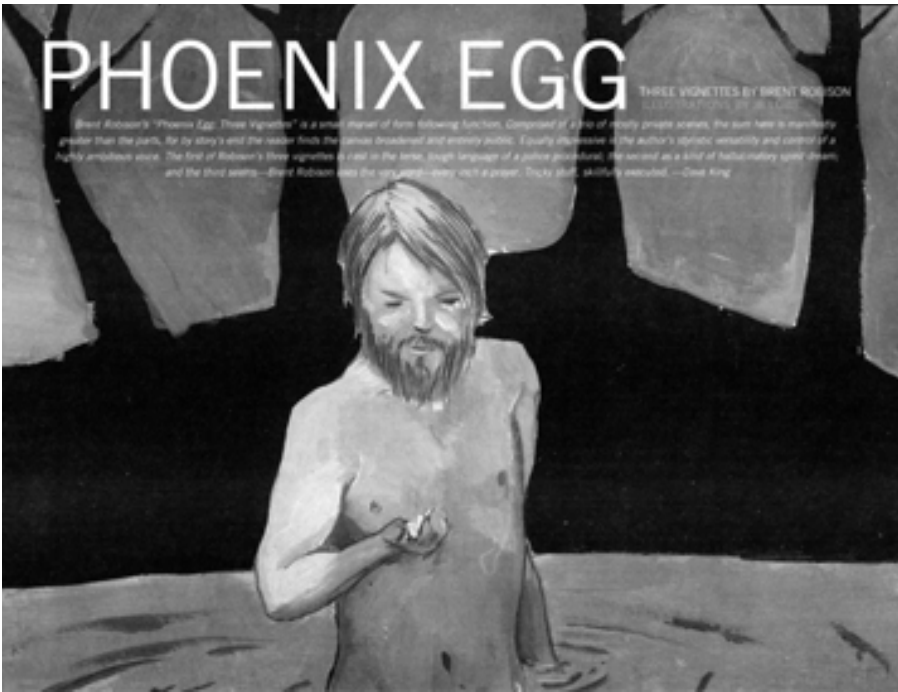


PHOENIX EGG
THREE VIGNETTES
By Brent Robison



Brent Robison's "Phoenix Egg: Three Vignettes" is a small marvel of form following function. Comprised of a trio of mostly private scenes, the sum here is manifestly greater than the parts, for by story's end the reader finds the canvas broadened and entirely public. Equally impressive is the author's stylistic versatility and control of a highly ambitious voice. The first of Robison's three vignettes is cast in the terse, tough language of the police procedural; the second as a kind of hallucinatory spirit dream; and the third seems—Brent Robison uses the very word—every inch a prayer. Tricky stuff, skillfully executed. —Dave King

CABIN

Tony feels a needle-twinge of new guilt, a little spike in the ever-present hum, as he lies to the friendly young woman in the jewelry store.

“It was a gift,” he says. He shifts his weight and swallows.

“It's really beautiful.” For a better look at the object on the glass countertop, she leans closer to him. “It's just too bad about the damage here along the edge.” She points with her pinky, the elegant tiny nail polished a pale mother-of-pearl.

Tony just stands there, silent. He judges himself deficient in all social skills after three months alone in his cabin. What a far fall from the glib talker he'd once been, back when life was flashy and brutal. He used to say to himself, I am three things, and three things only: Italian. Catholic. Cop. Now, he knows he's much much more, but he can't quite put a finger on exactly what.

Tony has left his old life behind. His wife had asked him for a divorce just before the century turned, citing something she called “patrol car widowhood”—the streets of Staten Island and the loud crew of shoulder-punching guys at the 120th Precinct had become like the air he breathed every day. The court date came and went, and he marched forward, day in, day out, noble and empty-headed, numb and duty-bound, until on a bored and angry whim in the dark of winter, he volunteered for a stint at Fresh Kills.

He had grown up in Arden Heights with the stench of that vast landfill in his nostrils every day. But now it was different. Everything in the world had changed. He donned white coveralls and a respirator with some 499 other NYPD, FBI, and civilian workers to comb the endless debris from the towers.

