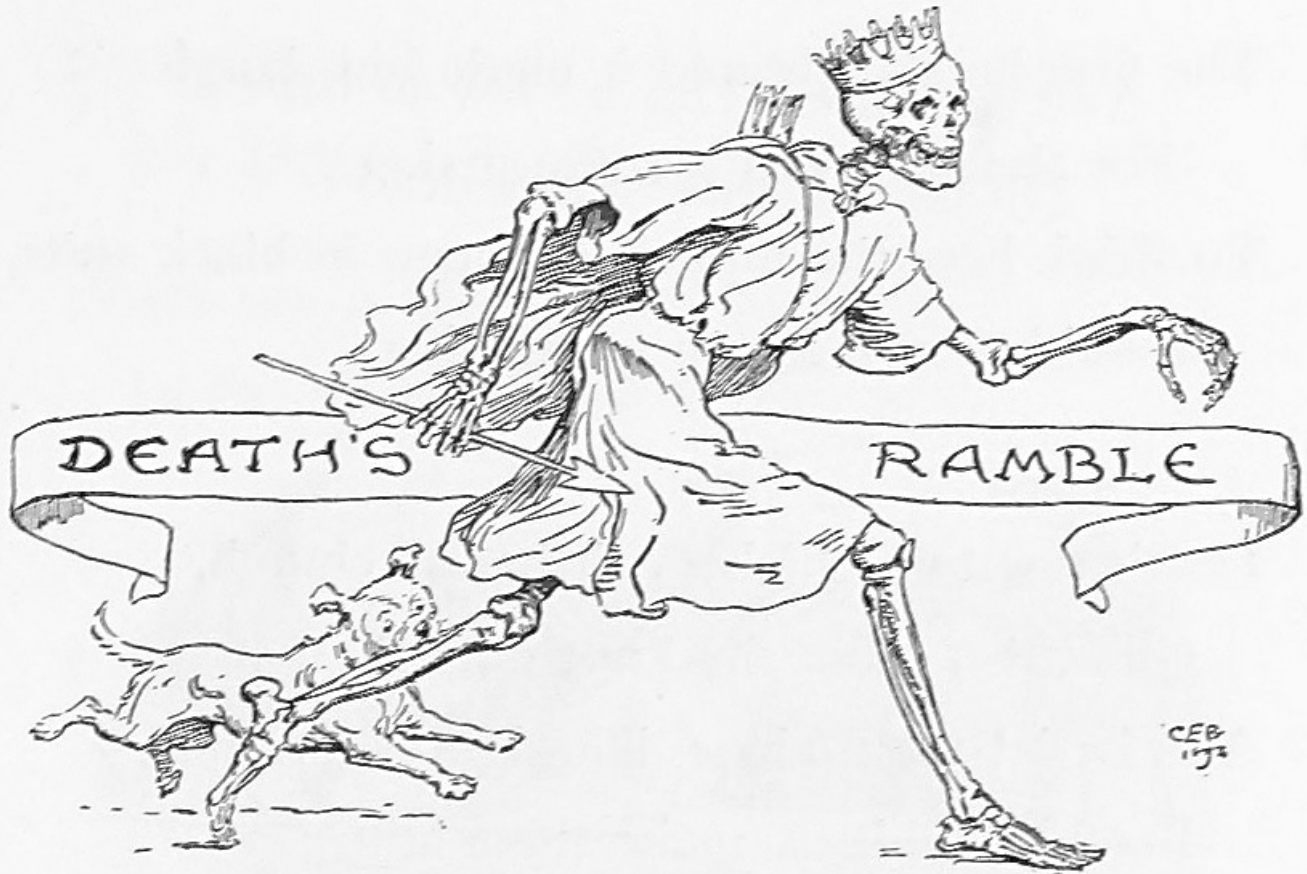


SHIRLEY

ISSUE FIVE

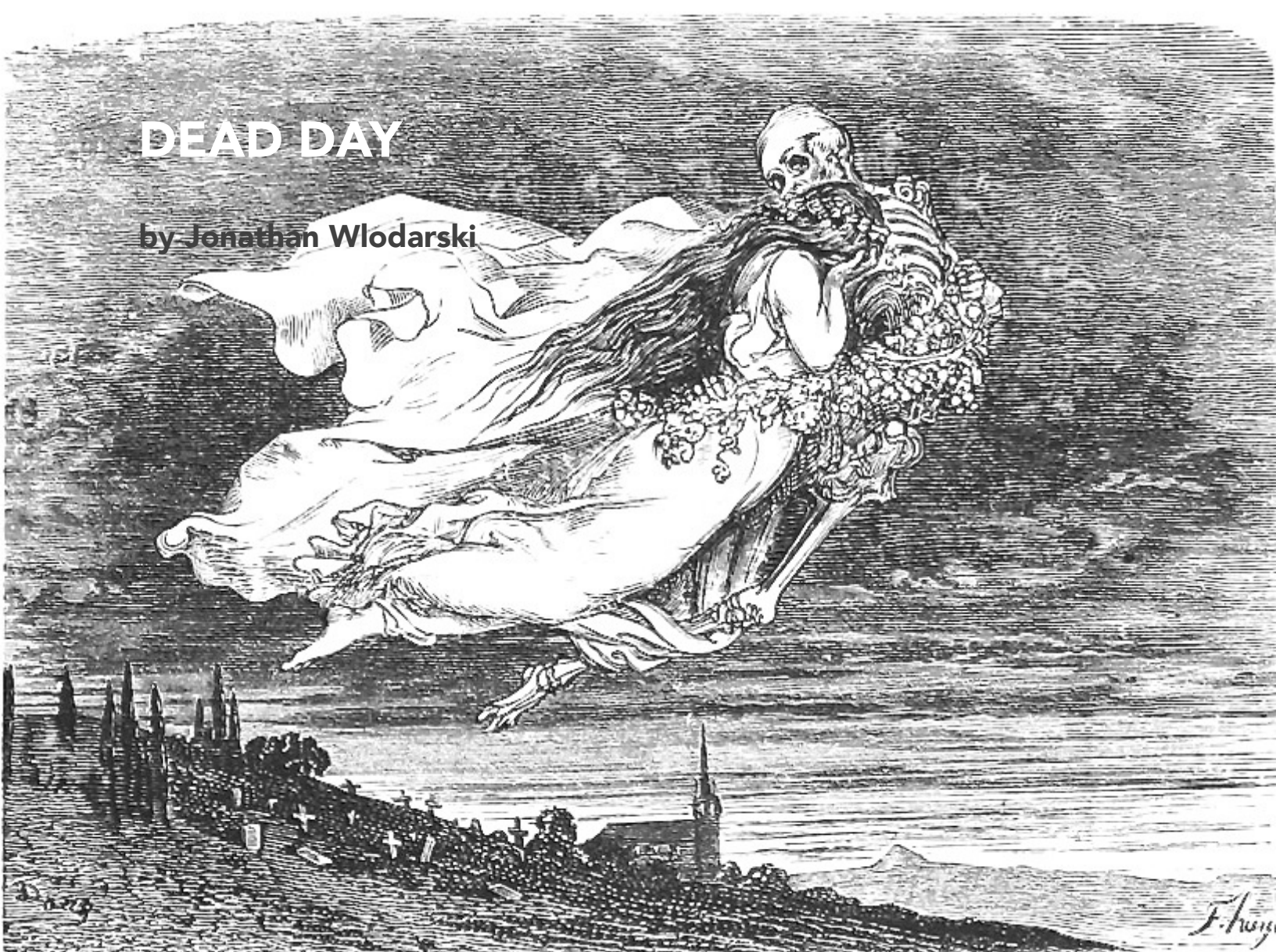


FEATURING STORIES BY:
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AUGUST 2016

DEAD DAY

by Jonathan Wlodarski



You're probably too young to remember Dead Day—I was only 6 when it happened. Maybe you weren't even born yet. I forget how old your profile said you are. 19?

20. Just had my birthday last month.

Oh, happy birthday, haha.

But definitely you have heard about it—at exactly 3:16pm on July 19th, 1999, every person in Ohio simultaneously had a visitation from a dead loved one for exactly 7 minutes.

I think I remember that, yeah.

I'm sure you've seen clips online, interviews with a slew of dazed Ohioans, or maybe that gas station security tape footage where everyone suddenly starts weeping and reaching out to touch the air in front of them, dropping their two-liters of pop and nudie magazines in shock. That gas station was two towns over from where I grew up. It burned down in an insurance-claim-related arson a couple years later, but people still drive out there to see it. Hallowed grounds, they think.

For years, we introduced ourselves on the first day of school by saying "I'm Julian and I saw my Grandma Rhonda on Dead Day." I'm not Julian, by the way. Have we not formally introduced ourselves yet?

We haven't, lol. I'm Jeremy.

