



CORVUS REVIEW: FALL 2015

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EDITORIAL**Dear Reader,**

With pleasure, I present the Fall issue of Corvus Review. This is our largest issue to date, over 200 pages of quality work, and I couldn't be prouder. Each piece offers a glimpse into each writer's mind. You might like what you see and you might not, but I challenge you, dear reader, to peruse this issue to its end.

For this issue, I opened the door to new editors. Andy Tu and Luciana Fitzgerald generously gave of their time and expertise and, as a whole, I feel allowing them into Corvus' inner sanctum proved most productive. Special thanks to them for their help sorting out the bones.

When I began this little lit journal around this time last year, I never imagined it would reach so many. It is truly an honor to work with such talented people and I look forward to the opportunity to reach many, many more.

Enjoy and happy scribbling!

Best,
Janine Mercer
EIC, Corvus Review

Cover Art

Bio: Gayle Miner is a photographer based out of Boston, MA. She is in the process of completing her bachelor's degree in environmental science from Boston University. She began photographing at a young age and has continued to pursue the art alongside her studies. Her photography is primarily influenced by her travels, which have brought her to nearly every continent. Most recently, she has been doing remote sensing research which has inspired to look at the world with a different perspective and is the driving force behind her Google Earth Art.

WEBSITE: <http://gayleminer.smugmug.com/>

Editors

Luciana Fitzgerald is a Milwaukee, Wisconsin native who loves to study languages and their rules. Her writing was first published in 1996 by the Art of Writing: Young Authors & Artists Conference - and nothing since then. She is a crazy cat lady, who happens to also be a wife and mom. When she's not editing or busy with adulthood, she enjoys coloring with fancy markers, crocheting small toys and playing computer games.

Andy Tu currently lives in the quiet mountains of Barichara, Colombia, where he enjoys life away from technology.

Janine Mercer is a Canadian ex pat who resides in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her work has been featured in The Quint, Sinister Wisdom, and others. Mercer's poetry book entitled, Collection: A Chesterfield Reader can be found on Amazon.com. She is currently shopping another poetry collection entitled Human Stew. A crime fiction writer at heart, she has two manuscripts under her wing. Time & Again saw completion in 2012. Planning Revenge on the Eight Ball is a WIP. She resides in Milwaukee, WI, with her life partner, a collection of (moderately creepy) taxidermy and a plethora of pets. She is the EIC for Corvus Review.

PROSE

Mad Mad World

Luke Silver

I'd rather not go to the party, she thought. I'd rather not go to the party, because if I go, I might see Johnny Netters; we might make eye-contact, and then I'll either have to look away, which is rude, or stare at him and wait for him to look away, and that's just plain awkward and uncomfortable. And if I go, maybe he'll even come over and talk to me and ask me a question like, *How are you, Susan? Or do you want to grab lunch sometime next week, Susan? Or will you dance with me, Susan?* In which case I definitely won't know what to say. No, I'm pretty certain. It's pretty clear to me. There's really only one option here. It's overall safer this way.

Susan hung up her favorite dress on her closet rack, the long white one with the blue carnation print, and step-step-stepped up the ladder and onto the 'Princess Bed' that Paw-Paw had built for her. She sat on the edge of the bed, and the petite feet on her petite frame dangled down toward the carpeted floor.

She felt good about her decision. The party at Maya Rivera's was going to be a wild affair, and Susan didn't know how well she'd handle a wild affair. How had she come to such a definitive decision? Through deliberate logic. By connecting the dots. The invitation that came in the mail was riddled with perfume and glitter, and in large bold hot-pink font read, "Maya Rivera's Dope Bat-Mitzvah Party" and promised large bold attractions like a surprise musical performance.

Anything wild was probably unsafe, Susan reasoned. It increased the likelihood that things would escalate beyond her control. The situation with Johnny Netters might go horribly awry. And while it might not, if she weren't physically there, how could the drinking, and swearing, and overall bad behavior miserably ruin everything? It couldn't! She didn't really like surprises anyway. Surprises brought uncertainty, and uncertainty brought dread, and anxiety, and other scary things that couldn't touch her when she closed the canopy curtains on her Princess Bed. Yes, Susan felt increasingly happy with her sound judgment.

Besides, didn't the USA Network play re-runs of *Monk* every Friday night? *They did*. And wasn't watching her favorite television character by the same name, a man who had OCD like her, but still kicked B-U-T-T

and always defeated the bad guys with caution and sound logic, more than enough of a reason to stay home? *It was.*

Susan smiled and looked out the window and heard the sounds of a male blue jay engaged in a spring mating call with a female. They're singing to each other, Susan thought. How utterly adorable! She glanced over at the Jonas Brothers clock on her wall that read a quarter past seven. Paw-Paw was coming home soon!

Charles Pennington scuttled home in the bitter Midwest winter cold with oily hair, and oily pants, smelling quite strongly like oil. At another time, if he were going out to dinner, or to a parent-teacher conference, perhaps, he might have worried that his physical impression wasn't the most favorable, that he wasn't presenting himself in the best of lights. But in his current situation, Charles Pennington had no mind for trivialities. He was in quite a hurry.

There was only a ninety-minute window between his first job, a mechanic at AutoWorld, and his second job, a bartender at Wings&Ales. Ninety minutes wasn't a lot of time to make it home, scrub the oil off in the shower, enjoy family time over dinner with his daughter, take a moment to himself, and change, before hauling ass in a new outfit back across town. Something always gave. Lately, it had been the personal private time. He still hadn't even cracked open the book that he bought himself at the seminar last summer on how to invest wisely and become a rich father. Nor had he replaced the torn shower curtain in the bathroom that drenched the tile floor every time he took a shower.

Although fixing the house wasn't really doing something personal, it was more of a collective good. It was something that benefitted Susan as much as it benefitted him, whether she appreciated it or not. He feared he had forgotten how to appreciate himself. What he really needed was a vacation. A nice private weekend getaway somewhere secluded, but not totally remote. Far enough away so that he could get time to himself, but close enough so that if, God forbid, something bad happened to Susan, he could race home right away.

Charles Pennington laughed at his whimsies. What money was going to pay for this vacation? Even if he could scrounge the savings together, and even if his boss at AutoWorld, Rick, and the night manager at Wings&Ales, Pedro, did understand that he needed a few personal days, who would look after Susan? He couldn't really ask her to stay with one of her friends, because, well, her condition made that unlikely. Plus, if Susan had a female presence around to help her, and teach her about the female things that Charles couldn't relate to, it would be easier on

the both of them. Raising a daughter as a single dad with two jobs was no damn cakewalk. If Janey were still with them, things would be different...

Charles shook the thoughts from his head. What was he even trying to get at? That he was unhappy when so many other folks had it worse? That he wasn't pleased to have a daughter who was unique, and special, and also by going to the party tonight, trying her damndest to fit in with her peers? Susie was the world's greatest blessing! Other kids her age probably spent the weekends getting doped up, sending each other naked pictures on the Internet, and passing around all sorts of diseases. Did he want that kind of daughter?! *Absolutely not!* Would he rather parent the Riesman girl, who he heard had lost her virginity to three different guys on the football team on the same night?! *HA! NO!*

Sure, he wished Susan wasn't so timid sometimes, but given girls like the Reisman girl, wasn't her phobia logical? Wasn't it sound actually? A rationality well beyond her years? Wasn't the world a scary place? A place that might devour his little princess' pure heart? A place where you bring in your wife to the doctor for a headache and find out days later that she has brain cancer and two months left to live!

Charles Pennington reached his block and walked obliviously past the figure observing him in the parked, unmarked van. He stopped suddenly in front of his house, realizing that he had forgotten to phone-in an order to Big Frank's Darned Tasty Foot-Long Hoagies. He quickly pulled out his cell phone and punched in the number five.

"Yes, hello. I'd like to place a delivery order...two Darned Tasty Foot-Long Hoagies. And can you please make sure that whoever makes these hoagies wears sanitation gloves and washes their hands before they make them?...Ok. Wonderful...324 Elm Street."

Susan heard the lock on the door click sounding out her father's arrival. She rejoiced and raced down to meet him, well not exactly raced, or even hurried, but moved at a deliberate pace. She took off her socks and held onto the railings because racing down stairs can lead to disasters like broken bones and brain hematomas.

She met him at the bottom of the stairs with a big smile, but *whoa!, the stench!* And although she kept reminding Paw Paw that his motor oil was awful to those around him (by which she primarily meant herself), and that improper hygiene, along with many other things he routinely did, like drive sometimes without a seatbelt, or use the bathroom with the kitchen stovetop flame going, can be deadly, he never

fully learned the gravity of his misdoings. But she always wholeheartedly forgave him because he was often pooped from working so hard.

“I’m going to get in the shower,” Charles Pennington said, fully cognizant that his clothes were the source of his daughter’s squeamish behavior. “I left twenty dollars on the coffee table. If the delivery boy from Big Frank’s comes with our Darned Tasty Footlong Hoagies before I get out, pay him.”

“Did you order it the way I like?” Susan asked in her nicest possible voice, trying to approach the gravely serious subject in a non-accusatory manner. Yet she was still skeptical that her father, who failed to take necessary hygienic precautions to extend his own life, might illogically employ the same misguided decisions on her life (but only accidentally of course), though she’d *never* question his intentions.

“Yes, I did. Now go get dressed, or we’ll both be late.” Charles couldn’t wrap his head around why Susie was dressed in her pajamas. Was she going to a pajama party? If she was, he hoped it was the innocent kind, where girls slept together in a room and shared ghost stories, and not the devious Reisman kind, where boys snuck into windows and rooted each other on while the girls took turns performing sexual favors.

“I’m not going. I’m not ready yet,” she said gleefully. “*Monk’s* on TV.”

“Ok!” Charles responded in a resolute tone that surprised himself, and he hurried to take a shower so as not to waste any more of his dwindling time.

Peter Kandor set out on the Big Frank delivery bike with a resentful mind and two Darned-Tasty Footlong Hoagies strapped to his back in a heat-sealed pouch. He resented Milwaukee for its bitter winters. He resented the douche bag that placed the order and forced him to bike like hell to keep the Milwaukee cold from freezing his face off. But most of all, he resented his parents.

His mother, AKA *the nagging bitch*, thought that pedaling sandwiches would help keep him out of trouble. His father, AKA *the pussy*, basically thought whatever the hell his mother thought.

Were they right? *Ehh?* He hadn’t gotten into any trouble recently.

But was he gaining anything valuable from this plebeian job?

Nope! Zilch! Nada!

Was he learning any skills that would further him later in life? *Hell no!*

He didn't plan on racing in the Tour De France. And biking all night not only made him look like a total tool, but it also made him hungry. So hungry in fact, that he probably took a meatball parm and a hot pastrami straight to the face every night shift. So instead of getting the six-pack, or soccer legs, or Greek-god body that might make girls want to bone him and call him Daddy, Peter Kandor was getting fat.

He pedaled furiously and wondered what his parents intended when they forced him into taking a limp-dick job. Did they only aspire for their oldest and brightest son to find contentment in mediocrity, AKA, the opposite of ballerness? Did they not realize that his cunning and quick mind was always at work, plotting and planning at a much faster rate than the common man?

Maybe they were to blame. Maybe if *they* had been more enthusiastic about his education when he was younger, and not spent their evenings buzzed and checked out in front of a television, he would've won a national spelling bee, or taken to and excelled at a random hobby like chess, or fencing, that gets Goobs into good colleges and keeps them out of trouble and away from limp-dick jobs.

As he approached his destination, Peter wondered about the mysterious health-freak that called in the order. Would the mysterious health-freak tip him well? Peter hoped so. He envisioned the health freak as some fat old butt pirate. Some fudge packer with a two-inch chode who gave it to a willing much younger Asian sex slave. And Peter imagined that when he arrived with the hoagies, the chode-giver would eye him, and tip him generously, and want to pork him, but that he, Peter the Great, the ultimate schemer, would realize what was happening and accept the tip and reject the invitation. But maybe, instead of the fat old turd burglar, it was his sexy seductress sister with huge tits who'd answer the door wearing lingerie. And she'd eye him, too, but not all aggressive and creepy like the flamer, but in a sexy and sad way because she was lonely from sharing the house with her brother and his gay lover. And in an erotic voice, she'd tell Peter how strapping he was, and that he was such a gentleman for braving the elements on her behalf, and offer him an even larger tip than her brother had, but not before he first came inside and warmed up beside her roaring fire. And he, Peter, would not reject her invitation, but would accept it, and once he got inside, would immediately command the home with his masculine prowess, and the woman seductress would pick up on his virile odor and lead him upstairs where she'd bone his face off.

He rang the doorbell amped up by his imagination and full of longing. When the woman that answered the door was not the sexy MILF

seductress of his dreams, but instead a very diminutive girl with a squashed face and wild curly hair, he felt utterly devastated. So heart-wrenchingly crushed, in fact, that he handed the little squirt the sandwiches and peaced-out before remembering to receive payment.

Peter resentfully hopped back on his bike, and resentfully mad-dogged the four-eyed Goobers sitting in a parked van across the street, and resentfully started biking like one-nut Lance Armstrong through the cold Milwaukee night back to Big Frank's Darned-Tasty Footlong Hoagies.

After her father hopped out of the shower and scarfed down his hoagie, and after she reminded him of the health-hazards of leaving the house with still damp hair, and after he pulled a wool cap onto his head and hurried out of the front door, Susan sat down on the couch and readied herself for an Adrian Monk marathon. And while the commercials ran and she waited for the episodes to start, first the one about Monk's killer ex-wife, and then the one about the dead parking garage attendant, and the one about Willie Nelson after that, her mind drifted to Johnny Netters.

Was he dancing and having a good time at the party? Or was he sitting in a corner chair by himself? Did he secretly pine for her when he was alone and in the dark the way she did for him? Or even think about her at all?

Be Patient! She reminded herself. Nothing good came from rushing. Mistakes, and accidents, and uncertainty came from rushing. She'd try with Johnny when she was ready. She wasn't ready yet, and there was time. There was always time.

Trevor Barren sat in the neglected van, peering out into the dimly lit street. He had watched the bartender exit his craftsman bungalow thirty minutes earlier and scuttle off down the block. Now Trevor waited, taking extra precautions to make sure that the bartender wouldn't come back and disrupt his plans to bust in, gut the place, and make away with loot.

How much? Trevor estimated anywhere from two to ten thousand dollars. *What would he do with the money?* Maybe go to Vegas and stay at the Bellagio. Or New Orleans for Mardi Gras, and trade beads with sluts so he could touch their tits.

Was it right or fair to randomly select an unaware community citizen to rob based on a glance he had offered at the bar four days prior? Who determined right or fair?! *Religion?* Bullshit!

Only an idiot would go blow up schools and believe he was going to heaven. Or actually think that hurricanes were a result of God getting pissed at all the homosexuals for marrying each other.

If it wasn't religion, then what was it? A sense of moral purpose? A higher intellect?

More bullshit.

Man breathes, eats, shits, sleeps, fucks when he can, and does it again. Just like every other animal. Hope, virtue, selflessness, greed, envy, pride: humans talk themselves to death about all that and still can't reach a conclusion. Truth is, all that is a rationalization. Strip away the high-brow enlightenment, the intellectual heaping horse-shit, and underneath it all, people are motivated by a basic instinct to survive. Just like every other goddamn species.

Really, the only people who disagreed, were the PTA mothers and community organizers, who sat on high from afar and sermonized to their kids, and their friends, and their friends' kids, about how to make the world a better place, and wade through tough times with a kind and compassionate soul. They didn't understand the Serengeti because they never had to.

No matter what those philanthropists did, no matter how many soup kitchens they helped at, or rape-trauma group meetings they made brownies for, or police brutality sit-ins they sat in on, at the end of the day, they shut off their 'do-gooder' switch and went home. They ate, and drank, and shat, and fucked, also living like animals - only domesticated ones.

But Trevor was different. Trevor was a wild beast. He had memories: Mr. White and his big cruel hands with the sharp shiny rings, his fat girlfriend and their two angry dogs, the streets, and the cars with the strange men that pulled up beside him at night.

Come here, Sweetie! How much you gonna cost? Get in the car!

The world wasn't fucking kind. Mr. White wasn't fucking kind. And the bartender wasn't kind either, or else he was a domesticated animal that didn't get it, or else he was a wild creature that did get it, and he understood that Trevor was just following the only true mantra there is: to survive in the Serengeti, one must take for oneself.

At 8:45 P.M., after three quarters of an hour of waiting, Trevor slipped out of the van and into the street. He snuck up on the porch, and quietly picked the lock, and crept into the house.

He started in the kitchen, first with the china plates, and the good sterling silverware, placing them into a burlap bag like the Grinch in the Dr. Seuss book.

Only when he reached the living room did he see the television program and the little girl. For a second, time froze, and they just stared at each other, their eyes perceiving the world before their brains made sense of it, but then the girl opened her mouth and started to holler.

Shut up! Shut up! Please! Trevor begged. *I'm not here to hurt you!*

But she didn't shut up and just closed her eyes, and stuck her index fingers in her eardrums, and continued to scream as loudly as she could.

GODDAMN IT, LITTLE GIRL! LISTEN TO ME! SHUT THE FUCK UP!

When Peter Kandor reached Big Frank's Darned-Tasty Footlong Hoagies, he found Big Frank waiting for him.

Your delivery order from 324 Elm Street called. Big Frank said. *They said you left before they paid. Go back and get my money.*

And Peter slumped and ventured back into the Milwaukee cold and back to the small craftsman house to collect Big Frank's money. Huffing the entire bike ride and now feeling full of embarrassment, Peter thought that his mistake with Big Frank had plummeted him from the status of limp-dick to shrivel-dick, and the cold reinforced his thought pattern, because the cold had removed all the feeling from Peter's lower-half, and, in his boxers, his penis had, in fact, wrinkled and curled in upon itself.

As he approached the house, Peter's feelings of shame turned to feelings of fury. Who did this midget, curly-haired snot think she was? Mother Theresa? The Dalai Llama? The Patron Saint of the good Karma society? If she found a dollar on the street, did she put it in her wallet like a normal person, or did she report that dollar to the police?

Peter felt that when she answered the door, he'd drop her a line. Let her know that by acting all high and mighty, and winning a trillion gold-stars, she was also taking a big steaming dump right on his face. Maybe even tell her that he, Peter the Great, was an unappreciated diamond in the rough. *But what if she knew that? And what if that was why she called Big Frank's? What if when she saw him, she immediately recognized his prowess, and all she wanted was a second chance to see him again?*

If that were the case, he couldn't blame her. If that were the case, then he wouldn't be mad at her and would explain that she wasn't the source of his anger but that the cold was, and that while he wouldn't bone her because she wasn't his type, he would happily befriend her because he respected her ability to read other people.

Peter approached the house full of self-confidence, and he knocked loudly on the door. No one answered. When he saw that the door was

cracked open, he knocked again. But still no one came. At that point, Peter thought about just turning away because he had a habit of starting jobs and hobbies and quitting them halfway through, but trying to explain to Big Frank that after two trips to 324 Elm Street, he still didn't have Big Franks's money, wasn't worth the drama. So instead of leaving, Peter pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The house was dark and disorienting, and he first heard the television in the living room. Peter opened his mouth to speak, but before he did, he made out the sounds of crashing, and glass breaking, and a struggle. And then it got quiet, and he heard the other sound, the terrible gasping sound, too.

Peter panicked.

He wanted to run, but his legs were Jell-O and wouldn't move. His brain begged his body to listen, and he swore to himself that if he left, and never fully learned the extent of what was going on in that back room, he'd thank himself later, and his parents would thank him, too. Because they weren't really *the nagging bitch* and *the pussy* like he sometimes claimed they were. And although he didn't have a great job, and the weather really *was* face-freezing cold, and his body wasn't ripped like a male model's, none of those were things to get resentful about. As long as he stayed alive, he'd always be dreaming. But still, his Jell-O legs just wobbled and quaked.

And he thought about the girl, who may or may not be an excellent judge of character, and may or may not have recognized his invaluable value, and he thought about her draining vitality, and he willed his body to preserve his own vitality, and at that moment, Peter finally recovered the missing feeling in his legs.

He ran, although not back towards the door and Big Frank's, but instead to the kitchen, where he grabbed a frying pan of the no-stick Cuisinart variety. Wielding the pan like a tennis racket, and channeling his inner Rafael Nadal, the tennis player with both the olive complexion and killer calf muscles embedded with deep blue veins that ran like rivers, Peter imagined the back of Trevor Barren's head as a tennis ball, and the house of Charles Pennington as the hallowed center court at Arthur Ashe Stadium. He charged into the living room and smashed the back of Trevor Barren's skull with a cross-court winner, and in his head, the crowd went wild.

Peter looked down at the frightened little girl lying on the couch with deep bruises already-forming around her neck and a web of burst red blood vessels in her eyes. She tried to tell him something, but her

voice was all gargled, and he wasn't listening. Everything was too exciting!

Maybe they'd write a book about him now! After which, they'd turn it into a blockbuster movie, *Peter the Great*, with many sequels and a television spin-off. Not to mention they'd create replica action figures that would utterly *own* the action-figure retail market. He smiled.

Stay right here. I'm going to call an ambulance.

"Thank you." Susan croaked to no one because the fat deliveryman with the beads of sweat on his forehead and traces of stubble on his chin and neck had already disappeared back into the kitchen.

Her head ached with a dull throbbing pain like some creature in her head was angrily beating the inside of her skull with a mallet. When she sat up, and the blood pumped from her heart to her brain, and then all throughout her body, she felt dizzy and nearly toppled over.

Susan nervously glanced at the wiry man with the glasses who lay still beside her, with a faint trickle of ichor running down the back of his neck and onto the carpet. Had he just tried to kill her?! It all happened so fast and seemed so surreal, and she hadn't even gotten a good look at her attacker. One second she was watching *Monk* and laughing when her hero's occupation forced him to confront his phobia of nudists by solving a murder on a nude beach. The next, her face was suddenly drowning in seat cushions and violating hands wrapped around her neck like a vice.

As she struggled to make any sense of her brief and wholly unexpected flirtation with death, Susan had only one thought: the miserable time that Paw-Paw took her fishing. What had he been thinking bringing her along? The metal hooks that went flying every time a line was cast off could take out an eye! The water sloshing around the bow could easily cause someone to slip and fall overboard. Plus, she wasn't a boy! She didn't have an affinity for blood, and gore, and dirty water splashing onto her clothing, and the foul, foul smells.

How was it possible that Paw-Paw loved fishing so much? How had he been proud of the Smallmouth Bass he caught? When he held it up for a picture and called it a conquest, all she saw was the fish's desperate final struggle. And now, hadn't she almost died the way Paw-Paw's fish had? Didn't that Smallmouth Bass flop and thrash on the deck when it couldn't breathe, the way she did in the couch?

It was all too terrible to think about!

Susan shivered, and her body began to slowly sway, and she stared down at her uncontrollably shaking hands. She began to robotically touch the coffee table in front of her with both her left and

right hand, working in factors of one hundred, in an effort to calm herself.

Two left. Two right. Four left. Four right. Five left. Five right. Ten left. Ten right.

When his nightshift manager at Wings&Ales, Pedro, received the call and told him the news, Charles Pennington took off sprinting toward 324 Elm Street, terrified and blaming himself the entire way although he couldn't rationally explain why.

You should have brought her to the bar, Asshole!

So she could get hit on by inebriated older men?!

Why didn't you make her go to her party?!

Because she didn't want to!

At least hire a nanny, you Spendthrift! You shirker of parental obligations!

If I had the money to do that, I wouldn't need a second job!

When he reached his block, yellow caution tape and circling ambulance lights surrounded his house.

"I'm the girl's father!" Charles Pennington shouted. "It's my house!"

And he burst past the police barricades and slow-forming crowd of nosy neighbors eager for new gossip.

His heart nearly stopped in his chest when he reached the back of the ambulance and saw his daughter sitting cross-legged with purple bruises on her throat.

"Paw-Paw!" Susan yelled out and flung her arms around her father's neck.

Charles Pennington exhaled an enormous sigh of relief. He simultaneously cursed the Lord for nearly taking away both his daughter and wife before his forty-ninth birthday and praised the Lord for bestowing a fearless young hero upon his home to knock one murderous invader temporarily unconscious.

He wanted to thank this selfless lionheart, but the man of valor was preoccupied with the press, and Charles figured that at a more suitable time he would find out the appropriate address, and send a handwritten 'thank you' letter, and invite the knightly figure over for dinner, and service his car (if he had one) at AutoWorld for free, and forever offer him beers and Buffalo wings at Wings&Ales on the house.

"I'm so sorry, Honey." Charles guiltily sobbed. "I shouldn't have left you alone. From now on, I'll always keep my cell phone turned on, and I'll start driving to work so I can get home to you lickety-split."

Susan weighed his offer, juggled it, felt it, tried it on, but it scratched, and itched, and had mothballs.

“No, Paw-Paw. I don’t like the idea. Cell phones emit harmful radio waves that cause cancer, and car accidents are some of the most common fatalities. You shouldn’t really ever be holding a phone to your ear or driving at night.”

By the time the ambulance reached the county hospital on Barry Road, Susan had thought about the attack, dissected it, and figured it out.

The attack was a statistical anomaly. And since it had already happened, it almost certainly would never happen again. Such conclusions provided Susan with reassurance. They reinforced her beliefs: the best way to avoid profoundly disturbed men, such as the one that had attacked her, was to do exactly as she had done and stay off the streets and at home. Furthermore, such prudent decisions, also kept her burgeoning yearnings for Johnny Netters alive.

The world was a scary place, yes, and the attack was traumatizing, yes, but many other more mundane occurrences were scary as well. Public bathrooms for instance, or the backseat of an ambulance—

So, on the drive to the hospital she sat on her father’s lap and kept away from the unsanitary dangers of an ambulance backseat. When the ambulance reached the hospital and the emergency room nurse received her, Susan did her best to steel her nerves and make the best of the traumatizing and unalterable fact that hospitals have a terrible reputation for harboring germs and disease.

Bio: Luke Silver lives in a shoebox in New York City. He is a black belt in Kung Fu and lost his sense of smell. He will begin his MFA candidacy at Sarah Lawrence College in the fall.

Steak Tartare

By Daniel Davis

Matt poked his food again. Jesus. Well, Steph couldn't say he wasn't adventurous anymore.

She could say a whole lot else, though. Right now, she was going on about some woman from the country club—Melissa, Melinda, Belinda, something like that. *Country club*. They lived in a small town at the ass end of a bunch of cornfields, yet they still had a *country club*. With a *golf course*. And a *steam room*. And *social gatherings*. Steph was a member, and Matt by extension. He'd known what he was marrying into; he just hadn't expected it to so encompass his life. He'd thought he would still be able to go out, get a few beers at the bowling alley on a Tuesday night. Nope. Tuesday was bingo night. Rich person bingo.

He glanced around the clubhouse's restaurant. People in low-rent dinner jackets, vests, fake tans. Expensive tableware. Glasses with intricate designs on them. Some of the Midwest's best wine—not to be confused with the best from California, or Italy, or any other part of the known world. People from humble beginnings, pretending to live on the East Coast. It made Matt want a beer—not that he could get a Bud Lite here, even if Steph would let him.

"I told her she didn't know what she was talking about," the man at the next table said. Matt glanced over. The man—he looked vaguely familiar, probably a regular, God help them all—was eating pasta, twirling his fork as though he had been programmed to perfect this one action. Opposite him was a woman a few years younger. Probably a wife, possibly a mistress. The men here liked to step out publicly. For some reason, no one ever said anything.

The woman—beautiful, but in a naïve sort of way that made Matt dismiss her instantly—nodded her head sharply, but said nothing. She was eating a salad, of course.

"She wouldn't know savings bonds from bearer bonds." The man talked with his mouth full. "But she kept telling me, 'invest in SafePro.' So I did. I mean, I had to get her to be quiet somehow, right? And you know what happened?"

You lost your investment, Matt almost mumbled.

Steph said, "Do you think we need new carpet in the living room? The beige is looking a little worn."

"I lost my investment," the man said. "Every damn penny."

The woman laughed.

" Matthew," Steph said. "Are you all right? You haven't touched your food."

Oh yes I did, Matt thought. I touched it, and it moved.

He cut into it. Took a bite. Said around his wince, "Savoring the moment."

"Well, after that," the man said, "there was nothing for me to do but get rid of her. Why I took her under my wing, I'll never know. That girl's in the wrong line of business. Perhaps she should own her own fast food franchise. Her father managed a Hardee's, I hear. I suppose such things run in the blood."

Blood. Matt pressed his fork down on his food. Saw juices run. Well, yes. Blood ran, and things ran in blood. Made sense.

Steph resumed her monologue, the living room carpet forgotten. Matt hadn't even known the carpets were beige. Funny, how he'd thought his life would continue the same after marriage. Was he still happy? Obviously. Otherwise, he wouldn't be here, surrounded by these people, sitting across from this woman. That's what this was—love. The part people never mentioned.

And, truth be told, this wasn't such a bad place. Matt had eaten other things here before, so he knew the food—when cooked—was at least adequate. Maybe even good enough, if he suspended his disbelief like everyone else here, to make him think he was somewhere else, somewhere that, in the eyes of the rest of the world, actually mattered.

"The weather was perfect today," the man at the next table said. "I hit a sixty-eight. Nathan got a seventy. We were neck and neck until the last hole. I can't remember anything more exciting."

You're sitting across from a woman like that, and a round of golf is the best thing that's ever happened to you?

No, things could be worse than this. Matt had it good, as painful as that was to admit.

"There was this moment," the man said, "on the fourth green. It was like one of those moments, an epiphany. It just struck me, plain as day, everything made sense, you know? I was about to putt in, it was a sure thing, and...and..."

The words stopped. Silence. Then a high, piercing scream.

The clubhouse froze. Sound didn't drift away—it fell flat, as though suddenly snagged by gravity. Only that single shriek, rising steadily upwards, remained.

Matt glanced over. The man had pushed himself away from the table, knocking over his chair in the process. The scream continued uninterrupted. His face had gone pale and clammy, and his whole body

trembled from the wail that emanated from deep within him. His eyes were focused on his plate, and that's where Matt immediately looked—and saw nothing but pasta. He then looked at the woman, who was also staring at the plate. It was obvious, from the expression on her face, that she saw nothing else either. A waiter, a few tables over, stood mid-step, caught between asking what was wrong, and knowing full well that no explanation could be given. Explanations required reasoning, a capacity that this man lacked.

The stillness was only temporary. Only seconds passed—maybe just two or three. Already people were moving, coming from the peripheries of the clubhouse. Security, blending in seamlessly with the patrons and decor. Of course there was security.

Before the guards could reach him, however, the man took a step backwards. Matt thought it was the start of a mad dash towards the nearest exit, which would have saved the guards the effort. Unfortunately, the man's chair was in the way, and his foot became entangled with one of the chair legs, and both man and furniture went down. Security moved in quickly after that, their work done for them, and they dragged the man out.

Silence remained for a full five seconds after the man was drug through the swinging doors of the kitchen. Matt knew the time, because he could hear—or thought he could hear—a clock ticking. Then came the exclamations: surprise, disgust, outrage, indignation—the whole gamut of upper crust human emotions. Steph added her own epithets, as though her opinions were original.

As Matt watched, the waiter who had been about to intervene earlier stepped forward. The woman still sat at the table, a look of horror etched across her face. The waiter didn't say a word. Instead, he scooped up the man's plate, giving it a brief glance, as if to ascertain what had been the cause of such commotion. There was a brief twinge of disappointment at the corner of his mouth. Then he whisked the plate away, leaving the woman alone with her salad.

Matt turned back to his own table. Steph wasn't even looking at him. Which was okay—that was part of love, too. You don't always look at the person you're talking to. It's understood that everything you say is to and about them. Matt knew this to be true; and knowing that, he could live with it.

He stared thoughtfully at his own plate for a minute, trying to see something there. He thought he could, but didn't wait for the vague shape to take form. Instead, he grabbed his fork and cut down, digging out a bite, and raised it to his mouth. Chewed vigorously. At the

moment, he couldn't taste a thing. He figured that was better than some alternatives.

Bio: Daniel Davis is the Nonfiction Editor for *The Prompt Literary Magazine*. His own work has appeared in various online and print journals. You can find him at [Facebook.com/DanielDavis05](https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavis05), or [@dan_davis86](https://twitter.com/dan_davis86) on Twitter.

That's Entertainment (Circa 1991)

Jason Half-Pillow

Herb picked up the phone.

“Herbert Hahn?!” an echoing voice bellowed through the receiver. It came through a reverberating delay.

“THIS...

“IS...

“GOD!

“STOP...

“BEATING...

“OFF!”

Click. Call over.

It rang again, maybe two minutes later. Herb picked up.

“Herbert! This is the Lord thy God! Stop spilling thy seed upon the ground, lest I smite thee!”

Click.

A different voice this time - angrier, echoing like the last one, not quite as deep, more intense.

He asked himself why he waited for them to hang up and vowed to do it first next time.

The phone rang. He muted the TV and picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Hi Herb, honey, it’s mom.”

“Hey mom...”

“Herb, I’ve grown a penis and have decided to run off with another man. A Nazi biker fellow. Huge cock.”

The last words were said through laughter and he could hear others laughing in the background. Then there was another click.

Herb thought it had sounded just like his mother. He realized that he tuned out as soon as he heard “honey” – it had to be his mom or aunt, he had thought. He promised to not make that mistake again, but he was past his fourth beer and was pretty baked too.

Maybe he’d put them on speaker. Keep his finger at the ready to hang up. That way he wouldn’t have to remove the phone from his ear and find the button to push so he could hang up.

The phone rang. He pressed his finger on phone receiver then asked the other party to hold so he could put them on speaker. He heard a gruff voice say that was “just fine.” The accent was slightly Southern, or maybe just rural, or coastal for that matter. Some kind of hick voice. He got the speaker set up. It sat on an armrest.

“Hello?”

“Hell-o, Mr. Hahn. I sure hope you’s havin’ yourself a good evening.”

“I’m fine, thanks. Who’s this?”

“My name is Robert Jones, but-chyoo can go ahead and call me Bob – that’s what my friends do...”

“Ok.”

“Herbert, I’z a’ callin’ you this here evenin’ so as to inquire as to whether you are happy with your cable service?”

“Yes, I think so...”

“And how’s the picture resolution?”

“It seems just fine...”

“Is just fine really good enough for a man of your stature, Mister Hahn?”

“Yeah, it’s good. I see everything just fine....”

“Including the big ol’ titties on all the negro vixens you whack it to on that salt and pepper porn me and my buddies watch you wanking it to through our binoculars when your missus is out takin’ it up her ass from some herpes-sore-havin’ cock-wielder down in the shitter at the five and dime?”

Click.

He told himself his daughter could have heard that. She was three though, so it probably wouldn’t have mattered.

Herb centered the speaker better on the armrest opposite the phone and the ashtray holding his roach. He looked at the TV.

It was Monday night. The Jets had the ball on the Bills 5-yard line. He reached into his shirt pocket to grab the 1/8th ounce he had in a sandwich bag and took his eyes off the TV long enough to take a reefer’s worth of buds from it and carefully set five on the arm rest, one by one. The bud and the chair were close to the same color, so he thought it best to grab a magazine to set the bud on. He didn’t want to lose one or leave it there for his wife to discover when she got back from her book club.

