

CROWN of BONES

feel its presence,

unsettling every thought.

try in vain to slumber, gripped by violent terror.

Something is very, very wrong here.

**HORROR
THAT WILL TOTALLY
CONSUME YOU**

Let the headgames begin

CROWN OF BONES

Edited by Craig Sernotti

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CROWN OF BONES

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Introduction

By Craig Sernotti

Robust welcomes to all the drooling hunchbacks, hemophiliac suicides, crawling terrors, carnivorous vaginas, vomiting quadriplegics, and prurient bookworms who have stumbled across this e-anthology, *Crown of Bones*.

Horrors upon horrors under one thousand words. Flash fiction that will eviscerate your soul. Diabolica minima.

The gamut is herein represented. Are you a fan of the unclassifiable? For you are Kevin L. Donihe and D. Harlan Wilson's offerings. Perhaps your preferences are more towards subtle dreads? Jump to Jonathan William Hodges and Kurt Newton. Does gritty realism get you all hot and bothered? Read Harold Jaffe and Wayne Allen Sallee. Wacky weirdness? Mark McLaughlin (could anyone do it better?). And the aberrant; oh, the aberrant! Charlee Jacob, John Edward Lawson, Cake Earthhead, Alyssa Sturgill, Forrest Aguirre, Brian Rosenberger, and Lida Broadhurst.

So enjoy, my agog readers. A crown of bones awaits you. Do you dare put it on?

Dawn's Baby
By Charlee Jacob

Sun rises.

Bitch with her head on fire shows our heirlooms of ragged lust, rot burning on the brain, holes nibbled along the horizon of the gut. Dawn squats over a still-erect night. She rubs herself raw east to west, impregnating herself on shadow's motley collection. Their rectums bleed radiation revelations before her thrusting is through.

Sun sets.

She squeezes out a kid but sees he is another mistake—not the perfect universe she imagines during her keloid dreams/polaroid screams/black void schemes. She tosses him out toward the moon over the vanishing point, pale and scarred from a savage slashing some other drunken godling did on a razor binge eons ago. (Nothing ever heals right. It is the heat and cold extremes. It is the indifference of heaven. It is the souls in the atoms of the blood aching to be born red and beautiful.)

Moon rises.

She catches the baby in that mitt of a mutilated face. She puts a little gold dust and a few cosmic maggots in his mouth in lieu of milk, then twitters a mad lullaby about flipper kids initiated into blowfly gangs. Those are the ones that go about pissing on burning deities, afterward banging the cinders to ashes, Venus and Aurora in stinking gashes. Moon trills and toots, licks clean his sharkfin boots, afterward rolling him to her darkside/wild side/painless space sleepy as all dying side, where she nurses the rest of Dawn's rejected children.

The Fucking Abyss

By John Edward Lawson

There's nothing better than hero sex. Especially if you're a succubus's hero. Even more so if the succubus in question is the lilin child of Asmodeus and a Hollywood goddess, who shall remain unnamed here to prevent unnecessary attention in the form of lawsuits. Let's just say she was known for sex videos that were stolen from her residence. That, and an unmemorable stint playing a lifeguard on some TV show.

What you need to understand is that succubae aren't normal demons, not by a long shot, and I'm not your normal guy. That said, how far from the mark is normal? If the mark is 666 and it's branded on the back of your neck, well, you're gonna have a far flung concept of "normal." When you're used to shedding identities the way a snake sheds its skin you might also have a skewed perception of normal, of right and wrong. See, I'm a grifter, a drifter, and a demonic fuckdoll's mad mister. Any questions? Sure, sure, you got questions. No need to tell me.

Where did you meet?

In the Fucking Abyss.

Where's that?

Dive off the cliffs of the twelfth level of Hell, careening down past the strangely smooth valley that is, in fact, a pair of enormous thighs—Kali's thighs. Get the picture?

Are you married?

Hell no. I saved Lascivia's ass from a horde of angry Dread Mothers. Dread Mothers are feared in Hell, Heaven, and on Earth, so I guess it was a little suicidal on my part.

Why would you do such a thing?

For kicks, I guess. Let's say I was bored. You see, wereserpents are cold-blooded and need the heat of action to keep life interesting. Slumming in Hell is just a natural offshoot of my condition, you could say.

Your condition?

You're probably from the USA, aren't you... let's see, you'd call me seven feet tall and three hundred pounds. Some folks mistake me for a model: jet black hair, perfect teeth, abs men would kill for, and a taste for undercooked meat. My other side, though, well

nobody's gonna mistake that for a model: humanoid torso with twenty feet of serpent lower body, shimmering black scales with curved, pointed ends that jut out of my skin, capable of cutting through soft mammal flesh. Oh right, I got claws and fangs and a jaw that that unhinges, plus heat vision—and I can taste the air. Not a bad deal overall.

How about her condition?

When I first saw her it was love at first sight: tight muscles rippling under red scales, horns dripping with the blood of those she was fighting, demonic tail coiled around the hilt of a sword while her hooves cracked skulls. She flashed her luminous yellow eyes my way and it was a done deal. Since her mother was human she can materialize in “the real world” as a regular person. That's how I've seen her the most, looking like an exotic Persian goddess clad in black leather and coy smiles, wind blowing through her hair as we drive through the desert. She only gets demonic when she absolutely has to.

Can I investigate what's between Kali's legs?

Only if you get damned to Hell.

So what makes succubae different than other demons?

Because they're slaves, you simple sumbitch. Always manifesting in dreams, or other ethereal incarnations, unable to make actual contact with those they victimize, unable to gratify themselves even as they inspire sexual release in others. How would you like to face an eternity of that?

Well, they get to steal our bodily fluids, don't they?

They don't get to keep it, if that's what you mean. It goes to the various warlords of Hell's territories, used to create new minions. And believe me, you don't wanna meet these children of yours.

Explain that “lilin child” comment. What's up with that?

People who screw while thinking about somebody other than their partner let the door open for demons to cause impregnation. If you go on the Internet and watch Lascivia's mother in one of those videos you might be witnessing the demonic insemination without even knowing it. So put that in your pipe and smoke it!

