

A classical painting depicting Cupid, a winged cherub, in a lush tropical landscape. Cupid is shown in the lower-left foreground, holding a bow and arrow, looking towards the right. He has a quiver of arrows on his back. The background features a river, palm trees, a red parrot perched on a branch, and distant mountains under a cloudy sky. The overall style is reminiscent of 18th-century European art.

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“Expectations”

You know what I’ve noticed? We ask a lot from our writing. That which was once in our heads, pinballing around to get out, put to paper with precision and emotion and complexity and clarity. Scribbling the best we know how. We expect more from our creation than we do from ourselves.

And, therefore, it isn’t easy to be happy with what we’ve accomplished. There is always some other bridge we have to cross. Some other hurdle. Draft finished? Needs revising. Do it. *Do it*. And having revised as much as you are able or willing, it’s time to find someone else to read your work. Someone who you know (hope against hope!) will tell you honestly (really?) what their thoughts are about it. Not just the jots-and-tittles of grammar and punctuation – don’t get me wrong, these are imperative – but the blunt truth of plot and narrative and style and so on. Where does it ride off the rails. What still remains in your head, yet needs to be on the page?

Was that asking too much to just want to be happy about it for a minute? Feel the warm green grass beyond the finish line under your bare feet? Looking in the mirror and smiling at what you’ve accomplished. Something tangible, and real. Not perfect – no. But still... Just to appreciate it.

Apparently, yes. It is too much to be happy. No, I don’t know why this is so. There’s something a little bit off about being a writer, a poet, a playwright.

We can argue about that last statement until the cows come home, and someday we will, but not right now. I want to talk about the happiness thing.

Anyhow, we shared our thing with someone else. In search of a particular and peculiar validation we are unable to give ourselves.

And then we submit.

I think I’m not saying anything new here. I’m not offering one idea you haven’t already heard from someone else or told yourself. That submission is part of a goal. That acceptance through submission is the endgame. Yes, it is difficult to be self-satisfied. Important to value being in the moment, rather than keeping up the momentum. Only natural to let someone judge your work based on simple merit – something resembling an equation of completeness plus our own effort to do well divided

by the right time and place equaling, *what?* And to let this new thing, or even this old thing, be...criticized by someone else, is enormous. Full of trauma, or at least drama. (Are these words etymologically entwined? I wonder.)

There are not very fine lines between “he’s a smart fellow” and “hey, smart guy” and, finally, “you’re a real smart-ass.” Wise man and wiseguy. Knowledgeable and know-it-all. Or is it a slippery slope? No, a slippery slope implies that you are falling, or at least at risk of falling. Some kind of inadvertent action, tumbling out of control from one painful-looking bump to another. The fine line, on the other hand, is just there. Like if you reached out your hand, you could almost touch it, anytime you want. And then you’re past it. And there’s another, perhaps even finer line there, somewhere. Fine lines are like razors – you can touch them, step on them, wander over them, but should you?

My frequent not-so-very-fine line is that crack in the pavement between *what I said* and *what I meant to say*. (In other words, I apologize a lot.) So, smart guy, what did you mean to say? To not give into the social insistence on immediately revealing everything, how much it means to us, what a sacrifice it was to bring into the world. Just be happy about it. Enjoy just being creative.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t think that’s a lot to ask of ourselves. Readership is an artificially created reef for us to founder on. Which is an odd position for an editor to take, yes?

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

get a hold on you, believe

“Echoes”

by Sean Padraic McCarthy

Eric Concord watched for movements in the kitchen. He raised his axe high above his head, hesitated a moment, and then he swung. The log split immediately in two as he connected, both sides flying in different directions, and the sound of the crack seemed to resonate inside the radio on the pavement. Breaking the voice of the DJ. Splitting it, too. As if the sound had traveled into the radio, splintering it into a hundred different voices, trapped inside, and all talking at once. There just for a second and then gone. And then it was just the DJ again. He had Jethro Tull coming up, he said. A threefer. Threefer Thursday.

Eric loved classic rock. Music of his day. He had never wavered, moved on, not with music, not with the years, not with the decades. Something wasn't broke, no need to fix it. After about 1983, he figured, all music had begun to suck. Nothing left but an occasional weak outing from The Who, and the remnants of Led Zeppelin. A Rush song or two. That may have been the last holdout year, he figured, and barely one at that.

Now it was almost dark, early December, a few weeks until Christmas. The late autumn dusk seemed to gather, or spread, more than fall. It built and then smothered, quickly, everything dark. There was a chill to the air, but Eric only wore a gray sweatshirt, cut off

the sleeves, faded jeans flecked with white paint, and a red bandana. He liked the feel of the bandana, tight around his head.

The radio, a little black boombox, also splattered with white paint, was set far enough away so that it would be safe from flying pieces of wood. The antennae had broken once, back in the late nineties, but Eric had fixed it himself. He was good at fixing things. Small things. Now, this time of day, he was tired, but he could keep moving on adrenaline alone. Always had been able to. He worked as the foreman at a sheet metal shop in the city next door, and he had just begun to wonder who exactly was here during the day, while he was gone. Who was visiting. He had no concrete evidence, but there were other ways to tell. He could sense it. Smell it. Testosterone lingered like that, he thought. It was funny that way.

