

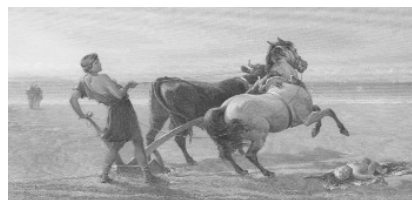
Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – THE LAST ONE IN by Julie Brandon. Ms Brandon is a poet, storyteller, composer and playwright. Her poems have been published in *Awakenings Review*, *Shemom*, *The Sheltered Poet*, *Poetica Magazine* and *Love's Choice*. Her one-act play, "Cup of Joe", will be produced at the 8x10 Short Play Festival in Westchester this April. She resides in Hoffman Estates, IL.

Page 5 – TWO ABYSSES by Will Bernardara, Jr.. He writes, "I am a writer of experimental fiction and a cofounder of the criminal literary circle The Tender Wolves Society. TWS is a trinity of convicted violent felons who happen to write (one of the founders remains incarcerated for dismembering a corpse after a rather nasty 'thrill kill'; the other two are on the streets, which shows you how foolish the state is). The group, inspired by E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Serapion Brethren* but updated for this 'century of fragmentation,' engages in literary pranks, sadism, philosophical rants, the fomentation of madness, and what we like to call ontological terrorism. We are misanthropic loners with vast surpluses of hate who will most surely come to bad ends. I have pieces in *Poor Mojo's Almanac(k)* and *Weird Year*, and pieces forthcoming in *Yellow Mama* and *Broadswords & Blasters*. Sometimes I make disturbing videos. I will be directing a feature film soon, about a creep who's obsessed with adapting John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* but he doesn't have a budget to speak of and ends up stabbing his girlfriend to death before finishing his laughably inept adaptation. I'm partway through the second draft of my first decently executed novel, which I like to describe as a kind of gay, stoner version of *Star Wars*. I live in Detroit and I'm armed."

Page 11 – FULL CIRCLE by Samuel Matteson. He writes, "I'm currently unpublished, so perhaps to my detriment I don't have publishing credits to add here. For what it's worth, I'm an undergraduate student at the University of Missouri pursuing a Sociology degree. Please feel free to judge this piece just as harshly as you would have if I'd riddled this cover letter with f-bombs and lewd gestures (in written form, of course) instead of the only two sentences I could seem to produce about myself. Happy reading!"



“THE LAST ONE IN”

by JULIE BRANDON

As I gradually regained consciousness, it seemed as though the air surrounding me was lacking in substance, which was silly, of course, because I had no trouble breathing. I suppose it could be compared it to thin mountain air except that the room smelled like stale cigarette smoke instead of pine. I found myself unconsciously taking deeper breaths than were strictly necessary.

The room seemed familiar. Dirty, worn carpet, a table lamp with one dim light bulb flickering as if the effort to give any light at all was well beyond its capacity. I could see a bed out of the corner of my eye but the ropes prevented me from getting a good look. I was sure that it was just as unimpressive as the rest of the furniture. Taking inventory of the small room only took a few moments. That left me plenty of time to think.

Three questions loomed in my mind. Where the hell was I, how did I get there and who I was? The first two may not surprise you. I mean, if you woke up tied to a chair in a beat up hotel room, I'm sure that you'd ask yourself the same ones? It's only natural, right? The last question surprised me. Did that mean I had amnesia, that I had been conked on the head? I considered that but it didn't seem right though I did have a pounding headache. Perhaps I had

been drugged. I clearly remember wondering who I was. What kind of crazy thought is that? For some reason, it made sense.

Right about then, the door opened. I was facing the shade drawn window and couldn't see who had come in. They had a firm tread, someone who walked without hesitation. Someone who felt they had a right to be there. "Ah, so you're finally awake." The voice was a harsh whisper and the breath felt warm on my ear as the owner bent down to speak to me. Clearly the speaker was trying to disguise their voice. Did I know them? I responded that I was. Ah, a man's voice. At least I knew that about myself. I was a man, tied to a chair. It wasn't much but it was a place to start.

"Do you know how long we've been looking for you?" I decided to risk a question or two. "Where am I and what do you want of me?" I wasn't prepared for the laughter. "You can't be serious! Everyone is always looking for you. I'm just the lucky son of a bitch who stumbled over you!" The woman forgot to whisper. Now I had one other piece of information. I was a man tied to a chair and a woman was part of the situation. "Now that you have me, what are you planning to do?" I asked. She snorted. "Please don't insult my intelli-

gence by playing dumb. You know what's at stake." She walked to the door, closing it behind her.

That didn't go very well. I tested the strength of the ropes. Whoever had tied me up knew what they were doing. I was pretty certain that escape artist wasn't listed on my resume. Trying to remember anything of value was fruitless. I had no control over the circumstances and staying stressed out would only deplete my energy. Besides, thinking just made my head hurt more.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I heard were voices through the closed door. Just a couple of phrases filtered through. Worth big bucks. We're supposed to bring him in. Fact number three and four, there were other people involved and I had a bounty on my head. I was also getting hungry and a trip to the bathroom was necessary. The door opened and the same woman leaned down and spoke in my ear. Her breath tickled the back of my neck. A thought started to work its way to the surface. "I've brought you some food. I'm not going to risk untying you so I'll have to feed you." I asked about the bathroom and she told me to hold it or soil myself. The disdain in her voice was evident. I hoped that I had a strong bladder.

She pulled the desk chair in front of me and sat down. I studied her face for a moment before taking in the rest of her. She appeared to be around 30 and was heavily made up. Her hair was dark blonde and pulled back in a loose bun. It was too dim to see her eye color. Dark slacks with a

pale button down blouse. She kind of reminded me of a bank teller. Average height, average build. She wouldn't stand out in a crowd but I suspect that was her intention.

