



# FALLING IDOLS

**“A masterful writer  
at the top of his  
form.” – *DarkEcho***

**Includes the novella “As Above, So Below,”  
a *Century’s Best Horror* selection**

# BRIAN HODGE

**Author of *Prototype* and *The Convulsion Factory***

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# FALLING IDOLS

by **Brian Hodge**



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## Original Publishing Credits

Stick Around, It Gets Worse © Brian Hodge, 1996. First appeared in *Darkside: Horror for the Next Millennium*.

A Loaf Of Bread, A Jug Of Wine © Brian Hodge, 1993. First appeared in *Frankenstein: The Monster Wakes*.

Blind Idiot Lovecraft © Brian Hodge, 1998.

Graphic Arts © Brian Hodge, 1993. First appeared in *Bizarre Bazaar*.

The Dripping Of Sundered Wineskins © Brian Hodge, 1996. First appeared in *Love In Vein II*.

Sensible Violence © Brian Hodge, 1997. First appeared in *Brutarian*.

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Once more, for D.J.

How you shine.

What is the curse upon religion that its tenets must always be associate with every kind of extravagance and falsehood.

— Aleister Crowley, *Book 4*

I became aware, more vividly aware than I had ever been, that the secret of life consists in sharing the madness of God.

— John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography*

## Stick Around, It Gets Worse

You weren't there when it happened, but you've spent so much time imagining what she went through during those final moments that she was aware of the world around her, you feel as though you were. You know the details pieced together by forensics experts analyzing the crime, and these feed you plenty of insight, but you knew her as the experts never could.

Remember the swoop of hair that would mask her left eye, and the way she'd always be pushing it back with two fingers, never three, and how that eye, when revealed, seemed to notice something worthwhile in you that no one else could recognize? Remember the way she would listen to music, sitting with folded legs upon the floor, doing nothing, just *listening*? Remember her penchant for giving money to downtrodden panhandlers and her tolerant smile when you complained, a smile that made you feel so small, so petty, so much less formed a creature than she was? Of course you remember. You remember everything, and still so clearly. Somebody has lied — time hasn't healed a thing, not for you.

The experts only knew her post-mortem; knew her unconscious, bleeding in the wreckage of her car; knew her clinging to life while her head was undergoing emergency reconstruction; knew her in the morgue's cold stainless steel drawer. Knew her just enough to tell you that she never once regained consciousness during those last nine hours. Knew her just enough to assure you that even had she lived, she'd never be right again, not the person you married, because the brain damage was just too extensive.

And you?

They didn't even know you at all. If they did they wouldn't have tried to make you see her death as merciful.

You've lost track of how many times you've found yourself right there beside her. She's driving her customary fifteen miles per hour above the speed limit on the Landry Expressway, and busy with the radio, while notched between her thighs is a tall paper cup of Thai iced coffee, her summer drink of choice. Thinking of work, or getting home, or the way you will feel together later in the night, another joyously fevered coupling to make a complete world between your flesh, just the two of you and nothing and no one else. You're flattering yourself, naturally, imagining her last thoughts to be of you, but that's all right. It's allowed. Something in you, never touched by daylight, needs to ache so much it makes you groan in the still, small hours.

She approaches the overpass and you see it coming from miles away, it feels like, but no matter how loudly you scream warnings it never does any good. How little it would take to change things: A flex of her wrist and she'd be in another lane, and that might be enough. Somebody else would be bearing this burden, and right now you'd gladly wish it on him. But it's yours, always and forever. It became yours the instant the brick thrown from the overpass smashed through the windshield and pulverized the left side of her head. You wonder, crazily enough, if she just didn't see it coming because her hair was in the way.

Vandals, a young police officer told you. They're pulling these stunts all the time,

and he doesn't think they have any real appreciation of the kind of damage they can cause.

The hell they don't, you thought, didn't bother saying. They know exactly what can happen, it's what they're hungry for, and the only thing that might've bothered them was that she didn't kill anyone else when her car went out of control. Ruining the lives of others, they've made this the mission of their own.

