

Hot and bothered to a fair-thee-well!
Laine Cunningham Award winner Michael G. Williams,
Richard Ong, Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal

The Blotter

July 2012

MAGAZINE



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"A Letter"

Dear Mr. White: Today the deer attacked and annihilated my hosta plants. Despite their being strategically situated at the back door, protected by the proximity to my kitchen sink window, somehow, and I assume under the cover of darkness, young bucks stealthily approached and did the deed. Last year the hostae survived until June 23rd, the year before it was Independence Day week. The coral bells not so long. I like to think I knew better and in a moment of blitheness – of hope – planted them anyway because they're very pretty and you can mix and match them like Garanimals and still end up with a nice garden. Unless all you're really doing is feeding the wildlife a little expensive *nosh* on the side. It seems that I'd be better off spending my money on corn in fifty pound sacks, flinging it out off the porch in buckets. The deer would be better fed, and I wouldn't have the mid-June disappointment of a garden of stems-only poking out of the dirt like a diorama of the 1917 shell-torn Ardennes Forest.

Sure I'm grumpy about it. When I didn't do anything special – didn't move the hosta close to the back door, didn't hang bars of Irish Spring soap, didn't string fishing line from tree to tree to make an invisible barrier (ha!) of monofilament intended to frighten the deer in the dark as they inadvertently bumped against it (again, ha!), the hosta tended to make it to the dog-days of summer. The more valiant the effort the worse the results. Other than seventeen year old boys attempting to get dates, I can think of few circumstances in the known universe where this is the case.

Speaking of which, when you are a parent, you believe that you can do many things. First and foremost is to protect your children. I've been staying home for nine years, feeding, cleaning, teaching, and transporting my girls through their lives. Each day they need certain aspects of me less. They can, with only a little assistance, run their own breakfast railroad. This summer we will migrate to them handling their own laundry. I still make lunches for school – because I like the idea of surprises and healthy food, and by assembling their lunchboxes for them I can reasonably assure both. Fresh raw snap-beans. Cubes of canary melon. Ham and Havarti on wheat. A small bowl of home-made chili. Carrot disks or a handful of peanuts. And I try to help with homework, although too soon I can see them working math problems I cannot fathom.

But theirs is nothing like my own childhood. They never wander off to go fishing two towns away. They never sleep outside in the woods on a summer evening. I don't even let them go home with their friends without a conversation with the friend's parents. Am I being overprotective? Are there more crazies nowadays, or is there just more of everything? If I don't protect them, will they inevitably be harmed? Or is it the hosta all over again?

To be honest, I sort of feel bad for the plants. They're doing everything that they should be doing. Early in March the first green-white fingers poke up through the dirt like the hands of recently dead zombies. Like on television. Yes, television. I suspect, Mr. White, that you would not be happy with the direction that television has taken. The best show out there, still crafted by people who have followed the arduous path of creative writing for a living, is called "The Walking Dead" and for all intents and purposes its stars are walking, groaning, drippy-nasty animated corpses. The worst?

Walking, groaning, drippy-nasty animated corpses, sans quality writers, in a show called "Survivor."

How did I get hooked on a show all about death? Tricky question, E.B.. There was nothing else on? I thought that if I tried this, then there was nowhere to go but up? Actually, it's quite something, a fabulous ensemble cast of relative unknowns, seriously talented writers, and a plotline that you can't ignore. And believe it or not, I was terrifically moved by one of the episodes – nearly to the point of tears. What does this say about me? I am emotionally involved with zombies and care deeply about mindless plants. That's the twenty-first century in a nutshell, I guess.

And who am I to be perturbed by deer? Am I not the invader in their space? I think I've been here a long time. Twenty years of watching the ice push stones up through the earth into the back yard, watching the black walnuts fall, scattered about by squirrels, root and send up their waving-hands leaves. Twenty years of lightning and rain. Twenty years waiting for the rhododendrons to figure out how to bloom. The deer have a species memory of when there was no house here, then the house being here. For them it is probably a tiny bit of fluff in the greater instinctual survival-education they pass from doe to fawn.

Elwyn, I don't understand how events seemed to conspire to prevent my having a nice garden this year. I know that a farmer's actions must be akin to those of a parent. I think I was attentive, but not smothering. Good planning – at least what I thought was good planning – analyzing where the sun and shade were going to be during the spring and then where the hot rays would pour down when the dry days of August sauntered in. It's a bit like committing whether or not to let your child take the bus to and from school, or driving them yourself each day.

Perhaps the real question is: are my children the hostae, or are they the deer? Is the act of planting hosta an act of defiance against the inevitability of nature, or an inadvertent act of kindness towards it? And should I be moving the girls towards the bus, letting them cross the street without my help, and stop effectively holding their hands each morning by driving them. Because despite all of your best laid plans, in the end children grow up, we're all food for...zombies, and deer always get their hosta.

Sincerely,

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com



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CAUTION

It's been a long day. Oh, it's been a long been along bin along binalong day.

The Blotter Magazine

announces with pride the winners of the

2012 “Laine Cunningham Novel Award”:

1st Prize - **Michael G. Williams** of Durham, NC,
for his novel “Perishables.”

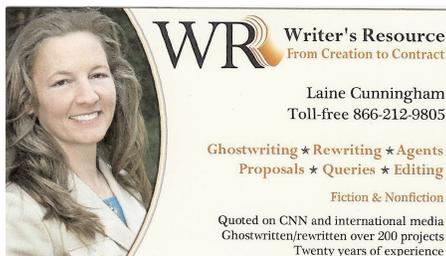
2nd Prize - **Michelle Barker** of Penticton, BC,
for her novel “The Beggar King.”