I'm Brendan. These dating apps are weird. I feel like we know so much about each other but you didn't even know my name yet. Crazy, huh? Haha. I didn't see my grandma on Dead Day, either. My grandmas are both still alive. Didn't you say one of yours just died? That sucks. I don't know what I would if I lost my grannies. Such sweet old ladies.

Yeah. I miss her a lot, lol. :/

Aww, poor guy.

Everyone else in my family saw someone: my mom saw her grandfather, an old Eastern European man who whispered prayers to her in Polish. My dad saw his cancer-stricken college football coach, and they talked about the latest developments in the Cleveland sports world. My sister saw Lady Di. Marietta was 10 at the time, and totally obsessed with the ex-princess after her car crash.

Quite a few people saw celebrities, actually: JFK Jr. (three days dead! What a tragedy!), Frank Sinatra, Mother Teresa, a handful

of Marilyn Monroes: her visitations were described as luminous and flickering like celluloid film. Maybe you've even seen the episode Oprah did—my sister was on it, where she told everyone that Diana cried when she heard about her own funeral. People around town were so excited by Marietta's fame that she even got to be homecoming queen that year, to the chagrin of a few 17-year-olds, haha.

I guess I would have been pissed too lol. So who did you see? Now I'm excited.

I didn't see a celebrity, or a family member, or even a real person. Who does that leave? You're probably thinking that right now. Everyone asks that exact question whenever we talk about Dead Day.

