

the darkness that enlightens...
Appocalypse
Playground

Issue 12
August '98

**NATURAL
PROCESS**



**You will find
many new and
interesting
things for your
savage enjoy-
ment in this
little literary
'zine:**

Poetry

**Short
Stories**

And

**The conclusion
of a serial play
"3712"**

Issue 12

Natural Process

*The stars that hang upon the eternal opaque sky,
they keep secrets from us.
Stars shine and fade into the never-ending darkness,
never to be remembered nor seen again.
As are those who fall from their grace,
like the tears that fall from our eyes.
Stars wither yet their shine remains,
a shadow of an ancient and forgotten past.
Stars upon the enormous blackened night sky,
at dawn, they disappear, become invisible.
The same stars, at nightfall, return
shining to signal their existence.*

- Gorthaur

RAZORS (THE EDITORIAL)

When I'm writing a story, it happens one of two ways but its always the same. Stories are born the way stars are. And why not? Stories are a product of the human mind, an organic thing subject to all natural processes. Stars are formed from natural processes. Stars are the most commonly created objects in the universe. So it is understandable that a natural process of the mind might follow its example.

A star is born one of two ways. First, the materials begin to collect in space. The matter is just there, for whatever reason, in the same place at the same time. After a while, it starts to gravitate toward itself, swirl around. It reaches critical mass and then Boom! Fusion. Sometimes a story is like that. The subject matter and ideas collect and form a story on their own accord.

Sometimes it's not that simple. There is another way stars are formed. When a large, gaseous stellar giant blows off its baggage and leaves the core of it behind, a new star is born from the core. Those stars are the most dense, they still bear the

pressure from the older, larger being. They are made of tight packed mass and degenerate electrons. The gas is so dense, it doesn't act like gas anymore. It's like a solid.

Stories formed this way are the ones that hurt the most. They start innocently, building and building well oast the fusion of ideas into a story. They swell and swirl. But then they get unstable.

When a star loses its outer layers there's a lot of debris. And when a story draft eliminates most of the componbets of its predecessors there's a mess left behind. Piles of paper become a planetary nebula around the desk -- wasted paper. But what remains is a white hot core, made of raw materials packed so tightly together that they cease to show the properties of thought. They become pure story.

The trick, which I haven't mastered, is to put the supernove in the reader's head. Build the story for them, propell ideas from the thing in all directions and leave them with the glowing core.



cover image by Eric Bates

Contents

Razors	1
Dance of the Damned	
Haircut	2
Okay Caroline	3
The Circles of Hell	8
Naught But A Cinder	
The Rain	5
Grave	6
Loss	7
3712	13

Haircut

A STORY BY GRACE PALMER

He brushed the short dark hair away from her face and kissed her cheek. Then he rolled sleepily back into the tangled sheets and slept. She lay there for a while, listening as his breathing grew even, and shivering despite the warm air that filtered in through the window. Then she rose, standing naked in the darkness. He murmured and curled up with his back towards her. She looked at him for a while, and then turned away. He was not important. Tomorrow she would leave him. He had to have known it was coming, anyway. She'd make him merely one of the many.

The woman walked across the room towards the bathroom, stumbling over formless piles on the way. Some of this was his junk. She'd make him take it with him when he went. She stepped into the bathroom and turned on the light. Its glare slashed across the unkempt room, unkindly illuminating the drippy plastic shower curtain, fishnet stockings, the exact rattiness of the Hawaiian doll whose skirts covered the extra roll of toilet paper. The whole room became a world of unwashed Formica. The tiles of the floor were cold beneath her heels. She locked the door.

The woman looked in the mirror above the sink. The reflection before her was bone thin, its shoulders angular. It painted its fingernails black. She looked at herself, at the skin that was so very pale and fine, stretched over her bones. The hollows of her throat and cheekbones were full of blue shadows. There was a darker bruised purple color across the knobs of her spine and beneath her eyes. Had she once been pretty?

She pondered how cold and unkind the blue eyes in the mirror appeared. She heard a stirring, and a thump on the door. She ignored him, and at last he went away. She could hear him gathering up his clothes, probably for the last time. She scratched her cheek with fingers all blue from makeup smeared across the sink top and left parallel smudges on the skin. The dark cosmetic made her skin look all the paler. She wondered when she'd last been up before noon. She wondered when she'd last owned an alarm clock. Some afternoons she worked the register at the organic co-op two blocks away, but mostly she didn't work at all.

She slid a cigarette out of the weathered packet on the sink top, lighting it and taking the first drag all at once. The wind coming in the window blew the packet onto the floor, and she left it there. She ran her fingers through her hair so that she could see the scalp under the dark mane. Was it time to die now? She'd done this before, often. Strange how the slaughter of identity still sent a thrill down her spine. The pale woman stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray and picked up her mother's old barber's scissors. The hair fell to coil around the drain in coarse black locks. Errant drops of water beaded on its surface and glued the individual hairs together.

When the last of her hair was cut as short as she could manage with scissors, the pale woman took up a razor. It purred like a friendly cat under her hand, as the short prickly hair fell away.

She put it down and stared at herself again. This was an undoing. She was becoming someone else again. Her head was pale all over, her skull seemingly as fragile as an eggshell. There were

hollow rings of darkness around her eyes, from lack of sleep, or . . . ? The pale woman rubbed her eyes again. The smudged eye shadow looked like bruises on her face, as though she'd been beaten. It was the same color as her eyes.

How many times had she done just this? How many times had she dyed her hair, moved away, tried to be someone entirely new? It wasn't working as well anymore, but she had known that the effect would fade. One can only forget for so long.

There had been times in the pale woman's life when the only thing that mattered was the next party. She crashed at other people's houses, fucked whoever. She'd cleaned herself up, though. She quit the drugs except for every once in a while. She was okay now, right? Why had she just dropped her lover like an old shoe?

