

As the attic door swung open, falling cobwebs intersected the beam of light from below. Hank came up his mother's stepladder, his shadow cast upon the wooden rafters. Yellowed sheets draped old boxes and furniture, but Hank wished they could have covered up the smell of mothballs. Rolling up his sleeves, Hank got to work cleaning out the mausoleum.

He started with some of the larger boxes, full of old Christmas lights and camping gear. He would take a few boxes at a time down the stairs, walking through the now bare home to place them on the driveway. His sister had packed the rest of the house away, dishes and picture frames all wrapped in newspaper. Hank was alone in the house, the silence was deafening. He figured his sister must have packed all the noise away too.

It didn't take long to clear most of the attic, and Hank had gotten sidetracked. He had opened to a box of photo albums, all with cracked vinyl pages encased in a brightly colored lace armor. It made Hank chuckle to himself, his mother had been a sucker for that kind of kitsch. One particular album, with *Early Days* embroidered across the title, had several old black and white candids taken by his father. He had managed to get Hank's mother into every photograph, her short beehive betraying her stern cat-eye glasses. Hank could hardly believe she was gone. It hadn't seemed so long ago when he was a kid, playing with his sister in this very same attic. Hank craned his neck, almost waiting for his mother to call him down for dinner.

The attic was getting hot, and Hank knew that the afternoon sun was at its highest. He placed the box of photos next to the stairs, telling himself to remember to take it down last, and got to work uncovering the old furniture. Most of it he was content to leave, a cheap chest of drawers and a few baby cribs weren't worth carrying out himself. After taking down the side tables and a book shelf, there was only one piece left. Hank pulled off its threadbare linen cover, revealing a polished oak rocking chair. Hank slid his hand over its well wrought curves. It looked better than how he had remembered it, a type of chair he hadn't seen anything like in years. It had been his father's, and his father sat in it the night Hank had left home.

**From:** [REDACTED]@uvlink.uvu.edu>  
**To:** Stephen Gibson  
**Date:** Monday, November 29, 2010 2:10 PM  
**Subject:** Peer Review Poem

Walker

As I walk, forever in the shadow.  
A harbinger of darkness, returning.  
As the light wanders away, broken, a faint glow  
The path is frozen over in snow.  
The trefoil leaves lay as ice, gleaming.  
As I walk, forever in the shadow.  
The vast plain of hills is frigid and hollow.  
The path left behind, dims, as all is fading.  
As the light wanders away, broken, a faint glow.  
I march across the frosted sea like an arrow.  
The shadow follows my steps, ever advancing.  
As I walk, forever in the shadow.  
The black night to which I avow,  
Pushes further into the land, overshadowing  
As the light wanders away, broken, a faint glow  
The world is once again hallow.  
The night of darkness has created a silenced world, unending.  
As I walk, forever in the shadow.  
As the light wanders away, broken, a faint glow.

It only took the events of one night to bring everything crashing down around me. But I guess it never takes much to tip the scale when you've loaded it with as much potential trouble as I did. I had spent so much time cultivating an image I thought I wanted, thought I could be. But when it came time to walk the walk, as they say, I could not do it. And it is that simple fact that remains my sole source of comfort as I reflect back on that messy, sordid situation.

It was after 2:00 in the morning and the last customers were filtering out of the club. My shift had ended at midnight, but I stuck around at the insistence of Jade and Amber. There was an after-party going on at the Blue Light motel, and they wanted me to come. Apparently Drew wanted them to bring me – and what Drew wants, Drew gets.

I sat down at a little table to the right of the main stage to wait while Drew and the other bouncers finished clearing out the place. I brought a shot of Patron to my lips and swallowed. It was my fifth tequila of the night, and at that point I didn't even need the salt or lime.

I had just put my glass down when I felt someone approach from behind. Before I could turn around warm lips were brushing my neck and I was being pulled up from my chair. I spun around and found myself face-to-face with Drew. A sheen of sweat glistened on his shaved head and his toned muscles were very evident under his tight, black shirt.

He brought his face right next to mine – so close I could feel stubble – and whispered in my ear. "Are you coming tonight, baby doll?" His hot breath smelled strongly of booze, though I knew he wasn't supposed to be drinking on the job.

