Jim stood in front of the mirror, the bathroom faucet leaked and synched with his breathing. The kids at school had talked about the game in the schoolyard.

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Cover: Boo Bear is all dressed up. By Brice Maiurro. Above: Willow loves Middlemarch. (All photos by Jen Kolic unless otherwise noted.)
You turn the light off in the bathroom and stare at the mirror. Next you would chant the name of a deceased person 100 times out loud while you stared at the mirror. Kids at school had been chanting “Emma Miller” in the restrooms at school. She was a 12 year old who had died last year during winter break when her family went on a road trip and their van slipped on some black ice. She was ejected from the back window while getting a drink from the cooler. Rumors flew around the school, children claimed that her neck had snapped and her hands had held onto her soda. When they played Emma Miller her ghost was always described with her head limp resting on her shoulder, her blonde hair wet from the snow she landed in, and an unopened soda clenched tight in her fist.

Fear of meeting the dead made Jim want to turn on the lights and run out of the bathroom, but curiosity kept the door closed and his voice from trembling too much, he began to chant.

“E-e-mma Miller.”

Nothing changed, the room was no darker than it was before, the leaky faucet kept its rhythm and nothing crawled out of the mirror. Jim felt silly for fearing a name. He kept chanting, easily, playfully, tauntingly.

“Emma Miller, Emma Miller, Emma Miller, Emma Miller, Emma Miller, Emma Miller, Emma Miller, Emma Miller.”

A quick stop to catch his breath and Jim kept saying her name over and over again. He got to 40, his heart picked up. Almost halfway and the only thing that had changed was the way the name sounded to Jim, It was starting to turn to gibberish the more he said Emma's name.

“Emmmallur, emmmallur, emmmallur, emmmallur, emmmallur, emmmallur, emmmallur, emmmallur.”

Four times left, his eyes had adjusted to the dark and Jim could see the faintest outline of his own head in the mirror, he strained hoping for more things to become clear. But nothing changed, the room was no darker than it was before, the leaky faucet kept its rhythm and still nothing had crawled out of the mirror. Slowly he tried to keep uttering out the last four chants, but by this time Jim could barely understand what he was trying to sputter out.

“Emmlurrr, emmlurrrrr, emmlurrr, emmlurrrrr.”

It was done, Jim had done the impossible. He had played the game to the end and had not seen a single ghost, he flicked the light switch. But the lights didn’t come on.

Struck with fear Jim went to open the bathroom door, and that’s when he heard footsteps. They dragged towards the bathroom, making a muffled scrape against the wood floor with each heavy step. With a quick hand Jim locked the bathroom door hoping whatever was on the other side would be held back by the small bolt in the door. The handle rattled from the outside, Jim tried to scream for help in the dark, but the words wouldn’t come out.

Jim shrieked, “EMMURRR, EMMURR.”

The door handle kept being rattled, so hard that the door itself was starting to move around in its frame. Jim kept trying to say anything that made sense but real words escaped him, tears rolled down his face, his shirt drowned in sweat. He pressed his body against the door hoping to keep whatever was on the other side away. The door made a loud crack and started to give way, Jim wasn’t strong enough, his small body was pushed back by the door, light poured into the bathroom. Jim screamed.

A. A. Becerril is a comedian and writer based in Denver, CO.
Live by the Sword
by Matt Yeager

When he regained consciousness, James was confused. Not at the beating he had received, when the guard took a walk and he found himself cornered by several other prisoners he had immediately understood what was happening and why, and though he had been afraid there had also been a sense of relief. In his many years as a guest of different prison systems the threat of violence had always been like a hideous Jack in the Box where you just waited for it to spring once the music stopped. When the violence actually came it was a small reprieve from the near constant worry about when that weasel would go pop.

The beating wasn’t a surprise. The fact that he was still alive after however was unexpected and he laid there for a moment as his body reported to his brain various aches and pains.