He stood half way up and reached bent-backed to grab one of his wife’s Sunset magazines and turned it to the whitest first page he saw and carefully picked each bud up and set in on the open page then sitting in his lap. The buds rolled to the crevice at the center of the magazine.

He looked at the TV and the Jets were now back on the 20. He turned up the volume to hear the color commentator.

“First the false start and then the holding – you can’t shoot yourself in the foot in this part of the field with five minutes and only one time-out, down by more than two scores...this is where you have to score a touchdown.”

And the other guy said, “And the Jets have struggled finding the end zone from inside the 20 this year and kicked way too many field goals when they need to be scoring touchdowns and have already settled for a remarkable five field goals in this game alone...”

“And a record number for any team at this point in the season.”

“You have to remember that they play more games than they used too, but still, it’s a lot of field goals.”

“Well, there they go again, another false start, this time it looked like Staley, the right guard but we’ll await the call.”

“Looks like another field goal attempt, unless they somehow get the ball in the end zone.”

“Sometimes being pushed back a bit gives the offense more room to work with, so its conceivable they could score here.”

The referee explained the call.

“Well, there’s no 63 on the field; I think he meant 73, and that was Staley and he clearly held here.”

They showed the penalty in slow motion.

“That’s an easy call to make.”

The phone rang. It startled him a bit and he brought his knees together quickly like he was trying to hide the bud. He held the position for three rings. He muted the TV volume again then picked the magazine up slowly and set it out flat on the glass coffee table in front of him.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Herb.”

“Who’s this?”

“What’s goin’ on dude?”

“Who’s this?”

“What’s flappin’ there big boy?”

“Who are you?”

“Dude, can’t make it tonight...”

“What are you talking about?”

“Tonight dude. We agreed last week when we were all baked at Kentucky Fried that I’d come over there and service your wife with my fat dong while you stroked it from behind the rhododendrons outside your bedroom window, but no can do, dude. Sorry.”

Click. Herb didn’t know what a rhododendron was but looked to his left and saw bushes outside the window and figured that’s what they were.

“That had to have been some of those neighbor kids,” he said.

He picked the buds out of the crevice of the Sunset and set them back on the armrest, picking them up carefully, one by one. He then leaned back in the chair and extended a leg so he could take his rolling papers from his pocket, and he drew out a paper. He broke the buds into pieces inside the paper then rolled up the joint. It was skinny but the buds were top shelf. He sparked the doobie with a Bic that was on full blast and the flame shot up violently the full height of his large head. He was a little startled and jumped. He lit it again, holding the lighter farther out, then moving slowly in until the blowing flame touched the doobie; he stopped the flame and took a long drag and held it.

“That’s some killer doobage,” he said in a strained voice still holding his breath.

The phone rang.

“Herbster!”

“Yeah...” He said exhaling the smoke.

“Be there in a few, Herbie,”

“What?” Herb drew in more smoke and held it.

“I said be there in a few, Herbster.”

Herb exhaled again.

“Who is this?”

“Your gay lover Bruce.”

Herb inhaled.

“I don’t have a gay lover named Bruce.” He said, obviously still holding in the smoke.

“Really? What is your gay lover named then?”

“What?” He let out the smoke as he asked.

“Homo says ‘what?’”

“Huh?”

“I SAID, FUCK YOU DICKWAD!!!”

Click.

He finished off the doobie and stared stupidly at the silent TV. The Jets were lined up to kick a very long field goal. It veered right. The field was well dusted with snow. He jumped when he heard a loud thump on the big living room windows and then realized the neighborhood kids were just throwing wet pinecones at his house. He could hear them giggling from the street below. Then another thumping series of wet pinecones hit the window. The Bills were celebrating the

missed field goal, their feet shuffling that tentative way people move after it snows, worried they'll slip and fall. They all skated around the coach slapping him on the back and almost falling. A group holding the giant orange Gatorade cooler slipped just behind him and spilled it all over themselves. The coach turned laughing then almost slipped too but righted himself by grabbing onto an assistant, who gave him an angry look.

The phone rang.

Probably one of his students again.

"Wish it would snow here," he said, watching the bushes outside the big window shake.

Neighbor kids again. He looked again and noticed the little splotches the wet pinecones had made on the window and felt a sudden appreciation for how clean and clear the windows were and what a great view they offered him of the small city down below, past the trees covering the little rolling hills.

He stood to go to the bathroom and the bushes stilled.

The phone stopped ringing.

He knew his tall frame caused a panic, so he yawned and stretched and walked to the window and pretended to be interested in looking out it. The joint had stopped burning in the tin jar lid on the armrest. The local news was on, the volume muted. He turned stretching and looked at it. In the silence, it was obvious from his sardonic expression that the anchorman thought the anchorwoman was a dingbat and was just as obvious from her expression that she really was.

He went back to the armrest to toke on the doob. The bushes shook when he turned for the chair and all the kids therein fled, pouring down the steep hill that led to his house – their sliding feet pushing bark mulch on the narrow road. He took a drag and found it was no longer lit. He stood a while longer staring through the window and listening to the laughter down on the street. He put the joint back in the lid then turned

to look out the window again, patting his pockets for the white lighter hiding in plain view on the open page of the *Sunset* before his cozy chair.

The phone wasn't ringing. It never did this time on a school night. If it rang again, it would have to be his wife and there would be some kind of trouble. He wasn't worried though. Her book club nights were always long. He was sure she was fine. He patted his pockets again for the lighter, wondering where the hell it could be, half-wondering if he'd ever actually had it. He moved a finger over one eyebrow, then the other, and was pretty much sure he had.

Bio: Jason Half-Pillow lives in Italy, where he writes stories. His work has appeared in a number of publications, including *Gadfly Online*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Dirty Chai*, *Hobo Pancakes*, and others. He won the Iowa Review's Tim McGinnis Award for Humorous Writing.

Shards

Ro McNulty

The bus driver gave me the wrong ticket, but I was still early for work. I sat on the railings by the river and played with my phone for twenty minutes or so before I went in. The houses just behind the river are those old, stylish Victorian houses that everyone's parents lived in when we were kids. I work in a supported living facility in one of those houses. From the outside, you wouldn't know it was there.

I recognized the girl who opened the door because I'd worked with her a bunch of times last year, but I couldn't remember her name. We went upstairs to the staff room and she went through the notes from the night before. Her name was Natalie, as it turned out, but I had to wait for her to say it in conversation before I knew who she was.

The shift the night before had been shitty, Natalie told me. I put my head in my hands and sighed out of sympathy, and we both laughed. Stevie, the difficult resident, had got angry and thrown a cup at Natalie but it had hit Mark, the easier resident. She'd phoned our on-call number and they had told her take Mark and lock herself in the staff room with him until Stevie had calmed down. It was unbelievably bad advice, we both agreed. Apparently Natalie had spent the night sitting on the floor next to the staff bed, watching films on her iPad with Mark, until Stevie had stopped slamming doors around and gone to sleep.

"It pissed me off, mind. Anna was on-call." Natalie said. "All the managers were out in town. I called Anna at about nine, she sounded like she was already pissed up. I could hear her, like, in a club or something in the background. What if we'd had an emergency? It's just like they can't be bothered. I mean, one minute they're telling us not to leave Stevie on his own, the next they're saying to lock ourselves in the staff room every time he gets aggressive. What do they think's going to happen the next time he wants us to leave him alone? He's going to start acting up again."

"I know, right?" I said. "Stevie's not safe in the house by himself anyway. I mean, he needs to lip read just be able to talk to you. What good's being on the other side of a door going to do?"

I hadn't even started yet but I wanted to go home. It was a Saturday, and I have another job midweek anyway. I couldn't be bothered with a difficult day today. Natalie left and said good luck, knowingly, as she closed the door. I sat in the staff room with a cup of tea and read what she had just told me again in the log book.

Stevie got up about ten minutes later and walked into the staff room, in his pajamas.

“Hi, Jay. You alright?” he asked.

“Hi, Stevie. Yeah, you?”

“Have... have I got you today?”

“Yeah. I’m here until six o’clock, OK?”

“Pardon?”

“I’m *here*,” I said, loudly. Stevie wore hearing aids. “Until *six o’clock*.” I pointed at myself, mimed a watch on my wrist and then held up my hands to show six fingers. I think Stevie actually knows some proper sign language, but I’ve never learnt any.

“Oh. OK. You’ve been away.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I said. “I went on holiday. Me and my girlfriend got married. We went on holiday to celebrate, but I’m back now.”

I don’t know if Stevie understood or not. He looked at me.

“Jay?”

“Yes, Stevie?”

“I’m going back to college on Monday. I need to go to the shops, to get a packed lunch.”

“Alright,” I said. “Have you got your spending money on you, or do you want me to get it from the safe?”

“Pardon?”

“Have you got your *money*? Or is it in the *safe*?”

“It’s in the safe. You need to get it.”

“OK. Have you brushed your teeth yet today?”

“No.”

“Alright, well, go and do that, then put some clothes on, and then we’ll go, yeah? Does that sound good?”

“Yeah.” Stevie didn’t move. I’d heard another support worker once tell him to *get out* because he was hanging around in the staff room, which I didn’t want to do, so I looked at him and smiled and said, “You alright? What’s the matter?”

“Jay?”

“Yeah?”

“My friend died on Wednesday.”

I didn’t really know what to say to that. Stevie had once said something similar about his Nan, who had turned out to be alive and well or, in the words of Stevie’s dad, *not dead just bloody old*. Stevie quite often repeated stuff that he’d heard from someone else, or seen on TV, and put himself in the story. Still though, it was hard to know how to respond.

“Oh... Is that...” I did my best smile and said, as gently as I could, “Stevie, is that something that happened to *you*, yeah? Or was it something that you heard somewhere else? Was that something you saw on the telly?”

“No. It wasn’t me. It was my friend.”

“Was it *your* friend, though, or was it someone *else’s* friend?” I pointed at Stevie, then pointed away to my left to indicate everyone else he knew that wasn’t in the room with us.

“*My* friend.”

“Oh.” I thought for a moment. “How do you feel?”

“Sad,” said Stevie. “I feel sad.”

“OK.” There was a pause, and then Stevie started laughing.

“Oh, go on.” I grinned. “Go and get dressed and brush your teeth, then we can go out. Go on.”

Stevie left the room and came back a few minutes later. He had put on a suit, and he asked me to tie his tie for him. I asked him why he was wearing it and he told me he was going to a funeral.

We walked up to the supermarket. On the way, Stevie said

“Jay? On Wednesday, my friend? She died.”

“Oh right. How did she die?”

“She was in the pub. She was drunk. She fell off her stool, and died.”

“Oh. OK.” I was trying to sound sympathetic but at the same time I still wasn’t sure whether what he was telling me was true or not, and I had about ten other things to think about once we got to the shop to do with Stevie’s budgeting and his food allowance. We walked past a building site that Stevie always wants to talk about. Stevie asked me why I wasn’t a builder and I said I wasn’t very good at it. He told me that if I was a builder I might have an accident, and I might die. Then he laughed again, and I smiled at him.

“Well, it’s lucky I’m not a builder then, isn’t it?”

It wasn’t an easy session. In the supermarket, looking at yoghurts, Stevie put some fruit corners in his basket and I told him he couldn’t afford them. He turned round and shouted, “Why not?” at me. He seemed to be breathing heavily, and shaking, staring at me. Then he grabbed the yoghurts and threw them back on the shelf, and walked off quickly.

Later on, at the till, Stevie tapped me on the shoulder.

“Jay? My friend died on Wednesday.”

“Oh right,” I said. I was still a bit stressed out after the shouting in the yoghurt aisle and I didn’t want to talk about his friend anymore. The woman in front of us in the queue was shouting at her kids. “Hey,

Stevie,” I said, loudly, “are you going to have a bath when we get home? I need to put your ear drops in afterwards.”

“No.”

“Alright. You can have one tomorrow, if you want.”

“Pardon?”

“You can have one *tomorrow...*”

“Jay!” Stevie cried out, suddenly, taking me by surprise and making me jump. “Stop *shouting* at me!”

We bought the food and then went to the kiosk so Stevie could buy cigarettes. In the queue for the kiosk, Stevie head-butted my shoulder and laughed. It actually hurt. People around us started to shuffle away, like they thought Stevie might decide to head-butt them too.

“Stevie, mate, don’t do that.”

“Why not?” I didn’t say anything so he laughed, and did it again.

When we got to the till, Stevie got out his passport and showed it to the woman. He asked for the cigarettes but she couldn’t understand what he was saying because of his speech problems. She looked at me and said, *what does he want?* I began to answer.

“He usually has twenty sovereign”, but Stevie suddenly shouted.

“No, Jay,” he shouted so loudly the woman behind the till flinched. I’d been pointing at a packet of cigarettes on the shelf, and Stevie smacked my arm down. “Stop *telling* her. Let *me* tell her.”

Stevie pointed and angrily said *those*, until the woman chose a packet of cigarettes at random and gave them to him. She looked at me, furiously, like it was me who was shouting. People nearby had gone quiet, listening to us.

Stevie wasn’t looking at me. He was leaning over the till, holding the cigarettes. “I want *forty*, not twenty”. *For fuck’s sake*, she replied and gave him another packet, and charged him. I went to leave but Stevie leant forward further and shouted at the woman

“My friend *died*, on Wednesday. She smoked too much, and got cancer, and *died*.” People were staring at us now without trying to pretend they weren’t.

“Stevie, *do not* shout at that woman. You *know* not to do that,” I said in my sternest voice. A couple of fat teenagers behind us started to laugh. I felt like walking out and leaving him there.

We went to McDonalds and Stevie screamed at me again at the till because I tried to stop him from getting a coffee because he’s caffeine intolerant. He told me to leave him alone and I said that I couldn’t, and he started screaming, *Do what I say. You have to do what I say*. I nearly said something stupid like, *No, you do what I say*, but I stopped myself,

and said something pacifying instead. I was pretty riled up by that point, and I was aware I wasn't handling Stevie as well as I could have done. It's hard not to let your own feelings get in the way sometimes. Stevie kept telling me to leave him alone, so I went and stood a few feet away around the side of the counter, and watched him get his food.

"I want four sugars," he said to the guy at the till. "My friend *died* on *Wednesday*. Some men went to her house and beat her up and *killed* her."

The guy gave Stevie his food, but wouldn't look at him.

We sat down to eat and I managed to chill out a little bit. Stevie told me to wait inside while he went to have a cigarette and I said that I couldn't, but that I wanted to get some air anyway, so if he wanted to, he could go for a cigarette and I'd go and stand down the street so he could be by himself. We did. I sat at the bus stop and watched him out of the corner of my eye, pretending to be looking at my phone. He sat down on the pavement and chain-smoked until I told him we had to get back to the house so I could look after Mark.

On the way home Stevie said that his friend's funeral was today but it was in London, so we had to get on the train. I asked him how much money he thought the train would cost from Bristol to London and he said five pounds. He told me that Simon, his key worker, had said that I had to take him.

"No, Jay. You have to take me to the *funeral*," he argued. But I pretty much just blocked him out. It was getting hard to concentrate by that point. I just wanted to go home and put him in front of the TV, or something, until he settled down.

We got back to the house. Mark was watching Top Gear in his pajamas. I sat down but Stevie started stamping violently on my foot, saying, *Do what I say! Do what I say! Do what I say!*

I stood up, quickly, without really meaning to. I tried to do my 'firm' voice, and said, "Stevie, I'm *not* going to support you if you carry on behaving like that. Do you understand?"

Stevie stamped on my foot again. I went upstairs to the staff room, and locked the door. I sat there at the desk, thinking about what I could have been doing with my weekend if I'd called in sick or something instead of going to work.

About an hour later there was a quiet knock on the door. It was Stevie. I let him in. He sat on the bed and looked at me.

"You OK, Stevie?"

"Yeah. Jay? My friend died on Wednesday."

I hesitated, and Stevie continued.

“I just told Mark about my friend.”

“Yeah? What did Mark say?”

“He gave me a hug.”

“Oh yeah?” I still felt exhausted after all the shouting earlier. I was so tired my vision was going funny. I swallowed, and tried to think of what the right thing to say was. Whatever I’d been trying to do earlier to distract Stevie obviously hadn’t worked. I asked

“What... what was her name, Stevie?”

“Amy. She was called Amy. She went to college with me when I lived in London.”

Stevie began to cry. He looked away from me, embarrassed and angry.

“How did she die?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” Through sobs, he said “I feel sad. I’m *sad*.”

“Yeah? Hey, Stevie?” In my softest voice, I asked, “Why don’t you tell me something nice about Amy?”

Later Natalie came back to do the night shift and we talked about Stevie. She told me she didn’t have any sympathy for him because of how badly behaved he’d been recently and we talked about taking Stevie to the doctor to see if she’d prescribe him some tranquilizers. Then I left. I walked into the city centre; it was getting dark, and I remembered how cold and crisp and clean it felt outside after all that stress. On the way home, the bus driver gave me the wrong ticket again.

“*One. Single. To Stapleton.* For fuck’s sake, it’s not difficult, is it? Christ,” I said.

The next week I went back to the house. Stevie was wearing his grey suit and tie again. I asked him why.

“I’m going to a *wedding* today.” He answered. “My friend Amy? We’re getting *married* today”

Bio: Ro McNulty’s work is featured in numerous publications, including Onyx Neon Press's upcoming horror fiction anthology. He has recently released his debut novel published by up-and-coming small press 18thWall productions and is currently guest editing an anthology with the same company. He manages and edits a science fiction zine called Empty Oaks.

Sorry About Your Dad

Meghan Phillips

The inside of Brian's duffel bag didn't smell as bad as I thought it would. It had been his dad's during Desert Storm, dragged through Kuwaiti oil fields, and bleached by the sun. Brian swore that Army duffels were designed to serve as body bags in the field. He threw his pen at my head and said to try it if I didn't believe him, so I pulled off my Docs and undid the top button of my jeans. Getting in was kind of like trying to crawl into a sleeping bag without unzipping it; I folded my knees and shrugged the sides of the duffel over my shoulders and then my head. Brian zipped me in. It felt cramped but also kind of safe, like maybe I could nap in there and come out sort of fresh and new. I kept waiting for him to start laughing and let me out, but all I heard was breathing on the other side of the canvas.

Some Things Are Easier to Explain than Others

This time I make sure that I talk to one of the sales ladies before I try anything.

The first time, I couldn't do it; I was too paranoid, watching for them, all women except for one flashy Hispanic man. It seemed like one was always hovering at the corner of my vision, black blurs slashed with red—nails, talons, lips, beaks—a wake of glamorous carrion birds waiting to swoop. I left after a few minutes. I was too flustered, too frustrated, and the bright lights and thumping bass had given me a headache.

This time I feel calmer as I stand in front of the lacquered display, scouring the neat rows of tubes. They remind me elevator buttons in a very tall building; I almost expect them to light up when I touch them. I think I look normal, standing in front of the display, but I still can't keep my brow from furrowing.

Within a minute, one of the vultures sweeps over to me. In thickly accented English, she asks, "Are you needing to be helped, young man?"

"I'm alright," I say, into my t-shirt. "I'm looking for a gift for my little sister. She really likes these lipsticks. I wanted to pick something for her on my own."

Her face softens. "Okay. Let me know if you need help," she says as she walks away. She'll tell the other salespeople; they'll smile and say "how sweet," maybe glance my way, but they won't bother me, not for a while at least.

I carefully pull one tube after another out of the slots. I'm not sure what I'm looking for until I pull out "No. 23 Strike a Pose." It's perfect, a soft rosy pink, like a little girl's bedroom. Bug's bedroom was pink, but when Mom moved in with Aunt Carol, Dad painted her room beige and put his weight bench in there.

This pink is the closest I've found to matching the color of Bug's room. I hold it up to the light; it shimmers a little. Bug would have called the sparkles fairy dust. She would have liked this one.

I scan the store one more time, careful not to catch anyone's eye. I twist the tube so the lipstick pops out as far as it can.

I put the tube in my mouth and slowly bite down. My teeth sink through the waxy cylinder, meeting in the middle with a soft tap; my mouth a little O as I pull the nub away from my lips and place the case back in its slot. I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth, a light pink smudge streaks across the skin.

I stand perfectly still, letting the chunk soften from the heat of my mouth. At first, the lump just tastes waxy, like an old crayon, but as it starts to warm, the taste begins to change, becoming familiar. I use my tongue to roll the chunk back and forth along the roof of my mouth.

It tastes like Bug's room when I used to perch on the edge of her small bed and read to her, hoping my scary dragon voice would drown out the sound of Mom and Dad fighting in the kitchen. It tastes like afternoons when I would come home from school, lugging my backpack and gym sneakers down the hall passed Bug's room, and I would see her on the floor, surrounded by stuffed animals, pretending to be a pilot with a plane full of fluffy passengers.

"Young man?"

Startled, I look up, eyes blurry with tears. The blond sales lady is weaving towards me through the shelves and shoppers.

I start stuffing my pockets with tubes of lipstick. Her face hardens as she picks up speed.

"Hey!" she yells. "Young man. Hey! Stop."

My face is wet, and I taste salty snot collecting above my upper lip as I cram the last tube of "No. 23 Strike a Pose" into the pocket of my hoody and start to run.

"HEY!" she shrieks, "STOP HIM."

I'm already through the security gates, alarm blaring in counterpoint to the store's techno soundtrack. Security will probably catch up with me in a few minutes.

For now, I run through the late afternoon foot traffic, savoring the last taste of my sister's memory.

Bio: Meghan Phillips lives in Lancaster, PA, where she works at a public library and reads fiction submissions for Third Point Press. You can find her on Twitter @mcarphil.

James Wharf
Matthew Laing

A powerful gust of cold and salty wind hit Jonathan Coddery dead smack in the face, reddening areas left unprotected by his salt and peppered beard and his coarse long brown hair. Being a fisherman all of his life, Jon was accustomed to the salty breezes and the miserable and inhospitable winters. Anyone who lived in James Wharf was either a fisherman or a business owner, and the majority dreaded the nightly winter commute from their homes and dens to the warmth of Molly's Beard. Hayson, the bartender, offered half-priced ales on Wednesday and most of the town would turn up at one point or another. Jon needed his fix – that hoppy aroma of freshly poured India Pale Ale; that sweet, yet remarkably bitter, slosh of Hayson's homebrew: "Kiss the Fish".

Halfway down the two-mile stretch of Rychester Road, which dissected James Wharf in half, Jon carefully trudged over a whitewashed wooden bridge. Mayhine Bay, stretching to his right, was a large circular bay bordered by gargantuan rocks and a few outstretched harbours flowing inward from the Atlantic Ocean. The sun was setting and a magnificent blend of orange, pink and yellow reflected off of the dark blue water, which seemed to extend past the bay into an almost infinite ocean. Jon could hear the shrill cries of seagulls coming from the docks as fishermen threw unwanted entrails into the shallows. He could hear deep and raspy voices in argument as men smoked their pipes and lit their cigarettes, all eager to share stories of their day's catch and profits. Jon huffed, coughed, and spat over the wooden railing into the Bay. He quickened his pace.

Despite its beauty, Jon hated the Bay and its shadowy waters. Beneath its surface the giant could move freely, under the eyes of the town, and pick and chose its prey – snatching man and child out of the water with thick gruesome tendrils. *Whatever it is, Jon thought, it's creeping, lurking under the surface, hiding near the bottom of the bay... feasting like some ungodly scavenger or demon on the souls of the poor and desperate.*

Those who lived in James Wharf fit that description quite accurately. It was tough to fish for a living and it was hard to raise a family on the ocean's brine. But, as Jon experienced growing up under the reigns of his salty father, there was more to it than any sum or asset. The water seemed to call for you; it seemed to keep you coming back, kind of like a dog fetching and returning a ball to its owner. Perhaps it

was the smell of the ocean; perhaps it was in doing a career so native to Nova Scotian tradition that it flowed in the veins of each fisherman.

Crossing the bridge Jon approached the tavern, his heavy leather boots stamping onto pavement as he crossed the divided road. He could smell and see thick black smoke pluming out of the building's near ancient red-brick chimney. The entrance of the establishment was marked by a stained wooden sign jutting outright from the side of the building: "Molly's Beard" with the image of a grotesque bearded and grinning mermaid. Jon nodded at Earl and Keith Gordon who had taken up residence beside the door, chain-smoking on cheap native cigarettes. They didn't nod back.

Once inside it was the usual scene. The warm tavern comprised of one room with a bar and stools on the right and a hearth and fifteen antique wooden tables on the left. The room was dimly lit by a few light bulbs attached to the ceiling and placed throughout the tavern, but the hearth provided much more light as the fire cackled and burned. The walls were littered with old beer posters, notably Hayson's favourite - the old Guinness caricature of the toucan with a dark pint of Guinness balanced on its beak, and heavily used dart boards thrown up at random spots. Jon could hear the old piano in the corner being played by Hayson's wife Mel, and some drunkards were singing and catcalling with hoarse voices. There was a loud clash of vintage pool balls as old Hal broke. The noise was deafening with loud drunken slurs and tales muffled by the sheer amount of people in the room. Immediately to Jon's right, One-eyed Bill Buckthorn was playing Euchre with Peter Stanfield. Bill nodded at Jon.

Because it was Wednesday, Molly's Beard was packed full of locals: over at the bar sat Nathan Selma, a businessman and friend of Jon's who ran the local grocery store down Herrin Road, sipping on his usual glass of amber whiskey; the petulant Doreen McAfreen sat at the back of the tavern near the fire sipping on a rum and coke; and there was the Ralphie Talon, in between the bar and the hearth, whispering something to the beautiful Megg Schwimmer while holding a pint glass in his left hand. Jon could smell the cheap malty booze and he craved a drink. He needed his daily dose or two, and took up a stool next to Nathan Selma in front of Hayson who was frantically pouring pints and pitchers. Hayson's mid-length black hair was stuck to his forehead, and his face was red with exhaustion.

"Evening Selm."

“Oh, hey there Jon. How goes the fishing?” said Selma as he drained his whiskey in one kickback. He was one of the few in James Wharf who could afford good Irish whiskey.

“Ain’t been on the water for a few weeks. Can’t go back yet, gotta make sure it’s safe first. I won’t go back ‘till I know *it’s* gone,” said Jon as he waved toward Hayson, beckoning him closer. Even the thought of the dark water gave Jon shivers and his arms were covered in goose bumps like a freshly plucked chicken.

“Ah, got ya. It’s just weird Jon... no one else seen such a thing in Mayhine Bay,” he said. “Most of James Wharf grew up on the tide like you did.”

Selm was one of the few friends Jon had in James Wharf and he could be counted on to be brutally honest. But Jon did not like the way he immediately dismissed what he had said. It seemed like the whole town was beginning to think that he had lost his marbles.

“No matter, Selm, I know what I saw,” Jon rebutted. “Jason’s dead cause of that bottom sucker. I jus’ can’t believe you all think it was only an accident. Jason’s been on th’ water since he was three.”

Selm stirred, his cheeks red with spirit.

Then Hayson came over.

It was nine and Jon had slurped down a few golden pints and a few whiskeys bought by Selm. His face had re-reddened a bit and he begun to slur his words. Over by the piano, Mel started a rendition of Loch Lomond drawing a small crowd:

The wee birdies sing and the wild flowers spring,
 And in sunshine waters lie sleeping.
 But the broken heart it kens, nae second spring again,
 Though the waeful may cease frae their greeting.

Hearing the verses, Jon only thought of one word: *water*. He shivered, shook his shoulders, and once again beckoned Hayson.

Jon and Selm spent most of their evening drinking and chatting about the local economy. Surprisingly, business had picked up at Selm’s store since some out-of-province tourists arrived in town last Sunday. Some sort of expedition, Selm gathered, and he figured by their accents that they were from New York or someplace near. A dozen or so tourists depleted all of his Kodak camera film and disposable cameras, not to mention enough fish bait to last well over a year. Over broken conversation, Selm heard a few young men talking about a “monster”

somewhere in Mayhine Bay. By the way he spoke, almost jokingly, Jon could tell that Selm did not believe a word.

This was alluring to Jon. He wondered how these tourists knew of the creature that pulled Jason down into the Bay. Maybe word of his tale had spread and, if so, he was happy with that. No one in James Bay believed him so any sort of support would be mentally reassuring.

Jon knew what he saw. As a child, his father once told him of an old fishing tale dating back to the time of his great-grandfather. Jon was seven and his father sat on the edge of his bed, in the darkness, face illuminated by a candle held close to his face. He told the story of two fishermen in the late eighteen hundreds who hooked something big in Mayhine Bay. With the candlelight making his father's face glow, Jon pulled the covers up and shivered. Whatever they hooked almost a century ago pulled one man down into the depths. The other man, Captain Nelson, watched with horror as a long black tentacle with suction cups the size of saucers broke through the choppy water and grabbed a sailor right from the deck of the boat. Nelson reported to the authorities that he could see a pair glowing red eyes under the surface of water, watching him as he stood shocked and unable to move. The sailor's left leg had been ripped open when the tentacle's sharp suction cups wrapped around and closed grip; leaving a pool of scarlet on the deck.

That tale frightened Jon deep down to the bones. To know that such a creature could be lurking in his Bay was terrifying, almost maddening; heck, kids swam in the cool water during the summer months. His father, like his grandfather, believed in the story and swore on a few occasions to have seen a large black shadow moving beneath the water's surface in Mayhine Bay. But, as Jon did not, they kept the tale within the Coddery family and sought little outside counsel. Perhaps they knew it was fruitless to announce and question a mysterious cloud of coal dust moving under the boat. *It doesn't matter now, Jon thought, Jason's gone and I will not, and cannot, believe the others.*

Jon drained his pint and headed towards the men's room. As he crossed through a zigzag of chairs and tables, Ralphie Talon looked up and grabbed Jon by the shirt pulling him over to his table. Megg Schwimmer giggled and moved aside. Jon reluctantly took her place.

"Oh hi there, Jonny-boy!" shouted Ralphie with excitement. "Where you going? Relax and have a pint on me!"

"Just going to the can," Jon responded without emotion. "Don't mind me; I'm having a few with Selm over at the rail." He began to stand

up when Ralphie put a large hand on Jon's left should and shoved him back down into the chair.

A sheepish grin grew on Ralphie's face. He looked eager to Jon, eager to carry out some charade or form of entertainment. At second glance, Jon thought the grin looked almost evil. Almost like one of those stone gargoyles, twisted and always grinning about some foul knowledge or deed.

"Come on! Enlighten us Jon," he said while draining a quarter of his pint, loud enough for a few others to draw near. Jon saw Doreen McAfreen shift over, and One-eyed Bill moved over to stand behind him. Earl and Keith Gordon came in from outside, and Selm remained seated at the bar but had turned to face the growing crowd. Mel had stopped playing the piano, and it grew quiet in Molly's Beard. Jon could hear rain beginning to fall outside.

"Listen Ralphie, I ain't looking for no trouble or attention," said Jon. "Just came down here to Molly's for a few good drinks and some conversation."

Ralphie looked at Jon as if he expected him to say that. Without notice he climbed up onto the wooden table and proclaimed loud enough for Hayson to turn: "Listen you all! Jonny's got something to say! Perhaps about how he's to blame for Jason's death! That poor lad- a good kid he was. Don't y'all agree?"

From around the bar came heightened murmur. The townsfolk started to converse with each other, some, such as Earl Gordon, began to shout out at Jon: "You're to blame, you God-damned bastard!"

Jon quickly stood up from his chair. Ralphie made an attempt to restrain him down, once again, but Bill helped him to his feet. Selm went over and grabbed a pool cue from the table and headed towards Jon and the tempered mob.

"Listen, I told you all! That...thing, whatever it is, took Jason!" Jon exclaimed profoundly, his temper rising. He was almost shouting at Ralphie. "Why won't anyone listen to me? I ain't lying to you, and I ain't lying to God. Hear me straight!"

Ralphie climbed down from the table and faced Jon head on; his pale blue eyes stared directly into Jon's. He was refusing to back down.

"There's nothing in that bay but fish, mussels, and weeds! Come on Jon, Marge left ya years ago for God-knows what reason. Maybe you're a creep and maybe you killed Jason!" shouted Ralphie. All around him he could hear voices of agreement.

"You fucking bastard!" cried the bitter old Doreen McAfreen, as she pounded a fist on the table.

“You heard the tales, Ralphie Talon! You heard them tales, all of you! My father didn’t lie to me; there’s something in that bay! I seen it with my own eyes: the tentacles, the glowing red eyes from beneath the surface of the water. Heck, it was almost dusk and I saw the burning red eyes!” shouted Jon, pointing a finger at the mob.

One-eyed Bill grabbed Jon and pushed him back towards the front of the bar. Selm stood behind with a pool cue in his hands ready for any sort of attack. Hayson retreated to a back room.

Once Jon was at the door, Selm shouted: “Get out of here Jon! Head home now!”

Jon did not need to be told twice. He opened the door and quickly headed out into the rain, down Rychester Road.

A mile out, the rain subsided down to a mist. The sun had set and it was quite dark except for a series of faint yellow orbs surrounding the town’s cast iron electric lanterns placed sporadically near the harbour, along Rychester Road, and down Main Street. The clouds had parted and the moon illuminated the Bay, reflecting a powerful white light off of the dark water. Jon headed hastily towards the bridge, not looking back, deep in thought. In the background, he could faintly hear Mel playing the piano and a happy drunken chorus booming along to Loch Lomond.

Jon felt like a beaten man.

What would he have done without Bill Buckthorn and Nathan Selma? At least there were a few left in town who would stand up for an old man such as himself. Heck, he had just lost his only son and to be challenged by the town was just appalling. *Why on earth would Jason’s death have served me well?* he thought. *That cruel Ralphie can’t understand that I loved and needed Jason more than he would ever know.*

One day, Jon had hoped to hand down his fishing boat to his son: the passing of the torch from one generation to the next, just as his father had done. *He’s right about Marge though,* Jon thought, *but it was quite the reverse as Marge was wacked in the head – she had to go.* Unfortunately, Marge had spread gossip throughout the town that Jon beaten her silly on a few occasions after he came home piss drunk from Molly’s Beard. After the town heard her lies, he was not liked very well, even at some points shunned. The town liked Jason though, and that’s probably the only reason the business stayed afloat.

He had reached the bridge and instead of hurrying home, Jon stood in its center and stared out into Mayhine Bay. It was very dark but Jon could still make out the Bay’s outline, and the rocky border to the

far left and right. The surface of the water reflected pale white moonlight, and a breeze gusted from across the Bay.

Jon was about to turn and carry on, perhaps gobble down another hoppy pint at home, when he stopped dead in his tracks. *There it was.*

About two hundred feet from the bridge, he could see a dark black mass protruding out of the water. An almost circular head with ridges and crevices housing a pair of sunken eyes; its red eyes seemed to glow and cut straight through the darkness. Small eyes for such a large creature. The terrible beast, whatever it was, remained in its position and stared at Jon, appearing to study his presence. Then a large fifteen-foot tentacle laced with saucer sized pink and putrid suction cups broke through the surface of the calm water and shot straight up causing a deafening splash. The arm then sunk down beneath. It seemed like a challenge; the creature was beckoning him to make his move.

