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Balance

By Bethany Walker

A low mechanical hum filled the uninhabited room. Rhythmic clicking joined in, as a red digital display scrolled to show a countdown, the seconds ticking down to oblivion. Shiny metal machines lined the room, operating untouched by human hands. Two screens flickered on, the collective glowing lights illuminating the mission control room. One showed a young brunette woman sleeping. Her hair tangled on the pillow as she rolled to her side and continued to dream. On the second screen, a mother panted in a hospital room as she stood beside a large bed, gripping the rail in the throes of her labor.

A switch slowly rotated as a scale rose from within the machine, each side balancing out the other for the moment. The control room had a single purpose: to keep the universe in balance. When one comes into the world, one must leave.

In the room where the brunette slept, clothes were thrown over a plush chair in the corner. On the desk, a stack of envelopes waited beside a roll of postage stamps, each address neatly written. A novel lay half read on the bedside table. It was overturned and splayed open to be easily picked up and completed.

The mother paced the hospital room, occasionally stopping to bend over and give a silent groan, her contractions making it impossible to stand. A nurse came in and had her lie on the bed, checking her progress. “Soon.” Her mouth formed the words, inaudible in the control room. Cogs inside one of the large metal machines began to slowly turn, the metal teeth meeting and parting in perfect symmetry. The scale slowly tilted until the left pan rested on the base of the balance.

As the brunette slept, the bedroom door slowly opened. A male figure crawled into the room, moving to the side of the bed. His movements were erratic, unnerving, his head cocked jerkily and quickly to different sides, scanning erratically. He stood, looming over the woman, tall and lean. The gaunt angles on the man’s face cast shadows over his eyes, making them pools of black. His shoulder blades protruded sharply through his shirt. A glint of metal caught the light as he pulled a long knife from the waistband of his pants.

Under the fluorescent light of the hospital room, the laboring mother’s team rushed into the room, bringing an array of medical supplies and devices. The doctor positioned himself between the woman’s legs, indicating to her that it was time to push. Beaded sweat rolled down the mother’s face as she readied herself for the task ahead.

A red button blinked above the screens and then compressed itself down.

The brunette stirred in bed, rolled onto her back and her eyes snapped open, just in time to see the knife thrust downward toward her. Her mouth opened in a silent scream, and her back arched in pain as the metal disappeared into her body. Feverish movement ensued as she tried to sit up, to get out of the bed. The man pulled her back as her hands clawed at the edge of the bed. A puddle of blood quickly formed, soaking the bed sheets beneath her.

The mother's mouth opened in a silent cry as her body contracted, pushing her child along. The nurses in the room hustled around her body, prepping blankets and the warming tray. The doctor slid her hands in between the mother's legs, ready to catch the infant. With the next contraction, the mother pushed, focusing all of her energy on bringing her child into the world.

The cogs in the machine moved quicker, racing the countdown on screen.

The man's lips curled into a disturbingly wide smile as he straddled the woman, pushing his knife into her again. The woman's face contorted in agony as she fell unconscious, head lolling to the side. His head tilted back in an inaudible cackle as he flung himself off the blood-soaked bed. The brunette's eyes flickered half open, then glossed over as her body caved into immobility. The man left as quickly as he had come.

Sliding out of the birthing canal, the boy took his first breath. As the doctor placed the boy in his mother's arms, he severed the umbilical cord and the child became his own person. As the mother gazed on his face for the first time, the boy suddenly stilled. His body went limp as if he were nothing more than a rag doll. The mother patted his face, a look of desperation crossing her own. She let out an inaudible scream as the doctor hurried to pull the child from her arms and rushed out.

The countdown hit zero.

In the bedroom, there was the smallest movement. A finger twitched. The brunette's lips parted slightly. Her eyelids opened to reveal the faintest spark of life.

Slowly, the scale moved back, balancing out once again. The machine's gears suddenly stopped and screens winked out, returning the room to darkness. An eerie stillness settled in the quiet. Seconds passed, and then the mechanical hum returned. Click. Click. Click. The digital display suddenly blinked back to life casting a red glow on the machinery as the countdown began again.