In his 43 years of life more than half of those were spent on the Inside of a jail or prison as was spent on the Outside of it. James knew some might pity that fact, but he didn’t mind. In his early twenties he was sent Inside for a crime he could barely remember anymore where he discovered he had a talent that had never presented itself before. James had been making a shank out of bed springs and duct tape and was concentrating hard on the task when his cellmate remarked that he had a real knack for it.

And he did. While it was odd to discover he was good at making improvised weapons he also felt proud to find something to be good at. Didn’t matter what you needed it for, word got around that if you needed a weapon James was the go to guy for it. He found he could turn nearly anything into a weapon, he could take a toothbrush handle or a pen and could make deadly in a snap. He’d made weapons from nails, duct tape, can lids, eyeglass frames, plastic utensils, and in some of his more inventive moods when he wanted to challenge himself, a bar of soap, a handful of Jolly Ranchers, and the plastic case from a stick of deodorant.

He found he could turn nearly anything into a weapon…

On the Outside he was no one with no friends and no sense of purpose. The world only confused and angered him at equal turns. On the Inside he still had few friends, except his talent was well known enough that while he belonged to no group every group had need of his skill. Outside, he was pathetic. Inside he was respected for his abilities and as an old man of the system. The last time they let him out he committed a crime just to get sent right back to the one place where he felt the world made sense.

James knew that eventually the day would come that someone would get stuck or sliced or hacked or ripped or punctured or impaled or stabbed with a weapon he had crafted and instead of going after the person holding the makeshift blade they would turn their anger towards him for making it in the first place. When the beating came he assumed that he’d finally reached the end of his long weapon crafting career. Waking up and discovering that he had just been kicked around was a shock. Mercy was one of those little freedoms that people typically left behind when they walked through the prison door.

As he took stock of his situation he sat up and saw that sometime during the beating they had taken off a shoe and sock from his right foot, which seemed strange. His foot throbbed with pain and he looked at it to see what was wrong. They had tattooed him. That was not strange in and of itself, involuntary tattoos
were one of many ways of retribution, though
typically they chose someplace visible such as the
forehead or hand and not something as easily covered
as a foot.

Scrawled into his skin on the top of his foot
was a rough image of what James thought was a
shark. It was a rushed job and looked like something a
young child might draw. Just an outline of sharp
angles, a large back fin and a mouth full of triangle
teeth. Usually the tattoos done inside the prison were
in blue or black ink due to the ink stolen out of pens
that were available. This one was done in a bright red
aside from its small black eyes.

He groaned and stood up. For a second, he
thought about going to the infirmary but that would
raise more questions than he had answers for, and
since nothing felt broken he counted himself lucky.
Instead he brushed himself off, found his missing
shoe and walked back to his cell. He never finished
the sweeping job he was assigned to do but he knew
no one would notice. His cell mate Sam sat on his
own bed playing solitaire. Sam was another old man
of the system, older than James, his white hair and
beard a snarled mess. Where James was good with
making weapons, Sam’s talent was his ability to get
along with everyone from guards to the cruelest
bastards in the place. Usually he went along with
James as a look out while he did the weapon crafting
and took part of whatever profit James made.

“You don’t look good.” Sam said.
“I guess not everyone is happy with my
services. Look what they did to my foot!” James
replied.

“Huh, that’s a new one. Never saw a man get
a fish drawn on him. You going to give them a
receipt?” Sam asked. The question was really if James
was planning revenge, certainly enough people owed
him a favor to make it simple to carry out if so.

He just shook his head and said. “Nah, was
bound to happen sooner or later. I get them back and
I’ll spend the rest of my time looking over my
shoulder. Not worth it.”

Sam shrugged and turned his attention back to
his game. James laid down and wondered who he
might be able to trade with to get some decent
strength pain killers.