A wave of dizziness washed over me, but I forced myself to stay standing. I didn't want Drew to think I couldn't handle my liquor – or that I really was the baby doll that everyone called me. I looked

# The Trail to Mero Junction

## Wagon Train

The first rays of a spring day did little to comfort Sarah Patterson. She lifted her carpet bag and took one last look around the dirt streets of her home town. In her twenty two years, Sarah had never traveled further than fifty miles. "Remember," she rehearsed to her father, "The lock for Glen Walker's barn door is under the front counter. And, Rebecca Saunders wants to trade fresh eggs and butter for twenty five pounds of flour."

"Stop fretting," Randall insisted. "Brett, will take care of the store. You just concentrate on taking care of yourself and Lily 'til I meet up with you." He wrapped his hands on each of her shoulders. "The new wagon and team might arrive in as few as three days. I'll be on my way from there." He pulled her close, "Just stay close to CJ. He'll make sure you're taken care of." She forced a smile.

"I know, Papa. It's just that this will be the longest time we've ever been away from you." He squeezed back tears, taking in a breath of Sarah's thick, brown hair. "You remind me so much of your mom; she was always fussing over things. But, it's time to think about our new home. That'll give you plenty to fret about."

Randall lifted Lily, his eleven-year-old onto the step of their wagon. "Mind Sarah," he said.

"Okay, Papa. I'll miss you so much." His tears flowed easily as Lily squeezed his neck. "My birthday," she said. "I'll see you in time for my birthday, right?" She kissed his cheek.

"Yep. I already picked out a surprise for you. Keep your diary so I can share every moment of your journey. We'll sit by the fire and you can read it to Sarah and me."

An anxious pain surged inside Sarah's stomach. She wondered if Lily would adjust to the new city. Would opening two new stores in separate cities allow them time to get settled by planting season?

Randall kissed Lily's forehead, "Mind Sara and CJ."

CJ Patterson, Randall's brother, rested one hand on the horn of his saddle. He raised the other and gave a loud, "Yah," signaling the wagons to leave.

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Jack Prescott lay in the king-size bed alongside his beautiful wife. Life had been good to him. Just today he had closed another realty deal, his fifth over the last few weeks. So why couldn't he close his eyes? Bonnie had been out since eleven; three and a half hours ago. His mind wouldn't settle. It was the first night that Jack Jr. had been quiet too, of all nights! He twisted to face the French glass-doors that went out to the patio. The summer night was unusually bright; a full moon.

Bonnie fidgeted as a noise came from the next room over. Looked like little Jack wouldn't stay asleep for too much longer. Since he was already awake, Mr. Prescott stood up from his bed and pulled on some woolen socks. He staggered across his room, sliding silently on the polished mahogany floor, and into the hallway. As usual, the baby's door was slightly ajar. Jack pulled it wide-open, quiet on its oiled hinges, and then quickly closed it again, just as quietly.

He gasped noiselessly to himself as he registered what he'd seen. The dark shape of a man had been standing over the cradle, just looking down at his son. Jack flew back into his bedroom and under his sheets. What could he do? The man was likely armed, and waking Bonnie would alert him and bring him into their bedroom. He decided to wait and see what the man did. Perhaps he had no malignant intent, he was just a psycho, and would leave just as he'd come. Jack would install that new security system first thing tomorrow.

But wishful thinking did Jack little good. Goosebumps rose over his skin as he heard the shrill cry of his son being startled awake. Bonnie struggled to wakefulness and started to roll out of the bed. Jack reached over and grabbed her arm roughly. She turned slowly to glare at him. His eyes must have told enough of the story. She pulled herself into his chest.

"What is it, Jack? What's wrong?" Her voice was groggy with fatigue.

He didn't have time to answer before the bedroom door glided open and the devil himself entered. Gun held flush against the baby that dangled upside down from his hand, he stalked toward the couple. There was nothing normal about him. His posture suggested that he'd been forced to carry an anvil on his back since birth. The moonlight radiating from the French doors illuminated a face that may as well have been empty. It watched the husband and wife, barren of emotion. It could have been a mask. Then it spoke.

