



The Death Issue



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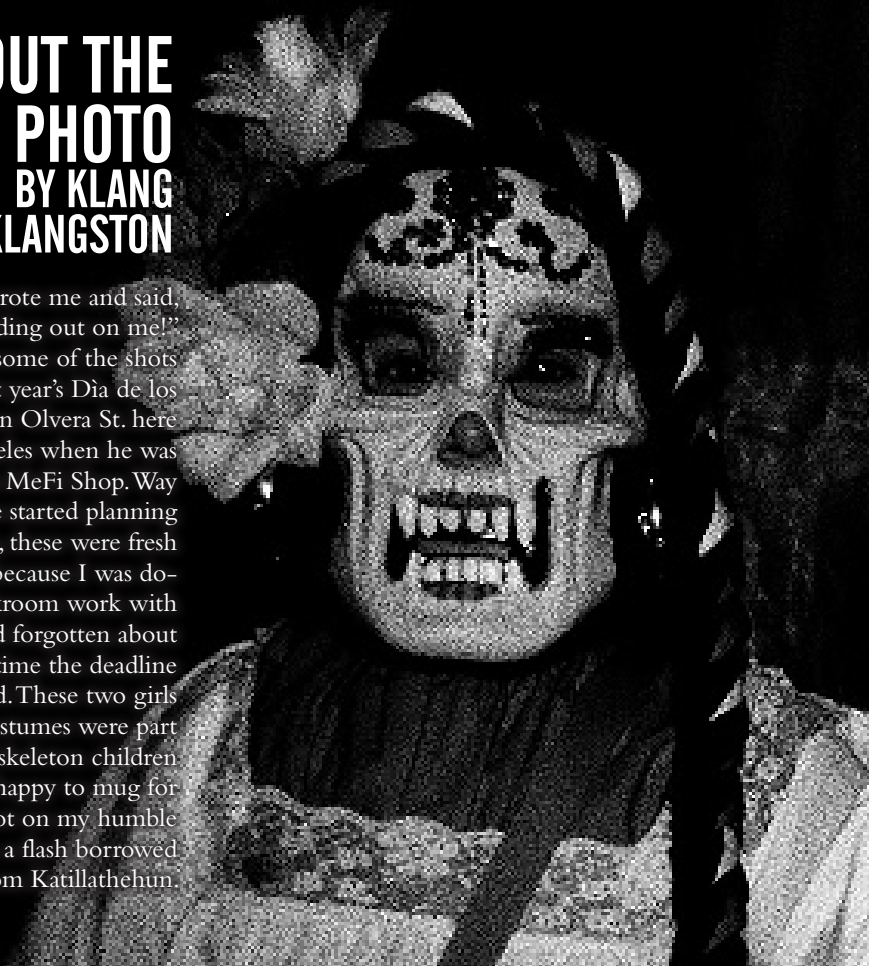
Halloween

Last minute search for a costume

By Jason Bitterman

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO BY KLANG KLANGSTON

Brandon wrote me and said, "You're holding out on me!" He'd found some of the shots I took of last year's Día de los Muertos on Olvera St. here in Los Angeles when he was browsing the MeFi Shop. Way back when we started planning a death issue, these were fresh on my mind because I was doing some darkroom work with them, but I'd forgotten about them by the time the deadline rolled around. These two girls in calavera costumes were part of a parade of skeleton children who were happy to mug for photos. Shot on my humble Holga with a flash borrowed from Katillathehun.



EDITOR'S NOTE

DEATH IS UNIVERSAL. No matter what path any of us take through life, we all get there in the end.

And along the way, most of us have to cope with the deaths of others. How we deal with those deaths is a big part of what makes us human.

We have two professionals: ColdChef and Bookhouse. ColdChef works as an undertaker and guides us through his first death call (pg. 30), as the unwanted visitor that provides the comforting formality so many of us need in the aftermath of a death — that cool professionalism that lets us step outside emotion and think, "It's OK. There's a system here."

Bookhouse makes murder his business in the figurative sense. As a crime writer (now grinding out a death a week for CBS's "The Mentalist"), he gives us "Agua Dulce," (pg. 7) a squalid little drama where at least four men die in the desert, but at least one man lives.

We have four pieces on the journey there, Brandon Blatcher's "Living With Death" (pg. 28) Howie Good's "Voyager" and "In Absentia," and Scattercat's "Winterwing" (pg. 14). Brandon talks about how diabetes will eventually kill him. My dad's got those sugars too, and my doctors have told me it's only a matter of time before I develop it — I've got family history on both sides. It'll kill me too, unless something else does first.

Scattercat and Howie both bring subjectivity and poetry to the last trip any of us will take.

We also have Pater Aletheias's difficult meditation on the beginning of life and the end of it (pg. 19).

Finally, we have four remembrances: Eulogies from Seanyboy (pg. 16) and Jofus (pg. 22), Woodblock100's "Homecoming" (pg. 21), and finally Lysdexic Dyslexic's "Lo Que Pasó" (pg. 36). They all touch both on the people that left and the people left behind.

And that's not even mentioning the bevy of great art all the way through.

Next month is another one of those universals: Sex. Sexy sex sex like it was our profession, but it'll be more fun if you get involved too.

[+],

Klang Klangston

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I was in a situation where I had to write a Final Letter to a family friend who was dying and had expressly said no phone calls, no visits. So, I wrote it like a letter I'd normally write ["I've been doing well, this is what's going on, my friends and I did this thing this weekend, the crazy chipmunk under my stairs did this wacky thing..."] and sort of wrapped it up with some "you will be remembered" sorts of things that were both true and not really maudlin:

"This time of year I always think about you and the lovely gardens you have kept" "You were the first one who really showed me the interesting aspects of tintype photography and I always think about that".

People pretty much have enough on their minds without worrying about you and your concerns. The most important thing about the phone call is that you make it. It's scary because you feel that you know it's The Last Call and feel like you'll blow it. You won't. Pretty much anything you say will be fine and making the call is so much better than what-iffing your way into calling too late. Put down the keyboard and call.

posted by jessamyn at 2:54 PM on August 23, 2010



[klangklangston](http://klangklangston.com)



"Road" a Baker Miller production (a non e mouse)

Agua Dulce

By Bookhouse (Jordan Harper)
Originally published in Crime Factory

JOHN RAN THROUGH the high desert, away from his grave. He followed the power lines through scrub-covered hills. The power lines hummed. They whispered words he couldn't understand. But that was just madness leaking from his triple-fucked brain. Just like the sparkles and flashes at the corners of his vision and the way his head throbbed in time with his heart, frantic. The pulse radiated from his scalp where Carter had taken the pistol to him.

John's mouth felt full of hot pennies. He spat a mouthful of blood. Some splashed on the brush and pebbles underfoot; some dribbled down onto his jeans. John wiped blood drool off of his chin. His hands were caked in desert dirt from the grave Carter had made him dig. The mix made strange mud on his fingers.

Jesus, his head. Triple-fucked indeed. Brain-swamped from death-fear shakes and meth hunger. Skull-rattled from the pistol-whipping. Whole-body blasted from the orange pills Carter had fed him.

John raced tumbleweeds and thought of death. Back in the desert, as he dug his own grave, death had come so close John could still feel ghost maggots crawling under his skin. And death could still be coming. Carter could be running behind him — it would take more than a shovel swung by a crank-skinny suckmouth like John to lay out Carter. Carter could be tracking him by torn earth and trampled scrub and spat blood. Carter could be aiming at his back right now ready to send a bullet through John's brain and end this whole stupid mess. Lord, nothingness sounded so sweet. John didn't know why he ran from it.

John couldn't do much, but he could run. He was made of rope and bone. Meth had melted the rest. He could run all day, even in the fire-season oven of the California high desert. After he'd hit Carter with the shovel, the power lines were the first things he'd seen. So he followed them. If he'd chosen right, the power lines would lead him out of the high desert and back to Agua Dulce. Down in Agua Dulce, in a backside motel room looking out at rock and rattlesnake warning signs, the boy sat on the bed, probably eating a vending machine supper of soda and pork rinds. Watching teevee.

The power lines led him into a canyon between two high backed hills. He moved into the shade of the valley. Underfoot the scrub was so dry it begged to burn, like ill will alone might ignite it. As he entered the wind tunnel of the valley John smelled cowshit. And that smelled like hope.

The longhorn ranch. When Carter had driven him up the mountain, John making the trip wrapped up in the bed of Carter's truck, he'd caught this same whiff of cow dung. On the other side of the cattle ranch would be the road. They'd been moving uphill then, so he could take the downhill path back to Agua Dulce and ...

Gunshot.

John's body reacted to the sound before the noise hit his brain. He froze. Pissed a trickle. Knew:

Carter was coming.

Late at night when the meth burned itself down to a dim glow at the back of his eyes, his teeth grinding so hard he could taste enamel dust, John knew plenty well that no one with a whole mind and a healthy disposition would owe as much money and crank credit to the High Desert chapter of Aryan Steel as he did. Aryan Steel, lockdown-born and baptized in shank-drawn blood, was made up of mad crackers too crazy for the businessmen who ran the Aryan Brotherhood. Aryan Steel's name drew heavy weight among badass rednecks west of the Mississippi. In Broken Arrow, in the Huntsville yard, in Little Rock, in Big Tuna, folks knew to step careful when they saw a man with a blue lightening bolt or two tattooed on his arm. A blue bolt tat meant the wearer had killed on an Aryan Steel greenlight.

Carter had two blue bolts on his arm the day John met him at the Dew Drop in Fontana, CA. John had been a Hells

Angels prospect once, and a name with some weight of its own. That was before the crank and booze and everything else. Now he was just a suckmouth with brown teeth and slippery eyes. John bought cheap Mexi crystal from Carter, the kind that dripped down the back of the throat like slow napalm for hours. John took credit when it was offered, then begged for it to be extended. But maybe John knew the whole time in the back of his brain, where the rot was blackest, that he wasn't buying meth from Carter. He was putting down payments on a slow-motion suicide.

The bill came due that morning in a shitty motel room in Agua Dulce. John had muled a couple pounds of coke for the Steel, supposed to chip a couple hundred off his tab. The pounds were on the coffee table. Carter was going to meet him at the room, pick up the pounds and trade him a tenth of crystal.

Three blue thunderbolt tattoos rode on Carter's bicep. John wasn't sure when the third one had shown up. It seemed like a thing a man ought to have noticed. Carter bagged the three pounds in a backpack while shooting eyes at the kid.

"The fuck is that?" Carter asked as he pushed a bindle across the table.

"That's my boy."

Carter shook his head as he packed up the pounds John had brought.

"You're shitting me. You brought a kid."

"Bitch mom left him with me for the weekend. She's off down to Primm Valley."

