San Antonio Review

Beckoning (mk2)

Sean Padraic McCarthy

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A lone walker stretches his legs in front of San Fernando Cathedral as a storm begins to move over downtown San Antonio. / Photograph by Darren Shiverdecker.

The Rockford brothers were already in Hell. The Rockfords all had dark eyes and enormous foreheads, and none of them were small, and at least one of them — Bud — was certifiably nuts. Bud had always seemed a little off, a little quiet, fiery violent, and usually stoned, but it wasn't until he had started disco dancing about town that people realized just how much he had snapped. He danced up and down Route 18, pulling moves like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, in full stride, shirtless, a construction helmet, and hockey goalie pads covering his legs. A Village Person went wrong. Usually, though, even the cops didn't bother him. Nobody wanted to bother him. Nobody wanted to get hit.

Bud liked to whisper to Aaron sometimes, and Aaron never knew whether to laugh or just nod. "I have a really big dick," he would whisper. "I really do. And the women just love it. They fucking love it." Sometimes a little drunk, a little stoned himself, Aaron was tempted to respond, "me, too" just to be a wise-ass, but he was afraid that if he did, he would end up paying for it.

Hell was set deep in the woods, in Willington, Massachusetts, and it was called Hell because of the way the flames in the clearing looked as you came through the trees. Flames and fluid shadows. From the distance, you could almost believe you had come

upon a coven of witches, dancing with the Devil. Now as Aaron and Sarah arrived, just after nine p.m., Bud was high up in a pine tree, howling and breaking off branches for the fire. It was late October, the night air growing darker, cold. Cold enough to kill you if you drank too much and passed out in the woods — and Sarah passed out a lot, always drank a lot more than she should. Pretty with black hair and sleepy blue eyes, thick eyeliner and blue eye shadow, she couldn't have weighed much more than a hundred pounds. And Bud Rockford, it seemed, had a thing for her.

He leaped from the tree and landed with a thud. Shirtless. He crouched and growled, flexing his muscles and snarling like the Incredible Hulk.

"What do you think of that?" he asked Sarah. "I just jumped twenty-five feet. I'm like a superhero. You love it. Don't tell me you don't love it. You love looking at me."

The fire sparked, ash floating in the air. Bud strode back off into the woods, and Sarah took a seat on one of the logs the brothers had put around the fire to use for benches. Sarah put her little white pocketbook on her knees, opened it up, and pulled out a cigarette. Flicked her lighter, and then blew the smoke from the corner of her lips. She looked at Aaron and smiled, one eye shut, trying hard to focus. Nine o'clock and already seeing double.

Sarah and Aaron were both in the honors program at the high school and were both still pulling good grades, but they both liked to drink more than they should, and Sarah was drinking even more now. The windows to the world obscured with a black curtain. It made it easier, Aaron supposed. The grief and the guilt. Sarah's boyfriend, David, had been killed two months earlier, and prior to that, she had been avoiding him most of the summer. Not because she didn't like him, but just because she didn't want to travel to see him. He had graduated, moved north of Boston, and had no car to come see her. He was on the phone with her early every Friday and Saturday night, pleading with her to take the train to come see him. But Sarah didn't want to come — she was going into her senior year — she wanted to hang with her classmates and party. And then sometime after midnight, late in August, the car David had been sleeping in, his cousin driving, had hit a tree, the back door flying open and sending the boy flying through the night. Smashing his head on the pavement thirty yards away. Aaron sometimes wondered if he had woken in mid-air, mid-flight, had any idea of what was happening. And he wondered if David had been in route, racing to come see Sarah.

It wasn't out of the question, Aaron figured. David had been frantic the last couple of weeks of his life, all about Sarah. Bud Rockford had been going about telling anyone

who would listen that he had fucked her, and it had got back to David. He felt helpless being so far away, he said, but even if he had been close, how much less helpless would he have been? What would he do against Bud Rock? Large, violent, and crazy.

"And she loved it," Bud had told Aaron a few days after the incident. He was doing his ventriloquist-like-mumbling, barely spreading his lips. "I could tell she loved it. As soon as she woke up. I could tell by the look on her face. She loved my big dick."