Are you sure there's no other way to get between Kali's legs?

Keep it up and you'll be checking it out sooner than you'd like, pal.

I've heard of make-up sex, but what's hero sex like?

It involves a minimum of five orgasms a day, accompanied more often than not by bloodsports.

Like that Jean-Claude Van Dam movie?

Hell no, fool! I'm talking about bathing my woman in a tub filled with rose-scented blood! Human blood!

What the fuck?!

Exactly. Sex in a tub of warm blood would blow your feeble mind, especially if you got up to it with two beings that never sleep, never tire.

I'm not sure I even want to think about that. Why in the world would you tell this to anybody?

Because if I didn't coerce some Internet hack to leave this on their obscure site, I wouldn't be able to hunt nearly as many blood sacks. That is, now there's a whole crop out there with knowledge of us, and knowledge is power. Especially carnal knowledge. If you weren't preoccupied with thinking about giant snakes fucking demons in a pool of blood Lascivia wouldn't be able to track you down when you sleep—sometimes being a succubus has its advantages. You do have to sleep, don't you? Sure you do. You probably expect to wake up again, too. When you do, do you think maybe we'll be there? Because we never sleep, just like I said. If my woman is in this world then we're gonna get freaky like nobody's business. And if she's going to keep up her energy so we can get freaky all day and night, she needs to feed. That's where you fit in.

Welcome to the Fucking Abyss...

Vortexes
By Jonathan William Hodges

Imagine this.

One moment asleep, dreaming of asinine events with no consequence on waking life, then the next sentient. Suddenly. Not the gentle emersion of a Sunday morning but the snap to consciousness flagged by things too stark to hide behind closed eyes.

For the briefest of snapshots that, yet, seem to last an eternity, you're as if waking from a tomb heretofore cold. Eyes foggy, movement lethargic, and the only true presence the echo in your ears that brought you to this state. What could just as easily have been a burst of misdirected wind from your fan disturbing a paper—you know is not. No, it was a distinct shuffling. A movement. Intruder? Not like you'd think.

A whisper. Not just one but a conversation. Soft but not soft enough. The mist clears and your eyesight chases your hearing. The dark—so copious you taste it on the back of your tongue, bitter, thick as congealed milk.

You roll to your shoulder and survey but see only shadows, twilight, only stars outside trying abortively to illuminate visitors. The whispers persist even with your movement, even though they know you know.

Lie down. Close your eyes. Go back to sleep. There's nothing there. The fan blows. Papers disturbed, bills unpaid, Post-it notes framing your computer a pollen rain. Swirling, turning, dust devils of reminders three months expired, encompassing a blur in their vortex, an inconsequent shape, a husk of what once was and may one day be again. If only you'll lie down. Close your eyes. Go back to sleep.

Another whisper. A giggle. Rapid-fire taunting quick as cocaine hearts. The fan drones. Over it, shuffling on the carpet. Skin without callus. They inch nearer.

You've lain back down, see the ceiling. One-two glow-in-the-dark stickers shaped like stars still holding onto a shred of light, fainter than the blush from a cat's eye in the dark.

A gentle brush of capsule-thin fingers on your wrist, coasting up your forearm, spider webs fashioned in the still of night. A murmur behind your head. Hair stirs. Not from the fan. Not from the fan.

This is not a dream. This is not consciousness. This is something impossibly in-between.

The hand finds your shoulder. Increases pressure. From behind you, a shape infiltrates your vision. Your first thought is that an eight-year-old should never look so weathered.

All shadows. All suggestion. All moving, never still, not still, gyrating, an aggravated tempest.

At your right side, a weight on your shoulder, finger-like digging, interpolating, gleaning, it doesn't matter; another child, nothing but shadows, a cyclone of twilight, swirling and locking you in its vortex.

Not from the fan. Never from the fan.

The two still-glowing points on the ceiling move. It's not you spinning. A shadow, crawling as a gecko, descending upon you, eyes an anemic green. Outlined in vague shapes bulging, collapsing. Coming down. Falling down. Then as much you as its own. Breathing in harmony. Synchronized. Nearly one now.

The two vortexes convene on you from opposite sides, cold as clay, brusque as neighbors, eyes green, skin wind, child-face shapes drawn onto adhesive notes (an eye, winking, a nose a curved line, a mouth, straight, ever straight, whirring, yellow, sticking, ink running, smearing, yellow, not from the fan).

A wind-mouth on your ear. Paper tongue licking, cutting sharp and bloody, whispering sour nothings. Close your eyes. It's not you spinning. It's not you breathing.

And for the jaded detectives to arrive some dozen days later when you've marked the realm of post office corkboards and milk carton countenances: the jagged alignment of yellow squares left on your bed, only slightly disturbed by the fan, on them smeared ink of you. Nose but a curved line. A mouth, straight, ever straight. One eye, winking.

A Fairytale on High for 30 Seconds By Cake Earthhead

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Sarah. Sarah seemed like other girls her age, she went to kindergarten, she danced, she sang, she drew rainbows and unicorns on her math homework. She even collected whatever cute pink monstrosity mass consumerism was currently cramming down society's throat. But Sarah was not like the other girls, not like them at all.

Sarah lived alone in a dark and spooky abandoned apartment complex, across from the donut shop that closed when rat parts were found in the jelly donuts. Her parents had abandoned her shortly after her birth on a Hechts department store perfume counter, convinced she was the spawn of Satan. Her foster parents died in a freak shark attack, when they fell off the cruise ship they were spending Sarah's food budget on. And, due to a misfiled form, child services had no knowledge of her existence.

Sarah did all right for herself, though. She worked nights at a strip club mopping up the nudey booths and cleaning the spunk off the glass. She was good at her job and managed to get a streak free shine every time.

But that wasn't the only thing that set Sarah apart from the other girls. She had a much darker secret. Sarah kidnapped babies. It wasn't that she disliked babies or wanted to harm them. She, in fact, needed them. More accurately, the horrible baby-eating microwave that existed in Sarah's kitchen needed them. The mechanical menace had been driven mad long ago by the thought that there existed kindermeats that had not been properly rotated and stirred.