Don't Look

By Faris Salhi

The faint thumps of footsteps came down from the floorboards above. The basement door was open and creaking slightly as the wind from the windows I'd opened came billowing in, flowing up and around the 90-degree turn in the staircase and pushing the door ever so slightly. A stranger's first thought would have been that it was a ghost, but I'd known this house since I was a baby, and I knew all its tricks.

"Noah?" Came Eleanor's voice from the top of the staircase. "You down there?"

"Yeah!" I called back up.

She paused for a moment or two. She wasn't expecting an answer from the basement. "Dinner's ready!"

"I'll be there in a minute!"

I couldn't blame her, really. I don't ever come down here except to change the air filter in the furnace or turn off the water to the yard before winter. There were only two lights, the small fluorescent ones that turn on with those pull strings and buzz like a dozen fireflies. They made the basement shadowy and mysterious. They made it dark, and I've always been scared of the dark.

I wasn't quite sure why I was down here, same way I wasn't quite sure where it was the brain went when it was bored, where strange and archaic thoughts seemed to rise to the surface of your mind like dead fish. I'd remembered something, something that made my stomach unravel, something I hadn't ever thought about for decades and had absolutely no recollection of. Nothing beyond that visceral sensation in my gut, that and cloudy image of a Handycam my parents used to have. They got it the day my older sister was born, an old Sony Handycam, the kind with the flip-open screen and extendable eyepiece that made the camera look like it's gotten a little too excited for its job. I found it in the plastic bin labeled Kids, which I thought was an ominous name. Kids? What kids? Kid's what?

It was lying in a heap of other little knick-knacks and trinkets, relics from a time long past, with textbooks of history I wasn't too keen to dig back up. Wallet portraits, miniature cars, trophies, medals, cassettes and tapes. Tapes most of all, the little 8mm ones with the plastic covers that flipped open. I reached in and plucked them out. There were seven in total, but a light flashed red on the Handycam when I tried to turn it on. I was almost relieved, but I couldn't shake that feeling in the pit of my stomach. I took it upstairs and let it charge in my office for the night, not sure at all what I was expecting to find.

I couldn't sleep that night. It was too hot, and I kept waking up to more of the blanket being bundled up on top of me, pushed and kicked aside by Eleanor. It's funny really. In the winter they'll take it and in the summer they'll pile it up on top of you like you slept in a graveyard. She had her hand on my shoulder, covering the birthmark. It was an odd birthmark, long and pink,

stretching from the end of my collarbone down to that little nook in the front of the armpit. It wasn't like any birthmark I ever saw, but mama said it was, and so it was.

I removed Eleanor's arm and sat up. My boxers were sticking to my legs, my balls. I thought about cornstarch. Did that even work? It sounded like something soldiers in Nam would do, huddled up together in a sandbag trench, broiling in the forest's humidity. I pictured myself right alongside them, rifle in hand, dressed in green camouflage, wiping warm sweat from my brow. I had my pocket watch in the pouch of my breast, with a picture of my darling back home. Somebody was passing around a can of cornstarch.

"Cornstarch," I muttered, swinging my legs up off the bed. "Where're they getting cornstarch in Nam?" Eleanor stirred and kicked the blanket onto the floor, stretching her arms out over my side of the bed. Her legs followed for good measure.

I stepped out of the room and over to Rosa's. The cat was sitting right outside her door, paws crossed and glaring at me. I glared back. Rosa was asleep, bright pink barbie blanket hanging off the edge of her bed, warm breeze flowing gently through the window next to her bed. She turned over and kicked the blanket off the edge of the mattress. Like mother like daughter I guess. Her night-light was plugged into the wall nearby, glowing warm and orange. Naturally, Rosa was scared of the dark. I'd tried telling her that everything was the same in the dark, that whatever you saw in the day was right there with you in the night, no bigger no smaller, just the same as it always was. She didn't believe me. Eleanor argued against the night light, explaining how kids needed to face their fears rather than run from them, but I'd managed to convince her. You never know what pillows or toys Rosa might leave strewn across the floor, things she could trip on when she felt a pee coming on at three in the morning.