The story Bud told was that he had had some coke, told Sarah about it, she drove off with him, and the rest was history. And in the days following, David was on the phone with Aaron. Pleading. Asking him to take care of her, watch out for her. Don't let her go riding off with Bud Rockford again. Or anyone else.

"I would do it," David said, "I'd protect her. But I'm fifty miles away. What the hell am I going to do from fifty miles away? Please, come on, man, you've got to help me. Guys take advantage of her. Look what that rock head did. You spend the most time with her. You're her friend. Will you watch out for her for me, Aaron?" He had hesitated a moment. "I can't trust anyone but you."

Aaron had agreed, of course, he had agreed; he had been touched by the request. He and David had been friends up until a year earlier, and then David began dating Sarah, and they had a falling out; and now, here he was, calling him, asking him to help him, saying he trusted him. Trusted him. Back to being friends. So of course he had agreed.

But it hadn't been easy. Policing her around everyone else. Whispers of "cock blocker." But Aaron's tour of duty hadn't lasted long—David was dead two weeks later, never having seen Sarah again. Aaron had been with her that night, sneaking her down his parent's cellar after everyone else had gone home. A crack in the glass of the ground-level window, and an early autumn chill in the air. They had sat on the battered yellow couch, faintly smelling of must and baby powder, and smoked Marlboro cigarettes and drank the last of the Budweisers. A fat candle burning on the coffee table in front of them, everything else in the room muted in the shadows: a poster of the Abbey Road album cover, a poster of a blonde St. Pauli Girl, and a gargoyle head with painted red eyes that Aaron had made in shop class. And when Sarah had fallen asleep, Aaron put his arm around her and pulled her close. Just to keep warm, he told himself as he stared at the ceiling. And somewhere, miles away, lights were flashing as uniform officers told the gathering neighbors to go back inside. An EMT blanket already covering David, his body lying face down in the street, a large pool of blood already drying beneath him.

Aaron didn't get the news until late the following morning. First shock, then disbelief. It was a joke, a rumor, a lie. And then something else. Something selfish and small. Liberating. Sarah could be his now, he thought, but the thought wasn't on the forefront of his mind, it was quieter, deeper, buried deep so no one else could hear it, no one else could know. There and then gone. It shamed him for a second, and then he, too, had started to cry.

Now he looked out through the trees, the closest illuminated by the flames, the ones further back mixing with shadows, and he wondered if the boy, David, were out there. Vacant-eyed and dead, watching them. Aaron believed he could feel him, and he didn't want to see him. As it was he saw him now, in his dreams. Often in the dream, Aaron would be sitting in the low light of his parent's kitchen, late, and there would come a quiet, slow knock at the twelve light kitchen door. Aaron would freeze up, knowing who it was, and then the knob would turn and David would let himself in. Moving slow, stiff, half his face missing, and all the while his eyes empty but locked on Aaron. He would take a seat, silent, and just sit and stare at him, and each night, in the dream, he had decomposed a little bit more. Slowly rotting. Sometimes smiling.

And wandering, Aaron thought. He wondered how long you wandered after you were dead. How alone you might be. And when he thought about death, that frightened him more than anything. Being alone, forever.

Tonight though, they were far from alone; there were over a dozen kids out there in the woods, Hell. The brothers — along with Bud, there was Bruno and Barry, the only one with light hair and several years older, and Billy, heavy glasses and the smartest of the four. The other regulars were also there. A short kid called Toad with a short torso and long legs and long arms. Danny Herlihy. And a few girls who Aaron was friends with — Marie and Debbie and Haley — but they didn't much like Sarah. And Pumpkin Head Fred was out there, too. Despite, the risks and volatility of Bud, it wasn't a bad place to go—far enough from the street that cops usually wouldn't bother you—and if they did, there was plenty of space to run, hide. And there were always enough characters about. Misfits to make you laugh.