Jon's legs shook and he coughed out in surprise. Despite his immense fear of the creature, he longed to show James Wharf the truth; he longed to clear his name and avenge his son. He did not care that the water was cool, almost frigid. He did not strategize how to tackle the putrid mass. He walked over to the shoreline and tossed his shirt aside, slowly wading into the black water.

The water was biting cold, licking and pinching his sides and his legs. He began to swim with outstretched arms towards the black mass which waited almost too eagerly. He was beginning to cramp all over, his mouth was chattering, his lips a hue almost blue. He was almost at the creature when-

"Jon! Hey Jon! You!" Jon could hear echoing from the shoreline, as he cocked his head back. Selm was shouting with outstretched arms. He had a despairing look on his face.

"Jon! Get back here! You gonna freeze out there! Listen- it's not as it seems!" Selm shouted. He spoke in a friendly manner, but there was a sense of urgency in his voice as if knowing the unexpected doom awaiting Jon.

Jon did not listen. He regained his pace towards the monstrosity. Selm's cries faded as Jon stroked through the water. He heard only two more words from Selm: "Ralphie! Keith!" but did not heed its meaning.

He made it another hundred feet and he was exhausted and ice cold. That's when it donned on him: *he knew what was floating fifteen feet away.*

The 'monstrosity' was a floating plastic blow-up toy turtle painted dark grey with etched ridges. It was rigged with a pair of red neon Christmas lights hooked up to a battery pack taped on the back. The

tentacle consisted of a pool noodle with painted paper plates glued on top and attached to a battery powered toy mechanism to make the arm systematically flap up and down. Right before his eyes the pool noodle rose and flopped down against the water omitting a loud hollowed sound. It was all a hoax; one designed to destroy Jon's credibility and sanity.

There were tears in his eyes. He could not believe he did not have a chance to avenge Jason, yet alone prove to the town that there is a beast in Mayhine Bay.

All of a sudden he noticed a cotton baseball cap on top of the water ten feet away floating amidst choppy waves. Jon knew instantly that this was Jason's ball cap: blue and white with a blue jay identifying the team's name- the Toronto Blue Jays. Jon swam with the last of his energy and grabbed the water soaked cap, holding it pressed tightly to his chest. He was treading water, almost forgetting where he was and why he was swimming in December.

As he held the cap in his hands with a sheepish grin on his almost blue and shivering face, he noticed a sudden intense glowing coming from beneath him. Two glowing circles the size of softballs shone a red fluorescence which cut through the water. The lights were drawing near. Jon realized with sheer joy that this must be the eyes of his monster! This was his chance to catch that dirty bottom sucker.

Jon grasped a breath of air and dove down deep into the water, Jason's blue ball cap clamped in his left hand as he stroked deeper and deeper. The once biting water was no longer cold. He could feel an increasing pressure in his head as he continued to swim down towards the glowing lights, to the creature below in some watery hall.

Nathan Selma watched from the shoreline as Jon abruptly dove down into the water. *He must have seen the trap; he must have realized Ralphie's 'joke', Selm thought, but why did he dive into the water? Why not call for help?*

He waited and waited, and Jon did not resurface. Selm had tears in his eyes.

He pivoted and was about to run down Rychester to get some form of help. Perhaps Jon was still alive, perhaps he had dove for some important reason - but then he saw *it*.

A dark green mass surfaced from under the Bay's water. Its head was the size of a small automobile and covered in ridges and indentations appearing almost reptilian. Its red eyes seemed to shine with such a light there could have been fire burning within its skull -

cutting through the darkness with a fiery intensity. The creature moved swiftly towards Ralphie's charade.

With a terrible groan, which seemed to loudly echo across the bay like a booming horn from a fishing vessel, an enormous tentacle broke through the water and grabbed the pool toy squeezing it between large yellowed suction cups. The creature then submerged beneath the water, dragging the falsity with it. Small waves jettted inwards towards the shore.

Nathan Selma stood transfixed, unable to move.

By God, Jon was right.

Bio: Matthew D. Laing is a Canadian heavily inspired by the works of Poe, Lovecraft, King, Howard, and Robert Frost. He is new to submitting fiction for publication, but has had poetry published in the *Literary Yard* and will have poetry published later this year in *Bewildering Stories* and *three drops from a cauldron*.

LLP
Bridget Duquette

Mr. Lowenstein shook and shivered, the slack flesh of his throat swaying wildly, glasses slipping down over his flat greasy nose. Stomach gurgling and hissing, he lunged towards the trash bin but was not quick enough to avoid covering himself in vomit. Moaning, he dabbed at his face – he was sweating heavily – then hobbled to his desk and phoned his personal assistant before slumping to the floor.

Jennifer entered the room to find Mr. Lowenstein propped up against the front of his desk, feet stretched out in front of him. The office smelled rank, like half-digested steak frites and rocky road ice cream eaten straight from the carton.

"Jennifer, if you would give me a hand..." He trailed off feebly and sighed.

"Sir, shall I call a janitor?"

Mr. Lowenstein seemed to be sitting in whatever vomit had not landed on his suit. Jennifer held her breath.

"Yes, that might be a good idea," he replied, wriggling against the carpeting. "And would you call my wife Evelyn?"

"Yes, of course."

Jennifer dialed the building's reception and asked for a cleanup, then flicked through Mr. Lowenstein's rolodex in search of his wife.

"Evelyn Lowenstein? I don't see her. "

"She goes by Earhart, in fact," he said. He began to cough a hacking, jerking cough, clutching at his stomach. "That's something modern couples are doing, isn't it?"

He hacked some more, then let his head fall back against the desk.

"Sir?"

"Young women...they've stopped taking their husbands' last names, no?"

"I'm not sure, Mr. Lowenstein."

She punched in Evelyn Earhart's phone number, standing as far away from her boss as possible. A cool, dry voice came through on the other line.

"Edward, is that you?" Evelyn Earhart asked, sounding very much amused by something.

"This is Jennifer Combes. Your husband asked me to call you."

"He couldn't call me himself?"

"Well, at the moment he's on the floor and he can't seem to stand up."

"What's he doing down there?"

Jennifer covered the receiver with her palm and leaned over the desk.

"Sir, what should I tell your wife?"

Mr. Lowenstein hiccupped. His chin was speckled with vomit.

"Tell her I'm not well. I can't seem to stand up."

"Yes, I've told her that, sir. What else should I say?"

He did not reply. Jennifer peered down at him and saw that he was gasping for air, noiseless as a fish.

"Mrs. Earhart, it seems he's having trouble breathing."

She turned back to Edward.

"Sir, I've told your wife you're having trouble breathing. Now shall I call an ambulance?"

Mr. Lowenstein did not reply.

"Mrs. Earhart, I've asked him if he wants an ambulance but he won't answer."

"You know, he did this last year on our annual trip to the South of France," Evelyn said wryly. "We've a cottage down there with a view of a

dancing stream, a rolling meadow, and of course the Alps in the distance. It's quite idyllic. But half the time we were there, Edward was lying in the meadow gasping for air, or vomiting into the stream, or rolling down the Alps covered in his own waste. I kept telling him, 'Edward, don't make such a fuss.'

Jennifer made sympathetic noises as though she could relate, even though she had never even been to the South of France.

"Mr. Lowenstein," she called to her boss, "your wife Evelyn asks that you not make such a fuss."

He did not reply, so Jennifer rested the receiver on a pile of coffee-stained documents and tiptoed around the desk. Edward had fallen onto his side, his face a reddish purplish blue.

"Mr. Lowenstein?" Jennifer cooed. She squatted down and stared at him intently. He was perfectly still, eyes half open, a strangely sweet smell wafting off his skin. Jennifer stood and hurried back to the phone.

"Mrs. Earhart, your husband is not breathing. Is that normal?"

"Oh, perfectly normal. Edward can go for hours without taking a breath. I frequently lie awake at night and listen for his breathing. He'll inhale at midnight and won't exhale until four, when the sun begins to rise. That's how his body works, believe me."

"I've never heard of such a thing!"

"You wait until you're married, dear. Or are you married?"

"Oh, no!" Jennifer blushed modestly.

"And why not?" Evelyn asked sternly.

"I-I'm not sure. I've never met a man I liked."

"Well, if you wait around for a man you *like*, you'll be waiting forever, dear."

Somewhere beneath the desk, Edward released a long, wheezing moan and then he was silent.

"Did you hear that?" Jennifer asked. "Edward just exhaled."

"See? He's just fine."

The two women exchanged a warm, complicit smile through the telephone, interrupted by a rapping at the door. Before Jennifer had a chance to answer, a sunken, tired face peeked into the room.

"I'm here for a cleanup," the little man declared, backing into the room, pulling his cart behind him. "Where's the mess?" He turned and surveyed the scene before him – the pretty, mousy brunette with the startled eyes standing behind the desk, phone receiver resting on her shoulder, and Mr. Lowenstein's burdensome body curled up against the base of his mahogany desk. The janitor's jaw dropped and he froze in place.

"Is-is he alright?" He asked, knowing already that he was not.

On the phone, Evelyn felt that she was losing control of the situation.

"What's all that commotion?" she cried.

"Oh, that's only the cleaner," Jennifer replied. "No, I don't know his name. Excuse me," she glanced over at the slack-jawed janitor. "What is your name?"

He blinked, struggling to remember.

"Paul," he said finally. He could not stop staring at Edward Lowenstein. "Have you called an ambulance?"

Jennifer, still locked in conversation with Evelyn, did not seem to hear him.

"Yes, he says his name is Paul. Oh, I wouldn't know. I would say Cuban?" She turned back to the janitor and held out the phone receiver. "Paul, Evelyn Earhart would like to speak to you," she said.

He did not move.

"Who is Evelyn Earhart?" He asked warily.

"She's married to Mr. Lowenstein." Jennifer explained, nodding down at her employer where he lay.

"Then why isn't she named Evelyn Lowenstein?"

Jennifer raised an eyebrow in annoyance and Paul reluctantly circled the desk and grabbed the receiver.

"Hello, Mrs. Earhart?"

"You know, it's very old-fashioned, this idea of a woman automatically taking her husband's last name when they marry," Evelyn moaned.

"Yes, Mrs. Earhart."

"These aren't the Dark Ages, you know."

"Mrs. Earhart," Paul interjected, swallowing nervously. "Would you like me to call an ambulance? I believe your husband is dead."

"My husband is many things, Paulo, but he is certainly not dead," she sniffed.

"Mrs. Earhart, your husband is lying on the floor, not moving, not breathing. Quite dead."

Jennifer had retreated to the other side of the desk, and was staring down at Mr. Lowenstein with a look of tender bemusement.

"Let me guess, he has made a mess all over himself. Yes? And he's lying slack on the ground like a pile of potatoes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And his face is blue and purple and he smells almost sickly sweet. Yes?"

"Yes, Mrs. Earhart."

"Well then, you can trust me that he is not dead. You know, for our thirtieth wedding anniversary, we stayed on an adorable little island called Motu Tu Vahine, not another soul around for miles. We were having a perfectly lovely time, but one day Edward decided to be sick all over himself and collapse in the sand, not moving, not breathing, for the rest of our trip. I was livid, of course, and the vacation was ruined, but that's just the kind of behavior I've had to put up with since I married him."

"Ma'am."

"Tell me, are you married?"

"Me? No, never."

"And how old are you? Your voice sounds quite mature."

"I'm thirty-four, ma'am."

"Well then it's time you were married."

He was not sure how to respond. He reddened.

"Is Jennifer still in the office? The young girl I was speaking to earlier."

Paul looked up at Jennifer, who was now circling the room observing her boss' small but tasteful collection of oil paintings, hands clasped behind her back.

"Yes, she is here," Paul said, and Jennifer turned to him and smiled.

"Paul, I would like you and Jennifer to take the afternoon off," Evelyn announced. "I insist on it and so does Edward, in fact. There's a little wine bar called Ciao a few blocks west of here. I would like you to take Jennifer there and show her a good time. I insist on it. And you're to tell the maître d' that Mr. Lowenstein will be covering the tab."

Noting the bewilderment in the janitor's expression, Jennifer cocked her head and inched closer to him, straining to hear.

"What did she say?" she asked when he hung up.

"She says I'm to borrow a suit jacket and tie from Mr. Lowenstein's closet and take you out for a drink at Ciao."

"What else?"

"We're to take the rest of the day off to become better acquainted."

"And what about Mr. Lowenstein?"

"She says we are to leave him right here as he is. She will take care of everything."

Bio: Bridget Duquette studied English Lit and Translation at the University of Ottawa. Her hobbies include reading, writing, and watching her peers flourish in their chosen fields while she stares at the framed art degree on her wall.

The Almost Child

Zacc Dukowitz

It was a chilly spring night in Santa Fe and John Hankovitch was dreaming. In his dream, Hankovitch was on a wide, warm river, floating along beneath a green canopy. Off in the distance was a small shape—something struggling in the water. He rolled lazily away, hoping it would leave him alone. Things were so peaceful out here, with the green branches above him, the sun shining warmly on his face, the water lapping at him like—

Something pulled him out of that. Hankovitch found himself suddenly awake in his bed, the dark stillness of the night all around him. His wife was not there. He felt out with his hand to confirm this fact, and a low moan floated into the bedroom. Or was it the wind? Tinkling sounds came from the bathroom—metal on metal, something like that—and he was up before he knew what he was doing.

She was on the floor. A metal towel rack in her hand, scraping across the tile as she moved her arms in small broken circles. There was blood. Bright red blood coming from her, pooled beneath her waist and smeared down her legs where she lay on the floor.

Hankovitch sprang quickly into action, at first kneeling to lift her but then standing and pulling a hand towel from the shelf, sending the whole stack cascading about him onto the floor. He ignored that and turned to the sink, the initials embroidered in crimson growing dark under the water streaming from the faucet, monogrammed towels her parents had given them but who cared about that, who cared about a wedding present when Cheryl was hurt. She was hurt, she was bleeding, and he turned with the wet cloth to kneel once more and find where she was hurting.

“John,” she said. “John! Listen to me.” He realized she had been saying his name since he entered the bathroom. “Don’t use that. This isn’t—I’m OK. I mean. I’m not *cut* or anything.”

“But you’re bleeding.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. She shifted in the blood, her hands in fists, one of them still clutching the broken towel rack. “I’m just...I’m so sorry.”

“Why?” His voice broke. “I don’t understand. Why are you sorry?”

“I’m not talking to you,” she said, snapping out the words. “I’m talking to *her*. To the baby!” And immediately he felt stupid—for not having understood, and for his frantic efforts to help. And then he felt guilty, because it hadn’t even entered his mind.

“It’s the baby, of course it’s the baby,” she said, a sob jumping from her mouth. She touched her bloody hand to her face, streaking red across her forehead and cheek. “We have to go to the hospital right now.”

At the hospital the doctor said, “Well, the only thing to do now is just let the body flush it out.” He glanced over at them from the white counter where he’d been writing notes on a clipboard. “Sorry. That maybe wasn’t the best way to put it.”

He rubbed his eyes, blinked them wide open, and put his glasses on. “But really, all we can do now is wait.”

“There’s nothing she can take?” Hankovitch said. He tried to picture the baby in his wife’s stomach, now not a baby. He tried to imagine what it would look like dead but all he could see was the tiny floating creature of his imagination, which moved and laughed inside his mind, which had a future in the world.

“She just has to leave it there?”

“John, it’s fine,” Cheryl said.

“We come in here and my wife is *bleeding*—she’s *bleeding* everywhere, and then we have to wait for forty-five minutes. And then you tell me that all she can do is, is just do *nothing*. That all she can do is just wait until it gets *flushed out*? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I’m sorry.” The doctor pushed his glasses up his nose. He was young but he was already balding, and his lab coat was much too long. It was hard to have such a person talk to you about something like this, about the death of a child. An almost child. It was such a minor sadness, a thing that almost was—so small, but then also so hard, so boney a feeling in his stomach.

“I really am sorry,” the doctor said again, in a voice that sounded like he was already in the next room. “But all we can do right now is wait for things to take their course. Come back if the bleeding starts again,” he said, folding his clipboard under his arm. “That would be very serious.”

He left before Hankovitch could think of anything else to say.

In the hallway Hankovitch threw up into a trashcan. The burn of the stomach acid hurt, and he liked that. It felt like what he deserved. He looked at Cheryl and had to look away. It didn’t help that he’d been right about wanting to wait to tell people. It didn’t help that he’d said he still wasn’t sure about being a father just two weeks ago, and then just last night, when he came back late from the bar.

It was 4:30 in the morning by the time they got home.

“I’m going to work,” Hankovitch said.

“You’re what?”

“Please,” he said. “I just—I think I can do this. I think they might offer me the job after all.” He glanced quickly at her, and away. “I’m supposed to have lunch with the board president today. Look,” he said, and she could tell he’d been rehearsing the words in his head. “People like to see toughness in a leader. *Resolve*. I can’t just take off from work because I’m *feeling*—because something bad happened at home.”

“John, I swear to god if you—”

But he was already opening the car door.

She shook her head, looking out the car window, and he went in ahead of her, thrusting his arm up against a strong wind, to change.

John Hankovitch was thirty-four years old, and he was the interim Executive Director for Santa Fe’s largest non-profit devoted to helping the homeless—Against Homelessness, or AH for short. He’d been working there for ten years. At twenty-four, after squeaking out a business degree from Moravian College in his home state of Pennsylvania, he’d taken an old girlfriend up on an invitation to visit her in Santa Fe. Two weeks later, his father calling to ask when Hankovitch was returning to help run the family dry cleaning business and things going well enough with the old girlfriend, he took a part-time job with AH.

And that sealed it. He’d only returned to Allentown once since then, for his mother’s funeral. And his parents had only been out to New Mexico for a visit once, for his marriage to the girlfriend, which had lasted less than a year. Over the last decade he’d worked his way up at the non-profit, from part-time employee to assistant site director, from site director to director of operations, ingratiating himself with board members, coaching soccer teams, bringing soup and condolence cards to co-workers, running a long-term campaign only he fully understood.

Hankovitch hadn’t started at AH with any particular ambition, but after the first few years a plan had formed. When his parents called it gave him something to say. He was too busy to come home: he had a career now. And Hankovitch did like working with the homeless, filling an essential need in his community. But he also liked the idea of pursuing something—of moving up in the world.

Of course, Hankovitch knew that if he declared his drive to one day run AH he would be called crazy. He knew what people said. That no one does that in a non-profit. That the board always wants fresh blood for their executive director, new perspectives, strong pedigrees from

prestigious institutions—something to put on their pamphlets to make donors feel reassured.

Hankovitch had never described his ambitions to anyone, not even his wife, though she'd gathered his designs easily enough. He was fanatic about showing up early and leaving late, always comporting himself, both at work and around town, with the self-conscious gregariousness of a politician running for office. Anyone who knew him could see what he wanted.

She knew even that their marriage had a role to play, that he might not have risked a second one—the first having failed so miserably—if he hadn't been thinking about how having a wife would help his reputation in the small town politics of Santa Fe. But she knew also that he was a good man, along the model of good men from her father's generation, or maybe her grandfather. Something about his drive put her in mind of FDR and Winston Churchill, of great leaders of the past, who possessed a type of reserve and focus that had fallen out of vogue among today's men.

Or maybe they just looked that way in photographs? It was hard to put into words, but her husband matched a certain image, a certain idea of what it was to be a man that she'd always held in high esteem. John Hankovitch was a loyal man, devoted, even courageous at times, if somewhat literal-minded. He was the man she wanted.

But how could he have left her alone on such a morning? She wanted not to be at home when he returned, which she knew would be late. She wanted to make him feel what she was feeling—so barren, so bereft.

But where could she go?

Cheryl lay in bed thinking these things as Hankovitch's red taillights winked down the drive, filtered through the stand of ponderosa pines that bordered the front of their house, tall black sentinels in the dark. She hugged herself. Her hands slipped down to touch her stomach, and a whimper fell out of her mouth.

Cheryl knew her husband, and she knew what people said about him. They would learn that he had left her to go to work. Left her alone after she'd been found bleeding on the bathroom floor to have lunch with Lois Catron, to try and convince her of something that would never happen.

Because everyone knew that John would never get the job. He'd been selected for the interim position to reward his dedication, and to keep him there, a loyal second-in-command, when a new ED was finally hired. This was common fact at the large local bank where Cheryl was

Vice President, and where one of AH's board members was her colleague (she'd been invited to join the board once, shortly after John proposed, and politely declined).

The taillights were gone. It was still dark outside the window, only a faint indigo hint of dawn's nearness in the sky. Cheryl turned away and put her hands again to her stomach, hoping beyond reason to feel a kick, which she had never once felt. To feel something, anything at all.

Dawn was breaking as Hankovitch pulled into the gravel parking lot of Against Homelessness. He was so tired as he walked up to the squat adobe office building that he felt like he was slipping into a dream, the soft crunching susurrus of his shoes on the gravel conjuring riverbeds, the cold wind blowing through his coat ice cold river water pouring over him. And he saw the struggling shape. It was a child in that turbid water, a tiny pale thing subsumed by dark waves. He paused with his keys in his hand, trying to see its face before it was swept away.

Inside the office a ray of sunlight sliced through the darkness, blinding him. He cursed violently as he fumbled for the alarm, elbowing a basket of pens to the ground, sending them scattering noisily across the tile and hitting his shin on a corner of the receptionist's desk as he reached to punch in the code.

Afterward he stood breathing in the quiet room. He was surprised to find himself afraid of the things he'd have to do that day, the lunch with the board president, the calls to donors, the small conversations with employees and with the homeless. He took off his coat and walked down the carpeted hall to his office. Gathering daylight outlined and separated things, a dark rectangle on the wall he knew to be a plaque awarded for service, a dark shape that was a statue of a man holding his hands out for alms, a small, dark oblong that was his own shoe on the tan carpet.

In his office strange blobs were suspended in the dark a foot below the ceiling—party balloons he'd bought a week ago, when they made the pregnancy public. Oh it had been early to tell people, he thought to himself, much too early, and then felt bad for thinking it. Cheryl had only been excited—she'd just wanted to share the good news.

He grabbed the nearest balloon and held it on his desk, stabbing a pen into the tough plastic and pushing out the remaining air. He grabbed the next one, and the next, working slowly through them, stabbing methodically, until the whole lot lay on the carpet like skins piled up after a hunt.

But now someone would ask why—now he might have to explain. And he didn't want to tell anyone. He could feel it in his stomach, how strongly he didn't want to tell them. Because they'd offer help, express condolences, and all at a moment when he needed to appear most strong. He was so close now.

He could hear his father's voice. *Be strong and move on*, it said. *Don't look back*, it said. *Seal yourself tight like a ship, and you'll weather any storm*. Heeding the advice, Hankovitch got down onto the carpet and began doing pushups.

After forty of them he was warm, and the fear had subsided. And he'd made a decision. He simply wouldn't tell them. What business was it of theirs anyway?

Hankovitch walked back to visit the shelter at eleven, as he'd done every day for three years running, since he'd first gotten a job working at AH's headquarters instead of at one of its satellite offices around town. He liked the visits because they kept him close to the people he was working to help, and because the fact of it looked excellent. It was the kind of thing a president or a CEO would do. He could just hear people saying, "Did you know he visits the shelter *every single day*?"

The shelter stood about fifty yards beyond the main office building of AH, on an open piece of land that abutted an arroyo. It always seemed such a quiet place on approach. You would never guess that it harbored teenagers escaping abusive fathers and mothers, fathers and mothers escaping abusive worlds.

The front room was empty when Hankovitch walked in so he sat down in an easy chair. He was so tired that in a moment he was dreaming. He saw the river again, the small child buffeted by dark waves. A hand reached forward—it was his own hand, strangely shrunken—but the child had been swept out of reach.

A voice pulled him out of that. "Mr. Hankovitch?" It was the receptionist, a young woman named Becky. "Sorry to bother you, but Ms. Catron just called. She has to cancel lunch."

His disappointment must have shown, because she brightened and said, as if to cheer him, "And how's Mrs. Hankovitch? She'll be starting to show any day now, I bet!"

"She's fine," he snapped. "How come?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. I was just—I'll get back to the front desk now."

He nodded, wiping at his bleary eyes. As she was leaving a young man walked out from the sleeping area. He looked to be about nineteen,

and was wearing ankle socks and no shoes, jean shorts, and a white T-shirt. He nodded to Hankovitch as he sat down.

“What’s up, man.”

“Hi,” Hankovitch said, smiling broadly. “How are you?”

The young man nodded again but didn’t answer.

He stood up after a moment and began picking board games out of a wicker basket, examining them, then placing them on the floor behind him. When the basket was empty he walked over to a bookshelf and began taking down books and setting them on a nearby table, one after another, glancing briefly at the titles before pulling out the next one.

Hankovitch watched all of this nervously. Finally he leaned forward, opening his mouth. “You know, we usually ask that—”

The young man wheeled around, holding a book in each hand. “What the fuck is there to do around here?” he said. “I mean, are we just supposed to sit around, like, like dogs at the pound, until someone picks us up or something?”

“What? No, that’s not the point at all. We’re not a foster care facility. What we do, we’re here to support people while they find their own way.”

“Uh huh. Sure. But what if they don’t?” The young man edged up to Hankovitch, lowering his voice. “Did you see that woman in there?” he said, nodding toward the sleeping area. “She was fucking talking to herself, drooling everywhere. You think she’s going to find her own way?”

“What I mean—I mean, finding your own way means something different to each person.” Hankovitch felt himself getting angry, and he tried to push the feeling away. “Most of us here are escaping something. We’re just trying to help people improve their lives, move past whatever they’re escaping.”

The young man stepped back, putting his hand on his chest. “Escaping? Man, I’m not *escaping* anything. That sounds like some coward shit to me.”

“I just mean, we all have things we’re moving past, and we all have somewhere we’re going. Can we agree on that? Would you agree on that point?”

The young man shrugged. “Man, I’m just here until I find a job.”

“Good. That’s good. That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Going from one place”—Hankovitch held his hand out at the level of his knees—“to another, a better one.” He raised it up to eye level.

The young man shook his head and laughed. “Man, you really believe that shit, don’t you?”

“What’s that?”

“That people can change.” He held his hand flat in the air, mocking Hankovitch. “That shit gets better.” He placed the books he’d been holding onto the table alongside the others. “Man, I’m just trying to get paid so I won’t have to live here any more. And that’s it.”

The young man walked out of the room, leaving the board games and books scattered behind him.

Anger welled up in Hankovitch. He should have been firmer. He wanted to walk back there and slap the kid, to tell him—to *show* him how tough the world was. At least his father had given him that, had taught him that lesson.

He took out his phone and entered Cheryl’s name. But then he hesitated. Maybe it was better not to call—he wouldn’t want her to think he wasn’t doing well. That he couldn’t handle the stress of what had happened. And he didn’t want to tell her about lunch being cancelled. That would just upset her. He could hear her saying that he should have stayed home, that he should come home early now that there was no lunch.

But he couldn’t go home, not right now. What kind of impression would that make? Better to stick it out and see Cheryl at the end of the day.

Hankovitch nodded to himself. He put his phone into his pocket, the games into the wicker basket, the books onto the shelves, and walked slowly back to his office.

After work Hankovitch sent Cheryl a text message on the way to Del Charro. *Working late but be home soon. I love you.* He was just going to have one drink and then he would go home. Just one—he deserved it after the day he’d had.

When Hankovitch walked in a regular named Tim joined him.

“Shouldn’t you be at home?” Tim said, handing Hankovitch a shot. Tim ran his hands over his stomach. “Aren’t you on ice cream duty? Pickles and peanut butter, that kind of thing?”

Hankovitch sank into a chair. “She’s OK,” he said.

Tim winked at him. “Hey, you changed your mind yet, about being a dad?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, are you getting excited yet or what?”

Hankovitch shrugged. “Should have used a condom that night in Vegas,” he said, shaking his head and smiling in a practiced way.

“Fuckin’ Vegas.” Tim laughed.

As the sun went down outside the bar Hankovitch found himself relaxing, forgetting about what had happened the previous night. More people arrived and they took more shots, raising their glasses, licking salt off their hands and squeezing limes into their mouths. What a joy, what a great pleasure it was to escape the pressures of the adult world for a little while.

The warmth of the liquor worked on Hankovitch. He imagined kissing his wife when he got home, sliding his hand under her shirt to touch her warm belly. There was something comforting about Cheryl since the pregnancy, a confidence and peace that drew him to her. No, he had not at first wanted to have children, but the idea had grown on him over time, and he had to admit that it was a nice thing, a wonderful thing to have a pregnant wife. It reminded him of how he'd felt when he first started working for AH, feeding people, giving them clothes, doing it because it was right and good, life promoting more life. A feeling that didn't need a reason, that didn't have to prove itself to the world. That was good simply because it was.

But then he saw Cheryl bloody on the floor, the broken towel rack in her hand. The baby was—it wasn't in her stomach. It wasn't anywhere. And he did want it. He did. But there were so many obstacles to tackling the project again, to convincing Cheryl he wanted to do it on purpose, that he wasn't scared any more of doing to the child what had been done to him . . .

"Are you crying?" A tall man with shaggy blond hair and a thick, unkempt beard was standing over Hankovitch. He wore a leather vest with patches stitched onto it—a skull, a lightning bolt, a gnarled tree—and his jeans were ripped open at both knees. It looked like there were twigs in his hair.

Hankovitch shook his head, wiping at his eyes. "Fuck you," he said to the guy. "I wasn't crying." He stood, squeezing his hands into fists. People around them stopped talking to watch.

But the guy wasn't making fun of him. "I was just wondering, man," he said, holding up his leathery hands. He smiled, white teeth showing through his blond beard. "Thought you might need a drink or something."

Hankovitch stared at him, trying to tell if the guy was genuine. Slowly, his hands opened. "It's stupid," he said.

"Try me."

Hankovitch swallowed, swaying so that he had to put his hand on a table.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll tell you the truth.” He held his hands out in the air. “Our dog got hit by a car. The vet said—he said she’s not going to make it.”

The guy nodded seriously, shaking his blond hair like a mane. “I get that,” he said. “I get that, man. Shoot, I’d cry too if one of my dogs died. What’s his name, man?”

“Her. It was a her. We were going to name her Samantha, after my mom.”

This information seemed to confuse the guy. “Well, that sounds really rough anyway.”

Hankovitch nodded. He noticed Tim watching him from a table nearby and looked suddenly around the bar, wondering if anyone from work was there, any of the nonprofit’s donors or anyone else of consequence.

“Hey,” the bearded guy said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “Can I show you something?”

“Sure,” Hankovitch said without thinking. For some reason he felt he could trust the man. And he wanted desperately to get out of sight, to get away from all these watching eyes.

They walked out into the cool night, where it was serenely quiet after the noise of the bar. Cars drove slowly along the narrow street of West Alameda, and the loud music, the close, hot quarters of the bar, seemed like a different world. The black sky was filled with shivering points of white light, which shone through the branches of a tall cottonwood as Hankovitch followed the man across the street and over a small bridge, crossing the Santa Fe River.

“Where are we going?” Hankovitch said, but the guy kept moving, looking back only to grin out of his beard.

Once they had crossed the river the man turned off the street and down a steep dirt path that curved back, leading into the darkness under the bridge. The echo of the water crashing under the low concrete ceiling made the river seem huge, a constant whoosh and tumble of sound that rendered talk impossible.

“Over here,” the guy yelled, waving his hand as he disappeared beneath the bridge. Hankovitch slipped on a rock trying to catch up, and was forced to step into a small eddy on the side of the river. The icy water hit the bare skin of his ankle like a jolt of electricity, making him inhale sharply.

Hankovitch stepped carefully out of the water, assessing things from the new stance of sobriety afforded by the cold water. The bearded

man wanted Hankovitch to walk under a dark bridge. He had not said why. He looked homeless—wild—unreliable.

The warmth that had filled Hankovitch as he left the bar was gone. He heard his father's voice in his head, warning him about what happens when you trust people. And he stooped down to pick up a rock.

He stood on the riverbank, swaying in the moonlight, peering into the darkness beneath the bridge. And then the bearded man appeared suddenly, yelling and holding out a small, white object. Hankovitch flailed forward, swinging at the man's face. When the rock connected with the man's skull it made a *crunch*, a sound Hankovitch felt in his hand as much as heard with his ears.

Hankovitch stumbled backward and fell into the river. Cold water seeped into his pants, under his shirt. He pushed himself up, clambered out of the water and back onto the riverbank. The man lay nearby moaning, his blonde hair spilled about him on the black dirt. A cut on the side of his face glistened darkly, the blood just visible in the moonlight.

He was trying to say something. Hankovitch scooted up to him, clutching the rock as he leaned down to listen.

"You got to save him." He pointed at the river. "You got to save him."

Hankovitch looked down to where the water ran swiftly out of sight. He felt something warm and wet run over his hand and recoiled, raising the rock to strike, but stopped when he saw that it was a white puppy on the ground beside him. There were more, four or five of them crawling around on the muddy riverbank, small pale shapes mewling in the darkness.

He dropped the rock, taking up the one that had licked him and holding it to his chest, petting it in hard strokes across its head so that the mud on his hands covered its white fur. It was trembling from the cold. He put it beneath his shirt and held it there, mindless of his own wet condition.

As he sat there he saw something moving in the river, and understood suddenly what the bearded man had meant. He had been holding a puppy when Hankovitch hit him, and it had fallen into the river. And he wanted Hankovitch to save it. Even though Hankovitch had hit him with a rock, he wanted him to save it.

Hankovitch set the puppy he'd been holding aside and began wading into the icy water. Was that movement out there—was it fighting to live? Or was it just the current flailing its tiny body in the water? He reached out his hand, straining to see. And then he heard a cry. It was

alive! He struggled forward with his hands outstretched, eager to see it at last. Excited, proud to have been vouchsafed such a thing.

And there it was. He touched the small body. He brought it to him, felt its tiny life shake upon his chest, and he knew that he could protect it. Something opened inside his chest, the heavy lid of a trunk creaking back on stubborn hinges. It felt like he'd been preparing for this his entire life. He'd been preparing and preparing, and at last he was ready.

He was filled with a great emotion as he turned back toward the riverbank, holding the puppy firmly above the rushing water. It was time to go home. It was time to see Cheryl. But as he struggled forward something caught his eye. The man he'd struck was pushing himself up. It looked like he held something, some kind of weapon in his hand, and he was moving toward Hankovitch. The door slammed shut—the flicker of feeling choked and was extinguished—and the world he lived in, the world he had created and continued to create, came crashing like a great wave back upon him.

Bio: Zacc Dukowitz holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Florida, and his work has appeared in the *Bellevue Literary Review*, *PANK*, the *American Literary Review*, and elsewhere. He wrote dialogue for and played the lead in the independent film *I Am Death*, and he currently lives on Lake Atitlan in rural Guatemala with his wife and two dogs, Scout and Boo Radley. Zacc tweets @ZaccDukowitz and you can find more of his work at www.zaccdukowitz.com.

The Storekeeper

Tom Sheehan

Before I knew what was going on, at twelve years of age, I saw what was going on... with Putney Grimes, who owned the Pioneer Grocery and General Store near my house, and one of his customers, Maxine Greenery. Truth of the matter was, I didn't know what I was actually seeing, or couldn't understand it until much later, but parts of this life were moving around me, memories as well as history being made, records being kept, innocence being expelled one way or another, true innocence. World War II, of course, was trampling on a whole tide of innocence. Glad tidings said General MacArthur was back in the Philippines, but on the other side of that, Glenn Miller was reportedly lost in the North Sea. My mother looked dreamy-eyed at that news, the way she could share some things without talking about them. In my own little way then, with just those dozen years in hand, I knew I was part of it all, part and parcel. Pieces of it enveloped me, or lifted me, or brought me down—experience building its everlasting testimony.