Something went deeply wrong inside him. He felt it as a slow relentless crumble. He was falling to pieces himself in the face of that eternal stream of broken things—objects touched and owned by permanently absent persons, and then, then, the occasional fragment of human flesh and bone, at first unrecognizable, until, with a horrible rush of awareness, so very familiar.

Standing at the conveyor belt he might, at any random moment, feel a sudden choke and a surge of hot tears, and go through terrible struggles to maintain composure behind his mask, surrounded by men. It was in one of those moments of disintegration that he focused on a tiny object, plucked it up, slipped it into his glove, and pressed it with manic energy against the flesh of his palm until he could breathe evenly again. He held on to the thing, and at the end of his shift, he did the unthinkable and smuggled it out of the compound in his boot.

Days later, before the great task came to an end, Tony quit the force, sold his Mustang to buy a used four-wheel-drive pickup, put his possessions in storage, arranged for his sister to rent out his house for a percentage, bought a truckload of supplies, and moved to a tiny cabin deep in the Catskills.

His grandfather had built the hunting cabin before Tony was born, but the family had rarely used it since the old man died. The one-room log structure and its surrounding twenty acres of forest on a mountaintop had languished in the far back of Tony's mind—something to consider in the distant future, but never, until that spring day, rising to a present concern.

He spent the first week in hard, sweaty labor, making the cramped, decrepit four walls into a livable shelter. Holes in the roof and one window. Door hinges rusted shut. Layers of mouse shit on the shelves and counters. Spider webs thick on everything. Mounds of bat guano in the outhouse. He used up his entire bottled water supply and had to lug refilled jugs up a hill from a little rocky creek below.

The second week was entirely different. Finally, he just let it all go, releasing his own trembling walls to the relentless gravity of his inexplicable emptiness. He broke down, utterly. He sobbed and drank and smashed things and drank some more. He vomited on the floor. He lay for days in a naked drunken stupor and found himself one midnight staring at his own candle-lit reflection in a window, with the barrel of his .38 revolver in his mouth. Through his fog, he comprehended that this was a point of no return, and he made a decision. He flung open the door of the cabin and threw the pistol with all his strength into the black forest.

The third week, he began to mend. He slept fitfully, but long. He bathed in the creek. He took lengthy walks through the fresh piney woods. He organized his tiny abode. In the bottom of a box he came across the one-inch piece of tarnished metal and crusted stone that had been the catalyst for his change—that thing once possessed by someone whose family would never see them again. That thing for which he would always be guilty.

He began to take trips every other week into the nearby village of Margaretville, and on the first such venture, he picked up silver polish and a library card. Soon the stolen pendant gleamed in shades of silver and gold, the egg-shaped stone showing glimmers like hot coals in its red-orange depths, offset by filigree of cobalt and violet. It leaned against the rough-hewn log wall on a shelf, next to a candle in an ancient baby-food jar.

He began to read. Mutely following the librarian's lead, he started with Thoreau and Emerson, then moved on to an astronomy text and a biography of Beethoven. He tried Dante and sampled Kierkegaard. He worked his way through novels by Dostoyevsky and Marquez and poems by Eliot and Rilke. He struggled with Steven Hawking and laughed at Mark Twain. He studied the Bhagavad Gita and the Tao Te Ching. He devoured Rumi. He read in a half-broken chair under a tree by the cabin door as the dapple of leaves inched across his pages; he read by flickering candlelight deep into the night.

His dark hair and beard grew long and thick until the day he saw the woman in the little antique shop and jewelry store. Back at the cabin, he carefully trimmed them until he deemed himself respectable, if a bit bohemian.

He had been looking at the jewelry in the window that day to see if anything resembled his pendant; he wanted to identify its stones, maybe even its maker. But now he had another reason to come back, walk right in, and ask. There was just one problem—for weeks and weeks, he had not had an actual conversation with a human being. He didn't believe he could still do it, or was even worthy to try. But he also felt that he had so much more inside himself to say than he had ever had before. He was both exhilarated and scared. And, at the same time, thoughtful, as if observing someone not himself. The woman behind the jewelry counter was part of this confused and fluttery jumble, but there was much more to it than that. It was connected to other, deeper things, scars new under his old skin, the marks of a bitter evolution.

