

## M u d L u s c i o u s I s s u e Z e r o

[ words by Steven J. McDermott, Peter Wild, C. L. Bledsoe, Dorothee Lang, & P. H. Madore ]

### FNG by Steven J. McDermott

Parked under the power pole I still wonder what I did wrong. Why was that transformer hot? I used to come here only on the anniversary of Jess's death. Now, it's becoming addictive.

Even with the klieg lights blazing night to day his wire cutters had glowed, then went molten, melting his gloves, before his flannel shirt flamed, burning up from the cuff, while he jittered - no harder than if he'd been running a jackhammer, really - until the transformer blew, all arcing wires and shrapnel, including the biggest chunk, which was Jess, launched from the cherry picker to bounce from the truck's roof to the pavement while the snapping wires tossed sparks.

CPR? Yeah, right. Ever burnt a piece of toast?

For years I'd dodged up side roads to avoid passing this stretch of highway, but three years ago I started returning to the power pole more frequently, every couple of months at least. Another rookie linesman had joined our crew; the first FNG they'd trusted us with since Jess's death. Chris, who'd been in Nam like me, chided the rookie continuously about being a Fucking New Guy, but I couldn't; Jess had been the last FNG, the guy I'd crispy-crittered by . . . how in the hell I don't know.

Six nights running now I've parked here, ticking down to the decade since Jess died, and I am so scared. Of what I'll do, and what I won't.

### The Renter by Steven J. McDermott

For about a week, Davie, the student whose rent check was keeping the bill collectors at bay, had been getting up in the middle of the night and doing who knew what in the kitchen. I suppose I could have just gone out and checked on what he was doing. Instead, I decided to surprise him.

After he went to bed that night I gathered the down comforter and my pillow, then crept back to the living room. Making myself comfortable on the couch, I waited. I don't think I slept?partly in anticipation, and partly because it was a rare clear night and the moonlight shining through the uncurtained window made eerie patterns on the walls. As I lay there, snug in my clothes under the quilt, I watched the splash of white light drift about the gray room.

At 3:15 Davie's alarm clock rang into the silence, startling me even though I'd been waiting for it. The alarm stopped almost immediately: he had been waiting, too. Unable to move, I listened to the vague sounds he made in his room. Then his bedroom door opened and closed. My heart hammered against my jaw as the door burst open and Davie came into the room. He turned his back to me and closed the door. Three quick steps and he was at the kitchen door, where he stopped, hand poised on the doorknob. He stood there for a few seconds, not moving. Then, taking his hand off the knob, he turned slowly toward me.

The couch was against the wall directly beneath the window and thus was the only place in the room in complete darkness. Because he was looking into the moonlight I didn't think he could see me. But he must

have sensed me. He took three slow steps and stood in the center of the room, the splash of light blazing against his feet and legs.

I peeked at him through my eyelashes. He had his boots on, but no socks. The hairs on his naked spindly legs were erect in the chill of the room. The only other thing he was wearing was a wool fisherman's sweater. I held my breath as he moved closer and stood beside the couch, close enough that I could smell his sickly sweet aftershave.

"Michael?" he said, shaking my shoulder. "You awake?"

"I am now."

"Come with me," he said, "I want to show you something."

He turned abruptly and went into the kitchen. I flung the quilt aside, got up and followed him. He was standing in front of the sink.

"Look," he said, nodding at the window.

I stood beside him and looked: in the pasture across the road were two Clydesdales.

"We're just in time."

One of the Clydesdales reared up on its hind legs into the moonlight.

"Will you look at the size of that thing!" he said.

The steam shot out of its nostrils as the stallion leapt onto the back of the mare. She sagged, jumped forward a few feet, but he stayed with her and she backed into his loins. Davie stood gripping the stainless steel of the sink with his left hand, breath rasping in and out in time with the stallion.

#### The Ninth of Av by Peter Wild

Apropos of nothing, he gets up out of his seat and starts tugging at his tie. With one hand, he's yanking at his tie – yanking so hard, all he's doing is tightening that bad boy, throttling himself. He's yanking at his tie as he jerks his shoulder, shucking off his jacket or trying to, one foot lifted onto the seat where he sat mere moments ago, looking for all the world like a man who has just discovered his clothing is in fact aflame.

Opposite, there's a family, a young mother, two children, a little girl of about five and a little boy who couldn't really be much more than two. About five seconds ago, the little boy had been crying as a result of something his sister had said or done, something to do with the fact that they were fasting, it being the day it was, the Ninth of Av, the saddest day in the whole Jewish calendar, if you believe that kind of thing – but now they're frozen, the little girl, the little boy and the mother, the pretty mother, they're frozen, watching this crazy birdman hop and pitch and turn.

