxurious sensation of it upon my body, its texture tested on my fingertips; even my dreams were exhausting. I fantasized of those lavish moments between orgasm and sleep, when Solomon would hold me; he would whisper his secrets to me, and I would share them with no one. He would speak of his dreams, his aspirations, and I would be proud for him. If he cried, I would comfort him.

It was three days before Solomon came to visit.

The color of my eyes is most unique; many people, men and women, have told me so. Often I would look at the eyes of models in fashion magazines, but never have I found eyes that compare with the green of mine. I have used my eyes as a means of obtaining things I want, as a tool; I've used them as a weapon to cut with; I've used them to seduce.

I locked my eyes with Solomon's, and was destroyed.

No! it was not destruction. Rather, it was construction; the power of sexuality, the quintessence of the concept became concrete in my mind. The dynamo of sexuality, the act of sex, was not acting but choosing to act or not. The power lay in *discernment*, the decision; the only matter left for Solomon was the resolution. I had recaptured my sexuality.

Solomon was, after all, just a man; and in principle I had already betrayed my husband for him—but I shall not feel guilt for fantasy.

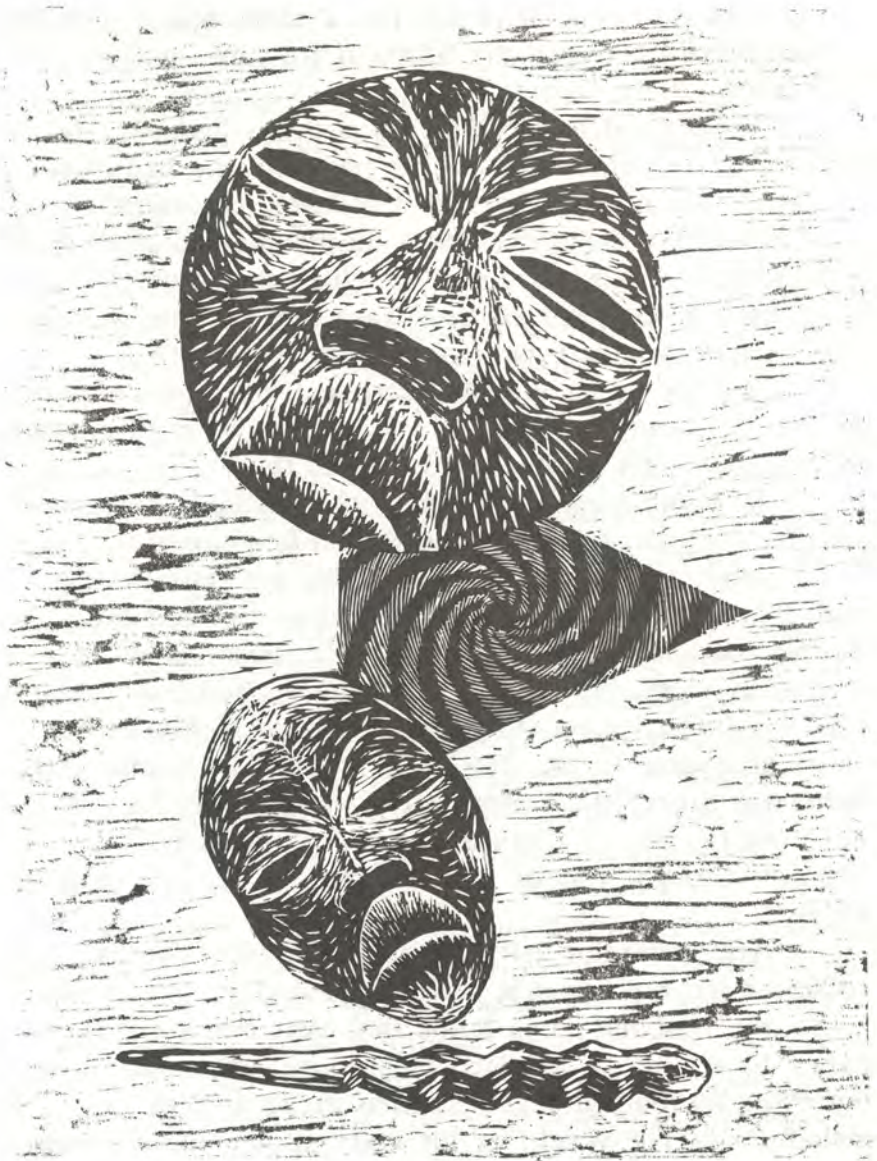
It occurred to me that my passions had been orchestrated by Solomon, however passively; he had done nothing to dampen my desire. I did not feel shame for that either. For Solomon was a master manipulator—he'd conducted this music many times, for many women. It must be a grotesque Hell he voyaged in, to hate women and to love women synchronously, in symphony.

But for all of that, the reason I chose to turn away Solomon was my husband. I will allow only John entrance to my body. His spirit already resides there.

Solomon must have sensed the passing within me of passion for him, but for some reason he refused to allow it to expire; I wonder now if he loved me. His flirting was subtle at first; he moved his fingers through his perfect hair, leaving his mouth slightly open. Then he uncrossed his legs, placing his hands on his somewhat spread legs, his fingertips pointing toward his cock. Finally, he stood and came to me. He kissed me on the mouth, but there was no rejoinder from me. I felt nothing for him, not even the joy of friendship. I would not smile for him. My only thought was of my husband . . . was he thinking of me?

After Solomon left, I prepared French Vanilla coffee. I put my home in order. I bathed.

My husband came home that next evening, so happy to see me; I delighted in his love, answering with my own. We bathed together, then made love so melodiously. The weight of his body upon mine was rapturous, his thrusting poignant.