"It's not about fear," I'd said to her. "Better safe than sorry."

I climbed carefully down the stairs, squinting through the dark. There was another night-light here, pale white and sensor activated. It wasn't very bright. I could hardly see the next few steps ahead of me. My office was on the ground floor, and when I stepped inside I flicked the lights on with an eager hand and collapsed into the warm leather chair. It was even hotter in here than in the bed. There was a single window and a single air vent, obstructed slightly by my desk and cabinets. Warm summer air flowed in through the mesh of the open window, just the sliver that could get through. The Handycam sat charging by my laptop, and there was a little green light flashing now.

I picked it up and opened the cartridge. Seven tapes to choose from, and I guess like anything, you start from the beginning. I picked up the one labeled Jan-July 1986, about a year and a half after my birthday, and I stuck it into the cartridge, closing the thing with a satisfying click. That was what I liked about these old things—they always let you know when they worked. The screen went blue for a few seconds, bright blue that lit my face up like a ripe blueberry. There was some static, and then an image came through. The colours were dull and the picture was noisy and grainy, but there was no doubt about it; it was me, a baby just starting to walk, wispy brown hair on his head and a buttocks wrapped in a swollen diaper. It looked like an ant's nectar-laden abdomen, and I chuckled under my breath. My parents had dressed me up in a suit

and bow-tie pin, pants stretched taught over the diaper and shiny black shoes no wider than a computer mouse.

I waddled around like a penguin, grasping at couches and chairs for balance, but it seemed like I'd gotten the hang of the whole walking thing, for the most part. Whoever was holding the camera (mama most likely, given the shakiness and giggling behind the lens), had me centered in the frame the entire time, but I studied the room as my younger counterpart stepped through it. Big, curvy couches lined with dark, polished wood. Symmetrical floral patterns on the plump pillows and big chunky tiles for the floor. I recognized the place. It was my grandparents' house, the one that was empty now after they'd died a few years back. Empty and dark.

The audio wasn't very good. It came through flat and with those distinct crackles and taps you get from getting too handsy with the Handycam. But it was alright, and I found myself grinning when I saw my sister chewing the fabric piping on the couch's pillows, and when I held a piece of watermelon in my hands that I wouldn't let go of but wouldn't eat either.

I didn't know what I was expecting to find in these memories, but in the end, I found it. I wish I didn't. I wish I'd just put it away, just taken it all, tapes and everything and threw them back into that box in the basement.

The screen went black for a few seconds, and I assumed the tape had ended. I was about to shut the screen and put the camcorder away when it suddenly flickered to life with those familiar titters and taps.

"Noah." I recognized my mother's voice. The picture was blurry, and she took a moment to adjust it. There was background noise and people talking, music blaring, something that sounded like America's "A Horse with no Name". When the image focused I saw myself again, chubby face up close to the lens and little arms outstretched to my mama behind the camera.

"Noah," she laughed, fixing my little bowtie with arm outstretched hand. "Where's daddy?" I looked a little agitated, that expression that parents know all too well when a baby's close to tears; scrunched up face, quivering bottom lip. "You wanna hold it? Here." The picture wavered and shook, and I suddenly found myself staring at my mother's face. "Where's daddy?" She asked again. "Where is he Noah? Go find him. Go find Daddy."

It seemed like holding the camera had put a cork in my rising tantrum, and I turned around and began to waddle down the hallway, my mother's voice fading away into the background. Everything looks different through a child's eyes. The walls were white and oddly bumpy, and the lights were so far up in the ceiling that they may as well have been stars in the sky. Daddy was at the end of the hallway, standing with a cigar between his fingers and talking with two other men. The noise of the party quickly disappeared behind me until all that I could hear were my breaths, deep and meditated, and my shoes clapping like a duck's webbed feet. There was a door slightly open to my left. I stepped towards it. It was dark in there, too dark.

"No," I uttered, gripping the Handycam's screen tight with my fingers. "Go back."