Pumpkin Head Fred was doing that now. Pumpkin Head had gone from looking like he was twelve to looking like he was seventy all within the course of a year. Excessive cigarettes, pot, whiskey and acid. Poor diet. He had been just over five feet tall a year or two before, Aaron would swear by it, but now he was nearly 6'. Long gangly limbs, and what was left of his teeth either crisscrossing or rotted, a few punched out. Faded

jeans and a denim coat to match, his hair was a mess, and his eyes perpetually bloodshot. He wasn't a bad guy, Aaron thought, just a knucklehead.

"I just bought a half before coming out," he now said to Aaron and Sarah. Aaron was sitting next to Sarah on the log — a tree that Bud had felled the week before — and Fred was in front of them. "If you want to smoke some. Hawaiian Red."

Sarah looked up at him. "Twist my arm."

Fred lit the joint, took a deep drag. He held in the smoke and held the joint out to Sarah, who reached out for it, missing by three inches. She shut one eye and tried again.

Bud was up in the tree again, breaking more branches, glaring at them. He let out a howl and then went leaping from the tree he was into the one beside it, crashing through the branches. He grabbed hold of a branch, feet swinging, and twigs falling, and then hung there for a moment, everyone looking up at him before he began to inch his way in, hand over hand, towards the trunk. More twigs fell, then there was a loud snap, crack, and then he was traveling earthbound. He landed on his feet, but went immediately backward, breaking his fall with his hands behind him. His hands gave way, and then he was flat out.

Pumpkinhead burst, letting out the smoke and smothering a laugh.

Bud bounded right up. There were cuts on his arms, face, and chest. A trickle of blood moving down his cheek. "Somebody think it's funny?" he said, looking around the fire. He looked at Fred, and everyone was quiet. "That you laughin', Pumpkinhead? I'll squash you! I'll conquer you! That's what I do— I conquer!!" He growled then, and Fred looked away, avoiding eye contact.

"I'm dead," Fred muttered loud enough for only Sarah and Aaron to hear, but Sarah was looking at the joint, resin canoeing down the side. She took a toke, coughed a little herself, and then handed it to Aaron. Aaron was watching Bud. Seeing, fearing, what he might do next, but all he did was start to dance. The Saturday Night fever moves again, spinning about the fire, and then he began breaking up more wood, snapping logs over his knee, shouting out as he did, glaring at Fred, and then throwing the logs on the fire.

Johnny Ray was watching him, too. Johnny was big, round and simple. A curly mess of hair, and a thin little mustache. Slow on the draw but good-hearted, he was at least

early thirties, Aaron figured, maybe older, and he lived with his mother and brothers on a farmhouse at the edge of Hell.

Johnny liked to drink, and he liked to sing. When Aaron and his friends had a car they would often pick up Johnny Ray walking along the side of the road, chin to his chest and carrying a brown-bagged six-pack and pint of Old Grandad like a football. He always seemed wary of the implications when they pulled over beside him, but without fail, he would get in the car as they pooled their money together for him to pick them up a suitcase or two of beer.

Now he took a seat beside Sarah and Aaron. He liked the young girls even though he was a good fifteen or twenty years older, but he was harmless. And he liked to sing to them. Now he cracked a sixteen-ounce Old Milwaukee, looked at Sarah, and started in on Springsteen's "I'm On Fire." Just repeating the chorus — "Oh, oh, ohhh . . . I'm on fire," over and over.

"I like that song," he said when he finished. Taking a slug from his beer, dribbling a bit down his chin. "Because it doesn't have many words, so it's easy to remember. You're pretty," he said to Sarah. "You put me on fire."

Sarah laughed a little, blushed, and lit a cigarette. Freddy passed her the joint again.

"Is he still looking at me?" he asked in reference to Bud.

Aaron just nodded. "Yup."

Bud's brother Bruno was sitting off by himself with his boom box. Bruno had a square jaw and was already going bald, hunched as if he wished to make himself smaller. He always reminded Aaron of the monster — Peter Boyle — in *Young Frankenstein*. Bruno didn't talk — not more than mumbles and grunts in negatives and affirmatives — but he always brought the radio, refusing to let anyone touch it. Except for Bud. Bud could do whatever he wanted.

