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Abstract
Sometimes when late at night I think I see someone out of the corner of my eye, it is really only one of those roving shadows. They rove up on a wall or behind me when I am pushing an empty gurney into the Waste Lab.

Keywords
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Cover Page Footnote
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Winesburg, Indiana: Pete, Waste Lab Technician

by Karen Brennan

Sometimes when late at night I think I see someone out of the corner of my eye, it is really only one of those roving shadows. They rove up on a wall or behind me when I am pushing an empty gurney into the Waste Lab. I do not know why it is called the Waste Lab.

I am really not afraid of anything.

When I was small, for a short time, buttons frightened me.

The gurneys have a peculiar smell, hard to describe.

I am not really sure what I should tell you about myself. The roving shadows are what come to mind because they are really so startling and mysterious, but there is also a cafeteria which at night is inhabited by a number of talkative zombies. They call themselves the Undead (predictably). And they jabber. Blah blah. They do not eat much, mainly the candy bars and juice boxes. I have discovered that they don’t like meat, which seems strange to me.

Strictly speaking, I am not in charge of the Waste Lab. If you care to know what the Waste Lab looks like there are three boxy windows up very high which require a device with a hook for opening, beneath which there are the walls with all the gurneys pushed up against them. That leaves a space in the middle of the room which I enjoy traversing. The floor is golden, as is the entire floor.
of this building.

I have mentioned that those gurneys really stink.

It is odd that through the Waste Lab windows which are up very high the view is always the same—night or day, it is as if a sheet of white paper occupies the space outside each window so that one has the impression of glowing blankness, of there being no world at all on the other side of the windows of this building much less the world of Winesburg, Indiana with its perfectly restored vintage fire engine, adult movie theater and my mother's Gift Shoppe, to name three things cherished by me.

You might deduce that zombies have something to do with the roving shadows. But even zombies cannot be in two places at once. The zombies, as previously stated, are in the cafeteria—all twenty, I counted—and here right outside the waste lab are the usual crop of shadows doing their usual roving up and down the walls and stretching and shrinking along the golden floors as is their wont and occasionally folding into little envelope-sized packages or splitting in twos and veering off in different directions and snaking down opposite corridors.

Perhaps meat reminds the zombies of their own lost and mostly forgotten bodies. Their own disintegrating bodies which are kept at the Winesburg Wondrous Peace and Light Haven which is also a dog and cat burial ground.

I prefer the words "burial grounds" to the word "cemetery."

One of the zombies, coincidentally, is called Pete also. He usually sits alone at one of the orange tables next to the kitchen door over by the window. In the cafeteria, the windows are filled with heavy black rectangles at this time of day. Once in a while one of the roving shadows streaks across and if you didn't know better you would think it was a tree.

More than once I have attempted to approach Pete for conversation. Of all the chattering zombies he is the quietest, but still he jabbers quietly to himself. They cannot help their jabbering, it is some kind of condition, probably, that they have to put up with as zombies.

Other than the gurneys there are large plastic barrels in the Waste Lab which they say are filled with eyes. Hard to believe, but I never checked. Though most things do not frighten me, I would not like to look into a barrel of eyes. Don't ask me why.

Pete jabbers mostly about physics. E equals em-ceed squared type-of-thing. Archimedes' experiments with buoyancy; Isaac Newton and his various theories of gravity and planetary orbiting. Pete, I said to him once, do you think the...
elliptical orbiting of ideas is a replica of the elliptical orbiting of the planets? In other words, I said, still arguing with Pete, who was gazing into one of the thick black rectangles that occupy the cafeteria window frames and moving his lips very slowly, not chewing his Starburst but jabbering, could it be that we are ourselves replica universes and that, for example, Winesburg, Indiana is a replica of the Milky Way so that, in conclusion, might we say that each of us is a replica of Winesburg, Indiana and vice versa? Sometimes I blow my own mind.

The other zombies sit in clumps along the side wall away from the windows and near the machines. I have never seen an animal—dog or cat—zombie and I hope I do not.

My mother, who is no longer alive, did once own a business called The Gift Shoppe which is also no longer alive, so to speak, having been appropriated by a company whose team of grinning sales people are always dressed in orange jackets. I have no idea what kind of business is conducted there. In my mother’s day, gifts were sold. Now, who knows?

The waste room has fat white hoses coiled against the ceiling. Strange but true. I have often been tempted to ask Mr. M_____ the purpose of the hoses and why, of all places, they reside on the ceiling of the waste lab, but Mr. M_____ never seems inclined to converse. I only ever meet him when he is leaving the building and I am entering it and at these times he averts his eyes and hustles himself into a white Chevrolet.

I don’t know how helpful this has been. I am who I am. The zombies come and go; they can be relied on to clean up after themselves—candy wrappers in the trash, chairs carefully replaced on top of tables. The roving shadows continue to mystify with their irrational movement, but I am accustomed to The Mysterious, it does not frighten me. I recently remarked to Pete that we are all enshrouded by mystery and walk around in its fog. Who is Mr. M_____ exactly and where does the white Chevrolet take him? What product is so important that six orange-jacketed sales people must overtake a nice Gift Shoppe? What about those hoses in the waste lab? The smell of the gurneys? The zombies and their dislike of meat? All mysteries that, as far as I can tell, will never be satisfactorily explained.

Karen Brennan is the author of five books, most recently a poetry collection, The Real Enough World (Wesleyan University Press, 2006) and stories, The Garden in Which I Walk (FC2, 2004). Her memoir Being With Rachel was published by WW Norton in 2002 and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize by the publisher. A recipient of a National Endowment of the Arts fellowship and an AWP award, her fiction, poetry and nonfiction have appeared in anthologies from Norton, University of Georgia Press, Graywolf, Michigan, Longman and Penguin, among others. She is a Professor of English at the University of Utah where she teaches in the
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