She uncovered a bowl and caught me looking at her. "Stop that," she snapped. She motioned to the person standing behind me who had come in with her and told them to blindfold me. "There'll be none of that. I've heard about you." Maybe I could hypnotize people or had x-ray vision. Damn. Now I couldn't find out. She told me to open my mouth and began to spoon in some kind of greasy stew. It was hot and made me gag a bit. She muttered that it was like feeding a baby and she blew on the next spoonful before feeding me. I was so hungry that I didn't care how disgusting it tasted.

After a while, I heard her stand up. She told the other person to take the bowl away, that she was going to see what information I had. A man protested that she was changing the plan. "What do you think you can do about it? I need this money!" she said. There was a slight growl underlying the words and he left the room without answering her. She removed my blindfold and looked at me for a moment. "I'm not afraid of you, you know." I told her that I wasn't sure why she should be. She just shook her head. I asked for some water to wash away the taste of stew.

She grabbed a water bottle off the dresser and said that we'd have to share. She took a swig and then held the bottle for me. As soon as my mouth made contact

with it, everything came rushing back to me. That elusive thought swam to the surface. I knew who I was or rather what I was. I knew what I had to do. I tried to keep the slightly bemused look in my eyes so as not to give myself away. She took another drink and sealed her fate.

She got up to leave the room and stopped suddenly. I heard her stumble a bit and felt her grab the back of my chair. She moaned and started to shake. "Oh my God, no! What have you done to me?" She sat down heavily in the chair she had just risen from, a look of horror on her face as realization dawned. "How did you do it?"

she asked. I looked at the water bottle. The woman groaned.

I smiled. "It's simple." As I watched, her features began to change. No longer an average looking woman, she was becoming an average looking man. I always tried to choose an unremarkable looking body and had done so again. I felt my body chemistry shift as the borrowing process began. My bones shortened, my facial structure rearranged itself. All exterior changes happened in a very short time including the clothing. It wasn't painful for me because the body is merely a shell for us but she was in torment. She moaned and writhed as

her skeletal structure changed and grew.

I watched her suffer. If she had delivered me to the powerful people searching for me, they would have slain her on the spot. The pain she felt now is nothing to what they did to each other every day. I was doing her a favor.

All the memories clicked into place. I would be the last one back. I hope they had waited for me. I had to keep moving and seek a way out wherever I could. Within ten minutes, I was an average looking blonde woman tied to the chair and there was an average looking man lying on the dirty carpet. I let out a loud scream and a large man ran into the room waving a pistol around. "What the hell happened?" he shouted.

"Get me untied now! He used his tricks on me. Don't let him get away." The man untied me and quickly bound the man on the floor. He was



quick and efficient. Now I knew who had bound me to the chair. I snatched the blindfold from the dresser and quickly gagged the man on the floor. He opened his eyes wide in horror and began to struggle. “No more of that.” I imitated the way she had spoken to me, angry with a hint of a snarl. A bad ass. I told the large man to give me his gun while he carried our prisoner down to the car. Once we navigated a narrow stairwell, we came out of the building into a deserted alley. A nondescript silver sedan was parked by the door. Perfect. There were a million cars like this on the road. No one would notice one more.

The large man propped the bound one against the car in order to open the trunk. As he turned around, I shot him through the heart. Clean, no suffering. He hit the ground with a loud thud. I rolled his body behind a dumpster and figured that no one would find him for a while. Once they did, the rats would have gotten there first. My unsuccessful jailor stared up at me in terror. I sighed. There really was no need to explain my actions but I always felt compelled to do so.

“We just wanted to help but your people saw us as a threat and hunted us down. The people who hired you want to make sure that nothing ever gets better.” I looked away. “We had so much to offer. Freedom from disease, freedom from war.” I shook my head. “We had such hope when we arrived. Then attempts to destroy us started. We couldn’t comprehend it at first. It was a foreign concept. What you didn’t understand is that we can’t be killed, that

we keep going. All we needed was a borrowed body. And then another and another. I’m not even sure how many I’ve borrowed.” I looked in the car for something to wipe my hands on. No luck with that. It was spotless.

“The others are waiting for me. They won’t leave until I return to the beacon.” How I hoped that was true. I leaned down and stroked his hair. I could smell the fear. “Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of your body.” I smiled. “Perhaps a little less make up.” The man didn’t appreciate my humor. “Just know that this is not what we were when we arrived but what your world made us. Maybe you should close your eyes.” I said as gently as I could. A single tear slid down his cheek. I raised the gun and fired.

After I moved the body behind the dumpster, I got into the car. There was a wallet with identification for several women. It seems that my borrowed body had led a pretty unsavory life. I drove to the edge of the dusty town and stopped the car. I stood in the road for a moment then got back in and drove west toward the mountains, desperately seeking the beacon that signaled the way home. ❖

“TWO ABYSSES”

by WILL BERNARDARA, JR.

The Forest of Splintered Bones is rank with zombie Vikings. They come and go, the putrefied hordes, like maggoty weather systems. Today, unfortunately, it's pouring.

Somewhere above us a bonepecker attacks a tree with its beak. The trees aren't natural. They were put here eons ago by giants. The trees themselves are the jagged bones of dead giants: ribs and femurs. Historians think the forest is a giant graveyard. No one has any theories as to why undead Vikings use it as their hunting ground.

I'm calm. I slaughter meditatively. Zombies are cake. I loop around, as graceful as a ballerina, my scythe swishing through the rotten meat with ease, lopping heads. Within minutes, forty or more shamblers are disassembled, their fetid bits quivering in ponds of gore.

At first I think he's a zombie and pirouette for the kill. But then I notice he's sitting on a gray stone reading or writing in a notebook of loose sheets. He's neither Viking nor zombie; he's an old man with a beard. An old *ghost* with a long beard, which is why he flickers in and out of existence like a strobe.

“Aye. Ghost. Got a name?”

The elderly apparition looks up from his notebook. His eyes are black electricity.

“Fernando,” he says, seeming uncertain. “Fernando Pessoa.”

“Pleasure. I'm Erica, adventuress and seeker of precious metals.”

Fernando squints. His weathered mug is like parchment embedded with runes.

“What is wrong with your ears, girl? They're pointy.”

