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Essence

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Morning Field Thoughts

I wake up and smile, get up and out,
Brush my teeth with a cigarette,
And take a walk.
Found are fields;
Corn rows with red dancing stalks,
Wheat too late for silage,
And a cold yellow butterfly someone forgot.
The dump down hill catches my morning eyes,
Memories of junk unwanted.
Like the false store fronts of East Berlin in '64.
I wasn't there.
I did see two discarded towel dispensers, some cans,
A rubber tire and leaves
Covering it all like a fresh grave.

Lynne A. Eshleman
The Baby Cried

The baby cried
I wanted to run
I couldn’t move

The baby cried
in my dream
I woke up

The teenager cried
I wanted to help
I wouldn’t let me

The grown-up cried
I wanted to run
knew I shouldn’t

The grown-up cried
I waited
you came to me...

A parent cried
waiting is the hardest part
my child grew up

Barbara Bergey

Ernest in Earnest

He stood by the typewriter, speaking to cats to play possum.
The coffee grew cold—it was already bitter.
Cigarette butts littered the floor
and ashes blew gaily across the butcher’s block.
The sun streamed through curtained windows, looking onto a sparkling bay.
He stroked his beard, tilted his khaki cap back
and whistled a dirty ditty, thinking of marlin.
The day was good.
He drew back his fist and wrote about Harry.
Antelope horns lounged in the corner,
old magazines drew dust on filing cabinets.
The old rug was frayed, the floor squeaked in winter.
Now sand crunched between the planks
and cats chased tails like puffy billiards banking into tipsy spina.
He smiled, laughed, scratched his thick arm and thought.
It was good to think.
He thought some more.
Key West gleamed at dawn.

Brendan D. Strasser
L.A. to Del Mar

The light was orange and low on her right side. Reflections of the dash fixed on his sunglasses as he drove the girl back.
They hadn't said much all day.

"Have you ever felt," she said, as if there would be more.
They kept driving since the freeway never ends. She didn't realize that things, after a while, would change. The landscape became absorbed for its indifference, and he only wished the radio would work.

Greens and blues had nothing to talk about. Would it always be like this, or wouldn't it always matter?

"What?" he finally said.

"Nothing."  

Lynne A. Eshleman

Walter, Lingering

He handed me a wig on a stick
and growled, "Take it-you are now an old man,
and need the pleasant disguise of illusion."
I, palsied limbs jangling, loose change clanging in
dangling pockets in baggy trousers,
took it, reluctant to whisper
lest it should crack his eardrums in its undoing.
I no longer speak-I have said it all,
or all I have to say.
My time bides still in dusty armchairs,
pale sunlight streaming through grimy windowpanes.
Geraniums die on the sill.
A chimney atop the tenement hall next door
blocks the morning light and, when the
hour is just right, comes into my room,
pinioned across the floor,
a brickless grey box wriggling on a fringed carpet.

Birds sing to me in the spring-time
from rusted fire escapes.
I no longer speak-I am spoken to.
My son visits me, but he is resentful, and would
rather not. He is busy.
He brought me the wig. I cast it aside.
I have no need for illusion-I have truth in another disguise.
I, an old man, shaking in darkness
with the heat turned low.

Brendan D. Strasser
When We Last Left Our Hero

In a way it feels good to be back.
There I was, disoriented in the twisted
newness of sons and lovers, daughters and haters
suddenly
finding myself battling to breathe.
I thought it might have been nice to take a quick vacation—
I hoped it might be different, escape further suffocation.
Surprise, surprise,
right between the eyes.
Beaten to the punch I was,
and manohman
what a woman’s punch does.

Before I knew what killed me
I was reeling into the next cerebral hemisphere,
bleeding like a sonuvagun.

Now
time and space (that wonderful couple)
allow me to refract upon the whole
sick situation as it were,
with something vaguely approaching objectivity—
sorry, though, detachedness hasn’t set in fully,
yet. (But, just like rigor mortis usually takes a few hrs….you get the picture.)

Anyhow,
as it turns out I was both a son and a lover,
and you weren’t.
My tough luck.
But fortune smiled on somebody.
Our bigbadbounceback boy, our brawny boxer
shows no scars no more,
so he’s theoretically no worse off than when
last left.
No worse,
no bad,
no good.
Just himself.
Just by himself.
(It may take a little getting used to again—back in the swing—you know).

