

FICTION



Death By STD

[photo animations available online only]

THE SCAPEGOAT

Michael Ives

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was
the priest of the most high God.
Genesis 14:18

He and his wife referred to their holiday hors d'oeuvre spread, a carefully rounded heap of deviled ham and selected spices, as the *Mound*, the exterior of which was covered with a mantle of processed cheese spread. Though few chose to eat of the *Mound*, neither cocktail party nor moveable feast could be considered complete without it, as if the *Mound* were invested with the power of an idol, as if it were a transgression to eat from the *Mound*, but an equally grave transgression to omit it from the “pre-prandial fare,” to borrow the phraseology of the husband. The occasional adventurer might with nacre-handled cocktail knife penetrate as far into the *Mound* as the lower reaches of its yellowish coat. Infrequently a lusty soul would entrench as deep as to catch on the tip of his knife blade a small bit of deviled ham. Yet the integrity of the *Mound* as a sacred, inviolable tumulus never failed to survive these bruised avatars. For the most part no one dared deface the *Mound's* inscrutability beyond minor excavations, which in any case, constituted a *ritual and hygienic scarification*. Lest anyone should nurture so much arrogance as to allow thoughtful conversation to intrude among the jello salads and pretzel nubs, always there was the *Mound* to warn him away from such extravagance. “Let your talk emulate a curved, sparsely pitted surface,” the *Mound* would seem to enjoin, “dumb and inanimate like unto the moon's.”

The moment the *Mound* entered the room, its near hemispherical perfection, the totemic gravity it asserted into the otherwise moronic ambience, would impel all present to

observe a momentary hush appropriate to sacred levels of admiration. *Ah, Mound!* someone would whisper, pointing at it as if at a hydrocephalic who, for the enormity of his fatal defect, was thought to bring good luck upon the tribe who gave it succor. Signatures of the divine: an aquarium in the skull—a dome of anonymous potted meat. The *Mound* gave off an aura of portent: that it might sire prodigies and miracles, that some token of unassimilated wonder might burst forth, as of suddenly coming upon an image of the holy mother pressed into the deck of an immaculately sealed slice of American cheese.

When, on one occasion, an unaccustomed guest chose unwittingly to drive a knife straight through the center of the *Mound*, everyone looking on let out a collective gasp, for it had remained a mystery whether yet more of the same macerated pork and associated by-products lay at the core of the *Mound* and not some other, explicitly numinous, token—a mortgage document for instance, or a golf ball. Oh, the terrible undifferentiated truth of the *Mound!* The hapless guest might as well have split open an infant's head for the looks of horror his bisection inspired. Like Buridan's ass, starving to death unable to decide whether to drink the water to its left or eat the hay to its right, the guest—similarly trapped between the inevitable injury he would cause his host by restoring the grayish mass to its crevasse under such intense scrutiny and his cresting fear that, on a footing with that very scrutiny, to eat from the *Mound* was plainly inadvisable—he hesitated for what seemed a geological age, *Mound*-encumbered knife in one hand, table water cracker in the other.

He knew what he had to do, had known from the moment he cleft the *Mound*, but as he began to chew, the full force of taboo bore in upon him the grievous error he had committed. *He's actually eating it*, someone whispered. *Sic transit gloria Mound*, another gibed. Even the husband struggled to suppress his astonishment. All then went silent but for the soft clinking

of ice cubes and, issuing from another room, the Hammond organ stylings of Walter Wanderly. People backed away, as if to escape responsibility for having produced a foul odor. An inexorable recognition began to paint itself into the fresh plaster of the guest's face as he swallowed the baneful dollop. The image of its descent down the length of his esophagus, heavy with intimations of sacrificial blades and altars and beribboned yearlings, lodged itself in the sensibilities of all who looked on, and for this act of witness they were drawn closer one to another, and he closer to the congress of furies gathering in his duodenum.

HERE

Elizabeth Gonzalez

At seven every night two bats come down the street, circling one another as they fly between the trees. They travel twenty feet above the asphalt, hunting mosquitoes and moths. They look like rags operated by an inexperienced puppeteer. Sometimes in summer the children toss up stones to watch them dive. They don't seem to know stone from food.

A woman wearing a camouflage coat and black pants walks a black dog every night. She comes out at the same time as the bats and follows the same route, head down, oblivious to traffic. The children call her suicide lady.

A man who lived on the end of the street committed suicide four years ago. He went on vacation and dove off a lighthouse. His wife was bewildered for a while, then moved away. He used to rinse his driveway every morning and nudge acorns out of the cracks with the toes of his slippers.

She turns the tap. Steam swirls under her chin. She has the window open for a breeze but there is no breeze.