At the funeral, family and friends and clergy were brimming with the same big question that, in a moment of weakness, scrawled itself on the front of your brain as soon as you got the phone call: *Why?* Everyone wanted to know why. A few, desperate to dredge up some comfort at bargain basement cost, spoke in platitudes — God's will, all shall become clear one day — and you would force yourself to swallow the bile, if only for her sake, knowing she wouldn't have wanted you punching anyone at her funeral.

"God's will?" you contented yourself with repeating, after hearing the phrase one too many times. "I can't decide what's more monstrous: a god who sends little thugs up onto a freeway overpass with bricks to do his dirty work, or the way people believe that a god like that actually exists."

Their blind trust has never made sense to you, nor the meager delusions to which they cling as proof of being rewarded for their faith. It's not quite in you to feel smug because you know better, but lately it's not quite in you to pity them their superstition, either. Mostly it's disgust that you feel. They call you lost, but that's just projection, you deduce, because you're the one who's comfortable right where you are, realizing there's no reason for anything that happens, ever. How they hate that, because it grants you a freedom they will never know. A freedom that would paralyze them if they did.

You remember something you read years ago, written by Stephen Crane, and how deep within you resonated the chord it struck: *A man said to the universe, "Sir, I exist!" The universe replied, "That fact has not created a sense of obligation in me."*

You take your comfort in the oddest places, don't you?

\*

By autumn, grief has become something permanently affixed to you, like a boil grown too thick to be lanced, drained. It must grow until it bursts, or turns to silently consume you from within. Your friends understand — she truly was everything to you — while you in turn understand their reluctance to be around you these days. You just aren't that much fun anymore.

She was the last straw, that broke the camel's heart.

It's got you thinking — you've never really known anyone who's died of natural causes, have you? Parents and grandparents, plus friends and neighbors and casual lovers, they've all left you too early, and in such ghastly ways. Cancers and violence, accidents and congenital defects, aneurysms of the brain and psyche. You've heard of people who've slipped peacefully away in their sleep, or in their favorite easy chairs, after ripe octogenarian lives, but suspect they must be mythical, in the company of unicorns and mermaids.

If you didn't know better, you'd think there was a deliberate methodology behind it all, a gradual pattern of calamity spiraling inward until, at last, you're the only one left to be dealt with. You could be expected to think that, but don't, because you still keep your wits about you, thank god—

So to speak.

While fall's vainglorious colors deaden to rusts and browns, and drab wet shadows lengthen across the city, you feel yourself trapped in freefall. The most appealing thing you can think of is the end of it all, by chance or by your own determined hand ... yet a spark of hope lingers on, that maybe there's something out there worth surviving for, if only you could find it.

It turns you into as restless a wanderer as any junkie hoping to score, as an insomniac, as one of Arthur's knights looking for the Holy Grail. Shoes married to the pavement, you submerge within the wretched refuse. The teeming shores begin at the stoop of the building where you used to live with *her*. Where you sleep, still, although you seem to have quit living months ago.

You don't even know what you're seeking, do you? Only that it's entirely up to you to find it, to make of it your new life and purpose. Nothing and no one else can do this for you. You take heart, for it can be done: Life, like death, can be as random and abrupt as a brick hurtling from overhead.

\*

"Now you take me, for instance," says Stavros, the old gentleman you've come to know and like. "My whole family killed in the war and me just eleven years old. Would I be coming to this country if this hadn't happened? No, no, I don't think so. All this life I've had here? It would be unknown to me."

Mornings, before work, you've taken to stopping by a sidewalk cafe where Stavros holds his solitary court, drinking cup after cup of coffee. Against the autumn chill he wears a bulky knit sweater and on his head a flat billed cap, and if back in Greece he would look like any ordinary fisherman. Here, though, he seems exotic, a rogue and an adventurer.

"Do you ever think you'd've been better off if things had just stayed the same?" you ask.

He laughs, showing his great mouthful of strong, stained teeth. "Never. God rest their poor souls, every one of them, but these were people, let me tell you, who'd clutch a child to their bosoms 'til it suffocated. It wouldn't have been a bit different with me." Stavros peers into his coffee, the twinkle in his eye sharpening into something more cunning. "I was liberated. Freed to become all the things that my first life kept away."