3rd Prize - **Tamra Wilson** of Newton, NC,
for her novel “Home at the Lincoln Hotel.”

Honorable Mention - **Marilynn Larew** of New Park, PA,
for her novel “The Spider Catchers.”



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An excerpt from “Perishables,” the 2012 winner of The Blotter Magazine’s Laine Cunningham Novel Award by Michael G. Williams

When the zombies came, I was at a potluck for my neighborhood association.

Odd, isn't it? For all sorts of reasons, not just that I'm a vampire.

It's true, though, being there when the zombies showed up. I was ten minutes' walk from my place, down at the Reinholdts' five-bed, four-bath McMansion. Gods, but I hate that house. When they moved in we didn't have a neighborhood association to stop them from constructing that vinyl-sided monstrosity and no sooner had they dropped the last box in their front hall than they'd begun agitating to start one so they could make sure their place stayed the biggest house in the entire development.

Typical mortals.

Some of the more bothered types went and talked to lawyers or talked to the city or, in the case of Mr. Jones-Magnum - the only person who's been here so long even I have cause to fear his attentions - talked to the city in the presence of a lawyer and, eventually, everyone who cared shoved their hands in their pockets and slunk back up their drives in silent resignation. The Reinholdts knew how the game was played and immediately began campaigning for Best Neighbors Ever. With gift baskets and mown lawns and good candy on Halloween they whittled away just enough of the resentment against them that they got a neighborhood association started without being its first victims. By New Year 2002 it was a done deal: Franklin Not Frank Reinholdt was elected chair of the

neighborhood association, with a three-member rotating board to keep the Reinholdts on a leash. Thus began their benevolent dictatorship of our neighborhood.

The neighborhood association's authority, I should note, does not extend to my yard. Oh, technically it does but Mary Lou Reinholdt always somehow seems to flinch when she tries to look me in the eye on my own turf. Every once in a while she'll come around and try to tell me one thing or another through the screen door but she always makes it fast and leaves faster. Franklin Not Frank won't even show up. He can't handle it. He's a wuss. The deal is, one of the rules imposed on the Reinholdts - really on Mary Lou, because we all know Franklin Not Frank is not the brains in that operation - is that whenever the neighborhood association considers a new restriction affecting a current homeowner's existing property then the homeowner has to be notified before the measure can be considered. The first time I actually met Mary Lou Reinholdt was for that very reason about four months after the association started.

Thirty minutes after sunset I'd heard a ring at my doorbell. I remember it took me a minute to figure out that it was, in fact, the doorbell. No one had rung my doorbell in years, not even on Halloween. I turn the lights on like anybody else but eventually my place acquired whatever psychic stain puts people of a mind to

ignore it and move on. My guess is, I turn the porch lights on a little too late and I leave them on a *lot* too late and I'm never out mowing my lawn and people notice the little stuff like that. People don't notice the house that always stays the same so it fades into the background and they eventually learn to ignore the house where the dogs yap all day and the kids are always screaming but they notice the house that has a vibe of being just slightly off. A house that feels and looks too empty stands out like an open grave.

Anyway, the doorbell rang so I walked downstairs and peeked out the peephole and I could see Mary Lou standing there on the front porch with her lips pursed and her eyebrows knit together. She looked just as pissed as all get-out, like *how dare I not answer her*, and I figured she was a missionary or some other kind of low-life. I flung my door open so hard the hinges squealed and at the same time hit the whole bank of switches in the foyer so that the porch, front hall, front stairs and walkway were all suddenly flooded with the brightest, whitest light possible.

A vampire never gets tired of seeing surprise in a human's eyes.

"Mister..." She fumbled for a moment, and I made a show of studying her face while she did. I wanted to remember her but I also wanted her, whoever she was, to *know* that I remembered her.

"Surrett." I leaned my frame against the door and the floor creaked under me. I'll say it, I'm not afraid to: I'm a great big fat guy. I'm

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middling tall, about six feet if I remember correctly, but I weigh in somewhere around three fifty. I'd been out the night before, and just woke up, so I was in my black trench coat and wearing the boots that give me a little lift and my thick black hair was pointed eighteen directions at once because I hadn't hit the shower yet and she just stared and stammered.

"M... Mister..."

"Surrett," I said again. "Withrow Surrett. And I don't want no damn Bibles or newsletters or what-the-hell-ever, so get the *hell* off my land." I slammed the door shut and flipped all the lights back off with a smoothly reversed pinwheel sweep of the same arm. Mary Lou was left standing there just as blind as a bat. I could still see her out there as I stomped upstairs to get out of my club clothes and into something more reasonable, like the bath, and I smiled to myself because I could smell that she was a little bit afraid.

That's how I came to be a member of the neighborhood association's board. It was early. Some people were probably just getting home from work. Others were probably out on their porches enjoying the April evening. By whatever means, from whatever place, someone heard that exchange and the next month I got a note stuck in the screen door by an anonymous neighbor: a resolution to restrict the weight of dogs allowed as pets in the neighborhood had failed, and I had been elected to the association's board in absentia.