He picked up another log and placed it on the hacked off tree stump he used for a cutting block. He raised the axe. Took another swing.

A shadow passed by the kitchen window again. Sheila, his wife, and the boy, now nearly nine years old, were in there. The house was high above the back driveway, and there was a flight of fourteen concrete steps leading to the back door, and a gray metal storm door that had been there as long as Eric

could remember. He remembered a lot of things. He remembered his oldest brother, Teddy, tumbling down those stairs. Fresh from the war in Vietnam, well over forty years ago now. And Eric's father, built like a wall of solid granite, muscles and belly bulging beneath his white T-shirt, thick black rimmed glasses and empty eyes, standing at the top of those stairs and watching Teddy complete his fall before he shut the door. Yes, the house had a lot of memories. And it was the only home Eric had ever known.

Eric had only been four when Teddy left for the war, so he didn't remember that much, but he remembered him coming back. They had a big party. *Welcome Home* banners, and balloons tied to the oak trees in the front yard. He remembered his father grilling hot dogs on the cinderblock barbecue out back, and cold cans of Schlitz and Coca Cola. And he remembered Teddy, just sort of sitting there, looking around, smoking a cigarette. The grass bright green, and Teddy's hair still short. Then within an hour, Teddy had stood up in front of the whole neighborhood, dropped his drawers, and pissed on the lawn, muttering "Fuck America" before he sauntered up the back stairs. Eric's father had just watched him, smoking, and it was later that evening, everyone gone, that he threw Teddy out the door and down the stairs. Called him a coward, and a communist, and told him not to come back.

Teddy did come back though, from time to time, over the years. Homeless and living on the streets,

addicted. He'd show up filthy, face red and weathered and hardened, still in his big green army jacket, his hair thinning now, and Eric's mother would plead with his father to at least give him something to eat, and then once the old man had said okay, and put a bowl of dog food out on the back stairs. Alpo. Alpo for Teddy, and Teddy was a hero.

Eric himself had never joined the service. He hadn't gone to college either as college probably would have meant he would have had to leave this house, even if temporarily, and he couldn't leave this house. Couldn't do that to it. Never. This house needed a family. This house *always* needed a family. The halls, the upstairs, the kitchen, the cellar, the dark front room with just one window. The front door vestibule where Eric's little league bat still leaned against the wall, just above his glove, as if he had just returned from a game an hour ago and not over forty years ago. The wallpaper in the front room was the same—faded apples and pears, green leaves on their stems—and Eric had ordered Sheila not to touch it, the same for the sunken couch in the room off the kitchen, the same for his mother's extensive salt and pepper shaker collection in the kitchen. Elephants, fat chefs, kissing yodelers, even one of Ron and Nancy Reagan. There were over a hundred of them, and everyone liked them right where they were.

He would still see his parents, from time to time, from the corner of his eye. His father, sitting up on his bed, just in his boxers, the sin-

gle low watt yellow bulb above him, casting the rest of the room in shadows. Casting the faded picture of the Blessed Mother on the wall behind him, in shadows. It was all shadows. The whole house was shadows. Echoes. And Teddy, finally welcome back, still filthy from the street, was in there sometimes, too.

After Eric's parents had given him the house and moved to Florida, the next family, long before Sheila and her son, to live in the house with him had been Gina Travoli. Gina had been a knockout. Thin with square shoulders, and a rack that belonged in bikini posters on the bedroom wall. High eighties hair. She and Eric did a lot of cocaine, staying up late, sometimes watching pornos, and Gina had always been willing to experiment, to try anything they saw in the movies, and they had some great sex. Kinky is as kinky does.

But then some of the salt shakers began to move. The chefs were where the lion and lioness should be. And the two naked little cherubs were suddenly on the windowsill, when they and the Sea Captain and First Mate had always been above the stove. Always. Gina denied this of course, said she didn't move them, but then she had started to look at a couple of his friends a little funny, like they had a secret. And then he swore he heard her whispering. And then it just happened.

One minute, she was telling him to fuck off, lighting a cigarette and walking away. And then next minute, she was on the floor. Holding the side of her face, and

crying. And then she was crawling away, but no one should crawl. He hated to see her crawl. She left, and went to live with her sister for a few weeks, but he talked her into coming back, and then it just happened again. He couldn't put his finger on why, but there was something with the show they were watching on television, *Married with Children*. Kelly Bundy made a joke about having sex with some guy, and Gina started to laugh, and he understood then that there was something between them. Some kind of secret. And then he smashed the television. Eric didn't see her again after that, and then the house was empty. He had hated it when the house was empty. Just the fleeting shadows, every time he turned a corner, and all the whispering. But then, after a few months, Bacardi McAlary, his childhood friend from down the street, moved in with Ed Creighton. The Cowardly Lion.

There were parties after that. A lot of parties. Booze, chicks, and all-night cocaine. Bacardi slept in the middle room upstairs, the room that had been Eric's parents. Eric couldn't sleep in that room as it didn't feel right. If he slept in it himself, he might fracture the past. He wasn't sure why that was, but he knew it to be true. So he rented the room to Bacardi with the condition that he not remove the picture of the Blessed Mother from the wall. The Blessed Mother could not be removed.