Carter laughed. He knew the score. Primm Valley was the first place to gamble over the Nevada line. The bitch told folks she didn't like Vegas; she didn't care about neon lights and faggots riding tigers. But the truth was — and John knew Carter could guess — she couldn't wait the extra forty miles to Vegas. The boy's mother had the casino jones. John couldn't say much about it; he had his hunger for meth. With a degenerate gambler mom and a suckmouth dad, the boy was doomed to grow up thirsty for something. Only question was what. Maybe booze, which was what John's old man had drown in. Or maybe crank if John was still around to be a bad example.

Carter walked over to the window. Outside, Agua Dulce baked. The back of the motel faces a barbed wire fence plastered in yellow rattlesnake warning signs. Carter turned back around. There were pills in Carter's palm. The pills were orange-soda orange.

"Take this." Carter said.

"Man, I can't get down like that." John nodded towards the kid.

"Don't remember asking." Carter said.

John took the orange pills in his palm. He tried to ID them.

"Didn't give them to you to read, motherfucker. Take them."

John put them in his mouth. That same old pill-bitter slime coated his mouth. The taste brought memories of

a hundred memoryless days. He looked over at the boy watching teevee. Something with wings was stuck in John's chest. The wings beat against his ribcage. He swallowed the pills dry.

"Somebody else know where this kid is?"

"Why?"

"You know why."

And there it was. John wrote down the bitch's cell phone number and tucked it in the boy's pocket. He thought about kissing the boy on the top of the head, but he didn't know how.

"Boy. Going to step out. You wait for your momma here and buy something out the snack machine if you get hungry."

Two pickup trucks were parked outside the room. One John recognized as Carter's. The other one, a rusted out old Ram, had three Aryan Steel cowboys standing around it in wifebeaters and face tattoos. John counted five blue bolts between them. Behind the wheel was a fresh-faced recruit, his scalp still fish belly white. The kid — nineteen tops — had only one piece of ink, a still-wet Iron Cross. He looked scared, as if he was the one about to take his last ride.

The orange pills kicked in. Or maybe it was something else. John sank to the pavement as the world panned and zoomed. Blue-bolt-marked arms lifted him off the pavement, carried him to the back of the truck. He climbed into the bed of the truck on his own power. They wrapped him in a section of chain-link and half-covered him with a mildewed tarp. Carter tossed a shovel next to him and told the others he'd go it alone. He flexed his bicep. Three blue bolts swelled.

"Room for number four" Carter said with a smile. He covered John's face with the tarp as the white-power peanut gallery yuk-yukked.

The drive into the desert passed in an orange pill haze. The truck climbed. John sweated himself into jerky. He closed his eyes and saw the boy and wished he could change the channel. Finally the truck stopped and Carter pulled off the tarp. John's eyes solarized. Nothing but high desert scrub and power lines far off. Carter handed John the shovel and gestured to a patch of desert.

"Dig." Carter scratched himself under the chin with his big-ass pistol.

John dug. The dry soil was hard going at first as John sketched out a hole about his own size. Maybe it was the pills or the dumb animal shock but he dug without contemplating the crawl into it, the pistol blast and the eternity that would follow it.

"Good enough," Carter said. "Stand in it."

And something ancient and not yet dead came out of John's lizard brain like a solid thing, swallowing up his chest and holding it tight. Carter saw him hesitate and swung the pistol butt into John's skull. John went down in the dirt. He saw the shovel and he thought of the boy and the shovel swung and Carter was on the ground. John

missed his moment to finish him. John ran into the desert.

John moved down the valley towards the smell of cowshit. The longhorns were sealed off from the valley by a barbwire fence. Carter winged a few more shots at him. None close. Bullets bounced off rocks. And then there was a popping noise and a power line clipped by a ricochet snapped and fell, spitting sparks into the desert scrub below.

John moved towards the barbwire fence. He smelled smoke. He risked a look behind him. The power line twisted around in the scrub like a beheaded rattlesnake. It puked sparks. Fires and smoke sprung up faster than John could believe.

Wildfire.

Any boy raised up in the California high desert knew to fear smoke and fire. It's how a chemical-laced suckmouth like John managed to avoid smoking. Every match tossed aside, each careless cigarette butt could set one off. Miles of burned brush, acres of black smoke. When the wind blew dry and sure — like it did today — a wildfire could gobble up a hillside faster than a man could run.

Running was the smart thing to do. Carter, now separated from his prey by fire and black smoke, lowered the pistol and headed out of the valley. The fire gave John a chance. If he could climb through the cattle pen fast he'd make it to the road on the other side before Carter could catch up. He saw a metal shack on the other side of the gravel road. But this was no time for going to ground. John wanted to run.

John reached the fence. A longhorn bull stood on the other side. The steer stared straight ahead. His horns hung over the fence. John grabbed them. The steer didn't move. John put a foot on the bottom strand of barbed wire. It wobbled under his weight.

John put his foot on the second strand. All his weight was on the steer when the gunshot came. Blood and meat and hide exploded from the bull's shoulder. The bull roared. It tossed its head. Barbwire ripped John's legs from thigh to knee as the bull tossed him into the pen. The ground slapped the air out of him. He gasped uselessly for agonizing seconds, trying to remember how to breathe. He dodged hooves as he rolled. He took a bath in cowshit. The animals, already freaked by the smoke drifting in from the valley, scrambled across their pen as bullets tore into them. John made it to his feet and risked a peek behind him. Carter had made it to the high side of the hill faster than John had figured was possible. But he had no way to reach John.

John made it to the gate that connected the pen to the road. Metal slats were easier to hop than barbwire. Blood spots soaked John's jeans. Blood squirted between his teeth. Darklights strobed in his eyes. His smoke-lashed lungs were bundles of raw nerves screaming their high white song. But not dead yet. His feet touched the gravel road and he felt home free. The road down would lead to Agua Dulce and the ...

Shit.

A rusted-out Ram climbed the road. Devil dust swarmed around it, spiraled up in eddies towards the cloudless sky. The men in the back of the truck had shaved heads. They had tattoos on their faces and necks. They had hunting rifles. They barked out rebel yells. Aryan Steel. Carter's cavalry. Carter's cell phone must have caught a rare signal in the desert.

Plumes of smoke hugged the earth. A thick cloud of smoke laid itself between the truck and John. The truck paused downhill of the cattle pen to stay in the breathable air. John looked up the hill. The fire cut off that line of retreat. Jesus, it had spread fast. Too fast. The open desert was in flames. He turned back to the truck. Rifles trained on him. The standoff had a shelf life. The fire was climbing into the cattle pen. Soon it would surround them.

Then the skinheads looked to their right, towards the metal shack. A rancher stood in its doorway. He had a shotgun trained on the truck. He had the Aryan Steel killers cold. He said something to them, quiet. They lowered their rifles. They knew a desert rancher would fire on armed trespassers. They knew what a tight spread of buckshot could do to them. Relief soaked John, numbed his pain.

Gunshot.

The rancher's jaw sheared off. He dropped his shotgun. He hands grasped at bloody air where his chin had been. Carter came out of the smoke below the cattle pen and fired again. The other skinheads trained their rifles on the rancher and opened up on him. He jitterbugged into death. Carter looked up the road and locked eyes with John. His face was a red mask from the shovel wound on his scalp. His teeth were bright white as he smiled at his prey.

A longhorn screamed like a woman when the knife is put to her. The fire had spread to the hay in the pen. The cattle were beginning to swirl in the pen, running from smoke and sparks.

"Come. To. Us. Or."

Carter had climbed onto the hood of the truck. He shouted out the terms of John's over the screams of the terrified longhorns. Carter yelled one word at a time.

"I," Carter said.

"will," Carter said.

"kill," Carter said.

"the," Carter said.

"boy," Carter said.

John stopped. It wasn't a bluff. A few years back an Aryan Steel roughneck shotgunned a four-year-old just for having the dumb luck to be at a "leave no witnesses" greenlight in Texas. There was no chance John would make it back to Agua Dulce ahead of the truck. Carter would kill the boy just to teach other suckmouths not to run.

So die and get it over with, John thought. There hadn't been a reason to run from the grave in the first place other than his body's own cursed foolish affection for its own existence. There had been days and weeks and years

of pain and his body wanted more. It had been a bad call, and the cost was a dead rancher and a wildfire and cattle just now burning in agony. So die. The boy may have one bad day of nothing but sink water and pork rinds before his bitch mom gets back from Primm Valley. And then the boy would have a whole life of no shitheel dad, no prison visiting rooms, no Moon Pie birthday cakes and gas-station-bought birthday presents. Today could wind up to be the best day in the boy's life, and he just didn't know it yet. So do the boy a favor and die.

He walked towards them with his hands raised in the air. Smoke swirled, sending the world in and out of existence. Aryan Steel sent the recruit out to meet him, a pistol in the kid's hand. John would be his first blue bolt. Why not? John passed the gate of the cattle yard. Now the yard was burning something fierce. He saw a longhorn pressing itself into the fence, not caring about the way the barbs tore at its flesh. Its eyes begged John. It hit John in the lizard brain; it vibrated in his nerves and the sockets of his teeth.

Out of the smoke a flaming piece of tumbleweed like a comet collided with John. He hit the gravel as the bush rolled over him. The world went gray for a second. He saw the boy. The bush rolled back into the smoke. John felt his shirt burning. He tore it off as he stood. Another wave of smoke hit him, and as the smoke coated his throat he saw the boy and then the smoke cleared and he saw the gate and thought, what the hell? Let the pain go on a little longer. But let's see if we can't spread it to the appropriate parties.

He ran to the gate. The skinhead recruit watched dumbly. A metal drop-bar held the gate shut. John yanked at it. Longhorns dug into each other. John looked behind him. Carter had figured it out, and was yelling at the recruit. The recruit had the keys to the truck. They were stuck without him. Carter ran towards them as a curtain of smoke drew itself between John and the truck.

John opened the gate. The cattle stampeded. The recruit went down fast. A horn tore his arm up. The pistol hit the gravel. The boy reached down after it. A hoof dented his head. His eyes popped out. The cattle headed down into the smoke. John moved to follow. He passed the dead rancher and scooped up his shotgun. Then the smoke got John. It hit him, got inside him. His eyes burned, his nose, the insides of his ears. Pain everywhere. He dropped to his knees. He crawled through hot gravel. He could hear cattle screams and gunfire and men begging Jesus and their mothers. He came out the other side into horror and hell.

A long-horned bull engulfed in flames galloped uphill, back towards the truck. It trampled a dead skinhead. A man with a face tattoo fired twice into the animal's skull before it hit him. When the bull fell the ground shook underfoot. The man was underneath it, burning, crushed. His broken chest rattled above the hiss of the fire. John came up to him and stove his head in with the butt of the twelve gage. Every shell counted.