Untitled

by William S. Hoovler



The Hunt

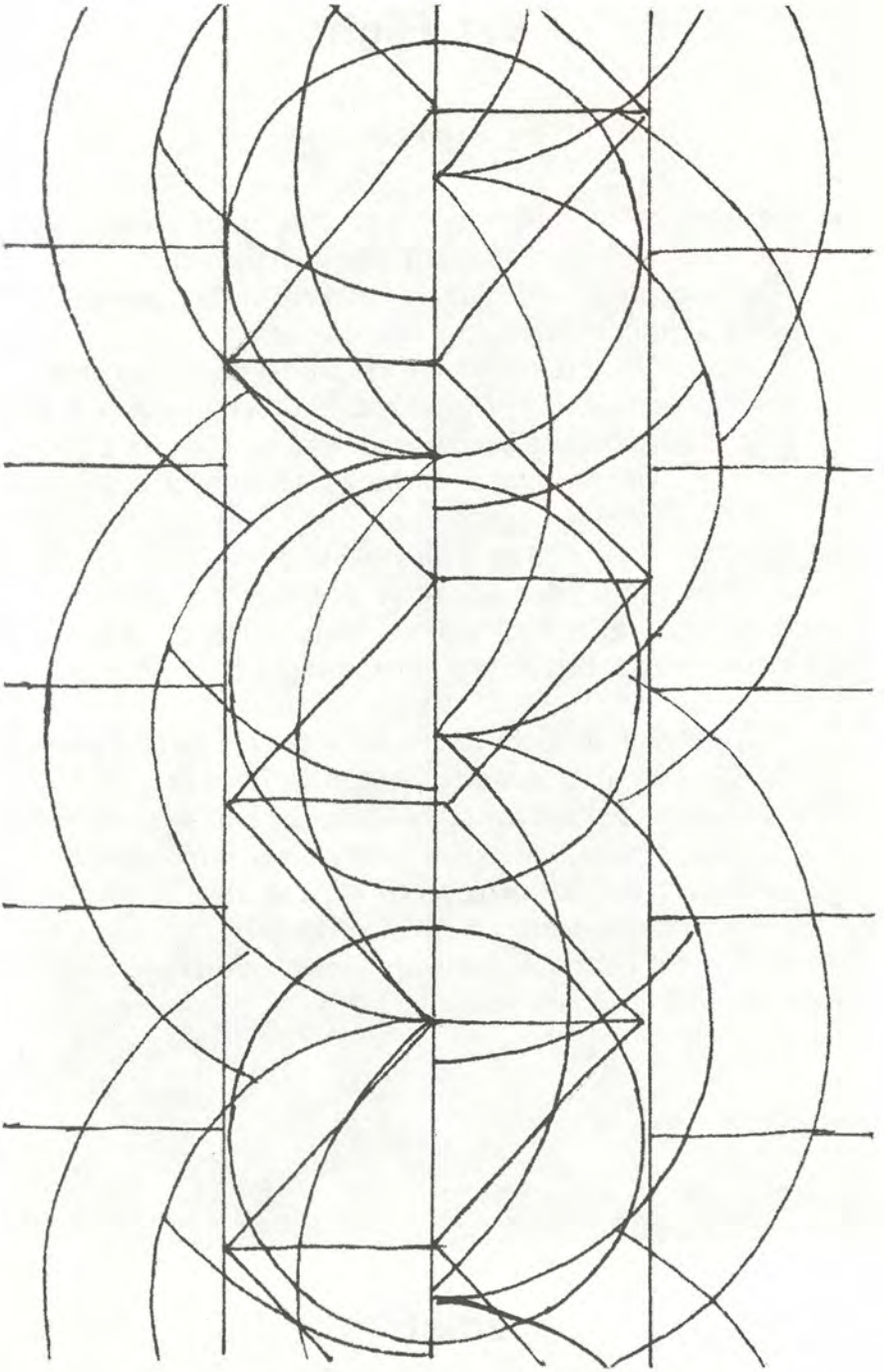
by William S. Hoover

Surrender

by Sean Jessup

Below the algae growing soft and green
at water's edge, down into deep marine
of pink anemone and tiger shark,
where narrow barracuda pierce the dark
and placid wings of manta rays are spread
with upturned tips, above the oyster bed,
there rests a solitary band of gold
oblivious to currents quick and cold,
a trinket settling down through silt and clay—
the wedding ring that splashed into the bay.

It seems that ring belongs there in the brine.
Its golden facets always used to shine
the brightest when immersed in salty tears.
That wicked ring which blazed for ceaseless years,
demanding sorrow's purifying flood,
now drowns in dense, asphyxiating mud
and decomposing fungus scarred by trails
of passing worms and hermit crabs and snails
all groping through the murky deep marine
below the algae growing thick and green.



Nude Ascending

by Jodd Gardner

Bat Flight

by Sean Jessup

As the tears of the heath drip like dew from green thistle,
a bat flies with birds toward the merciless sun.

The lamentable chirping of crickets is dampened
by vapors meandering over the fen.

In a leafless magnolia the birds stop to chatter,
but roosting in sunlight, the bat has grown pale
and his fur has been singed, and his talons are singed.

The weeping moor beckons him back to the vale.

The starlings peck acorns with chitinous beaks
and doves preen their layers of dry, chafing quills.
but bat flies on moist, veinous membranes of skin
and kisses brown berries on blossoming hills.

When the moor drapes her tresses across the horizon
the bat becomes tangled in blackness of night.

Then he turns toward the stars where the half moon is rising
and hovers a moment, then dives into flight.

As he bolts down to penetrate fog covered thickets
he catches the scent of familiar ravines,
then pursues the dank moisture down into the crevice,
hangs drooping in darkness and folds his soft wings.



Reins

by Christine Anne Lyons



Ethnic Cleansing

by William S. Hoovler

The Church

by Jamie Ward Key

Sunday. 8:30 a.m. The present.

The younger of the two murder victims suffered from adrenal genital syndrome. She had been a seventeen year old perfect genetic female—only there had been excessive production of androgen, a sex determining hormone, during the important stages of her development. This resulted in the formation of perfect external male genitalia—she had a penis, scrotum, and testes. However, her internal organs were entirely female.