As for Putney and Maxine, a warmth was in our midst, in spite of the shape of the world, even if I could not give it a name. I couldn't name it and I couldn't touch it, but it was there. It all centered in the store, small heart of the universe we knew. Much later I could call myself, in retrospect, the love child because I saw the love blooming right there in front of me between them, day by day, even though it took more than a few years' time, and I, of course, in my own routines and growth, felt the changes.

The way it was for a while, was that Maxine Greenery could be a widow for all we knew, and with two sprouting boys. The hard words came one evening just as supper hit the table while twilight was still holding sway, the shadows soft, day dwindling down onto its knees, full night advancing: her husband Harry had been declared missing, lost at sea from a destroyer in the Mediterranean, half a world away, a lifetime away. Shadows joined with shadows, loss atop loss. George Drew, the Fire Chief, brought the word, the self-appointed dispenser of the awful tasks, him in his snappy uniform, black gloves, white hat, pants pressed so that the creases were like sheet metal lines, and all blue, the tall, long length of him all blue. When he tucked his white hat under his blue arm, every person on the street knew it was not an inspection of the premises being approached, the slow walk into a front yard, the unhurried climb

to the porch, the soft tap on the door. And nothing followed that first horror announcement of the loss of Harry. No hail or hallelujah. No words or whispers. No rumors. Night and loss settled on us, heavy as one could imagine.

Harry was one of the good guys around our corner before he left, and Maxine was seen as a regular customer of Putney's—had been since Harry put her in that converted barn he had worked on for Ladd Griffin just around the turn from Putney's store, when he went off in the Navy. He was a magician with hammer and saw, good old Harry, and had the acute eye for resurrection, bringing old lines of structures into better new lines, new plumbs, walls standing the way they were meant to stand, with the good shoulders. In due time, the way promise evolves, as all the neighbors had said almost aloud and almost at once when he went away, and in total agreement with nary a doubt in the mix, that Harry would build his own house when he came back, when his turn came up, but those chances were now gone and slim at best, it appeared.

But the main guy here from my angle, Putney Grimes, owned and was the sole employee of the Pioneer Store in my end of town, near the first Iron Works in America that lay untouched for more than 300 years. When my pals and I had a few spare coins, Putney's store was where we ended up, a post-Depression magnet for kids used to grasping. Many of my friends had found labor to our liking, our stretch to manhood, the war moving at far edges, almost visible, the way we saw the Newsreels at the State Theater on Saturday matinees. And we had small jobs then, paying small change, and an occasional petty romance of the dreaming kind and plenty to do with scrap metal drives, paper collections, keeping our lips zipped, pretenses of one sort or another. Earlier, in a stretch toward manhood, I had carried baskets of manure and sterilized loam into the old mushroom house on Lily Pond that used to be an ice house before Freddie Rippon converted it to a mushroom house where, if the crop was fairly large and there was no disease, he could make some good money. As kids we were testament to that providence, trucks going off loaded to the market in Boston, our pockets full of slim coins, mothers at the kitchen table waiting for a donation.

As it was, most of my pals had a handle on such tasks in Saugus, closing in on the mid-century mark, money times better than they had been for a handful of years, and some of the old guys that made it back from Europe and the Pacific were comfortably on leave or medically

discharged, enriching all of us with new gestures, new stories, seemed like a whole new language. They brought their pieces of the world back with them, dumping much of it in our laps, the laps of those who had stayed at home, the kid brothers and kid neighbors and those who couldn't make the fit. My brother came back from the wild Pacific, right off an aircraft carrier twice hit by Kamikazes and once by a torpedo, never telling us until he got home, and my cousin Warren came back from Europe after Patton shook his hand in front of a gathering of troops out there on the edge of the Old World. Pretty special for a Saugus kid.

On the other hand, a few of their comrades managed to slip off the trains in Saugus Center, right out of North Station and the Army Base or the Charlestown Navy Yard, and closing on midnight, like they were total strangers. I guess some of them were. They had changed so much, had seen so much; all their stories though came as gifts, long into nights, at the edge of things too, a new expression, a new outlook, a new hope even as we knew many of the black parts were being glossed over. Some did not make the return trip and there ran a time and a cause that I knew all their names and all their faces, what they had left in the till for me, a kid from this end of town.

Putney's Pioneer Store was where much of the talk and information passed from hither and yon to all the houses in our end of Saugus. He carried a whole arsenal of goods besides the usual grocery items; most of the time catering to the ladies with cloth goods, small hats, big bowls, you name it and he'd get it. He specialized in information too. You could tell that Put was eager for all kinds of intelligence, as though he had been selected to be a communication center, keeping people informed, ranking news, passing tidbits that ordinarily didn't plan much hurt for anybody. Some things, I knew, he kept to himself, let others pass the word, like he was a sieve screening out the bad parts.

Mostly I think it was the melancholy of the war that triggered Putney, changed his expression, changed his manners, damn near changed his language...the odd pieces that somehow daily came down the street and through his door like the wind had kicked it open or something more elusive, the words of another telegram hitting straight at a heart or two, or a distant shot or shell seeming to come home to the storekeeper in a sweep of the morning air, as if it were aimed at him from the very beginning. All this culminated for him in Maxine and her own position in all of it. And thus it did for him, for the on-looker, for him

who cared even though it was at a most polite distance. They regarded each other in these times, each at some point of loss, at loneliness or liness.

In days of slow recovery, when the war was finally being won, Putney and Maxine were drawn by need. The future loomed lonely for both of them. When Maxine was in the store, she was always visible to Putney, who would put himself to that advantage no matter where he was in the store or who he was waiting on. He did it casually, not obvious to most other customers, and a perfect chameleon to my eyes. Often he let me sit beside the side door and read comic books for free, as long as I did not crease them too much. It was a measure of his charity, of the blooms that rigged his heart on many days as he looked on the scene about him, on the level of neatness. From my spot at the door I had a view down the front counter and down the back aisle. The first time Maxine stretched to put something back on a higher shelf, a packet or container she had dislodged from place, I caught a half smile on Putney's face, though at the moment he was waiting on the neighborhood witch, Ethel Nourseling, my old teacher with the strap or the harsh ruler for a wayward tongue. Maxine always wore dresses that seemed to have been slipped onto her slim frame, silky and soft and smooth the way they flowed with her, curves, grace and all the goodly package; that package contained blond hair soft as a summer cone, wide eyes that surprise found a good home in, lips a favored pink blossom had touched just about every time out, and a warmth, a warmth that was never spectacular, not for those of us who looked closely, but always countable, easily marked and noted, like a small party had started someplace and she was invited.

Putney, a bachelor all the way to forty, was not a handsome dog, as one wag said, but he was neat. You might know it-grocers tend to be neat, sort of going along with the territory-everything in its place to catch they eye, the silent art of advertisement, the handless reach. Things that look good might taste good, or feel good. To boot, certain facets of Put's behavior ought to be mentioned for the best picture of him. For absolute sure, he knew the store the way a woman knows her kitchen, shelf and larder, cabinet and cupboard, the bins and barrels at the end of the main aisle like greengrocer totems...what's stacked where, or put behind, what's left in easy reach and another tucked away under the counter for special days, or consigned for the next special sale or holiday. His clock, or his calendar, was pretty near perfect for his customers, for our

neighborhood. Now and then we'd see it working, the close lookers among us, like him spotting old Della Crandall coming down the street and him dipping below the counter to lay out what had been hidden for more than a week, a new bolt of cloth or an infernally new utensil the adventurous lady would grab in a minute. They'd been ordered for her and salted away for the most appropriate visit, as if old Put had a hand directly on her pulse, on her current interests.

In addition, he always wore an apron that was adorned with the day's work, wore it like a good soldier wears his chevron, one might say. He was proud of his work, his store, and he was potentially, if not actually, prosperous. As a stock boy he had worked there for the previous owner, went away for ten years, came back and bought the place, as though he had planned it all right from the very start. His "hello" each morning was broad, meaningful, countable, him having risen early to greet the day, to be there before the baker and the milkman and the newsboy. Early energy became him, the quick movements, the lack of indecision, jump starts on a new day. One man operations have to be fed that way.

His razor thin mustache was little more than a hairline's width, and moved each time he spoke, smiled or expressed want or dislike. I never really knew what color his eyes were; I guess I never really looked, though they did come off as some kind of greenish bit, sort of changeable under other expressions or enlightenment. Narrow in the waist from a lifetime of shelf stocking and lifting, and a sane and steady diet one could imagine, he moved about athletically, as if he were in a game. Neat and athletic our grocer. On top of the small ladder he could stock the top shelves with good speed, never losing balance, reaching just far enough when he had to. The neatness advanced in order to the store's ambience, the certainty of odors that abounded on certain days, on every day of some sort or other. There came coffee grinding and candy smothering my mouth and nose the minute I entered the door. It had been that way for a couple of years, the grateful larder of the corner store, pungent and ripe and so full of goodness I could feel the blossoms of it coming into the branches of me. There was the fresh vitality of new bread, fresh baked and threatening the back of my throat, saying I could grab some and run, or scrounge for a half loaf, and worry about the butter later on. And jumped up the freshness of lettuce and husky tomatoes and apple stuff so rich it could make your knees bend. Lastly, just as threatening, came the special meat days, when pork came on the run or cow's liver or lamb

kidneys advancing a whole new odor the kitchen got ripe with. Some days it could have been the edge of the slaughterhouse dumped on us, or the block outside Kmita's chicken house where the ax swung in morning sunlight and I could see a hen's last roost as darkness came close to it. I finally figured a whole lot of it out, all on my own...I had always been hungry, the Depression Kid always with an angle toward food.

Once, just as the door opened and a whistle of wind came about, or an airy breath because it was spring, Putney came to attention. I caught the scent too, the fragrance, not of the day or the May smells that came along in with it, like new leaves and new blooms and the old earth winding itself up again, but another and newer one, especially for me...and old Put, hardly paying attention the minute before, spun on his heels and Maxine was there, slim as ever, in her light blue dress sitting on her like a blossom, inhabiting the doorway. There was first the alert of fragrance, then the heart of fragrance, and a rocking in our souls, in deeply where it must count, where redolence, known, gathers all kinds of reactions. It was a sharing, that frequency coming on air, a quite special broadcast of a special bouquet. It fully carried Maxine on those private sheets of air.

And old Putney was at heads up. And Maxine glowed her usual warmth, as if she belonged in that place more than any place else, in the midst of all the sensual goodness. To my eye he and Maxine each had a fair amount of grace. I think, even from my angle, I put them together before they were together, though I'd never be sure of the timing.

Some of it meant, at least for me, that it was okay for them to look upon each other, that it was okay to look good, look neat, look to one's best advantage, if merely for the looking. It was permission from two lonely people not saying a word about such acceptance. Every time a teacher said, "Neatness counts," I was alert to Putney and Maxine, if but the extension of their images working the back of my head like a piece of a black and white film. Now and then, of course, in my mind's eye, going through my own exploding new dimensions, I was alert to her preparations, as to how she primed and primed herself, where she sent the kids while she did so, at least not alerting them that their mother was being a bit selfish, reaching out in a most harmless way but behind a closed door, locked away with herself and whoever might be tempting her company.

Putney was harmless from any standpoint, but he had keen eyes. I was always sure that she knew about his eyes. And I knew how her dress slipped easily onto her frame, thought of how she might have shrugged but a single shoulder to let it fall gracefully in place, and fully assumed that Putney had the same picture, the soft sounds of elegance and mystery coming together in the same motion, the same slow blur of beauty that might be slipping into place from a simple shrug.

When Doug Matlick's body was shipped home from a Marine plane crash in North Carolina and lowered into the Veteran's Section of our cemetery, I was there with my father who had been in the Marines. It was his own salute to Doug. Doug was Harry's best friend. Putney saluted too, the only time I ever saw him in a suit, plain and gray and new looking, and never once looking at Maxine the way he did in the store, for Maxine was there, being an old friend of Doug's. Before I knew it, we were there again, for another of Harry's friends who had come home for good, almost able to touch his old pal and teammate Doug, for they were now part of a new huddle in a corner of the cemetery, close as they ever were. Teammates again.

I knew every face at both services and the burials and could mark each of them in their places around town, and felt all the sadness you could expect a body to hold. I didn't cry, though, did not shed a tear, but when I looked at Putney I saw he was shaken past his roots. It was as if everything all the others had felt closed in around him, and around Maxine who only once turned and looked at him with the most serious look I had seen in a long time. It was as if she had spoken, but with silence.

I watched them for two years as the slim war victories became big victories, and more of them rousing across the face of the globe. The two of them seemed to grow toward each other without really knowing how close they were.

Wiley Okens said at The Vets one night that "them two ought to find how to scratch each other's backs 'stead of sparrin' around like pretending." Many folks in town knew that Maxine was finding a bit of release in Putney from what was hounding her, the squeezed pillow, the silent nights. Putney allowed her more than a sense of hope, but all of it at a distance no matter how close they got on days she came to the store to pick up a few things for the house. Even when there were days it came

off as mere exercise to walk to the store and go away empty-handed, she did not leave with an empty heart. Yet, at forty years of age, distilled in his manners and outlook, damn near cemented in place if not character, Putney had that one old-time speed. Of course, Maxine's two boys would now and then enter into the slow-moving stand-off of sorts, tipping the scales in pro and con arguments the way kids do more than people realize. Malcolm Burdus the undertaker offered, "One mouth advanced to four mouths is some kind of algebra no matter what math says."

Putney's down to earth and thoughtful approach was appreciated by those who voiced opinions on romance, illicit or otherwise. "He don't rush that girl out of her boots none at all," Malcolm told Wiley one night and later on said, "If he don't hurry up, I'm going to beat him to it." All of them somehow knowing that Putney had ceased a regular Saturday night removal from town that was seen as a concession to Maxine and the space that had grown in his heart.

"Hell," Wiley replied, "he's got all the time in the world, Malcolm, and you got all the room in the earth. But I'm suspecting that ole Put has just that one speed and we ain't seen it yet." So the talk moved on about them, and the store leaped upon good days for Putney when Maxine came in through that front door like spring was sliding around behind her playing games.

All the time, no matter how we read it, the unknown sat on the face of each of them, the uncertainty, the Fates that move all around us like the tides on a beach, touching, drawing back, nipping and tapping, neap and run, like the manner of unvoiced threats and promises.

As it turned out, things happened at night to old Putney. It was always at night or the approach of night as it gathered down the street or from across town and he could feel a descent coming down around him.

One evening, almost to closing time on one of his late night closings, a shower ahead of him, a visit to the library ahead of him, two young fellows robbed bachelor Putney of what was in the till. The eleven dollars, all in singles, were hardly worth their efforts, as he had hidden under darkness the balance of the day's take inside a pair of rubber boots hanging on the wall behind the counter, safe enough for the bank in the morning. But one of the young fellows snatched a candy bar as he and his companion were leaving with their eleven dollar gain. It was a

Sky Bar. All Putney could think of was somehow getting a box of candy to Maxine, then he realized he hadn't been shot for eleven dollars. He told that to the police chief, in so many words. It was a new expression for his face.

Then, on another night in our local history, without notice or fanfare, from what unknown terrors he had been caught up in, and much older, Harry came home, came into the store late, as if riding the darkness itself, the ghost of all ghosts, despite the edge of his voice yet still haggard and not at all like his old self. He hailed Putney from the door. "Hey, Put," he said, "howdy partner, I'm going up to surprise Maxine. Got a nice box of candy for me? Good as you got. I ain't got much else to carry."

Putney would never forget those words of Harry's.

If it was a bad turn and a bad year for Putney, it was a bad year for Harry too. And also for Maxine, one could imagine. Harry, after the quick celebration and a hundred stories taking all kinds of shapes, the dark and the doomed, filled with odd characters and fairy people, ogres and demons of all measures and reaches, drank from one end of the day to the other. For a whole year he didn't pick up a hammer or a saw. Maxine once in a while would come into the store with a puffy lip, or a tear in her eye. Put had to look away, mind his own business, fall out of love if he could, for beyond all things that mattered it was a hopeless situation. She was hurting and Put stopped looking at her the way he had for those few years of his dependence on her.

The story that made the rounds was indeed bizarre, if anything more bizarre than war can be, and rescue at the ends of desperation. Harry, it was learned, was pulled from the Mediterranean by a French fisherman and hidden in the fisherman's house. For a long while he was tucked away in a secret space in the attic of the fisherman's house, where, through one small opening above an eave he could watch the small village square as it revolved under the war and under the Nazi occupation. One hellacious day he saw the Germans execute three American fliers right in the square and saw their bodies dropped into a hole, doused with gasoline, and torched. When the fire died out, the remains were covered over at the end of the day, interred right in the square of the little village. Three days later, when house searches were renewed by the Germans, the fisherman moved Harry to another house

and a secret room whose access was halfway down the depth of an old well in the cellar. That “hole in the wall” led to a spacious room dug into the hillside many years earlier for a different cause. The new “landlord” had a daughter, Yvette, just 17, who shined on Harry and visited him at least once a week and often stayed most of the night. When she became pregnant, it was apparent the family wanted to keep Harry under cover for as long as they could. Yvette gave birth to a son, and Harry was kept in the room some months after the war was over before he climbed out one night and made his escape.

He fled his European life.

But, as one must realize, the memories of Yvette, and the memory of another son, never quite left Harry. Maxine never admitted to knowing, but she must have known some of the mystery. Harry’s long incarceration, the visitations of his young lover, the subsequent son, all hounded him no end. All of it had followed him home to Maxine and the two boys and the subsequent nightly visits, away from home, to bar after frivolous bar, to friend after frivolous friend. The pattern was constant and unbreakable and the deadly inroads were open.

We did not hear the stories come up as spoken history here in town; they drifted in on their own feet, on an every-which-way wind from odd sources coming across the town lines by postmen, taxi drivers, delivery men, the coal man Merv Takens who thought Harry should be hospitalized because he had flown on that same flight of alcohol. Problems knocking at Harry’s heels were openly discussed in the barber shop, the post office, and in our own bars, though never in the ear of Harry on his way back to the house after a night on the next town, or the one beyond that. After a while we could picture him being followed, ghostlike, by his French lover and mother of his son, and the son himself. That had to be a bear to carry on one’s back already borne to drop weights easier than promises.

One night, the moon behind a sudden cloud, mist rising as if from the earth itself the way fog walks on water and roadways and intemperate reaches, history making new demands, life itself asking for settlements, Harry was killed as he walked across the turnpike from one bar to the next, going from John’s Bar to Ma Taylor’s Kitchen across Route One. One of his own drinking buddies ran him down, never seeing him on the dark road, never seeing the dark specters stepping right out

behind his drinking pal, never seeing those who were keeping him company.

Putney, to his everlasting credit, started all over. And I watched him again, from a new perspective and a new awareness, only this time he must have measured time and what had been eaten up of that which was granted to him in the first place. For he picked up some speed in his delivery, like he was coming right out of the bullpen at Fenway Park.

One night a few months later he carried with him his best box of candy and Maxine opened the door for him and the storekeeper shifted directly into second gear. Nothing was ever the same again.

Bio: Sheehan has work in *KYSO Flash*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Rosebud*, *Linnet's Wings*, *Copperfield Review*, *Literary Orphans*, *Frontier Tales*, *Provo Canyon Review*, *Western Online*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Serving House Journal*, *You are Here*, *Nazar Look*, etc. Sheehan has 400 stories on *Rope & Wire Magazine*, 28 Pushcart nominations and served in 31st Infantry Regiment, Korea 1951.

ME
Michael Price

This story is about me.

Aside from the fact that you have obviously, somehow, become fortunate enough to come in contact with this finely crafted piece of literature, you don't matter a whole helluva lot. Simply put, in words that even you might understand, based solely on your merits alone, you don't count. Therefore, you should thank me. As you read this, I give you worth.

Many years ago, it became readily apparent to me how truly special I am so I, therefore, have been obliged to accept this as a matter of fact. You should too and, for the most part, you have. Good for you. know it must come across as fairly obvious that my intelligence is undoubtedly to be revered. Additionally, I have amassed boatloads of money over the years, as notably evidenced by my...well, for one thing, my boat, my spectacularly gorgeous yacht...by my exceptionally fine wardrobe, *two* stylish European automobiles, and thousands and thousands of dollars worth of designer sunglasses. My state-of-the-art, elegantly modern, high-rise bachelor pad provides the quintessential definition of the term "luxury condo." Furthermore, I am exceptionally handsome in the classic GQ/beefcake mode, far too glib for words (get it? that's funny!), and, for years now, stunningly beautiful women have worshiped my every move, swooned over my every utterance. None of this is my fault, and should not be held against me. I seem to have been born this way. Whenever I treat myself to a leisurely jaunt down the sidewalks of the big city, I always walk right down the middle. None of this keep-to-the-right shit; *I* make *you* move. And those candy bar and gum wrappers I toss on the ground? Some city employee or whoever actually gets paid to pick that shit up. I mean, can you believe that? I'm a walking stimulus package.

I grace a local health club with my presence three or four times a week, whenever I feel like it, only during peak hours, of course. I always get the aerobic stuff out of the way first. Why? Sure, it's a good way to warm up. But more importantly, everywhere I go after that, everything I touch, every bench I lay on, a welcoming little bonus of special perspiration awaits whoever's next in line. Good for them. If they or anybody else wants to wipe it up, that's their business, I couldn't care less, it's not my problem anymore. Occasionally, somebody will actually ask if they can work in with me on something I'm doing, usually something with the weights, go every other set on a machine, split a bench, ya know, whatever. I always say no, of course. The nerve...they

can wait. What I'm doing is always more important, always has been, always will be, and takes precedence every time. Most people already know all that but every once in a while I regrettably am approached by God's most recent gift to ignorance and--can you believe it?—I get asked to share. It actually happens more than you might think. It's sad. I almost feel sorry for the damn morons.

Well, not really.

Okay, not at all.

I borrowed a couple thirty-five pound dumbbells from the club a few weeks ago. Walked out with 'em in my Gucci gym bag, right past the pimply little chicky-poo at the front desk, the one always smiling her tight little junior college ass off at anything that moves, doin' the minimum wage/free membership hokey-pokey along with the rest of her cutesy little pals (pretty pathetic, actually--pubescent eye-candy, at best).

And I know what you're thinking; yes, those weights were kinda heavy, hanging so low, thought for a minute I might even be running the risk of stretching out the ol' Gucc bag, that maybe I shoulda borrowed 'em home one at a time. But, hey, I really do need 'em back at my place, for those days when I don't feel like going out or it's raining or whatever, or for the big game on my big screen. Priorities, am I right? And for what I'm paying that money-sucking sweat shop? Hey, I deserve 'em. Gotta keep the pipes pumped up for all the pretty little *of-age* babes, right? See, there ya have it

again--priorities. They're great to have around during commercials.

The dumbbells, I mean, not the priorities.

Incidentally, that time you had your hands full of whatever crap was in all those boxes and the guy in front of you let the door slam in your face? Yeah, that was me. I know you said something, I think you might have even stooped to foul language, but I wasn't really paying attention, nor did I give a rat's ass. Besides, the guy behind you helped pick everything up, anyway, the schmuck. I know, I checked, just for the hell of it, more for shits and giggles than anything else. And I'm guessing (so I've been told) this is the part where I'm supposed to tell you how bad I feel about the whole deal, that I'm really sorry, I'll never do it again, but those would all be lies, so never mind. I don't do the door thing. My time is more valuable than that.

Automobile turn signals have always been a waste of electrical engineering, as far as I'm concerned, and a colossal pain in the ass to boot (ass to boot, boot to ass...God, I really *am* funny!). I don't even bother with 'em unless I see a cop hangin' around, trolling for

suckers, and sometimes not even then. Hey, I'm right here, I know you can see me, it's a red Porsche, for chrissake, get the hell outta my way, I'm turning. And yo, pedestrian, pay attention, in case you haven't noticed, I'm a lot bigger than you are, get your lousy ass across the damn street or I'll run ya down, chop-chop, whad'ya say? Hell, a long time ago, I even tried to get my mechanic to disconnect the blinker wires on my cars. I mean, why bother? Everybody sees *me*. C'mon, it's a brand new Mercedes convertible, ya gotta be lookin' right at me, I'm turning, already.

Joe said he couldn't do it. Communist.

Shortly after I purchased and moved into my delightfully urbane abode, some artistically challenged addle-brain was hired—by who, I don't even want to know--to deck the walls of our building with art. It was all I could do to refrain from unmercifully belittling him and his excruciating lack of taste, that week he hung the hideous tripe. I waited until he was done and gone, then mercifully replaced some of the more offensive of his imbecilic selections with a number of aesthetically captivating paintings from my collegiate art class days, plus a few award-worthy photographs from my prodigious personal stash. I hated to break up a fabulous collection but, my God, something had to be done; I live in the damn building. I tossed the other shit in the dumpster, where it undoubtedly came from in the first place.

Okay, so a couple nights ago I walk into this bar. Nice place, decent scenery, been there, done that. Better than average success rate, not bad at all, really, definitely worth my while for a return visit. Anyway, I'm standing there, posed at the end of the bar, affluently dappered for the evening, as usual, scotching to myself, I dunno, on my second, maybe third...I see this chick across the bar. Real dolly-and-a-half. She's sitting there by herself: big jugs, nice hair, good make-up job, *cavernous* cleavage, the whole package. So I call the bartender over, tell him to buy her a cocktail, anything she wants, put it on my tab, shot, wine, whatever. Bartender goes over to the chick, brief conversation, she looks *right at me*, gives me the cute little smile...shakes her pretty little head no. Couldn't believe it. *Couldn't frickin' believe it*. I'm thinkin', she has no idea what she's missing out on. So I go over there, introduce myself. Nothing. So I start talking to this chick...ya know, real suave-like, charming the crap out of the whole deal. Says she's meeting her boyfriend. I'm thinkin', sure honey, I'll bet. Go ahead, play hard-to-get, I know how to play that game, too. So we're talking, ya know, mostly about me, naturally. Turns out she's the poster child for Air-Heads Anonymous, a total flight deck, brain of a pocket gopher, and, as it turns

out, a fabulous ass to go along with those wah-wah knockers which now, up close, look absolutely delicious. And I'm thinkin', let's get outta here, honey, I know a place, wink, wink, yada, etcetera...but hey, I'm playin' it cool, ya know, keepin' the eyeses on the prizes, as it were. So we're talking, talking, five, ten minutes, maybe...turns out she actually *does* have a boyfriend, no shit. He shows up, a half-hour late, and a real pip-squeak at that: five-eight, five-nine maybe, one-thirty-five, *tops*, bad hair cut, wearing an L-Mart clearance-sale close-out three-piece job and a buck-special tie, not to mention the scuffed-up *brown* penny loafers (more like *pennyless*)—none of which matched. And I'm thinkin', the whole time laughing my ass off inside, *oh baby, this is gonna be so easy*. So I buy the guy a drink, what the hell, try to be a good guy, anything he wants, on my tab (a *Fuzzy Navel!*—nice drink, Mary!). So we keep talking for a few minutes, she and me, I mean. Then junior fashion plate with the pretty little drinky-poo goes all brave on the deal and tries to bunny-hop his way into the conversation. Turns out *he's* an idiot, too, one of those puny entry level business geeks that should never be allowed to speak where liquor is served, all of which I probably could have told you before he ever opened his skinny-ass lips to yap, yap, yap it up. Not to mention, a lippy little punk on top of everything else; wouldn't you know, a real sass-box. Suffice to say, we kinda got off on the wrong foot, didn't hit it off real well. There were issues, more than one of which were directly or indirectly related to a few of my favorite female physical attributes, *all of which were practically gift-wrapped and sitting on a bar stool right in front of me*. So, what does he do? The little shit gets in my face. He actually gets up in my face, starts bitchin' at me, calling me this, that, the other; *couldn't frickin' believe it!* Starts railin' on me for hitting on his woman. Well, *duh!--no shit pally!* I was saving her, for God's sake. Him, too, for that matter. The puny little twerp was bound to get dumped sooner or later, *no way* a babe like that was gonna stick it out with...*that!*...she was bound to come to her senses, and probably a helluva lot sooner than later. A beauteous prize package like that *obviously* deserves better than little Miss Penny-loafer, sipping on his fu-fu-juice. God, he was pathetic. But he would just not let it go. He keeps comin' at me. So I take this little twit's bullshit until I just can't frickin take it any more, nobody could've. And I get pissed. Like, *really* pissed. You would've, too. Hell, anybody would've. Twerp! Fuzzy Navel...*pfft!* What a wuss.

Long story short: I end up with a couple broken knuckles outta the deal. Hurts like hell, too.

So I've been informed that I'm allowed one phone call as one of the honored guests in this shit-hole. Damned if I can think of anybody to call who might want to help me out.

The food here is terrible.

Got my first court appearance in the morning.

Good for me.

Bio: Widely published in literary journals, Michael Price has been writing fiction for more than 30 years. He earned his BA in Theater from the University of Minnesota in 1980 and performed his own one-man one-act play "No Change of Address" to considerable acclaim at the 2012 MN Fringe Festival.

Bad Boys Don't Get Dessert **by William Quincy Belle**

Henry stood in front of a wall-mounted case consisting of small plastic drawers. Dad said he had taken possession of the case when a local dentist had given up his practice and sold all the office furniture and professional equipment. The case with its drawers made for a great organizational tool in the basement workshop. Using a magic marker, Dad had labeled each drawer and filled them all with various items like nails, screws, Marr connectors, and what have you. Henry was now scanning each row of drawers, looking for something specific. Ah, third row, second drawer from the left: razor blades. Dad always used a razor to shave and would put the old discarded blades in the basement workshop in case he needed something similar to an X-Acto knife.

Henry pulled the drawer open and looked at the scattered pile of a half a dozen blades. He picked up the top blade by using his thumb and index on the ends of the blade. Henry shut the drawer and held the blade up to look at it. This was perfect. It would do the job nicely.

Henry turned around and faced the terrified man held captive in a wooden chair. He stared wide-eyed at Henry. He was breathing heavily through his nose as his mouth was stuffed with a ball gag. His face was bathed in sweat.

“When I was six, Dad showed me an old black-and-white silent film called *An Andalusian Dog*. It was one of the first surrealist films.” Henry turned the blade around between his fingers. “I was always fascinated by the opening scene where the filmmaker slits a woman’s eye. Even though it was all fake—the eye was actually a calf’s eye—it did have the power to startle if not horrify the viewer. There are things that get you right in the gut.” Henry looked away. “What’s the word?” Henry furrowed his brow, then said, “Visceral.” He gave the man a triumphant look. “That’s it, visceral.”

Henry stepped forward and walked around the chair. “Last year, I dissected a cow’s eye in biology class, and that was sort of the same thing, but it wasn’t a human eye.” He took up a position behind the man. “I thought since you were here, I should take advantage of the opportunity.”

Henry grabbed the man’s forehead with his left hand and brought his right, which held the razor, to the front of the man’s face. The man tried to scream but the ball gag muffled any sounds. He tried to twist in the chair but he was firmly held in place and could do little but struggle.

Henry felt the man go limp. Henry stopped. He let go of the man's head and it flopped forward onto his chest. Henry half stepped around to look and realized the man had fainted. No matter, this would make things easier.

Henry supported the man's head with his left hand and used his thumb and index to pry apart the eyelids of one eye. The eye was rolled back in the head so the white was almost completely exposed. Henry leaned over as he brought the razor up, then, using the point of one end, sliced into the eyeball going from left to right. The clear gel of the interior of the eye, the vitreous humor, spilled out. Henry looked at it curiously. He touched the substance with the end of his index finger. Using his left hand, he squeezed the eyelids, trying to coax the remnants of the gel out of the eye. He looked at the substance, trying to remember what it had looked like in the movie. How strange and yet how similar.

"Henry!" His mother's disembodied voice came from the top of the stairs on other side of the basement.

Henry let go of the man's head and stood up straight. "Yes, Mom?" He remained still, straining to hear.

"Dinner!"

"Okay, Mom," said Henry in a louder than normal tone. "I'll be right up."

He walked across to the workbench and left the razor blade before heading to the stairs. When he reached the first step, he flicked off the light and headed up to the kitchen.

"Wash your hands, dear." Mom was busy serving up two plates.

"Yes, ma'am." Henry stepped across the main hallway to a bathroom and cleaned himself up.

"What's for dinner?" Henry was drying his hands on a towel as he looked back in the kitchen where his mother was busying herself at the stove.

"I had to stay a little late at the store tonight so I didn't have a lot of time to do much. Fortunately, I did have frozen pork chops. I hope you don't mind, dear."

Henry walked back into the kitchen and sat down. "Mom, come on. You know I love your cooking. Even when you're not trying, you do something tasty. I hope I can develop the same skill to create something from nothing."

Mom laughed. "Well, aren't you the charmer." She walked over and set two plates on the table. "Certainly your father never complained."

His mother paused, then said, "Bless his soul." She crossed herself and turned back to the stove and fiddled with the burner controls. She

remained standing with her back to Henry. Henry heard her sniffing. He knew she was on the verge of crying.

"I miss him, too." He tried to change the subject. "I'm starving. And you must be, too. You were saying you had a longer day than normal at the store?"

"Yes." Mom took out a tissue and blew her nose. She turned around and came to the table. "Let's eat." She sat down and smiled at her son.

Henry stared at his plate. "Ooo, baked potato." He reached over and pulled the butter dish closer to his plate, then cut the potato into smaller chunks.

"Your Aunt Teresa is coming over tonight after dinner." Mom pointed to a white cardboard box on the counter. "I picked us up a treat; your favorite, in fact."

"You mean...?"

"Yes, Boston cream pie."

Henry looked both surprised and pleased.

"Aunt Teresa and I are planning the church picnic."

"Oh?"

"Yes. A week from this Sunday, we're going to have a church social after the 11 a.m. service. Teresa and I are heading up the women's group. We're going to arrange a picnic brunch outside at the church. I do hope you will come."

"Of course I will. I can help out with the tables and chairs. I'm sure you could use an extra pair of hands." Henry used his knife to spread chunks of butter over the pieces of his baked potato. "Oh, I love a baked potato with butter," Henry said, chuckling.

"I would appreciate it." Mom cut into her pork chop. "We all would appreciate it." She put a piece of pork in her mouth and chewed.

Henry scooped up some potato and had raised his fork about halfway to his mouth when a blood-curdling scream came from the basement. Henry froze. He stared at his mother. She stared, wide-eyed, back at him.

The two of them remained silent, looking at one another. Finally his mother said, "Henry, what was that?" After another moment, there was another scream. "Good lord, what in heaven's name is going on?" She immediately pushed her chair back and stood up.

"Mom, I can explain...." Henry sounded apologetic. His mother had already headed for the basement and he ran after her.

His mother stormed down the basement steps and turned on the light. There was the distinct sound of sobbing coming from the workshop

on the other side on the basement. She marched across the open area, then turned the corner. Mom came to a dead halt in front of the man in the chair. "Oh... my... God...!"