Sarah had no idea where the bloodthirsty kitchen convenience had come from. The microwave itself had come from Mal-Wart (of course), but where whatever force now possessed it had come from she could not say. It had first spoken to one melancholy September night. She was crying herself to sleep, hungry and alone, as she usually did, when the unplugged microwave lurched to life, surrounded by an orangish glow.

"Child, why do you cry so?" moaned a voice from deep within the machine.

"I'm hungry Mr. Microwave," she responded, not knowing that a talking appliance was not a normal occurrence. (Sarah had learned most of what she knew about life from children's television shows, where talking inanimate objects were both common and numerous.)

"I know how you feel, little miss..." growled the haunted electronic. "I have been hungry

as well, for a long, long time... Tell you what... You take me down from this wall, and I will see that neither of us ever go hungry again..."

Sarah didn't really have any other options. And so it went each night she left her insufferable apartment, carrying along her microwave in her tiny arms, riding the subway in search of babies to feed it, because she could not handle acquiring or carrying anything larger. Whatever the hellish creature didn't ingest became her meal.

One night while Sarah was riding the almost empty subway home from a very successful night's work, the smell of burnt hair and charred flesh still wafting from the microwave, the only other patron in the subway car approached her. He was a traveling dental equipment salesman, with an overt interest in little girls and the police record to prove it. The microwave, sensing its meal ticket was in danger, rose to Sarah's defense. Tendrils of greasy cheese and black heartblood lurched forth from the depths of the demonic microwave, enveloped the pervert, and began to drag him kicking and screaming into its digestive bowels. The man's bones crunched and popped and his flesh tore and twisted as his body was forced through the small doorway the microwave used as a mouth. A dark red smoke with horrible burning smell issued from the appliance as the man was devoured.

From that day on, Sarah's life became a lot easier. The microwave had developed a taste for pedophile flesh, and they were much easier to come by than babies. Sarah quickly became very adept at luring pedophiles she met in Internet chat rooms into coming to her home so she could feed them to her microwave.

She also began to feel a tingling sensation in her no-no place when she thought of her microwave, and when she touched it, it felt very good. It became a common sight to find her furiously fingering herself, bathed in the eerie glow of the microwave as it cooked the latest pedophile dinner special for two.

Eventually she came to understand that she was in love with the hell born appliance. "Mr. Microwave," she said to it one day, "I... I love you..."

"I love you too my darling little Sarah..." the microwave responded. She wrapped her arms around it. They were married by a pedophile priest Sarah found on the Internet, before they nuked and ate him. Afterwards they consummated the marriage by having putrid nauseating crude tentacle sex. A few days later Sarah celebrated her seventh birthday.

And they lived happily ever after.

I Wear Black to Mourn Myself

By Alyssa Sturgill

We are the Black Dahlia. Every day we kill ourselves and saw our corpses in half. Bored, we desecrate ourselves. Dark hair spills like ink across the ground. Maggots pace, carry our bodies' bloody gossip back and forth from one of us to the other. My sister's tongue crawls over, soft red in the darkwilted grass. I stitch it onto my own. It tells me all the things I never knew. The beetles spill out of me in a ragged black tide.

My sister opens my mouth and speaks through me with two red velvet tongues.

"Who are you?" she asks.

"We are legion," she answers herself. "No grass, please." The tongue slides out to lick last night's strawberries and creme from my lips. My other tongue doesn't struggle, but falls against hers, into the rhythm of her caresses.

We gaze at each other raptly, in love with the hopeful starlet we become each night. Because when I am Her, I know that once I tasted like blackberry pie. I was the living shadow, and walked like slow red wine. I carried the ghost of opium smoke. I danced at velvet operas, and I wore black to mourn myself.

This is the way we always play, and the dread tongues whisper in the unholy darkness. The flowers bloom black in my eyes and their roots sip my body away. A necklace of maggots, like sticky pearls, embeds itself in my skin. I pull out my heart by a string of red beads.

I look back across the field at my sister. She looks back, smiles. The flowers are in her throat now, blooming in her mouth, in her steaming intestines. They vine like ivy through the crumbling bricks of her teeth. She blinks back the millipedes bleeding from her eyes. I stretch out my hand, and in that instant, we multiply. There are hundreds of us, as far as the eye can see, fields that stretch across forever, and corpse after corpse after corpse in the distance. I can feel the black earth pushing into my skull and up through my bones. And, once again, I wear black to mourn myself.

Originally appeared in *The New Absurdist*

Tickets, Please

By Forrest Aguirre

He wakes sitting, face pressed against the soot-stained glass as the wheels clackity clack over iron rail. It smells like a charnel house. He smudges the window muck with a sleeve and stares out at the smoky gray sky—sullied mists rise, polluting the air over an immense plain textured by cavernous cracks that glow of magma.

The passenger turns and startles at the corpse seated next to him. It is Miss Easton, the widow from down the street, known for killing her neighbor's pets and putting razors in children's apples—not everyone thinks her husband's death accidental. Now she has joined him among the dead.

Other bodies fill the car: Captain Grody, the bigoted police chief who killed several blacks “in self defense”; Father Sullivan, who spread The Word with almost the same vigor as he spread altar boys' legs; the gossip Mary Felixton, notorious for spreading the lie that Jake McGrew molested children when it was she who had violated her niece. Twenty others sat decaying in the car, some mummified and desiccated, others bloated with putrescence, some with eyes agape, others eyes closed, others with void sockets. He stands, scoots to the aisle, careful not to upset the dead, wondering why he is not among them. He walks to the front of the car, desperate to leave the rotting remains of those he knew and despised in life. A flick of the door's lever and he passes from the coach to the engine, briefly inhaling the sweet-rotting air in between.

Heat bleeds from the engine's walls, pistons deafening as he yells to converse with the engineer. No response. He recognizes the tattooed arms of Joe Bender, knuckles bruised from battering his wife, son's blood caked underneath his fingernails. The passenger turns back, noticing the rump end of the whore Kathleen DiMattio protruding from the blazing coal furnace. Her skeleton smiles between charred lips, the same gleaming grin that ruined a hundred families.