I saw a fictional character: the Little Mermaid. From the fairy tale. The original one, where she kills herself to let her true love be happy. My mom used to read it to me every night, and I'd cry and cry as her blood spilled into the waves. My mother was convinced I was in love with her, and maybe I was. And now look at me—using a gay dating app and meeting you!

I guess the Little Mermaid was my first and only female love, haha. You said you're bi, right?

Yeah lol. Playing both sides ;)

I can't imagine loving a woman. I wouldn't even know what to do with any of those parts, haha. Not for me!

Anyway, at 3:16pm on Dead Day, I was at my babysitter's. I was pretending to have a tea party when the mermaid materialized before me. She flared into existence looking just like the illustrations in my storybook, vivid primary colors, clean lines, and simple geometric shapes.

She had her legs when she came to me, long, slender

rectangles that tapered into tiny isosceles triangles. She tried to walk toward me but winced with each step—the movies never get this part right, but the story says that each step she took with her human legs felt like she was walking on knives. I told her to stop walking and approached her instead.

I don't think I've ever seen so much sadness in one set of eyes, but I've also only met one person who's doomed to die again and again and again for love. She opened her mouth to speak, but the only thing that came out was a rasping groan. Of course she couldn't speak—the movies usually get that part right.

That's like all I remember about her tbh

I thought maybe if I could kiss her, because I really, truly loved her, that it might save her and she wouldn't have to die anymore, so I rushed forward to kiss her on her perfect-oval red lips, but I passed through them, through her. I turned around to face her again. She pointed to her heart, and then to mine, and shook her head slowly. Am I boring you? Sometimes I get carried away when I tell this story, haha. It's kind of an exciting story, though, but maybe not as exciting as the one you told me yesterday about surviving a plane crash. Did I already tell you that I had a nightmare about being in a plane last night? Your fault, haha.

You aren't boring me! This is exciting lol

Seeing her so sad and empty, silenced and separated from the sea, knowing that I was just another heartbreak that couldn't save her from staining the sea foam scarlet, I felt like I had to do something, y'know? So I snuck out of my babysitter's house—"house" might be too generous a word, perhaps "cottage" is more apt, one of those three-room affairs barely big enough for a kitchen table and a bed, a seasonal timeshare kind of thing that I found out her father got her with his mob

money—yes, the mafia is alive and well in Ohio,
thanks for asking, haha.

Lol. There's mafia in New York too...

Anyway, my babysitter's little yellow cottage was on a cliff that backed up directly to the mercury-laden waves of Lake Erie, and I somehow got it into my head that if I jumped off that cliff just right I could break myself open on a breaker wall and the Little Mermaid and I could be happy together, or at least she could get her fins back. My little six-year-old heart couldn't bear hurting her as I had, nor would it allow the story to end once more in blood, at least not her own.

Awww :(

I looked over my shoulder and there she was, watching me as I teetered and tottered in the tall grass at the edge of the precipice. The mermaid flashed me a smile and nodded encouragingly. I swear to this day her teeth were tiny black daggers and that her eyes were shiny red circles, little tide pools of hunger and blood, but I've checked the storybook a hundred times and I must have made it up because the artwork never shows her teeth and her eyes are green like seaweed. That tattoo I showed you that you said was sexy on my thigh is actually the artwork from the storybook, haha.

Oh yeah lol that tattoo is pretty cool!

Thanks, haha! But you probably figured that out already. Needless to say, I convinced myself to dive off the edge, but I didn't get hurt, thank god. Wet and cold a little but no blood spilled. When my head bobbed to the top of the lake, she was gone.

Oh my god!

Y'know, dozens of people reported that their visitations persuaded them to commit suicide, not just mine. The hospitals here in Ohio tried to lock all of us up, diagnose us with schizophrenia and stuff, but doctors from other hospitals, more experimental places, they got us real help. I still see my old doctor sometimes, because sometimes I get too sad if I remember how I didn't get to save the mermaid, and I try to drown myself in the Ohio River or the Portage Lakes, but it never works, thank goodness, haha.

Wait, what?

My doctor? Her name is Anita Slater.

No, no. Not that. The...other thing you said. About jumping in the lake and stuff.

Oh! My doctor said it's fine. You probably have heard of her. She was the one who went on all the morning talk shows and said it was impossible that everyone within state lines suffered a unique delusion simultaneously, and she's the one who testified in court when those allegations came out that Dead Day happened because the Ohio General Assembly couldn't reach an agreement on something called the Spirits and Visitation Bill, which caused a seven-minute legality lapse.

Umm...what? Are you sure you're okay?

It's like that time all the national parks shut down, but with ghosts, haha, at least that's what some people think. I don't know what your stance is on spirits, but ever since I turned 18 I've been an active member of the Visitation Party, campaigning to legalize ghosts, which I do think are really out there. I hope one day we can lift the ban on otherworldly encounters

permanently, not just for 7 minutes by accident like
on Dead Day. Wouldn't it be great if we could all
talk to our departed loved ones again?

I think it's really important to stay in touch with
our pasts because it can teach us so much about
ourselves! My dad decided to get back into coaching
after Dead Day and now he's leading our high
school to a state championship!