The fire was on them now. The air was thick with heat. The oxygen was eaten clean out of it; John couldn't catch his breath. A fire devil like a cone of flame danced across the road. The truck had caught fire. Its tires exploded in four quick bursts. A shirtless Nazi, a beard of blood pouring from his broken front teeth, had taken shelter in the burning cab of the truck. He screamed toothlessly as the melted upholstery bubbled onto his skin. He scrambled for the door handle. He fell onto the gravel, rolled trying to put the fire out. The upholstery sizzled into him as John walked by with the shotgun raised.

Carter came up from the truck bed. He was bleeding from a bad chest gash. His big-ass pistol barked. The bullet took John high in the chest, a through-and-through wound. It burned. Now John was cooking on the inside too. Blood bubbled from the entrance wound — a lung shot. John was dying. He didn't want to die anymore.

Carter fumbled for a reload. Bullets dripped through bloody fingers. They bounced on the gravel. Carter raised the unloaded pistol. John stared down the barrel at nothing. Carter dry fired an empty gun. He said something John will never know. He smiled as John put the shotgun to his head. The buckshot made Carter's head go away.

John walked. The fire sang and sang. It gobbled all around him. Helicopters flew overhead. The animals of the high desert moved with John down the mountain. A coyote ran past him. Rattlesnakes slithered down the road ignoring the mice and lizards that ran with it. No predators or prey anymore. John moved slowly. He saw things that might have been Gila monsters or just flashes of smoke madness. He trudged as if the pebbles at his feet were snow banks. He hunched over himself, too weak to lift his head off his blood-bubbling chest. He wasn't going to make it.

A longhorn with pink burn flesh like a baby's skin trotted out of the smoke. Sparks shook off its smoldering hooves. John grabbed a horn. He slumped over its back. He rode the steer down the mountain in a fever dream. He heard animal cries, men yelling, helicopters buzzing, fire popping and hissing and roaring. But under his closed eyes all he saw was the boy.

The animals left the mountain. They swarmed among the fire trucks and cop cars that sat at the base of the hills, at the city line of Agua Duce. Cattle ran into the streets of Agua Dulce. They wove around evacuating cars. John kept riding. Finally a fireman spotted John and pulled him off the steer's back.

"Johnny," John said through fire-cracked lips as someone strapped a plastic mask over his mouth. The mask blasted him off to pure oxygen heaven.

"Somebody go fetch Johnny," he said. "Somebody go fetch my boy." MFM

Born and educated in the Ozarks, Jordan Harper has worked as an ad man, a rock critic and currently as a writer for CBS's The Mentalist. There's a lot more beautiful trash to read at jordanharper.com. Check it out.



CHRON2011

louche mustachio

Being afraid of dying is kinda pointless, 'cause we're all going to do it one day. We don't know how we're going to go or when, so worrying about it doesn't do much good. Live, while you can, 'cause one day death will come calling. The suggestion about breathing is a good one. Taking a yoga class could help you learn breathing techniques. But really, don't fear death.

*posted to Ask MeFi by
Brandon Blatcher at 10:06 AM
on June 24, 2010*





DaddyNewt (Richard Newton)

Voyager 8

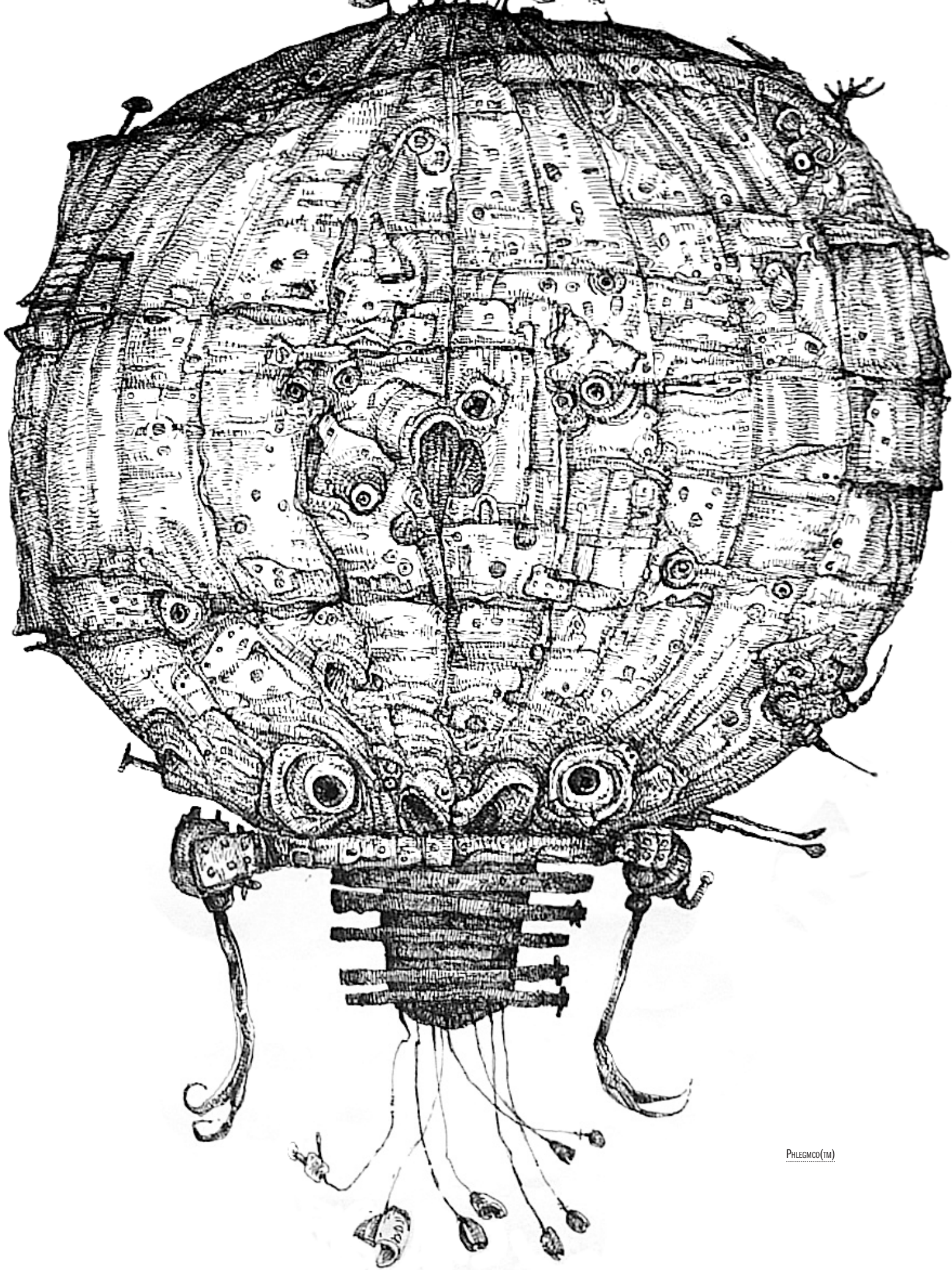
1. He're like gods, but sick.
2. Our words require more words to interpret.
3. Is it winter where you are? Somber streets brightly stained?
4. The sea consumes with the avidity of fire.
5. On a Friday in August Christopher Columbus sailed west into the unknown.
6. His country was the future.
7. Tonight thought invents crises.
8. There are sharks off the Cape and pebbles for eyes.

In Absentia

1
I asked the pale child on the playground where you were. No answer. I went upstairs, but the bed was empty. If I closed my eyes for even one moment, I was pestered by flies and terrible dreams. I came back down. The new world suffered from the same impudent weather as the old. I stopped every few feet to look around. Whole weeks rushed past me. A stranger's face quivered with emotion. I thought I was dead. I wished I was dying.

2
Which would you take, the shortest route or the most scenic? My poor mother! She wouldn't drive on highways, but it was her humid and flaking heart that killed her. Small brown birds scatter as I approach, unwilling to share their diseases. Something from last night's dream is caught in the bushes. I bend down to see what. A mouth rimmed in salt presses against mine.

by Howie Good





the liquid oxygen

EULOGY

by seanyboy (Sean Bamforth)

THIS EULOGY WAS written on the second of June in 2009. My Grandmother didn't have a funeral. The Catholic church wouldn't allow us to call it a funeral, as her body had been donated to science. They called it something else and told us we had to bring the body back later for a proper funeral. The Catholic priest seemed very disappointed in her wish to be cut up and prodded in the name of SCIENCE!

A few things need saying here. There's no mention of my brother A—— in this, because he'd fallen out with my grandmother some six years previously on account of having an uneducated girlfriend. She struck him out of the will, but J—— and I put him back in the will. It's not what she would have wanted, but it was the sort of thing she would have done.



We didn't bring the body back for a second funeral. I think my grandmother would have liked this. She hated pomp, and also she hated the idea that somehow a dead body held something of the divine within it.

There weren't that many people at the service. It turns out that if you live to 98, most everyone who knew you is dead already themselves.

I wrote this out and printed it up, but when it came time for me to deliver the eulogy, I improvised around the words. It was better for that; more human. So this isn't what I said, but it's as close as you can get without having been there.

Here we go...

I just wanted to say a few words about my grandmother.

First of all, though, I'd like to thank you all for coming. I'm really touched that you could come to this memorial, and I'm sure my brothers are, too. It also makes me really happy to learn that my grandmother had such good friends. I've spoken to a few people over the last couple of weeks, and they've all told me how much they liked Delia. Thank you.

I'd also like to thank P—— and G——, without whose help and guidance things would have been a whole lot more difficult over the last two weeks.

I don't really want to say too much about our grandmother, because I suspect that I didn't know her as well as I could and I didn't know her as well as some of her friends who are here. I knew her only really from brief meetings over the last 15 years where I'd go and see her and she'd tell me where I was going wrong in mine or my brothers' lives. It's hard to put something together from that, but I feel I should at least try. If this isn't the person you knew, then I apologise. It's the person I sort of knew.

My grandmother was a liberal. She leaned strongly to the left in her beliefs. She believed strongly and passionately in equal opportunities. Her newspaper of choice was always the Guardian. She was a lifelong member of the Labour Party. Her mother was a suffragette. She believed that you had to do what you could for those that were less well-off than yourself. In the 1980s — when we all worried about these things — we worried that she was actually a Communist. The phrase "Reds under the bed" was used several times in conversations about her.

She loved art, reading, the theatre, architecture, poetry and beautiful things (never expensive things — just beautiful things). And she loved those who created such beautiful things. Most especially, she loved her late husband, the artist Reg Cooper — a man who died way before his time and whom she never stopped loving.