That evening he woke up in a world of pain. It
felt like he was being stabbed in his right foot. He
reached down not sure what he could do but needing
to find the source of the pain. As he touched his foot
it stopped and went away. He laid back down in the
dark and wondered if it was a muscle cramp or if the
tattoo he had been given was infected.

As he fell back to sleep it occurred to him that
it had felt like the biting of a several small, sharp
teeth.

The next morning, he woke up and again felt
the stabbing pain come and go. Quickly he kicked
away the sheet and looked down at the tattoo.

It had moved.

James was certain the tattoo had been on the
top of his foot. Now the head of the shark was above
the knob of his ankle with its mouth stretched wide.

It had also changed.

The tattoo yesterday had been the sketching of
a young child’s idea of a shark. Now it was longer,
larger, and more detailed than the day before. Now it
looked more like a caricature of a shark, with
predatory black eyes and rows of teeth visible behind
the ones in the front.

James shook his head and wiped his hand
down his face. He had taken a few blows to the head
the day before. That was probably all. He just wasn’t
remembering the details right. Then he stood and
realized that though he could feel the cold concrete
floor under his left foot, his right foot was numb. He
stomped it up and down a few times and still felt
nothing. It was as though his foot was full of
Novocain.
His mind spun. He could call for a guard but then what? Explain that he had been tattooed against his will and that the tattoo was now moving around? He’d be in the ding wing with the other lunatics before sundown. James thought he could wait a day to see if it would get any better.

During his work duties the stabbing pains occurred again. The occurrences lasted for only a few seconds and would go away quickly though it left behind a growing trail of numbness it its wake. James took a peek when he went to the bathroom and nearly cried when he saw the tattoo. The shark had moved again and was now long enough that the tail stretched to his ankle while the open mouth was nearly on his knee. He tried to keep up appearances until the end of his work shift and then he limped back to his cell.

The cell was empty as he sat on his cot and stripped off his pants to see what the tattoo had become. The shark was large enough now that the mouth of the beast went all the way around the circumference of his leg and the nose was resting on his upper thigh. The tattoo was now even more detailed and was more of a realistic sketch portrait of a crimson shark than a tattoo. As he stared down into the shark’s cold black eyes James noticed that the skin on his leg was starting to ripple. The dorsal fin actually rose up stretched the skin of his leg out, and as James watched the head of the shark bulged, then it bit down to the now familiar stabbing pain then opened its mouth again.

Panic took hold of James. There was a corner where he had stashed some of the weapons he had created. He frantically dug them all out, spilling contraband over the floor of the cell but oblivious to anything but the tattoo. Searching quickly, he took a sharpened toothbrush with a duct taped handle, raised it high and jammed it down into the eye of the shark. Doing so he felt a sharp pain, and in his panic he thought that it was the shark taking another bite. He pulled the toothbrush out and stabbed the shark over and over as blood ran down his leg.

He kept stabbing, arm pistoning up and down, until the tattoo was unrecognizable. Then his fingers became too weak to grip the toothbrush any longer and it rolled off his cot into a pile of the other weapons he had made. James saw and knew that he should really hide the weapons before a CO saw them but his eyelids just felt too heavy to keep open any longer. He tried putting pressure on his leg to stop the bleeding as darkness crept up along the edge of his vision, and the last thing he saw before his sight faded was a shark’s fin breaking the surface of the red tide of his thigh.

Matt Yeager is a writer who lives and works in Minneapolis, MN.
Things Willow Loves

The flannel blanket.

The remote control, obvs.

Nail files, for some reason?

This comb she fucking stole from me.
Knocked-over boxes to glower in.

Brushings!

This carrot toy.

Editorial Consultant Brian Flynn.
The Wheel of Circumstance
by O’Brian Gunn

“How many people are likely to die if we shut
down San’cane now, Misch?” Representative Paury
asked. She cast a look over at the woman with
opal eyes scanning the tablet computer hovering
a few inches over the table.