Henry came up behind his mother. "Mom, I can explain..."

Mom turned around to face her son. "Henry! How many times have I told you to not do this in the house?"

"I..."

"You are supposed to do this in the shed. If your father were alive, he would tan your hide." Mom crossed herself again and looked at the ceiling. "Bless his soul."

"But I put down a tarp."

Henry's mother turned back to face the man. He was whimpering. He stared at her with his right eye. The left eyelid had caved into the socket now that the eyeball had deflated.

"Look at this mess," said Mom. There was anger in her voice. "Your father always kept a neat workshop and here, look at what you've done! My God, you've gotten blood on the floor." She half turned to her son while pointing to the floor around the chair. "You are going to clean that up, young man. You will respect the memory of your dead father by respecting his workshop."

Henry stood there with his shoulders and head lowered as he looked at his feet in shame. "Yes, ma'am."

"Your father always told you to keep the hobbies out back in the shed. That's what it is there for. It is far easier to hose down the shed than to try to keep the workshop clean. Heck, you start sawing through a body and you end up with blood and flesh everywhere. It's a nightmare to clean up and if you don't clean up properly, that stuff starts to stink after a while."

"Yes, ma'am."

Henry's mother turned back to stare at the man. She had a perplexed expression as she stepped forward and leaned over to look closer at the hands. "What's this?" She pointed at the man's right hand. It was palm down on the wooden armrest. On the back of the hand were two metallic spots.

"Ah... galvanized plasterboard nails."

Mom nodded her head, half smiling. "Very good. I'm impressed." She looked at the left hand and discovered the same thing. Henry had first strapped the man's wrists to the armchair, then hammered two large nails through the back of each hand to secure it to the arm of the chair. The man couldn't move his hands without further ripping his flesh from the large nail heads.

“Let’s see: fingernails ripped out, the little finger amputated.” Mom nodded her head as she looked over the man. “Yes, good.”

Henry grinned. “Thanks, I-”

“Henry?” Mom continued to study the man.

Henry had his mouth open but said nothing.

“Please don’t do this again.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I want you to use the shed.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mom looked at the man’s left eye. “What did you do to the eye?” She leaned over to get a closer look.

“I....” Henry shifted on the balls of his feet. “I slit it open with a razor blade.”

His mother clicked her tongue, then shook her head. “You and your father and that Dali film. Geesh, you both seem to be obsessed with eyeballs.”

The man stared at the woman with his one good eye. Saliva dribbled from his mouth. His voice was almost a whisper. “Help me.”

Mom looked at the man in the eye. She held his gaze and said, “Aunt Teresa will be here at seven and I do not want her to have to put up with any screaming coming from the basement. We have important things to discuss and I don’t want any interruptions.”

“I don’t know how he got the ball gag out of his mouth,” said Henry.

Mom sighed and stood up. “You are just like your father. He never did get the hang of securing a ball gag.” She shook her head. “I can’t tell you how many times somebody cleared their mouth without using their hands.”

Mom walked over to one side of the workbench and opened the doors to the large wall-mounted tool cupboard. She looked around a moment, then selected something. Henry watched his mother turn back with a hatchet.

“Ah, Mom....”

“I’m sorry, Henry. You should know better. You have to suffer the consequences.”

Henry’s mother half turned, then swung the hatchet in a large arc over her shoulder. The man gasped just before the blade sliced into the top of the head with a heavy thump followed by a squishing sound. The man’s body went rigid as his limbs went into spasm, then there was an audible whoosh as the air came out of his lungs and his head sank forward. The man was still.

Henry and his mother looked at the man's skull split open by the force of the blow. The hatchet was embedded in the flesh but as they watched, the handle of the hatchet slowly tipped forward, then the entire tool fell onto the floor with a clatter.

"Henry?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You are not getting any dessert."

"Ah, Mom...."

Mom looked at her son with a slight look of disdain. "Don't you 'ah, Mom' me." She pointed to the dead man. "I want you to get all of this cleaned up. I want that body outside immediately. You get it down to the woodchipper and I want to see it mulched before you come back in the house. And you are getting up early tomorrow morning. I want you to fertilize the back garden before you go to school."

Henry said under his breath, "Oh, boy."

"Pardon me?" Mom looked at her son sternly.

"Nothing."

"Now get busy." Mom stood there, tapping her foot.

Henry sighed and walked over to the workbench and picked up a hammer. He went over to the dead man and pulled out the plasterboard nails with the claw.

"I'll keep your dinner warm." Mom turned around and headed for the stairs. "And I'll save you a piece of pie."

Henry grinned. He knew she couldn't stay angry with him.

Bio: William Quincy Belle is just a guy. Nobody famous; nobody rich; just some guy who likes to periodically add his two cents worth with the hope, accounting for inflation, that \$0.02 is not over-evaluating his contribution. He claims that at the heart of the writing process is some sort of (psychotic) urge to put it down on paper and likes to recite the following which so far he hasn't been able to attribute to anyone: "A writer is an egomaniac with low self-esteem."

You will find Mr. Belle's unbridled stream of consciousness here (<http://wqebelle.blogspot.ca>) or here (<https://twitter.com/wqebelle>).

Until We Meet Again
Allen Kopp

During the years that Florida Seamungle took care of Freddy, her invalid husband, he wasn't able to speak or barely to blink his eyes. She did everything for him: got him up in the morning and put him to bed at night, bathed him, dressed and undressed him, lifted him in and out of his wheelchair (he had always been a small man), cooked his food and fed it to him (all he had to do was swallow), and talked to him as if he might answer. She read to him, sang to him in her wheezing soprano, and sometimes she put a little rouge and lipstick on him to make him seem more alive.

When Freddy finally died in his sleep, Florida had his body cremated without fanfare. She put his ashes in a large-sized Hellman's mayonnaise jar and kept the jar on a shelf of the curio cabinet next to the TV where she could always see it.

Florida thought she could go on with her life (what was left of it), but she found it was just too bleak and lonely—empty, so empty—without Freddy. She had been married to him for fifty-two years and most of them were good, fine years. She wasn't able to erase all those years and go on her merry way as if nothing had happened.

At a place called *Under the Sun* on Skid Row Boulevard that sold just about anything she bought a full-sized male mannequin (also known as a doll) with fully articulated arms and legs. She took the mannequin home with her in a taxi.

Of course the mannequin looked nothing at all like Freddy. Everything about him was shiny. He had shiny black hair (complete with pompadour) painted on his head, shiny black eyes (sparkling, like the glass eyes of a stuffed mountain lion), and a shiny skin with red spots on both cheeks. His shiny lips were slightly parted, showing tiny, perfect teeth which, of course, were shiny.

At first Florida was put off by the difference between the mannequin and Freddy, but after a few days she came to accept the difference and appreciate it. The mannequin was a young man and at times she was able to think of herself as a young woman worthy of him (even if the mirror told her otherwise). And, even though he was inanimate, he was for the most part no more inanimate than Freddy had been.

Florida Seamungle was happy again or, if not happy, she felt useful and not quite so lonely. At mealtimes, she propped the mannequin

up at the table and put little dabs of food on his plate which, of course, she ended up eating herself or putting down the garbage disposal. She was delighted that her grocery bills were smaller because the mannequin really didn't eat all that much.

As she chewed her food, with the radio playing lively dance music in the background, she looked over at the mannequin and smiled and he always smiled back. He was never grumpy or out of sorts. He never dribbled food out of his mouth down his front. He was the perfect dining-table companion. How fortunate she was to have found him!

She left him in his place at the table while she washed the dishes, and when she was finished she wheeled him into the living room and lifted him onto the couch, propped his feet up and covered his legs with an afghan. (He had always been susceptible to chill, especially in the lower extremities.)

They both liked the same programs on TV. If she laughed while watching, she looked at him to see if he was also laughing. If she cried, he also cried, and if she became bored with a program and wanted to change the channels, he was always compliant.

After the weather report, she switched off the TV, took the mannequin into the bedroom and got him into his pajamas and into bed. She pulled the covers up under his chin, kissed him on the forehead and turned off the light. She always left his door open a couple of inches so she would hear him if he stirred.

After several months of unchanging days, the line between Freddy and the mannequin became blurred for Florida and then disappeared altogether. The mannequin became no longer a substitute for Freddy but Freddy himself. Florida forgot that Freddy had died (she put his ashes in the basement where she wouldn't have to look at them). He had been with her all the time. It was a leap she made in her mind as easily as breathing.

In October the days were warm and the sky as blue as it had been all year. Florida wanted Freddy to have some time outdoors before winter set in again. She dressed him warmly and took him for a stroll in the park where he might observe the beauty of nature. The little outing went so well, and they both enjoyed being out of the house so much, that she took him again the next day and then the day after that.

On the third day of Florida pushing Freddy through the park, a woman came and stood in front of the wheelchair and Florida was forced to stop. She thought the woman was going to ask her for change because she was that kind of woman, a bum or a homeless person.

"What's the matter with you?" the woman asked.

“What?” Florida asked.

“What, are you, deaf? I said, ‘What. Is. Wrong. With. You?’”

“Why, nothing’s wrong with me,” Florida said with a smile.

“Are you an escapee?”

“Am I a what?” Florida asked.

“You are such an asshole!” the woman said with exasperation. She was very short and fat, wore a filthy knit cap on her head and a man’s wool overcoat, even though the day was warm. She brandished a lighted cigarette like a knife.

“I beg your pardon?” Florida said.

“Every day for the last three days I’ve seen you pushing that dummy around in that chair.”

“Dummy?” Florida asked.

“Yeah! *Him!*” the woman said, pointing at Freddy.

Looking down at Freddy to see how the woman might be affecting him, Florida said, “He’s my husband.”

“Your husband!” the woman said with a hoot of laughter. “One of us is nuts and I don’t think it’s me!”

“If you’ll just let us pass?”

“It’s time you woke up and smelled the roses, dearie!” the woman said. “That dummy ain’t nobody’s husband!”

A small group of people, sensing that something interesting was happening, had gathered around to listen.

“We’ve been married for fifty-two years,” Florida said. “Not that I think it’s any of your business.”

“Well, I hope you’re married for another fifty-two and I hope he don’t give you a bit of trouble, neither.”

“That’s silly,” Florida said.

The people who had gathered around laughed and the woman with the cigarette bowed like Sir Walter Raleigh and receded (or seemed to) behind a tree.

Florida felt the people looking at her, laughing. She wanted to get herself and Freddy away as quickly as she could, back to the safety and security of their own home. How ugly the world was! How cruel people could be!

Feeling shaken, she stopped the chair and sat down on a bench to rest before going home. The air had suddenly grown colder and the sun, shining so brightly just a little while ago, had receded behind the clouds.

“It was a mistake to bring Freddy out into the world,” she said. “He doesn’t need this any more than I do.”

She pushed her fingers lightly into Freddy's upper arm and he tilted crazily against the arm of the wheelchair in such a way that only a person not in his right mind would think he was a real man.

"You *aren't* real, are you?" she said. "I've only been fooling myself all along."

She began to be afraid somebody might report her and they—the bureau of crazy people, maybe—would come and take her out of her home and make her stay in a mental home against her will. They might even shoot volts of electricity into her head, the way she had seen on TV. The thought made her feel light-headed with apprehension.

She dumped the mannequin (not really her Freddy, after all) out of the wheelchair under a tree and hurried away before she changed her mind.

On her way out of the park, an old man shuffled toward her.

"Can you spare a dollar?" he asked.

She looked at him and smiled. "Freddy?" she said.

"Name's Boo-Boo," he said. "At least that's what my friends call me."

"Would you like to come home with me?"

She touched the sleeve of the jacket he wore that was slick with dirt and said, "*Gunsmoke* is on tonight. That's your favorite show."

"What time is it?" he asked.

"I think it comes on at eight," she said, misunderstanding the question.

"You really want me to come home with you?"

"Yes."

"What's the catch?"

"No catch."

"Could I have a bath and some clean socks?"

"Anything you want."

She pointed to the wheelchair. He sat in it and twisted his head around and smiled up at her.

"This is all right!" he said.

She touched him reassuringly on the shoulder and began pushing toward home. She thought how light he was, how easy to push, and how much she had missed him in the time he had been away.

Bio: Allen Kopp lives in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. He has had over a hundred short stories appearing in such diverse publications as *Bartleby-Snopce*, *Penmen Review*, *Short Story America*, *Danse*

Macabre, Skive Magazine, Churn Thy Butter, Quail Bell Magazine, State of Imagination, and many others. His Internet home is at www.literaryfictions.com.

No Substitute for Terror

Michael Price

His new wife tried to talk him out of it. “Sweetheart, listen...I have a good job,” was how it began. “You really don't have to do this...”

“No,” he said, smiling stubbornly. “I'm the husband now.”

“But you just got out of school,” she reasoned. “We'll be fine. You'll have lots of offers next year, I'm certain of it...”

“I need to get started.”

“... or you could do something else.”

“Not a chance,” was the firm response. “It's my calling, I know it, it's what I was meant to be. Besides, it's great experience—what better training could there possibly be?”

“Or we could move. Everybody needs nurses, I could get a job anywhere. We don't have to live in the city just so I can be close to work.”

“Honey, you know I love you and I love what you're trying to say, I really do, but... look, you know my father was a teacher, both grandfathers were teachers, an uncle, an aunt, my sister, two older cousins... all teachers.”

“I know, I know. But sweetheart, you remember how it was.”

“It wasn't that bad...”

*

Larry knocked twice on the open door, took one large step into the classroom, inquired, “Anybody home?” and smiled broadly at the seated students.

Twenty-two sixth graders stared back at him in silence, blatantly unimpressed.

“Okay,” he gulped, striding toward the blackboard, stopping directly behind the teacher's chair and over-sized desk. The term *buffer zone* bolted through his head, masked by a more normal smile. “And a good morning to you all, ladies and gentlemen.”

No response.

Larry licked his lips with a dry tongue. “Okay again.” He turned and picked up a sliver of chalk. “My name...” writing on the board, “... is Mister... Maschke.” He set the chalk back in the tray and faced the class, an assemblage impressively unified in its expressionlessness. Larry inhaled deeply, exhaled quickly, and utilizing his pleasantest tone, “Now, as I understand it, you've already been informed that your Mrs. Brewer is starting her maternity leave today and won't be with you for some time.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

Larry discerned the male voice from the back right corner of the room. It startled him for a second, not so much because of the profanity but due, to a greater extent, to the deepness of voice—for a sixth grader—as well as the turn of the century literary reference—again, for a sixth grader. There was a sprinkling of youthful giggles.

He reached down and picked up a clipboard of papers from the desk. “And let's see, back there, you would be Mister...” He ran an index finger up and down the top page on the clipboard, stopped, and looked up again, concealing a burgeoning grin. “Huh.”

Resorting to the *first-day-on-the-job, get-off-on-the-right-foot, play-along-with-the-students* variety of humor, he straight-manned, “Unless I'm misreading Mrs. Brewer's seating chart, young man, you must be Sabrina Whitehead.”

A maleficent wave of juvenile snickering ripped through the room, lasting several seconds.

After most of the laughter had subsided, “Probably not, genius,” sneered the same voice from the back corner, a young man's voice severely bitten with sarcasm. “You're an idiot.”

The room fell eerily silent.

“He's Brock,” *sotto voced* a smallish girl seated in the first row, directly in front of Larry, displaying the sourest of faces. “Yucky Brock Drew. He's older.”

“Yeah,” nodded Larry, pasting on a smile, “I got that. Thank you, Miss...” he checked his chart. “... Miss...”

“Whitehead.” She smiled, a helpful smile.

Which elicited yet more laughter, including a mostly mirthless chuckle from Larry. “I see,” he said. Then, as jovial as he could muster, “Okay Mr. Drew, Miss Whitehead, class,” he nodded, edging his way around the desk, “I can take a joke as well as the next guy...”

A spitball hit him in the ear.

“Hey!”

He hadn't seen from which direction it had come much less who threw it, but it evidently had traveled a fair distance and with considerable velocity because it stung more than he thought a flying spitball ought to, but he had no real reference in the matter.

Larry allowed himself a few moments to compose himself as yet more juvenile snickering simmered through the room. “All right... okay,” he started slowly, suppressing mounting gall. “I hope I don't have to explain why that's the last time *that's* going to happen. We've had our fun for the day, now—are we all clear on that?” He paused in silence, panning the room, feigning extreme exasperation. Then softer, kindlier, “Okay. Now...I would appreciate it,

very much, if those of you not seated at your assigned desks would take the next thirty seconds to move to wherever you're supposed to be so we can take attendance and get started.”

All twenty-two students stood. They began to mingle, dawdle about, softly droning at and with each other as if it was a post-AA meeting smoking and coffee confab, only for little kids. Larry sat behind his desk and waited patiently for the students to sit, but few did.

“Okay,” he clapped, “let's everybody take a seat—*now*, please,” he volumed above the din, accenting the *now* with theretofore unprecedented sternness, fully aware of how precipitously close he was to slipping into the domain of actual anger, an area he had consciously resolved to avoid on his first day as a professional teacher.

And again, “Now...*please*.”

The class dissolved into silence as the students grumpily began to sit: the most uninspired round of musical chairs in history, thought Larry.

He never did find out if anyone ended up where they were supposed to be.

He knew for certain that at least three boys didn't. Brock Drew and two other boys, smaller in stature but with bullyish deportment, were standing, scowling, in front of a large side closet, containing, among other things, gym equipment.

“Yeah teach, we usually have gym class first thing,” said Brock, opening the closet door. “Ain't that right, boys?”

“That's right,” paraphrased the other two boys.

“Yeah,” agreed a few classmates, softly.

Larry quietly corrected, “The word is *isn't*, not ain't, Mr. Drew,” then flipped the top page on his clipboard. “See now, that's not at all what Mrs. Brewer says in her notes,” he said, pointing down, maintaining a peripheral awareness of Drew and his pals. “It says right here that you have language first thing in the morning.”

“Bullshit.”

Giggles.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Bullshit what Mrs. Brewer says.”

“Yeah, bullshit!”

Larry felt his stomach flip-flop. “Please watch your language, Mr. Drew.”

“Or else, what?” Brock glowered daggers at Larry. Larry stared back, outwardly firm, Jell-o on the inside.

Brock lifted a small softball bat from the closet, eased the hallway door shut, and stepped forward, the other two boys flanked behind him. “Who here

wants to play kickball?" he voiced in the direction of the rest of the class, two wildly nefarious eyes burning directly into Larry's.

"We do, we do!" unisoned the class with volume.

"Now just wait..."

Louder, "Kickball! Kickball! Kickball!..."

Larry was losing control of the room and he knew it but this was all new to him; he was absolutely, positively unsure of his viable options under such circumstances. Later, he would recall thinking at that very moment...keep it light. When in doubt, always go with your strength.

"Kickball! Kickball!..."

"But Brock," Larry stated with an uneasy chuckle, "everybody knows that bats aren't allowed in kickball..."

"Shut up!"

The class was now supremely rabid. "Kickball! Bullshit! Shut up! Kickball! Bullshit! Shut up!..."

With ambush-like execution, Brock and his two buddies strode forward as one and penned in Larry, up against the big desk.

Brock began violently hacking away at Larry with the bat.

"Hey...Ow! Cut it out! Hey!"

Larry blocked the first few swings with his arms; he knew immediately that his left wrist was broken. Brock's next swing landed in the pit of Larry's stomach, knocking the wind out of him, rendering him temporarily voiceless. One last swing sent him to the floor, writhing in silent, air-sucking pain.

"Get 'im! Get 'im!" yelled the students, many rising to join in the onslaught.

Brock dropped the bat and began kicking Larry in the rib cage, over and over and over. The other two boys aimed for Larry's head, kicking and punching with their little fists in fury, just as Larry began getting his wind back.

"Help! Somebody...ow!...somebody...ah, ow!...go get Mr. Lundquist, somebody...ah, God! Help!"

"Hold 'im down!" bellowed Brock, the driving force of the young mob, over the din. "Get his mouth! Shut 'im up!"

Now every student was up, all twenty-two sixth graders, all but a few involved in the fray. They pinned Larry flat on the floor, face up, three or four students per extremity. Larry could barely move, only his head side to side, and only a little bit. One of the smaller boys stuffed an eraser in Larry's mouth; Brock took some white tape from the medicine kit from the same side closet, wrapped it tightly over the teacher's mouth and around his neck, to secure it in place.

“Uueh! Uueh!” was Larry’s muted cry for help.

A boy grabbed a stapler off the teacher's desk, opened it flat, and repeatedly punctured Larry's face when it wasn't being pummeled by the students' battering fists and feet. The biggest, chubbiest girl in class, hesitant at first, got into the melee by bouncing up and down on his stomach. Not to be left out, two of the smaller girls collected stick pins from the bulletin board and jabbed him dozens of times, all over his lower abdomen and legs. Everybody else was, indeed, playing kickball—with Larry's beaten and bruised body in the featured role as the ball—the entire class with wild fury blazing in their eyes.

But it could have been worse.

During the savage frenzy of feet, fists, and all else, nobody had noticed little Sabrina Whitehead slip out of the classroom.

“STOP THAT RIGHT NOW!”

She had calmly walked down to the end of the hall--because you weren't supposed to run in the hall, not ever--to inform the school's principal, Mr. Lundquist, very matter-of-factly, that her class was killing the nice substitute teacher.

“Uueh... Uueh...”

And she was just in time.

Just as the principal arrived, Brock Drew discovered the desk drawer in which Mrs. Brewer kept her scissors.

“GET OFF THAT MAN!” screamed Mr. Lundquist.

A fractured skull, three broken ribs, collapsed lung, broken wrist (in two places), broken nose, several chipped teeth, countless bumps and bruises (both external and internal), and seventy-seven stitches.

“It really wasn't that bad...”

And a concussion.

*

“Sweetheart, please...you don't have to do this.”

“Yes, I do, now more than ever.”

“You could do... almost anything else.”

Larry sighed. “Honey, we've been through this.”

“But...so soon?”

“I told you, it's what I was meant to be. It's my calling in life.”

“But sweetheart, you remember how it was...”

“Chalk it up as an experience. It'll be different this time, I promise.”

*

Larry rapped twice on the open door, took one large step into the classroom, inquired, “Anybody home?” and smiled an unseen smile at the seated students.

Sixteen kindergarten students stared back at him in stunned silence, most of them terrified, thoroughly unnerved at the sight of all the bandages, as Larry strode to the front of the class.

All except one five-year old boy, a child noticeably larger in stature than his classmates, sitting in the first row, who immediately stood and peed on the substitute teacher's feet.

Bio: Widely published in literary journals, Michael Price has been writing fiction for more than 30 years. He earned his BA in Theater from the University of Minnesota in 1980 and performed his own one-man one-act play "No Change of Address" to considerable acclaim at the 2012 MN Fringe Festival.

Samson
RS Deeren

Journalistic Intent-

The following interviews are in no way specific or biased representations of the inhabitants of Samson. Rather, they are generalizations from a larger collection of biased representations.

Mr. Elms-

I moved here when I was twenty-five. It was the summer after I dropped out of graduate school and became a teacher; High School Economics. These people. *He scratches the gray behind his ear.* What was I saying? Oh, yeah, my students. Little bastards. I mean, you think you'd get a little more leeway with teenagers: a poke here, a jab there. Bullshit is what that is. They're nothing but children posing as adults. Everything is a riot to them. Who else could make the concept of diminishing returns into a sex joke? I stopped making lesson plans my fourth year. Something to drink? *I decline. Can't write drunk.* Now Carly... Carly Salina... she was a great student, smart, mature. Four years of Varsity golf; captain her sophomore year. Knew the laws of supply and demand. If only every student were a Miss Salina. *He begins to pickle his finger in his drink* That's not her name now, of course.

Mrs. Kennedy-

And I told Sherri, I said, "Sherri, you can't tell your son that it's alright to be out all night after some concert and then call into work sick the next day." You play, you pay. That's how I raised my kids. Her son lives at home. Tried living away for a few months. Stayed in some rundown hole of a house with a guy who sold marijuana. Didn't work out, of course. She never taught him how to live for *himself*. He practically lived off noodles and crackers. I know because Jenn Wilks told me, she did. I bet he never once did laundry. No doubt he took it home for Sherri. And that's just what I was telling Wendy last Friday at work. *She lights another cigarette.* I mean— I tell Wendy that I don't have time for that bullshit. She wanted to know if I could bring oatmeal cookies to the boy's swim meet this Tuesday. I told her, "Sorry Wendy. I don't have the time this week. I've got my mother sick down in Detroit and I've been down there every Sunday." My mother's gotta get her will in order, you see. Wendy understands. Her father died last summer; prostate cancer. But that's what I'm getting at. How many hours in the week? It's not fair how I've got to put in a full forty plus by each Friday and then come in for the past, what? Three Saturdays? To negotiate a new contract when there is *no* way that I can get those union morons to see that a ten/twenty co-pay will be cheaper in the long run. Nope. Not gonna happen 'cause all they see is that five/ten co-pay and their hearts

start fluttering. Premiums people! That's where you save. It's not fair that I have to work with people like that. People can be so selfish sometimes.

Billy Burgess-

My sister caught me jerkin' off one night at the computer. I was thirteen, I think, which woulda made her, hmm, five, I guess. Let's see, I was born in '89, so yeah. That's the problem I'm getting' at, man. Too damn crowded here. Been gettin' that way ever since I moved. I drive home every three weeks or so to see how the folks are doin' and I hardly recognize the place. More of that "in with the new" shit, ya know? They tore down Vinnie's Pizza to put in a Speedway. *He shakes his head and smiles.* Broke my share a hearts there. Country girls have a way, you know? Like desperation and acceptance all rolled into one and boy do they have a kick.

Homeless Jeff-

Yeah, I got the whole place down pat. Right up here. *Pokes his temple.* People think that the best spot's gotta be Main Street, all the cars. But I know the real payoff is just off Hops, all the kids, ya know? I know. They just throw anything away and don't give a shit. Pop cans and bologna sandwiches. What kind of lunch is that? Shit parents, ya know? Good for them kids to throw that shit away. Good for me, too. I used to go there after they'd go in for class. Now I have to wait 'til the busses leave for the day or else I'll catch hell from one of those teachers. The place is empty by five; nobody stays later than they have to. But what were you sayin'? My name? *I tell him.* Heh. Nah, man, I got a place to live.

Dr. Wilks-

It's the Mexicans. They started moving up here about thirty years ago. Just a few at first but now it seems like droves. Drugs bring crime, bring disease, bring down the community. The girls are the first to fall. I swear they all can't wait to piss off their fathers. *He scratches his crotch.* I can't tell you the number of girls that come in with some type of itch. *He smiles.* But my wife gave *me* three boys.

Jamaica-

I changed my name when I got married— Mrs. Smith. Boring, I know. But normal. I changed it again when I divorced and moved back here. I didn't want to stay with my parents again. Who wants to move back like that? No, I need my independence. I'm an adult and I'll do what I have to. Sometimes that's gonna get you home later than dinnertime and I'd rather not have that talk with Dad. I rented a small room above Towne Café just off Fallow Street. I can see the church lights on nights when I'm not workin'. *She looks back down at her knees. Fidgets.* But no, no I haven't played a round of golf in years.

Bio: RS Deeren's fiction and nonfiction appears in *BartlebySnopes*, *Cardinal Sins*, and forthcoming in CCLap's *The View from Here Anthology*. His short story, "Après Moi le Deluge," won the 2012 Tyner Award. Before attending Columbia College Chicago, he worked as a line cook, a banker, and a lumberjack in rural Michigan.

PATIENCE

Anne Leigh Parrish

Patience was misnamed. Rage, Anger, or Wrath would have been more apt. Clearly her mother was in an optimistic frame of mind when she chose what to call her unwanted, unplanned, and unusual child. That her existence came as a surprise didn't mean love was withheld. Patience was cared for, tended, never shunned. As she grew, it was her mother who wished to possess the quality she'd named her child. Patience was difficult, rambunctious, seldom at ease with her own skin.

Her teachers were the first to sound the alarm. Patience was perfectly intelligent, they said, but showed no interest in learning. She seemed to have contempt for the whole process. Patience declared to her baffled mother that the teachers in the snow school across the road gave their students homework. They had class trips and assemblies.

How Patience knew this was unclear. Snow people didn't mingle with mud people. They kept to themselves, and Patience's people were expected to do the same.

No point in worrying what goes on over there, her mother said. It's not for you, or me, or any of us.

Why not? I'm just as good as they are!

Because. It's always been that way.

Then I'll cross the road. I'll go to that school. I'll learn what the snow kids learn.

Patience, no! You must not cross that road! Snow and mud don't mix!

What bothered Patience is that her people did cross the road. They went every day to clean houses, iron sheets, cook, and take away a few coins and bills placed on whatever surface was near – a counter, the top of a barrel – but never into the hand, for snow must not touch mud.

Snow can melt, and mud can harden, Patience thought. It was Patience herself who hardened, but only on the inside. Outwardly, she seemed to have adopted a spirit of quiet resignation which pleased her mother no end.

Time passed, as time always does, and things changed for the mud and snow people. A new spirit of cooperation and acceptance seemed to prevail. Snow people and mud people became friends, business partners, even lovers. Sometimes they married. A new identity seemed to be at hand, and Patience, now a community leader, sought a new vocabulary – a new name. Mud people were descended from the earth, the rich ground from which food came, and Patience advocated being called Children of the Soil. When that was too long,

and thus inconvenient, it was shortened to Soil. Snow people wanted a name change, too, and since snow fell from above they became Sky.

For a while, everyone was pretty happy with their new names. Then trouble started again because Soil was always lower than Sky. Patience tried to impress upon the citizens of her town that both were equally necessary to survival, and so both should be treated equally under the law. Patience was older, her hair was streaked with white. Yet her passion for justice was as strong as ever.

While the law came to recognize equality, the hearts of human beings did not. Soil was still considered less valuable than Sky. And because the peacekeepers were usually Sky, further trouble ensued. Rights, once briefly respected, were ignored. Young Soil men, unarmed, were shot by Sky police who later swore that they believed a weapon had been in hand. One horrible mistake could be explained as simple human error. But the trend continued. Soil feared, Sky reigned.

In a city by the river that cut the country in two, a young Soil man walked down a street. The street appealed to him. It was open and wide. Traffic was light, he wasn't concerned for his safety. The day was warm, the world felt gentle. Until a Sky police officer drove up and told him to stop walking in the road. Is there a law against walking in the road? Soil asked Sky. The officer repeated his request. His voice grew loud. The world wasn't gentle. A final command was issued, a shot fired, a Soil man was now down in the street. The Sky officer claimed self-defense. The Soil man charged at him, clearly intending to do him harm! Certainly he'd had a weapon, if not in plain sight, then concealed somewhere on his person. No weapon could be found, though, and the Soil community raged.

Patience brought her people together. They held a vigil. They sang. They walked arm in arm to the Sky police precinct, where they were met with two Soil police officers, who knew that they were tokens, yet acquitted themselves with honor and respect. The crowd was allowed to remain in place, singing, taking turns speaking at the podium that had been set up at the suggestion of the mayor. He promised a full investigation. He assured them that the matter would be handled fairly.

Patience knew there was no fairness. Her people knew it, too. They spoke of retaliation, of causing mayhem and strife. They would arm themselves in protest, and for their own protection. Patience counseled against it. Only greater anguish would result.

Night fell. Patience tied up her hair. She washed her hands and feet. She put on a clean white dress and a necklace which had belonged to her long dead

mother, a string of amber stones separated by silver balls, the only thing of value Patience owned.

She prayed. *Let me end better than I began, let me die better than I lived.*

The pavement was cool against her bare feet. She entered the street where the Soil man had been slain. On its surface were the invisible footprints of her people as they'd walked together in song. She walked on and on in the night. The police car approached her slowly, its lights dancing in the dark. The voice commanded her to stop and to come no closer. She raised her hands, walked on, waiting for the sound of gunfire, then willing it to come.

Bio: Anne Leigh Parrish's debut novel, *What Is Found, What Is Lost* (She Writes Press, 2014) was chosen as a Finalist in the Literary Fiction category of the 2015 International Book Awards. She is the fiction editor for the online literary magazine, *Eclectica* and lives in Seattle.

Not Big, Not Easy
Al Kratz

My wife and I were on the Vampire Tour in New Orleans when I saw the woman with the Barbie doll on her shoulder. That's more interesting than vampires, I thought. I wondered if my wife would agree, but I noticed she had strayed to the other side of the group. She did that sometimes which most of the time bothered me, left me wondering what kind of husband gets ditched by his wife and if my wife secretly thought I was a dick. But this time I didn't care. I had the girl with the Barbie. I had toys.

Even plastic Barbie knew a vampire tour was bullshit. I could tell she was intuitive like that. She could sniff out Camp, and she didn't care how much everyone else fell for it or if they were dumb enough to pay fifteen dollars for it. She was going to let them all know things could be cooler, that there could be a better way to live. She was going to smirk until the humans got it.

I made eye contact with the one holding the Barbie, and I knew it meant something. I didn't know what for sure. This story isn't the kind where a man suddenly understands what women are thinking. If it were that kind of story, my wife would stop it right here and say that I couldn't be in it. Regardless of what my wife would've said, I thought the contact meant this: This woman knew that I knew she had a rare Barbie. Not the kind my daughter had like Ballerina Barbie, Nurse Barbie, or even Desert Storm Barbie. She knew I knew this was the rare Subversive Barbie. She knew I got why a grown woman would have a Barbie on her shoulder at a Vampire tour. I was in. I wanted to help this woman and her Subversive Barbie start the revolution.

The perfection of this encounter reminded me of something my wife had said to me the first night we were in New Orleans, something that, just by the way she said it, I knew would require perfect circumstances. I'm not talking about when she said, "Hey, follow me to the bathroom with these guys I just met. I'm going to trade them some weed for coke." Nor am I talking about later when she said, "Hey, we should have sex out on the balcony. When else will we get the chance to do something so crazy?" Instead, I'm talking about when we came in from the balcony for a cigarette and she said, "Hey, if we were to meet the right girl, I'd be open to trying a threesome."

I have to admit, my wife did have a way with words. I have to admit, all of this was a lot to expect from one vacation. But this wasn't supposed to be just *any* vacation. This getaway was supposed to be *the* one that would save the marriage. This one was where we were supposed to break through the day-to-day malaise, the way of life we sometimes had affectionately (other times depressingly) called The Grind. This break wasn't about sacrificing our lives to

help our little children make their little dream lives. It wasn't about nurturing a life-long commitment to love that my father, the preacher, had blessed in his God's name. It wasn't about our faith or lack thereof. It wasn't about our future at all. It was about shedding our past and leaving it in the Bayou with the other rattlesnake skins that could have been perfect if they had been given room to keep growing.

As it turns out, it's hard to be under the influence of bathroom-barter-coke, pay attention to a vampire tour, and kindle a three-way romp you've only recently learned was hypothetically acceptable. I was trying to slow my mind and make sure I was thinking straight. Subversive Barbie Girl sure seemed like the right kind of girl to me, but I assumed I would have to confirm this with at least one other girl, if not two. Talks with my father hadn't covered this stuff. Neither did my mother. I decided the best thing to do was keep laughing with the subversive, let her know that I for sure got it.