Now he switched on Robert Palmer. *Addicted to Love*. *Addicted to Love* was all over the radio, all over MTV.

The music looked to send a jolt through Bud, and the disco dancing switched to the dance from the video, Robert Palmer and the red lipstick girls with guitars, Bud staring at Sarah, as he shifted his shoulders back and forth. Looking at him now, Aaron thought maybe he even looked a little like Robert Palmer. At least a psychotic version thereof.

He danced over to them now, still singing, the music still blaring.

And then it happened. Pumpkinhead tried to suppress a laugh again.

He was still smoking the joint, inhaling deep and trying to hold in each hit as long as he could, and more than likely anything could have set it off. It sounded like a laugh, but Aaron supposed it could have been even more cough than anything else.

Accompanied by the quick release of smoke. Pumpkinhead was obviously trying hard not to look at Bud — it wasn't good to look at Bud when stoned.

It didn't matter. Bud picked him up and tossed him into the woods. Fred, pinwheeling in mid-air and then landing with a thud, and a moan. One of the other girls, Haley, let out a startled cry, said to her friends that they should leave. And the other brothers just stared. Bud then started in on Sarah, his eyes wide, and his pupils wider. Dilated. He pointed at her.

"I fucked you, and you loved it. Admit it, you loved it, you fucking little bitch. Tell it! Say it so everybody can hear! You want me twenty-four seven, everyone wants me twenty-four seven, because I'm fucking sexy!" he shouted.

"Tell it!" shouted his brother Bruno, repeating him, his voice sounding more like a high-pitched squeal.

Sarah wouldn't look at them, either one. She merely stared at the ground, her knees up and tight together. Then she ran a hand back through her hair and lit a cigarette. Exhaled the smoke from the corners of her lips. Everyone was now silent, everyone except Bud, and Fred, who suddenly climbed to his feet and scrambled away, running, a shadow retreating into the darkness, the forest.

The fire crackled and a piece of ash floated by, landing against Bud's cheek, red in the glow from the flames.

"Admit it!" he shouted at Sarah. "Admit that you loved it! Tell everybody here that you loved my cock!"

"Bud," Aaron said, "leave her alone, man, this isn't cool."

Bud switched his glare to Aaron. "No. You're not cool. Now stay out of this, you fucking little pussy, or I'll ram your friggin head up your ass, backward. You understand me?" Then: "Say it!" he shouted at Sarah again. "Tell the world!"

“Kill him,” mumbled Bruno.

Bud spun his head around towards Bruno. “Shut up, Bruno! This is my business.

You’re a fucking pussy, too.”

Bruno folded his arms tighter across his chest. “I am what I eat,” he mumbled, his lips still tight.

Aaron went to stand, but before he climbed fully to his feet, Bud pushed him over the log. Aaron hit the ground and heard Bud clear his throat, and then spit. Sarah let out a small cry.”

Aaron rubbed his head a second. It was insane to jump back up, to challenge Bud, suicide, but if he didn’t, what did it say about him? About his vow to his friend, now dead, out there in eternity. He had to jump back up. He stared at the night sky, stars, puzzle pieces in the canopy of trees.

And then he heard Johnny Ray. “You spit on her again, I’m going to spit you into the fire,” he said. “She’s a lady.”

Aaron sat up. Johnny was on his feet, his belly hanging low. He adjusted his pants, eyes challenging Bud. Bud glared at him, sizing him up, scheming. And there was a lot to size up — Johnny must’ve weighed close to three hundred pounds. If you could dance around him, you might be okay, but if he ever got hold of you, probably not so much.

“This is none of your business, Fat Man.” Bud flexed his biceps.

Johnny sipped his smaller bottle. The Grandad. “I’ll make it my business.”

Bud just growled a little. Still considering, Aaron imagined. It was one thing to go after any and all of the kids, but Johnny, although pretty limited in the thought department, was almost twice their age. An adult. It was another thing to go after an adult, their world and ways of doing things, thinking, just still a little bit too foreign. Intimidating. And it was something of taboo.