The face in the mirror was blank and lifeless, except for a few moments when it seemed grimly accusing. It seemed that all the years — they seemed longer than they were — had drained the spirit from her. Time was the greatest downer of them all, sucking the energy away until she was merely a shell. "Who are you?" she wanted to say to the woman in the mirror. Certainly that was not she.

The woman looked down at her wrists, at the fine blue web of veins just under the skin. If she should puncture those . . . The pale woman imagined her life running down into the drain, washing away the dark hairs. Those were her last life, those hairs. The blood would wipe them away, and all the secrets and unfortunate things she had done. Yet her flesh remained whole, despite the imaginings.

What if she were to die just then? What if the thread should snap? Would anyone miss her? The pale woman thought of the lover who by now was long gone,

and stared at her naked scalp. She could see the veins there, as well. They lay like lines on a map.

She leaned against the bathroom door, watching herself. The mirror was cracked, and she could feel the one naked edge of the glass cutting into her skin, but she did not deign to move. She was so thin and pale it looked as if death might have already taken her, if not for the steady rise and fall of her breasts. She thought of the fleeting, androgynous touch of flesh against flesh, and contrasted it with the cool pain as the glass broke the skin.

She suddenly couldn't breathe. Her heart was beating as though to break her ribcage. She tried to gasp out something — anything — to the lover in the other room, but words would not escape her lips. Anyway, the door was locked. Her imagining was coming true; she was going to die. The thoughts raced through her head on top of one another. Her heart felt like a startled bird taking flight.

Then it stopped. Not her heart, though, but the feeling of imminent death. Suddenly she was simply there, collapsed against the mirror with blood trickling down her back. The woman stood up, and looked in the mirror again. The face there could have been made of alabaster. She was an artist's model: hairless and flexible. Wordlessly, she unlocked the door, turned off the light, and stood there for a while as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Then she went out, into the other room. The lover was still there. He stared at her; she could see his eyes shining in the light from the window.

"What were you doing in there?" he asked, as she crawled into bed beside him.

"Nothing."

Okay Caroline

A Story By Dylan Kinnett

"Okay Caroline," I said. "What game do we play next?"

It was getting dark in the backyard as the old barn's soggy shadow stretched out behind us. Her tiny hands made fists around tufts of grass, ready to finish the leaf fight that we'd been having.

"We'll be frogs!" she squealed, and hopped around me. "Hop. hop. Hop. But, what else do frogs do?"

"Well,"

I wondered, never having been a frog before, or considered an amphibian's idea of pastime. "They sit all day in the stinky, fetid, swamp -"

"What's fetid?"

Caroline hopped again. "Stinky," I said, and leapt a bit to catch up with her. "But you already said that." "So I did, so I did," I continued, "they live on lily pads in the swamp, sitting like we are. And they talk."

"YES!" Caroline's eyes glimmered

"they talk, belchy, like this," And she bellowed a frog's belch

"Bleeaugh!"

"Yes," I said, "Ribbit" I said. "Urp." A dog barked at us from some other back yard. Caroline jumped onto my pad, rocking it on the water a bit from the force of her landing. She whispered,

"It's dinner time now. Catch me a dragonfly!" I smiled at her, and brushed some of the grass out of her hair with my hand-flipper. But her eyes insisted. So, I puffed my cheeks out as far as they would go, suppressing another froggie belch. I tilted my head toward the newly sunken sun. My tongue cooled quickly in the thick summer air. I tasted fireworks and barbecue. Caroline's laugh was a high, raucous affair.

"Your eyes get really big when you do that." She put her hand on my head.

"Tag. You're it!" Caroline ran off behind the barn, cackling.

The Rain

Carmen C. Wong

Wipe away that glisten from
the corner of your eye and wish away all dark doubts
on the stars that light the sky.

With daylight from your laughter
to wash away my pain I hope and plead that twilight
will bring with it the rain

The moon warms just as softly
as your kisses ~ light as air transfixed in timeless memories
Lost ~ in a longing stare.

Whilst gentle breezes linger
whisper to me its dreams teardrops from celestial souls
drown their calls with rainy screams

