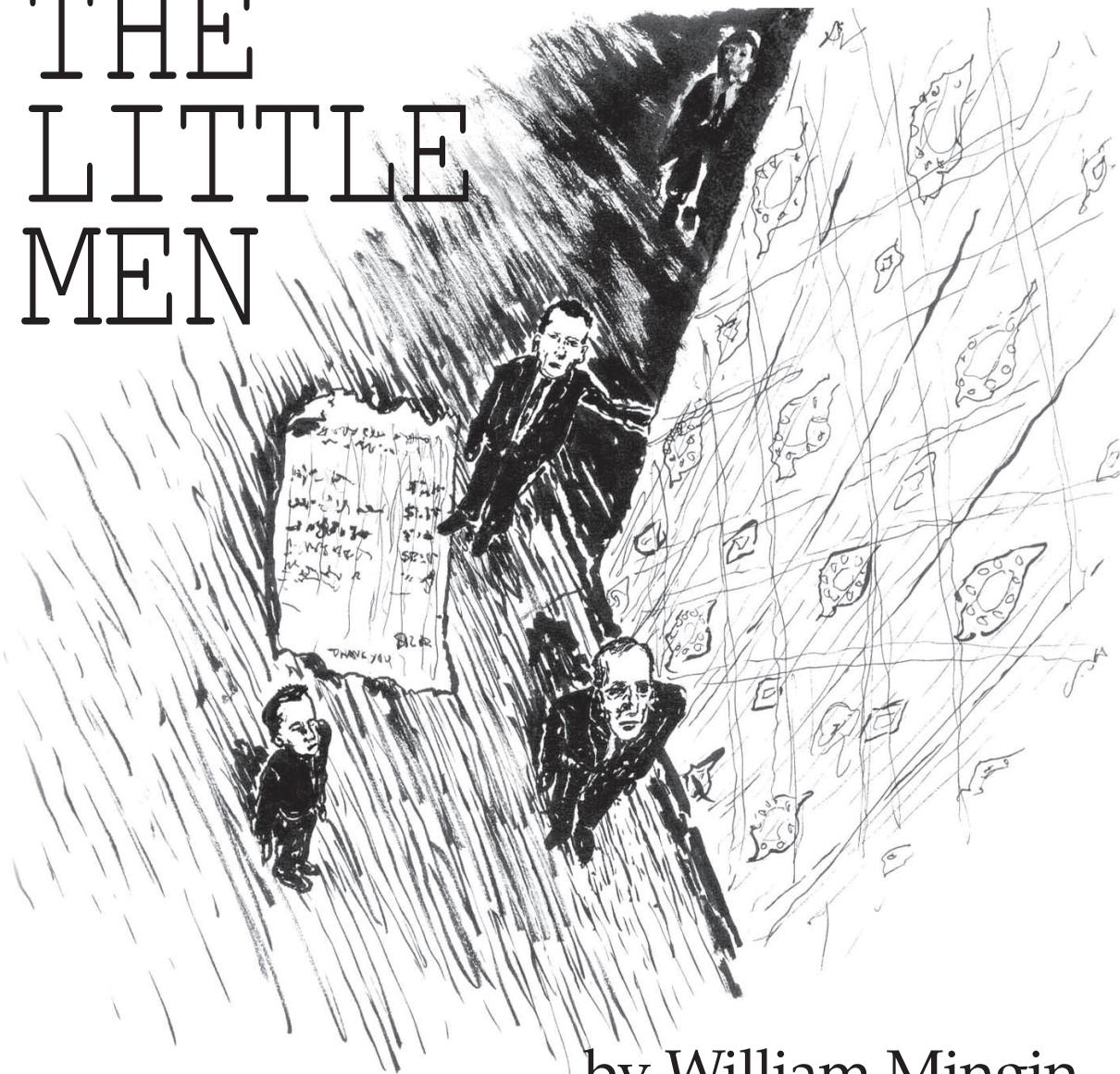


THE LITTLE MEN



by William Mingin

The little men were mostly three to six inches tall. He first discovered them when he pulled out his sock drawer to find them standing, silent, staring up at his colossal form with solemn faces and unblinking eyes. Their clothes were drab—black suits, white shirts, dull or slightly shiny

black ties. They wore their hair short. He sighed and pushed the drawer back in, admiring their sea legs, as they neither stumbled nor shook.