And I would probably not have known about
my mental illness if the Little Mermaid hadn't
shown me it was there—that's how my doctor
says I have to talk about it, like it's always
inside me. I guess it is, haha.

So I guess that answers my question, one dead
person I'd like to talk to, haha. What about you?

Are you still there? I hope I haven't scared you
off, haha.

Hello?

Hello?

A SKATING TEAM COMPETES

by Megan Tabaque



Angela is the dumbest.

Ashley R. is the most annoying.

Ashley B. is anorexic.

Amanda is the saddest which is understandable.

Jessie is the cutest.

Fat Heather has the highest jumps.

Skinny Heather is the nicest.

Leila has the strongest stroke.

Gina's butt is big.

Stacey's legs are the best.

Keiko has the softest hands.

Nicole is gone.

And Ashley L. is the tallest, but that's not why she's captain.

I don't smile.

The dressing room isn't really a dressing room. It's a locker room. But it's a dressing room today because of the competition. The Sunsations go on in one hour and all fourteen of us are varying levels of naked and mascaraed. There are lockers and

benches, and posters of Wayne Gretzky that are faded and rolling up off their tack like they're cold. Put a sweater on, Wayne.

Our team captain Ashley L. had a boob spurt after we already had our fittings, so she's busting out of her sequins and there's nothing Miss Nadine can do about it except avert her eyes. Miss Nadine says put a sweater on, Ashley L! Ashley L. does what Miss Nadine says.

In the corner is a big open-mouthed trashcan next to a row of snack machines that are mostly empty except for old gum and expired Bugles. The hockey players say they don't like eating Bugles because they're shaped like little dicks and only fags eat those. One time I saw Vince Mahoney eating Bugles by himself in the Zamboni garage. He called me a fag and ran away leaving the Bugles on the floor. The next day, I saw the Zamboni clearing the ice and the bag of Bugles scooting along in front, caught in the brushes, crinkling in terror.

Vince Mahoney likes the cheddar Bugles better than regular.

The dressing room that isn't really a dressing room smells like hockey player balls and wet rubber. I haven't ever smelled a hockey player's balls, but Ashley L. says this is exactly what they smell like. The hockey players aren't here right now though. Ashley L. says they're all probably at the Thirsty Marlin buying virgin margaritas for their slut girlfriends. Then Ashley B. says the Thirsty Marlin doesn't card, so, maybe some of them are not virgins. Then Ashley G. says, the drinks or the girlfriends? Then all the Ashley's cackle like giraffes and apply their lipstick. I pretend they have black tongues.

The Thirsty Marlin has a special where if you can eat a 5lbs. hamburger, you get another 5 lbs. hamburger for free. Vince Mahoney says he did it once and then barfed all of it up in bed that same night. I don't believe him.

Vince Mahoney likes cheddar on his hamburger.

The Sunsations go on in 45 minutes now. Our captain, Ashley L. sniffs the air and gags. She says the hockey players rub their balls all over the lockers like dogs. That's how they can tell whose is whose. And that's why it smells like this. It smells bad. Maybe she is right this time. We never use the lockers. We use the benches. We spread our towels out and cover them in neat rows of pins, powders, hairspray, and false eyelashes. We use a lot of hairspray to make our heads look smooth and aerodynamic. Miss Nadine doesn't like fly-aways. She says to spray until it crunches. We're only allowed to buy Aquanet in the aerosol. Last competition, fat Heather told Miss Nadine that she learned that aerosol is bad for the environment and asked could she by the pumpable Suave spray instead? Miss Nadine said sure she could but she'd have to quit the team because she was being gutless and did she want to be gutless or did she want to fucking win? Then fat Heather started to cry and said never mind and skinny Heather patted her on the back and said there there, other Heather, there there.

Miss Nadine was trying to quit smoking that week. She failed.

Despite all the hairspray today, the lockers still smell. They are spray painted blue and yellow, but you can tell they used to be dead-beige. It is 30 minutes before competition now and the two Heathers are taking turns putting each other's lipstick on. The color we use is called Swoon.

The captain, Ashley L., cuts her little finger on the corner of one of the old lockers, where the paint had rusted into a spike and she screams a curse. Fuck! Ashley B. sees the blood and faints into Ashley R. which causes Ashley R. to stab herself in the eye with her mascara wand and scream a curse too. Shit! Ashley R. calls Ashley B. a freak for fainting on her and punches her in the braid. Then Miss Nadine points her unlit cigarette at us and yells at everyone to shut up and be adults.

Everyone shuts up and tries.

Everyone's lipstick is applied now and everyone's lips are shut tight.

Miss Nadine stalks out of the room and yells at the Zamboni guy for a lighter.

We have 20 minutes before competition now. This is usually the butterflies begin. I don't drink any water before competition even though we are supposed to. I don't want to pee or barf by accident because of nerves. Ashley L. never gets nervous. She tells us so. No one helps her bandage her finger. She does it herself with a scowl using the first aid kit on the wall by the garbage. Skinny Heather walks over to start patting Ashley L.'s back but Ashley L. shoves her away and calls her an idiot. Skinny Heather can't help but be nice. I don't know why.

—What doesn't kill us makes us stronger. —Is your finger gonna scar?