Naughty But A Cinder

The New Poetry of
Apocalypse Playground

Grave

Carmen C. Wong

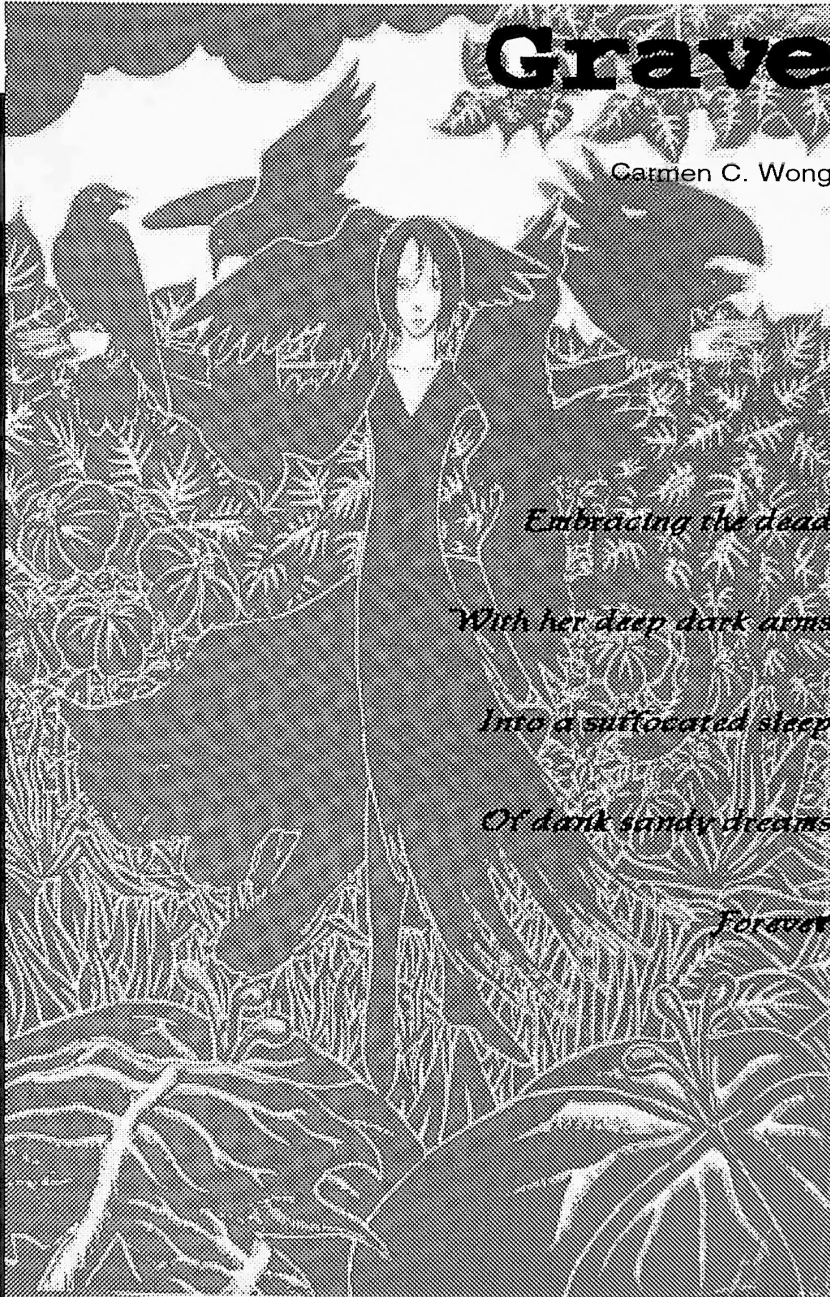
Embracing the dead

With her deep dark arms

Into a suffocated sleep

Of dark sandy dreams

Forever



LOSS

Carmen C. Wong

Art thou asleep or strangely faded,
Blown with blue cloud dust, weary from wishful thinking of hopes lost,
moon dreams and twilight memories that refuse to sleep?

Art thou lost, or withering wanderer
thrown in a place where roses bleed with crystal dew
where tears never cease and twilight memories are wont to keep?

Art thou dead or in death-like sleep
swallowed with sickly greif that eats your heart and kills your soul
decays, destroys your twilight memories that ache and weep?

Dance of the Damned

Story Editorial

by Ginny LaFrance

There are many kinds of evil in the world. Some of them have names and faces we recognize. Others are not known, yet they still invoke a choking sense of terror in each of us. In Houarners *The Circles of Hell* a troubled father is more concerned with getting on with his own jumbled life than with sharing time with his child. He offers to her, as a consolation prize in exchange for his love and affection, an odd doll. But the strange, faceless doll soon takes on a life of its own which destroys their fragile world.

And in the conclusion to the new play "3712", mother and daughter mentally and emotionally spar with each other, while questioning their equality and directions in life.

The Circles of Hell

By Gerard Daniel Houarner

"She doesn't love you," Alexis heard, a soft whisper insinuating itself into the clatter of utensils landing in the box, the salsa music playing on the portable boom box, and the grunts and curses of the men moving the sofa through Mrs. Rivera's apartment door and into the elevator.

Alexis stopped emptying the deceased widower's kitchen drawers. He glanced at the bare cabinets, the cartons stacked by the kitchen doorway, the doll lying at the end of counter his supervisor had left for Alexis to take home to his eight year old daughter, Gloria. He shook his head and returned to packing the remnants of the dead woman's life. A dj's re-mix, he decided. Somebody trying to add a little originality to the same old formula. He wished someone had done the same to the doll — a faceless, foot tall assembly of soft, plastic parts that looked like a prototype for a collector's doll. Cleverly masked joints allowed a realistic range of movement, and the proportions suggested a typical woman's figure rather than some female model's idealized, and fantasized, measurements.

Alexis returned to his job, and could not keep his thoughts from straying. Mrs. Rivera's deceased husband had worked in the Merchant Marine, and their scattered children had already cleared the place of all the valuables and exotic gifts he had brought back. There was hardly anything worthwhile left, and the rest of the clean-up crew had already staked their claims on the usable appliances, clothes and pieces of furniture. The supervisor, taking pity on the maintenance staff's new man, had offered the doll as a consolation prize. Next time, the supervisor promised, Alexis would get a chance at the good stuff.

Alexis accepted, hiding the shame he felt at the thought of offering such strange gift to his girl. Like her friends, she considered anything less than brand names disposable. A faceless doll, no matter what the quality, would gain him

only her contempt. As if he had not earned enough already, with Maribel, his social worker wife, supporting the family since the factory laid him off, and his struggle through a string of menial jobs ending with a porter job that brought in half his wife's pay.

He finished the utensil drawer, closed the box, put it on top of the others he had packed. Poking the doll's yielding shell with a thick, stubby forefinger, he said, in Spanish, under his breath, "Maybe you don't love me either." A mild tingling sensation shot through his flesh, as if his hand had been asleep for all the years of his life, only to be awakened, blood roused and spirit shaken, by the cool, dead touch of plastic. He shook his head, laughed, turned his attention to sink cabinet and its nest of roaches, cans and bottles, rags and bags.

"But I do," he thought he heard a voice say. He stopped, turned. The radio blasted a classic 70's Tito Puente record riddled with timbala riffs.

He reached over the boxes and changed the station, ignoring the protests of his co-workers. If he couldn't get something decent for his family, at least he'd get the dj's playful mix out of his head.

He came home late from his community college literature course that night. Gloria was crying at the dinner table, her voice rising above the ten o'clock news blaring in the background. Maribel, head under a kerchief, stained T-shirt loosely tucked into jeans that fit last year, was washing the dinner pots and plates in the kitchen alcove while she talked on the phone. Alexis put his satchel and jacket down on a chair and knelt by his daughter.

"Hey, what's the problem, princess?" he said, giving her a hug and speaking into her ear through a veil of black, curly hair.