In a way I’m relieved to be back.

Mark Harris
The Paper Man

I walked up Greenwich Street looking for the Paper Man.
I was warned not to go alone.
Approaching him on the left side,
I saw his large belly wrapped in polyester pants.
He wore white shoes and shirt and a turquoise jacket
too warm for April.
His clear blue eyes widened as he noticed me.
Smiling, he fixed his belt.
“Benny’s Paper Palace” was scribbled on the rusting screen door.

Greeting me, Benny touched my arm and led me
into his dim cellar.
Low ceilings pressed down the stuffy must.
I heard 1940’s music which I couldn’t hear outside.
My attention, focused on shelves over shelves of purples, aquas,
oranges and reds dulled by dust,
was distracted by Benny standing inside the air
others leave around me.
A glossy black and white photo of a younger Benny
next to a polished Cadillac was placed,
dustless, on a shelf.
Grasping my shoulder he began to speak in a low voice,
“i gave the car to a college girl, no, no
she didn’t have to do anything for it.”
He grinned.
“You don’t think I am a fresh man, do you?”
He chuckled.
I wanted to leave, forgetting about the paper.
“Come with your hair down next time.”
He kissed my temple with old lips.
As I walked into the sunlight,
Benny turned inside to dream of his paper dolls.

Chris Ruggiano
Wishing Well

Penny looked down into the abandoned well past the slippery stone walls, down to where a green film of dancing grates lay on the water. There was some filth at the milliwet she had picked apart yesterday, and she detected a little of the milk's stickiness on her fingers and also on the smooth slab on which she sat. Dropping a rock into it, she watched it splash, and, in the circle of clear water, Penny saw her face.

It wasn't really herself, but a dirty distortion. "Here I am again! Guess what? I drew you a picture." Reaching down beside her muddy, scuff sneakers, she gently picked up that day's watercolor. With outstretched arms, she let it go and watched as the smiling red face of the runny blue shed floated downwards.

Turning her head toward the house, she could see Nora, her stepmother, pulling up the drive in her new gray Chrysler. Without turning it off, she got out, threw her arms up in the air screaming, "Frank! Where are you? How many times have I told you not to block the garage door?" Her daddy's rusty yellow Beetle stood exposed to its insults and kicks. Penny whispered into the well, "I hate her. She's mean to me." She remembered all the times when Nora had embarrassed Penny in front of her friends, especially when Nora yanked her hair, causing Penny to spill her milk and then slapped her for the mess. "I wish she'd go away and never come back again!"

"Do you?" whispered a voice from the depths.

"Yes. Daddy and I would be so happy," Penny answered. She watched as the wavy image puckered its mouth to speak to her again.

"Do you really want to be rid of her?" it gurgled.

Penny nodded her head up and down and picked up a wrinkled demolition and held it to her nose. The hairs tickled, and then she let that fall too. Its yellow head flickered in the sun before it was swallowed by the pit.

"Here," murmured the voice, "take this." The sludge darkened. A watery funnel spiraled up towards Penny, a key riding its crest. Without hesitation, she grasped it. When the water had subsided, she looked down for instructions. "Put it in plain view on your dresser."

The crisp September air filled the two-story brick house on Cornwall Avenue. The walls of Penny's room had been painted pink, and she had colorized in her own picture of herself and her father in purple. She hung the arms of her stuffed monkey around the neck of her wooden giraffe. That was something she always had to redo since Nora always took it off and set it with the other toys. Emptying her E.T. bank, she noticed that the silver dollar her father had given her for earning a gold star that day in school was gone. E.T.'s head bobbed up and down as she put each of her pennies back in.

"Penny," Nora shouted with impatience. "Where are you?"

"What?" she replied meekly.

"Supper!" Nora boomed. Her voice shook the small crystal butterfly hanging in Penny's window.

Penny started down the carpeted stairs, and although she knew how many there were, she counted them each time anyway. She had on her green corduroy jumpsuit with a long-sleeved white blouse. Her soft blonde hair dangled in wisps around her cheeks. "Seven, eight, nine." She loved her house, her yard, and she was the best third grader when it came to hopscotch.

"Hurry up!" bellowed Nora again.