Johnny sipped, and Bud just looked away. Looking again at Aaron, now on his feet. “I’ll remember this,” he said. “Don’t think I won’t.”

The leaves tumbled by, the last traces of October hanging in the cold. Sarah and Aaron walked home, Aaron’s house. A long stretch of road with no houses, just trees.

Aaron's brother's car was in the driveway when they got to his house. A 65 mustang that his brother had put a thousand dollars worth of bodywork into— a lot for the day — and painted cherry red. His brother loved the car, and it looked nice, but it ran like shit. "Looks are all the matters, Aaron my Boy," his brother had said, "at least as far as the girls are concerned." His brother was usually out with his girlfriend in the car, but tonight for some reason, he was home before Aaron.

Sarah pulled a beer from her inside coat pocket, smiled a little, flipped the top, and handed it to Aaron to take a sip.

Aaron studied the house for a minute — the front light on, and the light on in the kitchen, but that was it — then he opened the car door and they climbed inside.

Sarah lit a cigarette and began playing with the radio knob. "I can't hear it."

Aaron laughed. "And you're not going to. I don't have the keys. I just thought we could sit a few minutes. It's getting cold."

Sarah looked at Aaron, one eye shut.

"He spit on me," she said at last, "I can't believe he spit on me."

"He's nuts. I've never met anyone so crazy. Why does he think you would want anything to do with him?"

Sarah laughed a little. "No clue. He's all fucked up and shit. I swear he was parked across the street from my house last week. My Mom was going to call the cops but then he went flying out of there. Nutjob."

Aaron could picture it. Sarah in her upstairs window, her mother on the phone, and her father sitting at the dining room table, next to the piano, smoking a cigarette and sipping his drink, scotch on the rocks. Ice blue eyes—just like Sarah's—and the house under siege.

"Did you ever do anything with him?" Aaron asked at last.

"He's all fucked up," Sarah whispered at last. "I was passed out. I don't know what happened." She snubbed out the cigarette. "David's dead and shit. Dumb bastard."

Sarah started to cry a little then. Aaron tried to imagine what had gone through her head when she heard that her boyfriend had died. She had never talked much about it with Aaron. Just cried at the wake, and then disappeared for a couple of weeks. What

did you do when you woke to the news that someone you loved was dead? He had never been that close to anyone who had died, until David, and even with him, they had fallen out close to a year before. Hadn't really spoken until David had called him, asked him to look out for her. And how long was he supposed to do that? How long was he supposed to look out for her?

"He pissed me off," she said now, wiping at her eye. Aaron reached out for her, and then she was hugging him, her face against his shoulder. Aaron held her tight for a moment. He didn't want to let go. He reached down and put his hand on her leg, then the inside of her thigh, and when she didn't stop him, he raised it up and slid his fingers slightly below the waistline of her jeans until he could feel the waistband of her panties. He held his fingers there for a moment. He could picture David, hear their last conversation on the phone— the urgency and the plea, the desperation in his voice — and then he could picture him as the car connected with the tree, the door flying open, and David in the air. Arms out like superman as he attempted to break his own fall. But nothing was going to break his fall — he was flying too far, too fast — and then Aaron could see it as his head connected and broke against the pavement. Eyes open, dull, vacant. Gone. Then more cars pulling over. Shouts and sirens. Darkness.

Sarah pressed tighter against him and Aaron could feel himself responding. Getting harder. She nuzzled her face into the hollow of his neck, and then raised her face, eyes closed so he could kiss her. Aaron brushed his lips against his own, pushing his hand lower, touching, and then he heard the knock come on the window. A tapping.

Aaron jumped. He turned quickly, his mouth going immediately dry, terrified at the thought of seeing a face there. Half expecting a cop, his brother, his mother or father — catching him with his hand in Sarah's pants. But it was none of those people, things. The face there looked whiteish blue in the light of the moon. Glowing and smiling. The face of Bud Rockford. Two inches away from the glass. He tapped two fingers again, twice on the glass.

"Come on out," he whispered. "I want to talk."

"Don't," Sarah said to Aaron.

Aaron reached over to push down the door lock, but Bud pulled the door open before he could. "Out," he said.