But I didn't go back. I stepped towards the door, pushing it open with the big camera in my

hands. The picture almost immediately went black, engulfed in the darkness of the room. I was short one of my senses, and all I could do was listen. My breathing became heavier, and I whimpered a tongue-tied, “mama?” into the darkness.

And then I heard a different set of lungs, a different person’s thud of boots heavy on the tiled floor. Something grabbed the camera, snatching it from the baby’s hands, and then it began to whisper, a bassy sort of sound, like a hoarse growl from deep within the throat. I saw the faint grey outline of legs, thin and ripped like a scarecrow’s, and a hand with fingers curled like rotting twigs. There was a glint of steel, just a flash and it was gone.

“Don’t look,” it whispered with a decaying voice. “Don’t look...”

I threw the Handycam down onto the desk, my chest heaving and my heart racing. I wanted to scream, but my throat had tightened to the width of a straw. The video kept playing for a few more seconds, and then it ended, frozen on the grainy black screen, frozen and silent. I clapped it shut and wrenched the tape out and stared at it for a moment or two before I felt my stomach stir. “Dinner’s ready!” Eleanor’s piercing voice came rattling back through my head, like the back of a torqued-up drill against my temples. I burst out of the office and ran to the bathroom, spraying vomit all over the toilet. The cover was closed, of course, and not a single speck of puke actually made it inside. My mind was spiralling, my heart fluttering like a sparrow shaking the lint from its feathers. Was that it? I thought. What that what I was expecting to find? Or is there more? The thought only made me retch up a few more helpings.

After about fifteen minutes or so I was feeling better, and I rinsed my mouth out with some Listerine before making the solemn climb back up the stairs. The night light at the top flickered slightly as the cat walked past, its tail casting a long and hairy shadow down the staircase. “Jesus,” I muttered, stepping past it. It hissed at me and then tiptoed over to Rosa’s room. The door was open a crack. It sniffed, but it didn’t go in.

I approached the door, my eyes straining in the dim hallway light. I don’t know what I was expecting to find, but I pushed the door open and looked.

And it was there. Standing overtop Rosa’s body like a wilting rose, swaying ever so slightly from the breeze. The orange night light lit its face up with sharp angles and deep shadows. I saw ridges and rot, hollowed eyes like gashes in its face. Rosa’s eyes were wide and glassy, and it towered over her, her arm in its claws, sawing at her shoulder with a breadknife.

I felt a warmth between my thighs as my bladder emptied itself down my legs.

“Don’t look,” it said, moving the knife back and forth, back and forth. Crunch, crunch, crunch...

Being a Clown

By Rani Jayakumar

Natasha knew that children either loved or hated clowns. There were those who thought clowns were beyond funny. These were the cutesy kids who adored the striped pants and giant shoes, and owned their own curly orange wigs. They yearned to honk the red nose, and found the changing expression of the red-lined lips hilarious. These children lived for the moment at the circus when the clowns came out into the ring, and clapped and cheered. They waited earnestly for the tiny car and the squeaky horn, anticipating the somersaults and antics. They clutched their stomachs and roared with laughter.

Then there were those who would not touch her with a ten foot pole. To them, Natasha represented all that was dark and strange about the seeming goodness of the world. The same nose that some kids wanted to honk made others run in fear. They saw the eyes and goofy grin as menacing, and found the garish makeup ghoulish. To them, a clown was as scary as a monster, maybe more.

With good reason, for Natasha was not a happy clown. She'd gotten into this after a failed stint as a bareback rider, a slip that left her unable to ride again. She could kick herself for that mistake. Instead of the fame and respect accorded an accomplished rider on a magnificent beast, she had to humble herself and stumble for applause. Her life-destroying hobble got her a laugh, and her twisted smile elicited giggles. She struggled at first, and eventually, she decided to make use of it. Still, she didn't have to like it.

When her act began that fateful day, she was only daydreaming about her riding days. She was raising her whip high, turning to hundreds of creatures trotting forward, their teeth showing, mane flying. She lifted the whip and began snapping it in the air. One by one she whipped it over the horses, their neighs accompanied by the loud stomps of their many feet.