After that they showed up many places: standing on his canned goods in the cabinet, like conservatively-dressed statues on

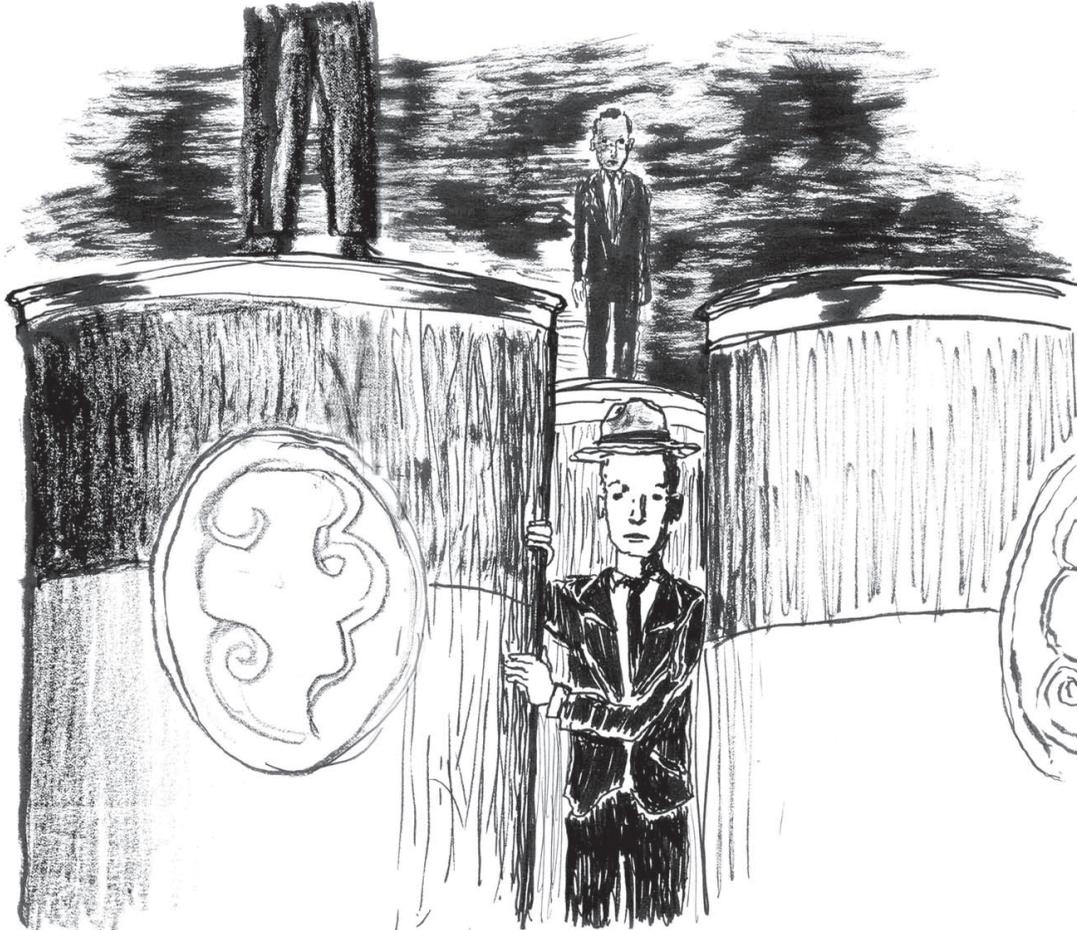
tin pedestals; resting on bags of noodles like beanbag chairs; with damp, plastered hair among the draining dishes near the sink; even shivering in the produce bin of the refrigerator. Those had earmuffs.