She didn't believe in labels. It didn't matter to her what kind of Christian you were, or what religion you believed in, even if you had no religion at all in your life. She simply didn't care. She saw what was moral in a person, and she didn't care what they called it. If it was good, then she accepted it.

She loved the world. The last time J—— and I saw her, she talked about how different the world was today than when she was younger, and I was winding her up a bit about it, saying, "Yeah — but it was better then, you could leave your doors open, everyone looked out for each other, etc." And she told me that no, the world is better now than it has ever been before. People are safer and happier. She said that technology fascinated her, and that the positive effects of new inventions like the Internet were a boon to humanity. She talked about the end of world wars and Nelson Mandela. She talked about the slow march of progress toward having equal opportunities for women.

And it's hard for me to say how proud it made me to hear her say these things, mainly because I can't really understand myself why that is without running into the possibility that I'm a little bit condescending. But anyway — it does make me proud.

There's a line that you can draw from my grandmother, via our mother, to my brothers and myself. I believe that the good things in myself and my brothers — the things that make us well-liked, sociable, frighteningly honest, friendly, empathic, and strong-minded — can be traced directly to her. Some of the bad things, too: We have a tendency towards rebelliousness, we're all bloody-minded and we have no respect for authority. We're sharp-tongued.

She was all these things and we are, too, and knowing that we still carry that side of her within us is one of the things that's made me happier over the last couple of weeks.

There's one other thing that should be said. The fact that she spent her last few years incapable of getting out into the world she loved so much was terrible. That she outlived her husband by such a long time was a tragedy. That she outlived her only daughter (our mother) was the most awful thing for her to bear. I can't begin to imagine how much this broke her heart. It's a comfort to me that she won't have to feel that heartbreak anymore. We shall miss her — Delia Cecilia Cooper, our grandmother. But there's a part of me that knows that this is natural — that this is part of the way things go in this life. I don't personally believe in God, but she is still here — in my brothers' hearts and in mine. We shall never forget her. MFM



FACIAL EXPRESSION 6.3

By Pater Aletheias (Kirk Cowell)

I'VE MADE IT a habit of adopting a somber expression between the lobby and the third floor, so I've had time to settle into it fully by the time the doors open on floor five. I think of it as facial expression 5.8, because on my chart of the "Seven Universal Expressions," anger is no. 5 and sadness is no. 6, and I'm aiming for something that expresses deep concern with just a hint of frustration at the capriciousness of the whole damned situation. 5.8. A countenance more in sorrow than in anger, like the ghost of Hamlet's father. I feel like a ghost sometimes, caught here between the realm of the living and the abode of the dead. Or maybe I feel like Heracles visiting Hades. This elevator might as well be the Styx.

I did have two coins, but I put them in the vending machine already. All I can offer Charon is the last third of my Diet Coke. I doubt it goes well with ambrosia.

My thoughts are getting scattered, silly. They leap all around. I really can't think about it directly, or I'll fall apart. Surely I wouldn't be the first, though. What happens if a visitor just starts weeping uncontrollably in here? Is there anyone whose job it is to guide the fainting over the threshold?

Yeah, of course: Charon. Charon's got to be around here somewhere. He'd better hurry up, though — only a few sips left.

For a split second I think about trying to shift to expression 6.3: sorrow tinged with polite but unprying concern. It's supposed to tell other parents that my kid isn't doing well, but that doesn't mean I don't have time to hear about their kids. It's the one that's supposed to convey my love and concern for the whole world. It's got a high technical difficulty level — if you aren't careful you can overshoot and wind up at expression 6.5, which is the beginning of morbid curiosity. I have training in hospital chaplaincy, so 6.3 is something that I've practiced, but you've got to be careful with it.

I'm just too damn tired to try. Hello, world, it's a 5.8 day. Leave me alone. Just let me hold my son. Don't get in my way, because I swear to God I have 5.1 on stand-by and you do not want to experience righteous indignation from a man with three theology degrees and a son who might not leave this place alive.

The chime sounds and the doors open. I step across and scrub in, hoping I'm still corporeal enough to activate the pedal that opens the door to NICU.

Try to hold on to some hope, all ye who enter.

I don't know who to confess this to, but I have to tell someone, so here it goes: I didn't want a son.

I know why. My father was a vicious bastard, and I don't have many childhood memories of him that don't end with me on the floor, bruised and trying to catch my breath. Some people react to parental abuse like that by deciding not to have kids. Not me. I decided to only have girls. I couldn't imagine fathers and sons having a good relationship. I mean, sure, I know it happens. On a true/false test if the sentence is "Many fathers have a wonderful relationship with their sons," I'll write in a big fat "T" and not think twice. But knowing it and being able to picture it are two different things. It doesn't feel true.

When we had the twenty week ultrasound with our first child, we cheered to discover it was a girl. Sandy and I had a spontaneous celebratory lunch at the Outback, which was a big deal on our budget. It was smiles and Awesome Blossoms all afternoon. We called our friends and started shopping for baby clothes. I was ecstatic.

Fast forward two years and eight months later, and we're looking at another ultrasound and this time it's a boy. I fake a 3.5, delighted surprise, but inwardly I'm devastated. We go to Outback again because I feel like if I did it for one kid I should do it for the next one, but this time it's all I can do to choke down a salad. I just want to go outside and kick the walls or punch out a window. And I hate myself for feeling this way, because that's how the old bastard felt about me. He never even gave me a chance, goddammit, and now I'm in serious danger of doing the same thing to my boy, and I know he doesn't deserve that. No one does.

So I've been trying for a while to muster up some kind of feeling toward the boy that isn't sorrowful or hostile, and this best I can manage is indifference. Indifference is better than venomous hatred, though, so I focus on indifference. I'm the most determinedly disinterested man you've ever met.

Right up to the moment that he slips out of his mother's body and I listen for the cry that never comes.

It's called meconium aspiration, which is doctor-speak for "poop-breathing." If things go well, the baby drops a load of thick, back tarry mess into his diaper a day or two after delivery, but occasionally they just go ahead and let it all out in utero, and then the challenge is to get their mouth suctioned free before that first big breath. Sometimes you get most of it in time; sometimes you don't. Aidan sucked in a great big glob of the stuff, covering his untested lungs with

a layer of nasty gloop that made it hard to get oxygen into his system. He was whisked out of the delivery room to NICU, and the first time I got a good look at him, he was inside an oxygen tent, tubes everywhere, and headphones over his ears to muffle the beeps and alarms of the equipment surrounding him.

On the list of “things that will land your newborn in NICU,” there are worse problems than meconium aspiration, but nothing on the list is good news, and none of them are guaranteed to end with a healthy baby coming home. I’m not sure what I had imagined, but this isn’t it.

Now he’s two days old and running a fever. The doctors can’t determine where the infection is, so they are treating it like meningitis but hoping it’s something else. Not much to do except start antibiotics and cross your fingers. Intravenous drips of medicine run into the remnant of Aidan’s umbilical cord.

“His belly button might wind up looking a little funny,” the nurse says, like I give a damn.

I look down at him, my son, my one and only son. He has full lips and thick blonde hair, and the broad shoulders and stocky build that has characterized the men in my family for as long as anyone can remember. He looks like me.

I stroke his arm, his cheek, his hair.

There’s no reaction. He can’t tell I’m there. He’s too sick, and the sedation is too strong.

Nurse Emily brings a chair over and I sit, with my hand resting on his arm. I stay there for five hours, watching and waiting. Neither of us moves.

Sandy joins me and finds a chair on the other side of the baby. She, too, rests a hand on his arm. I don’t know what to say.

Across the room we see the Robinsons. I don’t know them well, but they’re always here, and we’ve talked a little. I nod my greetings. The Robinsons are keeping vigil over their twin girls, Emma and Molly. They were born too soon, and they weigh less than two and half pounds each. Yesterday I glanced in at them, their pale translucent skin stretched over such frail, tiny frames. They are beautiful but haunting. Put together they weigh just barely half of what Aidan does. The Robinsons know this, too. When I met them they were walking past Aidan’s crib on the way to the girls’ side of the room. “That’s a big baby!” Mr. Robinson exclaimed.

I just mumbled “Yeah,” suddenly feeling awkward that my kid, born just four ounces shy of ten pounds, is the giant baby of the NICU. He seems so weak to me, but the Robinsons are praying that their girls will make it to his size someday, if they are very lucky, months and months from now.

I’m not even sure why I’m here. It doesn’t mean anything to the baby, and he does have a big sister at home who could use some parental attention. We’ve been telling her for weeks that soon the baby would come out of Mommy’s tummy and then we would bring him home.

She doesn’t understand where Aidan is. Mommy’s womb is empty now, but the crib in the nursery is empty, too. We try to explain, but she isn’t even allowed to see the baby so it’s all a bit too abstract for her not-quite-three-year-old-brain to process.

I should get back to her. Sandy can stay for a while if she wants—

Oh, Christ.

The Robinsons have sat down across the room, and the nurses are setting up a partition. There is a sign up asking visitors to be as quiet as possible. They open up the sterile incubator on the right — Molly’s side — and carefully hand the baby to her mother.

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. This isn’t good.

Sandy notices the break from the routine, but I don’t think she realizes what’s happening here. I glance through the window out to the waiting room. The doors open. One of the hospital chaplains steps inside and stands near the doorway, waiting.

Nurse Emily closes the partition, and now we can’t see the Robinsons anymore, but I hear them whispering, taking turns, talking to Molly. I can’t make out the words, but it’s not hard to imagine. My heart is racing, but I am still and silent. I stroke Aidan’s hair and concentrate very hard on not letting my lower lip quiver. I hold my breath.

The whispering is over. The sobbing begins. Someone asks what the exact time is.

Oh, holy Christ. Jesus.

Sandy realizes now, at the end. She looks up from our son and her eyes form a question. I ignore it, so she says the words. “Did that baby just...?”

I shrug for a moment and act like I don’t know, but the lie is worse than the truth. I nod.

“I need to go now,” she says.

I’m trying to hold on to expression 6.3, even though that whole stupid labeling system is so goddamned silly and juvenile, and I know that, but it’s what I’ve always done. When we walk through the waiting room we pass the chaplain. His eyes are closed, whether in prayer or fatigue I can’t tell, and I know that none of this is his fault, but it’s all I can do not to kick him in the shins.

Hello, Charon, you bastard.

Outside, I realize that I must have grabbed my Diet Coke bottle on the way out of NICU. As soon as I notice it in my hands I throw it as hard and high as I can up against the side of the hospital. Stupid, impotent protest. My loss of control embarrasses me, so I pick it up and throw it away.