The children work at the table. They are learning to do bubble tests. If none of the given answers fit, instead of NA for None of the Above, they are told to mark NH for Not Here. As if to say, there must be an answer somewhere but it's gone missing.

Moths bat at the screen, drawn to the light over the sink. When she turns off the water she can hear them hit, a splanging sound quiet as clothes dropping on carpet. They hold onto the screen with hooks fine as hair. They have mistaken a 60-watt bulb for the moon.

The moon is out, only it's 200,000 miles from here. Today it came out in midday, a bland blue picture hanging over the grocery store parking lot like a prop laid out in a hallway before a show.

The neighbor's porch light goes on. His wife died in the spring. They are from another era and still loved each other. Sometimes at night when she is out on her porch she hears him cry. His dogs are keeping him alive. They need feeding.

This afternoon she passed a farm where a sheep was cuddling up to a cinder block wall. Its chin was pressed tight against the block, eyes closed in sleep. She wishes she hadn't seen it, that black chin pressed against the block.

Her son has a question. She takes the paper from him and reads. A ring of suds radiates from her thumb into the paper. It will dry crinkly but clean.

She dries her hands and moves to the table. She makes the lightest circles around their mistakes, erasable circles, and they make corrections. The answers are here after all. The moths hit the picture window, louder against the glass but still a sound one has to listen for. She read an article that said they're disappearing, fruitlessly courting billboards, soaring headlong into headlights, filling bug zapper trays. Fortune favors the bright.

One by one the children pack away their papers. One by one they return from the shower, hastily dried, and she tucks them in. Tell me what I did when I was little, her daughter says, her hair wetting the pillow, tell me about your childhood. What her daughter means to ask is, who were you, who am I?

You used to say hambubber, she tells her. Twice in first grade you rode the wrong bus home. Once you were jumping on the bed and knocked your teeth through your lip and had to get stitches. Finally her daughter smiles, satisfied. She remembers, she always says, even things that happened when she was too small to remember.

She reads stories to the baby. The old stories are brutal and she edits them, takes out the squirrel's heart in the box, the stones sewn into the belly of the wolf.

Her husband is asleep. The moths are at the windows, tracking the last light. Up close, they are unique. Some have shaggy legs and rust-colored manes like lions. Some have iridescent wings like the insides of shells. They are the colors of old pearls and bark and dried out cornstalks at sunset. They all have great black eyes and cannot help themselves; they see in every glimmer something shining, something beautiful, something they cannot live without.

She turns off the light, and one by one the moths drop away, making the tiniest sound of all when they let go. Down in the back of the yard, milkweed leaves wave like white hands under the moon. Her husband stirs, reaches an arm across the bed. Where are you? he says, and she says Here, I'm right here. If the children come in the middle of the night and say I'm scared she says, Here, and pulls them into bed.

How do you know, she wonders, when you've found what you were looking for? She has been a stranger on this road forever, hunting after things that shine; she still can't tell from the cast and fall of a thing whether it is food, whether it is stone.

THE BUILDER, THE FATHER AND THE SON

Steve McClain

The Builder sat sobbing in the turret attic window overlooking the river. The tin pig's head which he had built from tourist gadgets, gutters and chicken wire was fitted firm over his chin and wrapped tight around his ears. He had punched holes for his eyes and none for his nose. He'd cut a stern slit through which he ate and drank infrequently and most times messily, leaving a wetness on his naked lap.

At the pig's chin he'd punched a hole through which he had looped the coarse twine he had discovered months previous in the pants pocket of the pants he'd found in the closet at the attic's corner. The twine dangled downward over his uncovered chest and was tied hurriedly to the belt he had built round his waist from belt leather, tourist gadgets, gutters and chicken wire. It was his chastity belt. At the crotch, he'd cut a toothed mouth from the junk tin through which he had roughly drawn his penis weeks before. He had left his scrotum hidden and he thought protected behind the apparatus' face.

From the wicker rocking chair (a chair he had discovered during his first hours in the attic room) the Builder watched the road and river below him. It was Christmas or New Year's. It was snowing in Stockholm and cold. A blond woman walked floors beneath him by the chimney boats at the river's edge before the Statues' Bridge. Her white hair, escaping beneath her hat, bounced against her coat's back as she walked. She wore a black leotard above her boots, and what the Builder could not see of her thighs' shape swinging beneath her chest, he imagined frowning from his chair. Beneath the Builder's room, the Father sat reading to his Son.