As he returns to the passenger car, a loud SNAP! echoes out as the arms of the dead raise high above their heads, holding tickets aloft as if waiting for him to inspect them. He tentatively reaches out to grasp the nearest sigil-laden pass, then stops, a strap-razor in his hand preventing him from taking the proffered slips. He lowers the razor and laughs out loud, for now he remembers—he is the conductor. He smiles and takes the tickets. The corpses smile back, leering in graveyard corruption over all their slit throats.

In a Deeper Pool of Sorrow

By Kurt Newton

Sometimes it takes me down, pulls me under like summer at the beach when I was eight years old, up to my neck in numbing surf, lips blue, mouth still stinging with the taste of salt-water, when another wave comes and pushes me down like a big wet hand, and everything tumbles wet and grey and dirty and as quiet as a dream, and while I'm trying to right myself another hand grabs at my ankles and tugs, and I can't get up, though the surface is only a few feet away, and my eyes are burning cold and my lungs feel crushed like two soda cans, and I feel myself being dragged along the sand, out into the deeper, colder grey, and I look to see who's pulling me, afraid that maybe a giant crab has latched onto my stone-dead toes or a monster squid has wrapped its suction-cup tentacles around my numbed-skin ankles, and all I can see is the water, and within the water there is only the pale shadow of something more, something hungrier than crabs or squid, hungrier than the seagulls that hover above the picnic tables on the boardwalk, something that wants the eight year old warmth in my veins and the eight year old scream in my throat, and so I kicked like I've never kicked before, not knowing then what it was that wanted me, but knowing full well that I wasn't ready to find out, and I fought against the hand that held me, and pushed my way toward the surface with a gasp and stumbled to the safety of the beach coughing and trying to dance water out of my ears, and it wasn't until years later that I knew what it was in that water, what it is, on days like this, that washes over me like a wave and tries to take me down, pull me under, it's the same monster that swims on dry land and pools around gravestones after the hole has been filled and the people have left for their cars, the same monster that floods the attics of old houses abandoned by loss or grief or neglect, the same monster that creeps just outside of arm's reach, like a tide, gaining momentum, gaining strength, inching ever closer when my own strength begins to ebb, a monster with a thirst for sorrow and a hunger for life and a determination as strong as my commitment is weak, and I know it will come for me again and again, tugging at the skin of my heart, pulling at the ankles of my resolve, until I no longer have the instinct to kick and scream, or the desire to even try.

Bloodbath in the Kiddie Pool

By Brian Rosenberger

It was a blistering August day when little Jimmy Wells disappeared. No notes, no ransom. His mother's complexion was the color of vanilla ice cream, her composure melting as she pointed the police towards the backyard. Water splashed in the plastic pool. The shark smiled, red like a cherry snowcone, beneath the summer sun.

Unspeakable

By Mark McLaughlin

There are those who believe that true horror can only transpire in the most grotesque and doom-laden of surroundings. They would have you think that the gibbering, uncouth abnormalities that haunt the madness-spawned extremes of existence can only be seen, touched, and perhaps—God help us—even smelled only when one has strayed beyond the blessed light into the pestilent, stygian depths of unhallowed darkness and soul-searing doom.

To those who would make such statements, I would have only this to say, were they to ask me if I believed in their far-flung, delirious claims...

No.

For it was in the well-lit, lurid, tawdry glare of the Turtledale Mall, at about 2:15 p.m. on a busy Saturday afternoon, that I saw a hideous, mind-blasting waking nightmare of such putrescent unspeakableness, I actually was not able to speak about it. And the frustrating thing is, none of the other shoppers saw that squamous abomination which had shredded my psyche with its glistening horrendousness, for it was crouched upon a steel girder high overhead. The mall's designers had apparently been influenced by that whole 'warm industrial' look, which uses a lot of bright colors, but also features exposed ductwork and painted beams and whatnot. It's kind of a kitschy take on a post-modern theme and I think the designers were really just trying to cut corners by not installing fake ceilings, but then, what do I know? I'm no architect.

I'd just happened to look up when that mildew-ridden, diabolical presence had chosen to peek out from behind a girder, high overhead. I don't know why I was looking up—maybe I was just stretching my neck muscles, I can't remember—but suddenly BAM! I saw the creature, it saw me, we looked at each other, and that monumental moment of bloatsome blasphemy numbed my brain with fear-packed frighteningness, so that all I could do was continue to look up and utter "Gugg!" repeatedly.

I was really trying to exclaim, "Gosh, that otherworldly entity is certainly cause for worry, especially in such a crowded mall, with children and sweet old grannies and other pleasant family members shopping, blissfully unaware of that which lurks above!" But alas, I was only able to force a croak of "Gugg!" out from between my terror-paralyzed lips.

I wanted to point out that indescribable indecency that hid overhead to the other shoppers, so I kept trying to point upward with both hands, crying out, "Gugg! Gugg!"—but woe is me, the mall's sound system was playing a kicky pop song, and all the other

shoppers simply thought I was dancing, since I happened to be pointing repeatedly upward and shouting “Gugg!” in time to the music.

I imagine some of them must have thought we were all on some kind of reality TV show, because pretty soon, other shoppers put down their bags and began pointing upward repeatedly and crying out, “Gugg! Gugg!” in time to the kicky pop tune.

Then a TV crew from Channel 5 Action News showed up, and reporter Olga Wong told the viewers at home all about a new dance craze that was sweeping its way through the Turtledale Mall, and I was really upset that she wouldn’t look up, no matter how much pointing I did or how many times I cried out “Gugg!”

But then, I shouldn’t be too hard on her. It’s not like she was a mindreader, though if she had indeed been able to read my mind, surely the cerebellum-freezing frenzy festering in my cranium would have caused a similar situation in her own hitherto not-fear-encumbered gray matter.

Pretty soon the thing that squatted amidst the rafters—no doubt irritated by the sundry off-key shouts of “Gugg!” echoing through that doomed dominion of discounts—tore a little hole in the space/time continuum and shambled through, sealing the extra-dimensional opening behind him or her or it.