"Fifteen, sixteen," she smiled. Once more, they were all there.

The dwindling orange rays shone through the kitchen window. Steamy vegetables and greasy hamburgers met Penny's eye. Today, as always, dinner was served on paper plates. A few dirty pans lay scattered on the counters.
Halfway through dinner, which up to now had been silent, Penny realized she wasn't going to be able to eat one more dry cube of carrot. She started separating the various colors on her plate.

"Stop playing with your food," Nora snarled, and then to her husband, "Frank, I don't see how this skinny kid survives on your little trips to the candy store." Penny only glanced at Nora; her Daddy's newest wife. She didn't dare hold her stare long since she always felt Nora's gray eyes would drill holes into her blue ones. She only caught a glimpse, then, of the way Nora's lips twisted when she was angry. This was greatly magnified by her frizzy flyaway brown hair and high cheekbones. Penny looked at her father, his eyes begging her to cooperate. Frank was thirty-four with weathered strawlike hair. Penny felt rewarmed by the familiar corduroys and checkered flannel shirt. She wondered why he had married Nora and subjected Penny to such nastiness.

"By the way, Frank," Nora got out in between bites. "What do you keep out in that smelly shed?"

"What shed is that, honey?" he asked distractedly.

"Now what shed do you think I mean?" she pressed sarcastically still chewing her food. "The wooden one out back."

"Oh, oh that shed. Why do you ask dear?" he said trying to gather up the slippery insides of his burger.

"Well, darling," feigning sweetness, "I went out there today to give it a, you know, good cleaning and, uh, it was locked, and I was wondering if you would tell me why."

"Oh," Frank said after he took another mouthful, "I have the new kerosene heater out there and the lawnmower."

It was dusk, and the streetlights were beginning to come on. On her red and blue swing set, Penny was swinging higher and higher trying to touch the faded clouds with her toes. Below her, lightning bugs were flickering. She could hear Nora upstairs through the open window.

"Penny!" Nora shouted, "why can't you keep your room straightened up? I always have to..." Penny saw the light in her room go off. The crystal butterfly was still sparkling. Wondering whether she wanted to go get some of the lightning bugs or not, Penny began to lose some of her momentum.

Just then, she saw Nora watching her from behind the screen door. Then she opened it and quickly walked over to Penny.

"What's this Penny?"

"A key," she replied.

"Yes, I know it's a key, but to what?"

"The shed," she said as she climbed up to the sliding board. A curious look grew on Nora's face. She walked over to the shed which stood farther back from the house. Its windows had been boarded up and the high grass around it almost covered the entrance.

Penny slid down just as Nora put the long-handled key in and turned it. The she stepped into the shed. The sharp scream made Penny jump. It began to fade. After she had gone down the sliding board a third time, she sat and listened.

As she went over to the door, she tried to catch some of the lightning bugs on her way, but it was getting dark, which made it difficult. With her little body, she heaved the door shut and locked it. Then, racing to the edge of the yard, she stopped at the well and sat down. Looking into its smothering blackness, she took the key and dropped it. After hearing the familiar splash, she turned and skipped toward home.

Cindy Wiemann

Sense

You smile at me
while your eyes are far from mine

You hold my hand
while your head is turned away

You hear my voice
while you speak a foreign tongue

You smell my presence
while you remain in your world

You say you love me
while you forget my name

Debra Dursi

Joyce O'Brien
Shorelines

Scattered clamshells hatched of fury
lie cracked, rank, crushed
milky guts spilled to sand
in soft silty slithers
oozy drops of dew-clear glaze

Splintered splinters of rough white pine
dormant and
dappled with brine
gulls peck-peck-peck at seaweed tangles
tattered, scummy, scanty garments on
beach-breast dunes

An overturned, boat
weathered like wizened, whiskered face
of old man
tired, trembling, tare
warped in sea like clapboard shingles
tapping on old walls, rapping
echo thru halls

Surf crashes, breaks, forsakes, snatches stones
and recedes to foam
fothy, foamy balm of sea
salt breeze lulls over furious waves
and carries past hopes,
only a smattering

Brendan D. Strasser
Dealing With God

Somewhere, a friend asks how we would deal with God if He showed up in a college-town bar:
He would smoke lots of cigarettes, and read about famous things in the most current magazines.
He'd live the way that would cause people to say;
"I wish I could do things for people with out wanting something out of them."