When I turn the key in the ignition, the warning lights on the dashboard blink off and on, shining red against my pale skin. I picture Aidan, so new, so weak, surrounded by the flashing lights of the medical equipment, and the hum of the ventilator, with a cannula in his nasal cavities and tubes running into his belly and his legs. And I realize what an idiot I’ve been, a real world-class jackass, for the last five months, that I thought it would be hard to love a boy. MFM

Granddad's Homecoming

by Woodblock100 (David Bull)

I WAS ON the Shinkansen, traveling to Nagoya, from there to head south down the Kii Peninsula to Kiho-cho, the place where my daughters' grandfather was born and where he spent all his life. All his life, that is, but the final year, which he stayed with us in our Tokyo apartment, and then the final few weeks, which he spent in a nearby hospital.

He passed away there at 84 years of age, on the fifth birthday of his youngest granddaughter, my daughter Fumi, followed later the very same day by his younger sister in her 70s, who was still living back in the home village.

With no other relatives living nearby, a simple evening vigil in our town's funeral hall was the only public acknowledgment of his death. The next day he was cremated, and we filled a simple china urn with his ashes.

It was this urn, packed in a small box and tied with a cloth, which I was now carrying on the train, his final ride back to his home town. His eldest daughter was waiting for us there in the family home at the edge of Ozato village. I passed her the urn, and she placed it in a spot she had prepared in front of the family altar. Over the next couple of days, Grandad's friends and acquaintances came by to pay respects. It was not a particularly sad or dreary time. As he had been quite old, and was bed-ridden for some time, his passing had been neither a shock nor unexpected.

The arrangements were made with his temple for the funeral, and on the morning, we all trooped up there for the service. The women sat kneeling in the formal seiza style on one side of the room, and we men sat in the cross-legged agura style on the other. Grandad had been very devout, spending his final years deep in religious activities, and had been a strong supporter of this local temple. So the priest quite warmed to his job, and the service lasted a long, long time. Every day, I sit in this cross-legged style while working on my woodblock prints, so this wasn't such a problem for me, but some of the farmers and town people around me were not quite so comfortable. A rather heavy-set florid man next to me started swaying this way and that, and a bit later started a good strong snoring. We ignored him, as did the priest, who continued intoning his endless chants.

An eternity later, it came to an end, and we walked across to the graveyard high up on the sunny side of the valley, overlooking the scattered houses and rice fields below. His daughter carried the urn, someone else brought a shovel, and the priest brought along a few other things. I wasn't sure what to expect, but these people had seen all this many times before, and the ritual proceeded quickly. A rather small hole was dug in front of the gravestone memorializing past members of the family (mostly prepared by Grandad himself), and then rather to my surprise, the urn was not carefully placed into the hole, but was rather opened, and the contents unceremoniously tipped out into the earth. Grey dust and white, charred bone fragments — all tumbled out together.

On top of these remains, the priest laid a white robe that Grandad had used in one of his many circumnavigations of the 88 temples of Shikoku, and then a tiny slip of folded paper containing the kaimyo, his new name for the afterlife, which Grandad had gone to special pains to procure a few years ago. The earth went back into the hole, we tidied up a bit, and then everyone went home. It was all over. An 84 year long journey was all over.

In the train, on the way home to Tokyo, I carried no urn, but instead bore a different burden. The vision of that little hole in the ground and the jumble of bones. As I write these words, I am 42 years old ... halfway. MFM

Eulogy

by Jofus (Joe Saunders)

I DELIVERED A eulogy for my godfather Malcolm Small. He died of complications from lung cancer having been a lifelong and excellent smoker. He was about 60, I was about 20. It was absolutely the day I became a man. I can't say with any certainty that I've done anything I'm more proud of in my life than getting up and talking that day. I'm not sure if it lessened the pain of loss, but it certainly helped me find the edges of that pain and define it a bit better.

I don't remember what I said now — but I had it all written down. I didn't sit down and think, "And now I will write a eulogy." I just got home from work shortly after he died and started writing — specifically, I started writing disjointed single sentences about what he meant to me. This was no act of memorial prosody — it was more like a shopping list.

- He was the first man to get me properly legless drunk.
- He'd do this trick where he'd discreetly rip a notch in a beer-mat, quietly wedge it onto his nose and then, in mock outrage, demand of the pub "Who the fuck threw that?"
- He bought me a pocketknife and taught me to roll cigarettes properly.

Pretty much your basic Most Awesome Godfather Ever.

I was just writing down how I felt as simply as I could. I finished it; sent it to my Mum and Dad, who showed it to Mac's widow, who called me and asked me to speak.

The most memorable point of the eulogy — beyond the usual horror of public speaking — was the sudden, hidden, awful significance of some of the things I'd written, most notably the ashtray memory:

Mac was a potter. He made most of the lamps and ornaments that I remember from the house I grew up in. He made this one particular ashtray that had fired badly and had a little rattly bit loose inside it. Like many of his seconds, it ended up in our house and I purloined it when I went to college. One evening in my first year I stumbled out of bed drunk, gave it a kick and broke it.

I didn't think much of it at the time, and even less when I wrote this memory down. In actual fact, I can specifically remember adding it as an afterthought — it stood between two memories that I thought were far more significant and I wanted to break them up. It was simply added for padding; for scansion.

Standing at the dais though, in a Hereford crematorium with a giant of a man dead next to me in a cardboard coffin (he had not been the most successful of potters),

brought a whole new and terrible significance to the event. I stopped, teared up, tried again, teared up, tried again. I'd written a speech I was incapable of delivering. It took around a minute to get past that innocuous sentence. A minute that stretched into eternity.

I also know that I swore. Mac loved swearing and was the first grown up I said "fuck" in front of (we were in a car crash together. It was brilliant). I think I also told the story of when, shortly before Mac died and well into his chemotherapy, we pitched up at yet another funeral. As we were waiting to file inside, he commented to a mutual friend who had himself recently been diagnosed with an incredibly invasive skin cancer, "It's hardly worth you going home is it?"



After Mac's funeral we all went to the pub and I got so wonderfully drunk. I was clapped on the back, a woman threw herself at me and, around half past ten, a wibbly old man tottered up to me to congratulate me on my speech. He was wearing RAF insignia and was bedecked in medals. I've literally no idea who he was but he looked every inch the kind of person that people of my generation would be delighted to be congratulated by.

It strikes me now that — beyond the backslapping and congratulations I received that night — Mac kind of made it easy for me and the other people in his life who spoke that day. He led the kind of life that made for great eulogies — and to an extent they kind of wrote themselves. Like I say, all I really did was get up and read out a list

of his personal Greatest Hits with me. My Dad did pretty much the same thing and got to use the story of "That Time We Were Thrown Out Of The Plough In Ledbury."

(Which was basically:

Mac: Do you brew this beer locally?

Landlord: (*proudly*) Why, yes sir. We make it in the yard out back.

Mac: (*thoughtfully*) Doesn't travel very well, does it?

Exeunt, pursued by bear)

My sister drove us all home that night. I got in late, fell into the arms of my new girlfriend (and now wife, who hadn't come, thinking it inappropriate) and cried for two hours solid. MFMM





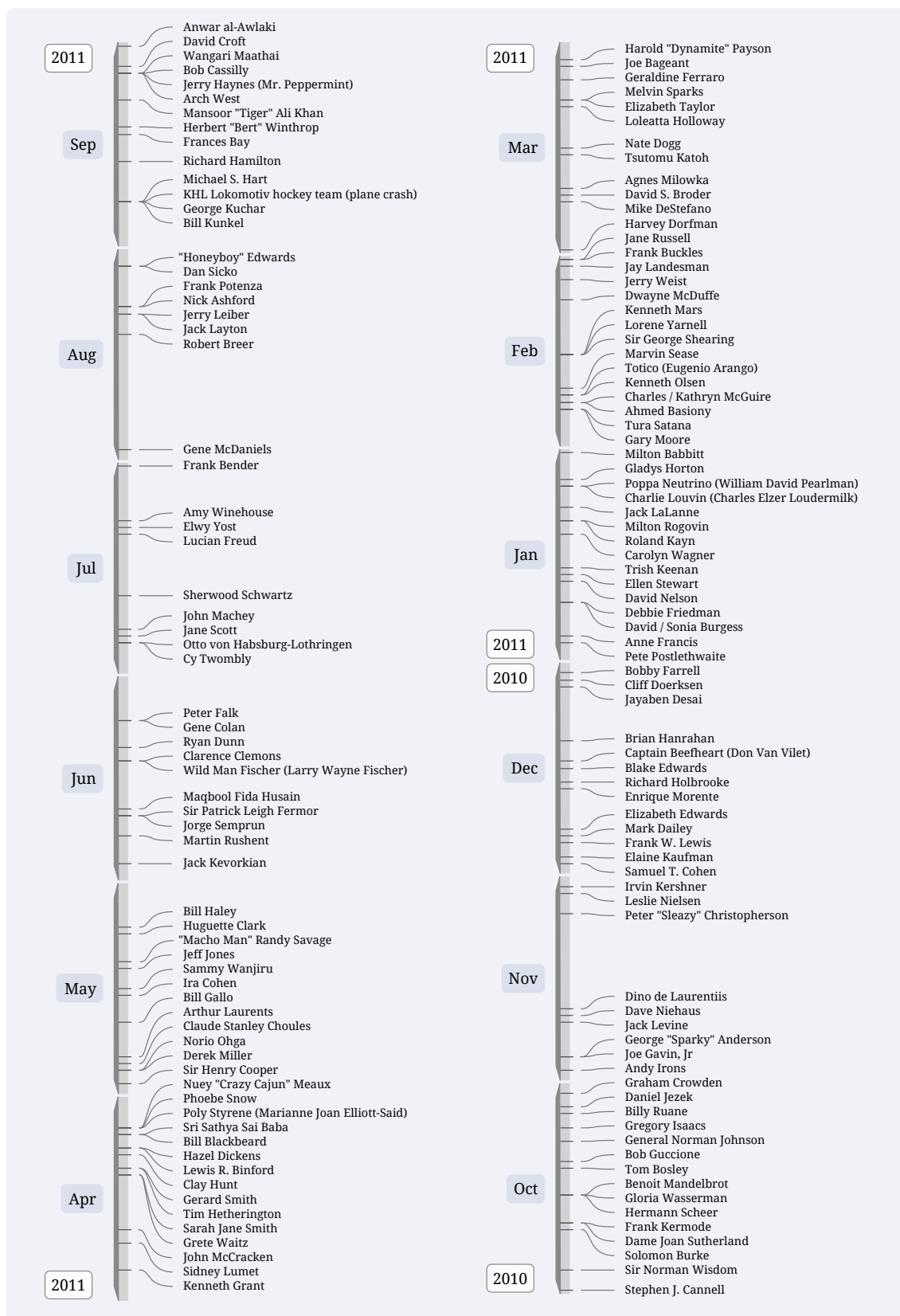
klangklangston

If you're thinking about death, you're missing life.
Death will be whatever it is. Make the most of now.
posted to me7i by Eideteker at 9:11 AM on October 17, 2008

MetaFilter Obituaries

by -jf- (James Fiedler)

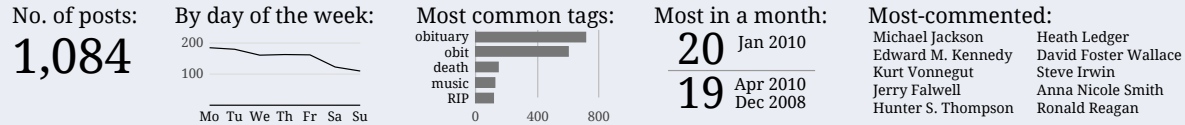
October 2010 – September 2011



All obituaries, September 1999 – September 2011

This includes MetaFilter posts through September 2011 that 1) were timely announcements of a person's death, 2) were posted because of the person's death, and not only for circumstances surrounding the death.

