

Volume 1.12  
6 August 2011

# “Doors in Shadows”

# Cannoli Pie

A Tasty Variation on Literature, Photography, Food and Music



Artwork by Stephen Krauska

# Slice It Up



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# Letter from the Editor

My preferred story aesthetics have long straddled the traditionally bold line between image-driven grotesque and wit-fueled pop. Brian Evenson doesn't write about trendy drugs. Likewise, Douglas Coupland doesn't do amputation cults. But I have always found myself equally engaged, as a reader, with these opposing genres. But perhaps it wasn't until recently, when putting together a project I will for now call StoryVault (a project that attempts to archive and categorize all of my stories for easy reading; more to come in the future), that I realized my mutual engagement too as a writer.

Part of the StoryVault project includes tagging each of my stories with 1-2 word descriptive terms. Here's what I came away with (the larger the font size, the more often the tag is used):



Apparently, I am drawn to domestic, grotesque, meta-fiction with a touch of pop culture and humor.

There is a new breed of writers, I believe, who feel equally driven to blur this bold line (though perhaps more consciously than myself). Popular culture can be grotesque (and perhaps its very nature demands it to be), and the grotesque can be sugary and fleeting (the Bizarro genre, generally speaking, does this very thing).

Craig Wallwork, for example, gives us a universal allegory that blurs the line between faith and fact. Pablo D'Stair, always on the paranoia defensive with his writing, offers a story of misplaced identity and its resulting wrongful lockup in a mental ward. But the wrongly accused doesn't seem to care much about his entombment. I blame the prescribed medication. Nik Korpon transports Gabriel Garcia Marquez's concept of a feathered old man into the world of sexual fetishists.

Enjoy these writers and more in this month's issue of Cannoli Pie Magazine. But don't stop here. Explore, go beyond these pages. Be a part of the literary community.

Caleb J. Ross



## define the unknown function

Short Fiction by Pablo D'Stair

When they let me out of the main care facility, they told me I had to give the folder I was carrying to the person in charge of the boarding house facility, it would contain everything about my program, medications, my schedule of therapies. "It's up to you to get to the facility," the attending doctor—not my doctor—had said, gave me a pass for the bus and pointed out the route I needed to take, two transfers. I didn't really understand, but told him Yes of course I'd get right to the place, I had no intention of anything else. "Well," he said, like I'd not just said what I thought I'd said, "if you decide to show up, you have to give them your folder, it'll have everything they need to set you up, but it's up to you to get there, you aren't a patient here anymore and you're responsible for yourself, the boarding facility is something we offer but it's not in our scope to ferry you there." He hadn't even looked up at me. The file was sealed and heavy, squat, almost like it had a video-cassette inside, but it was really just a lump of papers.

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I waited in a common area, not technically inside the boarding house. There were puddles from people who'd been going in and out all day, I wondered who did the mopping, if I'd have to do the mopping. I was motioned to the window just to be told to go around through the door, a discordant rattle sounding, probably a buzz if I was on the other side of the glass. An orderly was waiting, much more slight than the orderlies at the main care facility and I fell in to step, was led to my little room where there were folded

bed clothes and towels and the outfit I was told to change into. "You can hang your own clothes up in the cubby," the orderly said, but he added quickly that they would just be taken out by staff in the morning when the room was turned over. "Do you just want to take them now?" "You can leave them out or hang them up in the cubby, it doesn't matter. No I don't want them." "Okay." He had a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket and I averted my eyes, pretended the motion into just rolling my neck like it was sore.

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Because I didn't see any power outlets anywhere, I assumed the television on the dresser hadn't been set up, was surprised when it came on at my touching the power button of the remote. I was just considering going to sleep, blearily staring at some program when the door opened and a doctor entered, asking me to please lower the volume, I nodded and turned the set off. He handed me a cup of juice and then another cup with three blue tablets in it. "Have they changed my meds?" He waited a moment, then asked me to please take the medication. "I'm not sure, is this what they have me on? I've never seen these pills before. I usually just take one of the large Protocol Zeno ones." "I need to watch you take the meds," he said, coughing in his hand. I was too tired to care and so swallowed the tablets, opened my mouth wide and moved tongue side to side, the doctor now seeming to think I was clowning around. "That's not necessary." "I'm sorry." He put a sheet of paper into the little laminate sleeve affixed to the inside of the door and told me that would be my daily schedule, that it would be gone over first thing during my meeting with—he tapped the laminate indicating—Doctor Pritchard. "Okay."

\*\*\*

I slept badly, woke up at least half dozen times with terrible cramps in my ribs, in my legs bad enough to make me spring up, slip over the bedside and keep crumpled on the hard carpet mas-

saging my calves. When I woke up the last time, it was more peaceful, but my arm was extended limply above me, the fingers moving in a sloppy pattern like pretending to play the piano. I was comfortable, watched my arm, slowly sat up when it drifted back down to my side, tingling from lack of circulation. There wasn't a clock in the room, so I tried flipping through television stations to see if any news program indicated the time. Five thirty-eight, I sighed, wanted sleep but felt rigidly awake. There was only the set of clothes I was wearing, so I got out of them, shook them to freshen them a bit, got dressed again, looked at the schedule on my door, taking note consciously for the first time that the door had no window slat, that as far as I could tell the only opening was a floor vent. I was to meet Dr. Pritchard at seven-fifteen. Expecting the door to be locked, I chuckled when the knob turned. There was no reason the door would be locked, I supposed, and with it opened I could hear general sounds of orderlies pushing carts, conversations, televisions, could smell stale semi-pastires and coffee just brewed. I glanced to verify it was seven-fifteen and not seven-fifty that I was to meet the doctor, but noticed that the paper had Douglas Nuir listed as Patient, and not Archie Penn. Someone else, not me.