Gloria wept into his shoulder, her complaint reduced to sobs. He picked her up, walked gingerly by the small shelving unit filled with his wife's

Apocalypse Playground

collection of crystal animals that separated the dining area from the living room, and muted the TV with the remote. He sat on the couch, put Gloria down next to him, his arm around her, waited. Maribel leaned out of the kitchen, waved a covered dish. He held his hand up, signalling her not to microwave his dinner.

"Okay, now am I going to hear a straight story from you, or what?" he asked, squeezing her shoulder and pulling her closer to him.

"Daddy?" Gloria said, wiping her face, then launching into an intertangled collection of tales about a girlfriend's party, an overnight stay, a school project's due date, a fight with a boy in the building lobby, and her mother's broken promises.

Alexis listened, glanced at images of murder and car crashes and sports highlights on the news, drifted back to the rhythms of passages from Dante's *Inferno* the teacher had read in class. His daughter's voice merged with those of his schoolmates, new friends, young and old, who had gathered at the bar after class for beer and philosophy. Her stories became lost in the discussions still ringing in his mind: which Circle of Hell would welcome the mayor, governor, Congressmen and Senators, Trump and Steinbrenner, professors, bosses, ex-lovers, family members. Her desperate reasoning for being allowed to sleep at a friend's house wove itself into the memory of a heated discussion over whether it was better to serve in Heaven, rule in Hell, or do nothing and wander in Hell's ante-room with those who were neither good nor evil.

Gloria had stopped talking. A fast-food commercial blared. The excitement of the evening's intellectual stimulation dissipated like the aromas from his mother's kitchen the day he watched her die of a heart attack on the cold linoleum floor of their Washington Heights apartment.

"Well, Daddy?" Gloria asked, squirming in his embrace.

Maribel hovered nearby, arms crossed.

The weight of family bonds and responsibilities settled on him. He closed his eyes, trying to catch a last, fleeting glimpse of his other life, so different from his everyday existence,

from anything he had ever known as a child in the Dominican Republic or growing up in New York. Talking and listening, instead of fighting or running. Thinking, instead of being lectured to by his father, family, teachers and counselors. Exploring and discovering, rather than serving the term of duty and meeting the obligations of relationships owed to his younger sisters left without their mother, and to his father, left alone to raise three daughters. Studying and learning, working his mind and spirit for himself instead of his body for the people who depended on him. Only his first couple of years with Maribel, before Gloria arrived, had given him the same taste of joy, the same promise of something more than the certainty of a daily burden and the prison of family routines and responsibilities.

But his moment of freedom was gone, like a dream broken by the morning alarm.

"I have to talk it over with your mother," he said.

Gloria wiggled out of his grasp and glared at him. "Why can't you say!"

"It's way past your bed time," Maribel said, swooping down and grabbing hold of the girl. "I let you talk to your Daddy, like I promised, but that's it. Enough. To bed."

They went down the hall. Maribel slammed the girl's bedroom door closed. Gloria's crying faded. Alexis watched the end of the news, numb from the sudden absence of hope. He picked up his satchel, took out his books and folders. The doll, in a plastic bag.

He started towards the bedrooms. Maribel emerged from Gloria's room, glared at him and put her finger to her lips. Alexis backed out of the hallway. Gloria came out, turned up the TV, grabbed him by the arm and took him into the kitchen. She pushed him to the back, down the narrow space between counter and stove, hard, so that he slipped and slid and almost fell to the linoleum floor but slammed into the refrigerator instead.

"What the hell are you thinking getting home this time of night?" she whispered, stabbing his chest with her finger. There had been a time when he would have felt the sharp edge of a manicured nail, the electric shock of

their connection to each other. Instead, there was only the jolt of bone probing fat, seeking some vital point to penetrate. She glowered up at him, the unforgiving neon light exposing the lines around her eyes and mouth, bulges of flesh under her jaw and at her waist, the gray in the hair she never bothered to style anymore.

He looked down at the gut spilling over the belt of his jeans, wondered what he looked like to her in the harsh light.

"You know I have a class —"

"That ended at seven thirty. You walked through the door at ten thirty. Where the hell have you been?"

"Out. With people from the class."

"Oh. You have time to socialize? Beer with the boys, or wine with the students?"

"What are you talking about? I just wanted to hear what everybody was saying about the —"

"What about Gloria?" Maribel threw her body behind a sweeping gesture that ended with a snap of the wrist in the direction of Gloria's room.

Alexis shook his head, held his hands up. "How was I supposed to know she had a bad day?"

"What about a phone call? What about just coming home?"

"Wait a minute, Maribel. I don't understand what the big deal is about —"

"You're not spending enough time with her, that's what the big deal is. Alexis. You were with her for a year while you were out of work. All the time. Dropping her off at school, picking her up, doing her homework with her, taking her out when she was home from school. Do you understand? She's used to having you around. It's called separation anxiety. She's having a hard time adjusting. It's hard enough her getting used to you finally getting back to work, but then you're in classes every other night and at the library and reading and writing on the weekends, and now you're hanging out with all those blancos and negras and forgetting about your own family, your own daughter —"

Alexis brought his hands down quickly, like twin hammers, whistling close by her before slapping them against the refrigerator door. The sting of metal on flesh reminded him of

Apocalypse Playground

pain, and blunted the rage threatening to blow his self-control apart. "Don't lecture me," was all he could manage as he stared into the hurt trembling in her eyes, the anger suffusing her light brown skin with blood. He looked to the floor, afraid of the color she was taking, then became frightened of what he might find on the linoleum and glanced at the kitchen entry. He closed his eyes against the nightmare hallucination of his daughter staring at them as they argued, and finally rested his gaze on the light fixture.

"I thought you liked being lectured," Maribel said, her voice a low but intense flame.

"You're jealous," he said, after a deep breath. "You're afraid your dumb hick husband will know just as much as you, and you won't be able to be my social worker anymore." He paused, then continued, "How's that for an assessment?"