—So what if it does?

—It's just like sleeping beauty.

—A finger prick.

—Find a way to use it.

—Doesn't sleeping beauty die?

—Yeah!

—Maybe?

—Grin and bear it.

—Focus, guys.

—Flowers are pinned on the left side, Gina.

—Sorry.

—Remember - Big eyes, bright brows.

—Smile like you mean it.

—Like your mouth is made of sunshine.

—Tall spines, like pines.

—Don't stick your butt out when you stroke forward. —What if I have a big butt?

—Then skate like Gina.

—Tuck it.
—Tuck it.
—Tuck it under tight!
—No slouching.
—And no grouching.
—She’s talking to you, Giggles.
—...
—Keep pace!
—Keep time!
—It’s called synchro not STINKchro, bitches.
—Yeah!
—Bitches!
—Bitches.
—Bitches!
—Let’s win.

Miss Nadine doesn’t hear us say bitches. Miss Nadine is often somewhere else smoking a cigarette. Like right now. When Miss Nadine smiles, it doesn’t look like her mouth is made of sunshine, it looks like her mouth is made of vintage scrabble tiles. Ashley L. spends a lot of time with Miss Nadine working on formations. Ashley L. smokes cigarettes too. She uses whiteners though, so she still has a sunshine mouth. When Miss Nadine and Ashley L. smile at each other it looks like that scene in Snow White where the evil witch is giving Snow White the apple and her cracked, wooden teeth are all slimy with desire. Miss Nadine loves Ashley L. I can tell.

Miss Nadine’s daughter died in a car accident five years ago.

Miss Nadine comes back and tells us we have 15 minutes until we’re on. Everyone flutters to their bags and grabs their skate guards and puts on one last layer of hairspray. We scuttle around like a school of fish drowning in air, our sequins catching the sterile fluorescent lights. I blink a few times without moving. Before we skate, we always have to practice our suicide off ice. It’s Miss Nadine’s signature move where two lines of skaters drive diagonally into each other at top speed and thread through each other, every other body passing through the eye of a needle with just enough room not to lock blades. Ashley L. yells at us to get in order to practice threading and we do what she says. After we’re done she yells again to get us in order for the top of the routine. While I’m walking to the back of the line she grabs my tiny biceps and squeezes hard. She clenches her brilliant teeth at me in a grin, nods, and smacks my butt. We start walking to the rink. The smell of balls dissipates and it starts to smell like stale winter as we march to the rink.

When I don’t smile in practice, Ashley L. whispers to just pretend like I just had sex and then calls me an idiot. I don’t know how to do that. I don’t like smiling. Ashley L. started calling me Giggles when I told her that and then everyone at the rink

started calling me Giggles too. Miss Nadine. Mister Bill. Mister Bruce and Miss Margaret. The Zamboni guy and the skate rental girl. My mother thinks it's sweet but I don't. The only person who doesn't call me Giggles too is Vince Mahoney.

Vince Mahoney called me other things though.

Amanda never smiles either but nobody tells her she has to. Both of her parents are dead from freak aneurysms so she gets a pass.

I didn't know what an aneurysm was until Amanda.

It is now 10 minutes before competition. We are waiting behind the gate, huddled against the glass in our line. Keiko's mom takes a picture of us from the stands without announcing it. Only the Ashley's and I are looking. Keiko has her forehead against the boards and is breathing a fog angel onto the panels.

Part of what makes us a team is how we feel about each other. How Ashley L. the team captain helps Miss Nadine take care of us and builds camaraderie by reminding us to smile and be positive and strong for ourselves and for each other. Except Ashley L. isn't a very good team captain. In fact, I think I hate Ashley L. I want to tell her parents that she smokes cigarettes with Miss Nadine. I want to tell her parents about how she calls me a stupid name and talks about sex too much. And that I've seen her talking with her face really close to Mister Bill's in the penalty box before practice a bunch of times. But Ashley L.'s parents are never at practice or anything. I don't even know what they look like. Mister Bill owns the rink and has been Ashley L.'s coach forever. He has a salt and pepper mustache and wears Calvin Klein jumpsuits. I liked his daughter Nicole, but she stopped skating with us last year. Nicole and me liked all the same music and hated the Gloria Estefan medley Miss Nadine picked out for competition last year. I miss Nicole.

Mister Bill is going through a divorce.

The announcer says our name out loud on the microphone and a man in a polo shirt pulls the gate open for us. I straighten my spine and tuck my butt under as we pump onto the ice. The butterflies in my stomach reel and I can see Mister Bill's hopeful face looking down at us from the stands. He winks at someone. I get in position with my right arm long and extended and my left arm curled around my chin. I do not smile. I look down.

I hate competition. I hate all the people staring at us through the scuffed glass. I hate how cold it is. How fast my dress rides up my butt after the music starts. I hate the butterflies. I hate being the smallest end girl. We have to line up tallest in the middle to shortest on either end for the kick line. Jessie is the other one and she's much cuter than me. She smiles without trying. Like she doesn't have to think about it. She just puts her lipstick on and says, I love this color!, and smiles through the whole routine. I hate her, but I feel bad about it. Not the way I feel about hating Ashley L., but the feeling is still there.