Eric took off the bandana and wiped his forehead. The yard was disappearing in the darkness, the late autumn shadows creeping from

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the woods, and he could see his breath. He placed another log on the stump. Swung. The lights in the kitchen window were warm and yellow, but he could no longer see anyone in the window. And the windows in the other rooms, the dark rooms, had candles going in them. Christmas candles. Eric took a deep breath, and then the station on the radio suddenly clipped off, going haywire, racing voices as if someone was spinning the dial, and a forest of static. And then more voices.

The Cowardly Lion hadn't been a bad guy, and Eric had really liked him before he moved in. He was a good shit. Friendly and thoughtful and full of hugs whenever they stayed up late doing coke. But then the longer he stayed, the more he looked like him, the Lion.

"Fuckin...fuckin...dude," the Lion would say, looking at Eric from beneath those heavy, happy, high as a kite, eyelids, and opening his arms, "Come on. Come on. I got ya." It could be two a.m., three, four. Sometimes, the sun might even be rising out the back window, above the stone steps, and small red garage. The Lion would get you in a squeeze, and sometimes he wouldn't let you go for three or four minutes at a time, and Eric liked that. The Lion would talk about love, and friendship, and brotherhood and family. A lot of laughing, smiles, and sometimes tears. It was the way with cocaine, everybody loved everybody until they started coming down. The Lion's funds for coke started running low, though, and then he started breaking into crystal meth.

Clawing at his skin, clawing at the air. And then one day when he woke in the late afternoon on a Saturday or Sunday, shuffled by and started the coffee maker, and Eric could have sworn he turned and looked at him, and said "Courage." And then enough was enough. He knew the Lion had to go.

Eric upped the rent, and the Lion already owed him as it was, and then Eric laid in on the line. "Out," he said, "Just get out. Get out of my house."

He didn't argue. He was just gone.

Now, Eric wondered if he should have put up cameras. People had cameras in their homes these days. Some just outside for surveillance, watching for burglars, but others tucked high up in corners of halls and kitchens. And bedrooms. Everybody watching everybody on a closed circuit. But Eric supposed he couldn't afford cameras like that. He tried to picture Sheila sometimes though, when he wasn't with her. Picture her changing into lingerie, something sexy, and always texting on that phone.

He had walked in on her, sitting up in their bed, and on that phone, just a few days before, and she had jumped, startled. Her face had dropped a bit. "I didn't know you were home. I didn't hear you come in."

And that had been good. Because he had tried to be quiet. He didn't want her to hear him come in, but the whispers had followed him upstairs, only stopping each time he himself halted a step,

and he had been afraid she may have heard them. But apparently, she had not. "I didn't hear you up here, either," he said.

She put her phone down on the bed. "You're home early."

"Yah," he said. He sniffed the air a bit, subtly. Nothing. Just a trace of the candle she sometimes lit on the bureau. "We pushed out so much product on Wednesday—filled all the orders for the week—that the boss let us go early. Go enjoy the day, he said.

"That was nice of him," she said.

He looked about the room. The window was open a bit, but the closet door was shut tight. He walked over and opened it, feeling her eyes on him as he did. The clothes were mostly hers, just a few of his shirts he wore out for occasions, and his suit. He didn't have much fancy clothes, not much that needed to be hung. The floor was covered in shoes, some of them dusty. All women's. There was nothing else in there, but a Home Goods bag on the floor with some curtains in it that she said she was going to return. Nothing else.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

He hesitated, took a shallow breath. "I had a Patriots hat. A baseball hat. One of the Superbowl ones. I don't know where I put it." He turned and looked at her. "I thought it might be in here."

It was, he remembered, after the Lion moved out that came the happiest of times. Because Danny Hurley moved in.

Right from the beginning, Danny was a match for Eric, and a match for the house. Eric couldn't quite put his finger on why that was. But it was something. Eric supposed he would've kicked Bacardi out, too, along with the Lion back then, so he and Danny could be alone, but he couldn't do that because Eric and Danny could never make mortgage. Not back then, not their own.

Danny and Eric had hung in the same crowd, but not until after high school, and it wasn't until he moved in, that it all hit Eric—he had never known anything like him. They would fish and canoe and bowl and go to Red Sox games, the Patriots, drink beer, and watch T.V. Then lift weights in the cellar. They also played wiffleball games in the back yard—if you hit the ball through the uprights that Eric's father had built for him in high school to practice kicking field goals—it was an automatic home run. And so was Danny. An automatic home run. They swapped presents on Christmas, and did special things for each other on their birthdays, and life had been good until Mark interfered. And Mark had ruined everything.

Mark was a big kid. Long, shaggy dark hair, and steely blue eyes. Had been an athlete in high school. He had hung in the same crowd with them, too, came over for the parties, and as long as he went home at the end of the night, that was fine. But then he stopped going home. Usually, he'd come over on Friday, leaving late Sunday night. But then it turned into arriving on Thursday, sometimes even Wednesday, leaving Monday. And

some weeks he didn't leave at all. And the more time he spent with Danny, the less time Danny spent with Eric. And that could not fly, no siree Bob.