## A Spool of Wire and Feather

Short Fiction by Nik Korpon

Lydia left me on April 1st. I thought it was a joke. We used to play games like that, where I'd call the apartment and disguise my voice and tell her I was going to peel her like an orange. Once, she poured olive oil over the floor right in front of the door. She didn't know I was carrying Mom's urn. We used many paper towels.

As she threw belongings into a microwave box, she said she couldn't stand it anymore, to watch me float aimlessly. The word jellyfish was bandied about.

Two weeks and I still hadn't left my apartment. I wanted to be present for the big reveal. The phone call beginning with Surprise! and ending with rug-burned knees. By the time the rent was due, I figured my assumption wrong.

I sat on a park bench, eating sunflower seeds from a bag. A man rummaged through the brush. He plucked berries from branches, added them to the bark and acorns in a Tupperware container. After a few minutes, he sat next to me.

'Are you going to eat the rest of those?' He picked out the uneaten ones. 'Thank you,' he said and invited me to his apartment.

We took the elevator to the top floor. Branches and leaves lined the walls, bits of cloth and paper holding them together.

'Where do you work?' I crunched seeds between my teeth for something to do.

'I'm a Xerox technician,' he said. 'I make the machines in my office work better.'

I swallowed the last shell and he took the bag from my hands. I told him I'd take it to the garbage bin on the roof.

He said, 'I can fly myself.'

\*

After the robot woman said, 'Thanks for calling Rods and Cones. Please leave a message,' I began to sweat.

'Lydia, it's me. I was just calling to tell you about my new job. I thought you'd be happy to hear. Xerox technician. It's pretty...mobile.'

\*

The man perched on the couch with a glue gun in his hands. A girl sat next to him, cradling a gutted pillow. They looked up when I entered. Her hair was old and looked like twigs.

'This is my girlfriend.'

'Oh.'

She whistled to me.

He squirted dots of glue on his forearms, then placed a single feather on each. She stood them upright.

'We're in love.'

'Oh.'

She whistled to me.

The woman said, 'Hold yourself while she comes.' Her throat might have been burlap.

'Hello?'

'Lydia, it's me.'

'Hi.' Someone in the background asked for handcuffs and nails.

'I was calling to make sure you got my massages. Messages.'

'Oh, yeah. That's great.'

The man tipped a bowl of berries and rocks into his mouth and chewed. His girlfriend sat on the other side of the table, mouth open and head tipped back like a sundial. The phone company had disconnected me.

'There's a lot of things I can do. Possibilities.'

'I'm just glad you found some direction for your life. Really.'

He bent his face over hers, choked mush from his mouth to hers. I didn't want to imagine their sex.



'We should eat, sometime. Together.'

She said, 'Oh. Yeah.'

He wiped her mouth with a napkin. A candle threw their shadows against the wall.

\*

Crumpled feathers covered the floor. Jagged clear chunks at the tips, tinted with skin. The man crouched on the arm of the sofa, his toes curled around the edge and arms extended. His girlfriend held a spool of wire and a needle in one hand and a clutch of feathers in the other. His flesh was awash with blood.

'The glue was a bad idea.'

She whistled, mournful. After she finished, he stitched her arms in feathers.

'These should stay in, now.'

'Why?'

He pointed to the open window.

'Maybe we should try that from my apartment. It's only the second floor.'

\*

The hospice nurse spooned a spear of broccoli in his mouth, wiped the corner of his lips.

I sat on the edge of his bed. 'How are you feeling?'

'The food is awful.' He pointed at the nurse, spoon wavering in the air like a mirage. 'And she won't let me go to the park.'

I smoothed my jacket. Tiny cartoon animals danced a conga-line down my tie. 'Your legs are broken.' I checked my watch and listened for the cab downstairs.

'Right.' He tried to flap his arms. 'I forgot.'

Lydia tore off the wing of a Cornish game hen and sunk her teeth. I pushed my salad around the plate.

'I could help around your store. Fix the machines. We could talk more.'

She chewed and swallowed before speaking. 'That's sweet, but we don't get many copy fetishes.'

'I can do the cash register. Or stock the

dildos. Or mop.' She held half a glass of wine in front of her mouth while I stared.

I said, 'I'm just trying to be useful.'

'I've met someone.'

\*

His girlfriend wore longsleeves. All afternoon, she'd been as loud as grass growing.

'Aren't you hot?' he said. She shook her head.

'But it's July,' he said. She pushed air between pursed lips and rubbed the back of her wrist over her face. Her shirt fit as tight as a shadow.

'Where are your feathers?' he said. She exhaled and opened her mouth to display teeth sharpened to tiny pyramids. Bare arms pocked with stitch marks. I wondered if it spelled an apology in Braille. She tried to whistle but I heard only shredded breath.

He looked out the window, whispered, 'You're right. We should break up.'

She left a handful of twigs and two Tupperware containers of berries on his kitchen table. He whistled a quiet melody.

'Aren't you upset?'

He looked at me and blinked. Sucked in his lips. 'I can't date a cat.'

I rolled my sleeves above my forearms and placed them on his lap. 'Can I start with glue?'



# Muse

Short Fiction by Brandon Tietz

The first thing Roxy Socrates does is rename you.

“Because although Peter sounds nice and is probably the kind of guy that votes liberal and supports gay marriage,” she explains, “I’m just not sure Peter is an artist per se.”

When it comes to identities, Roxy is an expert.

Two weeks ago she was Candy van GoGo.

A week before that: Mercury McMuffin.

And one time, for a period of about an hour, she wouldn’t respond or acknowledge your presence unless you addressed her as iPhone.

“Having one name is dumb anyways,” she says. “They go in and out of fashion just like clothes and music.”