The dog thing was probably what Mary Lou came by to talk about. I've got a Doberman named Smiles. He weighs 150 pounds because I feed him some of my own blood once a week. When I have to go to town on my own, or when I leave him out front for the day to

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guard the place, I leave him on a chain that's too big for a large man to grasp in one hand because that's the only chain Smiles hasn't broken yet.

That got my attention, so I took the position on the board. What the hell, you know? Even we – *especially* we – can act on a whim and that was mine in that moment.

Being on the board turned out to be pretty low-impact. Once every six months I went to a potluck at the Reinholdts' damned house and we'd have a semblance of a meeting. I'd walk Smiles up there - no lead, I'd hate to see the leash that would work on him if he needed one - and drop him off in the Reinholdts' fenced back yard. He would spend the entire evening sitting on their back porch watching me through their series of French doors, ignoring their Jack Russell named "Killer". Killer usually just barked until he passed out.

The night the zombies showed up was the night of our spring meeting. It promised to be a pretty dull affair. The autumn meetings are always the ones where somebody gets pissed because their neighbor isn't raking enough for their liking or otherwise shit in the donuts and somebody needs to throw a hissy fit over it. Spring, on

the other hand, is easy-going. Spring is when they're all dusting off that old landscaping software and talking about maybe *this* year they'll actually build those garden beds. It's a time when they imagine everything will be exactly the way each of them, individually, wants things to be all the time. As such, it usually involves nothing more fraught than a lot of sitting around munching on stale cheese balls and avoiding Franklin Not Frank's "world-famous" jellied beef loaf.

Don't ask. I don't even know what jellied beef loaf *is*. I asked one time and all I got in return was, "Oh, eh.... heh heh... think of it as a kind of *sausage*." Franklin has this weird vocal tic he only displays when I directly question something. It always starts with this half-hearted chuckle and then he avoids giving me a straight answer.

That particular spring it was remarkably warm - global warming has finally caught up with us, I guess - and we'd not had a single flake of snow the whole winter. Raleigh isn't exactly in the Alps but we're used to seeing a *little* winter weather. Not so that year, and we'd spent the first half of March with daytime highs in the 80's. As it was warm the night of the meeting I'd made do with some old jeans and a stained t-shirt from the '82 World's



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Fair. You remember, the rainbow waterslide kind of logo thing with the flame icon at the far end and 1982 WORLD'S FAIR on the near end of the slide?

Come to think of it, maybe you don't remember. Oh well. It was a fun time. Got to see the Budweiser horses, the Clydesdales. You've probably seen the ads.

Me and Smiles went up the street at an easy pace. I was bringing homemade biscuits and a batch of ambrosia salad. I love to cook, though I'm not particularly good at it. What tends to surprise most of my fellow kind is that I also love to eat. Most of us can't keep food down, our bodies reject it outright and it just comes back out, but my maker was a smarter one than most so she made me eat early and often to teach me how to keep it in long enough to fool folks. I was, as you might expect, not one to shy away from an ample meal in life and so I was glad to take up eating as a hobby in unlife. I might never lose another ounce of weight in all the time I spend on this earth but at least I can eat for hours and never *gain* an ounce, either. It's a small comfort, but with us every sensation counts.

When I got to the Reinholdts' place, I skipped ringing the doorbell and just walked Smiles

right on around to the fenced back yard. The moment my hand touched the latch on their gate, Killer went ballistic.

Mary Lou knew by the sound that I must have arrived and came out on the back porch to greet us. She took one look at Killer and her shoulders sagged in a quiet sigh. For the first time in a long time I thought I detected something human in Mary Lou's body language but then the Stepford programming kicked back in and she smiled as best she could. "Withrow," she said, trying to purr and coming out sounding wrong. "So glad you could make it. I'm sure you're very busy."

"Oh yes," I responded, the ambrosia and the plate of biscuits cradled in my arms. Smiles sat by my feet and sniffed the air audibly in Mary Lou's direction. "Been working on some new stuff."

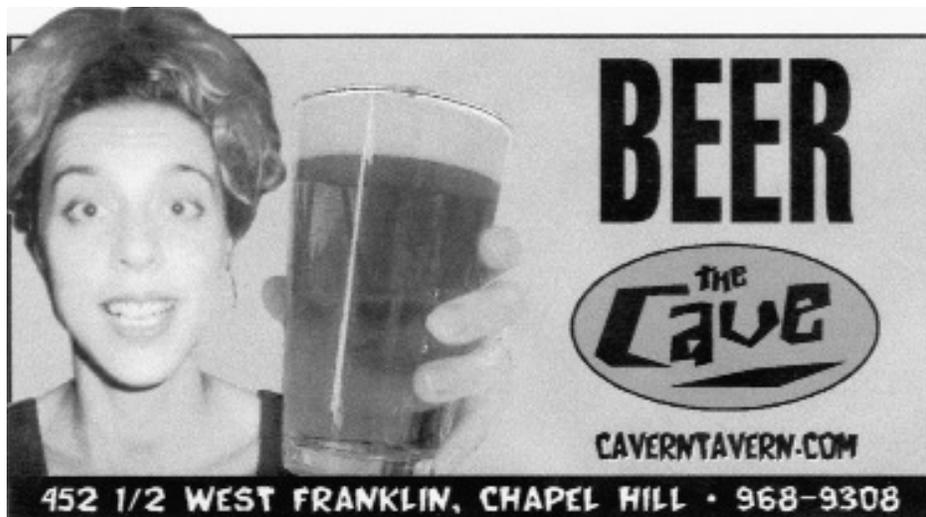
"That's nice," she intoned, and then she turned and walked back inside, leaving the doors hanging open. She couldn't even handle that much small talk with me. It was nothing new.