Eric would sometimes stand outside Danny's bedroom, silent as a church mouse, when he knew Danny was in there, an ear to the door. Listening for voices. Listening for breathing. Sometimes, Danny would be on the phone, his voice muffled and distant, and sometimes he would be just moving about the room. And other times, he might just be snoring. Eric took the most pleasure in listening to him breathing because that meant he was at peace. And Eric wanted to be there with him, at peace. The problem was, he couldn't be in the room there with him, not all the time. At least not at first. Not until he learned to float.

The first time he floated, he had little control of the direction he was going. He just hovered beneath the ceiling, and he could see himself, lying below himself him on the bed. Completely still, eyes locked open. Stripped down to nothing, and the army helmet that had been his brother's. But then, once he learned control it, he could move about more. See other things, other people. He had floated into the bathroom once, and saw Bacardi standing there at the toilet, taking a leak, and then Eric floated upstairs to Danny's room, and watched Danny sit on the edge of the bed, reading a book and smoking a cigarette, and then he got down on the floor, his own little radio going, and did some sit ups. Stopping every minute or so

himself, and staring at the ceiling, resting. Eric believed that was when they reached their communion in that moment, him staring down at Danny, and Danny staring up, and maybe not seeing him, but somehow sensing he was there. And Eric wanted to anchor himself, swim down there and hold him, even if Danny didn't know he was there. It was a love thing. Untainted and pure, but not a gay love. Eric didn't do gay—no, sir—but he loved Danny like he had never loved anyone else. And Danny loved him, he was sure of it.

At first, he, Danny and Mark would all just drink beers together in the back yard, maybe sitting on the driveway, but then they would disappear without telling Eric. Maybe hit the pub, or go out fishing by themselves in the canoe. It got too be too much. Way too much. And Eric found himself, leaving his body, floating, more and more, going in search of them. Up and down the street, and sometimes down to the river. But never too far. He was afraid what might happen if he went too far. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to get back. So if he had to actually physically leave the neighborhood, he took his pickup, the Blue Path Finder. Going in and out of the local watering holes, dive bars and pubs, looking, and once even checking with the clerk of the local motel, to see if they had signed in, his body feeling hollow. They hadn't been at the motel though, and the one time he found them at a restaurant, there had been a scene. Eric had rushed in, and he had started to cry, slid in beside Danny, demanded to know what was hap-

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pening to them.

Mark had just looked at him, those ice blue eyes, and then right before he sipped his beer, he had said, "What? Do you want to fuck him?"

Eric had taken the pitcher and tossed it at Mark, and then he bolted out of there. He spent the night in the little shed, out behind the house, laying on the wooden floor, pine needles sticking to his back and arms, staring at the ceiling, and listening for songs from the woods. Listening for the cold.

And then that was that, for two weeks or so. Mark didn't come around for a while, and things had almost got back to normal, except Danny still wasn't spending time with him, and he still really wasn't talking to him. Yes's and no's, and grunts about groceries, work. And Eric knew in his heart that anything he said or did, was probably being repeated. To Mark.

It had all ended a week or so later. He had a feeling it would.

Danny had been gone when Eric had got home from work. And so had Bacardi. And after showering and putting on some cologne, Eric had gone down to the 1-2-3 Pub, and drank a thousand beers.

When he pulled into the back driveway, close to one a.m., Bacardi's car was back in the driveway. As was Danny's. As was Mark's.

Eric started up the stairs, grabbing the pipe rail to steady his balance, and he stopped inside the small, dark back hallway.

And he could hear them. In the kitchen. Talking.

"Fucking wacko told me he's

been having out of body experiences," said Danny.

Mark laughed, loud and exaggerated, his voice shaking the house, shaking Eric's thoughts. "You're shitting me?! Where's he go?!"

Eric's senses were on fire. Fine tuned. He heard Danny exhale his cigarette smoke. He wanted to leave, to go in there, above them, take it all in, but he was too drunk, and couldn't concentrate; it wouldn't work. Danny exhaled again.

"He says he floats."

"You're shitting me," Mark said again.

"I shit you not," said Danny. "Floats."

"Wow," Mark said. And then there was silence, and then he was laughing again.

And then he heard Danny say, quietly, "He's insane."

Eric couldn't see straight then. Everything was red, everything was pulsing, his temples, his fingers, his heart about to come out of his chest. His movements, no longer his own. He banged open the door and stormed into the kitchen.

Bacardi and Danny jumped. But Mark—who was facing away from him, sitting at the kitchen table, the Seamstress and Shoe Maker Salt and Pepper Shakers on the table in front of him—just turned slowly, and looked Eric up and down.

"Out," Eric said, "Everybody Out!"

Nobody moved at first. Bacardi was just staring at the table, looking like someone needed to wipe that grin off his face, and

Danny just took a drag on his cigarette, and snubbed it out. Mark was still staring at him. And then Mark and Danny both stood.

"Let's go," Mark said to him. "We'll take my car," and then Mark started doing that two-step, walk on the tips of his toes, walk of his, across the kitchen.

"No, he stays," Eric said, gesturing at Danny. "Just you."

Mark stopped, looked at him, straight lipped, but his eyes were smiling, laughing, like they sometimes did when he believed he was smarter than you, or had one up on you. "Do you own him? Just because you can float around above people, it doesn't mean you own them."

And then Eric charged him.