This is one of the many artistic renovations that Roxy makes, handing you over a shoddy fake ID that’s already peeling at the corners, the eye and hair color wrong, the weight about twenty pounds shy of accurate, but she’s smiling, and you can’t get upset when Roxy smiles at you.

She points with her flaking mulberry fingernail at your new name in all its fraudulent glory, saying, “See? Now that’s an artist.”

You read aloud, “Victor von Shade?”

“Von Shàde,” she corrects. “Like ‘God’ but more likely to be featured in *Time Out New York*.” Roxy winks, skin oily and peppered with light acne from not showering and never deep cleansing. She flips her murky yellow hair and a chunk of drywall or paint goes sailing to the hardwood floors of your studio apart-

ment. You, Victor von Shàde’s, studio apartment. Not Peter.

Peter is from a small town in Nebraska.

“But that doesn’t sound hip enough,” Roxy says, “So we’re going to tell people that you’re from Brooklyn now.”

She assures you that this will help fight the stigma that Nebraskans can’t paint, that they actually are smarter than the cows they sex with.

“Trust me,” she says, her hand smoothing down your shirt. “People will finally stop calling you ‘cattle-fucker’ if you say you’re from Brooklyn.”

Roxy Socrates turns on a checkered Van heel, examining the work leaning against the walls, frames napping on knotted floors and paint-flecked bed sheets. She inspects oil-based grain silos, hayfields, and combines. Blue skies over gold expanses. Frowning in disapproval, Roxy squats down in black vinyl leggings, flipping a row of canvases towards her like records, uttering, “Crap...crap...mega crap.”

The old fashioned water pump and stone well.

The pastel cornfields. Peter’s cornfields.

She pushes the canvases back against the wall, asking you, Victor von Shàde, “What the hell happened to the new work you were doing, cattle-fucker?”

Those wheat fields and lonely tractors, as much as you’re embarrassed to admit it, you created those for her. Every watercolor chicken and cow had been made with the simple intent of seeing Roxy smile, to watch her nod approvingly, just like she almost did the first time she saw your work: a month ago, when former-you, Peter, had met her in the back of a small gallery you were showing at. She cupped your face with her chewed little fingers, gazed into those gullible eyes of yours and said, “You’re not an artist yet, but with my help, you will be.”

And whether it was your Midwestern ignorance or Roxy’s so-sure-of-herself attitude, either way, you were captivated.

Not in love.

Inspired.

“Edie Sedgewick, Patti Boyd, Kate Moss,”



she ticks her fingers off one-by-one. “These are muses, and we’d have no Andy Warhol or John Lennon without them.” Then Roxy takes one of those fingers and swings it your way, pointing it gun-style at your nose and stressing each word, “No-more-farms-Victor!”

She stomps your barn.

She punts your flock of sheep.

“Art needs to evolve,” Roxy says. “That means you need to evolve.”

According to her, one of your main problems is that you don’t even look like an artist, and the Gap t-shirt/Wrangler jeans combo isn’t exactly helping your plight.

The second thing Roxy Socrates does is change your image.

Placing a mesh shopping bag on your counter space that’s already littered with paints and brushes and pizza crusts, she says, “Strip,” unpacking plastic neon yellow shades, an old hoodie, and black skinny jeans. As clothes pile around your ankles, she pulls out a Salvation Army messenger bag, a Timex watch, a can of tobacco with rolling papers. Another pair of skinny jeans.

Roxy mentions, “You need to make your own cigarettes from now on. That’s a rule of the arts: if you can make it yourself, there’s no need to buy it.”

This is when you remind her that you don’t smoke.

Never have. Not once.

“And these jeans are too tight,” you tell her, pulling, tugging until your thighs are like twenty pounds of meat in seventeen-pound sacks. You have to mash your tubesteak and grapes down one of the legs to keep from zipping them off, but Roxy isn’t listening, or watching; she sets down an MP3 player, hair gel, and a can of beer on the counter next to the rest of the stuff, your stuff. Victor’s new image.

She says there are rules to being an artist. A code.

“It’s not as simple as shopping at thrift stores and being vegan,” Roxy says, spreading a glob of pistachio-colored gel over her hands before attacking your scalp. The wet strands

tickle your forehead, but you don’t fidget or complain. For her, you stay corpse-still. “Being an artist is a lifestyle in itself. Drinking PBR and voting against anything the Republicans try to pass is how you let the world know you’re a part of that.”

Some of this is static logic.

If PETA is in favor of something, then we automatically are too.

Everyone at *The New York Times* is a liar because it’s owned by fat cats.

And if you absolutely can’t bring yourself to be an atheist—for fuck’s sake, at least have the decency to choose an Eastern religion.

“Christianity is just Bible belt-speak for capitalism,” Roxy says, giving your hair, Victor’s hair, a final ruffle with her fingers, making it intentionally messy. As an artist, this is supposed to say to the world: “I control chaos in every aspect of myself.”

It says: “I reject conformity.”

“And the black eyeliner lets people know you’re a patron of a free-thinking society and open to bisexuality,” Roxy says, shaking a slim vile at you before setting it down with the rest of the stuff, the indie band records and women’s rights lapel pins.

This is when you admit to her that you don’t know how wearing secondhand clothes and not showering makes you a better artist. You don’t comprehend how protesting puppy mills will affect your paintings.

“I’m also not sure what a vegan does,” you confess.

“It’s more like what a vegan doesn’t,” Roxy says. “It basically means you can’t have the meat or the by-product of anything with a face.”

You look down at your feet, Victor von Shàde’s feet, and frown.

But then you feel that hand on you again. Roxy tenderly palms your cheek



# Muse Cont'd

Short Fiction by Brandon Tietz

and chin, telling you, "Honey, you are a machine of the arts."

She says, "You can't feed the machine Taco Bell and saturated fats, Victor. Do you think Da Vinci ate a Gordita before he carved David? No, he fucking didn't."