He tells you stories, as he does each morning since you first paid him attention. Tells you what it was like to cross an ocean and see the world unfolding with eleven-year-old eyes. You listen, and you breathe in the scents of coffee and buses, watching both his seafarer's face and the brisk sidewalk passage of everyone who, unlike you, is going to arrive at work on time this morning.

He's the only friend, new or old, who doesn't seem to mind being around you. And you wonder: Which of you is more desperate for a companion?

You're not sure when you first became aware of it, only that it seemed to imperceptibly creep up on you. Something you might've noticed the moment you sat down but only acknowledged after nearly an hour: Someone is waving at you. Across the busy street and down one building; a second floor window, ornately archaic, in contrast with the more modern storefront below. Few ever pay any mind to the extinct architecture above their heads. Amazing, the way gargoyles can hide in plain sight.

It's no one you know — you're quite sure of it, just as you're sure it's you this woman is waving at. Even from across the street you can see how white and pasty her skin is, her thick and naked shoulders sloping beneath greasy straggles of dark hair. Modesty isn't her virtue, obviously, and you watch, half-fascinated, half-repulsed, as her breasts squash against the window.

A vivid red grin, the only true color about her, splits her face when she realizes that you notice her.

“Do you ... see that?” you ask Stavros, and point.

But even as you ignore her frantic overtures for you to come up, come up and join her, you have the feeling that just as this invitation is for you alone, so is the sight itself.

“See what?” he says.

“I...” You shake your head. “I should be getting on to work,” and when you're halfway down the block curiosity gets the better of you, and you turn around to see her waving goodbye — or at least until next time.

\*

The skin condition begins like a common rash, spreading and intensifying from there, from scalp to face, down to your neck and shoulders and chest, your back and arms. A great portion of your waking hours are simply spent scratching an itch that never feels sated, and within days you can scarcely bear to pass before a mirror. Scaly red patches, some crusty from too much scratching ... you don't wear them well, but then who does?

The dermatologist diagnoses psoriasis. What's causing it, you want to know. *Why?* Together you rule out food allergies, various environmental irritants to which you may have exposed yourself. You've not changed these sorts of routines in quite some time.

“Of course,” says the doctor, “we can't overlook an emotional component to this outbreak.”

Swell. You're not even supposed to grieve properly?

Treatments begin, oral dosages of etretinate and sessions of outpatient ultrasound hyperthermia, but you don't seem to make any improvement. To the contrary, you seem to be getting worse. It gets to the point where your boss thinks it would be a fine idea if you'd take sick leave. You're not the only one relieved. This is welcomed by an entire office full of people to whom you must be becoming terribly aberrant. And at whom you've been increasingly tempted to scream, “None of you knows just how lucky you are,

not a single complacent one of you!”

Stavros is the only one who doesn't mind your appearance, but you're wearing a hat pulled low these days, with your coat collar turned up, and bandages whenever your busy fingernails have left your face oozing. Camouflage has become a vital skill.

“No improvements,” he says, not quite a question, seeming to mourn for you.

You shake your head, wondering with shame who's staring and who's averting their eyes. When you're not occupied with this you usually glance at the window where the strangely repellent woman waved to you. Although as far as repellent goes, you definitely feel a new sympathy toward her. You didn't know what repellent was then.

You think maybe you've seen her since, grinning from other windows, other doorways, catching your eye, then disappearing, as if teasing you. But there's a certain innocence in teasing, and hers was lost long ago, if ever she possessed any at all.

Luring you, then? That's more like it.

“If your doctors do you no good,” says Stavros, gritting that mouthful of brownish ivory, “then maybe you should go to another kind of doctor.”

“A second opinion,” you murmur. You're reminded of an old joke. *You want a second opinion? Okay: You're ugly, too.* “I don't know any other kinds of doctors.”

And from the way Stavros smiles, you know he's about to make one of his stranger pronouncements.