But those who talked of Him really wouldn't know.
They could only speculate past ideas, conversations or dreams.

He and his girl-friend wouldn't really love each other, but they would always go to the parties.
She would act strange when she saw another girl who loves her current lover.
He would do all the talking as if they were in a rush.

"And it's on to the next circle round,
Circle around you do,
The gent around the lady,
And the lady round the gent.
The lady around the lady
And the gent around the gent.
And it's two in the center,
And kiss your honey honey honey."

And God might say;
"I'm just trying to warm up my truck."

Lynne A. Eshleman
Black Dawn

There was a black dawn this morning;
but I ventured out in spite.
The air was gone, at first—
then it materialized, stealthily, as stiff sweat
across my wrinkled forehead.
The air matched my thoughts
but I foraged on like a dead man,
flailing left and right, wielding the scidir
as if it were my brain and just as sharp.

Thick roots oozed, bent and buckled
before my strokes; I grunted
with thankless satisfaction.
When the sweat blinded me
my heaving ribs like a shellac;
the strokes came slower-harder-duller.
I was forced to stop
and clear my vision with a wipe
of my shaking forearm.
I threw a cynical gaze out to the horizon.

No light yet.

Mark Harris

A Slice of Life, Dripping

Truck-stop greasy spoon hamburger joint 3 AM
cowboy hat driver swaggers in scuffed boots
chin stubble like rawhide brass belt buckle gleam
denimized Greek statuary celebration of man’s man
soiled counterstool.”Coffee, yeah, ma’am, if you please”
all-nite special over-easy dark toast QJ
OK
bleary vision hazy kitchen smoke all-nite drudgery
slap splatter crack funk clutter “pick up, Betsy”
day-old newspapers old new bad news no news good news
box scores in late editions win two bucks on Lakers game
hey, Lotto strike, lucky-strike Lucy won third time this week
she’s got the system beat.
small tips don’t get a waitress by
“more coffee” “Yes, ma’am, and a donut”
yesterday’s yeast as tomorrow dawns
coffee pour consume in nite black gurgles down fleshy drain
navy sky fades to orange fire on mountaintop distant
road snakes toward desert must be on way again
one more coin in jukebox “o don’t be cruel”
$2.19 keep change buy a box of cigarettes
don’t smoke em all in one place
slam groan chug screech roar throb of metal monster
eating asphalt with studded rubber teeth
into distant land of sunrise
on to new end of old road
fire edge of dawn always end never ends.

Brendan D. Strasser
The hunter stalks with tooth and claws
With blood-stained hair on massive jaws
With silent swift victorious spring
Gives terror to each living thing
The flesh of liqued marble move
He never need his glory prove
Ah, what majesty to me
Would being such a hunter bring
To move such perfect flesh as that
Which serves the mighty tiger cat
For though I eat and breathe and sleep
My muscles are not carved so deep
I do not run with that one’s grace
He goes with swiftness; I with haste
With others of my kind I pine
To have that soul, to have that mind
But if as beast I were to turn
What mournful lessons then I’d learn
See, cat, he pays for glorious size
He pays for claws and fire-eyes
The weak man does with envy stare
And kills the cubs within the air
The coward steals the dappled skin
From rippling back that bears no sin
He like would steal the glory, too
Though glory none but great cats use
So kill my tiger, claim that he
Has not advantage over thee
But he and I, we call thee fool
A tiger need not live to rule.

G. Strang
You Moon Be Full

No wonder, all fact;
This moon requires no explanation.
Listen and I will tell you that things are not the same

This moon seeps in above palms and soft furs,
Through neighbor's satellite disk receivers,
Over roof tops and covers on pools.

You moon, be full

Behind this slit-glass-flapped door,
In front of the aqua-tint fan on the floor,
Above white cotton and under pink wool.

This moon can only come in.

Onto the clay tiles under the dirty orange sherbet shag rug,
And into my fixed eyes.
No wonder, all fact: you moon be full.