Mark went backwards and hit the table, the table sliding, Eric on top of him, sending beer bottles scattering, but Mark was strong enough to push Eric off him, and start swinging. Eric still couldn't remember exactly what happened next. There was heat, and breathing, and strength and resistance and red, the connection of fists on flesh, and fists on bone, and Danny was shouting, grabbing for him, grabbing for Mark, and trying to get between them, and then they were in the back hallway, and then down the back cement stairs. Sliding on the ice as they hit the driveway.

Eric banged his head on the tar, and when he looked up he could feel the blood trickling over his eye. Mark had already gained his feet, and he was standing, hands on his hips, catching his breath. He was bleeding, too. His

lips, his nose. He pointed.

“You,” he said, “are fucking nuts. You’re a lunatic.”

Eric still hadn’t stood. “Out,” he said again. “Out. Get off of my property.”

“Gladly,” Mark said. “You won’t see me again, you fucking nut job.”

And then he was gone. As was Danny. Bacardi had disappeared upstairs, shut the door to his room. Eric had gone back to the kitchen, the house hollow and empty and ringing all around him, and he stuck his head, his face, under the kitchen faucet to rinse away all the blood. He could feel his father as he did, eyes staring through those thick glasses, dragging on and exhaling his cigarette. And then he was speaking. “Don’t tell me you’ve turned into a little pussy, Eric. Jesus Christ, are you going to let that cock sucker bloody you up in your own home? In my home?” And then he heard his mother, and she was whispering and soothing, and then she was crying. Someone shouted for her to shut up, and then there was more arguing, and the voice of his brother, drunken, announcing he was home. And then everybody was talking at once, and Eric was on the floor, burying his head in his arms, crying and shuddering, and trying hard to breathe.

The next day he took a ride to Nantasket Beach and by the time he got home, Danny was gone, as were all his things. And following day, there was a note from Bacardi, giving him a week’s notice, but letting him know, that he was going, too.

That winter was darkest he remembered, and seemed to go on forever. Ice built up on the driveway and on the back stairs but with nobody coming or going except Eric, there was no need to do anything about the ice. In fact, some days he wished the entire house might be encased his ice, with him still inside. Frozen in time. And on some days he shut the heat off completely, and on those days, he slept in the back room with the pot-bellied wood stove, and he would lay on the floor and watch the flames. The whispers would sometimes come through the floor, come from the cellar, and he knew the spirits down there were starting to get cold, and were rising up from the dirt. He wouldn’t leave his body, wouldn’t float—he was afraid of where he might end up—and he wouldn’t go upstairs. He was afraid to go upstairs, afraid to see his father sitting there, shirtless, on the edge of bed. Asking him what happened to his family. Asking him What...The...Fuck...

.Happened...To...His Family?

Why did they go Eric?

Sometimes he would go to the foot of the stairs, and then his father would start calling down to him. “Eric! Eric! Get your little ass up here!” But Eric never went.

He tried to call Danny several times, left messages with his folks, but Danny never returned his calls. Then sometime around early spring, he heard through Grimer at the ABC Pub that Danny had met a woman. Some person about fifteen years older, with something like six hundred kids, and that he had got married. A wedding ceremony on a

small island off the coast of North Carolina somewhere. And Eric was not invited.

That winter had turned into a long spring and summer, a lot of long walks in the woods, listening to the words and studying the trees, the earth—he didn’t want to be alone in the house much anymore, and the house didn’t want him there alone, he knew—and it was close to a year after that that he had met Sheila at the supermarket in the pasta aisle. He had been watching her from behind—she had a beautiful behind—for the better part of three aisles, and he had just been waiting for the right moment. She wore no ring, and he had seen her glance his way, and knew she would never say no. And the house had been empty far too long.

He had waited until her cart was at a slight angle, and then moving slowly forward, his head turned as he pretended to peruse the aisle, he went smashing into it. Sheila jumped, and Eric smiled, immediately apologizing. “Oh, Jeez,” he said, an open palm to the air, “I am so sorry. I didn’t even see you there. I am such a klutz. You’d think I just got my driver’s license yesterday, for crying out loud. I didn’t break anything, did I?”

Their first date was the following Saturday—Eric took her to see a movie called *The Black Swan* which he didn’t understand—and after they stopped at the ABC Pub for a few drinks. He kissed her that night, but he didn’t try to take her home. And then the following morning he sent her a dozen roses, and she moved in a month later. And along with her came her little

son, a toddler named Jeffrey.

Eric had tried his hardest to like the little boy, to love him, to play with him and be patient with him, but he wasn't sure about the house, how it felt. Jeffrey wrote on the walls sometimes with magic markers—and then Eric took all the markers away—and he sometimes disappeared with some of the salt and pepper shakers, playing with them in the front room with the woven, oval rug, and Eric couldn't abide by that. He didn't lose his temper on these occasions, not exactly, but he did explain to Sheila, quietly, that playing with the salt and pepper shakers could not be allowed—they were worth like tons of money, he told her—and the only way Jeffrey would learn was if he spanked him with the hairbrush. Sheila said absolutely not the first time, but then after she threatened Jeffrey on several more occasions, and the boy still didn't listen, she started to cry and gave in. Eric said he would take the boy to the cellar for the spanking, so Sheila wouldn't have to hear, and wouldn't have to see. Beneath the dangling yellow light bulb, he lay the boy on the weight bench, and then he leaned over to whisper to him, "I love you Jeffrey, you are my son now, you are my family, and I want you to know how much this hurts me." The little boy looked back up at Eric with scared, pleading eyes, and then Eric, too, started to cry, and he knew he couldn't do it.