Now, she studies the pendant as she speaks. "I think I can answer your question.... This central stone here? That's a fire opal. Most likely from Mexico." Again, she points with her small pearly nail. "These delicate inlays around it are lapis—that's the blue—and sugilite—the purple. Of course, the

setting is sterling silver, and these accents are, I'm guessing, fourteen karat gold. It's a really excellent piece of work."

Tony feels an urge to say "Thank you," but then realizes that would be absurd. So he says nothing, just clears his throat and breaks out in a sweat.

She looks at him a moment with eyebrows raised, then smiles—an offer of aid. "Were you wanting an appraisal? Or considering selling it?"

"No. No. Thank you." Tony scoops up the pendant and starts to turn away, but forces himself to stop. He's succeeded at one part of his mission—the naming of the stones; now, he's not going to let himself fail at the other. With a deliberate motion, he turns back to her and says, "Thank you, you've been very helpful. Can...may I ask your name?"

She tilts her head so that one auburn lock of hair swings free from behind her ear. A smile plays at a corner of her mouth, and her eyes dance with something he's sure is a laugh—a laugh that, he now sees with infinite gratitude, holds not even a hint of cruelty.

"Sure," she says.

When she tells him her name, he realizes suddenly that he is able to rise to any occasion. No matter what the future may hold, he'll be just fine. For the first time in memory, Tony feels certain he is standing on the bright, dangerous brink of an actual future.

STORM

The wide river lay black as oil under the oily black sky, mirroring in an up-ended smear the hard glittery stacks of knife-point lights that formed the hulking glassy shape of the city. Hard corners jutted up mean like cubist biceps, slamming pumped and gleaming against the onyx sky where no stars could survive the infernal blaze of electric fire to hint at a world beyond that of men.

The Navajo jeweler veered the rented mini-van to the narrow shoulder of the elevated highway, and stopped. His wife, who came from a freckly line of Irish redheads and was a painter of big expressionist canvases on which vivid western landscapes seemed caught in a fiery dance, put her hand silently on his. With their three copper-skinned kids, whose eyes were wide and black, wider and blacker now on this midnight than ever before, they sat without a sound and stared across the dark rim of New Jersey at the dazzling mirage that was Manhattan.

Out of their small city on the high desert and across the gigantic twist and fold of crust that holds peaks and prairies and vast fans of river drainage and endless migrating storms of dust blown by big winds, all that flatness and unremitting dark that is called America, they had flown, all of their feet for the first time leaving the bony stone surface of home, so that their toes felt the absence and curled in their five sets of shoes, all together as one, family-style, and now they perched on the edge of the continent, come on a pilgrimage to look for a new home in the city at the center of a different world. The art world.

The man and his wife shared dreams. Their dreams were of a home in a place where all humanity's beauty and grace were gathered, a place where the very air pulsed with creation and the very light of day hummed with the energy of fine and fantastic invention. Where the dull and the narrow were outnumbered. Where the spirits were kindred. Where their children's minds could grow both sharp and open. Where he could push his work far past tradition into new bold worlds of shape and gleam and hue, where she could be inflamed by the gritty and muscular alienness of everything in sight until it poured through her onto the canvas. And where the universe would at last show its appreciation.

They stared at the city. The man brushed one long black lock from his forehead. He remembered a line from Neruda: *Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.*

No one said a word. He pulled into the traffic, traffic that even at midnight was heavier than he'd ever seen before. In ten minutes they were under the bedrock, under the real skin of this land that was covered and covered again with new skin and newer skin of tar and gray slab and grime and they were under the river that had flowed down from the ancient glaciers since before the first white-sailed ship,

since before the first canoe, and still flowed slow and wide, pouring its endless waters into the sea. When they rose up out of the tunnel, the kids all began speaking at once and the little van became a capsule of chattering noise so noisy they didn't hear the low steady rumble, the low pulse and hoarse whispery roar of some wild beastly heart that pounds and pounds and wills itself to go on pounding somewhere there in the darkness, deep under the glittery cracked and filthy pavement.