Lynne A. Eshleman
Circuit

The basement is musty and stale. I feel uneasy, and I move slowly, alertly, down the stairs, listening for other people’s footsteps. I wish that the outside door to the basement had a lock on it. Only a screen door and a rotting wooden door. There is also another trap door leading to the backyard. No lock on it either. Our building is on a corner. Three sides of our property link to the street. The fourth is adjacent to the post office. We have no neighbors with cheery lights in their kitchens, no mothers washing dishes or making popcorn in the evening. No one to look out her window and notice the man with the polished blade, say, approaching the house where three girls live alone. No one who would call the cops or shine a flashlight. Neighbors would remember to talk about it in the morning to other neighbors who would definitely look out their windows that night.

The basement stairs are painted gray. The new landlords recently put a spring on the inside basement door. Now the door abruptly shuts behind me as I go downstairs. It could warn someone I am coming down. I am sure the roaches live and breed in the cellar, where wooden walls rot, cinder blocks crumble. Sometimes the floors are moist from an overflowing sump pump which clink clanks and makes sucking noises all day. The roaches probably found their way to our building through the damp areas. They have stayed and multiplied. Mice may also live in the basement, although they do not venture upstairs. It is warm in the boiler room. They may stay there.

As the door slams behind me, I feel tense. I fumble for the light switch along the cool cinder walls. I flick it on, but the light bulb has gone out or been smashed, leaving crumbles of sparkles on the cold floor. The stairs support me as I go down, but they are rickety. The railings would never support me if I were to lose my balance.

What scares me about the basement are the many corridors and rooms behind closed doors. Long halls go off in two directions. Each leads to rooms, unoccupied and unlocked. At the front of the basement someone long ago built storage stalls. These stalls look like horse stalls with locked doors. I can only guess what is behind them. The farther back in the basement I go, the less light there is because there are increasingly fewer windows. In the farthest room there is a mattress. It frightens me. Why is it there? The basement is certainly not free of mold and cobwebs, but it is free of clutter. No broken chairs, no tables missing legs. The mattress is often propped up against a wall. Sometimes it isn’t. This dark place is next to the boiler room. It’s warm back there.

Chris Ruggiano
Ferris Wheel

Summer sun
smiles
on the block
She sits
watching
the towering wheel.

Fading sun
shadows
the block
They walk
anticipating
the ride.

Lost sun
darkens
the block
They wait
staring
in awe

hand
in hand
side
by side
round
and round
one night
each summer
ferris wheel.

Debra Dursi

I've got a one way ticket to hell
A tipsy, tumy, dizzy spell
A turning, learning, unkempt place
The blackness, breathless, heat of space
A lurking, murmuring, fancy fill
A demented, deranged, horrible thrill

Nancy Piccirilli
Chasing Hopeless-Like Answers

No sound scuttles across purplish night as I skirt around an uncertain hole, bouncing on frustration of my own device like a clown doomed to juggle his soul a ruined land and a helping hand greet me, but neither offers the haven I seek; only a gnarled rope or a terror-born hope are the wicked tools of the meek.

What I once had—and never quite caught—can never be again; all long time gone have gone away, lumbered ‘round the bend; impressions, expressions, heartache, despair—all a comic who knows who; acquaintances, remembrances, wondering, cares, and a question: “What can I do?”

Anyone roaming dark-eyed streets beneath midnight’s unholy embrace can ponder and kick stones, to private longings give sweaty chase, and ease up, follow up, come upon the secret no man knows, count the hours, watch the flowers, hear dawn’s rooster as it crows.

Sunrise dominion, a herald of what was once and is no more—pale horizon, fire and pain, memory and tears mingled on a dusty floor; I have come upon discarded lies erupting like blackthorn weeds words flung out in passion’s dismay, answering only to the moment’s needs.

Trapped in a line I never knew was mine, but now know always tethered me; I’m too blind to grope, too remorseful to hope, I ask only to be left be; brown twisted branches scrape their fingers together in a grating screech of ire as I stumble along, pondering right and wrong, unresolved and under the wire. It all seems so strange, so much like loss, less hurtful but oh so much grief—a dull ache, a heartbreak, a clicking tongue are all small deaths, eternal but brief.

Brendan D. Strasser

Mike Stanislaw
The Short, Frustrated Retirement of MacAllister Storey

MacAllister Storey had come to the end of all his hopes. Strolling down the hallway of Magpie College's Hoover Hall whistling "Elmer's Tune," he thought about nothing in particular. He was in a bad mood. Stopping momentarily, he shuffled his feet, realizing he had forgotten where his 100 post-contemporary literature class was meeting.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Storey," one of his colleagues said, whizzing by with a steaming cup of coffee and sneezy shoes.