He said nothing to Sheila upstairs, but as soon as the boy scurried by, she knew he hadn't done it, and she hugged Eric, and

started to cry, too. And then she was kissing him. Eric moved his lips about over hers, but the feeling was hollow, and it was almost as if their mouths could open so wide, that their souls would slip out, one mouth into the other, and then they would be one. He wanted to be one.

"Maybe," she whispered, "I've been a bad girl."

He pulled back and looked at her. Her eyes were half shut staring up at him.

"Maybe," she said. "I need you to spank me."

A bad girl. Now on the radio. Rush's song "Tom Sawyer" came on. *A modern day warrior, mean, mean stride. . . .*

He brought the axe down again.

The axe went all the way through the chopping log, hitting the concrete below, and sending off sparks. The tool vibrated in his hands, and the noise, the ringing, echoed out through the neighborhood. Shutting his eyes, he could see inside the house, see inside the kitchen. Sheila, her bottom getting a little wider, moving slowly about, preparing dinner, Jeffrey at the table, doing his homework. Struggling with math, struggling with everything. And so many souls passing by, so many, and neither one being able to see, or hear, them. Why was Eric the only one? The only one who could remove himself from his body and be with them?

He had to believe there was a way to make them see. A way to take them with him.

He thought about the testos-

terone smell again. The way it lingered in the air, and he knew Jeffrey was too young to produce that much testosterone—Eric had learned all about it in way back in high school health class. The teacher, Mrs. Treet, had blonde hair, down to her shoulders, and glasses, and she often wore skirts, untucked blouses. She would sit on a stool in front of the class, her legs crossed, and teach, sometimes gazing down at the book, or pamphlet, and sometimes going to the board to list forms of birth control and talk about sperm. And testosterone. Like it was all natural talk. And Eric, a starting offensive tackle on the varsity football team, as well as the kicker, had stayed after class once, requesting extra help, and imagining what would happen once he was left alone in the classroom with her, a woman who wanted to talk about things like that. But nothing had happened. She had given him a quiz review sheet, and he had sat in his desk and stared, and then after a half hour or so, she had looked at her watch and said she had to go. And then Eric had stood in front of the gymnasium doors and watched her walk to her car, and that was that. But he had learned in that class. She had taught him things. He knew about girls. Women. And how they reacted to testosterone.

So who was stopping by the house? His house. And what could the walls and spirits be seeing that he could not? And who was she being bad with. She had been on her phone again more often than not lately, texting. Eric hated texting, and he hated the new phones.

Hated social media—most of the world's problems started with social media. Old boyfriends and girlfriends, finding each other. And fucking. He had heard her watching a T.V. show about it before. A morning talk show, while he was in the kitchen, making coffee. He had asked her whom she was texting so much, and she had said her friend Lisa—Lisa was trouble—and her sister Debbie. Her sister Lynn. They were trouble, too. And her parents. She said she texted her parents, but Eric didn't believe that. Who texted their parents? And whose parents even knew how to text?

Eric's own parents had passed before the whole cellphone thing exploded. His father had gone first. Down in Florida. His heart had exploded. Eric should've been there. But there was no way to know it was going to happen, that it was coming. His father's voice had always sounded like a low sort of growl, and Eric had heard the growl that night in his room. Gruff from decades of cigarettes. It had awoken him from his sleep. It came through the walls, and Eric had opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, and he knew the old man was dead. The call came a half hour later. And they had buried him three days after that, flown him back up to the plot, the cemetery, here in town. Eric had wondered if the old man might rise, but he did not—they just lowered him into the cold winter earth, the backhoe waiting about forty yards away, and then his mother began to wither. Getting smaller and smaller, looking like an elderly elf. Within half a year, her skin a full nicotine

yellow from smoking since she was eleven years old herself, she looked as if just a brief gust of wind might take her away. And then she was dead.

Dead.

But what was dead, anyway? He wondered. He knew it wasn't nothingness, because if it was, he wouldn't hear them whispering. Sometimes crying. Sometimes laughing. At him. The dead could torment you if you didn't do the right thing. Didn't do what you were told. If you did the wrong thing. Why did so many people do the wrong thing?

Shadows passed the window again. They were all just shadows, weren't they? The living and the dead. There really was no difference. Shadows of who they had been days and years before. A car drove by and beeped, and Eric, his eyes down, chin lowered, gave a high, opened hand wave. He didn't know who it was, but it was someone who knew him. Someone that liked him.

But that was impossible. Because everyone was gone.

Back in the day, when they were kids, you could always just walk down the street, or out to the baseball field behind Bacardi's house, and find someone to talk to. Hang with. Now there was no-one.

Eric put another log on the stump on the driveway, and took another swing, but dark had nearly completely settled in now. So fast. This time of year. And nothing ahead but winter. Darkness and cold. He swung again, missed. The blade sticking into the tree stump.

He heard the whispering then. Coming from the house, he thought. Coming from the cellar. The bulkhead door lifted just slightly, and then fell back in place, rattling as it did. And then the voice. A girl's voice. A woman's. Calling his name. Eric looked towards the backyard. The skeletal trees at the edge of the woods, and moon rising above. He tried to clear his head. But he could still hear the whispering. It sounded like Gina.