“Our best estimate is roughly 3.2 million,”
Misch replied. She tapped the screen and eased out a
labored breath. “But that’s conservative. This
substitute magic system could shut down sooner than
we think.”

A man with platinum hair in a business cut and
a lightly wrinkled face interlaced his fingers on the
table surface. “That’s why we need to initiate the
transition as soon as mystically possible, get back to
using Nuan’cane.”

“Rubare, most of the citizens in your district
can easily afford the new runes and sigils required to
use Nuan’cane.” Paury pulled off her glasses and
massaged the bridge of her nose. “If you represented
people from less wealthy districts, or if you even took
the time to learn about people outside your district,
you would have a firm understanding of just how
hard-pressed other people are to afford basic health
blessings, let alone brand new sigils and runes for the
same magic system they bought runes and sigils for
several years ago.”

An orb of ivory light sparked into existence
over the middle of the table, flaring with a glaring, hot
pulse that cut off Paury’s next words.

The male with a thick froth of chestnut curls
and blond streaks pulsing through every strand leaned
forward in his high-backed leather chair, easing his
elbows on the edge of the table as he curled his fingers
into loose fists. “We absolutely cannot afford to get
sidetracked digging up old wounds.” He traded a
glance between Representatives Rubare and Paury.

“Ones that are highly unlikely to be resolved before
the end of our current crisis. Now, our best guess puts
us at approximately two and a half years before we
burn out San’cane. When that happens, all mystically
fortified structures in Rallenthou will start to collapse.
All spells, charms, and blessings will fail; cities will
lose power; aeromobiles will fall out of the sky; and
there will be a massive panic throughout the entire
country.”

“Dominici, Dr. Worth and her team of
mycologists informed me that even if we use the
entirety of our reserves to pay for the runes and sigils
we need from Centurion Industries, it still won’t be
enough to afford all the mystical materials we need to
make sure every citizen can go back to using
Nuan’cane.” Misch paused and held the man’s gaze.

“People are very likely going to die, even if we are
ahead of that estimated deadline.”

Rubare held up a hand, holding back the
possibilities inherent in the woman’s words. “Can’t
we, I don’t know, set up a payment plan or something
for those who can’t afford the new materials?”

Paury opened her mouth to fire off a heated
response, stopped when she allowed herself to process
his words. Lips pressed closed. She blinked and tried
again. “That’s actually not a bad idea.” She turned to
Rubare. “I guess I was wrong in thinking you’d lost
your heart to a curse.”

The man scoffed, waggled a finger at her.

“Don’t think too highly of me, Ariana, payment plans
come with taxes.”

“Wait, why would we need to dip into our
reserves?” Dominici tapped and swiped at the tablet
floating in front of him. Eyes scrolled back and forth.

Eyes stopped. “Oh. We spent many of our resources
researching a cure for Nuan’cane.” He eased back in
his chair, elbows perched on the rests at his side.

“Sorry. Seems as though I missed a lot while I was
campaigning in Hiwatha. Still catching up.”

Misch glanced up from her tablet. “We also
have to think about the fact that while there are more
affordable alternatives to Nuan’cane runes and sigils,
they may not be fully compatible. And, unfortunately,
there’s no way to determine the level of compatibility
until spells or rituals are attempted, which could end
in a disaster.”

“Such as Nuan’cane becoming reinfeated,”
Rubare pointed out. “I’ve also heard rumblings of the League of Falanfae selling purposefully corrupted sigils in their continued efforts to wipe out all magic in existence.”

“I hate to heap more bad news on an already full plate, but there’s something else we need to discuss.” The other four Representatives looked down to the end of the table at the woman who had been silent up until now. Her form was concealed within a thick haze of emerald green mist and golden motes that undulated and swirled about her, leaving only her face visible.

“What is it, Kampartinia?” Misch asked.