“I'm half elf.”

“Oh. I'm Portuguese.”

Fernando looks down at his disarrayed notes and mumbles: “The coach pulled up. Night fell on me. Or is this merely me forgetting how to exist?”

This ghost appears to be deranged. It happens. Death drives some folk mad. Normally, I would venture on. But there is something about this *Portuguese*, whatever that is. It's his eyes. They're the eyes of a little boy who died long ago, eyes now stuck in the sockets of this old man.

“You're dead,” I tell him. “You're a discarnate, an afterimage of existence.”

Fernando looks at me, looks *through* me. His despair is epic.

“But... my work. It wasn't done.”

I try to be encouraging: “Don't fret, Portuguese. There's plenty of work for ghosts. All the major prime-time soap operas star ghosts. And haunting is as recession-proof as healing herbs and harlots.”

“I’m terribly perplexed.”

“Well, if it’s literature you seek, there is a small library in the hamlet yonder. I’m headed that way. You’re welcome to tag along, corporeal or not.” I smile.

The dead – ghosts, not zombies – come from a realm called Earth. Earth has many sacred names: Detroit, Providence, Iowa, South America, Bangkok - to name a few. Why they pop up here in our dimension no one knows, not even the Werewolf Scholars of the Dilapidated Creamery.

On the outskirts of the hamlet, while crossing a cute little gnome-bridge and babbling stream, we’re attacked by a swooping clockwork dragon. It’s likely some emperor’s son’s dangerous toy that got loose or lost.

One arc of my mighty scythe cuts the automaton in two. Gears and little plates go flying hither and yon; some screws and bolts splash into the stream.

“Heavens,” Fernando says, blinking in and out of the here and now.

Like all libraries, this one stinks. Probably because most of the patrons are sorcerers, loitering and scowling a lot, memorizing grimoires. Sugar augments magic, so sorcerers eat raw sugar by the handful and munch handfuls of hard candy like it’s popcorn. Consequently, sorcerers’ teeth are in rough shape. Hence the stench: tooth decay. If you see someone with black and crumbling teeth, they’re most likely a wizard of some kind. I don’t mess with spells,

myself. I don’t need magic; I have a reaper scythe and it’s super deadly. Besides, magic pollutes the atmosphere, producing mystical fallout and wizardly byproducts. It’s the primary reason our world’s so unstable: vestigial spell-junk everywhere. Their breath stinks up the library; but maybe I shouldn’t condemn? I probably smell like Viking guts. A bath would be divinity.

“Look there,” I say to Fernando. “Those gray boxes house the Winternet. It is a prophet, an oracle.”

Winternet’s everywhere. Even inns out in the sticks have it. It was created by a famous gay leprechaun and his pet ooze.

Ghosts can’t interact with physical matter, so I type Fernando’s words into the search engine. It feels prescient.

“P-E-S-S-O-A? Let’s see... *Orpheu... Portugal Futurista... Mensagem...*”

The librarian, a prim monster with a face of a dozen eyes, is glaring at us. Maybe because my companion is a specter and I’m armed with a six-foot scythe.

“Yes! There!” the ghost raves. “That’s me!” His eyes are nearly popping out of his head.

“It says your most famous work is the posthumous *Book of Disquiet*.”

“Posthumous?!” Fernando explodes. “A fucking possum!”

Everyone in the library – sorcerers, conjoined trolls, a swarm of highly literate dragonflies – shushes us. I feel my alabaster cheeks go all rosy.

“Fernando, this is a library. You can’t shout in here.”

“But my *Livro do Desassossego* – it wasn’t

finished! It was... it was *less* than a rough draft!" The dude's agony is total.

We sit down on a moss sofa. Well, I sit. The ghost just sort of mimes sitting; his butt doesn't really touch cushion. A few butterflies alight on the moss near us. They're the color of pastels.

Fernando says his "book" was just a jumble of scrawls in a trunk. He wrote under a slew of aliases: Search, de Campos, Soares, the Baron of Teive.

"Is my book here, in this library?"

"Doubt it. It said it was published by a penguin, so it must've been published in another realm. In this realm penguins are just dumb cold birds; they don't publish books."

Pessoa buries his face in his arms and lap, defeated.

"It's all absurd," he says.

The multi-eyed librarian scolds (in sign language) an ogre for using the gray box for watching sexy stuff. Some dirty princess doing unspeakable things to a unicorn.

"It's OK, Fernando," I say, patting his insubstantiality; my hand passes through him like through a light beam. "You're a ghost now, bro. You should concern yourself with ghost business."

I smell him before I see him: organic putrescence, halitosis. A bald sorcerer in a black cloak sits down next to us, rudely banishing the butterflies with his swatting. Half his face is like melted cheese, probably from some alchemical mishap.

"I couldn't help overhearing your friend here's dilemma," he says to me. His tone is slimy. His cloak reeks of magic - a

floral/industrial smell.

"All is dream and phantasmagoria!" Fernando cries. "It is with my own hands that I strangle myself."

Ghosts, as you can see, are known for their melodrama. Hence soap operas starring ghosts like *The Old and the Immaterial*. But this Fernando is something else.

"I'm Bognail the Misbegotten," the sorcerer supplies, although I don't recall anyone asking him his name. There is no such thing as a "good" sorcerer. They're all bad news. They're opportunists. And nearly all of them are partly insane from overexposure to magic waves that erode sense. It's not unlike Earth's radiation, which I've read about on the Winternet. Sorcerers, by and large, end their lives defecating on themselves and arguing with furniture.

"Imperious and inscrutable Life!"

Fernando curses.

Bognail grins, his teeth nubby coals. "It is the abyss you seek, poet shade."

Fernando waves around his notebook as though it's superglued to his palm. "Why can't I jettison this worthless journal!?"

"It's a ghostly accessory, Fernando," I explain. "It serves no function other than to signify what your life was about."

My explanations are in vain.

Fernando's deep in his idolonic pity.

"If you despair of your immaterial condition," Bognail interjects, smooth as rotten honey. "I've a cure."