The other victim had been a genetically perfect male, except the male had opted for a sex-change operation. The man was a woman. The throat of each victim was cut.

Sam closed the coroner's report. He opened his mind. The living would provide the answers.

He decided to begin the investigation by interviewing the woman's (*man's?*) husband. Her name had been Jamie, his Herbert. Sam was aware that 90% of the time a murder victim knew his or her killer. Often, the murderer was a family member. The address given at the hospital by Mr. Herrington was 3574 N. Timberline Road.

He knew it to be a clean middle-class neighborhood on the city's west side. It would take him about thirty minutes to drive there. The problem, Sam thought, would be tying Mr. Herrington, if he were indeed the killer, to the other murder victim.

Sam ran his fingers through his graying hair. He was tired. His belt was punched through the first hole, but it was still too tight; his belly hung over the belt. The brown suit he wore was wrinkled and nicotine stained; his tie had a burn mark from a fallen cigarette. His face was weathered, much like a stone building open to the deterioration of climate. Sam's stomach hurt.

The drive to Timberline had a calming effect on

him, though. He thought about his quickly approaching vacation time, to be enjoyed as soon as his partner returned from his vacation next week . . . fishing would be nice and relaxing. When he stopped and parked in front of the Herrington home, his hands were no longer shaking.

He rang the doorbell. When there was no answer, he tried again. He knocked on the door; his knuckles rapping on it was enough to push it open a bit. He opened the door with the palm of his hand, shouted to see if anyone was home. No answer; he decided to go in and have a look around. If he should find any evidence, he could always say the front door was open, and he'd thought, no he was certain, he'd heard a noise inside.

The living room was dark. All of the curtains were pulled closed. The furniture was early American, arranged so that the large-screen television was the focus of attention no matter where one sat. The carpet was earth-tone and thick. Sam walked over to the neatly arranged bookshelf, noticing most titles dealt with sexuality or religion, then picked up a gold-framed photo of Mr. and Mrs. Herrington. They were standing side-by-side, smiling, arms apparently wrapped around one another's waist. To Sam, they seemed happy together. Happier than he'd ever been, he sensed. He slipped the photograph into his jacket pocket.

A bedroom door squealed, giving Sam a start. He saw the door, now open a bit. He contemplated pulling his gun, but saw then it was only a cat. The cat swaggered into the living room, licking his whiskers. Sam liked cats. He was devoted to the downtown public library—he enjoyed books and learning new things—and spent one Sunday afternoon leisurely researching cats, discovering that the ancient Egyptians believed them to symbolize life. Scrunching down, he gave the cat a rub along its back as it passed him by.

He went to the bedroom doorway, stopped, then lay his hand on the door to push it open.

A premonition; whispering sounds came to mind, reminding him of Autumn leaves scraping down a

sidewalk. Yet, he knew the house was silent as a church.

He pushed the door open.

Mr. Herrington lay stretched out on the bed. He was dressed in a gray suit. His shoes were on. The top of his skull was scattered across the headboard.

Sam walked to the corpse and stared down at it. The blue-grey barrel of the gun still rested in the mouth, the man's finger still wrapped around the trigger.

There was a white envelope lying on the bed next to Mr. Herrington. Sam picked it up. The cat had left bloody-red paw prints across it. The envelope wasn't sealed. He lifted the flap and withdrew the note; it said, simply:

I loved her with all my heart. I'm going now
to see if I can find her. Her spirit was pure.
The body was wrong. Good-bye.

Herb.

Sam lay the note back on the bed. He returned to his car to call the death in. It was 10:30.

* * *

Two weeks ago.

Sunday.

It was raining, hard. The ground was muddy. Sam hadn't brought an umbrella, not thinking or caring, only remembering his son.

He stared across the grave of his son, at his wife. She wouldn't look back. He looked back down at the ground.

The rain water cut rivulets in the mud, ran into the grave.

Sam's head hurt. (God. My son drowned. How could you let it rain today?)

* * *

One week ago. Sunday

"She finished moving out yesterday."

"Are you sure?" Sam looked down at the old woman. She met his gaze, he read her eyes—(Who are you and what's it to ya?) "Did she say where she was going?"

"No, not exactly. She told me she was getting the

fuck out of Indiana and never coming back.” The old woman closed the door. Sam stood there for a moment, then returned to his car. He started the engine and drove away.

His son was dead. His wife was gone. Wanting his family back, he cried; he cried because he knew it could not be, and sensed that he might never have another.

* * *

Sunday. 9:30 p.m. A return to the present.

Sam Chapel flicked his cigarette out the passenger window of his car, then lit another. He looked at his Zip-po. It had been a gift two Christmases ago from his wife and his son, Todd. Todd was 10 when he died. He expected to have the lighter forever.

It was 86 degrees; humid.

He had driven to the spot where he'd been parked during the storm, just before the little black girl had led him to the murder victims. He'd been sitting in his car when a stone came flying through his open window, almost striking his face. He had climbed out of the car as fast as he could, with his .38 ready, but only saw a girl of about 12. Putting the gun away, he approached her slowly. She began to walk away slowly. He started to run after her, and she began to run. He'd slowed soon enough, out of breath. She stopped running. It became clear to him that she was leading him somewhere, so he followed. He followed her into the church. She never said a word to him. He would have to find that girl. She'd disappeared on him, while he was overwhelmed by the gruesomeness of the scene played out on the basement floor of the abandoned church. He didn't believe it would be difficult to find her, though; a purple birthmark covered one side of her face perfectly, starting in her scalp and continuing in a straight line down her forehead and ending at the chin. Even her left ear had been colored.

Sam drew on his cigarette, hard; the smoke hurt his lungs, the hotness burning the back of his throat. The pain reminded him he was still alive.

So he got out of his car, then reached back in for

his flashlight. He stuffed it into his back pocket, under his jacket.