Most of these were found under a handful of tags. There are surely others that would qualify, but did not use these tags. Thus, this set of obituaries is not definitive, but the results from a perfect set would likely differ only slightly.

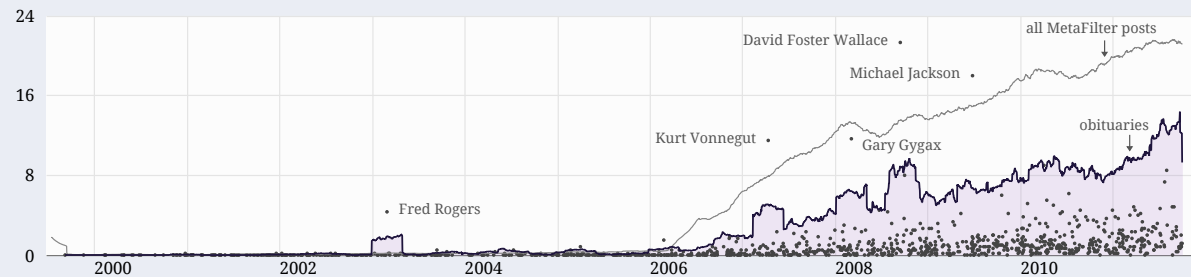


Number of obituaries per day

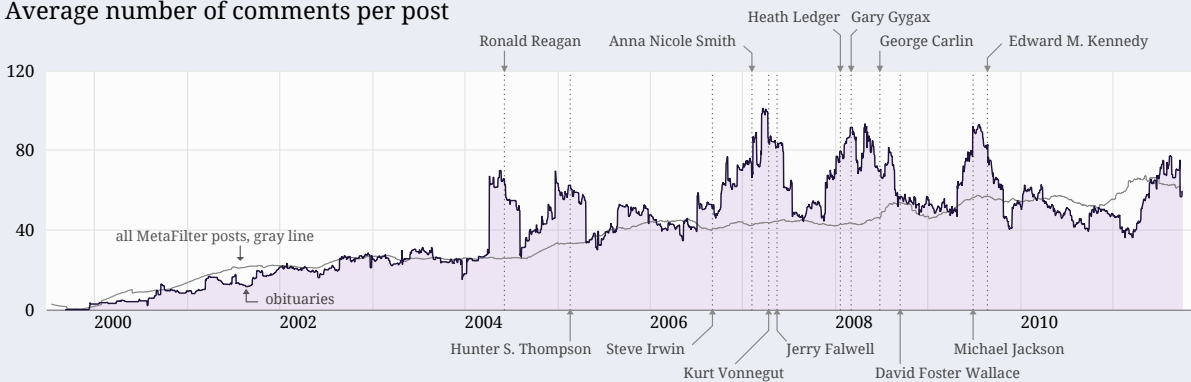


Average number of favorites per post

Dots show the number of favorites for each obituary, at one-sixth scale.



Average number of comments per post



The top graph shows a general increase in obituary posts from 2004 to early 2010, and a decrease since then. The graph shows absolute number of posts, but a graph of obituaries as fraction of all posts looks very similar.

The second graph shows that the average number of favorites is less than the overall average. The third graph shows that obituaries often have a much higher comment average. This seems to be driven by a few popular posts. Otherwise, the average is closer to the overall average.

All three graphs use a moving average with a four-month window (the given day, 60 days before, and 60 after). This smooths the data, making it easier to see trends.

The obituaries were mostly found under a handful of tags ('obituary', 'obit', 'obituaries', 'obits', 'rip', 'dead', 'death', 'deaths', 'obitfilter'). The one exception being posts from September 2011 that did not have any of these tags. The upward trend in the first graph after mid 2011 is due to these extra posts.

B-sides

By Brandon Blatcher

Living With Death

DYING IS GOING to suck, no question about it. Doesn't matter if it's by drowning, car accident or in the middle of sex, it's not going to be a good day. Even if you believe something comes after death, the actual death is not going to be a fun experience. It may be grand or exciting at best, but even that will be tempered by the fact you know you're going to die. Unless you're one of those crazy base jumpers, who think it's going to be another instance of cheating death. Oops, mistake.

The other problem with death is that you never know when it's coming, it's the worst unexpected visitor ever, in most cases. One can take precautions such as eating right, exercising, etc., only to have a helicopter crash on you as you walk down the street. It would be tempting to say death has a sense of humor or irony, but that would be just a little lie to tell ourselves to make death seem less scary. Truth is that death is part of life and the natural order of things. That's not a grand secret or deep mystery, but just a fact. Individually, we may choose to accept that or not, but whether we do or not has no bearing whether we will.

Out of all the living things, be they big or small, it's one of the few things we are all guaranteed to do. Not all of us will travel, have sex, be able to see or hear or walk. But we're all gonna die.

Having turned 40 back in August and thus middle age, that thought has been living in the back of my head the past few months. Like the watch in Poe's Telltale Heart, there's a certain background tick tick tick reminding me about death, specifically my own. I don't know how it's going to happen, but I have a pretty good idea. It'll probably be from a complication of diabetes since I'm a Type II diabetic. Sure, I'm generally fine now, and diabetes isn't so bad if you're youngish, eat right, exercise, maybe drop some weight. It's manageable and you can have a pretty normal life. But having it makes you think.

A little background on Type II diabetes (or "the sugars," as they're sometimes known): When you eat something, your body extracts the glucose from the food for cells to take it for energy. As the glucose enters the blood stream, your body sends a signal to your pancreas to release insulin into the bloodstream. Insulin allows your cells to take in the glucose and then get fuel for energy and lowering the amount of glucose in your bloodstream. In Type II diabetes, either the type of insulin we make is bad or we don't make enough of it, so glucose is stuck in the bloodstream, bathing the organs in sugar and not getting food to the cells. Over years, this reeks havoc on the body, potentially



leading to blindness, decreased sensitivity in the limbs, poor circulation which can lead to amputation and death, usually from heart disease or kidney complications.

I've been living with the disease for about eight years, with a few ups and downs, but generally good as I made the choices necessary to have a more normal life. It hasn't always been easy, but it beat the alternatives, such as feeling tired all the time and getting sick a lot. I got better, thought I had beat diabetes and death and was back to a normal long life. My grandparents and great grandparents had lived long lives, the earliest died in their late 70s, so I figured I was a shoo in till at least 2040. Yes, those were foolish thoughts. I'm still fine, but the realization that I

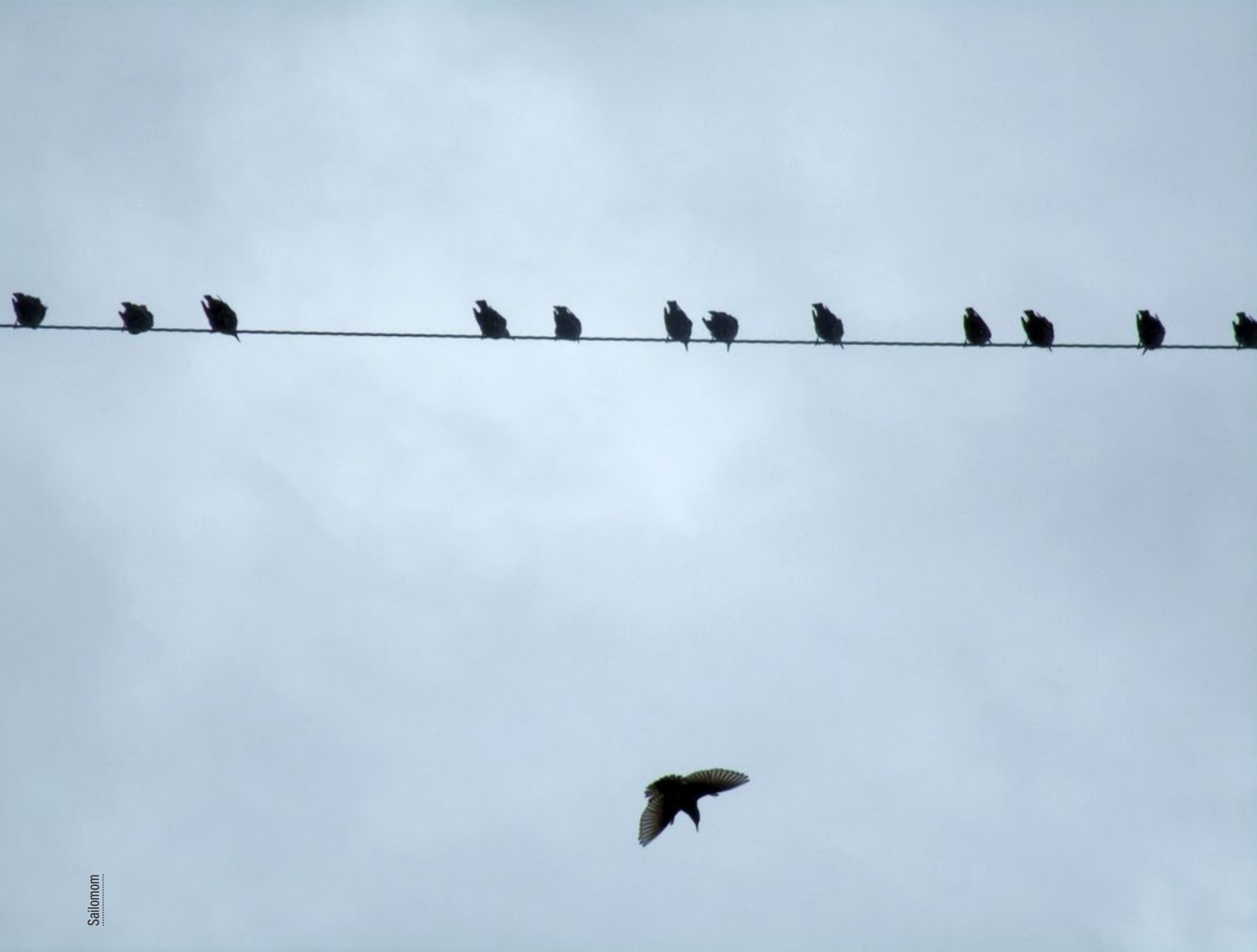


rhapsodie

have a chronic, incurable disease has slipped in and made itself a comfy home in the back of my brain. When I turned forty, it came out of that room and started walking around the rest of my head. Guess it decided it needed more space to stay comfortable.