I smell scam. Scam and rotten piehole.

There are two abysses. (According to this Bognail character; I know of only one.)

One is a natural abyss; the other, artificial. Everyone knows about the former. It's been described as a black waterfall, a cascading horror of liquid shadow, like ink that *eats* space and time and rocks and whatever. Some seers claim it's the blood of a long-dead god, forever marring the glen it's in, eternally pouring, a redundant shrine-loop. But no one knows for real for real.

Bognail says this mirror abyss, built or summoned by a sect of syphilitically insane pixies, is a black maw in a holler far north.

With roadkill breath, he says: "Ghosts enter it and never return. It is a void of rest for restless apparitions. Or so I'm told."

"You navigate by rumor, sorcerer," I accuse. "If you haven't ever even *seen* this second abyss –"

"I've seen it, elfling. In the glistening guts of a prize rooster."

He's referring to haruspexy or entrail reading – a foul but admittedly powerful form of augery.

Fernando's eyes are old dry wells in a sold farm's moldering corner. I've never seen a ghost so moribund.

"Peace?" Fernando croaks. Something like hope flickers across his face.

Bognail smiles. It's a rictus that would gag a maggot.

"I will show ye the way."

Bognail and Fernando stand up simultaneously. I stand too, a little unsure.

Bognail's left eyebrow rises curiously. It's very arch.

"If it's north, it's on the way," I say, defiant. I fancily spin my reaper blade batonlike, stilling it in a carrying position.

The three of us depart the cottagelike library, the stink of magic with us like a haunt.

On the journey north, we are attacked by a hostile blob composed of Bavarian custard and chipmunk bones, a rainbow cube that induced hallucinations in us, a band

of feral catamites, and a vicious anthropomorphic storm-cloud that rained wooden nickels on us, which left welts.

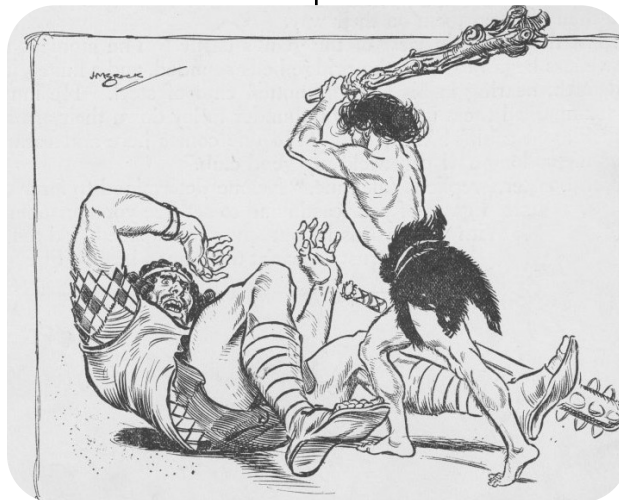
During all this hack-and-slash Bognail is about as useful as a moat of mayonnaise.

He casts a few rudimentary defense spells, but

it's my scythework that saves us. He's a lousy magician. I wonder how Bognail had planned to make the journey without someone like me... if indeed he had?

We stop to eat in a blueberry patch. I munch lentils; Bognail, true to trade, gobbles handfuls of taffy and anise squares from a drawstring pouch. Ghosts, of course, don't eat. Fernando takes the time to examine his illusive supplement, the notebook. He's as serious as a dirk in the duodenum. Serious as plague.

"What's writ upon its pages?" Bognail



asks.

“Gibberish.” Fernando shakes his head. “The text swims and blurs.”

“Glitchy is the afterlife,” Bognail says, mouth full of chewy and crunchy sweets both. “The legions that... *engineer* phantasmal environs try (unsuccessfully, it would seem) to replicate your prose for that spook ledger. It is... a kind of counterfeiting or mimicry.”

“The words I *do* see don’t sound like me.” Fernando looks perturbed.

I feel a swell heartways. I want to console this not-man.

“Perhaps the afterlife engineers *can’t* imitate your writings, Fernando. Because you were too powerfully original.”

Bognail scoffs. The anise squares are like quarry breaking apart loudly in his revolting gob.

“It’s not that, elfling,” Bognail sneers. “I can –“

“*Shut up, diabolist!*” I command, my little knuckles whitening as I grip the reaper tighter, instinctively, the reaction syncing with my anger.

Bognail wisely shuts his gross mouth.

I lean nearer to Fernando and smile. “They can’t copy you, Fern. You were one-of-a-kind.”

The pixies’ turf is little more than a sextet of emerald knolls and a hedgehog-rich basin. Pixies are horrors: a twisted synthesis of the cute and the monstrous. They’re pink or blue and they glow, which makes their innards visible. Their wings are a kind of indigo glass. Their heads are large

and keg-shaped, with beady eyes of pure pupil-less black on the sides where ears normally go. They wear tutus and their Thyestean noggins usually sport a bow or barrettes. (It’s like putting lipstick on Cerberus, really.) Pixies stand about four feet but generally flutter about and hover. They’re hideous, often cannibalistic, and put me in mind of petulant birthday girls gone blinking homicidal. Their mouths are all blunt square teeth, but their jaws crunch with the strength of machines. When not eating each other, they eat, messily, the basin’s poor hedgehog population, it seems. Pixies carry these glittery wands. No one knows what the wands do. They look trinkety.

“Where does this abyss yawn, sorcerer?” I have my scythe poised to dislimb someone.

“Down through the hollow, on the other side of that mound there.” Bognail points. His fingernail is long, black, and pointed.

The three of us descend into the sunny depression of herbage. The hedgehogs are so plentiful here I’m literally having to nudge them out of my way with my boots.

“The pixies. Where are they?” Fernando asks, wary.

“They’re only attracted by shiny objects. Flashy stuff,” I explain. “Good thing we’re a rather drab trio.”

We’re in the dead center of the basin; Bognail has something in his pouch. Now the something is in his palm, I notice: sleight. He feigns a ridiculously stagy sneeze: “AHHH-CHOO!” He blows force-

fully into his palm, disseminating a fistful of silver and purple *glitter*.