Maribel's mouth opened. The blood left her face. He felt a wave of sympathetic cold pass through him. The hurt in her eyes blossomed into a poisoned flower, petrified, and he knew he could never cut the bloom of pain he had nurtured with the neglect of his responsibilities and casual, edged words.

Maribel closed her mouth. She whirled about, stormed out of the kitchen. The TV and living room lights went off. Silence lurked in the darkness, threatening to attack him when the refrigerator motor cut off. He waited until he was certain his wife had gone to bed, then left the kitchen, picked up the doll and went to Gloria's room. He hesitated for a moment before entering, waiting for the sound of rustling sheets or slammed drawers; a word from his wife, his daughter, the doll. The apartment remained silent. Alexis entered through a creaking door.

Gloria lay awake in the bed, facing the door, her face glowing from the Beauty and the Beast night light in the socket by the headboard. She watched as he entered, closed the door, went to her bed.

"Hey, I forgot in all the commotion that I found something for you," he whispered.

"Did you and mommy talk?"

"Yes, baby. We talked."

"And, so, can I sleep over like I said?"

"Well, your mother and I didn't come to a decision about that."

Gloria spun around and pulled the sheet over her head. He put the doll against her back, patted her on the shoulder, kissed the top of her head. "I think it's a collector's item, like an expensive model. Maybe we can give find some clothes for her, or you and your Mom can make something for her. Draw a face on it, or something."

Feeling foolish, he stood, withdrew, gave his daughter a quick glance over his shoulder as he went to the door. She had rolled back over and held the doll in one hand, by the waist. It flopped back and forth like a miniature Fay Wray in Kong's grip as she shook it. Gloria's expression changed from annoyance to disgust, and she raised her arm to throw the toy to the floor. But she stopped in mid-throw, looked up at her hand. Her face relaxed. She seemed to melt back under the sheets, and placed the doll facing her on the pillow before she closed her eyes and curled into a sleeping ball.

Alexis slipped out, feeling unforgiven for sins he did not remember committing.

Maribel slept as far away from Alexis as she possibly could on the bed. He lay staring at the dresser in the gloom until he felt compelled to get up and go to Gloria's room. He stood half way in the doorway, listening, watching his daughter's steady breathing fall on the doll inches from her mouth.

"You think you are a good man," a voice said, in polite and perfectly enunciated Spanish, "and you are afraid of being a bad man. But all you really are is a man who does nothing really good or bad. That is why she does not love you. But I see what you can be. And I love you."

Alexis stepped back and closed the door. He went to the bathroom, pissed, flushed, then back to the bedroom. Maribel's eyes were still closed but he knew she was awake. He climbed in next to her and closed his eyes.

Opened them. Wondered if he was doing so for the first time that night; hoped he had just awakened from a dream.

He came straight home after work the next day. Maribel was on the phone talking to her mother. Sitting on the living room couch, still wearing the pants suit she had worn to work, she turned away from him as he entered and spoke in hushed tones. No cooking smells drifted from the darkened kitchen.

He went to Gloria's room, looked in.

"Hi there," he said, smiling.

His daughter sat cross-legged on the bed, back against the headboard. She still wore her school jeans, and papers and books spilled from the bag she had tossed on the floor. The doll lay cradled in her arms.

"Do you have any homework I can help you with?" he asked.

She began to rock back and forth, humming a tune he did not recognize. It sounded like nothing she usually listened to on the radio, or watched on video channels.

He approached her. Notes rose and fell, like a tonal roller coaster ride, punctuated by rhythmic grunts. The hair rose on the nape of his neck. She had dressed the doll in jean pants and a crude flower jacket like the one she favored. And the doll had dimples where its eyes should have been, and a bump where the nose would have been, had it been a normal doll. And there were bumps on the side of its head, and fuzz across its skull, like a fungus, and a pin hole in place of its mouth.

Instinctively, he reached for the doll. Gloria's head whipped around. Her eyes blazed as she hissed. Alexis backed away.

"She does not love you," said Gloria, in a voice pitched higher than normal.

As Alexis closed the door, he heard her say, "But I do."

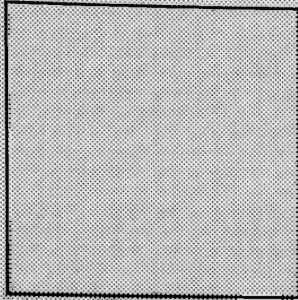
Going to the living room, he sat and waited for Maribel to get off the phone. His wife gave him several withering looks before finally hanging up.

"Maribel, we have to talk about Gloria —"

Her eyes widened. She gasped, leapt up, ran to the kitchen. He followed her, found her drawing a knife out of the holding block.

"I think something's wrong —" he continued, surprised by the quavering

Apocalypse Playground



Another Road Poem

-Dylan Kinnett

*this is how it is
there's a train comin' down
alongside the highway
by the bridge
that goes over the road
by the river
And I know
there's the chance
that it's goin' my way
that is,
that I might pass it
under the bridge.
It's good luck you know.*

but we miss.

I know.

*it's just up to speed,
coincidence.*

*It's only lights on the
highway,*

*be it the Sharpsburg screamer
or the Shepherdstown express
(they both go both ways
along the highway)
so I don't think
that the train was fate
or of what would have been
had I passed it
under the bridge.*

It goes by anyway, screaming.

*There are miles behind me
and more road ahead
so I step on it and go
under the river bridge
lights on the highway lights
on the highway*

*That train was fate,
And I passed it all the same.*

of his own voice.

Maribel flinched, faced him holding the knife out and up with both trembling hands. "You monster," she said, then growled as she hunched over, gathering herself like a trapped and wounded wild animal.

He fled, terror blowing its cold breath into his heart.

He took a room in a motel. When Maribel went to work and Gloria to school, he returned to the apartment and searched for the doll. When he did not find it, he gathered some clothes and his school materials and left. He worked, went to class, called his wife at night. His wife hung up on him.