A thought sometimes occurred to me in those moments when Mary Lou so visibly bristled at interaction with me: what if it wasn't just that I'd pissed her off that

time on my porch? What if Mary Lou was one of those people who can just *tell* when something isn't right? What if every time I spoke she got those tingles up her spine that said, *That thing is not a human being?* There are vampires who believe that sort of sixth sense is out there, in folks whose great-great-great-grandfathers lived in one of our towns and somewhere along the line figured things out and now, generations later, they have scattered descendants who can simply *tell*, through some genetic memory or otherwise inherited gift, that something isn't right about us.

Me, I don't know what to think about that. I don't explicitly consider it impossible – I'm a *vampire*, I know a human being having something like a gut feeling about us is way down the list of crazy-ass things that can happen – but I've never known anyone for whom the possibility was a real concern. Mary Lou had made me start to give it more thought, though, and for all that my presence clearly made her a little unhappy I have to say the feeling was mutual.

About the manuscript thing – I'm a painter. Officially, my "grandfather" was the painter. *Officially*, I'm just an heir who releases the occasional found work and burns the proceeds to fund an utterly failed attempt at a career as a



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novelist. It's a shitty cover if you care what people think, but I don't care what people think. Mostly. Sometimes I care a lot. Pride is usually what gets us in the end, all of us, human or otherwise.

The rest of the board was there already and Franklin was busy talking sports with Kathy Sams and Herb Watanabe. Franklin isn't a sports buff, and neither is Herb beyond the usual water-cooler talk, but Kathy can't get her head out of it. Kathy played on the women's basketball team for one of the local colleges, back in the day, and she's a bigger sports nut than anyone you can think of. When I walked in she was busy haranguing Herb and Franklin over their picks for an office pool on the basketball tournament.

"Why the hell did you put Montana in as going to the Sweets? Have you ever watched Montana play? Every year they field the ten guys in the whole state who are over six feet and not busy throwing bales of hay across a field somewhere. This year they just got lucky!"

That's what I heard come from the living room. Herb Watanabe was trying to respond but Kathy was fed up with trying to explain it to him. Kathy officially considered the rest of us, who ranged from Herb, in the office pool because letting the boss take a few bucks from him was a way to fit in, to me, who couldn't care less without bursting a vessel from the effort,

to be lost causes. There was, she had said one time over dessert, something wrong with people who are so disconnected from their communities. Kathy's team in college had been good - very good - but this was before ESPN was giving a damn about women's sports. I don't have to be a sports fan to know that women get a lot more coverage these days, and that's a good thing, but Kathy was pretty bitter. She'd won a national championship but no one she met ever recognized her name

Kathy and Herb had become, over time, the only reasons I didn't walk from the board once the novelty of sticking it to the Reinholdts wore off. Well, OK, that's not true. The reason I didn't walk was because I still enjoyed sticking it to them even after it wasn't new anymore. Eventually I would've gotten tired of that, though. Probably. Kathy and Herb, on the other hand, they're good folks. They joined the board in part, I have come to realize, because they wanted to keep an eye on busybodies like the Reinholdts but in part because they also thought the HOA thing had potential. They were just people like anybody else, suspended in mid-air between a healthy dislike for pointless bureaucracy and sincere optimism about their efforts. I genuinely had no problem with them once I got to know them. I didn't exactly start sending them fruit baskets every Christmas but I

had no reason to distrust them and couldn't manufacture a good reason to ignore them if I saw them out when I was walking Smiles, so I guess I have to say I liked them.

Dinner itself was the usual fare. We'd all brought a side dish and Mary Lou had done up a roast. Franklin had his jellied beef loaf out on the table and as usual everyone was kind of avoiding taking more than the amount exactly necessary for the sake of politeness. Conversation wound around the others' jobs - Herb is an architect, Kathy a programmer, Franklin does advertising jingles and Mary Lou is a property manager. Herb talked about how no one cares about good design, and the conversation briefly brushed up against how people these days just like to live in the biggest box they can squeeze onto a quarter-acre lot, but Kathy caught Mary Lou looking uncomfortable and so she steered us away into asking about Franklin's latest work. He'd supervised auditions for a campaign selling candy bars, and that was his big victory of the last six months: kids all over the country were humming a tune he'd picked for them whenever they stuck a dollar in a snack machine at school. Everyone stayed politely distant from probing me about my "professional" life, until Franklin said what he always says.

"Your grandfather was also an artist, wasn't he?"

Best In Show



by Phil Juliano

I shrugged. "He certainly was."

"Quite a gifted landscape artist in his day," Franklin said to the others, as though he had to explain it to them every six months or they'd forget. I always hate this part of our conversations. Normally I sit there and let it happen around me but that night, for some reason, I spoke up.

"He worked in a lot of themes," I said without looking up from my plate. "Landscape was just to pay the rent."

"Oh," Franklin replied, trying to save face, "I didn't mean to imply that his art was limited, it's just that landscape is what he's known for."

"I didn't know anyone was known for landscape," Mary Lou said over her glass of blush. She smiled at me, and I looked up to meet her eyes. Mary Lou had a

funny look on her face, and I thought again of that mythical sixth sense.