He took his axe and went to the bulkhead, and quietly lifted the door. Inside was dark, and everything smelled of dust. The dirt floor beneath his feet. He walked slowly forward, his hand outstretched, reaching for the lightbulb string. "You'll find it," the voice said. "You always find it."

She was right. He was always good at finding his way about in the dark. Be it in the air or on the ground. He had a sixth sense.

"I miss you Eric," the voice said. "Do you miss me? Come to me. Come in me."

Eric reached forward again and caught hold of the string. He pulled it twice with a click, and room was immediately lit in the dull yellow light. Boxes, and rolled carpets, and stacked Christmas decorations. A still assembled fake tree. The enormous oil tank which had always reminded him of an elephant when he was small. And Gina, sitting on the weight bench, in nothing but her bra and panties, her hands in her lap and her knees pressed together. Still so beautiful. She smiled at him, and he wondered if she were dead.

He glanced around quick again

to make sure they were alone. And they were. The punching bag hanging from the ceiling, his old football helmet, a poster of the Saint Pauli Girl on the far wall, stacks of empty beer cans waiting to be returned. And a few boxes of books his mother had moved down here from the old den years ago. Eric rested the head of the axe against the cellar floor. "I knew you'd come back," he said. "How'd you get in?"

But now when she opened her mouth to speak, no words came out, none that he could hear. An invisible wall between them. But she had mouthed three words, he was almost sure of it. "I...never...left." And that was the truth, wasn't it? Nobody ever left, nobody ever was gone. Everything echoed. "And you know that, Eric."

He shut his eyes for a moment, and then when he opened them again, though, she was just that. She was gone. The weight bench was empty.

His father's voice came from behind him then. "She's sucking his cock, Eric. You married the woman, and she's sucking *his* cock. In your house. Another man in your house."

And she's going to leave you.

Eric spun around but there was no one there. Just cobwebs coating the ceiling. The pipes. The furnace turned on then, humming loudly in the quiet, just for a moment, and then was silent.

Eric walked over and took a seat on the weight bench, leaned the axe against the side. The box of books was beside the weight bench. Mostly old paperbacks.

Covered in dust, and sawdust from the joist beams above where the termites had got in. Termites could wreck a house. Eating their way around the joists. Causing it to collapse. Causing it to sink. And his house was very old. Very old.

He lifted one of the books from the box, held it out beneath the light. The cover was fluorescent green, with a black, sparse tree. And two people in a boat on a pond. A man and a woman. Silhouettes. Shadows.

No trace left of Gina. No trace of perfume, no warmth. Just the empty space. He never should have hit Gina—he loved Gina. He loved everybody. But people just didn't understand his love. He loved deeply. Purely. He loved forever.

"Do you want forever, Eric?" A voice asked. A woman's voice. Almost sounding to be speaking long distance through an old phone. "Do you Eric?"

Did he want forever? Nothing was forever. Nothing. Did he want nothing?

Nothing was peace. Nothing was forever.

"Nothing is you," said his father. "Upstairs. Your house. You going to face yourself? We'll kick it through the uprights Eric. Together."

"Together," said the woman. We were here, and you were here, and we were here together. So long ago."

And there were more people about, he thought. More than his father, more than Gina. A lot of people. Old and young. And he could see them. A man with a mus-

tache, and his hair slicked, parted neatly in the middle, and a small girl in a white dress, bows in her hair and her face smeared with soil—he had seen her before. A woman on the floor, her knees up and legs spread, her dress hiked up around her waist, her face grimacing, moaning, as the hands reached out for the invisible thing atop of her. Gina walked by again topless in her panties, cut high on the thigh, chased by a small boy, a toddler, and Eric's older brother, still in his army jacket, retched onto the floor on his hands and his knees. The sound of horses outside, hoofs on the hard earth, clopping, and everywhere singing. Christmas Carols. "God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman." Then there was a scream. A slap. And somebody sobbing in the corner, the shadows, beneath the dust, and intricate webs. Weightless. Nothing.

A slant of light moved across the floor, growing wider as it did, and then everything was suddenly silent, except for the footsteps. On the stairs. Eric looked at the ax, and then he looked up. Sheila was there beneath the yellow light, the light glowing around her. Jeans and a long sweater. Red and green, and arms hugging herself about her chest. Big eyes. Beautiful eyes. She lowered her chin a bit, just the trace of a smile. She was beautiful. "I didn't hear you come in here," she said.

Eric was quiet a moment. Looking at her, bathed in yellow light. Like a stage. It was all a stage. They just had to play their parts. "What did you hear?" he asked at last.

"I heard someone yelling," she said. "It sounded like you were yelling. You okay?"

Eric gazed down at the floor. "I'm okay."

"What were you doing?" she asked.

Eric looked around the room, and then he gazed down at the book on his lap. "I was reading."

"You? Were reading?"

"Yes."

"What?"

He looked at the book again—the hills, the mist, the boat, and the tree—read the cover. "It's called... *In Our Time*. It's a book."