Sam squinted into the darkness, grunted. He'd had fried eggs and corn beef hash for supper, his favorite, even though he knew the hash and oil the eggs were cooked in would burn through the hole in his stomach. The heartburn that always followed was sending the hash back up, and he had to keep swallowing.

He started walking, tracing his footsteps back to the church where the bodies had been. He was reminded of scenes of cities devastated by war. The buildings had a blasted feel. Decay, with its own peculiar odor, like bad memories, spread out from the buildings. Hope seemed to have fled the neighborhood, leaving when the small businesses closed, when the families moved to the other side of town in search for something better. He stopped in front of the old church, glancing up at the broken steeple, wondering which way the cross had fallen when it had rotted off. The windows were all boarded tightly closed. Kids had spray painted over the plywood, telling the world that SHARON SUCKS DICKS and ANGELS RULE BRIGHTWOOD.

He walked up the steps of the church, stopping at the door and turning back towards the street. A group of young boys had stopped on their bikes and were looking up at him. The largest of the them, his brown legs looking strong enough to take him anywhere, shouted, "Hey police man, that place is haunted, there's ghosts in there."

Quickly, they rode off before Sam had a chance to say anything back, to ask why they weren't home, where it was safe, how they knew he was a cop, why they cared if a ghost got him. He lit another cigarette, swallowed hard, and entered the church.

Although the building had been flooded with police and media after the bodies of the victims had been found, the church still had an angry aura for having been abandoned and forgotten. Hundreds of footsteps had been left on the dust floor, but already they showed signs of filling and fading. Cigarette butts littered the floor; they would remain for a long time, maybe outlasting the church.

It was dark inside the church. Sam turned his flashlight on, cursed because the batteries had grown old and could only offer a pale, yellowish light. He rubbed his belly, feeling like throwing up. Even after everything else, the thought of puking in a church gave him a shiver.

The air was hot and thick, like his mind. There was still a stench creeping from the dead cat, but it wasn't as bad as the other night. He walked over to the cat's corpse, moved it with the toe of his shoe; it was stiff. In a while it would become one with the floor and building itself.

He moved towards the doorway leading down into the basement. It was almost, but not quite, closed. He pushed it open with his foot. The creaking sound the door made as it turned on its hinges made him laugh out loud. "Just like a fucking haunted house." He'd said it aloud, but regretted it immediately. His voice echoed in the basement, throwing "haunted" back up for his consideration.

He moved to the first step. It groaned terribly under his weight, so he moved a few steps further down into the basement, not wanting to leave his weight on one stair too long, afraid it might give way. He flicked his flashlight beam around at the bottom of the stairs until he spotted the light switch on the wall. The idea of the basement flooded with light comforted him. He hurried down the remaining stairs, banged the switch with his flashlight. Nothing. He remembered it working the other night. A bulb had been sent for and turned on; the mummings of disbelief that the electricity still worked were equal to the sighs of relief when light did cast shadows back to the corners. The damn thing must have burned out, he thought.

He walked to where the bodies had been. Chalk outlined where they had lain. Casting his flashlight beam around the room, he spotted the lumber that had been used by the killer to cover the bodies after their ordeal. He walked to the pile, casting his light on the floor. Coackroaches scuttled away from his light. They'd been feasting on the blood soaked-lumber. Sam couldn't hold it

back anymore; leaning over, careful to avoid the lumber, he vomited.

Feeling lightheaded, he went back to the stairs and sat on the next-to-last one. After a while, he felt a little better. He crossed his legs, leaned back and rested on his elbows, thinking whoever killed those people was one sick son-of-a-bitch. He started to snicker, then stopped when he remembered the last time he'd vocalized in the building.

He wondered what he was going to do for clues. Having spoken with the younger victim's parents, he was at a loss for something to do.

The girl's mom was religious, a bit of a fanatic, the husband whispered to Sam as they'd walked to the car. He'd said the minister at their church had more influence over her than he did, the man of the house. "In fact, he scares the crap out of me. There's something about the way he shakes hands with you. It's like he wants to know you much better, not to care but to condemn you." Sam replied that his Captain was the same way.

Sam leaned back more on the stairs, resting his head on the soft wood. Stretching his legs out, he rested his hands on his belly. He yawned. His nerves had settled a bit, he was calmer, and the church seemed to be losing its eeriness. Closing his eyes, he remembered his own experiences with fanatical religion. His mother had been Pentecostal, same as the parents of the murder victim, and insisted she bring her only child to services with her every Sunday and Wednesday. His parents didn't go to church anymore, and Sam hadn't been in twenty-five years.

Sleep captured Sam . . .

He was thirteen again. Reverend Haggot was thumping his Bible with his closed fist, shouting, screaming THE WORD OF GOD into the microphone, his voice amplified beyond belief . . . his parents gone . . . *where is Mom?* Oh God the woman next to me is starting to jerk I stand but can't move her left hand is smacking my ass and here comes Reverend Haggot he's frowning at my

eyes he has a mission I can't move

Sam jerked awake. He reached and wiped the slobber from his cheek. There was a roach on his hand and he flicked it off.

The flashlight with its pale yellow beam rolled off the step and blinked out. Sam was alone in the dark.

He stood. The flashlight had rolled under the stairs. Before he could move to recover it, a rustling sound emerged from the corner where the bloody lumber was stacked. The sound froze his muscles.

Like in his dream, he couldn't move.

A voice? No, it was only the whisper of cockroaches moving in the dust. Or *was* it something?

Forget the flashlight.

Sam turned and bolted up the stairs. He reached the door, twisted the knob. Nothing. The door was jammed. He heard a squeaking sound, barely perceptible over his breathing. His stomach squeezed in on itself.

The creaking sounded again. It sounded like . . . it reminded him of when he'd gone through the door and taken the first step. The stair had creaked under his weight.

That noise; the third time, the third step, something was coming up from the basement. He turned and pounded the door with his fist, forgetting his gun, forgetting everything, certain that something monstrous was finally coming for him.