I hate every single hair on every single girls' shiny, hairsprayed, flammable head including my own. It is now 15 minutes before we go on this ice. I wait until the last minute to put my eyelashes on because wearing them feels like tying metal sinkers to my eyes for fishing. What can eyelids fish for?

In my dreams, we wouldn't be competing right now. In my dreams I rip off everyone's fake eyelashes, one at a time, real slow, and paste them to my forearms with lash glue. By the time I'm finished, my forearms are hairy like a werewolf. Then I consume all my teammates in a ferocious fever. There is blood everywhere. Their blood tastes like rice cakes and nail polish remover. And the Gloria Estefan medley that Miss Nadine picked gets stuck on a loop and Gloria just keep singing "Feel the Beat of the Rhythm of the Night" over and over and over and I laugh because in that dream the rhythm of the night is ME and everyone feels me and I can finally smile.

Instead, we start the routine and I move through it like a drone. I hold hands with Keiko in most of our formations and even though she doesn't grip tight, she squeezes a little harder sometimes to wake me up, to make me pay attention. We complete the opening dance sequence, then the footwork. I'm especially good at the footwork. Choctaw, pick, mohawk, pick, cross right, cross left, mazurka, flourish left arm, lunge.

When we get to the pinwheel, it is pretty good, except dumb Angela starts off on the wrong foot and stays off for the whole move. In the middle of the Conga section, I imagine I am a wolf again and Keiko yanks my arm into the suicide. We pump our right legs hard, holding hands, rounding the far corner of the rink like magnetic marbles. I can see Ashley L. leading her line on the opposite of the ice. Her smile is explosive and her eyes fixed at center ice, the point of contact. Our trains meet the nexus point and you can hear the people in the stands holding their breath, even over Gloria's congas.

First Ashley L, then Ashley B., then Leila, thread Gina, Stacey, Ashley R., Skinny Heather, and then there's a snag in the thread.

Keiko scrapes to a stop and I crash into her. She squeezes my hand harder but doesn't pull me anywhere. Someone screams like a kettle whistle and the music stops. All 14 of us stare in different directions, our sequins catching the light and scattering it like a jar of spilled pennies.

Angela skates off the ice like a rocket.

Ashley R. follows after.

Ashley B. sees the blood and faints.

Amanda catches Ashley B. before she falls to the ice and buries her head in her hair.

Jessie has both hands over her mouth.

Gina's mouth is open like the garbage.

Stacey is asking us what do we do what do we do what do we do?

Leila looks up at the stands and collapses.

Keiko covers her eyes with one of her soft hands and keeps mine in the other.

I think about Nicole, but Nicole is gone.

Skinny Heather is on the ice on all fours looking up at Fat Heather.

Fat Heather is screaming hysterical in a pool of blood that pulses bigger with each passing second.

Ashley L. is team captain and thinks about what to do.

She looks up and sees Mister Bill running down to the ice. Miss Nadine running behind him. Without hesitating, she skates through the red pool, spreading thin across the ice's surface, freezing into red popsicle skin, and kneels down with hurt Heather. Ashley L. brings hurt Heather's head to her giant chest and tells her to breathe. She wraps her arm around her sweetly and takes hold of her left hand. Ashley L. says Shhhh. Ashley L. says don't look. Breathe first. I'm here. Don't look don't look. You're gonna be okay. I'm right here. I've got you, Heather. Don't be scared. Close your eyes. Just pretend like you just had a bad fall and nothing more.

Ashley L. doesn't call her an idiot.

Ashley L. rips the top layer of her skirt from her dress and wraps it as tight as she can around Heather's thigh. Those of us who stay watch through our fingers. Her leg stops pumping blood like a fountain and the expansion of the red pool slows. Mister Bill and Miss Nadine are on the ice now in their sneakers. They've got towels and their clipboards and Miss Nadine yells at us to get off the ice now now now.

We do what Miss Nadine says. We all glide away toward the gate and step off onto the rubber. Ashley L. stays by Heather's side, her pantyhose soaking up blood all the while.

I'm watching from behind the boards now. Through the scuffed glass. All of us are lined up, foreheads pressed, hot breath summoning a small army of fog angels to watch over Heather from the glass. Skinny Heather is in stands with her mother crying, hysterical. She tries to explain to her mom but she can't breathe right. Her diaphragm is wild. My blade, she says, I missed my thread, we hit, our blades locked, we couldn't, my heel got stuck, I didn't want to I didn't want to get too far behind, so I yanked, I yanked and yanked, she said, I didn't know it was her leg and not her skate, I was stuck in her leg, mom. I was stuck in her leg and not her skate. Skinny Heather had opened up hurt Heather's artery. Skinny Heather couldn't stop crying.

The paramedics come in through the Zamboni garage. When they open it up, I can see Vince Mahoney hiding out behind the Zamboni tank. The paramedics make a tourniquet and take hurt Heather off the ice in a stretcher. I see Vince Mahoney's head

follow them out from where he hides. He looks back at me from his hiding spot and says with his eyes--what the fuck--and disappears.