"John Turner," I said around a mouthful of broiled pork. "18th and 19th century. Hans Heysen, Monet, lots of well-known artists had or have landscapes as some of their best-known work. And it's still quite popular. There's Paul Sawyier, in Kentucky. Let's see, Kurt Jackson, he does mixed media sea-front stuff. Very impressive. Lots of stuff of Cornwall; he also does some photography." I shrugged and sat straighter in my chair, set my fork down on the plate, took a loud gulp of meat. "Landscape is a very respected theme, still, even if some people consider it 'fuddy-duddy.'" I stopped. I was starting to get pissed off, and my tone was showing it. I take a finished piece - one I've been careful to make using an aged canvas, a supply of paints it's hard to

find anymore, timeline-appropriate brushes, all the things needed to produce a work that's effectively been counterfeited even though I really am Withrow Surret and I really did paint it myself - and show it to a curator or a dealer and they check the signature and then they cluck their tongues and say something about how I was lucky to find it because surely there must not be many unknown works by my "grandfather" left and then they look at me like I'm the world's worst leech, like they can't believe I value my supposed ancestry so little as to place a high price on it.

Mary Lou arched her eyebrows and made an 'o' with her mouth. "I had no idea," she said. Everyone else chewed in silence. She made a little 'mm' noise to indicate she wasn't finished, like she'd just realized that perhaps she should clarify her statement. "I mean, I had



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no idea you were such an avid student of art, being a writer yourself.”

“Well,” I replied, “Fiction is an art.”

“Yes,” Mary Lou replied, so completely and blissfully tactful that no one could ever accuse her of trying to draw me out. “But there’s a reason they call it ‘arts *and letters*,’ isn’t there? I mean, there’s an art to writing, yes, but they’re not the same *thing*.” She lifted an elbow to point it at her husband, gesturing casually with the same arm holding up her glass of wine. “It’s not like writing *music*, or, say, painting.”

I know what bait smells like, and I didn’t bite even though I was definitely in the mood for it. Instead I just shrugged again. “Maybe so. I wouldn’t know.” Saying that was hard - the part of me that starved in a one-room apartment over an appliance store in Asheville for five years while I learned that landscapes are so important to the history of so

many artists because landscapes will sit still long enough for you to practice your craft, to learn, to experiment, to compare the results of one technique with another, to learn the little inner cues that tell you when you’re doing something right, when you should just keep working and not over-think it for a little bit because you’ve got that vibe; that part of me wanted to throw something. The part of me that has to maintain a public life just normal enough to go as unnoticed as possible, though, that part of me had to ride herd on everything else inside and it won.

Mary Lou was clearly trying to come up with something she could say in response to that non-reply, something that would cement her conversational victory, but I cut her off at the pass by jamming my fork into the sliver of jellied beef loaf I’d gotten and shoving the whole thing in my mouth.

No one had ever seen anyone else actually eat the jellied beef loaf before. Shocked silence descended on the table, and even Mary Lou’s pupils dilated a hair’s breadth when she saw me do it.

I chewed, and chewed, and chewed. Jellied beef loaf, it turns out, *is* a kind of sausage. Note the careful use of that phrase, though. Imagine taking deviled ham and stuffing it into a sausage skin, then baking it or frying it. It doesn’t turn hard, but it’s not complete mush. It tastes of salt and bland flesh, so there’s nothing remarkable there. It’s just meat-flavored *stuff* you put in your mouth and you chew. I was chewing a *lot* of it at once, and I chewed with merciless slowness. Chew. Chew.

Chew.

Franklin was watching to see what I thought, whereas Mary Lou and Kathy and Herb looked like they were waiting for me to top-ple over dead.

I swallowed the slice, raised both eyebrows slowly, and then lifted my hands over the table. I was very careful to give the impression that I was either going to reach for other food or I was going to try to cover my mouth before projectile vomiting. I let that second or three stretch out, and then I reached for the plate with the rest of the jellied beef loaf on it, carved a generous length of it and lifted it onto my plate.

“Delicious, Franklin.” I nodded at him, and then smiled. “I had no idea.”

I picked up the entire severed portion, one long and greasy tube of dull beige-pink, and bit it off like a candy bar. “Mmmmm,” I said, tonelessly, still smiling. I took another elaborately slow bite. “Yes,” I went on, rolling it around my palate, pausing to let the bouquet express itself, then jawing it again. “Delicious.”



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After that, Kathy eventually picked back up the mantle of conversation and wore that yoke through the rest of dinner. She tried to talk about the artistic side of programming - elegant designs, smooth operations, helpful commenting - and tried to use that to tie into writing in an attempt to build a bridge between me and Mary Lou. Herb helped her out as best he could, and over time it turned into Franklin and Herb and Kathy talking about how corporate structures obscure the creative efforts of the individuals in their employ, no matter how creative any one of them is, even if every individual in the organization is trying to be creative. As they turned into the Bad Luck Club, grousing convivially about the hardships of cubicle farms, Mary Lou kept watching me eat as I finished off the rest of the plate of jellied beef loaf. If Mary Lou was onto me, if she wanted to watch me for whatever it was that raised the hair on the back of her neck, I was happy to give her something innocuously bizarre: a taste for jellied beef loaf. I even smeared some on a biscuit and ate it like pâté to keep her on her toes. I smiled the entire time.

Franklin had just asked Herb and Kathy if they were ready for him to bring out dessert and they had made the appropriate noises about how it was too much but they'd love to try a little when I realized two things: Herb and Kathy were lovers and that I'd just heard a car accident in the distance.