The noise; the creak; it was closer. Sam kicked the door.

The door opened. Without looking back down the stairs, he ran.

Standing outside the church, he looked back at it. Clouds were moving across the moon, like a sheet over a corpse. His clothing was soaked with his sweat. The bottom of his left shoe felt uneven. Looking down, he felt his breath leave him in one long exhalation.

He scraped dead cat hair and goo off his shoe.

He bent over to puke again, but nothing came out.

He wanted to cry, but he couldn't.

He was empty.

(Sam had not entirely closed the door of the church behind him. From the crack left open, a little black girl with a disfiguring birthmark watched him. She trembled. She had not meant to frighten him. Silently, she finished closing the door of the church.)

* * *

Sam hesitantly approached the Reference Librarian.

Her name was Mary, she was tall and big-boned like himself, and he'd come to like her. He did spend a lot of his time in the library, and they often chatted pleasantly. She always expressed an interest in whatever subject he was researching. She knew he was a police officer—perhaps that would help.

“Hi, Mary. I’m looking for books about sex-change operations.” Sam shuffled his feet, embarrassed. Surely she would know it wasn’t for him, he hoped. He looked up, met her gaze.

She smiled at him. “Your research sure takes you to the far corners of the library;” she laughed, then blushed. Sam sensed she felt that he hadn’t caught her joke. “That’s a Librarian’s joke,” she said, starting to stumble on her words. “You see”

Sam interrupted her. “I’m sorry. Things have been rough lately. Unfortunately, this research time is being charged to the Department. I did catch your joke, though.” He smiled. “The library is a microcosm of the world.” He blinked at her.

“Would you like to have dinner with me sometime?” The question was out before he had time to think about it, to reconsider.

“I’d like that very much.” Smiling, she wrote her number down.

As she left him alone with his books, he noticed that she walked very nicely. She looked back at him over her shoulder, catching him. Her eyes seemed to indicate to him that she didn’t mind. He hadn’t known what to do, so he opened a book; he was pleased.

The first two books had been concerned with the operation itself; graphically. He’d learned things, like a penis is something of an external vagina, but nothing that

helped him understand the reasoning behind the operation. The book he opened next concerned itself with the psychological motivations for such an operation. It seemed that these persons who opted for such a radical medical procedure believed without doubt that they were spiritually and psychologically women; they were certain that their very *soul* was feminine, female. Somehow, perhaps through genetic mishap, they had been born into a male body.

With what he gleaned for his reading, Sam developed a theory about who the murderer was. What he needed to do now, he believed, was find that little girl. She had shown him the victims—could she show him the killer as well?

* * *

It took Sam 45 minutes to check out the church the Herrington's attended: Hope Church, the same one attended by the second murder victim. He figured he could take what information he had to his Captain, and it would be enough. Mr. Herrington believed that killing his wife would release her spirit, and that the spirit was *truly* that of a woman's. When he committed suicide, as the note indicated, they would be reunited as man and woman, man and wife. The case could be turned over to younger detectives to finish up, and he could take his vacation; he had accumulated at least a month's pay. Fishing some lakes in Canada would be great. He smiled. Spending time in the library would be enjoyable as well. He realized he was smiling, and smiled harder, enjoying the feeling, relaxing with it, knowing it had been a while since the last time.

He decided, though, that the vacation could wait a few days. He wanted to interview the black girl who had led him to the bodies. She was the last bit of unfinished business. The birthmark should make it easy enough to get an identification. He phoned the Brightwood elementary school. He had encountered her in Brightwood; she probably lived there. The school's secretary immediately remembered the girl, but told Sam he would have to come personally for the information because she would not give

it over the phone, and he'd better hurry because the school system doesn't pay overtime, and she didn't work for free. Then she hung up on him.

When Sam arrived at the school, the secretary had already copied the girl's file. He showed his police badge; she handed him the file. He saw the questions in her square face, but walked away.

"The family moved to Detroit six months ago." There was a sense of satisfaction in the secretary's voice, at the chance of throwing him off balance, for being ignored, but Sam just closed the door behind him. The file was labeled Layman, Alice.

Sam decided to get something to eat before going further. He stopped at a cafeteria-style restaurant, finding himself filling his plate with mashed potatoes and gravy, fried chicken, corn, and topping it off with a large buttered dinner roll. He added a slice of pecan pie to his tray, filling his cup with hot coffee. He felt surprised. He hadn't eaten this well since. . . he couldn't remember the last time. He ate all the food, then opened the file after the waitress refilled his cup with coffee.

He found that the family had indeed moved to Detroit almost six months ago. The girl, Alice, was 12 and had been held back twice from moving on to the next grade. There had been discipline problems with her, mostly violence against boys in her class. Sam imagined the taunting she must have endured for the birthmark on her face. He closed the file; even if the family had moved to Detroit, she hadn't gone with them. Leaving a tip on the table, he left the restaurant, deciding to check out the address given in the file. He had to be sure.

He drove to the address in Brightwood. There were lights on inside. Sam left his car, engine running, and knocked on the door.

"Yes, officer?" The woman peered at him through the slightly opened door, her brown eyes wary. He heard an infant crying in the room behind her.

How can it be I'm so easily perceived as a police officer? he wondered. "Is this the Layman residence?"

"There's no one here by that name. My name's

Hill.” She closed the door. He could still hear the child crying inside the house.

Sam went back to his car, lit a cigarette. He believed the woman. There was no reason for her to lie. He was at a loss. The girl was here in Brightwood, somewhere. Without her family, apparently. But where?

Could it be she was living in the abandoned church? That could explain her finding the bodies. But how could she live? He dismissed that question. He’d seen people exist in incredible situations; hers couldn’t be any worse, and probably not as poor as some.

He realized he would have to go back to the church. He shivered. That was the last place he wanted to be.

After stopping and buying a new flashlight and batteries, he drove to the church. The stars were beginning to dot the night sky.