Beyond providing you with a new wardrobe and hairdo, Roxy leaves you with a to-don't list scrawled out on recycled paper.

"Guidelines of the arts," she says. Don't shave or bathe.

Don't ride in anything that uses fossil fuels.

And don't ever stop questioning the government's plot to plant a tracking device in your tooth when you're not looking.

This is all part of Roxy's plan to make you less like Peter from Nebraska. Every little will-not and won't-eat-any-more is just another step towards being the artist. Even from across town, Roxy is curbing your behavior: when you shop at Whole Foods or sign an online anti-fur petition. She's taking over. But for some reason, you can't paint, and a small part of you wonders if this has anything to do with your muse, Roxy Socrates.

About three days after the inception of Victor von Shàde, she comes back to your apartment only to discover you haven't done anything, and it's not for lack of trying.

"You've been drinking the Pabst Blue Ribbon and wheatgrass, right?" she kicks an old chicken coop painting over to the far corner. Haphazardly tosses two galloping horses on top of that. A rusty windmill. She makes a suburban landfill out of Peter's work while you, Victor, have

jack shit to show her.

After a broken goat farm makes the top of the pile, she asks, "Have you been fucking cows again?"

You shake your head with the crusty, messy hair and cheap sunglasses that you're required to have on at all times, averting your eyes to the spaces where pizza boxes and Chinese take-out containers used to be. Anywhere but Roxy's disappointed gaze. This is when you admit to being a bit distracted by the Extreme Makeover: You Edition.

It's difficult to be creative when you, Victor von Shàde, are having your nuts squeezed by a denim vice grip, not to mention the sick feeling from ingesting nothing but PBR and health food. After twenty-two years of steaks, pies and fries, a little side salad is a real gut-rumbler.

"I'm sorry your primitive digestive system can't handle a little tofu, but this is a serious problem here, Victor." Roxy puts her hands on cocked hips, glares at you and says, "You know I only date artists, right?"

"I am an artist," you say. "I'm just having a little artist's block."

Roxy snickers, nose crinkling playfully. She squats down to go through her \$2 thrift store non-leather purse, pulling out a couple of small tangerine bottles with white caps and says, "You don't have artist's block. You just haven't taken the right pills yet," and then your muse is pouring a pharmacist's rainbow into her soft little palm.

The third thing Roxy Socrates does is give you drugs.

Handing you a blue oval, two carnation pink orbs, and a green and pearl number, she says, "I take these so I don't wind up having conversations with my refrigerator...but for you, they oughta keep your mind off the barns and cow-shit."

Roxy cracks open a PBR and tells you to swallow.

She tells you not to ask a bunch of questions about the pills she's giving you because Victor wouldn't do that. It would be very un-Victor, she warns.

"I just want to know what's gonna hap-



pen,” you say. Pills in one hand. Beer in the other. Roxy pauses in the middle of pulling out a fresh canvas to put on the easel. Your paints and brushes and foggy mason jars of rinse water.

She gives a little huff and replies, “Art. Some fucking art is going to happen.”

And between your lack of productivity and the fear of Roxy walking out the door, you decide to embrace the Victor persona and whatever narcotics are about to kick around in your system. They couldn’t possibly be any worse than the bean dip and pita chips you had for lunch. This morning’s \$7 organic grapefruit.

And Roxy says, “You need to stand in front of the canvas before your legs go numb.”

She says, “Tell me if the walls start yelling at you so I can translate. I speak a little Spanish.”

This is when your fingers begin to prickle.

This is when you, Victor-not-Peter, feel your brain deflate like a slow leaking Michelin. Neck burning. Tingling. Eyeballs throbbing like they’re about to orgasm, and for the first time, you look at the canvas and don’t see Nebraska. Your hand yearns to create something other than rural America and hum drum living.

So you paint a non-farm and a never-was dude ranch.

You paint a non-existent cow pasture.

You betray yourself: your cow-fucking, country bumpkin culture.

And although you have no idea what colors you’re using or the form they’re taking, Roxy is standing backstage just behind your ear saying, “You keep this up and you’ll be having sex with a human.”

Then she switches canvases and gives you more pills.

A black and yellow pill. Little electric blue pill.

As an artist, this tells society: “I reject the Reagan era.”

It says: “I love you, Roxy Socrates.”

The last thing your muse does is make you into a legend.

This is after the mild heart attack and twenty minute conversation you have with your paintbrush, post-nosebleed and mild seizure in

which Roxy blames all of your ailments on 9/11 and the Delta Delta Delta sorority house. All the while, more pills are popped into your mouth. You, Victor von Shàde, peck them out of Roxy’s palm like chicken feed. Always painting. Always creating except when you pause to tell her your arm has Lou Gehrig’s disease or you just heard the wall talk.

Roxy yells at it in Spanish and squats down on the mangled hardwood, pulling slimy hair behind an ear, she begins cutting the next section of canvas with a pair of shears, telling you, “We need to discuss how people are going to remember all you’ve done.”

This is right about when you go deaf in your left ear and the paint starts to smell like Quizno’s sandwiches. You tell Roxy and she rushes over with a beta blocker and two red pills, a vegan pot brownie that you take a couple bites of, and you never stop painting.

She says, “You can’t commit suicide for at least another five years, and cutting an ear off would be so passé.”

On your spine, a slim chill crawls up your back as Roxy goes snip snip snip with the shears, turning your shirt into a vintage hospital gown. You feel the blade insert itself into your waistline, biting down on the denim hugging your love handle. Roxy mentions something about shooting yourself being due for a revival.

“But we don’t have a gun,” and then you wonder what the back of your head would look like as confetti, showering the hardwood floors in tiny little fragments of skull and brain, blood misting warmly through the space as your one and only muse, Roxy Socrates, dances and smiles and bathes in your brilliance. She would call it a performance art. Or an homage. And you tell her, “I think I just had my first suicidal thought.”