He took a half day off from the job and waited for his daughter at school. A car pulled up, a man emerged, flashed a badge, showed him a court order of protection. Other parents gathered. Alexis walked away, stunned, numb.

That night, he stood across the street from his family's apartment, debating whether or not he should try to talk to Maribel. He went home, called his wife's mother. She cursed him in Spanish, told him she always knew no good would come from a Dominican marrying her daughter. She promised her husband and sons would hunt him down and kill him.

Alexis wished his mother was still alive so he could find comfort, and answers, with her. He called the sisters he had helped raise and told them what had happened. They promised to do what they could. When they did not call back, he spent the night trying to tease from them what they had discovered. One of sisters treated him with a coldness he had never felt from her before hanging up. Another kept asking why, until he had to break the connection because he had no answer, and she would not explain her question. The last sounded drunk, and her words slid on the edge of coherency as she rambled between giddiness and weeping. Early in the morning, he reached his father, who listened to his story without saying a word. Silence hung between them like the absence of the woman who linked them together. Finally, his father said he must have done something terrible to make Maribel and the two families so angry, and asked what his perfect son had finally done. Alexis heard the echo of ancient rivalries, cut his father's inquisition off, and spent the sleepless hour before his alarm rang haunted by the image of a face forming on the doll he had given his daughter, and a voice declaring a terrible love for him he could not understand.

His supervisor found him standing in Mrs. Rivera's apartment, where the painting crew was setting up.

"Looking for a new assignment?" the man asked, coming up behind Alexis.

"The stuff you took out of the apartment," Alexis said, searching for a way not to sound ridiculous, "was any of it...unusual?"

His supervisor put his hand on Alexis' shoulder. "She had a huge collection of junk. The old man preferred the ocean to her and stayed away as much as he could. But he kept coming back, so he must have loved her, or their kids. Whenever he did return, he brought all kinds of things to distract everybody. Later, after their kids left, he had things to keep her company. He used to show me, when I first started working the building and ran into him. Some of it was pretty creepy, but valuable, he used to say. Like toys, with mechanical tricks, and electronics like the kind you see now, with playback sound and video. Only back then, nobody'd ever seen anything like it. Collector's items, maybe. Or prototypes of equipment nobody ever bothered to make. What the kids didn't take, like that stupid doll, is for sure garbage. Hell, half the stuff I saw those kids move out of here was junk. But don't feel bad, Alexis. The appliances the rest of the guys got were on their last legs, the furniture old but not antique, if you know what I mean. Nobody made out on this deal. But I promise, I'll look after you next time."

The smell of new paint turned Alexis' stomach, and he went to the window to get fresh air. Below, he saw two of Maribel's brothers standing next to a parked car by the entrance to the building parking lot.

The supervisor stood next to him. "I heard you and your wife are having a hard time. They showed up an hour ago, asked about you. I told them to go to hell. But I think maybe you better take some time off, straighten things out between the two of you."

The fear Alexis felt was not focused on the men waiting for him, or even on

Apocalypse Playground

the madness that had overtaken Maribel. He was not afraid of the lies she might be spreading about him, or what his own family was thinking he had done.

What sapped the strength from his limbs and the heat from his heart was the question of what Mr. Rivera had brought back to his wife to keep her company. What had he passed on to his daughter? What had chosen him to love, now that Mrs. Rivera was gone?

He had stopped wondering which circle of Hell he had been consigned to, why something new had been added to the mix of his comfortably familiar life. School notes and the draft of a paper were scattered, unfinished, back on the desk in the motel room. Books were strewn over worn carpeting, unread. He had missed class. Pieces of dreams and hope twitched in his mind, dying, poisoned by a mystery's touch.

Alexis watched from half a block away as Maribel's brothers moved boxes and furniture out of their old apartment building and into a rented truck. His heart jumped when Maribel brought Gloria out. His little girl jumped up and down, peeking into the back truck, pointing at the pieces of her bed as her uncles carried them across the sidewalk. Maribel wiped a tear and one of her brothers comforted her while Gloria chased her bed to the truck, laughing along with the rest of her uncles. Alexis felt his heart twist, his stomach lurch as if left behind by a free-falling elevator taking the rest of him down into the depths of the earth. He fought against the urge to join them, to reclaim his wife and daughter. He remembered the strength and toughness of her brothers.

Maribel and Gloria went back inside, followed by all but one of the brothers. The last climbed into the truck, stayed inside. Alexis approached the building, staying across the street, passed the truck, crossed over and came around the front of the truck. He was not sure what he wanted to do. A vision of his daughter danced in front of him, beyond his touch.

"She does not love you," a voice whispered.

Alexis stopped, glanced at the boxes, picked out the colorful fashion stickers Gloria had used to identify her cartons. He pierced the sealing tape closing one on the top of a pile, reached in, sifted through toys. His fingers brushed against something warm, closed around a yielding form. Plastic, not flesh, as he first thought. A wave of heat shot up his arm, crashed over the rest of his body, bringing with it a tide of emotion that shocked him. Awakened him. Illuminated with phosphorescent currents the emptiness he never knew existed inside of him; highlighted shadows twitching in dark corners he never wanted to see.

A shout startled him. One of Maribel's brothers rushed out of the building's service entrance, pointing and yelling at him. The brother in the truck popped his head around the back and cursed. Alexis tore the doll out of the box and ran. The others chased him. Alexis' legs pumped, carrying him over concrete sidewalk like an eagle's wings.

"But I do," the breeze whistled as it blew past his ears. The doll burned in his grasp, a piece of molten plastic poured into the hollow of his soul.

The other men on the job stopped asking him to join them after work for beers at a stripper joint. His supervisor gave up pushing for him to take time off. His classmates and professor tracked him down through records in the Bursar's Office and asked why he quit class. He refused to pick up their calls and immediately erased the whining messages they left on his answering machine.