Outside, through the plate glass on the strip out front of Terminal 1, there are maybe a dozen aeroplanes sat uselessly glinting in the sun: Sun D'Or, El Al Israel Airlines, Israir Airlines, Arkia Israel Airlines. The sky is all bleached out, white and hot like sand.

The lazy aeroplanes and the bleached out sky and the heat; that's the backdrop, the backdrop to all of the stuff that comes next.

Aside from the man, nothing is moving. It's like the world is holding its breath. There are people milling around, or there were, but now: nothing. There is just the man, with his jacket turned inside out but hanging off of the cuff of his right arm, uselessly flapping like a bird with a broken wing. The tie is loose, a noose which he tugs up over his head, twisting the collar of his shirt out, spavined and awkward.

Not that he notices.

Suddenly there is movement, far off, the clatter of feet coming hard in this direction like rain on tin. The man is gulping for air, one minute flapping his hands at his sides and the next struggling with the top button of his short-sleeved shirt, all the while ducking and weaving and whirling about, a panic-eyed dervish in half a suit spinning like a fanatic.

There are men, coming. Plain-clothed men, security guards, police and IDF running with their arms wide at their sides, running like a gang of kids fleeing the law – only they are the law and they're running, bringing the law with them, as if the law was some kind of holy rain. They're running and they're yelling at people to get out of the way. They're running and yelling but they have radios on their lapels and they're talking into their radio lapels as they run and yell. They don't say this is serious but they don't need to.

This is serious.

The sight of them jerks the pretty young mother back to life. What has she been doing this last five seconds? Sitting here, her and her two children, watching some man – some man she can't even describe even though he's stood in front of her. Her mind is a blank. She's terrified, suddenly. All she can do is stretch her arms, one to the left about her boy and one to the right about her girl. Here she is. Terminal 1 of the Ben Gurion International Airport, waiting for her mother's flight, waiting to make sure her mother gets in safely, wanting her mother's first sight to be her grandchildren. Here she is. Caught. Trapped. Like the proverbial fly in the proverbial spider's web. She knows that she should do something. But she doesn't know what. She could stand. That's one thing she could do. She could scream. She could grab her children and flee, hoping there was still enough time to make it far enough away.

The man is standing on his jacket, pulling with all of his might, his hand caught up in his sleeve. He's grunting, desperate. His face is purple and his eyes are bulging. How old is he? Not even twenty-five. He's young at any rate. There is a sound, a fearful adolescent howl searing out through his clenched teeth. Is he Arabic?

Is he forming words and are those words of Arabic extract?

The men are close and the men have drawn guns. Some of the men have drawn guns. Some of the men have produced telephones and they are talking. Some of the men are talking to other men who are stationed further away. Some of the men are being told what to do and what to say. Some of the men are issuing orders. Yelling. Directing. Pointing. The men are fanning out about the man. The men are fanning out about the man and about the woman and about her two children, the little boy and the little girl.

The woman hardly moves at all. She doesn't think she can. It takes all of her energy to place her left hand on her boy's left arm, her right hand on her girl's right arm. She pulls them to her, resisting the temptation, finally, to look again at the man in front of her, reluctant to see whether there is anything that can be glimpsed beneath his short-sleeved shirt, her now silent children gawping at the spectacle, the two of them no idea at all that their lives might be on the verge of ending, might at any moment in the next fifteen seconds end with all of the abruptness of –

My triceps and biceps went on a game show. The object of the show was to name the original color of various celebrities' hair, based on their first appearances in film and television. The contestants were awarded bonus points if they could name the actual original color of certain celebrities' hair, if it was different from the color featured in the first appearance, and even more bonus points were awarded if the contestants could name the brands and types of dyes used. My biceps tied by naming the original color of a forgettable actresses' hair based on pubic hairs bought from the actress's gynecologist, who verified that they were free of dye or chemical tampering. My triceps were able to name the color of the actress's dog's hair, which had been died white but was actually blond. The award they shared was a trip to France. This was fortunate because my triceps speak French, as I am mostly made of croissants and pastries, and French is the predominant language spoken throughout my body. Some of me is cheese, but these parts speak English, of the British idiom. My biceps and triceps liked it so much in France they decided to stay. The muscles I have left are the ones who lost the game show. You can understand my trepidations.

#### The Orphan by C. L. Bledsoe

America is wearing a new hat. It's a pretty hat her grandmother bought her because America is an orphan. But she's not sad.