It hasn't been a bad feeling, though there's a bit of quiet horror over realizing you're not Superman and anything close to it. Thankfully, there's been a bit of maturation over the years. That makes it easier, having grown a bit and experienced the death of those close to me. It can be bad and hurt, but it's still happens. You can either cope or not, but life still goes on, the watch keeps ticking, even if it seems like it can't or won't.

So I'm going to die and Type II diabetes is probably going to push the button. In the meantime death keeps me company, reminding me that I'm lucky, I have a choice. I can go off my meds, eat crap and not exercise and watch and feel death take little pieces of me as I go. Or I can stick with the meds, check my glucose levels, eat right and exercise and I can beat the fucker back for a little while. That buys me some time and a better quality of life, but you know who wins in the end. In the meantime, it's just a matter of choices, the main one being not to be maudlin about this and get on with the time I do have. Also, look out for falling helicopters. MFM



Salomom

UNWELCOME VISITOR

BY COLDCHIEF (GJ CHARLETT III)

THINK ABOUT THIS: how often you go into a stranger's home? I mean, really think about it. Once, maybe twice a year? It's an odd and intimate intrusion.

I go into hundreds of strangers' homes yearly. I am always an unwelcome visitor. And I never leave empty-handed. In fact, when I leave a stranger's home, I take something more valuable to them than all of their possessions. I am the one who moves their dead.

I grew up in southern Louisiana, the son of a funeral director who was the son of a funeral director. The funeral home was my home; we lived back past the casket showroom and the closets full of embalming fluid.

Apart from attending an occasional service, we were mostly insulated from the day-to-day workings of the business. Still, as a child, I was deathly afraid of being in my own home. The fear that most small kids have of dark shadows and strange noises? Add to that the likelihood of actual dead people, 20 footsteps from where I slept.

I was a jittery lad, easily spooked and never quite comfortable in my home. And then — the movie "Poltergeist?" That wasn't a movie, that was psychological abuse. Until I was well into my teens, I slept in a sweaty ball, crouched against the side of my waterbed, as far away as I could get from my closet, completely beneath the magical protective blankets — head and all, lest some ghoul drag me from my slumber into the darkness.

My older cousins were no help. They lived in the adjoining apartment on the other side of the mortuary, and convinced me that the small side-chapel in the funeral parlor was haunted by an undead priest with white flowing hair and red glowing eyes, who roamed the building at night in a rusty wheelchair. Then, a week later, they talked me into getting a bottle of Coke from the vending machine in the arrangement office. When I did, they waited in the shadows and rolled the old wheelchair right at me while my back was turned. Mean bastards.

Not everyone in our small community shared my unease, though. Sleepovers at the funeral home were popular and exciting events for our classmates, our Scout Troop, and, of course our high school cheerleaders who probably still have nightmares of my brother chasing them through the hallways in his half-melted Frankenstein mask. Once, he leapt out from behind a coffin at the high school quarterback, and terrified him so badly that the jock knocked the door to the casket display room completely off its hinges as he screamed his way out of the building.

Even though death was our livelihood, and a constant part of our home life, it was never something that interested me as a job, even part time — until the night my dad woke me at 4AM and said, "Put your suit on." I was 17, a junior in high school and I'd never touched a dead body. I'd seen more than a few, but I was strictly a hand's-off person when it came to the post-living. But on this particular night, the death call was at a residence two towns over, and my dad was utterly exhausted. He'd only

just finished embalming one body when the new death call came in. Too tired to go alone, he needed a driver and an extra set of hands. Looking back, I'm certain that he tried to get every other person he knew to go with him, before settling on me out of desperation. I was a dainty young man and my talents were never in the category of heavy lifting.

I put on the only dark suit I owned at the time: a double-breasted gray jacket with flared "Z Cavaricci" pants. The only "tie" I owned (that didn't have cartoon characters on it) was a faux-leather skinny tie that ZIPPED up. Stylistically, it was several notches below a clip-on. I didn't have a plain white shirt of my own, so I wore one of my dad's. Even though it was a short-sleeved dress shirt, it hung down to my forearms. I looked like a backup dancer for MC Hammer. A strong wind would have caught my billowy garments and lifted me kiteward.

Dad gave me general directions and off we went into the night. He finished off a bowl of oatmeal, his only meal of the day, and fell asleep with his feet propped up against the dashboard of the hearse. I popped in my favorite driving cassette, a collection of movie and television theme songs, and my maiden voyage in the hearse found me cruising down the dark, empty streets of my hometown blasting the "Theme from Shaft." You damn right.

One of the best and worst parts of my job is the residential removals. Best because they're always learning experiences, and they create an immediate sense of intimacy with the family you're serving. Worst because never know what you're facing until you walk through that door and see the body. Every call is different.

Death happens anywhere and everywhere — hospitals, nursing homes, roadsides — but none of them is as intimate as a residential death. In a hospital, things move at a slower pace. There is a morgue where the body can be moved, and things aren't as rushed. A residential death is different. When that call comes, no matter the time of day or night, the reality is that there's a dead body in the middle of someone's house, and time is an issue. We put our suit on, grab a cot, and drive our hearse to the home.

Many different judgment calls must be made during the first contact. Is the death unexpected? What's the size of the body? Is it easy to get to? Are there folks there to help us move it? If police are there, we politely ask them to stay. That way, we know at least someone has our back.

We go in a team of two. One of us speaks to the family and documents everything; the other drives the hearse and helps move the body. This night, as we got closer to our destination — a grand antebellum Greek Revival mansion — Dad woke up and began navigating. We turned down the highway that led to Angola Prison, and crossed an old bridge made entirely of unconnected rough-hewn logs. They shifted shakily as we tumbled across. We drove until we reached a tall iron fence with a small brass plaque. A ramshackle shotgun shack sat next to it that, still occupied by descendants of slaves who worked at this plantation.

We continued down a tightly-packed gravel road, passing through a canopy of oak trees curtained with Spanish Moss. As we emerged from the trees, we drove up to a large plantation house, lit entirely by gas lanterns. It was a spooky and unsettling sight.

The first mistake I made that night was trying to back the hearse up, to make it more convenient for us to get to the cot. "Don't." Dad said. "Never back up your hearse to a house. You're not a delivery man. This isn't a meat wagon."

Pulling up to a house for the first time, you unconsciously take stock of what you see and apply it to the task at hand. A wild and unruly yard is often a bellwether for the chaos that faces you inside. A few extra cars are good, because it means you have help. A lot of extra cars can mean a jam-packed house full of nosy friends and relatives, all of them offering unsolicited advice. Is it wrong to judge someone's ability to pay for funeral services based on the appearance of their house? Of course it is. Do we do it every day? Of course we do. Such is the nature of the business.

On that night, there were no extra cars. No one was there but the wife of the deceased and her older sister. They were tired from their vigil, but their spirits were high, drinking coffee and laughing. We stepped through the front door and I saw the massive mahogany staircase that led from the first floor all the way to the attic. To my left was a dim parlor whose only feature was an adjustable bed in the center of the room. There was the deceased: a man in his 80s who'd died peacefully in his sleep. I stood with my back to the wall, hands clasped reverently in front of me, as my Dad began going over the paperwork with them.

After a hug and a little bit of small talk, he'd begin with, "What do you have in mind for funeral services?" As they told him about whatever church, minister, and cemetery they'd like to use, his mind would start to plan the next few days, taking into account any other services currently planned.

"Are there any folks coming from great distance?" This was his way of finding out if we need to slow the process down. The worst thing you can do is make a family feel rushed. Because of the logistics involved in planning a funeral or memorial service, the next day is too soon. You really need a day to relax, another day to plan, and then the services can begin on the day after that. Think of the death as an injury and the funeral as the start of your treatment. The longer you wait between the two, the more time the family goes without the start of the closure they need.

While I'm standing in their homes, one of my favorite diversions is trying to determine the hobbies and interests of the household, based on the objects around me. I scan the video collections to ascertain their tastes. I look at their bookshelves to gauge the level of their sophistication. The crap that people collect tells a lot about them. There's a fine line between a collector and a hoarder of junk.

After we answer their questions, we suggest they get

a small notebook to write down any more that occur to them later. We'll answer these during our arrangement conference. Then we ask them to show us where the body is. As we move through the house, we quickly judge whether we can maneuver our cot through the home and any narrow hallways without moving furniture. The first time we see the body, there is an instant of either dread or relief, based on their size, weight, and state of nakedness.

Having formulated our plan of attack, we returned to our hearse for the cot. It was a multi-level cot that could be operated by one person, with a weight-rating of 1000 pounds that luckily I never had to test. We rolled it into the house as close to the body as possible.

We always bring clean white sheets with us to facilitate the moving. For a small person, we lay the sheet next to them, and then roll the body to the opposite side, tucking the sheet under them. Then, using the sheet as a sling, we lift them and move them to our cot. For a much larger person, we take the sheets and twist them into long ropes, slide them underneath the body, and tie them tightly across their thighs, mid-section and chest, and use the sheets as a grabbing point to lift the body.

This guy was a small man, who moved easily. Once on the cot, we strapped the buckles tightly across his body to hold him.

Care should be taken when moving a body. After death, the bowels and bladder tend to release, leaving a gross surprise when the body moves. I'll never forget the time I was moving the body of a man who'd died of lung cancer. As I lifted him up, I heard a low, guttural growling coming from him. Too quickly to stop it, his mouth opened up and a thick, black viscous fluid gurgled out of his mouth, down the side of his face, and splattered on the carpet below him. I became a non-smoker that night.

After we placed this body into the hearse, my dad went back inside to make sure that there were no other questions, and to get us each a small cup of their thick, inky coffee for the ride home. I stood outside the hearse and listened to the crickets in the bushes and the frogs gulping in the nearby swamp. There's something about being awake when the rest of the world is asleep. It feels as if you're cheating the system somehow. The sun was beginning to rise over the moss-covered trees and I was just going to make it home in time to get ready to go to school. We drove away slowly ("Never hurry to leave, son. You've got precious cargo and they're watching to make sure you're cautious.") with dawn breaking all around us. I remember my suit feeling damp from the morning dew.