As it turns out, guys running vampire tours didn't like guys paying more attention to girls with Barbies on their shoulders. It took me a bit, but after an abnormal break in the flow, an uncomfortable silence, and the tour guide asking if I had something to add, I did seem to get it.

"Nope, not a thing," I said in my most rebellious voice and then looked at Barbie Girl as if to say, "What a clown. Let's start the revolution." She seemed to agree, but she moved forward with the rest of the group except for the leader and my wife.

"How about this is the end of your tour right here pal?" the little drama queen said.

I watched them leave me. Watched the girl holding on to the Barbie bouncing on her shoulder, saw her turn slightly as if she were letting me go. It was as if she didn't know for sure what had been possible, but she had the clue we were missing something special.

"What was that about?" my wife asked.

"I don't know, right? What's that guy's problem?" I knew then exactly what to say to fend off any more conflict. Sometimes I did know the perfect thing to say and for a bit, even imagined the vacation could work. Luckily, the coke wasn't close to wearing off.

"Want to go dancing?" I asked.

But then again, some vacations just don't go to plan. On some vacations you end up on a thirty-square-foot dance floor with a three-thousand-square-foot dance floor in your head, cutting the hell out of the rug to Britney Spears like you and her catchy pop hooks are going to change the world. Some vacations you don't remember everything that happens at night and, when you wake up, you don't ask your wife too many questions. You

accept your death sentence hangover even if it has no intention of ever completing the punishment. Maybe that's just New Orleans.

I was trying to eat one of those pastry things everyone told me to get when I remembered the girl and her Barbie. I put the pastry in my mouth and bit off a chunk, but it all just sat there and asked what next. I moved my teeth, but the pastry just giggled and lolled around like a dumb little kid. When my wife wasn't looking, I blew it all out over my shoulder. Those pastry things seemed overrated. I wanted to think more about the girl, but my brain wanted me to suffer more, and my wife wanted me to move more. She wanted more New Orleans.

Maybe it was the fear my mouth might never again process food, or the paranoia lingering from the bathroom-barter-coke, or the guy at Jackson Square driving his car alongside our bus while fervently masturbating, but I just wasn't into New Orleans anymore. I just wasn't feeling it, but I kept this from my wife. I had to be a trooper, I knew that much.

And then on our last walk through the Quarter, something perfect happened again. We were going down the sidewalk, and I looked up to a balcony. Even through a foggy haze where everything that had happened the night before could have been a myth, I knew without a doubt that I saw the girl with the Barbie, and she saw me. We looked at each other like we had just found water. I had faith in this. She was across the street and on the second floor, and she was so far away, the distance hurt.

"Hey, what are *you* doing?" I asked.

She smiled and held her arms out and looked around, and I knew that meant, *I'm just doing New Orleans, just like you, man.* I knew that much, but I believe part of it also said, *I'm right here, can you believe we found each other again? Come on up.*

My wife asked, "Who's that?"

This story also isn't the kind where the narrator sometimes tells lies. I've told nothing but the truth: I did know a lot by the end of this vacation. I knew my dancing would never change the world. I knew Britney Spears, at best, was a shooting star. I knew if you go to New Orleans, you have to try a beignet, your mouth should enjoy it. I knew the idea of saving intangible things was an intangible idea itself. I looked at the space between me and the girl on the balcony, and I wondered if *intangible* was lover's code for *impossible*. I knew the vacation wasn't for me. I didn't want a romping threesome even if it magically aligned right in front of me. I wanted the revolution.

Bio: Al Kratz is a writer from Des Moines, Iowa and an Assistant Fiction Editor for Pithead Chapel. He also writes fiction reviews for Alternating Current.

In Orbit
Paul Soto

They hover around each other in dissonant orbit every other week, holding beers on the porch. One of them is like an incandescent puppy. He's in charge of the auxiliary cord and recently dropped out of architecture school to pursue rock and roll. He's always messing around, patting their backs, quoting YouTube videos, and consistently offering Jolly Ranchers, no matter the occasion. They secretly consider him the heart of the group.

The blonde one picks the cherry ranchers because they taste so bright. He has perfect deadpan eyes and is comfortable enough to pick at his toes in all of their living rooms. He takes it easy, sits slouched, and would be an excellent bear in his next incarnation. He loves his dogs back home very much. The last time he really cried was when Lucy, his beautiful and withered Saint Bernard, was sick with an intestinal infection. He never brought it up to the guys, not once, every other week. Lucy passed away quietly, two hundred and fifty miles away from him. He's still hurting, but also grateful, and realizes now that dogs are really just soft, slobbering lessons in mortality. He imagines himself falling fervently in love with a Golden Retriever after college. He's already named him Gus.

The tall one can bench press over three hundred pounds and has six hard boiled eggs every morning. He's always been really angry about something, but no one knows what it is or how to ask. He never says no to another blunt or beer and grows quieter as the night goes on, staring off entranced into nothing at all.

The blonde one thinks he's angry about his dad, who has always been an insufferable macho dick and smears his expectations on him over the phone and at home, during holiday breaks.

The incandescent puppy doesn't really give his disposition much thought but he knows he could get a lot out of a girlfriend or a yoga class.

The last one, the occasional asteroid of this orbit, thinks it's more confusion than anger. He intuits that all of those muscles are heavy, fleshy drapes, installed to deflect introspection.

The asteroid, a weird, thin, hairy dude, kind of sits off to the side, holding the beer as a polite social ornament. He doesn't listen to what they say so much as why they're saying it. He likes watching the playoffs and absentmindedly eating jalapeno chips, but sometimes the entire world—every cloud, gutter, and apple—radiates with such ardor that he has to go to the bathroom or fake a phone call to calm down. He has no idea how to grab them, point outside, and un-ironically tell them all about everything, how it all seems

to blend together and burn. Other times everything feels stale and lazily rehearsed, and he would rather go to his room, clean it impeccably and sleep.

The incandescent puppy is telling a vigorous, sprawling story about a girl he met at his last gig, swinging his beer to outline his emotions. Some of it splats on the blonde one's shoe. The blonde one freezes, feigning disgust, and, after a beat, sticks out his tongue victoriously, fooling no one. Giggling, the incandescent puppy resumes his story. The tall one stands stolid between them, staring off in private. The asteroid pretends to sip and smiles at the way they nod and sway in strange counterpoint, like orbiting planets. He sets down his beer and sneaks up behind them, embracing them around the shoulders. Unfazed, the incandescent puppy finishes his story and extends his own arms, closing the circle.

Bio: Paul Soto is a student in Austin, Texas. He is currently trying to weave together a summer to-do list that will cover basketball, pool time, Richard Brautigan, a part-time job, and a little bit of Zen. He will seek an MFA soon after his graduation, up where winters aren't just distant myths.

The Seven Year Itch
D.A. Cairns

'Is it anywhere else?'

'No.'

On your other hand or somewhere else on your body?'

'No.'

'Maybe in the elbow joints or behind your knees?'

'No,' said Rick, more firmly as he wondered why the doctor did not listen to him in the first place. 'Only one place. Like I said. My finger. My ring finger.'

The doctor continued to stare hard and thoughtfully at Rick's finger while mumbling something under his breath.

'It's not uncommon, you know,' he began, 'for people to have allergic reactions to jewelry, especially gold jewelry against their skin.'

'But we're coming up to our seventh anniversary.'

'Yes,' said the doctor, who had turned his attention to the computer on his desk. This guy was the type of doctor who justified Rick's usual reticence about visiting their little surgeries.

'April 17.'

'Yes,' replied the doctor mechanically.

'Is this how you earn your two hundred bucks an hour?'

'Yes.'

'Look,' said Rick, grabbing the doctor's chair by the seat and spinning the unsuspecting fellow around to face him. 'You have no idea how itchy this finger is. I can't sleep. It's driving me nuts. And you saying that after nearly seven years of wearing this bloody ring I'm suddenly having an allergic reaction to the gold in it just doesn't cut it mate. That's crap.'

The doctor cringed and sheepishly offered a suggestion, 'Have you tried taking the ring off?'

'Don't you reckon I've already thought of that? I can't get it off. I'm twenty k's heavier than I was when I first put it on. I've never had it off my finger and to tell the truth I've never wanted it off, but damn it, this itch is more than I can stand. Haven't you got some cream or ointment or something?'

'Yes, yes of course,' said the doctor softly.

Rick realised he had let his emotions run away. It was a fault of his and he knew it. He had always been an emotional boy, crying at the drop of a hat, blowing his stack over the smallest inconvenience or misfortune, and unfortunately he had not yet grown out of such childishness. At thirty nine years of age it might be too late for this old dog.

'I'm sorry, doc. I just need some help here and I felt like you weren't trying.'

The doctor mumbled again and handed Rick a piece of paper upon which he had written some unpronounceable name.

'Try this first but if it doesn't work, cut the ring off.'

Rick stared at the thinly built and pasty faced doctor. 'Are you married?'

'Just celebrated anniversary number five with wife number three.'

'Shit eh?' was all Rick could think of to say, and then he left.

He had put the first load of ointment on his finger in the chemist and despite not feeling any immediate relief, Rick was assured by the attractive young pharmacist that continued application should see a marked improvement in two to three days. Rick had asked lots of questions and for clarifications to give him reason to stay there longer, but eventually she excused herself and told him to come back to see her if the ointment did not work. Rick thought it was probably worth the trip back just to see her, even if the ointment did work.

Now as he drove home, it still itched so he put some more ointment on while he was stopped at a red light. The thought of cutting the ring off seemed appealing in that it offered an immediate solution, but he really didn't want to do that and he refused to believe that he was suddenly having an allergic reaction to gold after seven years. Be patient, Rick, he told himself, be patient.

It was Stacey, his wife, who had insisted he go to the doctor in the first place and finally she, as she so often did, wore him down with her continual nagging. Even though it was for his own good, it was still a pain in the backside to be badgered and Stacey was a master. If they handed out black belts for nagging she would have held a seventh dan and operated her own studio with hundreds of willing disciples hanging off her every word. If Rick was unsatisfied with the doctor's diagnosis then Stacey was sure to be a hundred times more so. He was not looking forward to getting home, and sadly, he reflected, he often felt that way nowadays.

He pushed the door open and called to Stacey. 'Hi baby, I'm home.'

She appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, the boring one with flowers that her mum gave her for Christmas, and frowned at her husband.

'What did the doctor say?'

Rick scratched his itch nervously.

'Said I'm allergic to gold, and if this ointment he gave me doesn't work then I should take the ring off.'

'Oh,' said Stacey in exaggerated alarm, 'that's fantastic. Are you sure the doctor said that or was it one of your philandering mates. You'd love to take the ring off, wouldn't you? Imagine the freedom.'

Rick said the thing wrong thing, 'I can't take it off,' and knew it immediately.

Stacey stood in front of him with her hands on her hips, and despite the tension and drama of the moment, Rick admired her curves and wished he could...

'Oh,' she said again crashing in on his thoughts. 'So you admit you want to take the ring off but you can't. What a shame.'

'Bloody hell, Stacey.'

'Don't swear!'

'Ah for fuck's sake,' said Rick just before he left the house totally exasperated.

Stacey was always on the offensive and Rick wished he knew why. He loved her but she made herself so ugly, so distasteful to him, by the way she spoke and acted that he felt better when he wasn't with her, and only had pleasant memories and raunchy fantasies filling his mind. The war was getting the better of him. He felt so miserable and low that he called a mate and requested an emergency meeting at the pub. Alcohol and the company of friends were Rick's saviors.

At the Sportsman's Bar in The Long Beach Hotel, Rick found his favorite stool and ordered a schooner of VB. Behind the bar was a very hot looking newcomer, and Rick watched her pull his beer with great pleasure. An object of beauty. Was it wrong to enjoy being served cold beer by a beautiful woman? When she smiled he wanted to jump the bar and give a great big cuddle and tell her she was gorgeous and the best server of beer he had ever met. Where did she get such perfect teeth? Where did she come from? Stacey never served him beer even when he asked for it. The thought of Stacey made him itch.

'You're new here,' said Rick as he took the glass from her hand and paid her.

'Second day.'

'My name's Rick,' he said placing the beer on the bar and extending his hand towards her. 'I'm a regular here.'

'There seem to be lots of regulars here, Rick.'

'Yes, but I'm the most regular.'

She laughed and Rick rejoiced in her laughter, soaking it up and allowing it to refresh him like diving in the ocean on a hot summer's day.

'Cut it out Rick,' said a voice. 'She's spoken for, aren't you Jen?'

Rick was caught off guard. The voice was that of his mate, Shiny, and he apparently knew the girl.

'I'll have the same as Casanova here thanks.'

Jen moved off down the bar to serve another customer, leaving Rick and Shiny slack jawed and staring after her.

'A fine example of womanhood,' said Rick.

'And a real sweetheart, mate but she's with Donny boy and you're married.'

Rick tried to sound offended. 'I was just saying hello.'

'Bullshit!' Shiny sneezed the word into his hand. 'Comes to you and women, mate and you aren't ever just saying hello. Am I right?'

Rick wanted to disagree, but he didn't.

An hour passed, and a half a dozen beers disappeared into the two men's stomachs as Rick told Shiny of his woes.

'Mate,' said Shiny when Rick had finished, 'my advice to you is this; stop flirting with and fantasizing about every hottie that crosses your path for starters then go and see another doctor about your finger, and for fuck's sake get Stacey to a shrink as fast as you bloody well can.'

'You think she needs help?'

'By the sounds of it. I mean people get the crankies and you know women have periodic attacks, but when a person is permanently shitty then I reckon something's wrong.'

Rick raised his glass to Shiny and tipped the rim towards him. 'You are a great man Shiny; even without hair.'

Shiny kicked the leg of Rick's stool and said, 'Finish your beer and get the fuck outta here, would ya?'

Rick was running over the events of the day in his head as he left the Longbeach Hotel and consequently was not really paying close attention to where he was going. One minute he was walking freely the next minute he was colliding violently.

'Hey! Ow. Watch where you're going.'

A tall red headed woman with a sparkling blue dress was staring at Rick with her hands on her hips, and for a moment Rick thought Stacey had dyed her hair.

'Sorry! Sorry!' he said as he rubbed his ring finger.

Rick noticed some papers on the footpath and an overturned archive box. He knelt to begin retrieving them. 'Let me help you here.' He looked up at her; stunning even from this angle, and said, 'Are you okay. It's my fault. I'm so sorry.'

He wondered how many times he had said sorry, and if she was going to say anything to him. Stacey would have been giving him the rounds of the kitchen by now, nonstop while making him grovel and beg for forgiveness, scuttling around on his hands and knees frantically gathering her precious pieces of paper.

'It's all right, really, I'm okay,' she said sweetly.

Rick stood and waved his hands at the paper, 'But what about...?'

'Scrap paper. That's all. Rubbish.'

She had not moved but had dropped her right hand down by her side while the left hand rose in unison with each soothing word of forgiveness she spoke, and touched him lightly on the arm. The touching seemed like a great idea. He reached for her upper arm as humble words of contrition and genuine concern formed on his lips. Unfortunately she turned and his hand brushed her breast. Mortified, Rick quickly pulled his hand away and began apologizing all over again.

Stacey would have slapped him and told him to keep his hands to himself, but the red head was laughing. Was she laughing at him? With him? It was confusing and Rick did not know whether to laugh along or keep on saying he was sorry or cut his losses and run away. Could such a beautiful woman be so kind and gracious? Was she more than a woman? Rick began to feel like he may have just met God.

'My name's Rick. I really am very sorry. I'll just pick up the paper for you and I'll get out of your way in case I abuse you again.'

That made her laugh too. Rick's heart swelled with pride. Damn, I'm good.

When he had finished collecting the scrap, he handed the box to the redhead and apologized one last time for good measure. She thanked him and walked away. His eyes followed her down the street until she turned a corner and disappeared from view.

Just then Shiny exited the pub and stood aghast when he saw Rick.

'Are you going to take my advice or not, ya wally? What was her name?'

'I didn't get it,' said Rick with a smile. 'Did you see that? Amazing. What a woman!'

'Mate, if you think the grass is greener, then cut that ring off, jump the bloody fence and get on with it. I'm going home to my lovely wife who is waiting to dine with me and our children.'

Rick thought Shiny's parting comment was a bit of a shot at him, but it wasn't really in his nature to be nasty, even for the sake of a laugh.

'See ya, Shiny. Thanks for the advice.'

Because he did not want to go home and because he felt there may have been some merit to Shiny's advice, Rick decided to go to the local medical centre and get a second opinion on his itch.

It was a five minute walk, and once inside Rick was informed that all the doctor's had appointments for the remainder of the afternoon, except for Dr. Khan who was seeing those without appointments.

'That's fine,' said Rick.

'Please have a seat,' said the receptionist. 'She'll be with you soon.'

She? thought Rick. The itching was reaching annoying levels again so he pulled the little tube out of his pocket and applied some more of the mildly soothing ointment.

Rick grabbed a magazine from the top of the pile on the coffee table and said quietly to himself, he hoped, 'Excellent. A female doctor from the subcontinent. That should give me quite a different point of view from the pasty white boy at the other place.'

He passed the time admiring the pictures of all the pretty starlets in their revealing and outrageous party dresses as they posed on red carpets at various movie premieres. Delightful they were.

A woman called his name and he turned his head to find the source of the voice. A short dark skinned lady with a white coat was searching the room to match a face to the name on her list. Rick stood up and their eyes met for an instant. When she turned and walked away, Rick followed her down the hall where she stopped outside her room and motioned for him to enter ahead of her. Although short, Rick noted she had a petite well rounded figure which the plain lab coat could not obscure.

'Have a seat please,' she said before joining him in the room, closing the door behind her and sitting down opposite him.

'That's a lovely accent,' said Rick. 'Where are you from?'

'South Africa. But I was born in Pakistan.'

Dr. Khan had smooth flawless skin, a large mouth and huge almond shaped eyes, and she smelled of some sweet perfume which inflamed lustful thoughts in Rick's head.

'Is it all right if I say that you are the best looking doctor I have ever seen?'

'Thank you. Yes, it's all right. What's wrong with you?'

'Nothing that you couldn't fix.'

Had there been an audience they would have groaned loudly and simultaneously at Rick's corny remark and he wished he could suck it back into the pit of bad taste from whence it spawned.

The beautiful doctor smiled. 'Go on.'

Go on? Go on? said Rick to himself as he started to feel like he was losing his mind. What was happening here? In the real world when you made tacky comments like that, women were offended and they labelled you a sleaze bag and kicked you out of wherever they were because they could not stand the sight of you.

‘I have an itch.’

‘Where?’

The doctor was playing it straight while Rick was feeling increasingly crooked.

‘It’s a bit embarrassing,’ he began. Somebody stop me, he thought to himself.

‘It’s all right, I’m a doctor. Try to relax and let me see. Would you be more comfortable on the examination table?’

‘No, here is fine,’ he said as he stood and felt for his belt buckle.

‘Let’s see,’ said Dr. Khan.

Miraculously, Rick was suddenly himself again, the moment passed, the blood flowed back into other parts of his body and he sat down very quickly. Shrivelling in his seat while his face burned, Rick wished he could have crossed his legs. He had to find something to say and fast.

‘Sorry about that. Belt buckle was digging into my tummy there.’

She smiled and thankfully consented to the lie.

‘It’s my finger.’

Dr Khan took Rick’s hand in hers and examined the offending area. Her hands were incredibly soft and Rick was unable to stop himself from commenting. Whether the good doctor was naïve or just incredibly tolerant, it was as though a light had all of a sudden been switched on in her head. When Rick stroked the back of her hand with his free hand, she pulled away and gave him a scorching look of warning.

‘How long have you been married?’

‘Nearly seven years,’ said Rick with a sigh because he knew exactly where the doctor was going with that question.

‘Cut that ring off!’

She scribbled something on a piece of paper and shoved it towards him. ‘And apply this three to four times a day.’

When Rick failed to get up and leave, she stood up and opened the door for him. ‘Good-bye.’

As he strolled back down the hall, Rick tried to decipher the figures on the piece of paper Dr Khan had given him. He wasn’t sure but they looked awfully similar to the ones on the page from the first doctor. Not being able to clearly make out what it said was good enough excuse for him to go back to the

chemist anyway, and as headed back to his car, thoughts of the intelligent and attractive pharmacist made him smile and forget all about the close call in Dr Khan's room.

The sight of another woman caused his smile to evaporate like a puddle of water in a desert.

'Wait!' called Rick to the woman in uniform. 'Wait please. I was with the doctor.'

Rick studied her as he approached, playing with his wedding ring. As she completely ignored him and continued writing him a ticket Rick noticed that either her grey uniform was three sizes too big or she was extraordinarily skinny. The effect was to make her appear like a little girl playing dress ups in daddy's work clothes. It was amusing but amused was not really what Rick wanted to be at that moment.

'Please. I'm here now.'

She spoke with a newsreader's voice; deep and authoritative, and fantastically sexy. 'I'm sorry sir. There is a one hour parking limit here.'

'Tear it up sweetie,' said Rick. What the hell, he thought to himself, was he thinking by calling her sweetie?

Overlooking his absurd suggestion and the way it was delivered she simply went about her business, finishing the infringement notice and placing it together with an envelope into Rick's hand. She looked at him briefly and he saw her face with its sharp lines, proportionate features and clear skin and he was struck with how young and fresh she appeared. Very cute.

'Have a good day sir.'

Rick was dumbfounded. Totally unruffled by his presence she had executed her duties to the letter with calm professionalism. Dynamite. The day was becoming an overwhelming blur of wonderful women and strange experiences, and Rick was unable to make sense of it all. He determined to go home and face Stacey and suggest she get some psychiatric help even though he knew that would go down like a ton of bricks through cling wrap.

But first, one more stop on the way home. Stacey's best friend, Trish. Trish was a very reasonable person and someone whom Rick had always liked and respected and enjoyed spending time with. He applied some more ointment to his itch, then drove to Trish's place.

He knocked three or four times before she finally came to the door of her apartment, and even then she was obviously in a hurry. Slightly breathless, her hair was wrapped in a towel turban and a pink bathrobe with blue elephants was draped insecurely around her body.

'Rick,' she said surprised. 'What are you doing here? How did you get in?' Rick shuffled his feet and rubbed his finger absently.

'Someone was leaving as I arrived. I'm sorry I should have called. You're on your way out.'

'No, no,' she replied backing away from the open door, inviting him in. 'I just got home.'

Rick thought he could smell alcohol on her breath.

'Come in and sit down. Do you want a drink?'

'Do you want to get dressed first?'

'Why? Don't you like what I'm wearing?'

Rick thought she looked fantastic but there was no way he was going to say so. This was his wife's best friend. Alarm bells should have been going off in his head, warning him to leave, but he didn't.

'You look fantastic.'

Trish smiled before turning and heading over to the kitchen. Rick followed.

'Liar,' she said.

'No really. I've always liked the combination of good looking girls and blue elephants.'

Trish laughed and as she reached up for a glass from the shelf, her robe opened a little at the front and he caught a glimpse of the top of her breast. She must have felt a breeze there or maybe she felt the lusty heat of his eyes on her, because she quickly grabbed the wayward material and pulled it tighter.

'Maybe I will get changed.'

Embarrassed, Rick looked away. 'I'll just help myself to a drink then. Got any whiskey?'

By the time she returned, Rick had found the whiskey, poured himself a double shot and found a comfortable spot on the couch. He was studying his itchy finger when she walked in.

'It's a bit early for whiskey, isn't it?'

She sat down beside him and the sight of her caused him to nearly choke on his drink. He coughed and spluttered as she patted then rubbed his back. If he thought she was uncomfortable with the accidental peep show in the kitchen, then seeing her in her underwear murdered that idea.

'I thought you were going to get dressed.'

'Why, Rick, I know why you came here.'

'To talk, I'm..'

'We can talk later,' she said as she swung across his lap and straddled him. Her breasts, barely contained by a white lace bra were now at his eye level and she could have leaned in and smothered him and he would not have had the strength to resist. Rick was totally aroused and completely confused. His

attempts to gently push her off resulted in his hands having a firm hold of her breasts, and she giggled.

‘Hang on a tick, Trish.’

‘This is what you want, Rick. You’ve been on the prowl all day. Actually you’ve been on the prowl for months.’

She stood up and put her hands on her hips.

‘I’ll give you what you want, Rick. Come on, be a man for me.’

Rick laughed. ‘What about Stacey?’

‘Stacey doesn’t give you what you want,’ said Trish as she sauntered over to the kitchen counter and leant on it thrusting her bare bottom cheeks in his direction, while swaying her hips slowly back and forth. ‘I’ll give you what you want.’

He stood up and fumbled with his belt buckle and when undone, his pants fell around his ankles and he tripped over them. Laying prone on the floor and struggling to get his pants off over his shoes, Rick soon found himself underneath Trish, who was crouched over his stomach. She carefully slid forward across his chest and up towards his chin, but abruptly stopped and stood up. She helped him remove his pants as Rick lay still in a state of shocked excitement wondering how far this would go.

Eventually he managed to squeeze some words out from his dry mouth. ‘What about Stacey, Trish?’

‘Do you want me or not? I saw the way you looked at me in the kitchen, even when you first arrived, and you’ve never been here without Stacey. You want me, well here I am, Rick.’

Something changed at that moment. Maybe it was her tone of voice or the expression on her face which to Rick was undecipherable, but he went very suddenly off the boil. Hurriedly, he pulled his pants back on and sat down.

Trish looked hurt now and genuinely embarrassed and Rick stared at the floor and played with his finger.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Trish and then she started to cry. Tears were an even more difficult proposition as Rick’s natural impulse was to give her a hug but he really didn’t want to touch her at all now. It was a though he had just discovered that she had some contagious disease. Rick’s final response was to ignore her so she ran off down the hall.

‘Sorry Trish, I...’ he called lamely after her.

Words seemed futile so Rick continued to sit and sip his whiskey and occasionally scratch his itch. He kept looking at his watch and wondering if he should leave but something made him stay. It was so hard to figure out what had happened. He had always liked Trish and had, if he was honest, and now seemed like a good time for honesty, enjoyed the odd fantasy about her, but

never did he seriously imagine that she felt anything for him or that such a situation would arise. It was weird. Too weird. On top of everything else that had gone on through the day, it seemed almost as though he was no longer living his own life. There was a painfully obvious message here for Rick and he was only now beginning to accept the inevitability of taking heed.

After twenty long minutes, Trish returned, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. She still looked sexy because she always looked sexy in whatever she wore but Rick now saw her differently.

She sat down opposite Rick and when she lifted her eyes, he could see that they were red and puffy. Her right hand rubbed her right upper arm and her left hand clung tightly to her thigh.

Rick waited patiently, unsure of who should speak first.

'I feel so ashamed, Rick. I don't know what happened. I just came back from a lunch with some friends and I'd had a lot of wine, but I thought I was okay.'

Battling with recurring images of Trish in her underwear, Rick fidgeted in his seat and finished the rest of his whiskey.

'Why did you come here? Why today when I was like...not myself?'

'I haven't been feeling myself lately either and...'

Rick rose from the couch and walked to the kitchen, where the bottle of whiskey sat on the counter calling his name.

'Stacey and I have been having troubles.'

'I know.'

Trish sat up straight and pressed her hands to her cheeks. 'Rick you could have...just now. I mean if you didn't stop, then...'

'Let's forget it, eh?' suggested Rick interrupting her. 'Better if we move on, don't you think?'

'Why did you stop?'

Some of Rick's mate's would have said he stopped because he was gutless, but Rick was concentrating on Shiny now as the voice of reason in his life. He could almost hear Shiny congratulating him on stopping with the words, you did the right thing there mate. Go home to Stacey. Work it out. She's your wife.

'It's time to climb back over the fence and stay in my own field no matter what the grass is like.'

Trish stared at him as though he had spoken a foreign language. 'What?'

Rick examined his finger and was surprised to see the redness had vanished. The ointment appeared to be working and he thought he should go straight away and tell the beautiful pharmacist, but no, bad idea.

'Nothing happened Trish. I spent the day in school and now I'm going home. Thanks for the drink. I'll see myself out. Bye.'

Pulling the door closed behind him, Rick left Trish's apartment but was soon back knocking on the door.

Trish opened the door and was still wearing the same stunned expression as she was minutes ago when Rick had suddenly turned into a philosopher of sorts.

'I'm too pissed to drive, Trish so I'll leave the car downstairs and catch a cab, okay.'

Trish nodded and smiled before closing the door.

Down at street level, Rick dialled for a taxi and sat down on the low brick fence to wait. The itch had completely gone and Rick was free to concentrate on plans for the best, most romantic wedding anniversary he and Stacey had ever celebrated. He would not tell her about this extraordinary day, not yet anyway, but he would make sure his energies were directed solely into his marriage, and a long and happy future with Stacey.

Bio: D.A. Cairns lives on the south coast of New South Wales where he works as an English language teacher and writes stories in his very limited spare time. Over 40 short stories published (but who's counting right?), he blogs at <http://dacairns.blogspot.com.au> and has authored four novels including A Muddy Red River which will be published in 2015 by Rogue Phoenix Press.

Mermaid
Bob Carlton

As the rising sun burned the haze away from the glass-smooth surface of the pond, eleven year-old Bailey Coggins looked out toward a quickly receding pink and purple horizon that finally settled on the wooded far shore as its limit. Moments later, the twitch and hop of his red and white bobber, the tiny vibrations sent coursing along the bamboo rod to Bailey's fingertips, gave him the instant electric thrill of the day's first nibble. He watched the bobber dive down and pop back up, then skim along the surface a foot or two before dancing up and down again. Bailey gave the line a slight tug, feeling for resistance. Twice more, and he could feel the constant pull of the hooked fish. The creature had plenty of fight, but not much power; a slight flick of the wrists and Bailey had the fish out of the water, bringing it slowly back toward him in a steady arc as he raised the pole upright. Thrashing wildly, the small perch, no more than four or five inches long, swung into Bailey's waiting palm. The boy grasped the fish tightly, its constant struggle to escape causing its fins to dig into Bailey's hand. The hook had caught it through the upper lip, and Bailey had little trouble in removing it. He held the fish a moment or two longer, its movements now stilled except for its gills gasping for breath and the occasional slap of its tail. Bailey tossed it softly back into the pond and watched as, for only a moment, the sun caught the tiny sliver of golden flesh, wild and alive, a small shard of light darting down into the darkness.

"How come you threw it back?"

Bailey turned quickly, unaware that he had not been alone. Standing behind him was a young girl, probably about six years old, squinting at him through the harsh light of morning. A slight breeze ruffled her white sundress and blond hair, and with her untanned legs, bare feet, and fair features, she seemed to Bailey somehow alien and insubstantial, as if at any moment she could dissipate and be blown back to that strange place from whence she came.

"Too small," Bailey shrugged. He turned around to bait his hook with another worm before gently sending the line back out over and into the water. Behind him, Bailey heard the girl humming a tune softly to herself as she moved off somewhere to his right. A few minutes later, he saw her out of the corner of his eye, playing at the edge of the pond far off to the south of where he sat. He took no real interest in what she was doing, just shooting a glance her way every few minutes when he grew bored by his bobber's inactivity. He could hear her down shore, the tune she hummed somehow maintaining the same volume in his mind's ear as when she had been standing behind him; but

the sound of her playing in the water seemed to come from a great distance. Each time he looked in her direction, Bailey noticed she was farther away and further out in the pond. However, she seemed perfectly at ease, the rhythm of her play and the volume of her wordless song never faltering.

As the morning wore on and the fish became increasingly disinterested in what he had to offer, Bailey's attention lingered on the girl for several minutes. He watched as she waded out into waist deep water, where she spun lazily back and forth, arms out away from her body, fingertips barely skimming the surface of the water. He watched as she dropped down, submerging herself entirely, then popped back up, throwing her head back and slinging her hair out of her face as she spewed away the pond water. He watched as she lolled about for a minute before standing up, rigid and straight for a moment. She put her arms out in front of her, palms together, and in a fluid, easy motion, dove out into the pond head and hands first, her feet surfacing momentarily as she slipped smoothly below the surface. It was at just that moment that Bailey's rod twitched in his hand.

Whatever it was on Bailey's line fought him for a minute, then dropped off, leaving Bailey with an empty hook and a deep sense of dissatisfaction. He quickly re-baited the hook and eased his line out into the vicinity of his recent loss. After he had sat for several disconsolate minutes without result, Bailey suddenly realized that he had never seen the little girl resurface after her dive. He turned away from the sleeping bobber and looked at the spot where he had last seen her, but he saw no sign of her. Curious, but not yet concerned, Bailey pulled his line with its drowned worm out of the water and began to walk slowly down the shoreline. There was no sound, no movement, the surface of the pond undisturbed even by bugs.

"Hey! Kid!" Bailey called out when he reached the area where she had gone in. His own voice was the only reply. He looked around in confusion. How long had it been between the time she went under and when he thought to look? Could she have come up and gone home? He called out once more as he searched along the shore where she had been, how long ago now? Not knowing what he should do, Bailey Coggins did nothing.

Sounds from the town as the day came alive filtered through the quickly heating air toward him. The nearby highway hummed, the distant church bells rang, and the familiar sounds of his own neighborhood, just beyond the low hill to the west, reinforced the ordinariness of the day. Still, the pond lay silent. Bailey sat on the bank and waited, for what he did not know. If the little girl was indeed still in the water, it was beyond his power to save her. If she had gone back home, she did not need his help. Either way, Bailey felt powerless in the face of inevitability.

Bailey sat for hours, staring across the pond, and nothing seemed to change; even the sun moved so slowly that the arrival of dusk took him by complete surprise. Reluctantly, he retrieved his pole and walked over the hill and home. He would pay attention this night to the local TV news and all the grown-up talk around him. He would hear nothing of a missing girl. When time came for bed, the lack of resolution would leave him unable to sleep. Finally, at midnight, he would get up, get dressed, sneak out of the house, and make his way to the pond, his way lit for him by an obliging full moon.

Bailey did not know what he was going to do when he reached the edge of the water. He only knew that he had to have some kind of answer. Who was this little girl, and where had she gone? Bailey remembered how strange and out of place she had seemed. He decided at last that she must have gone back home, wherever that might be. Maybe, he thought, it was a place far below the waves of the surface world, where she reigned supreme as the child queen over the missing and the dead who do not show up on the evening news. She could communicate with the creatures of the deep, including a small perch, a tiny witness that could assure her that Bailey Coggins was a good person, kind to those weaker than he, always ready to help those in need.

Bio: Bob Carlton (www.bobcarlton3.weebly.com) lives and works in Leander, TX.

Coming Undone

Epiphany Ferrell

The last thing Fritz expected to find among his luggage was a tongue. A tongue was a strange find, even for someone with multiple entanglements in the entertainment world. Fritz knew it right away for a tongue, partly because it had been packed on ice inside a plastic bag and so retained something of a normal appearance, and partly because it was pierced with a bright sterling silver ball and he knew at least three people with similar piercings.

The door to his hotel room was still open, the under-tipped bellboy evidently not feeling himself sufficiently recompensed to close it, so Fritz quickly strode over and shut it. It seemed the right thing to do. After all, the tongue had belonged to someone, and leaving it out for casual passers-by to gawk at was disrespectful. And quite probably illegal.