It was spring when they arrived, the first of the new century. Now it was spring again, and a storm was approaching. It was that first day of the year warm enough that all in the city could be finally sure, once again, that the slate-dark clouds advancing from the west would eventually bring flowers rather than the sting of wind-driven ice or the heavy snow that so fast turns as gray as the streets it falls upon. The Navajo jeweler felt the air change with the oncoming weather as he strode down Broadway, feeling good, feeling tall, feeling the cash in his pocket. He had just delivered one of his best pieces ever—a new design he named Phoenix Egg for its stone and its silver swirl like a wing or a flame—handed over with pride and gratitude to a guy in a coffee shop on Eighth Avenue in the Twenties. Now, as he walked, he was thinking, thinking hard, stepping strongly, loving the feeling that his own rhythm was, at this moment if not always, so in tune with the city's rhythm. But there was a shadow, and it wasn't just the coming storm. As his thoughts became clear, he slowed and stopped.

Recently, late at night, his wife would cry. He would say, "Let's try a little longer."

He knew it was an old story. Things were piling up: The foul air in the print shop where he spent his long numbing days. Her sore feet from waiting tables part time. The rent. The galleries who returned their slide packets unopened. The perpetually plugged plumbing. The tears of their children as each, in turn, was bullied. The scattering cockroaches. The street fairs where overdressed ladies haggled his price down, then walked away. The shit smell of the subway stop. The weapons in school. The galleries that would be so very glad to hang her paintings for a fee of only \$1,995, paid in advance. The fights of the neighbors, too vicious even for Spanish to soften. The rent. The evil gangsta attitude his second son had adopted. The rat on the windowsill. The store that went bankrupt and disappeared overnight, along with his work. The galleries, all the white and clean and shiny and irrefutably inaccessible galleries. The rent. The dead body in a doorway up the block.

"Let's try a little longer," he had said.

The storm approached, and then it arrived. It broke over the great city on the island and it was as though the tallest spires were flinty lances piercing the underbelly of the sky and ripping the soft gray hide, as if the sky were a hunted animal, as if the sky were offering itself up to death and rebirth in some vast turning, and then it rained.

Rain poured from the wounded sky in rivers standing up, water running down the misty air like it ran down the concrete walls and stone walls and glass walls and walls of brick that stood up straight all this way and that with hardly any space between, as crowded as the skinny piñons with two-inch trunks in their thick stands on the mesa where it's everything vertical and no undergrowth and where no deer can ever be tracked. Water fell in cascades with no air between the drops, with only liquid streaming and splashing down so you'd expect to see pink-bellied salmon climbing their inexhaustible climb toward home, toward a home of blue sky somewhere above the muffling fur of cloud; but there were no salmon here. The rain flowed down the air and down the walls and beat the ground and splashed up away from the ground, this ground that was no ground but a floor, and it spread itself wide across the hard flatness and dark crown of sidewalk and street and it swirled into pools at every corner and eddies at every curb and it took on the grimy charcoal color of all the surfaces it flowed across, washing them clean, and it turned the city into a glistening delta, all rivulets and channels that moved like a tangled traffic of wet things and wet music, right and left and north and south searching for a route, the water like all water hungry for a low place, crosstown, downtown, under the town, on a race through dark tunnels and drains where nothing is alive, and pouring and pouring with a great slithery sigh into the big slow rivers that do nothing but flow on and on and empty themselves so generously into the sea.

When the storm let loose over the city, the Navajo jeweler stood on the corner where he'd been standing all the while the clouds were lowering, and he never moved except to close his eyes and raise his

face to the rain. Under the pounding gray waterfalls, faceless figures dark as slate ran bent with their eyes to the pavement and their shoulders hunched and their umbrellas and newspapers and clutched hats making a rushing chaos all around him, him in the eye, in a storm of frantic flutter not at all like the big grace in the wide sweeps and turns and ripples when the swallows lift as one over the desert cliffs into the clear empty glow of twilight.