It's a sparkling cloud, hanging in the air, sunlight dancing on its shiny specks.

The knobgobbler couldn't have called the pixies any more obviously had he blown a tuba. The nasty sprites rise like glam mosquitoes from their furrows. *Dozens* of them. Candy-colored flying things.

But pixie block-teeth are no match for my reap. It's like mutilating the air. I whirl malevolently, and the valley echoes with the inhuman shrieks of lacerated pixies. Cutting through tutus and torsos alike; my scythe slashes the wings and they shatter like mirrors do. Pixie blood's neon pink and it spurts and splashes and paints the grass. The hedgehogs hide.

I lapse into what I call my Killer Zen state. The massacring slows down, becomes banal, effortless. Rote murder. I'm spinning and hacking, limbs dropping heavily to ground. It is in this meditative killing zone that I'm able to admire the scenery: Fernando, transparent, rays of sunlight skewering his body, stares at me and my violent dance, something like grim reverence in those somber eyes of his.

Bognail, meanwhile, is stooping and prying the pixies' wands from their dead fingers, his eyes glassy with greed. He has an armful of the glittering rods.

I whirl and kill. I hear Bognail blurt something about vast sums folk will pay in some faraway town for pixie wands. They're kitsch; people like them there.

I snap out of it quick, shake the mur-

der trance out of my head. Fernando and me are ankles-deep in chopped pixie parts and bioluminescent guts.

Bognail's gone.

"He ran off. The sorcerer," Bognail tells me.

"Yes. I reckoned that."

"The abyss of repose. He said -"

"There's no second abyss of repose, Fernando," I say, wiping pink gore from my blade. "He lied. It was just a tale to get us here. So he could make a little scratch off some souvenir wands. What a dick."

"How did he even know of this place, that the pixies would be here?"

"He read a rooster's intestines."

The sadness in Fernando's face - the letdown - is deep-felt. This poor ghost just wants to die for real.

But then... then I have an idea. One of those perfect ideas that come like gifts.

"No time to rest anyway, Fernando. You have work to do."

He looks at me, disquieted.

"My penmanship isn't the finest in the realm, but it'll improve. In the next town we'll buy paper and ink. I'm going to be your personal assistant."

I smile. Fernando looks at me for a long time.

The first sentence the ghost has me write? *Every dream is the same dream, for they're all dreams.* ❖

“FULL CIRCLE”

by SAMUEL MATTESON

The two of you lie side-by-side, eyes locked and barely blinking. It's been almost twenty minutes since you finished your last attempt at intimacy, and the silence that's followed has become increasingly claustrophobic. You've lost track of what you actually want from her, but trying to think about it inside the cloying quiet is proving impossible.

“Let's try again,” you hear yourself say. You hadn't intended speak in the first place, but your voiced idea seems logical enough, so you decide to keep at it. “Just one more time. You can tell me what you need. Completely on your terms, but... Please.”

“No.” Her expression strains at the word. It hurts you to see. Whatever it was you'd wanted from her, it wasn't this. “I think we're gone,” she says, “and I'm tired of trying to bring us back. We've just been going through the motions.”

You bite your lip instead of replying and slide a thick lock of her hair through your fingers, focusing intently on how it feels against your skin. Years ago you'd told her her hair had felt like spun silk, and you'd thought yourself something of a poet for saying it. But that line had been nothing more than a recycled literary cliché from the mouth of a teenager, and now you can't

even pretend it still applies. As it stands her hair is barely more than a coarse tangle. It's just as bright gold as it used to be, but it's lost most of its magic now that you know the gleam comes from a bottle. It's not the dye itself that bothers you, though. It's the understanding that everything else in her life is just as carefully controlled as the bleach.

“Come on,” you say. “One more time. We haven't lost it all, have we? I just want to feel like us again, and if we don't do it now we'll be out of time.”

She turns her body to the wall. “Don't talk about time. I can't take it.”

Time. You should've known better than to use that word. You're not fond of it, either.

She looks lonely with her pale back to you. Still, as much as you want to, you don't reach out to comfort her. She's the one who touches, not the other way around, and that's stayed the same no matter how many years and miles there are between her and her past.

You resign yourself to checking your watch. It's nine minutes to midnight. Simple arithmetic makes that an hour and thirty-two left.

She gets up on her feet and moves to the closet on her toes. A flicker of orange

light crosses from the window and slides along the gentle S-curve of her back. “Do you mind?” she asks. She’s caught you staring.

You snap your head away. “I’m sorry.”

Cloth rustles against cloth as she dresses herself in fresh clothes. You hadn’t realized she’d stocked the closet at all, but stopping to think about when she might’ve done it only brings more silence, and more silence only brings back your nerves. You repeat yourself to relieve the tension. “Sorry.”

“Sorry?” she echoes. “Is that all you can say now?” Her voice shakes with nerves of her own, and maybe a little spite, too. You can’t be sure about the spite.

She’s fully dressed by the time you look back to her. You instinctively draw the sheet up past your chest.

“I’m going out,” she says. “Come with me?”

You just blink at her. You think going outside should be the last thing on anyone’s mind tonight.

After a moment with no reply, she adds in a small voice, “Please?”

She rarely uses the magic word, so you must have been wrong about the spite. And you’ve never said no to her, anyway—even on her worst days—so of course you agree in the face of a genuine *please*. “Sure,” you say with a nod. “Whatever you need.”

You get out of bed, too, and wrap your arms around yourself as some kind of shoddy armor from her eyes. There’s little point to the exercise. She’s already scrutinizing your body the way she’d never let you scrutinize hers. There’s nothing personal about

that double standard, though. Her walls had gone up long before you came into her life.

Concrete pricks at your feet as you go around scooping up clothes, and the discomfort reminds you that the smooth hardwood flooring you’d picked out together will never be installed. A sinking feeling buries itself in your gut. You set to purposefully buttoning your shirt to will it away, but your eyes cross the window as you work, and what you see only makes the pit in your belly that much deeper. Outside, the pleasant suburb you’d been so eager to join is drenched in a steadily pulsing red-orange glow.