\*

You're not the type who would ordinarily frequent those who don't hang M.D. shingles from their walls, but, relieved of your office duties, you have all this extra time. And Stavros speaks so glowingly of her, and she does live in his building, so you don't have much of an excuse.

Ellen Medicine Crow is her name. Her father, Stavros told you, as a boy was given tutelage by the legendary Black Elk, although you're not sure if you believe this. Quacks never stop seeking ways to boost their own stock.

“A shaman,” you say upon first encountering her. The irony isn't lost on you. If your rationalist friends could see you now.

“I prefer healer,” she tells you. “It doesn't sound quite as presumptuous. Or as intimidating.”

Intimidating. She's that already, this Lakota woman. She must be near fifty, if not past it, but carries herself tall and strong and supple in a way that's agelessly youthful. The only giveaway is the crinkles around her eyes. Her hair reaches her waist, black but threaded with strands of gray. Ellen Medicine Crow inspires your first sexual thoughts since *she* died, which frighten you with their suddenness, their power.

It's no easier when you learn she wants to come stay with you for a few days. There's so much she has to learn about you before she can help — *if* she can, she adds, which is the main reason you give in. You rather like the honesty of this kind of medicine, of someone who, unlike your usual physician, may be perfectly willing to declare your case a lost cause.

It feels strange having a woman around again, although her presence is hardly like that of a roommate; rather, a bird or some other creature that watches you with bright, all-seeing eyes. At night she sleeps by your side, although there's no touching but for accidental brushes. You turn away whenever an erection raises, yet feel sure she must know what you're thinking; too, she surely notices your shame over such traitorous skin, but has the grace to pretend she doesn't.

You distract yourself some of the time with the photo albums that accumulated before the hurled brick changed everything. Page after page of memories, some fresh, some seasoned by years, all of them capable of bringing you to tears if you look at them just right.

Ellen Medicine Crow lingers behind you as you bow your head at the table, weeping, and you feel her bend lower. Feel the light touch of her hands on your shoulders, the press of her forehead at the back of your neck. She's just sharing in your grief, but you drink in her touch with a terrible fear you'll never know anything so tender again.

Perhaps she knows this too, and this is why she mourns.

"Why did you decide to become a healer?" you ask her later, with a drier face.

Hair shimmers as she shakes her head. "I didn't decide. I had nothing to do with it. It decided for me. The most I ever did was choose not to fight it."

"Suppose you wanted something else, that this wasn't what you wanted to do. Wouldn't you have fought it then?"

She's patient with your honest skepticism, has undoubtedly encountered it before. "But how could I? The universe creates what it needs. All I had to do was grow. There's no reason to make it all so difficult."

You laugh, not cruelly. Mostly you wonder why you had to turn out so enlightened. "I just can't buy into that," you say, but no more. This hardly seems the time to get yourself into a reasoned argument against determinism.

Although you can see the appeal: The illusion of hands moving behind the scenes; accountability; someone or something to blame for the wretched turns life takes in this fucked-over world...

And you're angrier than you have any right to be, aren't you?

On the third day Ellen sends you out on an errand, something you must do by yourself. *Go find a rock and bring it back*, these are her instructions. *At least the size of your fist, a rock you feel compelled to pick up more than any other rock.*

You've never given rocks much thought before, wanting only to duck them when they're thrown, but she's the healer. You find one a few blocks away — it's a tougher order to fill in the city than you might think — half-buried in a nest of weeds beside a stagnant ditch. It passes Ellen's approval and she has the two of you sit on the floor, facing each other. Her face is serious, clouded even, her focus upon you total. You are the world. And you are in trouble.

"It's more than just your skin," she says. "It's everything, everyone you lose and everything that breaks for you. You wonder why. Why it happens to you. Don't you?"

You shake your head. "I already told you, I don't believe—"

"Lie to yourself if you want, but don't lie to me."

Your head lowers a bit. And you suppose, possibly, you may at least entertain the

sometimes notion of believing in reasons, that coincidence stretches only so far. You nod miserably, wondering if Galileo felt this way, forced to recant.

“Then ask the rock.”

You stare at her. “Ask ... the *rock*?”