I doubt it will surprise you to learn that vampires have remarkably keen senses. I heard screeching tires and a car horn and then the distinctive tin can crunch of metal against an obstacle and I could tell from the sound that it was probably three blocks away.

No one else had heard it at first, so when I looked up and

around towards the windows at the front of the house and the street beyond the others all started in surprise.

"Hear something?" Kathy asked. The slight tremor in her voice told me she and Herb and Franklin had grown weary spending the last fifteen minutes walking on eggs. She was jumpy.

I looked at her for a moment and nodded towards the window. "Thought I heard something, but it could just be my imagination." The others looked towards the windows, too, even Mary Lou, and then I heard the horn again.

"Was that a car?" Franklin looked out in that general direction.

"I..." I paused, considered, went on. "I'd swear I heard a car accident just a second ago." I set down the last of the current biscuit. "But, you know, it could be anything." I looked the other direction at the French doors off the dining room and Smiles was still sitting there watching me. He's a pretty good gauge of when weird stuff's going down, but he can also be misleading. His only job is to protect me. If people are dead in the street he doesn't really give a damn unless I'm one of them. Killer, on the other hand, forgot Smiles just long enough to run to the fence and start yapping his head off.

The car horn sounded again, closer this time, and then headlights splayed against the front of the house. The horn was more insistent than before, and Franklin walked to the front windows to survey what he could see beyond the shrubs they'd placed there for privacy. "Someone's just pulled up in the drive," he announced.

I knew that something very bad was about to happen because from outside I could hear Smiles start to growl.

I wasn't going to start crazy

paranoia talk out of the blue so I sat at the table and watched the living room and foyer. Franklin stood in the bay windows, watching the car in the driveway, and narrated for us as the guy got out of his car and ran up the front walk to the door.

"What's he look like," Mary Lou asked, and Franklin shrugged at her in the dramatic, both hands out to the side, both shoulders pumping up and down way of an actor on stage.

"He's just some guy," Franklin said, but it was cut off by the doorbell ringing frantically: RING-A-RING RING-A-RING RING-A-RING, and then the guy started beating on the front door and shouting something we couldn't make out.

"Aren't you going to answer it?" Mary Lou had stood from the table and was trying to shout over the noise, Franklin looking back at



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her uncertainly. His hand hadn't moved from the blinds; he hadn't moved from the window. "Answer it," Mary Lou shouted, and Franklin took two hesitating steps to the door. In those few seconds, the guy's shouts had become less complicated and more coherent. Whatever he was yelling before was just a muffled jumble of syllables, but now it was easy to make out: *Help me, there's been an accident, he was saying. Help me, please; I need to call the police.*

Kathy and Herb were still sitting at the table with me, and I noticed that they had briefly touched hands under the table, both looking to the other for reassurance. Definitely lovers. They weren't going to do anything, and it didn't look like Franklin would either. I started to stand up, my napkin falling out of my lap and into the middle of my plate, but Mary Lou had already made for the door. The guy was still tap-dancing on the doorbell so I couldn't make out what Mary Lou said to her husband as she went by him but it was ugly and her face was set as hard as an anvil. With one twist of the knob

and a practiced sweep of her other hand she'd undone the dead bolt and yanked the front door open. The stylized, decorative ukulele on the back of it - tiny, with three strings instead of four, little wooden spheres suspended on twine such that they would bang against the strings when the door opened - twanged a wild chord and the others all jumped a little in anticipation of what they might see.

The stranger on their doorstep was, in fact, just some guy. He was in his late 20's or early 30's, dressed in khaki slacks and a solid-color oxford button-up. His close-cropped black hair and his coffee-colored skin cooperated to make him look a little younger than he might actually be, and his wide, red eyes and choked speech indicated that whatever had happened out there, he had just now started sobbing over it. His head was turned away from the house, in the direction he'd come, but when the door opened he whipped back around and stared at Mary Lou, lips quivering, for a long moment before he said anything.

"Holy fuck," he mumbled,

his voice strangled and high-pitched. "Oh, god, we have to call an ambulance, I just ran some guy over in the street." Other than his voice reaching for the top end of the scale and shaking wildly, he sounded pretty together. Shock, I figured. Turned out I was right, because he interrupted Mary Lou when she started to say something in response: "But..." He shook his head at her and she was quiet. "But then it happened *again*," he said.

We all blinked at once.

"Franklin." Mary Lou was very calm. "Go and get the telephone and call 911." Franklin was quick to obey, and disappeared into the kitchen immediately. Mary Lou had never taken her eyes off the kid at the door, and this time he let her talk. "Now," she said, voice even, "Tell me exactly what happened so that we can help you." She reached out and took the kid's elbow and led him out of the doorway, into the foyer, and closed and locked the door behind him. He sank into an armless chair between two large, fake plants - a chair I'm pretty sure Mary Lou would only let someone use in the event of an emergency, so the kid at least had that going for him - and took two deep, ragged breaths. "Actually, first," Mary Lou added, "Have you checked on either of them? Do they need first aid?"

The kid shook his head and his eyes went wild all of a sudden,

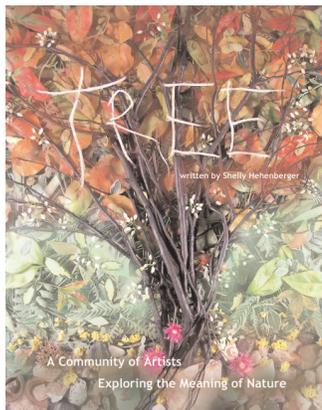
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his pupils wide like saucers and the whites bulging out at me. Trust me when I say that I know the look of mortal terror on a human being. This was *that*, and everyone in the room recognized it from firsthand experience or from ancestral memory.