"Humph," said MacAllister Storey.

MacAllister Storey walked into the classroom ten minutes late, but since T.S. Eliot had said, "There will be world enough and time," he wasn't worried. He stared awkwardly at his students. They stared blankly at their desks. Whatever feeble conversations they had been engaged in had ceased. Silence hung like marshmallow in the room except for the faint, scurried, acid noise from a Walkman in the rear.

MacAllister Storey's gaze wandered from row to row, pausing on each of his bright and polished pupils, the aspiring intellectuals, the creme de la creme, the future leaders, the budding hope of mankind. "How, for the love Pete," said MacAllister Storey. "This place looks like a lobotomy victims convention."

Arnold Nettle was digging for buried treasure in his nasal cavity. David Murphy was checking his granitic shoulders, and watermelon bishops bulging from the Purple Moose Saloon T-shirt stretched across his Roshuree chest like a ketillation skin. Marilyn Faustonny pushed a bangle beneath her Day-Glo green veilten skirt and adjusted her bunchmph-up hose, unheedling of her sagging intellect.

MacAllister Storey sighed the long, weary sigh of a dirty old man as he affixed his cornet to his grille. He looked around, and his eyes met hers, and she smiled. "MacAllister Storey, I love you," she said.

The bar had the usual types—the wrinkled pants Bohemians, the earing désire and assiers, and the unempt-heartedback pocket Braudie paperbacks' 600's holders. MacAllister Storey sat next to a redhead whose mane floated around her angelic face like a scouring pad halo.

"Good evening, miss. The carnels here don't bite."

The presence of beating always inspired MacAllister Storey with the chaotic reality of mind that drove him to utter pathetic wallows that double for art in certain circles. The crimson-crowned cherub smiled at him. "But the flies do.

MacAllister Storey debated asking her if she was ever 'bit by a dead bee,' but he didn't think she'd get the joke. Instead, he ordered a gin-ail-Pepsi from the Lispin' Bartender. MacAllister Storey drank slowly, watched the bartop dancer toss back gin-flem locks from her fuxiinent brows and sighed the strange, sad sigh of a dirty old man.

The dean of academic affairs got wind of MacAllister Storey's frequent early dismissals of class and even more frequent barroom binges from the assistant dean of campus life, who heard it from a nameless colleague who had been hiding in the book closet of one of his more attractive students when MacAllister trundled past that evening with an Irish flag draped across his shoulders. In three-piece suit efficiency, the dean procrastinated for two weeks while "being advised of the situation" and "considering the possible best course of action. After clearing up these weighty matters, he marched onto formulizing alternative methods within jurisdictional bounds" and "deciding upon the most feasible reform."

At semester's end, MacAllister Storey was asked to resign his position and gently rete to the gray Naturworld of scholarly research the university so gallantly served him on a silver pension platter. MacAllister Storey sneered at the offer; he wondered why they hadn't sent up the head of John the Baptist as a second course. He visited the dean one bright Monday morning. The dean was less than gracious.

"Do I look like a donkey's rectum?" MacAllister Storey grated, certain to polish his gnash speech for the bottom line down he not confronted. "I'm not nester, you know."

He stared down the man across the desk, whose face indicated he was the type who would laugh at nothing, nothing except possibly human suffering. "Of course you're not," the dean whined, absentmindedly stuffing a stuffed poodle he was told his wife had won him at Coney Island by arm-wrestling a professional boxer. "Your memory's just not what it used to be."

"And don't speak to me in demeanable euphemism, you Uplike buzzer," the professor bellowed, placing his opponent in the unenviable position of making a comeback to nonsense.

"My hands are tied, Dr. Storey."

"Humph," said MacAllister Storey.
Watch me
Can you believe what you've done
The redwoods and I
Spurts of growth
Rapidly, erratic, erotic
And you will never know
The context
You—the player who hasn’t read the script
You—the artist with materials I gave you
You will be the ocean with no rhythm
And I—yes I, the mountains that your waves cannot crash
I—the wind that blows upon you
I can warm or cool you
Only you'll never know
You don't know where I've hidden the script...

Nancy Piccirilli
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