THE JUDGMENT (AFTER FRANZ)

Kenneth Tighe

George surveyed the bleak, sparsely furnished bedroom with satisfaction. There was a single window with a view of an enormous brick meat plant, a closet door adorned with a poster of Rodin's "Gates of Hell," and a simple bureau. On top of the bureau was a small plastic trophy depicting a boy executing a perfect handstand. Upon the neatly made bed lay an open suitcase filled with the paraphernalia of a life: articles of clothing, necessities of hygiene, a thick stack of frayed drawings. At long last George would leave this room, a development that filled his heart with a strange glow, a wild kind of happiness he'd never known, for his life to this point had been a series of predictable events systematically arranged by his parents. In twenty years of living he had never controlled his destiny nor experienced, in the slightest way, the thrill of spontaneity. Now, after a brief meeting with his mother and father, he would walk out of this house into an uncertain future entirely his own.

Two wonderful occurrences had made this freedom possible. He had become engaged to a lovely young woman whom he had known for several months, and he had been accepted into the Academy, an unprecedented accomplishment in George's family. It was a family, as his father was fond of pointing out, of clerks and gate guards. Indeed it was in total secret that George had obtained and submitted his Academy application. Without telling a soul he had completed a battery of rigorous tests. He had submitted designs, sketches and formal drawings of buildings erected out of the caverns of his mind. Most of his creations were dreamlike structures, vast labyrinths that often rambled beyond the very margins of the page. He was accepted

by the Academy on the same day that he was accepted by the lovely and perfect Felicia.

Now he need only inform his parents of the wonderful news. Then, with suitcase in hand, he would proceed to the subway station to meet his good friend Maxwell. Together they would travel uptown to the apartment they had already leased, an austere but affordable flat near the Academy where Maxwell was a prominent and successful student of chemistry.

The walls and floor of George's room vibrated with the passing of a train below. It was a common occurrence, something George had learned to ignore, as the building was situated directly over a subway line. He lifted the small plastic gymnastics trophy from the top of the bureau and held it carefully in his hands. Over the years its coating of cheap gold paint had nearly chipped off entirely. He placed the trophy gently inside the suitcase and snapped it shut. With the suitcase resting on the bed he left the room.

Out in the hall were the familiar kitchen smells that had marked his childhood—onions, cabbage, sausage. Entering the dining room he saw the familiar picture on the wall. It was an old print of the Savior wearing some strange, thorny headgear that broke the skin of his scalp, spattering drops of blood over the pinched agony of his face. It was a striking countenance, worthy of examination. But it was the Savior's heart that always drew the eye, for it was entirely exposed, skin and bone having been miraculously splayed to reveal a pulsating, blood-red organ. Indeed, protracted scrutiny of this heart had been known to produce the optical illusion of a living, pumping muscle.

George's mother entered the room, a short gray-haired woman with a narrow and severe look about her. His father followed. He was a tall bald man with a strange and vacant face. Strapped to his belt at hip level was a revolver that was securely fastened in a leather holster. Together they looked across the dining room table at George. He returned their gaze and said,

“I am engaged to be married to Felicia Bauman. I have been accepted by the Academy into their School of Design. I have leased an apartment in the West End with Maxwell Brown.”

There appeared suddenly, at the corners of the bald man’s mouth, the faintest suggestion of a sneer. He cast a furtive glance at his wife whose face had opened into a wide and very polite smile. She fastened tender eyes upon George, the smile widening, and said, “Where would this design come from?”

George said, “It comes from me, just me.”

“We shuffle papers,” said his father. “We guard gates.”

“I suppose,” said his mother, “that design falls from heaven like rain.”

George bristled. He threw back his shoulders and said, “This is what you said about my tumbling, but my trophy speaks for itself.”

A fine spray of spittle issued from his father’s mouth. “Surely you knew it was presented out of sympathy, to spare your sissified feelings. Why—it’s plastic!” He held out a massive palm that closed slowly into the rock of a fist. “I could snap it in two,” he said. “I could crush it into little pieces!”

“You’re aware of course,” said his mother, “that Stanley Bauman is a bank officer. You’re aware that a relationship with his daughter is laughable.”

“We guard gates,” said his father. “An engagement to the Bauman girl can only be nonsense.”

“The kind of nonsense,” said his mother, “that can only be fiction.”

“It’s obvious,” said his father, “that someone’s imagination has run amok. Mr. Bauman is an officer at a bank.” He leveled a superior smile upon his son.

George thought it imperative that he not rise to this bait. He and only he knew of the profound love for Felicia that dwelled in his heart, and of her mutual feelings for him. He and Felicia were committed to one another. Their bond was eternal and no

one, least of all these doubters, could alter that fact. So it was with intense personal pride and unwavering adoration for his future wife that George stiffened his spine in defiance. He need say nothing. He merely stood before this odd parental inquisition thinking of the lovely Felicia, of their mutual devotion, of the certainty of their future together and of the plush sofa in her father's home where, a mere three nights earlier, she had exposed her soft pale breasts to his feverish kisses.