As an artist, this informs society: “I



## Muse *Cont'd*

Short Fiction by Brandon Tietz

accept my temporary nature on this planet.”

It says: “I’m just your average, run-of-the-mill tortured artist trying to get some attention that I really don’t deserve.”

“Fuck that,” Roxy says. “You kill yourself now and you’ll get nothing more than a weekend tribute exhibit at NYU. We have to think in terms of a career, Victor.”

“For the sake of art and this relationship,” she says, “we need to sacrifice something,” pointing the shears at your nude body: your nipples and lips, anything that can be snipped off and stored in fluids for later. So you close your eyes and wait. You, Victor von Shàde, wait for Roxy to slide the blades around the tip of your nose or a testicle—hugging and squeezing until warm blood splashes the inside of your thigh or down your lips. You wait for pain, and then it hits you that maybe you’re not the artist after all.

Maybe you, Victor von whatever-the-fuck you’re going by now—maybe you’re the end result of Roxy’s ill-intentioned efforts and influence. Just another sculpture.

Then she asks, “Are you ready to be remembered forever?”

And when she slides those sheers around your prick, you know it’s not about anything you’ve created. These paintings matter just as little as your farms and fields in the corner. Those watercolor cattle and corn. Roxy Socrates is one snip away from signing her masterpiece.

And next week she’ll be creating some other artist.

She’ll be going by some other better name.



# Love Letters

Short Fiction by Richard Thomas

It started with the paper, tearing it apart into little pieces, pressing it into tiny balls and popping the crumpled words into her mouth. Cassidy would chew and chew his love letters while staring out the window, the sun setting across the city—her apartment falling into darkness. She imagined that she could hear him speaking, his deep voice filling up the empty spaces that she created with her desperation and remorse. He compared her to a summer day, to a moonlit lake, to a drug addiction—one he needed to quit. She didn't believe he would disappear—Cassidy felt their love was eternal. Twirling her long, red hair in slender, pale fingers, she stared out at the city, wondering where he was.

She moved on to the ink. In an effort to embrace a historical sense of romance, she purchased an inkwell and a quill, inserting the sharp tip into the shimmering black liquid, running the tip across the page. It didn't turn out well. When she hesitated, and that was often, she would place the tip of the quill on her tongue and tap it, tap it, trying to put in words her feelings for him, the man who spent many a night caressing her ivory skin while whispering in her ear. Soon enough her stomach rolled and flipped, tightening into knots of anguish, vomiting a great void into the toilet, her lips and teeth stained with death.

She crafted her own perfume, a mortar and pestle sitting on her kitchen counter, grinding up bits of sandalwood, pounding out waxy pieces of ambergris, slicing her finger over the stone bowl, crying into it, squeezing out blood orange, adding a few drops of honey. She poured this lumpy mixture of one screen after another, the weave getting smaller, until the essence was but a spoonful in a bowl. She rubbed it in her fingers, behind her ears, her kneecaps, and ran it across the envelope seal, dropping her letter in the mail. To no avail—he didn't notice.

When his silence filled her mailbox, a slender rectangle of metal and failure, she took up her needle and thread, to immortalize his final words, the last letter he sent to her, signing off with the words that haunted her now, caused her to flinch—love always the lie that he kept telling. She took a deep breath and ran the needle under her skin, a muffled gasp, her heart quickening, his love still finding a way to her heart. She pulled the thread through, up and down, the script filling her left forearm, a reminder of the things men say, a warning to the next fool that would certainly share her bed, a love letter to herself.



# Paradise Lost

Short Fiction by Craig Wallworth

## I

On my fifth Christmas at Paradise, Lucian told me about greed, and how it had forced God to question his own intention.

“Guess he never expected it to snowball the way it did,” he said removing a flashlight from his toolbox. “Most probably the same way Einstein didn’t think his work on mass energy equivalence would lead to the potential destruction of mankind.”

The bulb in the kitchen had blown, taking out the rest of the lights in the lodge.

Flicking the light switch on and off in the kitchen, he said, “Fuse must have popped when the bulb blew. The fuse box is in the master bedroom.”

A minute later I heard him say from the bedroom, “And God said, Let there be light.”

Then there was light.

“You’ll remember,” he said, walking back into the kitchen, “after Einstein realised what the Germans were doing, he approach Roosevelt to help the Americans build the first nuclear bomb. Ironic that a born pacifist, and advocator of world peace, inadvertently contributed to the one thing that could destroy it.”

Blowing away dust from the bayonet of a new bulb, he added, “After that, the lives of every person on the planet were in the hands of man, not God.”

Lucian owns all the holiday lodges here at Paradise, a small backwater at the end of the Black Briar Path on the outskirts of Dogmael. He’s not married, and doesn’t employ any other members of staff. All maintenance work he carries out himself, and when a guest vacates the lodge, it is he and he alone that strips the bed sheets,

vacuums the carpets, and restocks the fridge.

I asked, “But how is Einstein’s work a result of greed? Wasn’t he just doing what all scientists do, and satisfying his curiosity?”

Fixing the new bulb and flicking the switch, Lucian illuminated the kitchen before turning to me and said, “Einstein wasn’t a scientist but a theoretical physicist, but yes, you are right in that he was just doing what came natural. But by rationalising, or trying to predict physical phenomena in nature, Einstein had inadvertently created, if you’ll excuse the pun, a chain reaction that ultimately resulted in jeopardising the whole of mankind. Greed was to God what the atom was to Einstein: had it not been surrendered, the world would have been a much safer place to exist.”

#

When I was twenty-eight years old, I met a woman called Mary.