Every time America mentions her parents, her grandparents buy her something. They were driving down the street on the way to school, when America asked her grandfather if he used to drive her mother to the same school. America's grandparents exchanged looks and pulled over. Her grandmother got out and went into the first store she found and bought the first thing she saw and brought it back for America. It was a hat. It was round like the hats America had seen the people in the band wearing in New Orleans. Her parents had taken her there one time before they died. It was where they died, actually. The plane bringing them all back had crashed. America had survived. She'd been asleep through the whole thing. She woke lying on the ground, covered in smoke and other people's clothes from the luggage that had come open. There were fires and people were lying around in a big mess. Some of the fires were people and she couldn't hear anything, which was just as well, the lady at the hospital told her later. She wouldn't have wanted to hear any of that anyway.

A few days later her grandparents showed up with a teddy bear and when they took the bandages off America could hear again.

She told her grandmother how the hat reminded her of New Orleans, and they pulled the car over again. Her grandmother returned this time with a little statue of a bird. She showed it to America and then put it in the trunk, which was almost full. It was a cardinal, like the baseball team. Her parents had taken her to a baseball game once. America decided to let them get to the end of the street before she told them this. They were getting close to the school. They'd been driving for six weeks, now, ever since the morning after leaving the hospital. America wondered what it would be like at school, what new things would be given to her there.

#### 20 Minutes in Berlin by Dorothee Lang

##### 1: The Glass Dome

Waiting time from this point: 20 minutes, the sign says. She checks her clock, then looks up to the stone pillars, to the steps, full of people, to the glass dome that is barely visible from this point. Reichstag, the map states. As if it's still 1940, and not 2007. It must be the historic name of the building, she decides, and tries to imagine the inside of it, the parliament, the politicians, sitting in a large circle of tables. In front, an eagle. On the sides, reporters with their TV-cameras. And above it all, on top of the circle, this glass dome that is a tourist sight. Free entry, 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.

There are security checks, of course. There are double glass doors, screening passages, x-ray gates. The queue moves in slow motion. Yet the sign was right: a good quarter hour later, she is inside the glass dome. She leans over the railing, trying to catch a peek of what's happening underneath her, in the parliament, but all that's visible from above are hazy shadows. So she walks in spirals, towards the upper platform, trying all the time to find the line that once separated East Berlin from West Berlin. The Wall, it isn't there anymore, of course she knows that much, but it takes her by surprise that it disappeared so completely, leaving neither trace nor gap.

## 2: The Empty Room

She hasn't heard of it before, hasn't seen a picture of it. And thus, she almost misses it, even though it's placed right in the middle of Bebel Square: the empty room. It comes without colour, without door. It's built underground, right under the stone skin of the plaza. A sealed shaded glass plate is the only access it offers.

Around the plaza, above the surface, pompousness rules: there's the statue of Friedrich the Great, there's a classic concert hall, there's a church wearing a golden crown, there's Humboldt university with its marble entry.

Albert Einstein studied there, she learns. Also: Karl Marx. They lived here, in Berlin. Crossed the very square she stands on now. It's this thought that makes her look down, to the cobble stones underneath her feet. That's how she sees the piece of glass, and the metal plate in front of it. 1933, the plate says, and hands the story of this place, of the past, in 5 short lines. The story of the students who made a black list of books. Then cleared the shelves of the Humboldt library, according to their list. Piled the books up here. And burnt them. 20.000 books. Burnt not by Reich soldiers, but by Humboldt students.

She bites her lip, then kneels down, touches the glass. Afraid of what is waiting on the other side, she searches for the angle that allows a peek through the surface. Yet all she can see – is a white empty space. Nothing, she thinks. It doesn't make any sense. She stares into the room again, and with a shudder, she feels it: the presence of the books that aren't there any more.

Hours later, the image of the room, of the square returns to her, accompanied by the cruelty and softness of winter. She sees a frozen place, sees snowflakes falling through still air, covering the stones, the plate, the world as she knows it, and wonders how many people walk over the plaza, walk right over the glass without noticing it. White, she whispers.

## 3: The Wall

The weather looks okay when she walks along Stresemann Street, towards a spot that is supposed to hold parts of the Wall. Yet, just when she is half way down Stresemann, there is a huge cloud coming closer. She considers to turn around, to look for shelter, almost sure that the cloud will break into rain, but then it doesn't. Relieved, she walks on.