"Stay here," Aaron said to Sarah. He could feel his heart thumping, his hairs standing on end, his mouth metallic with fear. He climbed out of the car. The entire street was

dark. No lights, not even a car passing. It had to be well after midnight, he figured. Bud just stared at him.

"It's a nice night to get a little pussy, isn't it?" he mumbled. "Isn't that what you are? A little pussy? A pussy trying to get some pussy. Ha. That's pretty funny, isn't it? I'm a comedian. A pussy getting pussy. A pussy who can't watch his fucking mouth."

Aaron glanced towards his house, hoping to see lights come on, sounds or movement. Maybe his brother coming out. Anything.

"You spit on her," Aaron said. "She doesn't deserve that."

"Don't tell me what people do or don't deserve. I decide what people deserve. Because I'm a genius, and I'm fucking sexy. I am God. I decide. You just think you can cop an attitude with me because I'm so fucking sexy. That girl is a little cock tease. She can tease all the cocks she wants, but she's not going to tease mine, because mine's fucking huge. I should kill you right now, but I'm not going to. You're lucky. Because I could fucking kill you, and you know it. I have a right to do that. A right to kill all my creations. You should thank me."

Aaron just looked at him, feeling a sudden surge of relief—he said he wasn't going to kill him. With the moonlight now coming through the trees, Bud's face was half-illuminated, half dark, and then something changed, and he started to smile. A breeze came then, the leaves tumbling by. "You were supposed to be watching out for her that night," he said. "What happened, Aaron? Is this how you watch out for her? I see. I see everything. And I'm letting you live."

"What are you talking about?" Aaron said.

"Thank me," Bud said again. "I command you."

Aaron said nothing, and Bud stepped a foot closer.

"You're lucky," he said again, and the rest of it happened in an instant. Aaron felt the other boy's hands on his shoulders, and then before he could break free, a short left to the cheek. He stumbled a bit, and Bud threw him to the ground, and Aaron felt a boot against his head, repeating.

He heard a muffled voice cry out — Sarah inside the car. And then another car screeched to a halt on the street, someone else shouted, and Aaron rolled over and

opened one eye to see Bud running off into his back yard, off towards the woods. He glanced up at the moon again, and then it all went black.

When he opened his eyes, he was still dark, but he could hear a voice whispering beside him. The words not clear, nothing was clear. He couldn't see straight, everything blurry, and the whispered words sounded distant, carried an echo. There looked to be a small flame going in front of him, and after a minute or more, he realized it was in a candle. They were inside. Aaron looked around, trying to remember what happened. The candle cast shadows on the wall, fluid, and he could make out the gargoyle, hanging on the wall. Painted gray with red eyes. Horns. It looked a little like a demonic cow, he thought. And then he remembered he had made it. Sculpture class. The term before. They were in his cellar. And his head was throbbing.

Sarah lit a cigarette. She was sitting on edge of the big yellow couch, beside him. Her knees tight together. "I thought you were going to be dead."

"Really?"

"Yes. Well, at first anyway. Then I just thought you were going to be in a coma and shit. He's fucking insane. He should be arrested. He should be in jail." She held up a plastic bag, wrapped in paper towels. Cold, and dripping. "Put some more ice on your head. It looks like half a football. It must kill. Can you see okay?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "Where did you get the ice?"

"I snuck upstairs."

"Did my parents hear you?"

"I don't think so. I was wicked quiet."

There was a noise at the small window across the room, a tapping, and Aaron turned, startled.

"I think it's just the tree outside."

"How did I get in here?"

"You walked."

"I did?"

"Barely. You weren't making a lot of sense. A car pulled over to see what was going on, and that wacko took off running. The guy who pulled over helped me walk you to the bulkhead. You were having a little trouble keeping your balance and stuff."