Ashley L. is standing now on the other side of the rink. Mister Bill has his arm around her and Miss Nadine has her hand on her shoulder. Ashley L. isn't smiling neon this time, but she's smiling something. Mister Bill pats her on the back and her mascara starts to run. The laces of her right skate are speckled red. I follow the blood up her entire right side with my eyes, up to where it seeps into her torn skirt, into the seams like carnation dye.

The competition is cancelled.

As we walk back to the dressing room, Ashley R. whispers a curse. Ashley B. tells Ashley R. she's being insensitive and whispers a curse back at her. Before I sit to take my skates off, I rip off my fake eyelashes and press each one into my forearm. Ashley L. walks into the room like a hero, sits right across from me and doesn't say a word. I look at her without hating her. I start to unlace my skates and see her stained boots across the way from mine. I think about Vince Mahoney and wonder what it would feel like to do it with him in the Zamboni garage. I try to imagine we just did, and smile.

PERMANENT VISITOR

by Laura I. Miller



Fitful dreams—things like cars crashing and a murdered chef—are the only reason you awake. Your therapist calls it Level 1 Splitting, but you insist that the mind offers no escape from itself.

You don't see it right away, you only hear its clattering—like a wooden spoon caught in a turbine. You walk carefully into the living room, and it continues sitting five-feet long and terrible in your favorite armchair, rubbing its hind leg against its thorax. It

shows no interest in you—its Tyrannosaurus forearms hang dainty and immobile, its bubble-wrap eyes shimmer white and lifeless.

One knows instinctually when one's home is threatened. Chemicals reconfigure themselves without asking one's approval. And so you brandish bamboo skewers and stainless steel tongs in hopes of creating an atmosphere of disarray. You shout obscenities—you *bloodless scab*; you *miserable peckerwood*; you *parasitic turd*. Your therapist calls it: Level 2 Immature Defense.

Next, you spray citrus droplets on its opalescent shell, devilishly, thinking they will melt its exoskeleton into lace (Acting Out). The drops land affably, pockmarking the insect's gray-gold exterior, but otherwise have no effect.

The things you'll do to protect your way of living. Who knows how far it may have gone. But rage is a mauve room with no windows, and you can only stay inside so long. When these things happen, a certain measure of grace is required. A certain swallowing of one's dignity.

Time passes. And this is what you do: You microwave a cup of coffee and grab a stray magazine. You sit in your favorite armchair. Yes, the insect's twiglike lap needles beneath your butt. Yes, its thick saliva mottles your hair. Yes, it smells like lemon-scented death. But that's what happens—what did you expect?—that's the way it is. Classic Stage 3 Repression. You're lucky if you make it this far. You can even see Stage 4 Altruism bleating in the foothills like a sheep.

Whether or not you advance past this point, you should know that this is permanent; you need to understand that antenna hair and mandible pincers will forever clot your nervous system. The insect's forearms (you think it's some kind of desert grasshopper) may droop a little against the armchair's worn leather, but its eyes will remain fierce with kaleidoscopic inhumanity. You now harbor a dark intruder that squats in the recess, threatening invasion.

Damn it all, of course the dirtbag bloodsucker came while you were sleeping—when you didn't see how it got in. You don't even come out of this knowing where you're vulnerable.



WHATEVER THE CONDITION

by Jennifer Gravley

Everyone came back differently. Bob Morris came back the next morning, sitting at his spot at the breakfast table when his wife flipped the light. He made bacon and eggs with cheese for her and their son, and they ate them. He dressed and went to his job at the bank and attended his own funeral two days later. He said looking into the casket was like looking in a mirror. Judy Chandler didn't come back for three months and then simply sat on her heels in the flower patch by the bay window. Neither her grandbaby toddling nearby nor the moon shutting itself off on a night sleeted with rain could move her to rise. Sue Bradley talked but didn't leave the house. Her husband said she felt like a person when he hugged her, and all the widows whose husbands had died

before the coming back started steamed at their large-print book clubs and bridge nights.

The coming back started after my mother had died, so I returned home and waited with the bitter widows to see if the magic would turn retroactive. The weekly newspaper tried to photograph every ghost or ghost-person or person-ghost. The vocabulary was a living, changing thing, with the invincible young holding fast to the terms we'd all lived with before and the ones who'd come back and could speak fighting to reclaim slurs that rose up quick on the tongues of those who grieved in too-empty houses or slept to the sounds of everyone they'd ever loved still breathing. The rest of us struggled with the terms even we knew no longer fit, the words sticking in our mouths like heavy half-birthing blossoms. The photographs never turned out, but within a month the paper went daily with the increase in letters to the editor and the mushroomed appetite for human interest stories.

My sister worked at the hospital and witnessed a new range of behavior she didn't have the vocabulary for either. Old men on their sick beds threatened their middle-aged sons with hauntings so severe they left the facility with referrals for anti-anxiety treatment. Young mothers with cancer fretted over whether they would come back substantial enough to braid their daughters' hair or rub their husbands' penises with enough vigor to preclude a second marriage. It was only after the first violent car accident that it became clear one could come back as one was or as one was at the very moment of death. Everyone agonized the possibilities, but in our most secret of hearts we all wanted our own back whatever the condition.