Later, people would say she herself had snapped. Some speculated brain damage from the fall -- what else could make a kindly clown do such a thing? But the other side knew this darkness was always hidden inside clowns. It was inevitable that they would have these kinds of dreams that turned into nightmares.

Only she wasn't asleep. And it wasn't a whip.

When she awoke from her waking dream, there was blood everywhere. Many had not escaped, their carcasses on the floor. The rest of the audience had fled. Natasha alone held the red-stained blade in her hand.

Big Fella

By Cora Tate

Meredith and Alwyn each appreciated the other's competence and company. Alwyn's responsibilities included inditing the shift rosters, so the two often worked together. Because Alwyn did not play favorites, she and Meredith took slightly more than their share of night shifts. They picked up the man they later called The Big Fella on a night shift, midweek so quieter than many.

The call came in about ten o'clock, and the two women jumped in the ambulance less than two minutes later. Alwyn started the motor, while Meredith fastened her seatbelt and switched on the flashing emergency lights. As they pulled out onto the street, Meredith said, "It's Naomi and Jon's place. Possible cranial or spinal."

"I hope they're OK," Alwyn said, as she headed out of town to their friends' place a little faster than usual. She used the lights and siren to cross the highway against the light and sped the three miles out to Jon and Naomi Robson's rural retreat. Meredith jumped out and sprinted to the porch, before her partner backed the ambulance across the lawn to the concrete front steps. As Alwyn climbed out of the ambulance, a police cruiser pulled into the driveway and disgorged two officers.

The nearer one called out, "Evening, Alwyn. What's up?"

"Evening, Jack. Don't know. We just got here."

After the paramedic retrieved a Kendrick Extraction Device from the ambulance, she and her policeman acquaintance mounted the front steps together. The policeman knocked on the front door, as his partner came up the steps behind them and said, "Hi, Alwyn."

"Hi, Edie."

The greetings went no further, because Naomi Robson opened the door and ushered the three first responders into the spacious living room. Alwyn hurried to the foot of the stairs, where her colleague knelt beside the biggest human being either had ever seen, who lay with his head on the floor at a worrying angle and his feet almost halfway up the staircase.

Alwyn began to ready the KED for use, as the police officer named Edie used her cellphone to take three dozen pictures, shots of the injured party from every possible angle. Meredith whispered into her colleague's ear, "We'd better strap it on 'im anyway, but I think he's gone."

An Acquisition of Words

By Todd Sullivan

With the coming of dusk, Sunshine appeared. Dressed in a striped red and yellow suit, his skin the color of shadows invading Taipei, he checked his golden watch. His powers were strong, but Order still bound him, and the contract stated the deadline for collection loomed seven hours from now. Midnight.

Sunshine strode forward to the apartment where the borrower of a ray of light lived.

Taiwanese students from a nearby high school gaped at him as he passed them in twisting alleys wounding through the neighborhood. He nodded a greeting, his wide smile revealing pale white teeth. Of humankind, he loved youth most, their fire for rebellion against the rules of civilization an intoxicating stimulant. During the short moments he risked wandering the world under the cover of darkness, he sought out ways to inspire the young to reckless abandon and havoc. His persuasion of choice: art.

Five years had passed since the borrower had signed his soul away in blood. A great work of literary achievement would have been produced under the promise that Sunshine would take both the original copy and the artist's life as trophies. This was in exchange for all earthly rewards the borrower would gain through use of a ray of light, Sunshine's divine inspiration. He entered Lane 3 and followed the numbers down until he reached a green plaque labeled 58. Looking at the squat mortar building with surprise, he wondered why the borrower still lived in such squalor. Five years was more than enough time to write the novel, acquire an agent, sell the manuscript to one of the top five publishers, and gain the large advance for a work that would be considered brilliant. Transformative. An international success.

What was the point of selling one's eternal soul for notoriety and financial gain if one were only going to continue living where they started before the execution date? Once the signature block was signed, there was no backing out of the deal.

The stricken appearance of the building made Sunshine wary, but he calmed that temper of his which consumed when he succumbed to the temptation. With a flourish of his wrist, he pressed his forefinger to the tarnished button of 5A.

"Yes?" a distorted voice asked from the intercom.