He pushed the door to the church open, expecting it to creak and grinding his teeth when it did. It was hot and muggy outdoors, and it was even more so inside; he could feel the dust starting to collect in his nose and the back of his throat. He coughed. The echoes reminded him not to speak aloud.

The first floor, except for a mahogany pulpit—its veneer was beginning to peel off and splinter—was empty. The ceiling was vaulted, so there was no second floor; the bats have probably exited for the night, he thought, sucking up insects caught in the street lights. He checked the closet behind the pulpit, looking for signs of habitation but found nothing. He resigned himself to returning to the basement.

After propping the door to the basement open with his cigarette pack, smashing the contents but figuring it was worth 2 dollars, he built his courage, but felt it wither away as he took the stairs down two at a time. He stopped at the bottom, breathing heavily, then walked to the blood stained stack of lumber, flashing his light over it.

Shit. I’m just looking for a little girl. There are no monsters down here.

. . . but there was a few nights ago . . . human

Behind him, he heard breathing. Carefully, he changed the flashlight to his left hand. Stress—a taste like warm copper washed over his tongue; he realized his gums were bleeding. With his right hand, he slowly drew his revolver from its holster. He turned, almost nonchalantly.

His flashlight shone on the face of Alice, the little girl he searched for. She was holding a bloody butcher's knife.

Sam almost pointed the gun at her, but he saw the blood on the knife was dried.

He looked at her, searched her face, sensing she'd killed no one. "Did you see who killed those women?"

Alice nodded.

"What did he look like?"

"It was a white woman." Alice held the knife up, the point directed at Sam. "She did it with this knife. She slit their throats, just like I seen in the movies." Her forehead was wrinkled, like she wanted to cry but would not. "This is my house."

Sam walked over to her, took the knife from her. She gave it up willingly. He laid the knife on the floor, put his gun back in his holsters, then sat down on the bottom stair step, placing the flashlight four steps up so that the light would be on them. He took her hand, tugging gently. Alice sat down next to him. She put her face next to his chest, the purple birthmark facing outward. Sam could feel her breath through his shirt. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. He could smell their perspiration blending together. "You can cry, if you want. Sometimes I do."

"I don't cry, policeman." Her voice sounded raspy, like a whiskey drinker's.

"Do you want to tell me what you saw?"

"No." She closed her eyes. "I will, though."

Sam closed his eyes too.

"I just woke up. I think it was their voices that did it. They were crying, and praying, on their knees, side by side, arms across each other's shoulders. Then that

woman came up behind them”

Sam interrupted, “Where were you? Where had you been sleeping?”

“Under the stairs. There’s a little storage room behind there.”

Why doesn’t she cry? Sam wondered.

“That white woman, she came up behind them with that knife. She looked like she was proud or something. She reached around the older of the two women that was praying and cut her throat all the way around. Blood started spraying out in front of her, but she didn’t fall over or nothing. Then that other girl, she looked around and up and said ‘Mama?’ That girl’s mama cut her daughter’s throat too. Then that crazy woman, she got down on her knees with both arms up over head with that knife all bloody and everything and started praying to God. Then she just got up and left.”

Sam felt her body relax. “It’s going to be alright, sweetheart. We’ll have to leave now. Alice, you’re going to have to tell this story a bunch more times.” He pulled away from her, so he could see her eyes. “We, I, will find you a nice place to live.”

Alice took his hand, stood up. Together, they left the church behind them.

Alice cried on the way.

The Flock

by Peter Monn

“Esther, time for church! Esther!”

First of all, I hate my name. Nobody ever calls me Esther except Momma and my stepfather, Peter. Everybody else calls me Bobbie Joe, which I think is more fitting for an eleven-year-old girl. But I let Momma and Peter call me Esther because actually it's my goal in life to please God, and one way is to honor thy Mother and Father. My sister's name is Ruth which is just as bad I guess, but she never got any of the nicknames I did. Esther egg and Esther bunny. Momma told me she named us after the only two women who actually have books in the Bible, which I guess is a big deal. I just wish she could have named me Eve or Mary which are perfectly holy names.

“Esther, did you hear me? Time for church!” It is so hot that I can already see the sweat stains in my new dress, but Momma insists that I always wear a sweater. If I don't, people will be looking at my “two” and not concentrating on God.

Momma is waiting at the bottom of the stairs for me, filing her nails on one hand while holding Babe in her arm. To tell you what Momma looks like, it's hard. She's got that blonde color of hair that looks like paste in art class. She says it's real long, but I've never seen it out of a bun. She says that if she wore it long, she would be tempting Peter. Anyway, her body is pear shaped, with a belt always about to cut the pear in half. She doesn't really have ankles, just those sensible shoes that all of my teachers wear. And she always wears this huge cross. You couldn't miss it if you tried. She says it's so big to show her love for the Lord and also so men folk will look at it and not at her “two”. I wear a cross too, but it's not that big. I'd wear two if it meant I would impress Jesus.

“Esther, come on! Why are you just standing there

like two cold sausage links on a hot plate.”

“Where’s Peter?”

“Your stepfather has gone ahead early to prepare his sermon. He was very upset that you couldn’t go early to help him with alter guild. You know how much he hates checking all of the books and pencils. Now let me get a look at you.”

She handed Babe to me and then started buttoning my sweater. “Momma, it is so hot. Don’t button it up, please.”

“Do not raise your voice young lady! Now do you want to be the Devil’s temptress? Now hold Babe correctly or you are going to kill her.” She walked out of the room leaving Babe in my arms.

Babe isn’t my sister like everybody thinks. But I just let people think that because people would think the wrong things. People can be really mean sometimes.

Like that boy Tommy Cooney. I’ve never seen him in church once. He was the one who started all of the rumors about Ruth. He said he was the one that put Babe in Ruth. Momma told him if that was true then he could help out God’s child by paying for it, but Tommy just said that Ruth was a slut and it could have been anybody’s. That’s why Ruth left.