Nearly a dozen years later, after a few odd jobs and wrong turns, I found myself back in the family funeral business. I worked with my brother, my sisters and my dad for five years before dad died unexpectedly. And when he died, I stood by his bedside and hung my head and mourned my loss. But only for a few minutes. Then, with my siblings' help, I moved his body, because that's what I do. MFM







Winterwing

by Scattercat (Nathanial Lee)

It was not a sound that drew my attention. It might have been the absence of sound, a hush that rustled in the dead leaves and the snow. I looked down at my feet, at the source of the not-a-sound. The shadows of trees crept across the sidewalk like black water, and on those silent lines... movement. A bird stretched its shadow-wings on the shadow-branches in answer to my gaze. Wide wings, delineated against the concrete. Predator's wings. A hawk.

I looked up at the trees, squinting against the sun. There was no bird on the branches.

On the sidewalk, the shadow-bird hopped back and forth, agitated.

hurry, hurry, it said. *oh hurry*.

"Hurry where?" I asked.

follow, came my answer. *follow and hurry*.

It fluttered to the next shadow-tree, paused, looked back. I glanced at the sky. The sun was sinking low. Soon there would be no shadows. Or perhaps it would all be shadow. Either way, the same result. I looked back to the shadow-bird, thin and elongated. I followed and hurried.

My guide led me into the woods. It was hard to follow one shadow among many on the snow. The trees confused my sight, and only the half-heard sound of wings guided me. My boots sank deep; this trail was unbroken. We crunched across icy leaves and stopped in a clearing.

Here.

I looked at the ground. A bird, solid and real, lay stiffly in a small depression. Dead. I saw no wounds, no sign of scavengers, nothing to tell the story of how it came to be there.

look. see.

"Even the fall of a sparrow," I muttered. There had to be a witness, I knew. Where was he? Was it only songbirds who earned his love? Had he left us? Were we alone now?

Then I understood.

"I see you," I whispered.

The sun set.

The shadow was gone. MFM



LO QUE PASÓ

by lysdexic dyslexic

“The Apache don’t talk about their dead.”

This was something that my parents would run into when looking into my father’s past. It wasn’t something that was at the forefront of his consciousness until long after his father had died. He’d always known his father was a Chiracaua, but hadn’t really realized the implications until much, much later.

He started writing down everything he could remember about his early life and what others had told him about themselves. He talked a little about meeting Mom, a little about us kids when we were young, and other random stories.

There is no rhyme nor reason to the chapters that come. When he first started, I suggested he treat the fragments that came to him as pictures in a box, each with its own little vignette of a few hundred words. That’s what seemed to work best. One day we’ll get a soul-baring story of a young man’s first kiss; the next a heavily veiled, circumspect rumination on an old man’s daily struggle with PTSD from Vietnam.

He doesn’t talk about those dead, just as his father didn’t speak of his dead from WWII. Grandpa would shush Grandma whenever she’d try to speak of “lo que pasó.” If we did get stories from her, it would be when he was out of the room or the house. Those were also few and far between; Mom would scurry to her notebooks and write the snippets down, nearly verbatim.

I didn’t realize until last year that this was why we never celebrated La Día de los Muertos when we were growing up. I had always thought it was of my parents’ atheism. But my grandparents never said anything, and my Catholic Mexican cousins went all out for Halloween, not Day of the Dead. Certainly there was more fun and candy in that.

We also didn’t know that we had relatives all over the damned place. We kids knew that Grandma had eight brothers and sisters. We didn’t know about two of Grandpa’s brothers until they died. We didn’t know until we started looking at census records that there were nine kids on his side as well, with their kids living all over the place. I suppose once you stop talking, they’re dead too.

I’m guilty of this same crime; there are whole sections of family I don’t speak to, because there’s no value in having the relationship. The last time I spoke to my Grandmother was ten years before she died. When she did die, I went to a private visitation arranged (I realize now, very kindly) by an aunt that I didn’t visit when I was there.

I do speak of them to my children. I don’t say much, because there isn’t much that’s nice to say. I can tell some of the stories of my early life, my parents’ lives, and their parents’ lives. I won’t spare the truth about the bad; my little ones are just too young right now to know about this part of their past. It’s dead, slowly leaching into the sands of time, until it’s faded enough to keep from hurting me too much, and to keep from hurting them at all.

And then I will talk about my dead. MFH



a non e mouse



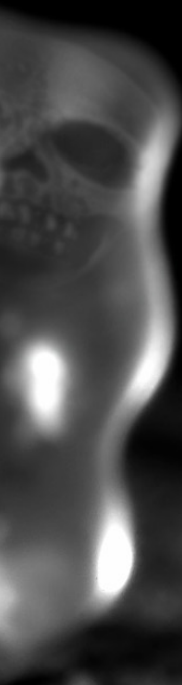
When I die, I'm going out into the Fifth dimension, where I'm gonna find Grant Morrison.

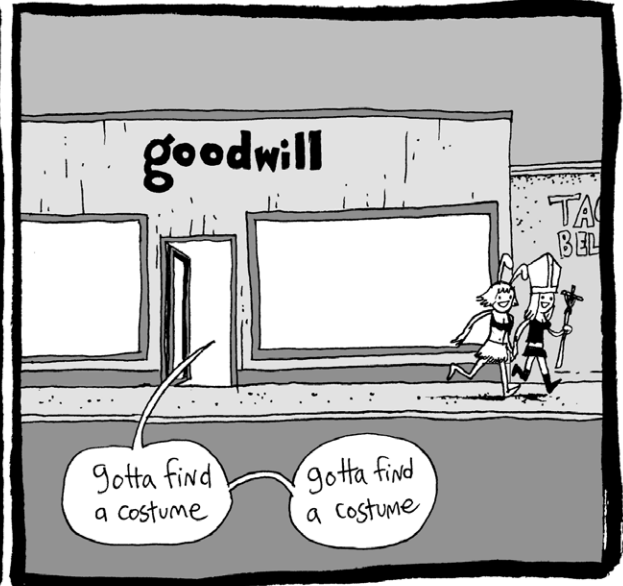
(And snog him unmercilessly).

(I hope).

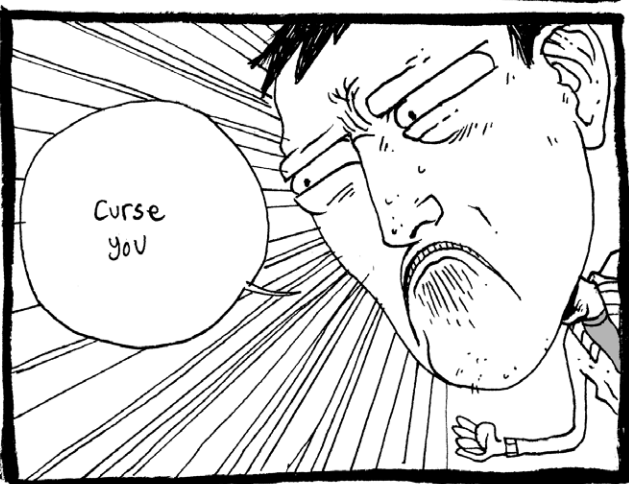
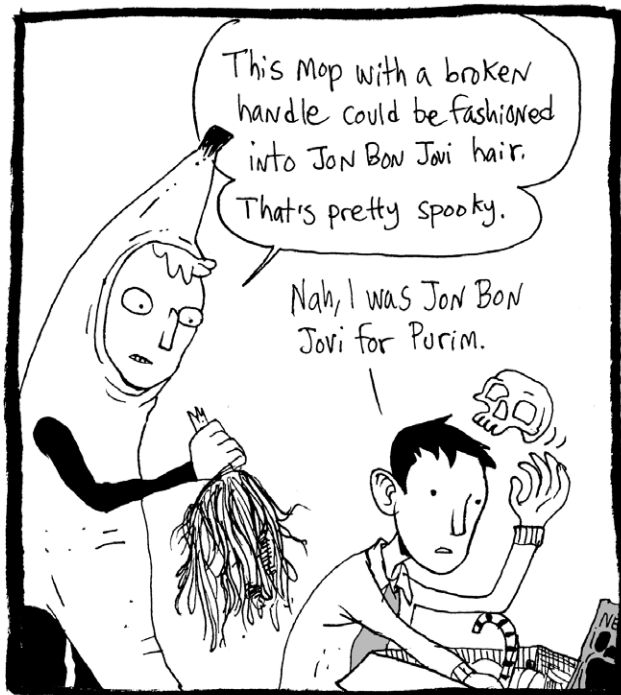
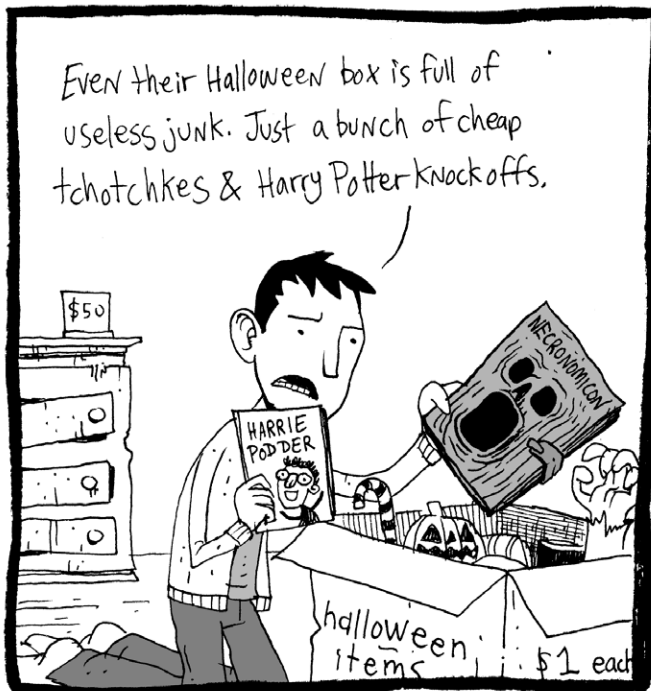
(Hey, it sounds better than getting eaten by wease/s).

posted to MeFi by bitter-girl.com at 9:43 PM on October 17, 2008





By Jason Bitterman





bittermensch.com



The Jam

The story behind the photo: It's actually a self-portrait, taken in my living room. My roommates and I were planning a Halloween party last year and needed a photo for the invitation. Conveniently, there was a large costume rabbit head in the storage area of the apartment. No one seems to know where it came from. I like to think it was a Halloween miracle.



mygothlaundry



louche mustachio

Note: Everyone needs a hug.