I was making my way from Elsmere Port along the North West coast on a temperamental Norton motorcycle, when I stopped by a cafe. There were no vacant tables. The windows were steamed; smoke filled every corner of the room. If I knew then that my life was about to change forever, I would have spent those moments in quiet meditation, reflecting on all the wasted years like a jailbird waiting for the prison gates to allow him a new life. Instead, I stood looking surly and unapproachable, growing more agitated by the lack of space in the café, and by comparison, that ever growing hole within my stomach. Mary emerged from the bluish cigarette smoke; chestnut brown hair tied back to reveal pale faultless skin, beautiful blue eyes, ruby lips. She brushed against my arm, and we exchanged smiles and awkward glances before a man vacated one of the tables. I was not entirely happy for the seat. I felt I had more of a chance of talking with Mary if I was an obstacle rather than a seated customer. And while moving over to allow the man to pass, I knocked a cup of tea from Mary’s hand, breaking it on the floor. I apologised and offered my services. Mary said I didn’t need to help, but I bent down and began picking up the broken pieces of

porcelain. I heard the owner of the café call her name. Mary, he shouted. I apologised, only this time adding her name. She later told me, when we were married, that she had never heard such hopelessness in her name as when I delivered it that day.

We married on December 22nd the following year, and exactly forty years later, I drove us to Paradise.

It snowed that first Christmas. All the lodges look over a large pond where you can fish when the weather is good. That year the pond froze solid and wild Grouse took to the ice like drunks to midnight streets. We spent most of the time reading, and doing very little but reliving years already past – the times when it was hard, and the ways we overcame our troubles. Though neither Mary nor I acknowledged the fact aloud, these conversations were less about reminiscing, and more about giving reassurances; with such adversity in life, we had a confidence, a faith, that whatever lay awaiting us in death we would overcome, so long as we were together.

The following summer Mary got a chest infection and died. I took her ashes to the coastline that overlooked the café where we met and gave a handful to the sands and the sea. Mary believed that in Paradise time was of no consequence. You could remain as you are, with the same love you hold. It was arranged, with the help and permission of Lucian, that a bench be placed before the pond and upon it a brass plaque with the words: To my wife, Mary. May time hold still our love forevermore, and Paradise keep your beauty untouched. Your loving husband, Joseph.

My daughter Grace asked me to stay with her that Christmas after Mary passed away. Judging by her tone on the phone, each sibling had orchestrated a pool, and by ill-fated luck, it was her name that was pulled from the hat. I decided instead it would be best for everyone if I went back to Paradise, to stay in the same lodge Mary and I shared the previous Christmas. I have been doing the same thing for that past five years. It is funny how tradition becomes more of a comfort than a burden over time.

## II

That Christmas morning I woke to a pencil sketch of Paradise. Beyond the veranda window all colour had been lost, erased by a night's heavy snowfall so all that remained was a brilliant white, naked and immeasurable. Where the sky kissed the horizon, trees stood shivering, barely visible save for a few faint black lines. The pond was the only area not affected by the night's fall, but even that looked wan against the bleached embankment. I noted too, no footsteps had yet marked the snow, a curiosity considering Lucian had always been out of bed before dawn.

I pulled out my best suit and gave it a brush down. I showered, shaved, and used some new aftershave my son John bought me. It smelt quite sweet and reminded me of lemons. At breakfast, I poured Mary and myself a sweet sherry and told her I missed her dearly. I opened up a few presents from the kids and left Mary's under the tree, as I do each year. Later, I would open it for her and read aloud the card I wrote.

Around 2:00pm, a knock came at my door. When I opened it, Lucian stood dressed in a fine looking navy blue suit, white shirt. The lines running down his trousers were pin sharp, the cuffs to his shirt looked expensive, and his hair was raked back and fixed. Everything about him appeared smart, graceful. Everything that is except his expression, which appeared marked by tenseness.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I've forgotten how to do these things," he said holding out a black, silk tie.

"Come in."

Lucian stood in the centre of the living room, his weight shifting from one toe to the other causing the floorboards beneath him to sound metrical. He re-



# Paradise Lost *Cont'd*

Short Fiction by Craig Wallworth

peatedly asked my approval regards the colour of the suit. I kept telling him that he looked fine, and by reply, he would brush sweaty palms over the jacket before pulling at his collar. Lucian was nervous because this year he had invited God to dinner. He normally eats his Christmas dinner alone, but he extended an invitation to God in the hope they could reconcile their differences. It was not a decision he took lightly, and I spent many hours with Lucian hearing out his reservations and anxiety. I can say that my years of empathising with people had brought a different perspective to the dilemma, and perhaps secured his decision to invite his old friend. As a way of thanks for my input and advice, Lucian offered the invitation to me. I accepted on the basis that I was poised unsteadily upon the threshold of my own mortality, and that no better company would I be in to understand what awaits me once I tumble.

“What about the shoes? Do you think I should give them another polish?”

I looked down and said, “They’re like mirrors. Try not to worry.”

“Who said I was worried?”

I was sure he was, but I felt to give further comment might only cause Lucian to become even more agitated.

“Hand me the tie,” I said.

I lifted his collar and placed the tie around his neck. I had never been that close to Lucian before, and it was the first time the broadness of his chest was made real to me.

“There,” I said, straitening the tie. “Very smart.”

Lucian stretched out his neck and pulled at the shirt’s collar again. “You think? I’m not over doing it, am I?”

“Not in the slightest.”

He checked himself quickly at the mirror above the fireplace. “That’s a fine knot, Joe,” he said, clearly happy with my work. Turning back to me, he asked, “Will you join me at my lodge for a quick dram?”

“Sure,” I said.