I suddenly realized I was late for a dentist’s appointment, so I fled from that malevolent mall of madness, never to return that afternoon.

But I did come back the next day because I still needed to buy dental floss, and—horror of horrors—I could not find the nice waxed-string type I like, *so I had to get the flat tape kind that sometimes cuts my gums.*

The Lesson

By D. Harlan Wilson

The lesson-giver's elbow wasn't working. Whenever he thrust his finger into the air to accentuate a point, the elbow gesticulated, swung like a pendulum and struck him in the cheek. His audience was a morass of taxidermists imitating ornery, cigar-smoking bullfrogs.

Nearby was a tree shaking its leaves. Everybody pretended it wasn't there...

The lesson-giver became more careful. He thrust his finger softly, gently, and his elbow began to kiss him on the cheek. A taxidermist acknowledged the feat of acclimatization with a powerful *ribbit!* The tree acknowledged it by shaking its leaves harder.

Overhead the silhouette of a kung-fu fighter sailed across the night sky. His karate chops were as fluid and true as a child's mother-love...

The finger stopped thrusting, the elbow stopped kissing. The taxidermists swallowed their cigars and stood up as the elbow blackened, withered, died. It fell off of his arm and floated to the earth like a leaf.

The lesson-giver pushed out his lips. "Let that be a lesson to you," he croaked...

The Last Day of Stasis

By Kevin L. Donihe

I. Wake Up Call

Ah shit! Time to go to work! I loathe work. It blows the fetid corpses of disease-ravaged primates. I'd love to spend my entire day on the sofa as tantalizing machines create sex-love and fuck-kill dioramas in front of the curio cabinet.

But, alas, no machines for the wicked! Not today. Not ever. The dioramas are all in my head, but that's okay. Head-things are often pleasant and sometimes *cool*. I've been working on crystallizing a few them. It takes a lot of concentration, more than I have at the moment. So far I've been able to project shadows of shadows that flicker and die. I'm working on it, though.

Constant improvement—that's my motto.

II. Dissatisfaction

My job makes me want to kill myself, but I love it just the same. I love it for the security it brings me, and for the way it gets me in touch with the mechanical gears that run my life.

I want the machine to become a part of me. I want to feel its circuits pulse like a cock. I want it to ride me bareback, straight into the heart of the Arizona desert.

There, I will remember all the things I've forgotten.

III. Lunch

The refrigerator handle pulses lightly in my grip. I open it and withdraw a fleshy jug of milk. The jug scowls disapprovingly, but I drink from it anyway. I'm used to its antics.

I wipe my lips with my sleeve and taste old milk, dead milk, milk long forgotten, milk memorable only for its stench. Wiping my lips on my sleeve is an old habit, dates back from childhood. Back then it wasn't so bad. Back then I didn't change my clothes once every three weeks.

The milk goes down all harsh and chalky. I wonder what might be in it. Then I dismiss the question entirely. I've taken tons of filthy things into my body.

IV. Leisure Time

The ducks in the park attack each other as I try to feed them. Disembodied bills and flying feathers in the air. It's a duck geyser.

Even my feathered friends are feeling the crunch.

V. A Religious Encounter

Jesus and I drink coffee at the local Starbucks. It tastes like reheated tapwater, colored with brown food coloring, but I don't care. I'm talking with Jesus and that's all that matters.

He tells me not to fear, but that's easier said than done. Later, at my apartment, he makes me a buttercrest sandwich. I'd never heard of a buttercrest sandwich before, but I eat it just the same. I figure that if the messiah made it, it has to be good.

Still, he went a little heavy on the mayo.

VI. Finally Alone

My balls are tender due to incessant whacking. I don't want to do it anymore. It feels like my soul is coming out of my penis, like the very essence of life is spilling out onto that old, old sock.

But I can't help myself; I'm a lifelong procrasturbator.

VII. End of the Day

I want to get high, but I'm all out of cough syrup. Dammit. I need that temporal displacement now more than ever. I need to close my eyes and watch the fractal geometry explode. I need to astral travel to the Everglades.

Death and fucking. Madness and cheese. There's nothing left for me here but magpie delight. I don't even know what magpie delight is. I'm guessing it's some kind of sandwich. Some kind of evil sandwich that sinks its claws into its victim's minds and removes their thoughts and fucks them when they're asleep and vulnerable. Fucking sandwiches, fucking, fucking, sandwiches.

I can't take this anymore. I'm losing my mind.

VIII. In Dreams

Monsters everywhere. Doors closing when they shouldn't close. Heaviness in the air. Monsters, monsters, monsters.

IX. Clockwork Winding

I wake up to screams so high-pitched they sound electronic. A strange thing hangs from my mouth. It looks like a cable. A rather large one, strangely cock-like. I'm not sure where I picked it up, but it doesn't concern me. I've woken up with stranger things connected to my body in the past.

I slip into my clothes after greasing up my crotch and armpits. I put a freshening mint in my mouth, which makes my breath feel alive and tingly. The electric burst surges up my tongue and into my brain, short circuiting it.

Then I head off towards my car.

X. Change of Pace

I gotta break this; I gotta kill this. Can't take much more. Bills, bills, bills. Worry, worry, worry. The nagging friends and family. The taunts and the curses. Work, work, work. Where has the Zen gone, baby? That's what I want to know.

And so I jump into my car's (human?) hide-covered seats and insert glisteningly phallic keys into the vagina-slot. It accepts the sex offering with a quiver. Now alive, the car makes groan-sex sounds. Then it's OFF! Oh my god yes, yes, yes! Flying down the roadway at a million miles a minute. Old greyhaired ladies look like streaky blobs in the nano-seconds before they pass beneath my wheels. Old men look like flapbutter pancakes spread from one side of the road to the other, stacked hundreds of layers high.

XI. Closing Thoughts

It's all fun and games until people get hurt. I fucked around with fire-pleasure and got fire-pleasure, which turned to fire-fucking, which turned to fire-death, which turned to life-without-end.

And so here I am.