Sheila nodded. "I see. Well we're going to finish decorating the tree. Do you want to come up? We need you to help us finish." She smiled. "You can put the angel on top—I'm too short—and then maybe we can have a toast or something. We still have that bottle of wine your brother gave us last Christmas."

"I think that was Easter," Eric said.

"Yah," she said. "I think you're right." Sheila turned and put a foot on the stairs. A hand on the rail. Eric hadn't move from the weight bench. She glanced at the book cover again. "We should take the canoe out on the river once spring comes. Once it gets warmer. We have it but never use it."

"We're always busy," he said.

"I know. But we should make time for it. Come on," she said. "It's cold down here. And besides it's creepy. I hate being alone down here."

Eric slowly stood, and took a step towards the stairs.

"Don't forget your book," she said.

Eric hesitated, halfway turned. "I'm going to finish it tomorrow. If I get a chance. It takes a while to read a book."

"You're taking the week after Christmas off, right?"

"Yah."

"Well, you can finish it then."

Eric nodded. "I will. I have a lot of stuff to do. This house needs a lot of work."

"Well, you'll have a whole

week. You have plenty of time."

"I do," Eric said. "Plenty of time." He nodded. The music was playing again. The carols. He hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, and watched as Sheila's shadow passed into the light of the kitchen. He closed his eyes and waited until everything was quiet again, the music gone, and then he shut off the light and followed her up into the house, the sound of his feet echoing forever upon the wood. ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

One of the people I was fighting was Andrew Garfield, the actor. Apparently he looks a lot like someone I knew back in high school. I bit him – Andrew Garfield, not my old classmate. It was unsatisfying to bite him, because he didn't stop bothering me, or trying to punch me, or pulling me away from what I was doing. What I was doing escape me at the moment, as the fight became the new plot-arc of the dream

At the same time, there was someone else in the dream, also trying to punch me, from the other side. Fortunately, there was a kind of silly-Hollywood-fight-scene quality to it, that only one person at a time could participate, so I was mostly worried about being cold-cocked, without it ever happening. Or maybe this is how it actually happens in real life. I don't know.

It would make sense if at some point during the dream I was shouting at Andrew Garfield that he was a conscientious objector in that movie, but dreams don't often make much sense to me. What is strange is that I kept biting him on the arm and hand and finger, and nothing made him stop. I wonder what I was actually biting: pillow, blanket, my own arm? Probably not, because it would have woken me up, don't you think?

CGI - cyberspace

Three by David Lenna

“Most of These Stairs”

I'd like to go back, to the times when I knew clearly
when the deaths avoided and I knew what was nice
now my judgment acts like it has been hit by grime
only that I am aware of, all crap delays my only act
the muddiest road of all the roads, which you are now slowly stumbling on
that eyes are pasted by the plasticine and bird's troll gets to ears every time
but later than your need would want 'till you after such a long time find out
you hear only some shitty echo of an echo, before an always inevitable end
as grey pigeons on pink masts are hanging dead, messengers of any of your previous future undoings
which isn't, exists on many pink twines, tied so thoroughly, oh, thanks, they were so nicely thorough
no one has survived there, after all, who could say he overcame obstacles and swam a frosted storm?
And mainly with development, with innate authenticity. It isn't like that, everyone's out of the norms

“My First Proud Experience on Heroin”

Poor visions of these purest gods sitting on their imaginary branches. A look into the right eye
to know I'm not welcome. Minutes pass by, nobody smiles. Years pass by. I think it's time for
my going. Because I don't feel good in this mysterious hypocrisy. Because I feel sad inside.
I would like to leave you.
They turned to me with some pitiful faces, talking a lot, in all the regretful tones you can ever
hear. And they told themselves they could as well go on, they could find some other boring
man without a thing to do. Thanks, guys, I laughed.
They left me.
So minutes pass by, so far these minutes only. Thinking in circles, measuring all the steps of
everyone, saying nothing, having nothing to say. You know, maybe you'll get young one day.
Maybe those idiots weren't so bad. Is everything really every time so plain here?
I miss you.

“Death Comes for David Lenna”

then consumed by her smile
 Laura lovingly strikes

Laura bought a candle
 I'm in a quick hurry
 in fallen leaves hidden
 she bought a shovel
 then smiles, she knows
 this wasn't bought without a goal
 Laura bought a nail
 this trap sets of its own accord
 then a match, hammer, boards and twine
 she bought a smile
 in the trap's memory
 I'm slowly dying
 Laura is digging a hole


Laura hasn't been buying for nothing
 then the fire burned away my mourn

Death comes for David Lenna

Contributors:

Sean Padraic McCarthy writes, “I have published stories, or have stories forthcoming, in *The Hopkins Review*, *BULL Magazine*, *Glimmer Train*, *Water~Stone Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Bayou*, *Cerasus Magazine*, and *Hayden’s Ferry Review* among others. My work has been cited in The Best American Short Stories, and I am a 2016 recipient of the Massachusetts Cultural Council’s Artist Fellowship in Fiction Award.”

David Lenna is nothing and everything in the universe. Not in yours, of course. His poems have appeared in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *The Broken City Magazine*, *The Blotter Magazine*, and *Jokes Literary Review*, among others. David lives in Prague, but you can send him some regards @hehasanaccount.



Found Objects:
an artist's life

Written and Illustrated by Shelly Hehenberger

Coming Soon! Watch this space...