"Jon A Than!" Sunshine rubbed his hands in glee. "The maturity day is nigh. Let me up, I have come to collect my due!"

A sharp intake of breath told Sunshine that he had not been forgotten. Such reactions from borrowers were common. When the time came to pay the debt in full, second thoughts and hesitations were bound to manifest.

"Was it today? I was so sure it was tomorrow." Even through the interference, the tremble in the voice could be heard.

Sunshine clapped twice and laughed. “Jon A Than! Do I seem like a man who would mistake such things? Come now, buzz me up! The night grows late, and the time to settle our account has arrived.”

Moments passed in which only static filled the silence. Just when Sunshine thought he would have to bend the laws of physics and risk being detected by an agent of Order, the intercom buzzed and the door unlocked. A warm flush of pleasure flooded him as he swept into the building and climbed the five flights in the dim staircase. Dull walls, flaking paint, and the occasional cockroach buzzing past his ears did not dampen his mood as he came out onto the rooftop to stand before apartment 5A.

Sunshine delivered a sharp rap on the door, and the borrower opened.

“Jon A Than!” Sunshine reached into his pocket and removed the red envelope containing the contract. “May I come in?”

Fatigue lines had aged the borrower’s face, making him look much older than his 29 years. With a resigned sigh, he stepped aside, and Sunshine entered an apartment that looked worse than it had five years prior when he’d visited the struggling writer. A damp chill hung in the air, and a line of ants crawled along a crack stretching up from a corner of the wall to the window. This, indeed, was unusual.

He turned to the borrower, forcing down a growing sense of unease. Attempting a jaunty tone, he said, “As stated in the contract, your death will appear a suicide. The genius haunted by demons that drove him to madness.” Sunshine laughed. “As for your eternal soul, well, that’s a bridge you will cross soon enough. Now,” and he held out his hand, “the original manuscript, if you will.”

The writer removed the contract from the red envelope and flipped through the pages. “After I signed the contract, I went over this document many times.”

“I did not lie to you,” Sunshine quickly pointed out. “For divine inspiration, your name will live on past your lifetime. Those are the stated conditions.”

“Yes.” He looked at Sunshine, a hint of a smile touching his lips.

The patience Sunshine struggled to maintain eroded further. Pleas on knees to void the contract would rouse no suspicion, but that smug look disturbed him.

“The novel came to me, one line at a time,” the borrower said. “And it was wonderful! Soon I envisioned pages, which morphed into chapters. Characters marched down the halls of my mind. Subplots sprung up like buttresses to support the grand cathedral I was constructing. And then, a resolution that only God, or,” and here he looked pointedly at Sunshine, “the Fallen, could conceive.”

“So where is it?” Sunshine’s mouth salivated, his hands tightly clasped, as he looked about the squalid apartment.

“Here.” The writer touched his temple. “A novel composed as an Epic. All in verse, which I will share with one person at a time, so that they can see the light and remember my name forever more. I am the original draft,” with this, he tore the contract in half, “and my soul, and my life, are mine to keep.”

My Dungeon Ghost

By LindaAnn Loschiavo

“If ye will listen to me, but for a little while, I will tell it ... in story stiff and strong...”

— — *Gawain and the Green Knight*

I.

He gave me my first kiss, a kiss which all
Others aspire to be. But that was not
As memorable as when he crept up
Behind me, deep in the stacks with Shakespeare,
And thrust *Le Morte d'Arthur* into my life.

Uther Pendragon, Lady of the Lake,
La Belle Isolde, Lamorak, Galahad,
Gawain and the Green Knight: he'd rattle off
These names like boys on our block recited
Today's New York Yankees' starting line-up.

Under his spell, I became capable
Of sin, adulteress wed to the head
Of Camelot, while disreputably
Cavorting. He cast me as Guinevere,
Himself as Lancelot, my illicit
Paramour. Troubadours lionized my
Beauty. Fortified by my favor, he
Won all tournaments, adoring his new
Heroic entity, the prison-like
Grip of its shallowness, his eyes askew.

Fantasy twitched, hid its murderous heart.