Fritz knew he should call the police, and naturally, he was disinclined to do so. People who deal with the famous and their secrets are in the habit of keeping secrets, not in the habit of enmeshing themselves in tedious and often detrimental-to-fame interviews with skeptical and boorish police officers. He wondered if the tongue belonged to one of his clients. It was an unpleasant thought; perhaps it meant that someone had spoken out of turn, or perhaps it meant that he himself was being warned against talking. He was unaware of any plot out of the ordinary which would require such a drastic message at this time, and that in itself was troubling. Overlooking the obvious was not a habit that led to continued employment.

One fact was obvious: the tongue couldn't remain in his hotel room. He thought about flushing it down the toilet, but seemed to remember from some cop drama in which one of his clients' guest starred that such a plan was not failsafe. Perhaps a drink would clear his head, maybe cheer him up, he thought, and so thinking, plucked the tongue in its iced plastic bag from his Kenneth Cole suitcase and dropped it into his jacket's inner pocket. Rather than risk wandering the hot streets and having the ice melt, Fritz elected to find a bar near his hotel.

The bar across the street, let's call it the Brazen Monkey (though that was not its name) was reasonably dark and crowded, but not too crowded. Fritz spent money, a bit of money, buying drinks for several young ladies at the bar. He ordered the vodka for their cocktails by name, which made them think it was top shelf. It wasn't. He settled on two who seemed to have conceived a dislike for each other, and let the others fade to the sidelines. The strawberry blonde seemed the nicer of the two, but the one with the olive complexion seemed sharper.

He bought them both milky cocktails with chocolate syrup around the rim of the glass. As he favored the first one, then the other with his intense blue-eyed sincerity, he dropped his hand to his pocket now and then, working the bag open, sliding the tongue into his hand. As soon as he had it, without a pause, he slipped it into Strawberry's drink. He did it while he leaned close to her diamonded ear, her glittered collarbone, to tell her god she was beautiful but she talked too fucking much. He said it loudly enough for Olive to hear, and hearing, laughed a wicked, sensual, conqueror's laugh.

Fritz checked his watch, dropped a name, said he'd be back, and slid out of the bar light to the street. He congratulated himself on his cleverness.

He hadn't discovered the eyeball in his other pocket, yet.

Bio: Epiphany Ferrell's career includes columnist at a coonhound magazine, and cops reporter for a couple of newspapers. Nowadays she's in public relations. Her stories appear in Cooper Street, PaperTape, Prairie Wolf Press Review, DarkFire, Seven Hills Review, Helix, WordSwell, and elsewhere. She is a fiction editor for Mojave River Review.

Resuscitation From Chicken Scratch
(A Writer's Exemplar)
Meneese Wall

Go to the tropics. Drink distilled sunshine. Release a sagacious genie trapped inside one of the intoxicating choices behind the tiki bar. (Don't mistake him for a literary guru.) Each day he serves up fresh-squeezed judgments about your life that are borderline tasty and questionably nutritious. Your outlook ferments.

Technicolor options blur by in a blender's morass. The world spins. Sultry tranquility appears squandered.

Your writing is a masquerade that reeks of another's pen. You retch at the prospects of publication, imagining that your work is one sentence away from postmortem.

Forestall the pall - visit relics; ponder the possibility of becoming one. Walk the beach and bathe in uncertainty while scavenging for inspiration and virtuosity of style (clothing optional). Yield to latent yearnings. Shhh, be still. Smile inside. Dubious optimism brews.

Soon, tastes all but wash away, leaving only briny island air upon your tongue. The seas erupt. Continents atrophy. The genie admonishes *Hone your voice*, but vaporizes before a wish can be granted. *Wait*, you implore. The unexplored wish haunts you (repeat steps for clarity). The wind lectures on your literary paucity and potential as your feet release their hold.

Wake ... Dust off the sand ... Note blue sky

Write ... Meet another genie ... Readjust preconceptions to fit new reality

Steep in the process... Repeat as needed

Eventually emerge from literary paralysis renewed, or find a new hobby.

Recommended for the following:

- Floundering artistic prowess (genius vs. hack), with quixotic or fatalistic expectations
- Prescriptive and/or monosyllabic style; naive shortcuts; vapid vision
- Crusade for proper writing length – corpulent vs. lean

- Prayers to Seshat (goddess of writing and measure) and Maat (goddess of balance and order) for proper symmetry between narrative and dialogue
- Love/Hate relationship with thesaurus
- Predilection for hostile expletives toward work's potential
- Isolation/disillusionment (beyond usual writer's introversion/despair)
- Persistent daydreams of solutions to the above that end in -ectomy or -icide

Bio: Meneese Wall amalgamates various vocations, avocations, duties, drudgeries, and felicities inside her Santa Fe crucible – writer, logophile, graphic designer, domestic slave, healthcare guru, wife, and mother to a catalytic daughter (not necessarily in that order). More of her creative dexterity can be found on her website – www.meneesewall.com.

Captain Rick's Jungle Adventure

Anthony Kane

One hand on the steering wheel, the other on his pounding head, Rick watched them board the boat. There was a clear difference between the children and the parents. The children giddily dashed on board, eager to climb towards a seat that bordered the water. Their parents didn't show such enthusiasm. Beaten down by the boiling July sun and the constant need to keep up with their over stimulated children, they shuffled on with sleeping infants and bag after bag stamped with the Florida Fun Land logo on it. Rick always felt a certain camaraderie with the fathers, squinting in the blazing sun, looking like they just wanted the day to be over. They were suffering from the family vacation hangover. Rick's hangover was of the more traditional kind.

They continued to board while Rick rubbed his temples, wishing he could wear a pair of sunglasses or at least a hat. Jesus, a hat would be so welcome right now. The Florida sun was searing his poor balding head. His shirt was soaked from sweat. He could smell the booze oozing out of him onto his yellowed captain's shirt. Rick took a few steps back from the oncoming traffic to keep his boozy scent at bay.

Drinking wasn't uncommon for him, but drinking during the day had only become a habit since coming to Florida Fun Land three months ago. It was about the only way to deal with becoming Captain Rick, a glorified carnie, taking weary families on a trip to the wilds of Africa. Drinking is what had did him in New York, missing auditions or not getting parts on account of getting shitfaced the night before. The wife begged him to quit, threatened to leave, take the kids with her, the whole melodrama. Surely she wasn't serious about that. When there's no paycheck coming in, that decision becomes a bit easier to make. They left when Rick was out on an audition one afternoon. He came back to their midtown apartment with a note left behind. How thoughtful. It only took a few months to get kicked out of the apartment. He scrounged up just enough to board a stinking Greyhound back to Florida to live with mom in the condo with the damn cats. So yeah, he drank. It was needed to get by.

When the boat was filled, he took his seat in the cracked leather chair that served as the captain's chair, and hit the button that pushed the boat down its motorized track.

"Hi, my name is Rick and I'll be your captain today."

Rick turned to face the crowd cramped in his boat. The children gave him a look of excitement, anticipation. The parents looked relieved to be off their feet for a few minutes. Most everybody seemed to be eating something. The common denominator through all the people that has passed through

Florida Fun Land was the ability to shove any and everything into their mouths. Theme parks appeared to give people license to an unlimited appetite that no five dollar hot dogs can cure. One girl was painting her face with her rapidly melting ice cream cone. A man bordering on being morbidly obese sat in the back in near romantic engagement with one of those grotesque turkey legs that were sold throughout the park. He watched the man attack the thing with gigantic bites, tearing into its greasy meat. Rick turned to face the front of the boat so he wouldn't become sick.

“Ladies and gentleman, welcome to the fantastic Jungle Adventure. As I said, my name is Rick and I will be your guide as we travel down the Mazeki River. Just a quick word, that Florida Fun Land's Jungle Adventure is in no way based on any properties of the Walt Disney Company or its associated theme parks. Let's begin our journey.”

No laugh on the Disney line. Either the adults weren't aware of what a second-class rip off that this ride was, or were too full of self-loathing at being on a second-class rip-off to want to even acknowledge it.

The boat idled up the shallow bed of water that functioned as the Mazeki towards a village that ran up on the left hand side. When the crowd's attention began to shift to the village, Rick quickly removed a flask that he had positioned underneath his chair. He had stitched a leather pocket making for easy concealment. He took a quick nip and shoved it back, all the while making it look like he dropped something.

“According to records, Sir John Taylor discovered the Mazeki in 1885 while looking for a passage through the Congo. The first village that Taylor came upon was what is up ahead on your right. It was the chief village of the Yoando, later to be renamed Prudencetown. You can see it is pretty much empty today. The Yoando weren't too responsive to Taylor's methods so they were unfortunately mostly eliminated from Prudencetown. But they did leave behind remnants of their civilization.”

The village was essentially some palm and cypress trees with a few small weathered thatched huts. There was nothing outside of the huts that resembled a village other than some random “artifacts” thrown about. One of the maintenance guys said they had just gone to a junkyard and told to get anything to fill in the village. In between a cluster of trees sat one distinct landmark. It was a stone tower with a series of faces etched on it, stacked one on top of another.

“That tower with the faces was called Bawan to the natives. How it got here isn't known. The Yoando weren't believed to be particularly artistic. It is quite impressive however.”

The tower was heavily leaning towards a clearing where the trees didn't quite maintain the illusion of the Mazeki. A golf cart could be seen sitting idly in the open space, in clear view of Rick and everyone in the boat. A few children began pointing and asking what it was to their parents.

"I see a few of you noticing the interesting vehicle behind Bawan. It seems the Yoando mastered golf cart technology before the Western World even knew about it. When John Taylor returned to England to tell the King about it, he laughed and said no such thing existed or shall exist. That's why, if you've ever been to the U.K, you'll notice that they don't have carts on their golf courses."

A few of the parents on the boat let out a little chuckle. The man in the back, now finished with his turkey leg, looked up from his snack to give Rick a disapproving scowl.

"Up ahead you will be able to see Martha Falls, named after John Taylor's wife who died when he was making his journey up the Mazeki. It was after he learned of this tragic news that he named them in her honor. The falls are colored in that green because of a special form of plant life that only grows in its waters. Now we are going to get real close to the falls, but I recommend that no one stick out their hands or attempt to drink any water of the falls. Florida Fun Land is not responsible for any illness caused by doing so."

That was the cue for some of the children to dip their hands into the algae ridden water. The more engaged parents stuck out their own to reign in their children. Rick thought of his own children. They're a little old for a ride of this type now, but he knew they would have hated it even when they were younger. It would have been a chore to have Donnie, the older one, sit still for the entire journey. That one could never concentrate on anything for any amount of time. It's why they had to put him in a special school, the teachers at his old one were so fed up with having to deal with him. Rick wondered if his wife had found any school in Scranton like that. Kyle, he would've wondered why he couldn't go off and explore the wonders of Prudencetown. That's not how the rides work buddy, you got to be a passenger, trust the captain. He would have thrown a tantrum until he or his wife bought something to shut him up. Guess he doesn't have to deal with headaches like that anymore. Then again, he hasn't seen his kids in six months. They haven't even called in the last two. All you got to do is call boys.

"If you look up further ahead as we begin to make our first turn, you can see the vast fields of Asphaltia. It is one of the vast stretches of uninhabited plains in the Mazeki region. No life has been seen in the fields in the last two decades."

"Isn't that just a parking lot?" an older child asked of one of his parents.

“At one time it may have been,” Rick shot back, “but now, they are great barren plains never to see the sight of humanity again...And here we have some elephants.”

Two elephants sat in a clearing of trees. Like all the animals, they were crudely constructed out of plaster and had no ability to move. Out of one’s upturned snout shot a continuous stream of water that pelted the side of the boat. It splashed up and hit some children, raising their excitement level to a few squeals and laughing.

“Why don’t the elephants move?” Another child, another question, this time directed at Rick. The innocence in his eyes made Rick a bit apprehensive in giving another smartass reply. Who’s a jerk to a child? he thought. He decided on the stock answer all the captains gave in this situation.

“They’re sleeping,” he answered in a soft voice, pulling a finger to his lips.

“Then why is that one still spraying water?”

“Elephants do a lot when they’re sleeping. They sleep standing up and...” Rick was fumbling here, “It’s almost a reflex, like sleepwalking.”

The child seemed satisfied enough that he stopped asking questions. His father sat bemusedly smiling out the side of the boat. It said to Rick that he’s your problem now. The fat man in the back, arms crossed, let out a flustered sigh.

Passing the elephants, the boat came to a great big rock, a mound of plaster four feet taller than the boat. The grey exterior had begun to chip and flake, its wire frame beginning to show in spots from underneath its plaster casing.

“This is Mitchell’s rock, named after John Taylor’s son. It’s imposing shape hides just as imposing an animal: a pack of lions.”

“Pride,” the fat man in the back shouted out.

“What was that?” Rick said.

“They’re called a pride of lions,” the man said.

“Very well sir. A pride of lions live in Mitchell’s rock. And if everyone is very still, hopefully we will be able to see one of them.”

As the boat glided past the stone, a solitary lion came into view. It sat under a tree, facing the passing vessel. It was far enough away that most couldn’t see that the nose of the lion was missing, and that a hole was in its back that housed a nest of starlings. Built into the rock, a roar was piped in through a speaker, more feeble than ferocious. It could barely be heard from the boat. The boat captain was supposed to enhance the lion’s roar but Rick felt that any guttural noises would increase the likelihood of losing his liquid breakfast.

“I think I hear it getting angry at us. Let’s see if we can speed this boat up and get out of here.”

Rick pushed another button and the boat sped up, leaving the tattered lion behind. Some of the children, their interest stirred for the first time, let out a disappointed moan at the lack of an exciting resolution. The boat continued on until it hit another cluster of palm trees. At this, it began to slow down until they encountered what looked like a group of rocks sitting in the water.

Rick played it quiet to gain the kids’ attention again, to give a sense of danger. “We have emerged from the lion’s den only to emerge into the dangerous lair of the hippopotamus.” The little girl that was earlier eating the ice cream now sat crouched under the boat’s sides, cautiously peeking over the edges. Some of the other children hastily turned from side to side to get a better look.

“These hippos have been known to attack these boats,” Rick whispered through the microphone as he pulled a gun out from a compartment near the control panel. “A captain always has to be prepared.”

A creaking noise started and one of the brown rocks began to move. A mechanical hippo’s head rose out of the water. Its mouth was wide open, as if it was attempting to swallow the boat whole. Shrieks came out of some of the children. Others clung to their parents. Most looked on with bemusement. One father was asleep as his young son clutched his arm.

“Stand back.” A canned roar sounded out of a speaker in the hippo’s mouth followed by another loud clang. Rick fired two shots on cue as the hippo roared. The noises ceased, but the hippo was frozen with its mouth open. It was supposed to recede back into the water after the shots.

“Did you kill it?” a little boy asked.

“I’m pretty sure I missed, but I think I scared it stiff. I hope we can get out of here before it tries again. Uh...hippos freeze when they get scared.” Rick turned and placed the gun down. He reflexively reached for the flask and only stopped when he realized someone may be looking at him.

“Sonofabitch,” he said under his breath.

The boat took its final turn and headed towards a brick building with stark white columns in front of it.

“Now that we’re past the hippos, it’s clear sailing until we get to Port Winston, the center of power in the Mazeki delta. Port Winston was built in 1887. It’s imposing structure and large columns stand as a stark reminder to the riches gained by the exploitation of the surrounding land and people.”

Hardly anyone was paying attention now, except for that man in the back. His face scrunched up as he began muttering to no one in particular.

The exasperation was building into a series of huffs. The tapping of his foot could be heard rattling off the metal bottom of the boat, ticking rhythmically.

About 200 yards from Port Winston and the end of Jungle Adventure, the boat stopped with a sudden jolt. It threw Rick off his chair into the aisle separating his rows of passengers. Rick slowly got to his feet, attempting to steady himself on his console. His face was flush with sunlight and embarrassment. He began to repeatedly press the button to get the boat moving. Nothing.

“What the fuck else is going to go wrong today?” Not realizing he was that close to the microphone, it rang out for all the boat to hear it. Gasps followed, and after a few moments of excited chatter, the fat man’s voice could be heard fighting through.

“There are children here you know.”

Rick looked at the man’s scorching red face. The tea kettle had burst. He appeared to be accompanied by no one else on the boat. Rick thought that a bit strange.

“What’s your problem buddy?” Rick shouted back. “You want to be the captain or something? You certainly had no problem correcting me earlier.”

“Because you’re doing a terrible job. You’re supposed to be adding to an experience, crafting a world for the children. Instead, you’re making fun of it, trying to be a smart guy.”

“Where the hell do you think we are?” Rick asked. “This is just some crappy ride at a crappy amusement park. If you want some whitewashed fantasy, go to Orlando.”

Back in New York, just before getting evicted from his apartment, Tom Yates told him go back to Florida. All those theme parks in Orlando were always looking for failed actors, Tom said. Why the hell isn’t Tom down here then? He’s so full of shit. Needing the paycheck, Rick had no other options. He got an interview at Disney. They turned him down, saying his “background didn’t match what we were going for.” Rick knew they could smell the booze on him. He had almost forgotten about the thing entirely, arriving just in time, haggard and hung over. Mom was the one that remembered Florida Fun Land. The place was a dump when he was a kid, a traveling carnival that had set up shop in a dried up swamp. It hadn’t changed much since. The pay was enough to pay the child support and fuel his nights out. There was nothing happy about this place.

The attention of the boat had now turned to the two men. Rick walked down the narrow aisle separating the two rows and got right in front of the fat man who was now also standing.

“You got to come here and stick your two cents in.” Rick was pointing at him now. I don’t need any help from some fat slob gagging down a turkey leg. Now sit down and shut up.”

The man pushed aside Rick’s finger, got right into his face. “I knew it,” he said. “I can smell the booze on you. I knew you had been drinking. I’m going to notify park management.”

At this Rick grabbed the man by his thick neck in an attempt to physically put him back in his seat. The man grabbed Rick around his waist and the two stood there grappling, grabbing at each other, their breaths becoming labored. Feeling the man begin to sway, Rick kicked at his legs in an attempt to get the man off balance enough to get out of his embrace. The man’s leg buckled and he stumbled backwards. His excess weight worked much the way an avalanche would, pulling the man’s entire body along with it. He tumbled over the side, and landed into the Mazeki in a full belly flop.

The man sat up in the shallow water, screaming “Help!” and “Security!” to anyone that would listen. The children became the most excited they had been the entire journey. They were laughing and pointing at the most interesting stop on the tour so far. The parents that had not been bothering to pay attention were now, and confused, whether this was part of the ride or not. Rick backpedaled, sat back down, and wiped his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. Sweat was running from his bald scalp all the way down the back. He could not even find the radio needed to call in the mechanical problem.

After perhaps only another thirty seconds of immobility, the boat finally found its life, and began its way again towards Port Winston. The children on the boat were still giggling as the man in the water stayed behind.

“He looks like one of the hippos,” a boy said.

Rick looked towards the dock, and saw that people began to congregate at the point where the ride ended. He pulled the flask out of its little compartment. When a cluster of overgrown ferns approached his side of the boat, he tossed the bottle into the gathering.

After the commotion at Port Winston had settled, Rick was called into the manager of Florida Fun Land’s office. Even though the office was air conditioned, Rick was still a hot, sweaty mess. The manager, whose name Rick couldn’t remember, as well as a tall man in a suit stood in front of him.

“Because of today’s incident, we’re going to have to let you go,” the manager said firmly but with a hint of disappointment in his voice. “On top of physically attacking a customer, you’ve also opened up the park to a lawsuit which this man has vowed to file.”

“I’m sorry sir,” Rick responded. “The man was verbally confrontational, and with all the problems occurring on the boat I lost my cool. There’s not any

defense for my actions. But I really need this job. I've got child support payments to make. I can't see my kids if I don't make the payments."

"This is not negotiable. Besides, there are also allegations made by this man, along with some others, that you had been drinking while operating the ride. This is a family environment. We have a zero tolerance policy for this sort of thing. We'll give you time to collect your things, but we want you gone within the hour."

Rick desperately wanted to make this man change his mind. Remembering his name would be a good start. As words and statements rattled around his head, nothing coherent formed. Come on, you're an actor, figure something out. Give these morons an impassioned speech to win this job back.

He placed his employee badge on the desk, and headed out the door.

"We will need to get a hold of you if and when a lawsuit arises," the manager said as Rick was heading out.

"Sure."

Walking across the vast expanses of Asphaltia, he could see the boats leaving for their trek down the Mazeki. The unbearable summer sun basted him in sweat as he reached Mom's car. Rick immediately got in the roasting car, and got out of the lot as fast as he could. Down the road, he pulled out a bottle of vodka he had stashed in the glove compartment. Taking it to his lips, it went down as warm as coffee. It caused him to pause. No more of this. Get your life together, Rick. Make your kids want to come see you. Today is a blessing. I'm going to be a new man from now on.

Okay, but I'm going to finish this bottle first.

Bio: Anthony Kane was born and raised in Binghamton, New York. He received a MFA in Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans. He has also attended Binghamton University. "Captain Rick's Jungle Adventure" is the first of his work that has been submitted to publications.

ELIAS
Fabio Bensoussan*

We talked then about an astonishing parentage between your Latin America and my Central Europe, two parts of the world equally marked by the historic memory of baroque, which makes the writer hypersensitive to the seduction of fantastic, magical, oneiric imagination. Milan Kundera

I have just bought the house. It is in a good general state; a hundred square metres, which include a bedroom and a living room, a kitchen and two bathrooms, besides a garage. It is an antique house, but the last man who lived in it had already incorporated digital modernity.

The last man who lived in the house introduces himself. He announces this solemnly, as if it were a trophy. After that, says goodbye to me, thanks me for my interest, wishes me happy returns and leaves. Now we are alone, in the center of the patio.

He looks at me suspiciously. He has lived in the house. I say I am aware of that, and that is the reason why I bought the property. He does not seem to believe what I say, or my interest in the house. I assure our family has celebrated his achievement, but he definitely does not believe my story. He asks me once again where I come from, and my answer only enhances his disbelief.

The street ahead of our gate was dusty and sleepy, he says. I look for some hens, but I do not see them, or anybody screaming *kako!* He says he could not play on the street, since the inside patio was very big, and he only heard their cry. The city, nowadays, with its 150 thousand inhabitants, was not a probable place to hear chickens through the streets.

I believe so, but am astonished – if he could not play on the street those days, what to say about nowadays? He points to the side, where the grandfather's shop used to be. The grandfather used to boast about speaking seventeen languages, and I tell him my grandmother spoke at least four. We come to the conclusion that could only be notable under the perspective of someone who lives in a part of the globe dominated by two languages, only. He definitely seems not to take the New World seriously.

I remind him of the time when I realized about his existence. It was more than thirty years ago. We were in my aunt's house, and he was the subject that

afternoon. I could not understand that sudden interest for an unknown, but I was soon told he was a kind of a relative.

A relative who did not have my surname – but my aunt’s husband’s. Fine, but since then I doubted the award winning had the slightest idea about his Brazilian relatives. I still did not think Brazil as the end of the world; today, I know it does not make sense discussing which of us actually lived in the end of the world.

He smiles, thinking all this is extremely funny. I tell him that since that afternoon I started being interested in him. It is ridiculous, he says, you were only eight years old. It is true, I answer, but I remember the time I read the two first pages of his novel, where the owner of an immense library talks to a curious boy, who said he immensely liked reading. He frowns and says that the prize I mention so much was big trouble to him, and that I must have been a little idiotic to believe all this could be.

He doubted my story. I myself am not sure about it. Sometimes, it seems to me just a kind of a family’s legend, to make fun for the elders.

He asks me what I intend to do with the house. I tell him I will not live there. He alerts me of my being a lousy businessperson, and that my purchase did not make any sense, even to him. *Es de buena familia*, he says. We say our goodbyes.

On the following day I catch a train to Sofia and come back to Brazil. Nobody here understood what I had done there. I announce my purchase, and say I did not travel to Bulgaria to look for Campos de Carvalho¹. He had organized the expedition that demonstrated to Brazilian people that Bulgaria existed. Neither was I in a government mission².

I say it is a promising investment but I do not convince anyone – not even myself. After all, it had been a bargain: for less than two hundred thousand euros I bought the house where the family of Elias Canetti had lived, on Slavyanska Street, in the city of Ruse. I also ask myself what I am going to do with it. It is a place visited by tourists, and I will try to take advantage of that in some way. Or, who knows, spend some time there.

My friends invest in apartments in Florida. I buy houses in Ruse.

¹Walter Campos de Carvalho (1916-1998) was a Brazilian writer. He published, in 1964, his last and surrealist novel “O Púcaro Búlgaro”, in which he tells about an expedition proving Bulgaria’s existence.

² Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff ‘s father, Pétrar Rússev, was a Bulgarian lawyer and entrepreneur.

Bio: Fabio Bensoussan (Rio de Janeiro, 1973) is a Brazilian attorney of the National Treasury and a professor of Laws. He also writes fiction and literary reviews.

He lives in Belo Horizonte, with his wife and two children.

*Translation Credit: Aline Leal Mota (Portuguese to English.)

NEVER EAT THE LIVER OF A POLAR BEAR

Colin W. Campbell

“Cheeky wee monkey,” Jo spoke quietly and unexpectedly.

“What!”

“No, not you. This.”

“What?”

The two of them had been working on student work in a diligent silence broken now and again to complain that teaching English might be OK, if only it were not for the marking.

She said it again, “Cheeky wee monkey, I didn’t ask for too much. Write a poem, just one poem, in a recognized form and in the style of one of the great poets writing in the English language.”

“So what did you get back?”

“Mostly worthy if boring stuff, but there’s always a cheeky one.”

“So what have you got?”

“This.”

Jo passed it over to a grinning Ann who read it out loud.

NEVER EAT THE LIVER OF A POLAR BEAR.

Balance the needs of work and play,
and eat with care, yes every day.
And what is more, I heard they say,
never overdose, on Vitamin A.
But someone really said, somewhere
never eat the liver of a polar bear.

“Well,” continued Ann who was by now unashamedly giggling like a schoolgirl. “The rhyme is quite sweet if you like rhyming couplets. But it is difficult to spot the style. Perhaps it’s not Shelly or Browning or even Shakespeare, unless of course it’s a very early Shakespeare perhaps age eight or thereabouts.”

As they went back to marking their students’ work, they agreed that the world is a far better place for having a cheeky wee monkey in it.

Bio: Colin W. Campbell writes short fiction and poetry in Sarawak on the lovely green island of Borneo and faraway in Yunnan in southwest China. www.colincampbell.org.

BOIL ORDER
C.F. Roberts

Tuesday

Since Hezekiah's death in the trash bin, Lulu has taken his old Robin action figure and stripped him

down to his unders. This creates a completely new superhero she refers to as "Naked Noxema". Naked

Noxema is presently embroiled in a complex adventure with Lulu's kewpie doll, Marzipan. They're

engaged in a life-or-death struggle with the six red death crayons on top of grandma's Charlie Rich

record. Lulu can't put it into words but somewhere in her head there's the supposition that the six red

death crayons are in possession of Hezekiah's soul and are preventing him from ascending to heaven.

She knows her mother would not allow such talk, but Lulu doesn't talk most of the time---there are

reasons for this. Marzipan fires her laser beams at the Charlie Rich landscape and the red death crayons

are thrown to the wind. She knows they'll regroup, though----they're tougher than they look.

Maroon is the wild card out of the death crayons, though, because it might be red or it might be

purple. Somewhere in the fracas Lulu supposes it will betray the crayons of death and join forces with

Marzipan and Naked Noxema It may be too early in the story for that yet, though. Lulu likes to try to

see the good in everybody.

“Lulu, leave your grandma's record alone.”

Lulu hears her mother but what she's saying isn't important....what is is the sound of crickets, clear

as day out in the wet grass. The back door is gone, so she hears them clearly. *Rikkkkt, rikkkkt, riikkkkt.*

She worries some of them may be drowning----whenever Marzipan and Naked Noxema are done

defeating the crayons she figures they may have to rescue some crickets.

“Lulu? I said leave your grandma's record alone!”

Rikkkkt, riikkkkkt, riiiikkkkt.

Wednesday

Men are yelling outside. Lulu gets up off the couch. She's sleeping on the couch, now, because her

bedroom is gone.

She wanders on out to the porch and her mother is out there and Uncle Larry and some other men

are in the yard yelling and pointing. There are piles of sticks everywhere.

Water's all over the ground and she's sure it's too late for the crickets. The men quiet down and now

they're just talking. Everyone from the neighborhood is gathering because there's nothing else to do

anyway, and then Uncle Larry and the one man start yelling and pushing each other. Lulu sees her

mother start like she's going to go yell with Uncle Larry and then she stops and just stands there.

Boring, complicated, stupid adult stuff.

She wanders into the kitchen, climbs onto the counter and grabs a cup out of the cupboard.

She goes to the sink and finds a lot of roaches and silverfish scrounging around. They scatter

when she leans in and Lulu has to agree that this is probably for the best. She twists the cold

water faucet. The plumbing in the kitchen shakes for a second and the faucet goes, "RUNCH," and

spews out water. The water is reddish-orangey-brown at first, but after a second it clears up. Lulu

fills the cup, shuts the water off, leans her head back and takes long, thirsty gulps.

She wonders what the day will bring. Negotiations with the Maroon Crayon are at a standstill,

But there's always hope.

She stares down the hallway at the doors. The bathroom is still there, she knows, as is grandma's

room. Her and her mother's rooms are gone. The doors are still there and the hallway looks normal

but both her and her mother's rooms are gone. Grandma was sleeping in the room that used to be

Hezekiah's but then Hezekiah died and grandma had come to stay with them. "I'm staying to help your

mother," Grandma told Lulu, although she isn't sure she ever saw Grandma helping much.

A sudden urge hits Lulu. She runs to her bedroom door, wondering if maybe her room came back.

She pulls the door open partway.

It's still gone. She sees black space, part of the wall and then the sky, then the highway, way out

there. She looks down into blackness and she can make out junk and then dirt. It doesn't look so far

down but her mother and grandma have repeatedly told her if she tried to jump down there, she'd get

hurt.

Satisfied that things are still the way they were, she shuts the door and ambles back out toward the

living room. She feels like she's in some kind of limbo because there's no more kindergarten and her

room is gone. She thinks of where Hezekiah is----wherever he is----and feels a kind of lonely solidarity

with him.

Around the corners and under the doors and in the closets and from the shadows the silverfish in the

house are singing to Lulu. Of course, their songs are very different from the songs of people---the

silverfish voices click and clatter and scratch, but she understands that when they sing it's the same

thing that people do....they sing to their children to help them sleep at night and maybe they sing on

their birthdays. She feels a warm comfort that they're sharing their songs with her.

Lulu is still thirsty. Outside the men are yelling again.

Thursday

It's night time and there are campfires outside the house. Lulu's mother and grandma and Uncle

Larry are outside on the porch and there's music and people are laughing. Lulu has a blanket over her

and everything is becoming vague and fuzzy.

She thinks she's alone and then she hears soft whispering and Mr. Noble is standing over her

smiling. He runs his hand along the blanket and whispers, "Lulu? Let's see what's wrong with you,

sweetie."

What's wrong is she's thirsty. She has half a mind to tell him so when suddenly there's screaming.

She almost can't recognize her mother's voice and half of it doesn't sound like real words, anyway.

“huuuAAAUUUUuuuuuhhhhAAAUUUUuhhDAVID
NOBLAAAAUUUUHANDSOFFAMABAYBAY

AAAUUUUUAAAAHHHHH” and other people come in and mill around the room and Mr. Noble is

gone and her mother is asking all kinds of questions and Lulu won't answer and she's bothered by all of

this noise. Her mother takes her out onto the porch and they sit with all the other people late into the

night. The grownups talk and talk and talk about nothing. She can't hear the crickets at all anymore.

She knows she should be hearing them now but they're silent. She knows she's lost them, just like she's

lost her brother.

There's an old man sitting on the porch, in the corner, smiling at her. She doesn't know who he is.

He's smoking a cigarette and smiling at her. He softly says something to her. It sounds like, “udyuduh?”

She must have not heard him right. She doesn't know what “udyuduh” means. She doesn't respond.

She stares back at him and holds tighter to her mother.

The Dream

It was a Flesh Spider; It was huge, it was in the middle of the living room, it had two heads and

eight legs and it was made of skin, like a person. It hobbled and rolled around on the floor and it went,

“uh, uh, uh, uh.”

Lulu closed her eyes and pretended to sleep but it was like her eyes wouldn't shut and it kept

flailing around the floor, going, “uh,uh, uh, uh, uh.” She put her hands over her face but it was like

she could see right through her hands. The Spider heaved and shuddered and it shuffled back and

forth like it didn't know where to go.

“Uh, uh, uh, uh!” It didn't seem to want anything to do with Lulu or even know she was there. She

decided she didn't want to give it any help. She stayed silent a long time and that was all she

remembered.

Friday

Grandma's pattering around in the kitchen smoking cigarettes. “Goddamn silverfish,” she rasps.

Lulu is momentarily frightened for the Silverfish but she's got her own problems.

Marzipan is wounded. It happened in a skirmish with the six red death crayons, sadly behind enemy

lines, deep in the Territories of Crayola. The Kewpie doll is under little cotton covers trying to heal.

Naked Noxema kneels beside her in a silent, grim vigil.

“Awww,” fawns Grandma, “Robin's such a good friend to your dolly, he's praying for her to get

better, isn't he?"

She glares at Grandma. Robin isn't Robin anymore; He's Naked Noxema. Anyone should be able to

look at him and see that, now.

Grandma sits face to face with Lulu. "Girl, I wish you'd talk," she says. "What's going on in that

little head of yours?"

"I want water," says Lulu. Her voice is loud and awkward and she almost frightens herself.

Grandma takes a full step back.

"Alright," she whispers. She heads off to the kitchen and runs the water. Lulu hears the plumbing

shake and the faucet goes, "RUNCH". Grandma runs the water for a minute and then fills a pan, and

Lulu knows this is all wrong. Grandma puts the pan on the stove and lights the burner.

"Nooooo," cries Lulu. "I don't want the hot water, I want the cold water!"

"I'm sorry, sweetie," says Grandma. "You know we have to do this. There's a boil order."

Lulu's heart sinks. There's nothing worse than not being understood. She stares up at the ceiling

and cries quietly.

A face looms into her line of vision and she realizes Hezekiah is floating above her. He talks to her

without opening his mouth. It's like he's thinking and she can hear it.

It stinks, don't it?

Yeah, Lulu thinks back.

That's the way it is, thinks Hezekiah. That's the way it is everywhere, all the time.

I know.

I'll seeya soon, Sis.

Okay.

He's gone. The Silverfish are singing again, and this time she understands their song. It's what

Hezekiah told her. That's the way it is, they sing. That's the way it is everywhere, all the time. They sing

it over and over and they never stop singing...it becomes constant and she realizes the silverfish have

been singing it all the time. Maybe they've just been waiting all this time for her to pick it up. She

begins humming the song to herself.

Later her mother and Uncle Larry come home. Grandma says, "your daughter spoke today."

Everyone fawns over Lulu and they offer her cookies.

"What's our lil' girl got to talk about today?" Bellows Uncle Larry. Her mother talks very softly

and kindly to her but Lulu doesn't have to be burned twice to know that fire's hot.

She never speaks to anyone, ever again.