His wife and daughter never called, though Maribel's process server did track him down to his new address, carrying divorce papers. A detective stopped by and questioned him about his relationship with his daughter, asked if he would take a lie detector test and submit to medical and psychological examinations. Neither his sisters or father contacted him to listen to his side of what had happened.

Alexis did not care. He was haunted by the sight of his daughter running into their old apartment building, laughing, unaffected by the absence of her father. The hurt of her betrayal lingered, like a flesh-eating parasite consuming just enough of his heart to sustain pain, but not enough to kill him.

"She did not love you," the doll said. He smoothed her dark curls, adjusted the strap on the bright red sun dress he had bought for her. Her legs were folded coquettishly under her, a knee peeking out here, a foot there. She leaned back on

the aluminum dinette table, head back, her dark eyes unblinking, her full, red lips slightly parted, as if in expectation of a kiss. He turned on the radio, and Willie Colon's latest peppered the air with relentless, joyous rhythms. He wished he was a doll, so he could sweep her into his arms and dance with her. "But I will love you always," the doll said to him, "whatever you do, whatever you think."

Her words insinuated themselves in his thoughts, unlocking needs and desires he had never known existed. He was repulsed by the potentials they uncovered. And excited. Were the nightmare acts rising to fill his imagination truly his, he wondered, or were they, like the doll's words, intrusions, invasions of someone, or something, else's life and appetites? Was the doll a mirror reflecting its owner's emptiness, or a demon corrupting his soul?

Alexis did not know. He was driven by the void within him to hold and cherish the single bond left to him. He was dependent, like the most pathetic junkie with heroin or crack, on the connection between himself and Mrs. Rivera's old and secret friend.

He adjusted the doll's pose, drawing her legs out where he could see their long, smooth curves. "You made them tell lies," he whispered, tears burning his eyes. His throat constricted, and he had a hard time forcing words out. "You drove them away from me." His hands shook over the doll's body.

"Their love depended on what they thought you might or could do. Their love changed when they believed you capable of acts beyond their imagining. They could never truly love you. But I know you have crossed the threshold. I know you have been good. And bad, as well. But my love for you will never change."

Alexis touched the doll, as he might have his daughter. Picked it up and cradled it in his arms. "I love you," he whispered in a hoarse and broken voice.

He fell, like an angel cast out of Heaven, down through all the circles of Hell and into the Devil's unconditional love.

Apocalypse Playground

“ 3 7 1 2 ”

A PLAY BY FINDLINE ACT TWO

CAST LIST

MON - **A**
mother of 47, who is getting over a separation and trying to get her life back together. She is plainly dressed in middle-class clothes, but she knows how to have a good time when she can find the energy.

CREATURE - **MON's** daughter. She's 21 and not overly attractive, but she'd do in a pinch. She dresses moderately, also. She doesn't have too much tolerance for school, but studies, and does everything else, because she must.

DEAD BODIES - These are people who've died, still dressed in their shabby burial clothes, and come back to life reciting poetry.

TIME

St. Patrick's Day. March. The year 3712. The future.

PLACE

The country, away from the city of Tallahassee, FL. The play takes place in a large backyard, where the nearest neighbor is only a cemetery.

(The future. The year 3712. And things don't look very different than now, but obvious style changes, as odd as the director wants. An afternoon on St. Patrick's Day. The backyard of a Tallahassee, FL house in a residential neighborhood. Not a lovely house or backyard, but good enough for two women on their own. The edge of the house can just be seen. A bush with red berries. Fallen leaves on the dirt-enveloped grass. Free-standing poles 20 ft. apart connected by sturdy clothesline. The shades of trees are moved from start to finish of play by the sun's constant motion.)

Continued from Apocalypse
Playground Issue 11...

CREATURE. You called me Christine.

MON. No.

CREATURE. Yes. Yes, you did...

MON. You are mistaken.

CREATURE. No. Not at all. No. I don't have a wrong thought in my head.

MON. (Trying to change the subject again) I can see the smoke from here. It's still going strong. He won't come..

CREATURE. Tell me, mother...

MON. (Pause, deciding) - I think it's just about done. You might as well forget those sheets. Nothing's going to get dry today.

(**DEAD BODY** comes, reciting a Shakespeare sonnet. Note: from here on, the **DEAD BODIES** may recite any poetry they wish) Remember when Disney World was like that. Every day, and the holidays. Until the Communists took it. That'll teach them to ignore a good ol' fashion Red Scare.

CREATURE. Mother...?

MON. Monica. You know I don't like to be reminded of that, Creature. Get those sheets inside, would you? Can you - oh, never mind.. (Takes the blowgun and shoots **DEAD BODY** with it)

CREATURE. You were shouting at me.

MON. I said I was sorry.

CREATURE. You think we're turning into those.. things?

MON. Give us a couple minutes, and I'm sure we'll come with the answer.

(Kicks **DEAD BODY** down the hill. They come much more frequently now and keep coming even when not noted. Note: the more actors or actresses to play **DEAD BODIES**, the better, although just two or three would do the trick)

CREATURE. (Pause) ..So what time is this guy supposed to be here?

MON. - Any minute.

CREATURE. I guess you'll have to call

him back now, huh?

MON. Why?

CREATURE. (Surprised) Well... because -

MON. Oh, Creature..

CREATURE. What?

MON. (Changes mind) - Take this in. It's ready.

(Puts semi-burnt ribs on a plate and hands it to **CREATURE**. Whatever the action, when a **DEAD BODY** shows up, one of them will have to kill it) **CREATURE.** Mon?

MON. Mmm...?

CREATURE. You called me Christine.

MON. Nonsense, Creature.

CREATURE. Yes.

MON. You misheard. Sounds close to "Creature".

CREATURE. You know my mind's never worked better.

MON. On this, it's mistaken.

CREATURE. I -

MON. If you persist, I'll become angry.

CREATURE. Comment dit-on cela en francais?

MON. And stop trying to show off.