With a turn of her head George's mother indicated that she was about to speak. "This friend," she said.

"This acquaintance," interrupted his father, "whom you fancy a friend."

"This—I don't know..." said the short gray-haired lady.

"Vagabond?" offered the eager pistol-packing elder.

"This boy," said his mother. "This Max whatever..."

George interrupted in a firm and clear voice. "My close friend Maxwell Brown and I have signed a lease for an apartment in the West End." He looked at his watch. "In fact, we have arranged to meet one another very shortly. He has obtained a key to our flat."

"A flat key?" said the mother. "Hmmm..."

George looked at her blankly. Her gaze assumed a look of benevolence and pity. Smiling sweetly she said, "A key is one thing. A lock that cooperates is still another."

George announced, "My bag is packed." There was a moment of silence. The two elders seemed taken by some collective mirth known only to themselves, as if a secret joke were being shared between them.

George's father, suddenly agitated, eyed his son with a hand squeezing the holstered sidearm. As if to calm himself he looked over at the picture on the wall. Following his example George too looked at the Savior. It was a very old print that had buckled in numerous places and was covered with old yellowed glass. These impediments created a potential for certain visual distortions.

As father and son perused the picture a late afternoon commuter train thundered below. The vibrations continued unabated and the image itself seemed to move. Certainly the Savior's face remained fixed, filled with love and pain. But the heart, the naked ever-present heart seemed alive, so vivid and bright with blood that, to George's weary eye, it looked more like a wound than a vessel, a large gaping wound the size of a man's hand that, upon close inspection, teemed with countless quivering white worms as thick as fingers, each intricately segmented, each with hundreds of threadlike legs wiggling, the tiny tips of which glowed with an odd phosphorescence.

The shaking abated, the portrait became still, but George felt as if the floor beneath him was the deck of ship in rough seas. He feared for his balance. He felt drunk. His father had lighted a cigar and layers of blue smoke began to obscure his vision. He looked through the haze at his mother who was high in the air. He realized after a moment that she was seated upon his father's massive shoulders. Her arm was outstretched, a forefinger pointed at George. He turned and began to stumble from the room, but not before hearing her unmistakable words: "You tumbling fool," she bellowed. "I sentence you to an acrobatic death."

Staggering along the hall George felt his intoxication begin to wane. His head cleared. He straightened his posture and quickened his gait. He opened the door to his bedroom, snatched the suitcase and hurried outside to the street. He took in a deep rush of cool air and his breast swelled with a renewed sense of purpose. The sound of his own heels clicking on the sidewalk was music to strengthen his resolve. Doubt and uncertainty fled before a hard, icy clarity. Moving quickly along the street he felt as if his future was etched deeply into his being, as if carved painfully into the flesh of his back. He hurried down into the subway station where he was to meet his best friend.

Maxwell was seated alone on a bench against the wall of the

station. He stood and looked at George with an affection that was palpable. “For some reason I was afraid you wouldn’t show,” said Max.

George pushed the suitcase into Maxwell’s hands. Max said, “I don’t think so buddy, you’ll carry your own baggage.” He was a pleasant looking young man with a full head of wavy red hair. “I have some bad news,” he said. “There might be a problem with Felicia. We’ll talk when we get home.”

George smiled and said, “Of course.” From the tunnel came the rumble of an approaching train.

“But I have good news as well,” continued Maxwell. With thumb and forefinger he held up a thick, gold key. It did not take a great deal of scrutiny to see that it was flat and smooth with no grooves or notches cut into it—a blank.

George smiled in approval. “What do you think Max? A key to the future?”

Maxwell beamed.

“Just as smooth and straight as an arrow,” said George. “Like the Six Train I’ll be catching.”

“No, we take the West End car,” said Maxwell. “The Six Train’s an express. It doesn’t stop here.”

At the far end of the platform a train emerged, screaming out of the tunnel like a black bullet. The entire station shook with an angry metallic gnashing. George pushed the suitcase against Maxwell’s leg, stood up and took several steps forward. Momentarily he hesitated, not over what to do so much as how, precisely, to carry it off. Immediately a revelation passed over him like soft heavenly rain, like an ancient genetic mystery decoding bright white daggers of truth into his mind. He threw out his arms and began a series of perfectly straight and erect cartwheels in the direction of the red line at the platform’s edge, his spinning limbs blurred like the spokes of a wheel. As if programmed he landed with both feet together on the painted red line. His toes gripped the edge of the platform. He bent his

knees, bellowed “I can fetch it Maxie!” and swan-dived neatly into the path of the barreling Six Train, thinking how fitting and proper it was, how perfectly appropriate, that an entity so small, a life so meager, should vanish in so vast and clamorous a racket.