It rained and rained, and when the flood began to thin, finally he opened his eyes. He breathed deep the bright washed air, the green living smell that the rain could bring, miraculously, even here. He felt a huge and sad love for the place where he stood and for all the sad and struggling others in all the sad little cubes stacked around and above and scattered in their endless grid out to the far edges of the city, all those less fortunate than he, with no place beautiful to go. He knew that finally the day had come and, turning, he descended dripping into the subway. At Clinton Street, he climbed the three flights slowly. He entered their small apartment, kissed his wife, kissed each of his three children, and then they packed their bags.



MORNING

Helen's mind is not on business. It's on a pinpoint, a potential, a something so microscopic it's more a nothing. In her center, it hums.

Every morning there is this settling in, the transition from the crush and chaos of the street, subway, elevator, to the solitude of her office. The solitude that will last a precious three minutes before it gives way to another crush: the focus of work, the pressure of duty. She punches the power buttons: monitor then computer. She toes off her sneakers, still tied, and slides them with a nyloned foot under the desk. She's not yet ready to put on the heels, the "torture-pedics" she calls them, so she stands in stocking feet looking out the window, a Starbucks cup still in her hand. Decaf, because it's better for the ovaries.

She had woken before the alarm, in the still black time, and climbed out of bed without waking Daniel. His schedule was out of sync with hers; a dark gulf had opened between them. Daniel was deep in the final act of the novel he'd taken a year off to write, and often stared blankly into space, his lips moving slightly. Sometimes in conversation with her, mid-sentence, his eyes would glaze, his focus wander. Only rarely could she get him to let her in, and then he'd turn suddenly manic and pace the room, arms waving, acting out scenes in dialogue, changing voices—a villainous basso profundo, a girlish falsetto—and if it was a good day they would simultaneously realize the absurdity of this picture, and dissolve into laughter. Other times a black silence would descend.

But as his novel had grown, so had an irrational need in her, from somewhere deeper than she'd known before. Even this junior broker job she'd worked so long for, that had finally netted her these actual walls and a window, could fade away, and she could smile to see it go. Sometimes this was alarming, but less and less so.

This morning, in the glow of the night light in the bathroom, she had done her monthly test. She peed on the little plastic strip, on the Urine Collection Pad, holding it gingerly by the ergonomic Thumb Grip, then watched for the lines to appear in the Results Window. Yes—today could be Ovulation Day. Normally—the last three months—she would have waited until evening to take the next step, but this morning she felt a vague hormonal insistence that sent her back into the bed, naked, next to Daniel. She caressed him, and then it was as if their bodies took over.

It was quick but good, better than it had been in a very long time. At first, just blind urgent fumbling. Then in the dim light of dawn his eyes opened, clear, and locked to hers. The prodigal ecstasy returned, the inexplicable merging, the goodness that was pain just too sharp and sweet to bear. She melted, lost in him and in all of everything. After they came together and he kissed the tears that ran down to the pillows from the corners of her eyes, she knew that these were the moments of her life that most closely resembled prayer.

Now, she hears the beep and whir of her computer booting up. She drains the cup and stretches a long yoga stretch. Hand on her chest, she feels the pendant that hangs under her blouse, against her skin; the gift from Daniel last May for their fifth anniversary; the glowing egg shape that she knew was his unspoken way of empowering her inner alchemy with a magic amulet. She's sure, yes, quite sure she feels the tiniest buzz in her belly: excited cells, busily dividing. She takes one more long look out the window at the view she loves: this incredible city spread out below, with her its goddess gazing down with overflowing tenderness from the 93rd floor. And somewhere in that far tiny tangle of roofs that may be Chelsea, her dear Daniel is just waking up, and now sun glimmers on both the big rivers, and the graceful bridges are like toys, and the city seems impossibly silent and peaceful. This is a moment that is almost like flying. And way out there to the north there's a plane approaching, just a bright little dot in the cloudless blue sky.

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