He doubted that they were police; the police didn't have plainclothes men that small. They could be CIA agents disguised to look small, or badly dressed aliens. But he couldn't imagine what they wanted from him. He had done nothing to them. There was something accusatory in their stare, as if he had forgotten a grave responsibility, to them or to another, though some

reticence kept them from mentioning it. He could think of nothing grave he had done or failed to do, only the usual run of minor wrongs, omissions, stupidities.

He thought of getting a cat, but was too tender-hearted. The image of a mouser trotting up with little arms and legs dangling from its mouth grieved him. He felt responsible for the little men. He worried when he closed the drawers, lest they misgauge the height and he crush their tiny heads.

He wondered what they ate and hoped they wouldn't leave pellets among his socks and underwear. But they seemed too



clean for that.

He never touched them. He feared that something sudden and violent would happen to him if he did, as if they might go off unexpectedly. After a while he spoke to them, as one does to a pet when alone, but when he caught himself at it, he stopped. He was particularly grateful that they never spoke back.

Sometimes he would grow furious with them, thinking them mindless, no better than roaches in business suits, roaches that could make eye contact. These moods passed.

After several months they began to show up outside his apartment, as if, whatever their message was, since it wasn't getting through, they had to intensify their efforts. In his basket at the grocery store, they balanced uncertainly on the soft hill of his bread or on spaghetti box walkways; they shivered on ice cream and frozen dinners. Always they stared up at him, expectant, forlorn.

They showed up in his car, standing on his dashboard like drab St. Christophers, mute and lost-looking, occasionally staring out the windshield like tiny dogs, but always turning back to him.

One night he went out with an old friend to a drive-in. Neither of them had been to one since they were teenagers; this was one of the last of them, and it was closing.

They watched the movie and laughed and ate popcorn. Giggling, they joked about getting into the back seat, each watching to see if the other really meant it. "Do you want to?" he asked her.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Okay. Let's."

She moved to climb back between the seats and then stopped. "Uhm—I don't think we'll be doing that."

"Why not?"

She nudged him to look. Standing on the low slope of the back seat, on the floor, on the hump in the floor, stood the little men, looking up at them like children.

"Oh," he said.

They left soon after, too uncomfortable to stay knowing that the little men were standing back there staring up, too short to see the movie.

One night, returning home late, as he clicked the key in the lock he stopped and looked up blankly at the door, in mute surprise at something he knew but could not say.

Inside, all the lights were on, lights he didn't know he had, light on light, each seeming to make the others brighter, until the light burst and splashed on the walls like the hearts of stars.

On every surface, on chair arms and table tops, on TV and stereo, in open drawers, on kitchen counters, on the floors, like groundlings at the Globe, stood the little men, some small as a thumbnail, some big as a cat, silently watching him. Hundreds of faces, pale, solemn, similar, most the size of quarters, and twice as many eyes swiveled to him in unison.

He felt sorrow and dread seeing them, at the pit of him the hard cold of ice. Chills of strangeness rode his nerves like waves in a taut rope.

The little men made way for him like a wave of black water with a foam of white faces at its crest. At the center of the living room he slowly turned, watching their surrounding faces, a field of importunate

daisies. Within him, all grew still. Then, as if he were so tired that he could no longer continue to stand, his head went back, his eyes closed, and he sank down slowly, lax and nerveless, first to his knees and then at full length on his back. The little men gathered in a crowded circle around him, eyeing his fair, lifeless face, damp hair, dark suit. Then his flesh and organs and blood and bones and hair and even his shoes and clothes all turned to a chalky substance like cake, that shivered and crumbled into chunks and bits as would a dry, unfired sculpture of clay. He was all white inside like stale doughnut. The little men came forward slowly, with still, serious faces, and ate up the crumbled figure to the last speck.



WILLIAM MINGIN has published eighteen short stories, with more forthcoming in such magazines as *Talebones*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Black October*, and *Zahir*; one was included in *Year's Best Fantasy 3* (Hartwell & Cramer). He has also published over 200 reviews, essays, and articles and currently reviews for *AudioFile Magazine* and *Strange Horizons*. He attended Clarion West in 2000 and is a member of the Garden State Horror Writers. He's married and lives in central New Jersey, where he runs a small book export business.