It's interesting, actually, there's been research done on this. There is an evolutionary advantage in people looking all crazy when they're real scared. One article about it said, basically, that it's how cave-men knew when someone was coming up behind them. Bottom line, when one person sees another person do that - eyes wide, pupils dilated, whites of their eyes just all over the place - it produces fear in the observer as well as the observed. It triggers the fight-or-flight mechanism.

It does not trigger that in vampires because a lot of the basic human instincts simply shut down after the Big Bite. That doesn't mean it gives us a warm fuzzy, though. In the movies, it's always Dracula running around with that stupid grin, his fangs hanging out like a TV antenna got stuck in his windpipe, people screaming up and down the countryside. It isn't like that for us, not really. We - well, the smart ones, anyway - try to avoid creating fear as much as possible. Fear gets people talking. Fear makes it hard to keep something secret and it makes people overreact. When humans start shuffling around and looking to each other for guidance we start hoping they've got their torches and pitchforks well out of reach. Fear makes people do *crazy* things.

"No, they don't need first aid," the kid said, shaking his head. I wondered what the hell was taking Franklin so long with 911. "No, they..." The kid threw his hands up to his face and pushed back the skin

around his eyes. "They're dead," he mumbled. "And... they *look* dead. They look... *really* dead." We were sitting in silence, and then the kid went on after a second or two. "They look like they've been dead a *long, long time.*"

Kathy and Herb both held their breath, and Mary Lou wrinkled up her forehead. "What do you mean?"

"I mean they were corpses," he said after a second. "I mean there were corpses in the street."

"Dead bodies in the *street*?" The Mary Lou Reinholdt that asked this question was not one human being concerned for another; she was the wife of the president of the London Towne neighborhood association.

"Dead bodies... walking around," the kid said, and then he turned to one side and puked his guts out all over one of Mary Lou's plastic plants.

Franklin chose that moment to emerge from the kitchen. "I called 911; they said the police would be here soon." He looked at all of us, looked at the kid trying to wipe his mouth on his sleeve, looked back at Mary Lou. "They said they were already close by, so it would be quick?" Franklin's expression was one of confusion and bewilderment. Mary Lou looked down at the stranger, then up at Franklin and made a motion with

one hand, against her other arm. I realized she was trying to mime injecting something. She thought the kid was drug-addled.

"OK," she said to him, taking a step back, and Franklin doing the same, very casually. "So what's your name?"

"Jeremy," he coughed.

"Jeremy," Mary Lou said very gently, "We've called the police, and they're on their way to help. In the meantime, I think if we go outside and look again you're going to find that you've imagined something very terrible and it's shaken you up very badly." Mary folded her hands together in front of her. "Do you want to go outside and check?"

Jeremy looked at her with his red-rimmed eyes and then looked over to the door and shook his head violently. "No way, lady, no way," he panted. "No way am I going back out there."

"Well, Jeremy, that's up to you." Mary Lou was 110% condescension. "I'm going to go see, and I'll be right back." Before anyone could say anything - though Franklin did at least open his mouth for just a moment - she'd whipped the front door back open and gone out, pulling it shut behind her.

Kathy and Herb were looking intently at one another, both hands still clasped under the corner of the dining room table, and I could hear Smiles growling again



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outside. Killer was barking his stupid little walnut of a brain out. No one noticed as I slipped in perfect silence out the French doors onto the back porch. I may be a lumbering fat-ass but any vampire worth his salt at least knows his way around some gauzy curtains and a simple door latch.

The back yard was silent for a moment when I stepped outside – Killer ceased his yapping just long enough to look at me, and Smiles' growl stopped as soon as I was in his presence again. For those few seconds I closed my eyes and opened my ears and let my senses roll out across the yard, then over the fence and into the adjacent lots, on out across the neighborhood. I could hear televisions in several houses, a cough that sounded like it wouldn't get better anytime soon – had to be Old Lady Jenkins, the one with all the in-home care – a couple of radios tuned to a local call-in request show.

I could hear soft footsteps on grass, someone shifting their feet back and forth.

I could hear shuffling, shoes scuffing against asphalt as though a drunken man were staggering down the street.

And another.

And another.

Very softly, I could hear Mary Lou praying under her breath.

I opened my eyes, and the night was gone. Darkness is no enemy of mine, and these old eyes can slice right through it. Smiles was watching me, waiting patiently for a command. I signaled him to stay and went out the gate to the front yard.

Mary Lou was standing at the curb, on the grass, looking one way and then another and shifting her weight between her feet. Her lips were moving but I don't think

she was exactly in charge of what was coming out. Fight or flight is not an instinct many people are really at home with anymore in their insulated little lives.

I strode up and cleared my throat from about six feet back. Mary Lou whipped around with wide eyes, took a moment to recognize me, then turned back and looked mutely up the street. I took two more steps to stand beside her, and followed her gaze.

Three corpses in their one-time Sunday best were staggering mindlessly in small circles in the middle of the street. They were probably thirty, maybe forty feet away. If they had noticed us yet they didn't have much in the way of showing it. They just turned and turned again, arms stiff by their sides, hands clenching and unclenching reflexively.