Going to slide into the womb now, slide free and clear into the zone before zones began. The Mother will welcome me into her soft and mushy arms. I will plant a kiss on her malodorous green face as she makes the grave all snug and cozy for me. She will plant flowers by my head, and my decay will cause them to grow big and strong.

This is my last day of stasis.

Makeover

By Lida Broadhurst

Gilly Girl slumped in my leather chair. “Party soon, Nikko precious.”

She drew a finger across the lips I’d dyed last week. A color I based on hospital floors streaked with blood and dirt. “Need a new look.”

“Whose do you goin’ to?” I asked, rhyming the words, trying to lighten the atmosphere, as I had lightened her hair.

She whispered a Name. “They’d kill me if I show up lookin’ like somethin’ they seen before. These”—she held up her fingers—“wouldn’t help at all.” The circle of sapphires I’d glued around her eyes reflected tears.

Since she’d been coming to my shop, I knew she liked being edgy—literally. While others clamped rings into their skin, she wanted gold nails that poked holes in the bits of cloth she wore. I’d woven thorns through her hair, filed her nails to points then pushed twigs under them. This bayonet effect was widely copied, especially after Gilly fainted from pain at a luncheon.

When the ambulance guys showed up, I trusted her to whisper, “Nikko’s idea.” So the gals flocked in, waving plastic cards. It’s what I’d dreamed of when I named my place The Cutting Edge.

Now I said, “You want something even crazier than an almost bald head with little different colored tufts? Or diamonds all over your arms and face?”

She frowned. “That’s so nothing now. Even this...” Her nails rasped against the cheek scar I’d created with ruby chips. “I want something the wannabees will want, but can’t have. Only me.”

I eyed those white snail trails down her arms. I didn’t sell the stuff, but I had seen the way she could go all freaky.

But she was forgetting fashion’s first rule. No matter how crazy or ugly or downright dangerous something is, someone is gonna want to copy it. And someone—maybe me—is gonna be happy supplying the demand. Still, I couldn’t think of any touch that would could be hers alone. Forever.

I mumbled, “Hey, Gilly, just go lookin’ like a regular girl. Say you’re retiring as the undisputed champ of dernier cri.”

Her tongue shot out. “Stupid, Nikko.”

Then she uncoiled from the chair, slowly. Like serpents, her thin arms circled my neck. “Please, please do something with me tonight.”

I knew she wasn’t referring to bodies squirming in bed.

An idea came into my head. I locked the door. “Okay, but pain’s involved.”

“So what else is new?” She tugged a syringe from her purse. “Gimme a hint.”

“Okay, I’m starting with a razor cut.”

She grinned. “Good, I’m sick of these tufts flopping around.”

“Lie back.” I adjusted the chair to flat. Now she looked ready for a real operation, except she had provided her anesthesia. Whatever she had jabbed into her veins had put her out. She looked like the picture of an innocent asleep.

I made one call to get stuff delivered. Happily, she wore shorts that barely prevented her from being arrested. I painted antiseptic lotion over the exposed flesh. Didn’t want her dying from septic poisoning she’d picked up here.

I began with a tiny cut on her right thumb. Blood trickled unevenly like a cold snake. More cuts had red worms crawling around her hands. At the nape of her neck, a companion wiggled out. Once they curled sluggishly, I used a slimmer knife to poke tiny holes over most of her bare skin.

Knuckles rapped the door. I cracked it open to accept a white box. I lowered her limp body, covered with a sheet, inside, and wheeled her down to the elevator. People were used to seeing me with my gear on a cart. A woman gushed, “Wish I could afford your services, Nikko.”

I mumbled, “Me too,” got everything into a cab, and was grateful to arrive at a boxy brick building. I shooed the doorman away and he went back to reading his newspaper. He’d never question anyone invited to that apartment.

A butler dressed in tight jeans and a tighter t-shirt let me in, showed me to a small room as I requested. I closed the door, stripped her down to her panties and got to work enlarging most of the pin pricks I’d made. I slipped a white silk sack over her body, left her feet bare. I assembled the wheel chair I’d ordered and sat her upright. She lolled against me, half awake. “How do I look, Nikko? “

“You’ll be the talk of the town.”

“You’re so good to me.”

I pushed her to the dining room. As the butler yelled, “It’s Gilly Girl,” I swiped the blade across her throat.

Blood rushed out like water from an overturned barrel.

Gilly would have gotten high on the compliments.

“So beautiful,” a woman breathed. “Like a ruby necklace dangling and flowing all over her.”

An art critic shook his head. “No, that white gown’s melting ice, and her blood’s a river unloosed in the springtime.”

The guests faces blended into one giant sigh of joyous appreciation. Their hands exploded into ripples of applause.

The hostess galloped across the floor to embrace me. “Nikko, you’ve outdone yourself. Somebody dying live at my table. Mrs. Youknowwho is going to die herself when she hears.”

I grinned. “Glad to oblige, ma’am.”

The host shook my hand, told the butler to bring me a plate of food.

Which I never tasted, since, after furtive glances, almost every woman screamed for an appointment. I wondered which one would be the next pack leader. For a while anyway.

40 Minutes, Any Given Day By Wayne Allen Sallee

Jimmy Vaughn had been slumming Chicago's latest upscale neighborhood since late August. He had a name that sounded like he just graduated from the cop academy, but that's as far as it went. Just turned forty-five and a Chicago native, born in Humboldt Park when it wasn't overrun with blight, Vaughn still looked like a hard-traveling paladin who never worked a job that had decent health and dental coverage.

Those who first met Vaughn found him to be a cipher, a thin guy with decent upper body strength who always seemed to never have his blonde sideburns the same length, even in bad lighting. Turek the bartender at Uptownjo's, the "e" in the name shot out by some meltdown who'd been aiming for the street light on Agatite but missed by about thirty feet, nailed it best, that the guy moved around, always with a notepad and pencil, running from past loves or dreams, a wannabe romance or a crappy childhood, born of the generation where fathers still folded their belts in half and put welts on their sons' balls. He thought Vaughn never did time, though he had a nervous tic that sometimes put a tiny smile on the right side of his face, the kind that ex-cons made so you'd think you'd mistaken them for someone else.