Momma says that Ruth was always a wild hair and a disgrace to the family, but Aunt Billie, Momma’s crazy sister, said that Ruth just had “thoughts about things.” You see, Ruth was always too much for Lowick County. She’d see things in magazines and movies that she wanted to do. She was always listening to Stevie Nicks and the Commodores while smoking Clove cigarettes in the back yard. She could lay there all day in her sunglasses and never say a word. I’d go outside to pray, and she’d look and start laughin’

“Hey Bobbie Joe, what are you doing?” she’d say.

“Praying to Jesus.”

“What for?”

“Because I’m one of his little sheep.”

“I don’t know why you believe all that shit.”

She’d sit and talk to me about a place called

Greenich Village and women's suffering, and then Peter would come out in his black robe, and I'd see Ruth get real scared. She was always real scared of Peter. If Momma told her to put on a sweater, she'd say, "Oh fuck off, Sister Perfection!" But if Peter told her to do something, she'd just do it. He never told her to go to church, but she did have to help him get communion ready on Wednesdays and Sundays. When they came home to supper after doing communion, they'd both look real tired, which is why I don't ever want to do alter guild, 'cause it must be really hard. They'd sit down to supper and Peter would sit really straight.

"Now Theresa, this looks like a fine meal. Yes, a very fine meal."

"Well, thank you." My mother would say.

"Ruth was a real help today." He'd say smiling.

"Yes, a real help. Weren't you sister."

Ruth wouldn't say anything.

"Yes indeed, I think she is learning a lot about pleasing God by helping me with alter guild."

Then Momma, Peter and I would go to church, and Ruth would go outside and listen to the Eagles and cry. I never understood why she'd cry. I asked, of course, but she said I was too young and then she'd tell me to shove it.

One day, I heard Ruth tell Momma she was gonna get rid of it, and Momma said it was God's child. A couple of months later we had Babe, and now she has to sleep in my room where Ruth used to sleep.

"O.k., Esther, I'm ready to go to church."

Momma is waiting by the back door. Peter's church, New Baptist, is next door so we just walk over there. I wait while Momma locks the back door. Looking down at my feet, I see the lounge chair Ruth always sat in.

"Momma?"

"Yes."

"Who is Babe's daddy? Is it that Tommy Cooney?"

"Well, Esther, it probably is. But why couldn't it

be Jesus'. Remember, Babe is God's child, our little bit of heaven."

She always says that.

The church is really small, so the service is first, and then Sunday school is after in the same place as the service. We sit down in the first pew after Momma says hello to everyone. Then Peter starts in on his sermon. Today, it's about temptation. He's talking about even when we're tempted by chocolate cake, or cigarettes, or even sex, which brings a wave of whispers from the congregation, we should pray to God for guidance.

"There is sin in the world." To see Peter, it's hard to imagine that he is a minister. He's young. Oh, I forgot to say, he's twenty years younger than Momma. She's fifty and he's thirty, but Peter is God's blessing after Daddy died. He actually looks like my Ken doll 'cause he's always smiling.

"Yes indeed, there is sin in the world.

Pornography, drugs, teeny bopping music, Need I say NO MORE!" He always raises and lowers his voice exactly like those guys on t.v. On Saturday nights, he paces around the living room and practices his sermons.

"Just the other day I was telling my sweet Esther that if we have the Lord in our lives, we will always have guidance, always, need I say NO MORE."

Whenever he mentions my name, I know what time it is. It's time for all the kids to go up to the alter so he can talk to "God's flock." We sit up there for five minutes while he smiles at us and tells us how to please Jesus. Ruth said it was a crock of shit, but I like it. It makes me feel important to sit in front of all the people in my church.

After the service we go straight home so that we can have supper.

"I got a post card from Ruth yesterday," Momma says.

I'm so excited I can hardly choke down the chicken rivlets and cherry jello salad.

"Where is she? Did she say anything to me?"

"It was for you, Esther." Momma reaches into her

apron pocket and pulls out a postcard with a lot of blue and green on it. I started to read it, but Peter pulls it out of my hand.

“Not until after this fine supper your mother has made for us. And then I was thinking that you could help me with alter guild this afternoon.”

“Yes sir.” So I finish my jello salad and washed it down with warm milk.

The postcard shows Maui, which is an island in Hawaii. It looks just like heaven, and so I’m sure that Ruth had found Jesus. I was really worried about that.

You see, after Momma told Ruth that we were going to keep the baby, Ruth decided that when it was born, she was leaving. Ever since, we’ve gotten postcards from Tulsa, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and now Maui. She never does say anything about Babe, but all of the postcards are for me. She always says weird things about coming to get me, which I don’t understand.

Esther,

This is really heaven. You can see all of the fish in the water. Don’t forget I’m coming to get you and take you away from “God’s flock” and from all of the pleasing Jesus bullshit.

Ruth

xoxoxoxo

This postcard is the same as all of the other one’s. They are always short, and I don’t really understand what she means about the Jesus stuff.

I put the postcard in the corner of my mirror next to all of the other ones.

“Esther.” It’s Peter.

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you change into a nice skirt and blouse, that jean skirt and new white blouse and come over to the church to help me.”

“All right, but why should I wear. . .”

“Don’t question me, Esther. Don’t you want to please Jesus?”

He smiles, showing his perfect Ken teeth and then

walks out of my room, closing the door.

I don't have Bible study on the weekends in the summer, so I usually stay at home and read after church, but only after Momma has checked that what I am reading isn't tempting. So I'm excited to get out for once and do something that would really impress God. Running over to the church, I sing a song that I learned in Sunday school today about all the little children in the world are God's children. It makes me think of Babe, and how I wish she was mine. Sometimes in the middle of the night, I hear her breathing in and out, and I go and pick her up. She's so soft in her little, terry cloth pajamas with feet. She has a little bit of hair on her head, but I'm always sure not to touch the top of her head because that can hurt her. I imagine that she's my baby Jesus and I am Mary.