You'll not mind I don't describe their faces.

"Whu..." Mary Lou was outside the mind of someone who could form words for the moment.

It is said that there are stranger things in heaven and earth, et cetera, and they ain't kidding. I know the world holds some esoteric and arcane shit because I'm one of those things myself but I had never seen the dead literally walk. I mean, we've all seen the movies, right? I have, anyway. Shit, for a solid three decades all I had to watch at night were old movies on UHF channels. These fellas weren't exactly *Night of the Living Dead* and weren't exactly *Frankenstein*. No one could confuse them for a mutant or a junkie on a bad batch. They were dead things, plain and simple, walking around. They did not moan, they did not hiss or howl, they just turned in slow circles, around and around, their eyes locked in front of them.

"Go inside," I said to Mary, very softly. "Just go inside. Lock the

door behind you."

She still wasn't very capable of listening and just stood there. I started to get antsy. Surely they would notice us eventually, right? Surely they would sense we were here: smell us or hear us or see us or something. They were dead, yeah, but in the movies that's always how it happens, right? Someone screams and then the zombies all stop what they're doing, turn slowly and charge. I really didn't want to be in that scene of the movie. I always hated those parts the worst, when some idiot loses their shit and gets everyone else killed.

I put my hand around Mary Lou's chin and turned her head so that she looked me in the eye. With all the force of personality I could muster, I drilled into her mind with my own and said, very distinctly, "Go inside and lock the door and let no one in or out." There's a reason why the Count always gets what he wants when he's alone with somebody in the vampire flicks. Mary foggily turned around and started stumbling back towards her front door.

I watched her go, checking over my shoulder to see if the three walkers up the road had heard us or anything, and as she neared the front door she reached for the knob. The door opened before she got there, though, and Franklin Not Frank poked his head out.

"EVERYTHING OKAY OUT HERE?" he called to me, unnecessarily loudly. He was scared and wanted to demonstrate to everyone that everything was precisely OK out here.

I heard the scuffling in the street stop, and turned around to look. None of the walkers were looking at me, but they had turned towards the house, and the front door, and the source of the shout. They started shuffling towards the

house and their stiff arms started to twitch.

I will kill that man before they do, I swear to God, I thought. What I said, however, was yelled over my shoulder. "Get her in there and shut that fucking door!"



CONTRIBUTORS

Richard Ong is a renaissance man whose colorful career spans from working in the engineering sciences and information technology to short story writing, poetry, photography and painting. At the moment, he is engaged in writing a screenplay for an independent action film company in California. Richard currently resides in his cluttered, musty bedroom office in Scarborough, ON, Canada.

Michael G. Williams is a native of the mountains of Western North Carolina and has lived in the Triangle area since 1992. He believes traditional publishers have to make one major psychological shift to survive the explosion of self-publishing and ebooks: publishers must transition from acting as gatekeepers to acting as guides. In an era in which anyone can produce anything and put it up on the Kindle store traditional publishers must begin to market themselves to compatible authors rather than the other way around, offering their expertise and market access to help creators make their work better and more widely recognized. In addition to writing almost exclusively in first-person about vampires, private investigators, magic and hackers who live on the moon, Michael is also an avid runner, walker and bicyclist, player of tabletop roleplaying games, reader of books, decade-long participant in National Novel Writing Month (www.nanowrimo.org) and he occasionally reviews comic books as Klarion at www.pinkkryptonite.com. The character of Withrow was created for a game in 1998 and Michael has been writing him ever since. Michael can be reached at michaelgwilliams@gmail.com. Visit www.robustm-cmanlypants.org/perishables for information on obtaining the rest of *Perishables*.

Phil Juliano lives in Minneapolis, which may or may not be the Asheville of the ice-fishing and indoor-mall-water-park set.

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird
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School is always a good-dream bad-dream. I can't find my schedule. I can't pull up my pants. I can't get to class on time. I don't know anyone in my class and I can't remember anything about the subject. Halfway through, I'd like to go home, but the traffic of other students mires my feet in an agonizingly slow linoleum slog down hallways that all look alike and jut at architecturally unsound angles. I want to go home, I think, but where is home? Is it my parents' old house, long sold so that they could retire to warmer climes? Is it a beach house full of memories of fine sunny days? Is it my own first apartment, or first purchased house, or is it the house I live in right now, with my family and my current life? Strange how I can't grasp all that and just show up to class on time.

MEH - Chapel Hill

Final Tidbits: We're thrilled by the response to the Laine Cunningham Novel Award. So many of you are out there really working at the writing game! Beach reading - get your child or grandparent a copy of *Tree*, published by PencilPoint Mountain (www.pencilpointmountain.com), an imprint of The Blotter Magazine, Inc. What is an imprint? It's what happens to your right cheekbone when you are a wise-ass to Evander Holyfield. Need karma-reparations? Make a donation to The Blotter (www.blotterrag.com.) Buy a Blotter t-shirt while you're there, we're almost out and want to place another merch order. And, as always, visit your local independent bookstore, faithful to a fault and with plenty of air-conditioning! Stop spinning in circles, asking, "Where have I seen that girl in 'Hunger Games' before, or was it something I misremember in a dream?" Open a book, turn on the local jazz station, grab a handful of pistachios, call your Dad - there's some concern about your car title, and give someone you like a kiss, they deserve it, and if they don't, well, you do. Got it? Good!

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