A couple of hundred meters further, she is there, standing in front of the remains of the Wall. Beyond her is another 4-lane-street, in front of her the entry to a railway station. In between, it's her, some others, and those stone pieces, solid, broken, sprayed with graffiti. They look like art, placed the way they are, on concrete bases. In between the stone pieces, there are displays with black and white photos, each carrying the memory of a specific moment of the past, each framed and dated: 1938, 1945, 1961. From the black and white schemes of the past she moves to the pink dots and green dashes that now colour the stone pieces. In between the dashes, she notices dates, combined with the most basic kind of personal statement: name and year, scribbled with permanent marker right on the surface. As always, this childish, careless, yet deep human urge to leave a mark astounds her.

In her memory, though, it's neither the signatures nor the wall stones themselves that leave the deepest imprint, but one of the photos: a woman with a suitcase in her hand, jumping out of a first floor window, escaping to the West while houses at the edge of East Berlin were evacuated and closed, one by one, while the wall stones were set. She tries to figure out how long it takes to make such a decision, how much time was left to pack that suitcase. Twenty minutes? Ten minutes? And the woman - did she ever stand here, in this place now, and get to see this photo of her, taken in that moment back then?

Beneath The Bridge And Into The Night by P.H. Madore

We talk about dreams that never came true. About baseball games our over-worked fathers never took us to as children. About celebrities we'll never meet and politicians we're not eligible to vote for or against because we haven't an address to call our own, though sometimes it feels like they're all ours. We talk about sex we'll probably never have. About jobs we screwed up. About fights we may have actually lost (in our memories we never lose.) About jail. About how we wish we could master the art of fucking the system, if only for the sake of preventing it from screwing us.

And when we run out of nonsense to talk about, we put our change together so that we can drink until sleep under our makeshift shelter takes us away from all this for a time. We talk less with each swig, think more with each breath.

Headlong Into The Wreckage by P.H. Madore

I threw my coffee at the white door. Caffeine splattered back to my bed, striking my arm with liquid heat as a cloud of ceramic shards spread before me.

It was something, but I needed everything.

I struck across the bedroom, took my first novel from an otherwise empty bureau. Used my dampened cigarette to set the manuscript blazing. Smoke swirls bellowed victory, and I dropped it to keep from harm. The sprinkler system defeated my creation.

Frustrated, I went to the Common Room and smashed an already-busted television using my strength, gravity, and a battered fire extinguisher. Kicked off my slippers, stripped my pajamas, and dove headlong into the wreckage.

I rolled around, reveled in the pain.

Now I was getting somewhere, but my body became angry and refused to carry on the creative process—forced me to pass out. My blood was dried and useless by the time I awoke, so I showered away my cuts and character-sketches the bruises.

The damned postman came around the time the sun reached its apex and gave me my mail: a stack of letters, nine packages. Each box held a crisp copy of my novel, *His Way*, and a long-winded or implied brown-nosing autograph request. Except one dog-eared and beaten copy—the only one I signed, re-packed, and set in the outbox. The rest I added to the hundred-deep stack which sat atop what was once a dining table but had, since the weight exceeded its ability, become a collapsed failure.

I sat on the floor near the television remains, next to the stack of admiring or hateful or time-robbing letters I had no intention of answering with a fresh pack of cigarettes. When I stood, there were five unread letters and zero cigarettes left. Night had fallen.

I went to the Sacred Room and sat at my typewriter. Distracted immediately, I looked around the purple

walls and read the only thing posted, the deed to my property. Took a lonely pebble from the desktop and chucked it in an attempt to puncture the deed. To nullify it, make it interesting.

Instead a newspaper clipping fell from behind the deed and, as a dove, glided over to me. I picked it up and remembered its details like my father's face: how, "when frustrated with the by-laws and insolitude of the grounds," I'd purchased the entire so-called writer's retreat using His Way's cash advance. I crumpled the clipping, tossed it in a corner. Nine words arrived from divinity, or so it seemed. I typed them desperately, fast:

J. Alex Sampson didn't care about the next idiot.

It wasn't much, but I was elated at the revival of my creativity—of fingers cold and uninspired for a simply wrong length of time. In the closet of the Sacred Room, I remembered, there rested a box full of other clippings—expository lies, trash; assumptive, probing, slanderous, superfluous, praising fluff which had no right to be inked yet nevertheless hogged space in my brain, in my home.

How illogical.

After hunting successfully for it, I sat this box near my desk and crushed the first clipping, and the next sentence came to me. Then two more.

As the pulp mole-hill in the corner grew, so did my tale. I took a break to revise. Went back to the top, started new. Brewed fresh coffee, drank it from the pot like spring water. And wrote on into the break of day, the dusk, the moonlight. Until my body quit on me yet again, and I was forced to rest.