He'd sit on the steps of the Uptown Theater, shielded from the autumn rain, and this was how the waitress at Uptown Pizza & BBQ had first met him. They dodged the flat, wet drops, jaywalking the whole way. Just the fact that she worked at the place everyone knew as The Greeks regardless of the sign and menus was a testament to the neighborhood going upscale. Inside the joint, a bunch of surly guys in sleeveless tees who all looked like they had just walked off the "White Lightning" set in *Grease*, would wait on customers from behind a stainless steel counter and flirt with the women while they juggled three orders at a time.

To compete with the pretentious bistros across the street, the owners hired a waitress and had some tables and plants on the already cramped sidewalk. The girl's name was Rasa, a nice Lithuanian name; when she asked about the notebook, Vaughn explained that he wrote stories about people, places, sold a few but mostly had them posted on a Chicago neighborhoods website. He wasn't looking for fame, or anything else, though he kept that last part to himself.

The rain stopped and Rasa went away with his order. She had interesting elbows and thick eyebrows. When he wrote about her, Vaughn thought he might change her blonde hair to violet, change the lipstick color, as well. He'd eat first, maybe talk some more. Rasa had time to talk—the rain had likely kept people away and they were just thinking on what kind of overpriced lunch they'd have when they walked over with their iPods and cell phones set on vibrate.

Rasa was surprised that Vaughn knew of the old Lugan neighborhood out south by Holy Cross Hospital and Queen of Martyrs. He mentioned a restaurant on 71st and Rockwell named Niringa, but that was before her time. She had a roommate and Edgewater was just too expensive; now it looked like Uptown was headed this way. Apartments reverted to condos, yet she never saw a single person on any of the balconies with the promised lake front views. Vaughn laughed in agreement. She heard that a Coyote Pizza was going to open next to Tony's Billiards, the pizza joint coming from Seattle, land of Starbucks.

The crowd picked up and he paid his tab, shaking her smooth hand and smiling a goodbye. That lopsided smile again, but Rasa liked it.

Vaughn was pleased with his day, walking back to his small room at the Darlington. First he stopped off at the Unique Thrift Store, thinking he might find a Hallowe'en tie or a black shirt with skeletons on it. He struck out there and cut down the alley behind Sunnyside. He'd been told it used to be officially known as Rehab Alley; now there were signs that warned: *animal feces carry viruses*, in big red letters.

A garage door was open, Vaughn at first thought nothing of it. Then a glint of silver, that was honest to Christ all he saw, and he was on the ground, his right pant leg sliced and blood spurting from his femoral artery turned his pants leg and belt buckle shiny red. He was kicked in the head, felt his wallet being grabbed. Footsteps running, faint. No one on the gaily flowered terraces all over his fucking range of view.

He thought of Rasa, the cracked concrete of the Uptown Theater, Rasa again, then a story idea he had started. Instead of AA being Alcoholics Anonymous, it was Afterlife Anonymous.

"Hi, my name is James Vaughn and I've been dead since October 22, 2004." Then all the ghosts and zombies reply, "Hi, James!"

He laughed thinking about it and a bubble of blood came out of his left nostril. That's when he knew that this was it. Vaughn thought of the sweet lepeški he ate in the restaurant in Lithuanian Plaza so long ago, thought of Rasa with violet hair then blonde again, and he died staring at the sign warning that dog shit was something upscale neighbors could or would not tolerate.

Burbank: 31 October 2004

Behead

By Harold Jaffe

The head of Paul Johnson was discovered in a refrigerator during a police raid on an apartment in the Saudi capital Riyadh, the interior ministry said.

Mr. Johnson was abducted by an al-Qaeda cell on 12 June. Photographs of his beheading were published on an Islamist website six days later.

His family has appealed for more news about the whereabouts of his body.

Mr. Johnson, who was from New Jersey, had been working as a helicopter engineer in Saudi Arabia for US defense contractor Lockheed Martin.

Security forces also found a surface-to-air missile, rocket-propelled grenades, automatic rifles, pistols, hand grenades, ammunition, computers, cash, nitrates and aluminum powder.

The discoveries were made after Saudi police stormed an apartment in Riyadh, killing two suspected militants, the interior ministry said.

It said three militants were arrested after being injured in the attack.

The raid in the capital's King Fahd District also led to the arrest of the wife and children of al-Qaeda's local chief, Saleh al-Oufi, officials said.

It is not known if Mr. Oufi himself was involved in the fighting, which is said to have started when security forces investigating the property came under fire.

If Mr. Oufi is found guilty in absentia his wife and children can be lawfully beheaded.

Mr. Oufi, a former policeman, became al-Qaeda's Saudi Arabia chief after the death of his predecessor, Abdul Aziz al-Muqrin.

Muqrin was reportedly killed in a shoot-out with security forces, sparked by the sighting of a car-load of militants attempting to dispose of a corpse, thought to have been that of Paul Johnson.

The Saudi interior minister later said Mr. Johnson's body had not been found.

His family appealed to US authorities to push the Saudi government to end the confusion surrounding the body.

Militants appearing on a video with a blindfolded Mr. Johnson in June had demanded that Saudi Arabia release prisoners arrested for links to radical Muslim groups.

After the deadline for their demands passed, graphic images of Mr. Johnson's beheading appeared on a website linked to Islamist militants.

Mr. Johnson was the second US civilian to have been beheaded by his abductors in the region this year.

Nick Berg, a US businessman in Iraq, possibly associated with the CIA, was shown being beheaded by masked militants on a website linked to Islamist causes.

Author Bios

Charlee Jacob has over 800 publishing credits for poetry and fiction, including two recent novels, *This Symbiotic Fascination* and *Haunter*, with Leisure Books. Some of her recent projects are novels *Dread In The Beast* (Necro), *Vestal* (Delirium), and *Dark Moods* (DNA). A poetry collection, *The Desert*, and a fiction collection, *Ghost Dancers*, are due soon from Dark Regions. Bloodletting will publish a stand-alone novella, *Wormwood Nights*. Her work has received nominations for The International Horror Guild Award, The Bram Stoker Award, The Darrell Award, The Rhysling Award, and The Pushcart Prize.