CREATURE. I'm not!

MON. Take this plate in!

CREATURE. No!

MON. Creature, I've just about had it!

CREATURE. Why won't you talk to me?

MON. Creature! For the last time -!

CREATURE. You hate me, don't you?

MON. Que quiere decir eso?

CREATURE. (Mocking) Show off!

MON. I can't help it!

CREATURE. Neither can I!

(**MON** slaps **CREATURE**, who cries on the deck chair. **MON** is very sad, and her anger leaves suddenly) **MON.** It's no good.

CREATURE. (Through tears) ..What?

MON. Your father can't come back. - I've got to tell you. Don't you want Mon to be happy?

Happy? Hummm...? I'm sorry.. Creature.. I'm sorry..

CREATURE. Christine..

MON. He's late because if I know your father, he's started to celebrate already.

CREATURE. He can't help it. Just like you can't help naming all fifty state birds and flowers starting with the Camellia and Yellowhammer of Alabama.

Apocalypse Playground

MON. My dear, Christine. Of course!
CREATURE. Christine!
MON. Certainly! Is there any reason not to now?
CREATURE. Am I your equal?
MON. Ever since I got back from the store.
CREATURE. You're too kind.
MON. Yes, well maybe a little. Since a few minutes ago, anyway. Comprenez-vous?
CREATURE. Oui, oui, je comprends.
MON. Merci.
CREATURE. Do you think the factory will ever close?
MON. Mon ami, I sincerely hope not. Why, I was just thinking -
CREATURE. I know what you were just thinking -
MON. I know you know what I was just thinking.
CREATURE. I know.
MON. When that dreadful man gets here. I'm going to have a few words. Before I'm through, the factory will run twenty-four hours a day. Until I can figure out a way to prolong the length of the day.
(They laugh together. DEAD BODIES keep coming, and they keep killing them, in all sorts of different and funny ways, to amuse themselves)
I'm so glad we were able to chat, you know. Really takes the pressure off.
CREATURE. I'm sure.
MON. Yes, yes. You know I probably would've wanted you had it been with someone else.
CREATURE. Not a doubt in my head.
MON. I know.
CREATURE. I know you know it.
MON. I know.
CREATURE. Because you love me.
MON. Together. We can start a new life.
CREATURE. It shouldn't be taking him this long. The factory's not that far away.
MON. I'll have a word with him. Let me know.
CREATURE. You sure that's a good idea now.
MON. You're right.
CREATURE. He'll want to explain.
MON. Rationalize.
CREATURE. Advertise.

MON. Himself.
CREATURE. Accomplishments.
MON. Things he's done, thriving bank accounts..
CREATURE. Make everything look so good -
MON. White-wash it all -
CREATURE. (During this, both women kneel the DEAD BODIES in the groin before killing them)
so no mistakes -
MON. Nothing shows up -
CREATURE. Except the good things -
MON. Things he wants us to hear -
CREATURE. It's amazing!
MON. The deceit -
CREATURE. of it all! Is that my father?
MON. I wouldn't've minded unfaithfulness - but to a factory?
CREATURE. Crafty -
MON. Explaining, over and over -
CREATURE. being an asshole once again!
MON. Right!
CREATURE. Right, right!
MON. Thinks we're soft!
CREATURE. Only reason he's coming!
MON. Right! Damn right!
CREATURE. Shifty!
MON. Can't be trusted! (MON and CREATURE look at each other and laugh) He'll be surprised!
CREATURE. And we can start over! You promised!
MON. It's all I've wanted for a long.. since he left.
CREATURE. Maybe he won't even come. Look. More smoke. It's really producing now.
MON. Yes. I want to get ready. Jason. That's his name. He should be here any minute. Oh, I hope he's not killed.
CREATURE. Don't worry, mother.
MON. I'll see about the dressing. And the table's set.
CREATURE. While I was reciting the Greek alphabet. Mother. Do you mind if I teach myself the piano tonight?
MON. No. Not if it doesn't - (Looks at the college textbooks and laughs. Picks them up) I'll throw these away.. (Starts to go in)

CREATURE. Mother. I just had a thought. I understand it all now. They can only repeat. The Dead Bodies. Whatever was closest to their souls. That's why poetry - you know, where all you have to do is repeat it. Don't you think? That's it. I mean, we're not turning into these things, don't you think?
MON. Does it matter?
CREATURE. I guess not. I love the country.
MON. Yes, of course. Let me know if Jason shows. Or the bastard.

(She goes in. CREATURE has fun with killing a few more DEAD BODIES and pushing them down the hill. She lets one chase her around the deck chair, then smacks it in the head with a shovel. She has fun for a few minutes more then becomes annoyed when more start to arrive. Without even looking at one closely, she kills him with the blowgun. Kills a few more. Then quiet. She starts to pull at the one she didn't see clearly and shrinks back in horror)
CREATURE. Dad! Oh, Dad.. oh... (But then she wonders what she's grieving for) You left me. Why did you do that? Were you reciting poetry? I didn't hear you. I would be sorry, but...
MON. (Off) Who are you talking to?
CREATURE. (Worried nature becoming pleased) - Just having fun with the bodies... (To DAD) but I'm not. (Kicks him. Makes fun of this dead parent) It's your fault, you know. Your fault. Whatever happened to me. Whatever happened to you. Your fault. Ha, ha.. I don't care anymore. I really d-
MON. (Off) Christine.. (CREATURE pauses, making a big decision. She pushes DAD DEAD BODY down the hill with the rest, as MON enters) Help me a bit with this potato salad. Venez ici.
CREATURE. Oui, oui.. (She follows MON in with a smile on her face. As she goes in) You know I never really liked the country this much before.
MON. (Off) Anybody show up, yet? (As lights start to dim)
CREATURE. Just a lot of dead bodies.. (Lights out)

T H E
END

COME...SIT...STAY.



LOST DOG COFFEE ~ GERMAN STREET ~
S H E P H E R D S T O W N