“Ask the rock, then stare at it. Stare into it, so that you see more than just its surface. Wait until you see the patterns and the shapes it shows you. When you see something ... tell me what it is.” She takes pity on your failure to grasp any purpose here whatsoever. “The rock will tell you what you already know, but cannot or will not admit to yourself yet.”

So you feel like a fool, holding this flattened slab in your hand. Talking to it. Staring at it as if it’s going to talk back. Except it does, of a fashion. Stare long enough and shapes will arise, minutiae of texture and shading, and suddenly you realize what’s actually going on here. Basic psychology, fundamentally no different than staring at ink blots. Okay, you’re back on track, you can accept this after all.

“I see the top of a skull, without the lower jaw — these dark spots are the eye sockets, and there are the teeth — do you want me to show them to you?”

She shakes her head, directs you back to the rock.

“There’s a snake crawling from a broken eggshell ... and that’s an axe head ... there I see a little guy, it looks like he’s caught in the jaws of this primitive-looking fish.”

That makes four from the top of the rock. She stops you and has you turn it over. You orient yourself to the new topography and keep going: A curved dagger. A branch with decaying leaves. A butterfly leaving its cocoon. Screaming faces in profile.

“That’s enough,” she says, tougher to read than any doctor you’ve ever been to. What must she think of you? Does she reserve judgment at all? You watch her lose herself in thought so deep it could be a trance.

“So what’s next?” You can’t contain yourself.

“Next?” she says, and shrugs as if wondering how you could be asking this in the first place. “Go put the rock back.”

\*

You’re feeling different even before you reach your door once again, as if you’ve been less than vigilant, let slip a crucial guard. You’ve as much as admitted there may be more to the world than you give credit for, a wizard behind the curtain of Oz. One slip is all it takes. Which facade will be the next to crumble?

What better proof than this: You didn’t cheat. You returned the rock to the precise spot where you found it, as if somehow Ellen would know if you conveniently tossed it in the nearest lot.

Her bag is packed and by the door when you return, and she’s obviously been waiting for you, dreading the need to look you in the eye. She does it anyway, for you are the world. And you are in worse trouble than you ever dreamed. Her gaze is brutally honest.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “But I can’t help you.”

No. Of course not. She's got you talking to rocks — where can you go from there? And why are you crying?

"Think of what you saw. The symbols, their meanings."

Again, they drift forth. Images of transition, of death to old lives, emergence into new. Pain and torment and tools of their infliction. These weren't in the rock and you both know it, just as surely as you know their true origin.

"You're undergoing a change," she tells you. "You're becoming someone or something else. I'm sorry. It's not for me to interfere with this."

"Because," you murmur, "the universe creates what it needs. And you wouldn't dare tell it it's wrong, would you? That it's got no right to do this to me. *Would you?*"

Your voice grows more ragged as she backs away from you, and how you wish her eyes looked younger, less knowing, less certain.

"What does it want from me?" you scream as Ellen takes flight down the stairs. You're sliding to the floor, arms wrapped around yourself in defense of the cold you suddenly feel. "*What does it WANT from me?*" Her footsteps fade, leaving you with empty stairs and hollow corridors, where even your kindest neighbors must now hide behind their doors if they don't want to see what you've become already.

\*

You spend days dwelling on all the people and institutions and ethics into which you placed your faith, only to have them now failing you. Not that you cast blame — it isn't in your nature to blame. You come to realize that the city is the only thing that hasn't let you down. Solid and gray, it's always there. Not that it takes notice of you, but at least it doesn't spit you back. These days that's a lot.

So it's inevitable that it becomes your true home after you return from a movie one night to find that your apartment building has burned. And you cry not for yourself, but for *her*, the way her existence has been systematically erased. Even her clothes are now ash, plus all the photos that kept her alive. She might now have been no more real than a daydream.

You sleep in your car, park where you can, walk when you're no longer able to tolerate its confines. Your crusted skin becomes a barrier between you and them, all of them, with their safe and placid lives. You used to be one of them, but no more — perhaps this is why they no longer see you.

You could get away with a lot, with this new invisibility.