We're library-eyed sixth graders, bewitched
By British poetry, legends, and lore.
He's eleven years old. I'd just turned nine.

Sundays we'd serve God together, speaking
Liturgical Latin, prim altar boy
In the sanctuary, his Juliet
On the balcony — — choir loft — — voice raised.
“Lead us not into temptation,” we'd sing.

My Dungeon Ghost [continued with a stanza break]

In class we'd pass naughty notes, wild words penned
By Malory, Tennyson, and Chaucer.
He dreamt of noble crusades, mighty steeds.
I thought about what constitutes the light
'Round which friends gather, pull each other up.

Three years later, I cast aside wimples,
Tippets, and my power to petition,
As Camelot's queen, for a Papal Bull.

The Round Table was no more, upended.
Graduation. New unknowns descended.

II.

"Sir Knight, if thou cravest battle here thou shalt not fail for lack of a foe."

There he was on horseback at The Cloisters,
Preparing to joust, taller, brawnier,
More Green Knight than Gawain but, all the same,
A verray, parfit, gentil knyght. No words
Passed. *His baner desplayeth, and forth rood.*

When I described his armor to neighbors,
They derided him: college drop-out, drunk,
An unseemly Port Authority cop.

*"Knight or patrolman, he's a barrier
To chaos. Love whatever saves your life!"*
This sassed retort is thought, not said. What nerve.
My words have more heft than gossips deserved.

Instead I kept my fingers on the pulse
Of Chaucer, Tennyson, Malory, Bede,
Chretien de Troyes, and William Langland,
Earned my degrees by forgetting to sleep,
Becoming an anchoress, books knee deep.

My Dungeon Ghost

III.

"Where shall I seek thee?" quoth Gawain.

Decades passed. When his voice returned, as if
Magnetic force spun a dusty mix-tape
From life's forgotten hits, as if he'd reeled
Me back to the library's Children's Room,
As if he were transmitting from the spheres,
I was too busy to listen at first.

When his voice returned, insistent, troubled,
It took three weeks before his confession
Was complete. His crimes were unspeakable,
Impressed their brutish force across the miles.

During the course of a contract murder,
His cowardice left an infant to starve,
Bawling inside her crib, though her father
Made provisions for her safe retrieval
From this house of carnage. But the killers — —
Two men who'd sired children — — did not phone.

In air arranged by bees, the final sting
Blitzed: a slow-witted male was convicted,
Stewed behind bars for nine years, innocent,
Incapable of such a heinous crime,
While my friend refused to speak, let it be,
Abused his liberty by offering
Himself as a paid assassin for hire.

Sweet altar boy, who rang the bells during
Lent's *Miserere*, had turned mercenary.

Arrests came ten years later when he was
Outed. His partner, ill now, suddenly
Decided to name the victim's husband
And him, betraying his accomplices.

Hours spent with the venerable Bede

My Dungeon Ghost

Enlightened us to the ways of the world,
Its fickleness and instability.
We valued courtly love and *curteisie*.
What incited moral degradation?

“Ye gan to grucche me!” was his sore complaint.
Yet he explained how he sought false glory,
A mad pursuit of titles — — duke and king — —
Jousting in a mirrored colosseum,
Betraying himself, forever in debt.

Consumed by shallowness, pride, and regret,
My friend had declined a coherent eye.

To offer him cash, I phoned the prison.

“He’s been gone a month,” the chaplain advised.

“When no one claimed him, inmates dug his grave.”

“Prithee grant an inestimable boon,
My queen, whose loyalty’s my only hope.
Family hates me but find my daughter.
Say I’m very sorry and I love her.”

I thought of what the Green Knight told Gawain:
Kindness, mercy, and what’s “less than to blame.”
I pledged fealty. Then he said her name.

*A knyght ther was and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.*

----- 111 lines

----- 827 words

Notes:

Section headings are all from *Gawain and the Green Knight*.

“verray, parfit, ...” Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, *General Prologue*, line 72

“His baner desplayath...” Chaucer, *The Knight’s Tale*, line 966

“A knyght ther was ...” Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, *General Prologue*, lines 43-46