Opening the door of the church, it looks like it's empty.

"Hello," I yell, with it bouncing back and forth on the stain glass windows showing important parts of the Bible. The birth of Christ, Christ on the Cross, and Mary finding the tomb of Jesus empty.

"Esther, I'm back here."

In the back of the church, behind the alter is a little room where they keep the robes and the wine and the communion wafers. I fake ice skate down the blood red carpeted aisles towards the alter.

"Come in, Esther," Peter says, closing the door behind me as I walk in. "O.k. You can help me count the wafers to see how many we used today."

I take the plate wafers out of the brass chalice and count them one at a time. I'm up to fifty-two when Peter touches my shoulder.

"My, it sure is hot today, isn't it Bobbie Joe?" It surprises me that he calls me that. "Aren't you hot?"

I'm scared and I don't know why, but his twangy, solid voice continues.

"Maybe you should take off your blouse?"

"I don't think I should," I say, crossing my arms. I can tell my voice is shaky, and I don't know why.

“Well, what if I took off my shirt,” he says, smiling. All of a sudden, he takes his shirt off, exposing his perfect Ken chest with little swirly black hairs all over.

“Esther, I don’t think God would mind; it is such a hot day.”

“Are you sure?”

“God would want us to be comfortable in his labor.”

“But I thought you always said that there is suffering in pleasing God.”

“Well, I think he would forget this one hot, August day. Don’t you.” I unbutton my shirt, but I feel strange when I take it off and all I have on is my undershirt. I continue to count the wafers, and then I hear Peter unzipping his pants. I turn around, and he’s standing there in his white boxer shorts, with the crucifix for Christmas hanging on the wall behind him.

“Yeah, it sure is hot,” he says. “Why don’t you take off your skirt, Bobbie Joe.”

I’m shaking my head low as he comes over and touches my shoulder again.

“Bobbie Joe, you are always. . .”

“Why do you keep calling me that? It’s Esther.”

“Well, I’m not just your stepfather. I’m your friend too.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, I was thinking of a way I could help you.” He’s getting closer and closer to me, and I don’t like it. As he gets closer, I can’t see the cross as well, just three tips framing his body. “You are always trying to please Jesus, and I think I know one certain way.”

I’m really confused. Squinting my eyes and shaking my head, I watch while he takes off his boxer shorts. His nakedness scares me. I’ve never seen a man like this before and I’m scared! I’m scared! This isn’t right!

He takes my hand and puts it on his thing although I try to pull it away. “God would want you to do this!” He yells at me, gritting his teeth. Spit is starting to come from his lips. “Don’t you want to please God, Bobbie Joe?” I can feel the little hairs by his thing.

“Good, Jesus would like this. He would be pleased.”

“NO!” I’m shouting, but I do want to please Jesus too.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN NO!”

The door flies open, almost knocking Peter down, and Momma is standing there, holding Babe, staring at me. Tears flood her cheeks, and I feel sorry for her.

“You temptress. Just like Ruth.”

“Let’s Pray!” Peter shouts. I look down and he is crying now too. “Let’s Pray for forgiveness for Esther!” Momma is walking out, and I run past her, pulling on my blouse.”

“Esther get back here, NOW!” She is screaming, but I just keep running out into the heat of the day.

I’m staying at Aunt Billie’s house in Chatangwa County now. It’s been a year, and I haven’t seen Momma. I don’t really know what I’d say. I guess it’s best I just stay here. I help Aunt Billie do her hair color, and she’s taught me Pinochle and Hearts. We eat tuna fish sandwiches with chocolate milk on the roof and watch the stars at night, or dance to country music in the kitchen. Lacy Jane Dalton is my favorite. Next week she’s going to take me to the mall to get some things for school. She thinks I’d look real nice in cords and sweatshirts instead of dresses, and she’s going to show me how to put on lipstick.

We stay up late, and I ask her about Peter and God, about Ruth and lots of other things.

“You know, Bobbie Joe, I don’t know a lot about the world, but I know that good byes don’t make things disappear,” she says, taking a drag off her long, black cigarette. “One day, you’re gonna have to talk to your Momma; she may change and see it’s not your fault. She may not. Religious folk never cease to amaze me.”

I know she’s right, but I just cozy up to Aunt Billie in her big bed and listen to the theme song of The Tonight Show.

On days like these, I think a lot about Ruth and wonder where she is. I wonder if she is trying to please Jesus. It’s not my goal in life anymore. I sometime

wonder if I was ever a sheep in God's flock. It's all pretty confusing for a twelve-year-old girl. All I know is that God better keep a good watch on his flock, or all of his sheep might one day wander astray.

Biographies

Mark A. Curtis: I am an English major hoping to continue my education at the graduate level and eventually become a college professor. I do hope that my writing will be decent enough to get into print occasionally.

William S. Hoovler: I'm a Junior at Herron School of Art studying for my B.F.A. My areas of concentration are printmaking, ceramics, and sculpture. I then would like to continue my education around the west coast to study for my M.F.A.

Sean Jessup: I was born in Indianapolis in 1968. Now, 24 years later, I am graduating with a Bachelor's in Psychology. My dreams, in order of decreasing likelihood, are: to earn a Ph.D. in Psychology, to build a Zen Garden complete with tea-house and fish pond, to have a volume of poems published, to win awards for that volume, and to be Earth's ambassador to an extra-terrestrial civilization.

Jamie Ward Kay: Jamie Ward Kay is the pen name for James W. Kirk.

Peter Monn: Peter is a third-year Creative Writing major. He is greatly influenced by Southern and Feminist writers.

Eric Sutton: He is a Senior majoring in painting at the Herron School of Art.

Christine Anne Lyons: She is a Senior B.F.A. painting major at Herron School of Art. She is currently working through modern and personal interpretations of female power and divinity with symbolic reclamations of her body.