Your foot brushes against your discarded tie, and after a moment of peering at it you pick it up and loop it around your collar. You’re sure she’ll think it’s silly of you to bother with a tie with such short time left, but you’ve always been able to take solace in small things, and the rote motions of fastening it help ground you a little.

A sudden crash shakes the house just as you finish the knot. She lets out a cry, but your senses are too dulled to react. You haven’t given yourself the luxury of jumping out of your skin for days. There’s no time for that, and your watch is proof: Sixteen minutes have already passed since the last time you checked it.

“It’s getting closer, isn’t it?” she asks. Her voice has evened out, but even in the relative dark you can see fear on her face.

Before you can reply she spins and rushes out of the room. The front door slams downstairs. Once your shoes are on, you

descend the stairs to the first floor and leave your half finished home empty behind you.

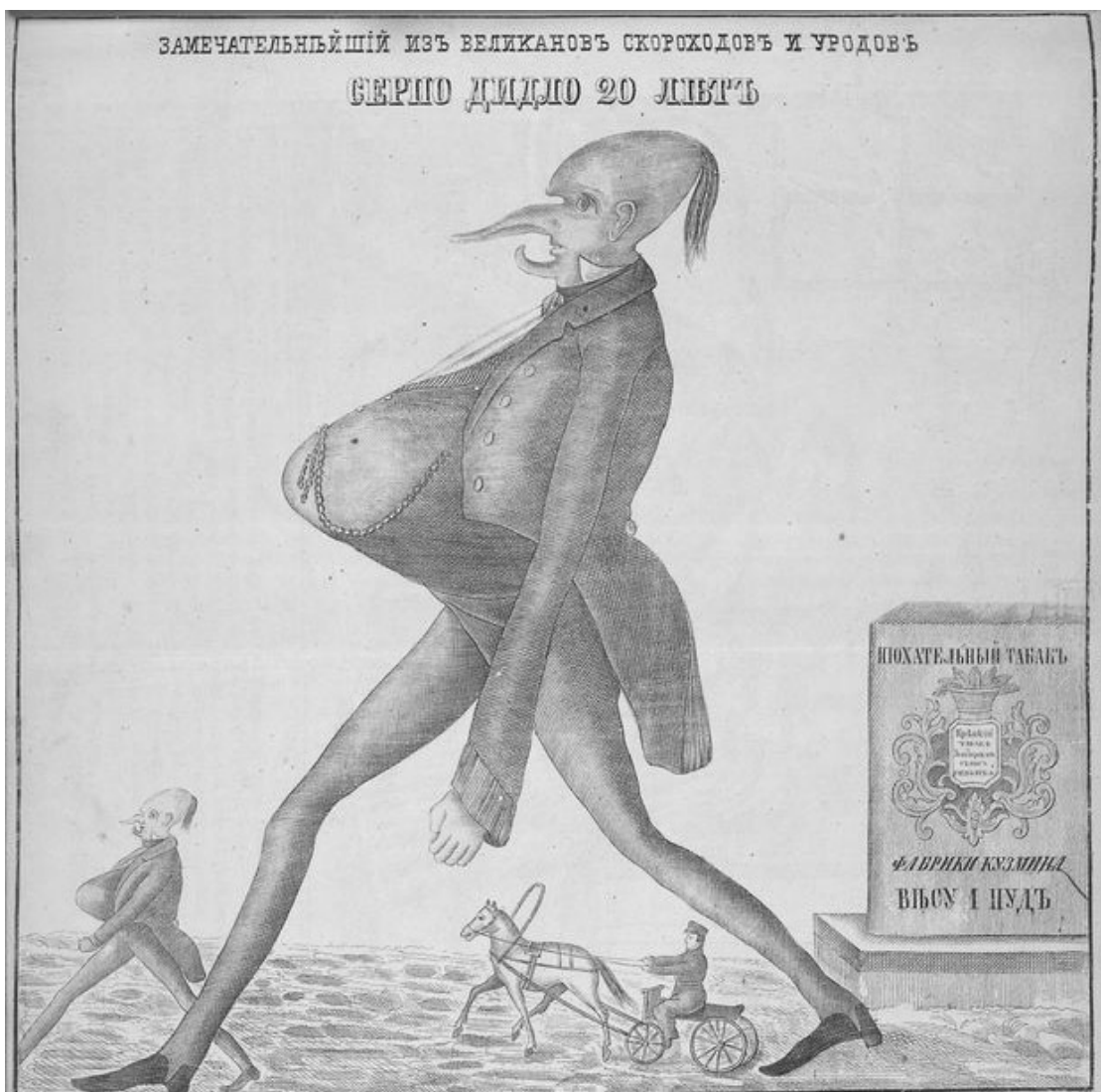
You shiver and push your hands deep into your pockets. It's markedly colder than the last time you'd gone outdoors. The pulsing light covers everything, and ash drifts across the cul-de-sac in all directions. Flames and debris consume a house down the street. You met the elderly couple that lives there once. "No," you mutter. "Lived there."

"What's that?"

You shake your head. "Nothing. Can we

get out of here?"

Her dark form silhouettes against the flaming building, and you make an effort to see her as the girl you met in high school. She'd been a different person then: Still apprehensive to a fault, but you never would've called her fragile like you would the woman she's become. From your very first interaction you noticed something in the way she held herself that betrayed a defense against invisible threats. Even when you hadn't known her closely you'd always felt she could survive those dangers. She'd seemed tenacious to you, somehow.



You cast your mind back a little more and picture her wearing her ever-present butterfly barrette. She'd worn it every day until college. She once told you it was lucky, but from the glimpses you'd caught of bruises under her long sleeves you knew she was anything but lucky. She was whip-smart—which would've been attraction enough—but more importantly she'd been *kind*. You weren't used to *kind*.