John Edward Lawson is an author, editor, and publisher living just outside Washington, DC. He was born in 1974 and enjoys traveling. His poetry collections include *The Horrible* (2005) and *The Scars Are Complimentary* (2002); fiction includes *Last Burn in Hell* (2005) and *Devil Entendre* (2005). While serving as editor-in-chief of Raw Dog Screaming Press and *The Dream People* webzine, John has also been editor of the anthologies *Tempting Disaster*, *Of Flesh and Hunger*, and *Sick*. Spy on him at <http://www.johnlawson.org>.

Jonathan William Hodges is a 23-year-old author of dark literature residing in urban North Carolina. His fiction has or will appear in *Flesh & Blood*, *Space & Time*, *Hadrosaur Tales*, *Sick: An Anthology of Illness*, and others. He edits & publishes *Wicked Hollow Magazine* and operates ProjectPulp.com, an online book/magazine shop for the small press. He dislikes liquor, enjoys humid North Carolina summers, and will one day die hopelessly alone.

Psychotic, but loveable, **Cake Earthhead** is an collage artist, writer, co-editor and raving madman who's works have terrorized such websites as *The New Absurdist*, *The Whimsical Icebox*, *The Dream People* and *The Dodsley Pages*. His work can also be seen in the anthologies edited by Nancy Jackson, including *Trip the Light Horrific*, *Dream the Dark Majestic*, *Travel to a Time Historic*, *Goremet Cuisine*, *Vintage Moon* and *Mind Scraps*. He co-edits the bi-monthly e-zine *Bloodcookies*.

Alyssa Sturgill writes horror fiction and poetry with a fixation on bizarre permutations of the flesh. She is the co-editor of the e-zine *Bloodcookies* where she also writes *Cinemasochism*, a bi-monthly cult movie review column. Her work has been featured in *The Dream People*, *Dream Virus*, *Gothic Fairytales*, *A Kick in the Nuts* (anthology), *Tempting Disaster* (anthology), and she has a story in the upcoming issue of *Cthulhu Sex*.

Her first book, *Spider Pie*, will soon be released through Raw Dog Screaming Press. She is by far the sexiest author featured in this anthology.

Forrest Aguirre is a recipient of the World Fantasy Award for his editing of the anthology *Leviathan 3*. His work has appeared in a wide range of publications including *Flesh & Blood*, *The Journal of Experimental Fiction*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *3rd Bed*, *Indigenous Fiction*, *Twilight Showcase*, *Redsine*, *Polyphony*, and many others. His work is forthcoming in *The MacGuffin* and *Surreal Magazine*. He has recently finished his first novel, *Swans Over the Moon*.

Family outings at Rhode Island's Misquamicut Beach were a common summer occurrence for **Kurt Newton** while growing up. The water was cold, the waves big, and on certain days the undertow was particularly strong—as if the ocean didn't want him to leave. Kurt spent a lot of time building sand castles instead, one eye always on the water. Check out Kurt's newly designed website at <http://www.kurtnewton.com> for information on where more of his works can be found.

Banned from the indie wrestling circuit where he terrorized both fans and opponents as the King Kong Kid, the world's tallest midget wrestler, **Brian Rosenberger** now scares the literate. His writing can be found in numerous places. Just look. He hails from Parts Unknown but perfects submission holds in Cincinnati. The choke's on you.

Mark McLaughlin is an unspeakable entity from beyond the boundaries of time and space. Turn-ons: mindless rampaging, orgies of destruction, and moonlit walks on the beach. Turn-offs: the powers of light, goodness and salvation ... as well as people who reveal movie endings. Collections of his fiction include *Once Upon A Slime*, *Hell Is Where The Heart Is*, and *Motivational Shrieker*. Also, he is the co-author (with Rain Graves and David Niall Wilson) of *The Gossamer Eye*, which won a Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Poetry. Visit Mark online: <http://www.geocities.com/mcmonstrous>.

D. Harlan Wilson has published over 100 stories in magazines, journals and anthologies throughout the world. He is the author of *The Kafka Effekt*, *Irrealities*, *Stranger on the Loose*, and the upcoming *Pseudo-City* and *Dr. Identity*. Currently he teaches writing and literature at Albion University in Michigan. For more information on Wilson and his work, check out his website at <http://www.dharlanwilson.com>.

Kevin L. Donihe's novel *Shall We Gather at the Garden?* was released in 2001 by

Eraserhead Press. A co-authored book (with Carlton Mellick III) will be released in 2005. Kevin's short fiction has appeared in over 140 different publications in ten countries. Venues include *The Mammoth Book of Legal Thrillers*, *Flesh and Blood*, *ChiZine*, *The Café Irreal*, *Cthulhu Sex*, *Roadworks*, and many others. He also edits *Bare Bone* for Raw Dog Screaming Press, a story from which was later reprinted in *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror 13*. His URL: <http://users.chartertn.net/mbs/kldwriter>.

Walking down a California suburban street or sitting in a chair at home, ordinary sights and sounds become something twisting in an odd direction without **Lida Broadhurst** thinking about it. Many of these weird visions have turned up in *EOTU*, *Nemonymous #1*, *Star*Line*, and many other publications. Her first poetry chapbook, *Into the Beautiful Maze*, published by Naked Snake Press, is a Stoker finalist.

Wayne Allen Sallee is the author of the novel *The Holy Terror*, the collection *With Wounds Still Wet*, and the chapbooks *Pain Grin* and *True Tales of the Scarlet Sponge*. While taking breaks from writing *City of No Second Chances*, a cop novel featuring Frank St. Cyr from his *Sex Crimes* piece "Shank of the Night," he's written a few stories in the Uptown area of Chicago, probably the city's most bipolar neighborhood. Also, he's being interviewed for a PBS documentary about Nelson Algren and his influence on Sallee's writing.

Harold Jaffe is the author of eleven books of fiction, including *False Positive*, *Straight Razor*, *Sex for the Millennium*, *Eros Anti-Eros*, *Terror-Dot-Gov*, and *15 Serial Killers*. Jaffe is editor-in-chief of *Fiction International*.