Sarah reached over to the coffee table, lifted a beer, took a sip. Aaron wondered if she ever stopped. She looked pretty in the light of the candle though. She always looked pretty. Aaron leaned closer to her, things went black again for a moment, and once they cleared, she was curled on her side sleeping, shoes still on, her feet against his legs. The candle on the table — in a jar that said *Entering Wellington* — had nearly melted to the base, the flame dwindling. He heard the tapping again. Aaron was still sitting up on the couch, and he wondered if he had just awoken again, or if Sara had been awake at all—if he had imagined, dreamed, the conversation which he swore took place just a moment before. Nothing was making sense. But his head was throbbing badly and the cellar was cold. Damp. They were going to need a blanket. There was a blanket on the bed, on the far side of the room. Fish netting hung above the bed — he had hung it for decoration — and he remembered David sitting beneath it the year before before he had gotten together with Sarah, long before he had died. It was late fall then, too, a school night—David was a senior — and it had just been the two of them. They had drunk a couple of beers and smoked a joint outside. David was mostly silent, staring at him in the darkness. Aaron remembered thinking he didn't know why he was staring at him. As if he were plotting something, or wanted to tell him something. And didn't know how.

"You spend much time with Sarah Trilling?" he had said.

"Sometimes," Aaron had said, his antennae up, wondering why he was asking.

"Huh," David had said. He dragged on his cigarette, still staring at him. "I wonder what she thinks about that."

And he was staring at him again. Now, somehow. Back on the bed, his back to the wall. Fading in and out of the shadows. He looked to be speaking but Aaron could not hear him. A shadow, a specter, trapped in another time. The tapping, Aaron thought now, must have come from him. Tapping to get someone's attention, and asking to be released, beckoning, asking to be free. Not stuck down here, in the damp of the cellar, the sump pump turning on and off, must and mold, and cobwebs high in the corners, forever.

Aaron went to speak himself but nothing came through. His insides tightened.

He could see them, himself and Sarah, on the night David had been killed. See them as if looking on from above, or on from afar. He liked being on the couch with her, liked feeling her beside him, liked the smell of her perfume. Liked touching her. The swell of her breasts.

And David in a faraway town, the car crashing into a tree and his body sailing through the night.

Will you watch out for her for me, Aaron?

And now Aaron had to wonder if he had been touching her at the moment David's soul left his body. Spinning through the night and up into the sky, into the stars and out of control, spinning higher and higher, faster, and then slowing down, gradually, until finally stopping. And then floating, lower and lower, back into this dimension, and closer to earth. Above Aaron. Above Sarah. Seeing them. And Aaron unbuttoning Sarah's jeans. Tugging at the zipper. Then his lips around her breast. Sarah whispering a little but making little sense. Finally unclipping her hair, and lowering herself down upon him.

And David, or what was left of him, hovering above.

They would all see each other again someday, he thought. Once again in darkness and in shadow, in cold airless rooms. Souls flickering. And what would Aaron say? Would he admit it? Apologize? Would it matter? Did anything that happened on earth matter, once you had moved on? Once you were gone? He would wonder about that for a long time, he now knew. He didn't know what he would say.

You were dying, and we were holding each other on the couch, listening for movement upstairs, kissing each other in the dim light of the candle.

You were dying, and I had her on top of me, her hands on my shoulders as she moved up and down. She put me in her mouth.

You were dying, and I had promised you I would not let anyone touch her, that I would look out for her.

No-one.

You asked me if she loved you, and I told you she did.

And then raising her legs bent at the knee, she smiled up at me as I pulled off her panties.

And you were dying.

Gone from your flesh. Broken against the pavement.

You were dying.

Sarah stirred then, and when Aaron looked across the room, the shadow was gone. There was a tapping again on the cobwebbed window above the bed. A branch or a hand.

Beckoning him forward or beckoning him back.

Sean Padraic McCarthy's short stories have been published or are forthcoming in Glimmer Train, Ginosko Literary Journal, Cerasus Magazine, december, The Hopkins Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, The Sewanee Review, Water~Stone Review, and South Dakota Review, among others. His work has been cited in The Best American Short Stories, and he is a 2016 recipient of the Massachusetts Cultural Council's Artist Fellowship in Fiction Award. His first novel IN THE MIDST OF THE SEA was published in 2019 by Pace Press. He lives with his family in Plymouth, Massachusetts.