

Brooklyn, New York

August 14, 2003

by Erik T. Johnson



The night of the blackout, I lay awake in the dark. Sweat mapped folds of my body I'd never felt before, each drop seeming to say that there is always more than you know, even so close to home. I lived on the first floor, and all my windows were open to the night and the occasional weary bark of a small-voiced dog. The breeze had died weeks ago.

I had tried to take a few showers and lie on the floor, on wet towels. I tried to think about art, plan my next painting, but it was no use. The night was stifling with heat and I could do no better than lie atop my bed, naked and without covers, restless as a man without eyelids.

It was exhaustion, rather than sleep, which finally knocked me out. Just as consciousness was fading I heard a heavy wet slap on wood from the front of the apartment. But I was feverishly tired and the noise could've come from anywhere, what with all the windows open, and I had a brief dream about childhood summer days at the YMCA pool.

I woke dry-throated, but drifted off again. Shifting for a more comfortable position, I rolled into a moist body that immediately pressed closer against me. At first I imagined it was a man, maybe just because you rarely hear about women breaking into apartments on the news, and at this early point of the evening I was still sure that what was happening was part of the same world as blackouts and 911 calls. I shook and it shook with me. The thing had stuck to me, by sweat or some other liquid, bodily or otherwise, I wasn't certain. Opening my eyes and afraid to turn my head, I saw only the dimmest dark shape, like an ink stain on black paper. Legs or a tail or a tongue seemed to hang off the end of the bed, and its mouth must've been at my ear, and whether it was whispering an alien language or simply breathing, I added to a growing list of things I was afraid to know.

The sinister breathing turned to a deeper, more regular drone which I took to be snoring. And the gravelly, moist wheezing went through my ear, and though I am only thirty-two, it continued deep into my brain until I felt old and at the end of things, and hanging on by a wet sheet.

I either had a heart attack or fainted. I wasn't sure how long my eyes had been open because the ceiling was nowhere in sight. My chest hurt and my arms were numb. I wondered if I had been poisoned, and the entire blackout a symptom. But now I couldn't hear the wheezing or the strange alien language either. I forced myself to reach a hand out—the bed was gooey, but empty.

I had to pee. I clung tightly to this mundane need and focused on getting up and finding the toilet.

Somehow I made it there. I felt many kinds of relief in the bathroom. But new noises rose from the living room. Someone or something was knocking things over, and things were breaking, and falling, and being moved out of older, illusory orders into a secret chaos that had waited for them until August 14, 2003.

I didn't dare flush. I crouched down in the bathroom, hid by the half-open door. There went some picture frames, and there some potted plants, and for the first time I noticed that all things of all types sit silently in the same way, but each breaks with its own voice.

Then as my unopened mail rustled back and forth like a tide across my desk, I made out the snoring. Whatever was in my apartment was sleep-walking. I heard the unmistakable jangling, and then crash, of the oversized abalone mobile-sculpture, which was a gift from a famous overblown artist friend of mine, being knocked down off its large, securely-set hook from the ten-foot high ceiling.

And then all was still.

Followed by a heavy excremental thud.

The snoring started again. Although I knew the thing was slumped in the living room, the sound hovered mosquito-close. The mysterious body lay in one place, but its sleep filled the apartment like an element. I wondered if the essence of this thing was its sleep, its unconsciousness. Perhaps it lived its life in perpetual doze. Maybe the slightest electrical conduction disturbed its sleep and it only surfaced on those rare nights when the City was engulfed in absolute blackness. The only major blackouts in recent New York memory were 1965, 1977, and now 2003. If my think-

ing was right, not enough people would have encountered the visitor for there to be any widely known stories about it. And there were precedents in nature for such cycles, if not this odd. Cicadas, for example, only appear every seventeen years. In any event, this was my hypothesis—the only one that made some sense, and I needed something that wasn't raving mad.

All right. If the thing now slept in the living room, I would open the front door and hope it would find its way out more easily.

My body had become entirely strange, each part equally salted and drenched, and I couldn't tell my arm from my heart or my past. Melting into the living room, I moved into myself, tip-toed across my brain, tried not to squeak as my soaking feet made their way through the debris scattered across my pounding chest. I moved awkwardly as though stepping backwards. And all of New York shrunk to the size of one slumbering monster's fluttering eyelid.

I pulled the door open to a yawning gulf, and turned from the sheer wall of out-

side just as the thing on the floor trembled. It touched my foot—what part of it, I'll never know, but it felt like a kiss—and rose, shambling, maybe through the ceiling—I couldn't see where the ceiling was—and I fell, I didn't trip, but I just collapsed among flower-pot shards and junk mail, and the thing grunted and it whirled around and around and picked up what it had knocked over and put things back, in the wrong places, and its dripping mouth swooped me up and hung me from the hook on the ceiling where the abalone mobile-sculpture had been, and the hook went through my somewhere needed and I swung like a pendulum, and I watched from very far away as it rubbed around rearranging things and after forever the snoring started and it slowly shuffled out the door and down the street, getting smaller and smaller in the almost morning. I had grown saltier, darker, hotter, stranger, further, a red sea of me fading in and out of existence, hot lightbulbs pressed up behind my eyes flickering on and off, on and off, and then, off and off and off and off and off and off and off.



ERIK T. JOHNSON's work has appeared *Trunk Stories* (Issue #1), *New York Stories*, *The Absinthe Literary Review*, *Underworlds Magazine*, *The Midnighters Club Anthology*, *Eotu*, and *Far Sector SFFH*. He is currently working on a bunch of weird short stories, another novel, and getting people to read them. He lives in New York City.