## On the Fence

"I don't like you man!"  
He pointed at the other kid's chest, with an overly  
Muscular arm.  
I can't see anything wrong with his chest. Maybe it's his  
Tight red shirt.  
It looks fine to me. Just  
A little faded.  
"What are you doing  
Coming around here anyways? We don't want pussies  
Like you here." Four others, behind him,  
Yelled and laughed  
In agreement. They had shaved heads and looked  
Like the talker.  
Red-shirt looked confused  
As I was. But  
Scared too. Real scared.  
He took a few steps back, held hands up  
Close to his pale face, his  
Mouth moved, a lot.  
But the other didn't seem to hear him  
Either; he just smiled slightly  
And stepped closer.  
His friends followed.  
Red shook his head, mouth moving, face  
Paler, and sickly.  
The leader pulled something out of his  
Basketball shorts.  
Red had backed into a  
Corner. He was yelling something  
Confused and angry; something  
Frantic. Then I couldn't see  
Red anymore. Only a circle.  
A circle of bald heads,  
Jerseys, and  
Fists.  
Something metal glinted  
Off the leader's fist as  
It moved back and forth; turning  
Red.  
I sat there, on the  
Fence. Less than a hundred  
Yards away. Something in me was  
Frantic as well. I wanted to...  
Run. Which way?  
But, I didn't move. Just sat there and  
Waited, till the five finally left. And red  
Was all that was left. Nothing  
Moved anymore.  
And I sat.  
Completely red.  
I sat in-  
Completely.  
Dead.

Catherine followed Miranda through the royal study, a medium room lined in wooden paneling that contained two desks against one wall and bookcases built into the other wall, to a private sitting room with actual carpet, a large fireplace, and two imported armchairs facing each other over a low table. Prince Ian was leaning forward in one of the chairs, his chin on his fist as he studied some papers on the table. He looked up and scowled at the interruption. Catherine was taken aback. The dark gaze of the spectacles wasn't the only change in the prince; his face was leaner, harder somehow.

Catherine had only a moment to register this sight before a new sensation washed over her. It felt like something deep inside her was unlocking, opening up. Then she felt the curse. It emanated from the glasses, as expected, but Catherine was amazed at the sheer strength of the curse. The magical sense she had developed was overwhelmed with cold anger and pride. She thought she could taste metal and smell blood, and she recoiled and fought the urge to gag.

"Well?" Ian demanded. "What do you want?"

Catherine closed her eyes and forced herself to focus. She called forth the part of her that had somehow unlocked and tentatively used it to reach forward. Her magic was lost in the vastness of the curse in a single breath's time.

Catherine opened her eyes. Ian and Miranda were both looking at her, waiting for her to speak. Neither had any idea that anything had just happened. Catherine made her choice.

"Pardon the intrusion, Your Highness. I came to resign."

The princess mouthed "What?" but the prince only said "Good riddance" in icy tones before turning back to his papers.

Catherine bowed and backed out of the room. Miranda followed, closing the door behind them.

"What was that?" she hissed, but Catherine shook her head and led the way back to the hallway.

"Didn't you see that something's wrong with him? What about those papers he was looking at?" Miranda demanded.

"Papers?"

"Marked maps, reserve military rosters, supply lists!" On seeing Catherine's blank look Miranda added, "Everything he'd need to organize before attacking another country!"

Catherine frowned. "That is one fast-acting curse."

"Catherine!"

"I know, I know." The magician held up her hands. "I tried to remove the curse, but it's way beyond my skill level. I just barely graduated."

Miranda closed her eyes. "But it *was* the glasses?"

"Most definitely."

"All right. I'll just get him to take them off."

"I doubt it will be that easy. The curse is twisting his reasoning. Bring in another wizard, someone who *can* remove the curse. Pretend he's taking my place so Prince Ian won't suspect anything."

Miranda nodded slowly. "That's a good idea. It should keep the foreign ambassadors from becoming suspicious, too." She outlined the insinuations voiced during the morning meeting.

Catherine shook her head. "We'd better hurry. If you'll write an official letter of request I'll take it to the Academy immediately. There's an advisor there who could break the curse."