It all added up, and more than anything else in your young life you'd wanted to save her. You've never fooled yourself into thinking you could do that completely, but at the time you thought you might bring a little joy into her life by asking her on a date. It had worked, for a time.

Her shadow comes away from the burning house, and before you can remember her *exactly* the way she used to be, her adult self is simply too present. Her old strength has been beaten down almost completely. Her cynicism's been keyed up to eleven in its place, and every chapter of her history is written in her heavy expression.

Her voice brings you completely to the moment: "How can you say that?" she asks.

You'd lost your place reminiscing. "I said something?"

"You know. You said, 'can we get out of here?' How can you ask that when there's nowhere else to go?"

She's right. No one place is safer than any other. Not tonight.

You wonder how your friends are faring in their own unsafe places. They're all with their families, which you think must be nice. You don't have that option. Your par-

ents are gone, and she'd narrowly survived her time with hers. She's all that you have, and you're all that she has. You'd been on track to make things official for a few days, but that was before the news broke. Since then the whole thing has lost its meaning—which had been scant to begin with—so you're honestly not sure why she still wears the ring.

You check your watch. "Less than an hour," you say.

"Stop it," she snaps, but not out of vitriol: Out of fear.

A roar splits the air, and you turn toward the source to watch in stunned horror as a chunk of rock cuts an unnaturally slow path down to the city on the horizon. The impact decimates the skyline, and your eardrums soon after.

She shakes her head in despair, but like you, she can't seem to look away. "How many people just...?" She doesn't need to finish the sentence. You both know what she means.

"Best not to think about it," you say.

She starts to cry, but she doesn't seem to realize it's happening. She looks so lost to you. You feel another pang of longing for her, and it's so strong this time that you actually do reach out to pull her close. She struggles at first in her old aversion to physical contact, but flattens herself to your chest before you can decide to give up.

"Remember our first date?" she asks. Your shirt muffles her voice.

Her question catches you by surprise, but you're grateful to her for surfacing the memory. It's definitely one of your

favorites, and the thought of it even makes you smile a little. “Of course I remember,” you say. “It was our day at the beach.”

She chokes out some laughter and tears before saying, “We got so sunburned, didn’t we?”

“That was my fault. I was too nervous to remember the sunblock. I couldn’t believe you’d said yes, you know? Back then... You used to be so pretty back then. You—” The word catches in your throat when you realize you’d said she *used to be pretty back then*, past tense, and you hope to God she doesn’t catch the nuance.

She doesn’t seem to. “You thought I was pretty?” she asks. “No, you were the cute one. I was totally giddy. I’d never been on a date. And for it to be you of all people.” She shakes her head against you.

The impacts around you are more frequent now, and the orange light is pulsing faster and faster, but you try your best to ignore it all. Your focus needs to be on her now, and on both of you together.

“It went even better than I’d hoped,” you say. “I even got a kiss. It was perfect other than the sunburns.”

She presses her cheek deeper into your shoulder, and says in a new, more assured voice: “I’m actually glad to be here with you. I am. I didn’t think I would be, but... Standing here we almost make sense again.”

You rest your chin on the top of her head. “I know,” you say. “If you think about it, it’s some kind of symmetry. We’re together again to see things off like we started them as kids. We were *good* back

then, weren’t we? And we didn’t roll around in bed all day when we were still good together. That was never what made us *us*. It was stupid of me to think that could bring anything back. But... Here now? We really almost do make sense.”

She stretches up on her toes to kiss you. It’s the first kiss with genuine emotion you’ve shared with her in weeks, and it’s strong enough to give you pause. The thought of your watch actually slips your mind.

“I love you,” she whispers, but it sounds more like a tentative question than a statement.

With as much conviction as you can work up, you reply, “I know. And I love *you*.”

The words don’t actually fit back into place like you’d hoped they might—and from her troubled eyes she clearly feels the same—but even detached from their proper emotion they’re something of a comfort. Three words, long dead, briefly resurrected.

The moment passes, and the three words are put to rest for the last time. The two of you separate, and once again you’re struck by the heavy weight of your watch.

In your last moment you have the intense feeling that something has been left unresolved. But there’s no point trying to suss out what it is. You’ve already run out of time.

#

You don’t notice the shift at first. That’s to be expected. Your senses can’t process your new environment, but that’s just fine. You’re with me now.

Hi there.

Let me look you over. I see your body appears much like those of the other humans to pass this way. There's nothing I can find to visually distinguish you from them, but don't let that concern you. You're still just as special to me as the first, even if I can't tell any of you apart. You see, you all have unique histories, and though I do admit those histories are quite similar—and most of my peers couldn't care less about them—they're not perfectly alike, and the minute differences that do exist have interested me greatly.

That said, I mostly find myself interested in a *sameness* of late. Nearly every one of the final gasp of your kind shares a novel quirk: You began your earthly ends with an almost religious reverence for clocks. Nothing changed about the clocks themselves to warrant your worship. Your watch wasn't actually as heavy as you perceived it to be, and its second hand still ticked along at the same speed it had before you knew of your fate. If I understand correctly—and I'm certain I do—all human watches were meant to count the seconds accurately. And yours did exactly that, even if it did feel a bit faster than usual.

Let's count them as they happened, shall we?

Forty-six ticks after the kiss.

Forty-five ticks after 'I love you.'

After those, a forty-seventh tick.

But no forty-eighth.

And no forty-ninth.

For the first time since its construction, the watch you'd put so much faith in

stopped keeping time. The importance your lot gave to the ticking makes the not ticking fascinating indeed.

In case you were wondering, her watch stopped just when yours did. You didn't notice her checking it, but I did. She was fussing over the time almost as much as you were.

And time! What a concept. I should tell you that time doesn't come in seconds and minutes and hours any longer. It's measured here in lifetimes: In deeds done and thoughts thought, in blood and sweat, love and tears, in all the things that make you humans human.

But I've gone off track. There are more pressing matters than my philosophizing. We stand at the beginning and end of all things, and you'll be leaving shortly, so I must ask you something outright. For rapidity's sake I'll actually vocalize it.