Anticipating God’s arrival, Lucian had redecorated his lodge, replacing the plain magnolia walls with burgundy red wallpaper. Tea lights brought warmth to every corner, the tiny flame allowing shadows the freedom to dance without consideration. Suspended from one corner of the ceiling to the other, fine muslin gathered in ripples, and the old leather couch usually barren and cracked as the desert, was now hidden under expensive looking silks and big decorative cushions. All of this was grand, but nothing in the room came close to the wonderful smell coming from the kitchen.

“You’ve really done a splendid job with this place,” I said.

“Thanks.”

He walked over to a small table where a crystal decanter and two tumblers sat collecting small stars of light. “I was concerned it was a little too decadent and lavish,” he said pouring us both a fair measure.

“Not at all. And dinner smells wonderful.”

“It’s goose,” he said walking to me. Handing me the small tumbler, he said “Not many people cook goose on Christmas day, but it’s more traditional than turkey.”

Tossing aside a few smaller cushions so he could sit properly on a small armchair, Lucian said, “We’ve known each other quite some time now, haven’t we, Joe?”

“Five years.”

“And in that time you’ve never once pestered me for questions. You know, about what God is like, Heaven and Hell, and what the meaning of life is.”

“I figured I know soon enough,” I said smiling in an attempt to lighten the mood, but it didn’t make a mark on Lucian’s solemnity expression.

“I have to ask, Joe; do you fear death?” he asked.



Embarrassment took me by surprise, forcing me to swallow repeatedly.

“No. Not really,” I answered, awkwardly.

“And why is that, Joe?”

“I know I have Mary waiting for me.”

“And had Mary been alive today, would you fear death then?”

“I can’t say I would be happy leaving her, but I know there is nothing to fear beyond this life. Knowing you has taught me that.”

“You’re a good man, Joe. You exemplify what both God and I hoped to achieve: a man who holds sympathy for another life before that of his own. This is why I do not fear you knowing the truth. How’s your whisky?” he asked.

“It’s very nice, thank you.”

“It’s a fifty-year old single malt. Only two bottles exist. A lieutenant who served under Mussolini gave it me as a present.”

“It’s splendid,” I said.

Lucian agreed and took another sip from his glass.

“You served in the war, didn’t you, Joe?”

I nodded.

“Do you remember, Ginkel Heath, Joe?”

I had made corporal in a recently formed anti tank platoon, and on the 18th September 1944, I was dropped with the rest of the 4th Parachute Brigade on Ginkel Heath. Our battalion suffered many casualties in the attempt to reach Arnhem. My platoon in particular was under severe fire and five of us became separated from the rest. Five miles from our base, German soldiers caught us. They grilled us for four days in an old abandoned wheat mill they had set up camp in. Each day that passed, they dragged one of us to an adjacent stable outside. The routine never changed: first came a blinding light as they opened the door to our holding cell, closely followed by a few moments of sheer panic and confusion as they dragged one of us out and into the yard. A few moments later came the distant screams that accompany torture, and then an hour later, a single gunshot. Weighed against the silence that followed that bullet, the screams from my friends were as melodic and welcoming as the birdsong.

When all but myself were dead, they brought me to that old abandoned stable. It was a warm day and the stable smelt of cooked meat and sweat. The straw beneath the legs of a lonely old wooden chair was stained red. The sun peered in through the broken roof as they beat me with fists and batons, calling me names and spitting in my face. Exhausted, they dragged me to the floor and placed a gun to my head.

Three loud bangs rung aloud that afternoon. For a man with a gun held beside his head, you expect to only hear one.

In the rafters above me, I heard pigeons flap their wings after the pin struck the barrel of each bullet. I heard the wind taunt the trees, and the worms burrowing through the ground beneath my feet. I heard everything but my silence.

I opened my eyes and saw the German soldiers lay next to me, each a bullet wound in their head. I awaited the fourth gunshot with all hopes and dreams of a home, a wife and children, fading. But that gunshot never came. Tired and beaten, I got to my feet, ran quickly to the woods, and kept on going until nothing surrounded me but tress and shadows. Fifty miles from Oosterbeek, south of the main railway line to Arnhem, a passing British supply truck picked me up. It was lost and shouldn’t have been there. I always wanted to thank the driver for picking me up, but I never got his name, nor do I remember his face.

“I don’t understand,” I said to him.  
“How did you know of Ginkel Heath?”

“You forget who I am, Joe. You would have surely died in that barn had it not been for the sniper, right?”

A thirst was upon me, one I slaked with the whiskey.

“Do you really believe you were just lucky, Joe? And what of the man that



# Paradise Lost *Cont'd*

Short Fiction by Craig Wallworth

found you, do you remember his name... his face?"

I shook my head.

"Think hard, Joe. Was it not the same face of the man that vacated the table in the small café, the same café where you met Mary? Is it not the same face you see before you, right now?"

A shiver ran through my bones.

"Don't be alarmed, Joe. I have known you for many years before Paradise. I have a tendency to follow those I believe will add value to this earth. What I did not expect is how much you would give me in return."

He went back to the decanter, brought it over and filled my glass. Since he began talking of Ginkel Heath I had not noticed the glass had run empty. I thanked him, and he sat back down, leaving the decanter beside my feet.

"I see no gain in dishonesty among friends."

With a warm smile, he asked if we should begin dinner.

I replied with a nod, but quickly added, "Does this mean God will not be attending?"

He sat back in the chair, a wistfulness pulling at his brow.

That night I didn't sleep well. I dreamt of a great banquet, and a table. At the head of the table sat Lucian, and all the other chairs filled with people I have known, yet could not name. I saw the man who drove the jeep, the same who rescued me. I saw my doctor, and the physician who removed the lump from my neck many months ago. I saw the man in the café, and the minister who married Mary and me. Each man shared a

similarity of expression, and manner, yet nether was identical. It was hard to put into words, but each man appeared to have been born from the last, sons and fathers, brothers and uncles. Lay suspended behind each of them was an arch of purest of white, like that which met me when I looked upon Paradise earlier that day. As I arrived at the table, my place set beside Lucian, each man stood and raised a glass, the whiteness behind them unfurling. I was sure, when pulled back into a short-lived consciousness, tears had dampened my pillow.