"Right." Miranda went back into the study and pulled some parchment out of a desk. Still standing, she dipped a pen in the inkpot and started writing.

Karen opened the door slowly, holding the knob in shaking fingers. She could still hear the murmur of voices downstairs as the last mourners gave their condolences and said their goodbyes to her parents. She had stayed in the foyer as long as she could take it, thanking the guests for their words, shaking their hands and accepting their hugs... and their assurances that it would all be okay.

It would all be okay...

She had tried to keep a brave face on for everyone. She had tried to assure them all that she would be fine, that she wasn't going to fall apart, that their assurances that, "life would go on" and, that it would "get better with time", were helping her feel better, that she was learning to accept what had happened.

But how could she? How could anyone truly accept it? How could they go on living their lives, knowing what had happened? Knowing that Jim was gone forever? She still had so many unanswered questions...

She had stayed as long as she could, but eventually it had become too much for her and she had had to excuse herself before she broke down in front of everyone.

She let go of the door handle as the room came into view, its white walls and white covered bed at a sharp contrast with the dark oaken dressers and red curtained windows.

Their room.

She quietly pushed the door closed as she kicked off her black heels, the only shoes that matched her dress, and padded across the soft white carpet to the closet. She opened the wood paneled doors wide and stepped up to the clothes rack on the right side, the side where Jim's dress shirts were hung. She gently brushed her fingers along the row of white button up business shirts, feeling the material as she walked to the end of the rack.

Jim had always loved dressing in a nice shirt and business suit. He would smile and say it made him feel important, that he liked to look professional for the people he went to see and, though he was just an insurance salesman, he said that a sharp suit and a warm smile made people think that he knew what he was doing. She had loved that smile.

She stopped as she came to a long sleeved blue pullover, his favorite. She ran her hand up its soft cottony material until she reached the hanger. She hesitated for a moment, then pulled it off the rack, removing the hanger as she went to sit on the bed. She dropped the hanger to floor as she brought the sweater up to her face and breathed in its scent, breathing in the deep smell of the fabric, the smell of the clean detergent, the smell of Jim. It had been his favorite sweater. She could still detect the faint scent of his cologne in its folds, and she immediately felt as though she were with him again. She remembered the day they had spent together in the park, when he had wrapped her up in his arms to keep her warm, when he had run his fingers through her long, dark hair, and looked deep into her blue eyes. She remembered his embrace, and how she had felt safe in his arms, like nothing could ever hurt her. She remembered it all... and then she remembered that he was gone.

She would never feel that way again.

She lowered the sweater, her hands trembling. It was too much. Her eyes welled with the tears that she could hold back no longer. Her shoulders shook with the sobs that she kept trying to hold in. She saw it all too clearly, the accident that had taken Jim's life.

Flash- She saw the rain falling all around her as she ran out to meet him, a smile of warm anticipation on her face at the sight of him, then Flash- She felt her smile melt as Jim turned in his seat, realizing for the first time that she was there, his eyes locked in a look of horror as he realized the course the car was taking, heading straight for her, then Flash- She watched as he

## Defending the Union (Part IV)

In her spacious captain's quarters, Morgan felt like the white metallic walls were closing in. She didn't even want to think how it would feel in the tiny crew quarters, bunked four to a room. But then the weight of the world wouldn't be on her shoulders, would it? If any Brekali survived, they would speak her name much like the Jews of Earth spoke of Hitler. How different things felt on the other side. It will be said that she hated the Brekali for their green skin or their scales and spikes where humans would have hair, but it was war—just war. It had to either be them or us, and we couldn't win unless we destroyed their civilians and children, too...right?

The intercom beeped above her head. "Captain? We have a Brekali vessel on sensors. It is five minutes out. What are your orders?" There was a tinge of fear she'd never before heard in Frasier's voice.

"Deploy the weapon, Lieutenant. We should be close enough to start to scramble their codes. When we are within range, fire immediately with a full spread. I will be on the bridge, shortly." She looked longingly at the vibrational shower and headed out the automatic door.