You wonder what it all means, and why you were chosen to play the fool's role in this grand illusion. This whole city a stage, with so few of its players even aware of their own parts.

That most peculiar woman continues to wave at you from afar, her hideous red grin more lascivious now. Sometimes she seems to laugh. She knows, oh, she knows all right. Your secrets are hers and always have been. Does she find you during your random travels or do you naturally gravitate to wherever she happens to be?

Does it even matter, when in all likelihood you're destined for each other?

The next time you see her she's waving from the third floor window in a monolithic old apartment building of gray stone. Its gables and cornices look heavy, vast, crumbled by the decades. Its walls stand mottled by years of water, seeping and trickling. It looms over you, set against a blue-gray evening sky threaded with hints of dying rose. The block you're in is a gauntlet of bare trees. Their leaves underfoot weave a ragged, wet carpet, slick and spicy with decay.

A few steps closer, a shift of light and perspective — you now notice the gargoyles perched on the building's corners and nestled above its eaves. Winged, horned, they hunch and squat above you in silent dominance, caught there like corrupted souls, or grotesque children birthed from granite.

They alone watch your entry to the building.

You find the stairs, and they beckon you up. One floor, two — what a chill this building holds, a mausoleum in the middle of a world that only looks sane and ordered. Cabs and cable TV would never know how to find this place.

The third floor.

Hallways are many, but you follow the most likely one, that will lead you to her. Your footsteps are small clicks in a greater hush made not of silence absolute, but small echoing murmurs heard through the walls. Someone is crying somewhere, and someone else laughing. Elsewhere, children are singing, but it's no song you've ever heard, and not a song for children's throats.

The door you decide upon is stout, peeling, as scabrous as your face. Unlocked, naturally, but you knew it would be. Another hand might not find it so, but for yours the knob twists easily.

It stinks in here, of mildew and unwashed bodies, but nothing you couldn't get used to. Sometimes you crave a friendly touch so much that you think you'd welcome it from a leper.

And you thought this place would be emptier than you're finding it. At least two dozen people are here, along the walls, but there's no furniture to speak of, and no one sits together, no one talks. Mostly they stare at the baseboards and the floor, some the ceiling, like gray strangers in a doctor's office. Waiting for their name, their turn, the expected surrender of their bodies.

In another room you find no one alive, just a jumble of blue limbs, bodies with hands bound behind them, thumbs tied together with wire. You can't see their faces clearly because all the heads have been covered by plastic bags, then cinched around the necks with rubber bands. Most of them died with their mouths open wide, straining against the plastic, sealed forever.

One of them looks like Stavros, but you can't be sure.

You find her in a room glaringly lit by a naked bulb dangling from the ceiling. A moist, yeasty smell surrounds her, but maybe that's just imagination, because her skin reminds you so much of dough. A roll of fat bunching about her thick waist, she kneels on the floor before a middle-aged man who lies naked and trembling on a tabletop. Her arm, her right arm ... you can't find it, and for a moment think she must only have one. Then you realize:

She's working it up inside the man. He shudders, groaning, as one bony foot pedals ceaselessly in the air, like a tickled dog.

You watch, a voyeur, until at last she grins at you. Red, so red. A tangle of greasy hair obscures her eyes, and she licks her lips as if she'd like to kiss you.

Not yet. Not yet. You're not that desperate yet.

"Get started anywhere," she tells you. Her voice is low and, for a woman, almost gravelly; not unerotic. "That's the one thing about this place, the work's never done."

"I ... I don't understand." At least you're being honest. You think.

And she laughs, fisting her arm another inch into the man. "I remember when I was like you."

"How? Like how?"

She grins again. "Asleep." Then she tilts her head back, and you know her eyes must be closed in something like ecstasy. Her mouth curls into a sneer, lips skinning back, and she's gritting her teeth, little gray pegs that rim her jaws.

"So few innocents," she says, "and so much time."

The man cries out, suddenly and sharply, and with the thick sound of membranes giving way she yanks her arm out. It glistens, and in her hand is clutched what may be his heart. It's so hard to tell, though — you think it should be red, but mostly it's clotted black, as if riddled with disease.