A hand extended from the hanging haze. A levitating hourglass manifested over her palm. Rich golden sands trickled from the nearly-empty top half to collect on the bottom, particles sparkling and glowing as they caught the light. “Rallenthou’s one thousand years are almost up. The goddess Cascankari will demand her payment of one thousand and eight souls for allowing our country use of the Ajin’n Causeway during the Reigning Conflicts.”

The four Representatives held a collective breath, none of them moving or blinking for a handful of seconds.

Dominici was the first to speak up. “As dire as that news is, I’m guessing you have a plan formulating, something that will be of great benefit to us all, I hope.”

Kampartinia swiveled her attention to him. “People are likely to die as we transition from the new magic system to the old one, people who were born on Rallenthou soil and are considered acceptable for the debt.”

The remaining Representatives batted glances back and forth, each of them willing the others to break the silence first and speak into existence the idea buzzing in the core of their brains and burning at the tip of their tongues.

Misch was the one to say it: “You want us to purposely allow people to die to pay a thousand-year-old debt.”

“Yes,” Kampartinia replied without hesitation, burnished hazel eyes steady and unblinking.

Rubare rubbed a hand over his mouth. “I don’t suppose Centurion Industries can manifest one thousand and eight souls and add it to our final bill.” The others looked over at him with expressions wrung dry of all traces of humor.

“I apologize.” Hands lifted. “I often resort to humor in response to such situations.” He closed his eyes and gave his head a slight shake, swallowing the lump in his throat. “We knew we’d have to make these choices when we accepted our positions as Representatives on the Quintessence Quorum, so we don’t have the right to balk at a decision such as this.” He turned to the others. “How do we willingly allow one thousand and eight people, possibly more, to die in a way that historians will look back on us and agree we made the best decision possible under our circumstances?”

Paury looked at the images of her district’s citizens floating across her inactive tablet screen. “Not in any way we’ll be proud of.”

“We can use people on death row,” Rubare suggested. “I know some will complain it’s a violation of the prisoners’ civil rights, but we can offer them compensation.”

“Not with the money we need to pay for runes and sigils, I pray.” Misch’s eyes glimmered in the overhead lights as she spoke. “Maybe we can see if a few High Mysicians can create golems and switch them out with the real prisoners. It’s far from ethical, but I think we can all agree it’s among the least damning of options.”

Paury shook her head. “We should at least be willing to do that ourselves; no need to drag others down into the tar pit.”

Dominici furrowed his brow. “I highly doubt anyone at this table, other than Kampartinia, perhaps, has the medical sorcery training necessary to create fully functional golems identical to their flesh-and-blood archetypes, down to their blood type and DNA. I know I lack the finesse required to wield such intricate magics.”

Kampartinia allowed the hourglass to shimmer
out of sight. “Much like the more dangerous circuits of Nuan’cane are sealed from public channeling, the true difficulty tier of medica magicka has been exaggerated to keep it out of the hands and mouths of the unwary.”

Silence descended, settled and steeped deep in the throats of everyone at the table. Paury was the first to speak up. “Now that we know it’s possible, are we still willing to go through with this, to sacrifice convicted criminals on death row?” She upturned an empty palm. “Even if it turns out some of them are innocent?”

Everyone except for Kampartinia lowered their eyes to the table. Dominici batted out a series of blinks. Rubare tugged at the sleeves of his dress shirt underneath his ivory suit jacket striped with alternating stripes of azure and gold. Paury adjusted her glasses, squinting behind her lenses. Misch divided a glance between her fellow Representatives.

“I can’t conceive of any other viable alternative,” Rubare confessed. “At least not with the timetable we have.”

Misch leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. “So we use a combination of convicts and marginalized citizens to balance the scales.”

“We can encase any souls that transition from now until Cascankari’s arrival in a Flux, much like we did with Nuan’cane when it first became infected,” Rubare said. “Of course, that means they don’t ascend to the Eicher Fields or descend to Tytyr, but some may feel the sacrifice is worth it for the good of their country.”