"Captain," her communications officer said as soon as she walked into Ops, "the Brekali ship is hailing us."

"Respond, Lieutenant." There was a tinge of unsteadiness in her voice as she wondered what was coming next.

"Earth Union vessel, we are a scientific exploration ship and have no interest in your war. Our sensors detect that your weapons are powered to fire, and our systems are malfunctioning due to a transmission sent from your ship. We cannot defend ourselves and all of our recently-obtained knowledge will be lost forever if you destroy us. We do not care for politics and only wish for peace. Please do not let our work for nearly a century go up in a fireburst blast!" His spikes were a much paler green than those she'd seen previously, but that was likely due to a deep space voyage and a lack of sunlight.

"Hold your fire, Lieutenant," she ordered, a tinge of curiosity in her voice. "That vessel is not going to be worth much unless we help them shut everything down and enter the virus kill code immediately upon reboot. Henderson, talk them through a shutdown on the com and head over immediately in a shuttle—with a very excessive security team, of course."

"Thank you for sparing us, Captain." The viewer turned to static and was shut off.

"Captain, this could be a trick. Need I remind you that we just tricked their people earlier today?" her CEO reminded her.

"Yes, it could be. But those Brekali are certainly deep space scientists and that's no military vessel. It's designed for food storage and long-term living away from the home planet, not for war. I have to take the chance that this isn't a Brekali trap nicely placed into our lap."

"Captain, the Brekali have powered down and I am nearly docking. Well, me and the ten armed guards that would fit in the shuttle. I assume we will take the ship in tow if we can get everything stabilized? I mean, the sensors showed a crew compliment of 85, so evacuation with our shuttles would take a while."

I turn up the already loud music and slam down on the accelerator.  
I scream out at innocent people as they walk by, mostly profanities.  
They don't understand, how could they, that I am having a breakdown.  
Life has been asking too much for too long and I am running away.  
I charge into the other lane and make a screeching turn up the road.  
There is no one else around so I start to scream at my dashboard.  
No one understands as well as my dashboard can about these things.  
The list of to dos, the expectations, the obligations, echo in my head.  
I turn the music up even louder trying to block out every thought.  
As I climb the mountain, going back and forth to higher ground,  
Life seems miles below me, while all above me there is space.  
At the top of the mountain I get out of the car and walk to the edge,  
The only sound is the gravel that slips from beneath my feet to fall.  
It seems too quiet to yell anymore, it would be greatly out of place.  
I cross my legs, sit down on the edge, and try instead to find serenity.  
My heart is still pounding in time to the angry music from my car,  
My frantic head will not let go of all the overtaking clutter of the day.  
There is a peaceful distance between me and the world below,  
With the immensity of the sky overpowering anything from life.  
I lose all concept of time, sitting there reminding myself to breathe.  
Slowly the echoes of the day begin to be erased, washed away by peace,  
Falling from me like the gravel down the mountainside, one by one.  
I have found my way back to myself once more, acceptance of my life.  
I sit there for hours longer, not wanting to return to everything yet to do.

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
Don't text, don't computer, don't eat too loud.

He dons dark blue Levi's that are almost skinny jeans but still respectable to his age.

What is his age?

He has a lot of energy.

Pacing around the class, with that intense look in his eyes.

His life is a mystery. He did, however mention that his wife is Chinese, while we were reading that book.

Class starts, he talks,  
that one kid who dominates class talks,  
he talks  
and walks over towards me.

Here he comes, he's gonna look over my shoulder at my notes on the reading to see how smart I am!

My stomach gets that roller coaster feeling while I frantically look over my notes on the reading to see

how smart I am.

Closer...

He passes me, quietly tells the girl two chairs back to put the phone away.

Ah, here's another one who hasn't been informed by a fellow student on the dos and don'ts of Goshert.

She doesn't hear him.

He repeats, only this time, louder and commanding instead of asking.

When provoked, his eyes can kill.

They can also look "interested" in students' comments.

The kid who talks is still talking; his audience is busy reprimanding,

The kid who talks says sorry for interrupting.

Goshert says its ok, I can multitask.

Hence, Listen to student talk + Reprimand another student with laser eyes = Ph.D