I make a noise akin to clearing my throat. "Human," I begin. My voice reminds you of shattering glass, which I'm not sure is a compliment or an insult. I don't stop to ponder it. It's all subjective, after all. So I finish: "Are you content with your life as you lived it?"

You can't answer—not in your current state—but I know you're listening. I also know exactly what you would say. The human mind isn't difficult to predict.

"No?" I ask. "Then you don't feel fulfilled?"

You would reply 'no' to that as well. Even if you could speak there would be no need for me to hear the word.

I go on, "You weren't rich and famous?"

You didn't see the world? You behaved badly? You didn't get the girl?"

Like all humans, you would be shaking your head if you had one. Maybe you'd be crying. I've never been much good at predicting the way regret manifests physically, and considering there are none of you left to study, I suppose I never will. How frustrating. But it's no matter. I understand the psychological aspects of regret perfectly, so I'm certain my questions have stirred your mind in some way.

So I ask my final question, one I've asked so many times now: "Is this how you want your story to end?"

You shout: "NO!" and the force of it thunders across the entirety of existence.

It's truly miraculous. I'm struck dumb by the enormity of what you've achieved, and it takes me a moment to find my voice again. "You can speak?" I ask in genuine, unabashed awe. "And with such volume! You must have a strong will to live."

I fall silent. This development requires me to think a bit. I've lobbed the same questions at countless of your kind, but I was never actually sure of what I hoped to gain from the asking. My peers mocked the futility of it, yet still I continued with my one-sided inquiries. And that's all they could ever be: One-sided. I never had an inkling that one of you might *speak*, but now... Though I know not why or how, I feel I've been searching for someone like you all along.

Ah. I can feel the rawness of your singular emotion now. How could I have missed it? Your *regret* was so pure at the precise

moment time ended that it froze like an insect in the amber of your being. I can almost taste it.

How utterly unique you are among your kind! How fantastic it is that it was I who found you first! My peers would have sent you along without a word.

But what to do now? Someone as special as you must deserve a reward. Yes, I think a reward is in order.

I find my voice again. "This is unprecedented," I say. The awe still hasn't left me. "To be honest, I'm not sure what action is proper here. I do have an idea, but it would be rather difficult to execute. It'd be such fun, though, and if I do say so myself it's as vividly unique as you are. You know, I *am* going to carry it out. And quickly, before my logical side can convince me against it. I do find going with my gut to be the best way, don't you? Even when it's risky?"

I wait for an answer, but it seems you can no longer speak. Or perhaps you simply have nothing to say. There's no way for me to tell, so I press on.

"This will complicate the work of everyone behind existence. We'll all struggle to adjust to the folded reality. Still, it's all so very interesting that I feel comfortable speaking for everyone here when I say the fun of witnessing the outcome will sufficiently ease the consequences. And there *will* be consequences for every being, but... Are you still following me, human?"

"Anything," you beg.

Aha! There's that voice again. Still with the begging, but this time it's not an appropriate response to the question. Then

again, from what I've seen of your interactions on Earth you did plenty of begging to get your way, so perhaps it's simply a comfortable behavior for you to fall back on. I'll let you get away with it this time.

"Very well," I say. "If you're following, I'll continue. I understand your life had precious few memorable moments, and happy ones fewer still. Your experience was a largely unpleasant one, wasn't it?" I begin to pause for you to answer, but realize I'm being rather cruel by asking. You're well aware of the qualities of the life you've left behind. So I quickly add, "But we shouldn't dwell on the past." Now I *do* pause, but only for effect. What I'm about to say requires some dramatic tension.

The short silence increases your nerves tenfold. Good. Now it's time to reveal your reward.

"I intend to offer you a gift, human, and you'll only have one chance to accept it. So listen very carefully, and answer me this: Would you like to try again?"

"Please, please, please!" Every entity hears your cries at once. You've made us all well aware of you now.

"I really do believe you've earned this," I say. "Close your eyes."

Your figure squirms in anxiety. You've realized you don't have eyes to close. Come now, I was only teasing you. I'm allowed at

least a little joke at your expense, aren't I? I'm giving you a big gift, after all.

"Breathe," I order.

You weren't able to close eyelids you never had, but you can in fact breathe. I would never play two tricks in a row. Some of my peers might, but I like to think I'm above that behavior.

"Alright," I say. "There's no need to

delay any longer, so I'll be brief. But in the parlance of your culture: Don't fuck it up this time."

Your equilibrium spins out of control, and after my voice fades you find you have eyes again. They're coming alive. Light swims back to you, and before long the sharp scent of salt dispels the dizziness. You feel what must be the sun beating down on your shoulders.

When your vision clears, you see a young girl. She looks about sixteen.

She smiles at you. You find yourself smiling back, though you're not sure why.

You notice a butterfly clip in her hair. *Now* you remember.

I give you a moment to bask in the understanding of the gift. It's only fleeting, but it's there. You *know*.

I'm quick, though, and before you can act I've burned away every memory of your first life—barring one.



Just for my ego, you can still hear a few words in a voice like shattering glass:
“*Would you like to try again?*”

You won't be able to place the words until the day you and I meet again, back in the space between all things. You're very dear to me now, so on that day I think I plan to make you a more permanent offer. You'll likely find it very agreeable. For now, though, enjoy your second life as best you can. Perhaps you really can right whatever went wrong the first time around. And if you can't... Well, we'll all be disappointed, but existence will move on as it always has.

Do be quick about things. Your clocks may have reset, but they're counting down to the end again.

Given free will, I can't stop your fellow

humans from making new and different decisions in this folded world. Their choices could be to your detriment or your benefit. I do not know. The fact of the apocalypse, however, is not ambiguous. I don't have to wonder why or how or when you'll meet your fate. I already know those things. Your fresh start holds only one question in my mind—or in any of our minds, really.

All of us are wondering: In the end, when the flames rain down on you once again, will she truly be by your side? Will your last 'I love you' stick the landing?

Will it?

Let's find out. ❖

END TRANSMISSION