"Thank you," he breathes, head lolling back, and at last his leg drops prone, exhausted, spent. "No more, please, no more..."

She rests the organ on the sparse gray mat of hair sprouting across his sunken chest. "You know better than that. With men like you, there's always more."

She has her arm back in up to the elbow before you can turn to run, run from the building into the welcoming night, where you have no name, no longer even a face.

\*

In the months since *she* died you've frequently found yourself driving the Landry Expressway, even when you have no good reason for being here. You drive it one direction, turn around at an exit chosen at random, drive it the other. Giving in to a need to linger where your one true love met her end, you suppose. Or perhaps your need is baser still — tempting fate, catch me if you can.

Red-eyed, red-faced, you burn gas this night as if there's no tomorrow. And maybe there isn't. The world has surprised you, has shown you things that a year ago might not have even been allowed through the filters that all brains keep in place to strain out whatever can't be tolerated. Now, though, you've been prepared, and it will take so much more to surprise you.

Traffic has been thinned by the lateness of the hour, but here you are in white line fever. When you see something hurtling at you from above you don't even swerve. The windshield implodes, a brief storm of pebbles of safety glass showering your bed, your home, the final sanctuary left to you. The brick ricochets off the passenger seat, slamming into the ceiling, then the dashboard. Surprisingly, you feel little fear, knowing that you can't be killed. Not here, not like this. You've come too far. Something has invested much cruel effort on your behalf.

You're standing on the brakes. The car spins out across two lanes of screaming traffic, and then you've broadsided a chainlink fence that shears apart to let you through. You've barely come to rest on the other side before your equilibrium is restored and you scramble from the car. Others have slowed to look, to marvel, as you emerge as unscathed as anyone can expect. Dusting yourself clean of glass, seizing the brick that was meant for your head...

And you run.

Backtracking, running parallel to the expressway, you pound toward the ramp that lets drivers on from the overpass. The city, the night itself, has turned red in your eyes, and you wonder what they're saying about you in those cars that swerve to miss you on the ramp. They notice you now, don't they, these people who once were you.

You crest the rise, stand for a moment beneath a sky full of gathering clouds. Down below you can see the fresh loops of rubber left by your tires, and on the other side of the overpass you see them, two figures running from the scene of the crime, and now you obey the purest and most instinctive impulse you've ever felt.

Whatever has filled you, they're no match for it. Run as they might from the expressway, deeper into mazes of brick and asphalt and corrosion, you gain on them in a matter of minutes, until they are close enough to bring down like deer before a wolf. You hurl the brick while yet on the run, and it arcs past the shoulder of the nearer fugitive, toward the leader, thudding solidly into the back of his head. Was there ever any doubt? Something guided it there, as surely as it was first guided through your windshield.

They go down in the street, one tripping on the other. The one you've struck doesn't get up. The other scrambles for his feet but you're there, upon him. He rolls over to face you, eyes feral in their terror. He can't be more than fourteen years old.

He thrashes beneath you with skinny stick limbs and unkempt hair, and you retrieve the brick. In your grip it feels light as a dream, heavy as an anchor. With the first downswing you crunch the boy's eye socket. The second unhinges his jaw. The third staves in his forehead and stops him from moving after one final, frenzied convulsion. He makes a much easier target, until there's no more point left to hitting him.

The other one is trying to crawl away by the time you finish, legs dragging weakly behind him, knees too weak to support his weight. The back of his jacket is already slick with the cascade of blood from where the brick first connected. You wonder who his parents are, how they let him end up like this, with no more regard for other people than bugs on which they might drop stones out of boredom. You wonder if they'll miss him. Or instead shed a few token tears, then go on their way, creating other monsters, other demons who haunt these lands, these canyons, these buttes.

Demons. Yes, that's it. That's what he must be. You know what they look like now. You know what makes them. And most of all you know why they're needed.

He doesn't give you any trouble at all.

And soon after you stumble away from them, the rain begins, disgorged by swollen black clouds, falling to rinse you clean, and to wash away the worst of the slick you've left in the street for rats and other eaters of the dead.