People I hadn't seen in two decades studied me from one grocery aisle over, looking for the rise and fall or pulse that showed I was among them before approaching. A few with sons or daughters who'd moved away were disappointed. Who was I, by living, to rob them of the hope that those who were too good to live in the town they'd been raised in might come back one last time? I went out as infrequently as I could, but when I did I bought little things I thought would please her if she did come back—a yellow tomato, a single rose-shaped button, shoelaces the color of a crayoned sky.

When my father and I left the kitchen after dinner the night I chopped the yellow tomato into a salad, my mother was sitting on the floor. She had been gone five months. I had been back two. I stepped around her and sat on the couch.

My father went back toward the bedrooms and returned with a box. "It's your medicine," he said and called out the names on the bottles of vitamins and supplements which had done nothing for her. We had thrown out all the real medicine.

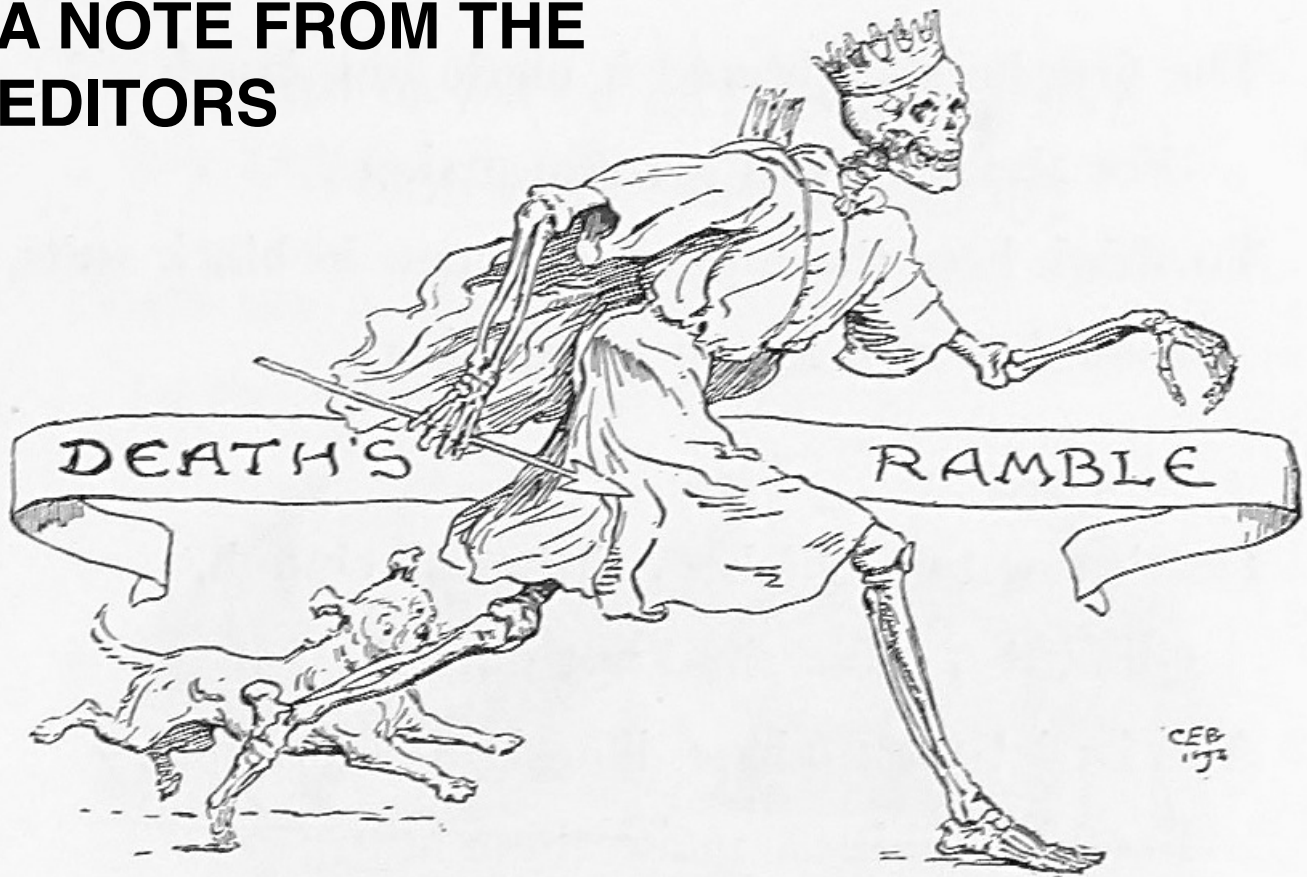
He held the box out to my mother as if she could still swallow.

My mother did not take the box. Her mouth was open, full of cancer. She got up and faced my father, who stood with the box in his hands, saying nothing. She

swung uselessly at him, seemingly as hard as she could, but he was already stumbling away from her.

I waited, watching from the couch as the bottles of vitamins and supplements fell to the floor between them. I had the feeling none of us would ever move them and they would expire there. I wanted my mother to hit me. I wanted to stand up and offer myself to her. I wanted to believe I could give her this one last thing.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS



Sometimes a theme emerges on its own. In this issue, four writers explore death, youth, and what returns whether we want it to or not.

Thank you for reading,
CB & LP