The next day I woke early to say goodbye to Lucian. Outside the forest trees tussled with a cold breeze, the rooks and the wild grouse welcoming the day with hearty cheer. A fine mist skulked along the gravelled path leading to Lucian's lodge. As it collected around my ankles, I found my steps slowing, as if the hands of a thousand ghosts were trying to stop me. Regardless, I pushed on, and though it took a longer than it should, I finally ascended the steps leading to his lodge with only a mild heaviness on my chest. I hoped at first Lucian would notice me approaching, and meet me at his door, but as I arrived, I noted all his curtains closed. I could only assume he was still resting due to the emotional strain he had undergone the previous day. As I turned back to the steps, I found a small white envelope nailed to the porch's crosspiece, my name written on in black pen. I pulled the nail away, and removed a letter from the envelope. Inside was a set of keys with the same number of Lucian's lodge etched into it. There was also small white card that read: Nothing is final in the world, Joe, so saying goodbye seems redundant. But I hope you will accept one more gift from me as way of thanks for your time and patience. You'll find it back at your lodge. Your friend, Lucian.

I returned to my lodge with no upset, but only a sense of excitement. I could not explain why my steps were lighter than those which I took going. The ghosts were still beneath my feet, but there was an urgency to get back, as if all I ever wanted in this world and the next would be awaiting me.



As I approached, the lodge's warmth filled my chest, and all at once the years that held me for so long diminished. I was bound by neither pain, nor worry, reborn into a younger me, and while impossible to comprehend, I knew she was there. I knew Mary was waiting for me.



# was Donovan Mere

Short Fiction by Pablo D'Stair

Donovan Mere stepped in out of the rain, the rusted bell at the end of a limp string given a hit by the convenience store's door. He shivered over to the self-serve coffee, running his hands through his hair. After his cup was full and lid affixed, he decided to clean his glasses, which were covered in droplets of water. As he wiped, nearly blind, he squinted in the direction of a metallic tapping, it sounded like a coin was being struck against one of the handles of the cooler. Getting his glasses to place, he turned in the direction of the sound. There was a man, soaked through with rain, staring right at him, a key in his hand being slowly struck against the cooler glass. Feeling his chest tighten, he coughed, took his coffee to the register and waited his turn, could feel the man's eyes on him. Even through the clerk's chatter with another customer, he could make out the faint sound of the key against the glass. He paid and as his change was being tendered he was startled by the sound of a mop head being slapped to the floor by a stock boy. He glanced across to the wet man, the sound of tapping now buried under the wet laps of the mop back and forth.

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Walking for a number of blocks with his head down, he soon became lost to his fatigued thoughts, to the slow turns of car tires through standing water. Bundled into a crowd waiting for a crosswalk to change, his concentration was broken by the sound of tapping—he chuckled and turned his head. The wet man stood staring at him, key tapping against the

damp, rusted sign above the button to change the signal. He stared down at his shoes, wanting to disbelieve what he'd seen, wanting to at least turn to verify, but could not move. He was jostled forward by the other pedestrians at the turn of the signal, walked numbly along, thoughts drowned under the blood rushing in his ears. He hurried along without wanting to seem frantic, tensed fiercely at the moan of an approaching fire engine.

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At the door to his townhouse, he dropped his coffee and tore through his pockets for his key, shivered it into the lock, got the door opened and the force of it slamming hung in the dark even as he got his coat off, his shoes off, moved into his kitchen to pour himself a drink. The bourbon calmed him a bit, but there was a dry spot to his throat that had him clearing his throat like a nervous tick, every ten seconds or so. It was because of this, he was not certain if he'd heard something at the door. He went silent, hand held curled at his lips, waiting for another sound. A moment later came a slathering knock, another, three, slow and fumbling, as though the door was being struck by an open palm. He reached for his telephone, dialed the emergency police number, waiting to press Send. Five minutes passed in silence. He was about to set down the phone when he decided he'd call, just to be safe. No sooner did he hear the soft ringing begin, then the sound of a key being fitted to the lock came from the door, in the next moment, the sound of the lock being unlatched.



# Whodunit

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**Pablo D'Stair** is a writer of novels, shorts stories, and a contributing essayist to the *Montage: Cultrual Paradigm* (Sri Lanka). Founder of Brown Paper Publishing (which is closing its doors in 2012) and co-founder of KUBOA (an independent press launching July 2011) he also conducts the book-length dialogue series Predicate. His current project is the 5 novella *Trevor English* crime/noir series. More information can be found by visiting [www.normancourt.wordpress.com](http://www.normancourt.wordpress.com).

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**Richard Thomas** was the winner of the 2009 "Enter the World of Filaria" contest at *ChiZine*. He has published over forty stories online and in print, including the *Shivers VI* anthology (Cemetery Dance) with Stephen King and Peter Straub, the

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**Craig Wallwork** lives in West Yorkshire, England, with his wife and daughter. After leaving Art College he studied to be a filmmaker before becoming a full-time editor for nine years. In his spare time he writes short stories and is currently working on his fourth novel. His fiction has appeared in various anthologies, journals and magazines. Follow his progress via his website: [www.craigwallwork.blogspot.com](http://www.craigwallwork.blogspot.com).

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This issue of *Cannoli Pie* was solicited and guest edited by Caleb J. Ross as a stop on his *Stranger Will* blog tour. For more information on Caleb, *Stranger Will* or the blog tour visit <http://www.calebjross.com/stranger-will-tour-for-strange/>.

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# Cannoli Pie

6 August 2011, Volume 1.12  
<http://cannolipie.com>