“If they knew the sacrifice they were making,” Paury scratched at her forehead with a grimace wrested from the corners of her eyes and mouth. “I’m guessing we avoid any level of disclosure about why we’re willingly allowing people to die. Asking for someone’s life is one thing, but these are souls we’re talking about.”

Dominici reached over and put his hand over hers, squeezing it. “We’re either responsible for the sacrifice of one thousand and eight souls, or every soul in Rallenthou. I’m sure Cascankari won’t take kindly be being denied her rightful due.”

The woman’s jaw flexed as she gnashed down on the bitterness thickening inside her mouth. “It’s not about the numbers, Victor.” She slowly pulled her hand away. “It’s not about the damn numbers.”

“What guarantee do we have that this will be enough?” Kampartinia asked.

“What guarantee do we have that it won’t be too much?” Rubare looked down the table at her. “Can you think of anyone better equipped to decide this?” Paury asked him. “Left in the hands of others, the situation could be much, much worse.”

Rubare wiped his hands on his slacks. “Sometimes I wish I’d listened when my father suggested I become a stock magus.”

“Stock magus or Representative,” Kampartinia said, “the bruising wheel of circumstance spares a care for no one.”

A world weaver and word wrangler, O’Brian Gunn’s work has been published on Fiction on the Web, Georgia Voice, and The Society of Misfit Stories. His writing sirens often lull him to the expansive shores of the speculative, the supernatural, and the superhuman. His first novel, FURIES: Thus Spoke, is currently available from Spaceboy Books. Find him on Twitter @OBrianGunn
Splut has a lucrative career in vintage printer repair. By David S. Atkinson.

Lazlo chilling in the sink. By Andrea Keleher.

Odin and Sabra cuddling. By Jenna Zelinger.

Odin getting ready to start his day. By Jenna Zelinger.
Black Cat Appreciation

Edgar is ready for his close up. By Jennifer Jas.

One Cuppa Cat—just add sugar. By Jennifer Jas.

New box, who dis? By Brian Flynn.

Not a black cat, but Khaleesi is still a queen. By Christie Buchele.
Fever When You Kiss Me, Fever When You Contract Diphtheria and Perish in an Antiquated Nebraska Farmhouse Because People Keep Refusing to Vaccinate Their Teenage Goth Children Before Letting Them Watch Old Cannonball Run Movies

by David S. Atkinson

Rents in Denver have gotten a bit out of hand. I resorted to an old iron room they used to set fires underneath to torture people. It gets pretty hot in there, but it's only nine hundred a month to be downtown and it even fits a king bed.

All my friends are jealous.

It wouldn't be so bad if the fire were only a quaint story rather than something they do to this day. Then it would simply be an iron room with a bad past instead of an active torture device, right? The burning goes round the clock though. Manager says something about requirements to preserve the historic character of the building. It's not as if he wants to do it. It's a lot of work and it makes him go through a great deal more Duraflame than is really practical.

We all have to make sacrifices.

Take me, for example. My air conditioning bills are sky high, even when it's twenty below. I take my baths in Lidocaine and keep ice stuffed in my pants. The food in my fridge cooks before I take it out, and my collection of novelty naughty chocolate sculptures of the Depression-era presidents went soft and droopy ages ago.

But at least my commute is short. Not too many at the office can say that these days, even with their clothing free of char. You've got to give somewhere.

It's just the way things are.

David S. Atkinson is the author of books such as "Roses are Red, Violets are Stealing Loose Change from my Pockets While I Sleep," "Apocalypse All the Time," and the Nebraska book award winning "Not Quite so Stories." He is a Prose Assistant Editor for "Digging Through The Fat" and his writing appears in "Spelk," "Jellyfish Review," “Thrice Fiction,” "Literary Orphans," and more. His writing website is http://davidsatkinsonwriting.com/.
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