They bring her out on the porch and all the people are out there and the grownups talk and talk and

talk. They're arguing something about "Deema" or "Peema", or something she's never heard of, eema,

eema, eema. Stupid, terrible adult nonsense. She thinks of the silverfish and their song. That's the way

it is everywhere, all the time. She thinks about the song for a long time and then she focuses on the

lightbulb. It's a big lightbulb, on the porch, over her head, shaped like a circle. The lightbulb becomes

her whole world and then she hears her mother screaming like she did the night before.

"OOHHHAWAWAWAAHHHHuuuuuhhhh!!!!"

She wakes up in darkness and she's on the couch. She looks down on the floor. Marzipan is still

under the little cotton blanket and she can see the form of Naked Noxema still faithfully kneeling

beside her. There's also a ring of silverfish and roaches and they look like they're praying. They're

singing; they're always singing, now. She subconsciously joins in. That's the way it is....that's the way it

is everywhere, all the time.

She sees her mother and Uncle Larry together on the recliner and it looks like Uncle Larry is

sleeping on top of her mother. A quilt is over them and she can only see the tops of their heads---her

mother's long, dark hair and the ring of curly hair surrounding Uncle Larry's bald head.

Something about seeing it makes her shudder, but the silverfish keep singing and she puts the

thought out of her head. She makes her way out to the kitchen. She climbs the counter and grabs a cup.

The plumbing shakes. The faucet goes, RUNCH.

Deep in the Territories of Crayola

Naked Noxema is desperate. Marzipan won't wake up and many, many lives now hang in the

balance. "Don't go to the outlands," he tells the silverfish. "We've lost thousands out there, you know.

All the crickets. You have to be careful. Stay close at all times and keep your heads down."

He has no idea what he's doing ordering the silverfish around. He shouldn't be in charge of

anything. He wishes Marzipan would wake up.

All the silverfish are singing. Naked Noxema tries to think of their anthem and sing along with it----

maybe it will calm him down.

Two Lego sentries run in. "Quiet," says Naked Noxema, "Marzipan is trying to get better!"

“This is important,” cry the lego sentries. “Maroon is really purple!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Maroon has changed sides,” they cry. “Maroon is with us, now! The Red Crayon Coalition is broken!”

Saturday

The men are yelling----the men are always yelling. They yell when they're happy, they yell when

they're sad, they yell when they're angry, they yell when they're all friends and they yell when they

fight. Lulu dislikes them all, even Uncle Larry.

Especially Uncle Larry, maybe. Lulu can't even think of a good reason for this but maybe she

doesn't need one.

It hits her that she might be blaming all the men for the crickets dying. It might not be fair, she

supposes, but with the way they act she doesn't feel bad about making that judgment---so it's okay.

One man is on the ground yelling. “You don't think the rest of us have kids? You don't think the

rest of us a'lost people?”

Her mother is yelling, “We're not saying that!”

Uncle Larry goes down the stairs. “Buddy, what're you tryin' to say? You lookin' for a punch in the

goddamn mouth?"

Lulu is using her inside voice, singing with the silverfish, over and over. It's her prayer, it's what

keeps her safe. That's the way it is.....that's the way it is everywhere, all the time. That's the way it is....

then there's a loud pop and then blackness and then she's looking up at the circle light again and the

circle light is getting brighter and brighter and somewhere far away she can hear her mother screaming

again and Grandma is screaming, "get some water, quick! Put some water on the stove!" And Lulu's

thinking, no....

Sunday

The ocean goes on to any point on the horizon and Lulu is suspended a hundred feet above it.

She's just hanging there in the sky and doesn't know how or why this is happening.

She's aware that there are lines criss-crossing the air above her and she doesn't know what it means.

"LULU!" calls a voice. And the song of the silverfish is gone and nothing is left but the great music of

the air and it goes

RRRRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEENNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN.

It's like the thing on the TV where they tell you this is only a test and Lulu feels as though she's being

stretched in every direction at once she's aware of a boat or a submarine on the horizon and another

one on another horizon and they're both firing torpedoes and the torpedoes will meet in the middle

and the giant music of the sky goes
RRRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEENNNN and someone is

yelling "HER FEVER WON'T BREAK" and the torpedoes are coming and she doesn't understand why

she's suspended in the sky but she knows the two torpedoes are headed right toward each other and she

is right over the point where they will meet and then she sees the light above her it's a circle and it looks like a halo and it gets whiter and brighter and it encompasses everything and REEEEEEEEEENN

she falls silently into blackness and--.

Monday

Lulu and her Generals meet with the Lego's and the crayons of life.

--Glad to have you with us, she tells the maroon crayon.

The green and blue families have embraced Maroon as if it were one of their own.

--I've wanted to work with you for a long time, says Maroon. The Turquoise Crayon embraces

Maroon.

--We need to break the Dome, says Lulu.

--We have to move fast, says Naked Noxema. The White Death is overtaking everything.

--Don't be afraid of the White Death, says Marzipan. Her wounds have healed and she's turned into a robot. The White Death is just Change, and Change is hard but it's also good. It's what you leave behind that will hurt you.

Lulu hears strange shuffling and bumping.

---Like that, says Marzipan. That will hurt you but only if you stay with it.

Lulu knows it's the huge flesh spider from her dream, but those days are over.

--I'm scared, says Naked Noxema.

--It's okay to be scared, says the Olive Green Crayon. Just use it to make yourself stronger.

--I couldn't have said it better myself, says Lulu.

--Are you ready to go? Asks Marzipan.

--I think I am, she says and Marzipan embraces her.

Their assembled forces fly over the Dome and she knows this will be the hard part. They fire and

fire their laser beams but the Dome won't break and the legos are falling---- they're all so weak when

they're separate. The Red Death Crayons are broken but they're still dangerous and despite all the good

people's firepower the dome is holding fast.

She feels hands grappling all over her body and several big, strong hands are pressing hard on her

face. A voice far away is going
OOOHHHAUUUHAUAUUUHHHAAAHHHuuuuuh” and she sees

the brave crayons falling away into the dark. Even brave Maroon is spiralling out of sight.

--We have to break the dome, screams Naked Noxema. We have to do it now!

Hands are forcing Lulu's mouth open. Several big, fat ugly fingers force their way into her mouth.

They're reaching down her throat and choking her.

--Abort Mission, shouts Marzipan, abort mission!

--No, chokes Lulu, and she bites down hard on the fingers. There are screams off somewhere and all

the hands pull away.

--Hit them now, orders Marzipan.

They swing by the Dome again and fire their lasers at it. Far away Lulu hears a man yelling,

“You think no one else has ever lost anybody,” and she thinks, I have lost somebody and that matters.

Cracks appear in the Dome and there's a loud pop and everything turns black but then she sees the

white circle of light up above and it becomes huge, it becomes the whole wide world, and then there's

the great music of the sky but even that subsides and the sky opens up like a big pop-up book and

there's God and Jesus and Charlie Rich and all the crickets are there, and Hezekiah is with them and

he's wearing a bright, glowing crown on his head, and Marzipan and Naked Noxema are there, and all

the crayons, even the bad red ones are there now----this is fine, because Lulu likes to see the good in

everybody. And the Heavenly Host's are all joined in song, and their voices all boom across the sky

forever, that's the way it is, that's the way it is everywhere, all the time...braying, vexing voices of old

fall away for good and there are fountains everywhere gushing pure, clean water and millions and

zillions of silverfish spin around her in great, huge circles and it's all Lulu knows forever.

Bio: Writer, visual artist, videographer and antimusician in Northwest Arkansas with his wife, writer Heather Drain, and a small menagerie of animals. Published and edited SHOCKBOX: The Literary/Art Magazine with Teeth (1991-1996)

The Test

Josh Rank

It never rains in this town. That's one of the most attractive features. Sure, your life might be the mealtime equivalent of a microwave dinner but at least it's usually sunny. That day, however, it was raining. Good thing the windshield wipers were still working. They watched as the plastic hung onto the blade by a thread, dragging behind as the metal scraped the windshield.

"I can't believe this," Becca said as she paused at a red light.

Patrick glanced back and forth. "I know. They don't even know to turn on their headlights."

"No, not that. This whole goddamn thing."

"Well, I mean it's kinda amazing that we've been at it this long and we've never been in this situation. I mean, if you just look at the odds of—"

"Could we not? Could we not look at the possibility of me being pregnant as a math equation?"

Patrick answered with a sigh. He looked over at Becca. His girlfriend of eight years. 44-years-old. Bangs holding tight to her eyebrows even though he's told her countless times he likes her hair long.

She glanced back at him. Patrick. Her boyfriend of eight years. 42-years-old. Never a fat man, but definitely beyond skinny. He started losing his hair in the last couple years but it would be another year or two before he would start wearing a hat whenever possible.

He adjusted the seat belt that held him a little too tightly. No matter what she said, he knew he was right. Eight years. Almost eight and a half. And not one pregnancy scare the whole time? Seemed like a record. The only people with better percentages are the celibate or sterile.

"Right. Exactly. Just don't say a word and maybe it'll go away."

The light turned green and Becca eased on the gas. It hadn't been good for a while. Their relationship. They both knew it. They're both there every day. Participating in the exhausting dance of keeping up appearances in public to avoid making their friends uncomfortable. As long as everything seemed to be okay from the outside they didn't need to admit it to themselves. And that's what it basically came down to: How long they could put it off. The unpleasantness. The awkwardness. The scene they created last time.

It was a little over eight months ago that Becca first poked at the idea of breaking up.

"We're not married. Still, even after almost eight years we're not married, so it wouldn't be more than just going our separate ways."

Patrick sat in the kitchen chair next to the refrigerator. His plate was empty besides crumbs from the garlic bread and a little vodka sauce. He was looking down at his lap and refusing to raise his eyes. There was an echoing siren out of their window, but there always was.

“We’re not in business together,” he told her. His voice came out quiet.

“What?” She told herself she wouldn’t get angry during the conversation. That she couldn’t get worked up. Patrick couldn’t handle it and she knew it. But here she was with her thigh muscles tense and a gravitational pull from the ceiling that wanted her to stand up no matter how hard she hung onto the tabletop. Her plate, still full of food, lay forsaken in front of her.

The siren disappeared. Another would take its place soon. “We’re not in business together,” he repeated.

“Patrick, what the hell are you talking about?”

They forgot to put music on beforehand. They spent the meal listening to the sounds of Patrick chewing and swallowing. Becca ignored the plate in front of her until she finally opened her mouth to speak. “Patrick, I think I should move out,” is what she said. After that, she said a few more cliché phrases you hear on TV and in movies but you hope no one ever actually says. “It’s not you it’s me,” or “This hurts me more than it hurts you,” or something like that. Things you don’t think people actually say until they say it to you.

“This isn’t a business partnership that you can just walk out on and think everything’s cool. Everything’s even. At least I can’t. Don’t you *feel* anything?” Tears were building around the edges of Patrick’s eyes. The river would start after his next sentence: “Doesn’t this *mean* anything to you?”

“Of course it does.” She stood up. The gravity from the ceiling was too strong. She defaulted to anger. She always defaulted to anger. It was easier. “How could you say it doesn’t?”

They knew this sort of back-and-forth wouldn’t lead anywhere, but that didn’t stop them from following it for the next hour. Patrick tried to appeal to her sense of empathy by fully displaying how hurt he was, and she responded with more anger because this was the very trait that led to the conversation in the first place. Patrick had no way of knowing he was only making it worse, but there wasn’t another way he could act. It could only build and build and build and build until he finally said it:

“Maybe I’ll just kill myself.”

The siren was back. It echoed through their neighborhood like a fire alarm. Like an air raid siren. Like a tsunami warning. Their neighbors were usually quiet but for some reason they kept stomping up and down the steps outside of the apartment door. Patrick was still sitting at the kitchen table, his face shiny with tears, and Becca paced in the adjacent living room. They were

maybe five feet away from each other and when he said this last sentence the world seemed to stop moving. The only thing allowed to continue were the sounds outside and they surrounded the apartment. They listened for the longest five seconds in the history of recorded time before Becca could respond.

“That’s not fair.”

And she was right.

Without thinking it through, Patrick brought out the piledriver. The Hail Mary. The pin in the final grenade. He said the one thing that he couldn’t come back from and he didn’t realize it until she told him it wasn’t fair. Suicide is not something to be taken lightly in her family, ever since her brother took the longest jump of his lifetime off the top of the high school when she was 16. Losing a sibling that young, and in that manner, would demolish any normal teenager. But what really shattered her was that he told her about it a week before and she didn’t believe him.

An hour later, the sirens remained but the neighbors had stopped stomping around. Becca and Patrick sat together on the couch listening to the sounds surrounding their apartment.

“I don’t even know where the hell to start looking for these things.” The supermarket was crowded. Mothers attempted to wrangle children while juggling groceries. Employees crammed eggs on top of bread in reusable bags without even looking. And the sterile lighting above the whole scene made it seem somehow futuristic. Becca and Patrick walked past the carts and baskets. They were only looking for one item.

“Maybe by the condoms?”

“The condoms? Are you serious? That would be like putting kitchen knives next to band-aids.”

Patrick stopped walking and tightened his lips for a moment. “Actually, it would be more like bug-repellant next to itch cream.”

“A child is not an itch.”

“So what is it then, an open wound?”

“Excuse me.” A teenager with an orange, mesh vest pushed past them. An employee.

“Hey, um, you.”

“Me?” The kid turned around. He was taller than both of them but he had a face that would have been a perfect fit for braces. His teeth were fine, but his cheeks still had an adolescent puff. His hands were clear of calluses. He was probably really good at finding stuff on the internet.

“Yeah, do you know where the home pregnancy tests would be?”

Becca swore to herself and quickly slapped Patrick on the shoulder. “Shut up,” she said with what sounded like an inward breath.

The kid glanced between the two and took a slow step backwards. “Maybe the pharmacy?”

“Thanks,” Becca said in the opposite direction as she began walking away. Patrick nodded a thanks to the kid and followed her. After a short amount of wandering, they found the tests next to the tampons. She held the EPT box and read the back of it.

“So, these things are pretty accurate by now, right? I mean, satellites are all over the place and most diseases have been cured,” said Patrick.

“The human body isn’t a machine.”

“I didn’t say it was a machine, did I?”

A woman came down the aisle and kept her eyes on the shelves. Nobody is here. Nothing is being heard. Becca continued reading the box before turning towards the woman and walking. Her shoes clapped on the floor and Patrick’s syncopations slowly caught up to her. They walked past the dairy and freezer section where the air felt a few degrees cooler. The speakers played a love song from the 90s but neither Becca nor Patrick knew the name even though they knew all the lyrics.

A half hour later, they were back at home. The rain was still falling outside, but it wasn’t hitting their windows. They could hear the runoff from the gutters and the only other evidence was the dancing puddles on the roof of the building next door. The box from the grocery store sat on the kitchen table in front of Becca. Patrick sat in the living room on the couch. No music. No TV. Just the sound of the rain falling from the gutter and splatting on the concrete outside.

“Okay. Okay. Okay.” Becca said that word at least fifteen times in the last two minutes. She’s prepping herself for the trip to the bathroom. She’s just waiting for the glass of water she drank to work its way through her body. Patrick rested his head on the wall behind the couch and stared in front of himself. Not at anything. But not away from anything. His eyes were open but they weren’t relaying messages to his brain. His brain was too busy. Words finally came.

“A plus is pregnant.” He meant it as a question but it wasn’t. It was a statement. “A minus is not pregnant.”

“Okay.”

“But that’s kinda messed up.” Patrick still hadn’t moved his eyes from the nowhere spot on the opposite wall. “Because if you’re not pregnant, you’re not subtracting anything, right?”

The silence between them somehow grew tangible. It was an invisible fog that could be felt but not seen. The air was thicker. Harder to move through. His question hung in this invisible fog until it ricocheted back into Patrick's head and he realized what he actually said, and that he was wrong. The minus sign might not take a person out of her belly, but it might take one out of her life. The little plus sign could not only keep that from happening, but perhaps even breathe new life. New life beyond the child it would indicate. New life that could disintegrate that thick, invisible fog.

Becca made no attempt to respond. The question could only lead to another argument and if that could be avoided, it was best to put it off for a little while more. No more words were to be said. It was time for action, not dialogue. She pushed the chair back from the kitchen table and the feet skidded. It didn't squeak. It sounded more like a stuck drawer coming loose. Patrick kept his gaze on the opposite wall until Becca stood up and grabbed the box.

"You're not subtracting anything. Right?" he asked again.

"I'm not doing anything, okay Patrick?" She paused next to the couch and placed a hand on his shoulder which had some dandruff flakes peppering his t-shirt. She tried brushing some of it off but it wasn't letting go so easily. "We're going to do whatever we have to do."

The floor beneath her creaked with each step. He used to tease her as he walked to the bathroom in the middle of the night by finding a creaky section and shifting his weight back and forth on top of it. It sounded like an old sound effects record. She'd tell him to cut it out, he'd make fun of her for being scared, and she'd at least pinch him when he returned to bed. At least a pinch. Often she'd dig her chin into the middle of his back. These are the memories they would have to try to forget if the stick showed a minus sign. The bathroom door closed behind Becca.

It was awkward, trying to pee on the little stick, and she got some on her hand. She flushed the toilet and the door opened before she could zip her pants back up.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"Jesus, Pat. Did you have your ear pressed against the door or something?"

"You said this is us. This is us doing this."

"That's right." She placed the stick on the counter next to the sink and started washing her hands. The hot water took too damn long.

"I'm just, it's just what if this is the last us. The last we. The last thing we do as us."

“Patrick.” His name bounced off the tile walls of the shower and disappeared in the row of towels next to the sink. The invisible fog had followed them into the bathroom so she put the lid down on the toilet and sat on top of it. They kept the light off. The blue light of the cloudy afternoon spilled in through the high window and the sound of the rain was still there. There was simply no avoiding it that day. “Of course it’s raining,” she said.

Patrick entered the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He placed his back against it and slid down until he was sitting with his knees in his chest, looking at a side profile of Becca on the toilet seat.

“How long does it take?” he asked.

“About two minutes.”

“This could be our last two minutes.”

“Patrick,” her voice raised uncontrollably. “Just don’t. Okay? Not right now. Let’s just not, I mean, don’t.” She wouldn’t look at him.

He stared at her not looking at him. They both knew they were the last chance for each other. On the other side of the wall were only another few decades of barren loneliness. Sure, love can happen to anyone at any time but not to them. This was it. They were it for each other and they’ve tried everything they could besides hypnotism.

“How long has it been?” he asked.

“Shit.” She looked on the counter and on the floor. She even checked her pockets even though it’s obvious they’re empty. “I didn’t set an alarm or anything.”

“Give it more time. You don’t want to get the wrong answer.”

“It’s been two minutes. It has to have been two minutes by now.”

“I don’t think so. I just got in here. You just sat down.” His lips were trembling. You can’t talk your way out of a plane crash. “Just give it more time.”

Becca eased back into a slouch. “You know what I was thinking about? Remember when we got robbed?”

“You mean when our landlord kept our security deposit or when the car was broken into?”

“The car. God, that was the first time I had something like that happen to me. You know? Like, I’ve been seeing it on the news and on TV and in movies and stuff my whole life but I’d never been mugged, never had a car stolen, and nobody really messed with my stuff. Until whoever it was smashed the window.”

“You were thinking about that just now?”

“Yeah. I mean, I felt like it was the first time I was really part of the world and not just watching it. It felt like I woke up and saw everything in 3D

for the first time. It was exhilarating and horrifying at the same time. If people are going to break into my car, what's stopping them from sticking a gun in my face or running me over?"

"Don't say that." Patrick's legs were falling asleep but he didn't move.

"But really? Isn't that the point? That these things can happen to anyone at any time? I mean, even presidents get shot once in a while."

Becca ran out of sentences and returned her attention to the stick on the counter next to the sink. "I'm going to look at it."

"I don't know if I want to know."

"You're going to have to know."

"I know." He wiped his cheek. "Just don't tell me right away."

She nodded. "If you say so." Becca stood up from the toilet and shook her hands at her sides. Two deep breaths and she leaned over the stick, not picking it up. The first sob came out in a gasp and then she covered her mouth with her hands. Patrick lost control of his chest and it began bouncing up and down, tensing and relaxing in pulses, but he didn't make a sound. He rose to his feet but couldn't feel his legs beneath the knees. It was an awkward walk to the sink, his feet seemed to kick further in front of himself than they needed to, but it was only a couple steps. In the blue light of the bathroom with the rain falling from the gutters, Becca turned towards her boyfriend, her face wet and features tensed, and hugged him. He held her tightly, but not too tight, and closed his eyes so as to avoid catching a glimpse of the minus sign he told himself was showing on the stick on the counter next to the sink.

Bio: Josh Rank is a graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and has had stories published in *The Missing Slate*, *The Feathertale Review*, *The Oddville Press*, and others.

POETRY**Rear Window****Jason Sears**

We hurdle between fog and the fear of engines.
Volkswagen, 2002, the egg blue beetle sings
 through the fields with weeds we called flowers.
Crush the raining neck bones, nerves, and spine.
We combusted, even from the beginning: elbows pink
 aside elbows, irrupting bromides, carbon-lit breath.

Lace

You masquerade as bashfully as yellow wallpaper.
Lines of sweat cling gossamer to your tattooed thighs
 like the sticky rubber edges of a fleur-de-lis stamp.
We never consider the possibility of combing our hair.
Time, unheard, rests in the chirps between fan blades.
 I focus on the skin in the cubbyholes of your collar.

Bio:

Jason Sears cooks up a riot of grandiose schemes while crunching data at his day job. When his fingernails grow too long, he just plays more banjo. He's been published by Snapping Twig, Black Heart Magazine, and The Monarch Review.

A Measure of Man
Edward Ahern

I reflect that which I despise.
Mourn the things not done.
Echo the words unsaid.

Falter before it's necessary.
Comprehend less than I claim.
Love through puffy self-image.

My missings are my measurements.
My flaws are my facets.
My aberrations are my absolutes.

But I am content
To stumble on, blear-sighted
In hopes of better vision.

Bio: Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over eighty poems and stories published thus far, as well as two books, his collected fairy and folk tales and a mystery/horror novella.

THE TRUCE

Rob Plath

i remember a certain day when i was 4 years old
 i remember my brother threw a lamp
 i remember how it broke on my sister's leg
 i remember how she screamed
 i remember the holes in her walls
 i remember the accusation YR A WHORE!
 i remember the retort FUCK YOU!
 i remember my mother & brother & sister
 all screaming at once
 i remember how it drove me off the couch
 where i was trying to sleep
 i remember shutting my eyes & running w/my fist out
 i remember screaming BE QUIET!
 i remember the sound when my hand went thru
 the windowpane of the front door
 i remember how they all stopped
 i remember my mother whispering:
 See what you made him do?
 i remember a sudden calmness
 i remember one of them examining my tiny fist
 i remember the others sweeping up the glass
 i remember the trio apologizing over & over
 i remember being smart enough to keep it a secret
 that i had not meant to shatter the glass
 i remember the piece of cardboard
 taped over the empty frame
 i remember my hand in a bandage
 i remember the red seeping thru the gauze
 i remember the brief but beautiful truce

Bio: Rob Plath is a 45-year-old writer from New York. His work has been widely published throughout the world. His most noted book is his poetry collection *A BELLYFUL OF ANARCHY* (Epic Rites Press 2009). Rob's most recent book, *HEARTS FOR BRAINS* (Epic Rites Press 2014), is a disturbing children's book illustrated by Swedish artist Janne Karlsson. He lives with his cat and stays out of trouble now.

DESERT SONG
Kallima Hamilton

Help me retrieve my heart—I've arrived
at the edge where the moon's purple and luminous,
licking loose an old grief.
Braids of silver light set sail boats of cherries,
that sweet pleasure
we recognize.
I am lifted up and carried
by a mysterious wind.
Diamond stars like shark teeth
cut a truth so wide,
each answer a lion on a pyramid of regret,
a tiny secret of jungle and sand.

Kallima Hamilton is the author of *Outside the Lava Fields* (Aldrich 2012) and *The Mermaid's Thesaurus* (Middle Island 2013). Her poetry has appeared in *Shenandoah* and *Prairie Schooner*.core.

Tick Tock
Albert Ingram

I began
on the mountains.

A nimble form,
all spore.

I cast my soul,
I had to live.

But suddenly:

The winding road.
The black room.

The clock hands and the future,
empty.

At the end of the years
and toil,

At the plateau,
I wonder:

What became of the time
I used to know?

Bio: Albert grew up in Auckland, New Zealand and has always had an interest in reading poetry. However, it was only after retiring, a year ago, that he started writing poetry. During his spare time, he enjoys reading, art and gardening.

Rabbits

Kate Garrett

He creeps amongst them, feather-swift and silent, dwarfs them all but they can't see past his glossy redcurrant hair and bold grin flashing. Their fragile filigree existence hangs in the balance. A trickster tricks. Rabbits hop. The small bones primed for sprinting and jumping, they're like light through a prism: watch them blur and shift, one colour, then many.

Months ago he left his own kind behind, slithered out into the world to see what he could find. And he found the rabbits. He knew they were waiting. If they bothered to look – and they never do – they'd see their destruction reflected in his eyes. They only see themselves, and a semi-truth behind his lies: *How beautiful you are, sweet ones. How I want to taste your skin.*

The rabbits breed with delicate grace and instinctively offer themselves to their fates. Simple desires, masking nothing, content. He charms them. He is all pretence. This creature walks amongst them as if he is the same. Picks them off one by one, his sharpened jaws and fine white teeth are instruments of his deceit. But it's how he's made. And it's how the rabbits were raised. Not one of them would dare to outwit a fox.

Bio: **Kate Garrett** was born thirty something years ago in southwestern Ohio, but has lived in the UK since 1999. She is a widely published writer, a 2016 Pushcart Prize nominee, founding editor of the webzine *three drops from a cauldron*, and a senior editor at Pankhearst. For more information visit www.kategarrettwrites.co.uk.

Bloody Stool
Jared Pearce

Whatever it means—too many beets
 or a split colon—it's telling a tale of woe,
 for what are we to make, standing above
 the porcelain bowl, glancing below

To filaments of life streaming down
 the hole? We often tell ourselves tales
 to survive what nightmares we devise
 and stumble into, but here we tell:

I know something that will get you in
 the end, some pressure will hunt and squeeze,
 an ominous gurgle will trip you up—
 the egg of your death is cracking.

We flush the tank. We don't control
 the body's valves—only await its oracle.

Theatre

I never loved any woman so much as Eliza
 Doolittle—when she launched Freddy into that garden
 seat and the back leg whipped off, she wrestled
 to keep her face straight, to keep the show on

all fours. She smirked a second, but then charged
 on: Don't talk at all—Show Me! and it was
 magic. I let out a laugh; I needed something to let out
 surprise; the stacks of seated dignitaries followed suit.

But we were not the stars, and we followed her back
 to Higgins, London, some century and how we didn't want

words either. After the show, as was my custom,

I dogged her to the dressing room. Someone asked
about the accident, and she barked coarsely.

I tossed out
my autographed playbill like some dirty, over-chewed pig's ear.

Bio: Jared Pearce teaches writing and literature at William Penn University. He currently contracted a boil on the under-side of his right foot that hurts like the dickens.

Thoughts from Midian
Justin Davis

sweetly, lighting fires in my head
your perfume drives a child
to make tomorrow easier, and
the night celebrates her hair. cities
of the desert herbs, horses and
working wood lift your voice again.

Album

no one else will join
me in the photographs
of our favorite sites,
this washing machine
and horses
tired of living
in storage.

Bio: Justin Davis is a poet based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His work has previously been featured in *Burningword Literary Journal* and *Two Words For*.

My Form
John Grey

I hand my form
to the man at the desk
who, as he is eager to explain,
is only subbing
for the woman
who normally mans the desk

and then I'm instructed
to join the dozen others
who are waiting for their
names to be called.

After an hour or so,
I'm finally granted face time
with another man
who says that my application
is missing crucial information
though he is not at liberty
to reveal what that information is.

He directs me to a room
on the thirty second floor
where I am to ask for
a Miss Levine.

She apologizes
for Ms. Sutton being out
on maternity leave
before telling me that
the information is not so much un-provided
as lacking crucial documentation
which Mister Norgren
on the tenth floor
will explain further.

Mister Norgren is dead.
Ms. Knoeller is new at the job.

She hands me a different form
 which she says is much less complicated.
 It's the one she uses to order office supplies.

She recommends that
 if I'm determined to pursue
 my original application,
 I should go see Mister Dunetz in the basement.

Mister Dunetz is on vacation.
 His fill-in, Mister Green,
 is just there to answer the phone
 and that there is no protocol
 for him to deal with me in person.
 I take a seat, call him on my cell,
 explain my dilemma,
 and he writes down the information,
 adds that Mister Dunetz will get back to me.
 Or not.

That was a month ago.
 I still haven't heard from Mister Dunetz.
 I did receive a survey in the mail.
 prefaced by the words, in bold letters,
 "HOW ARE WE DOING?"

No information was provided
 at to where to send the completed survey.
 But for an incomplete survey
 try the man at the desk.

Bio: John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in New Plains Review, Perceptions and Sanskrit with work upcoming in South Carolina Review, Gargoyle, Owen Wister Review and Louisiana Literature.

Natural Anti-selection**Peycho Kanev*****Bulgarian Translation Included**

Lord, the time has come for you to do something.
 The fish are gradually walking out of the sea.
 Monkeys start to write doctoral theses on
 “The meaning of banana in our technocratic culture”
 and all magpies turn red as a beefsteak tomato.

Back and forth again. Rivers flow without crabs
 in them. Everest shakes off its white cocaine coat
 and heads south to make love with the Alps.
 Where we go from here? We pick up the stone to do
 something with it, but we but place it back on the ground,
 ashamed.

***Естествен антиподбор**

Господи, дойде времето да направиш нещо.
 Рибите постепенно излизат от океаните.
 Маймуните започват да пишат докторски дисертации
 на тема: „Значението на банана в нашата технократска
 култура” и всички свраки почервяват като сос за бифтек.

Всичко се завърта на обратно. Реките си текат без раци
 в тях. Еверест се отърсва от бялото си кокаиново палто
 и се отправя на юг, за да прави любов с Алпите.
 А ние какво да направим? Вдигаме камъка, за сторим нещо
 с него, но го оставяме обратно на земята,
 засрамени.

Bio: Peycho Kanev is the author of 3 poetry collections. He has won several European awards for his poetry. His poems have appeared in magazines, such as: *Poetry Quarterly*, *Evergreen Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Off the Coast*, *The Adirondack Review*, *The Coachella Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *The Cleveland Review* and many others.

Paradox
Gary Beck

Blueberries and rape,
hummingbirds and persecution,
Pi and chaos,
contradictions seem to be
the very core of mystery,
for within them is contained
the good and evil in mankind.

Frail Bird

Tiny sparrow
hiding from other sparrows
in the briars of your nest,
hear a prophecy:
the silken buzzard
lures with sweet delights,
cotton candy,
clinks of golden coin,
but to fly with buzzards
you must be one.
When you lie at night,
crooning on my covering wing,
your taut wings shatter,
swallow your overwhelming chatter
that makes you lose
nourishment from your greedy beak.
You crawl into the comfort
of my warming feathers,
though you clawed them in the day.
Sparrow, full of fear,
I wipe the blood your talons drew....
and hold you near.

Bio: Gary Beck spent most of his life as a theater director and has 11 published chapbooks and 7 published poetry collections with 5 more accepted for publication. His novels include: *Extreme Change*, *Acts of Defiance*, and *Flawed Connections* and a short story collection, *A Glimpse of Youth*. He lives in NYC.

at my temple: *Backoffor*
 I'llfuckingjump;
from the hospital room
where strangers pumped life
back into my lungs
and sutured the awful
 wounds.
I did not yet understand
my wrists were not windows.

Bio: Cimarron Burt is a poet and freelance writer pursuing her M.F.A. in southern Minnesota, where her content has been featured in newspapers, social media, and radio shows. She has also performed for and with the brightest talents on the slam circuit, as well as presented research into the relationship between creativity and mental illness. When not doing any of the above activities, she can be found polishing her extensive cat knick-knack collection and swilling mimosas at brunch.

EMILY AS I PULL INTO THE DRIVEWAY
Darren Demaree

Family, great scatter pattern
of our small land
& even smaller house,
I have figured out nothing,
no way to predict
the mood of the house
through the living room window
& my staring, I imagine
is helping nothing. I have gotten
very good at reading Emily,
her lips and gestures to me
while I pause, functioning
more as a passerby
than the father of our children.
I always walk inside.
I don't always walk inside
fast enough.

Bio: Darren C. Demaree is the author of "As We Refer to Our Bodies" (8th House, 2013), "Temporary Champions" (Main Street Rag, 2014), "The Pony Governor" (2015, After the Pause Press) and "Not For Art Nor Prayer" (8th House, 2015). He is the Managing Editor of the Best of the Net Anthology. He is currently living in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

Seminole Square
Robert Boucheron

After a dental visit,
I stroll the shopping plaza.
Pigeons roost in the arcade
and foul the concrete slab below.

Half the stores are vacant.
The rest sell discount furniture,
cheap clothes, tobacco, Christian books,
used records, party favors.

A mild day, partly sunny,
a taint of fall in the air,
leaves shrivel on dwarfish trees
stranded in parking lots.

This place was lively years ago.
Everyone came, a sea of cars.
The tide of fashion ebbed
and left the asphalt high and dry.

Numb in the mouth, no place to be,
I pass a fountain dribbling on
gray pebbles like a man
who's lost his mind.

Robert Boucheron is an architect in Charlottesville, Virginia. His stories, essays, poems and reviews appear in *Bangalore Review*, *Gravel*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Milo Review*, *New Haven Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Poydras Review*, *Short Fiction*, *The Tushman Review*.

How to Eat Fire and Other Dangerous Activities

India Rose Kushner

She's been fascinated by flames since birth.
On birthday cakes, she wouldn't blow out candles,
wanted to watch the flames flicker, then burn out.
She wants a spark to break up the mundane.
Don't we all?
She needs the fuel, wants it all to mean something.
She tried everything.
Bungee jumping was a thrill, but she got tired of the bouncing.
Took fire eating classes, but she didn't like the taste.
Once she got so desperate, she pressed a burning cigarette
so close to the crease of her arm that she could feel the ash crackling.
When she grew too afraid of the pain she threw it, watched it bounce away.
She was doggy paddling in an ocean, searching for direction.
Growing tired of cheap scares, she finally looked inside,
found her words and used them to stoke up a blazing fire.
She hasn't looked back since.

Bio: India Rose Kushner is a part-time retail worker by day and poet by night. She lives in Baltimore with her nature-nerd boyfriend. She has been writing off and on since she was six. She loves chocolate, Harry Potter, movies and traveling. You can view more of her work at <http://nightowlroots.tumblr.com>

Bat Walk
Laura Del Col Brown

Like a crowd drawn by a medium's promise,
We stand in hopeful half-belief and listen.
The *ratatat*, when it comes, is real enough.
These floaters, these quakelets of dark
Are what we seek.

By the time we reach the lake
The detector's crackling. A late-night jogger
Turns back on hearing our incantation:
Pipistrelle. Noctule. Natterer's. Daubenton's.

Next day, as I type, the rattling recalls
Those hidden signals, searching in the night.

Bio: Laura Del Col grew up in Philippi, West Virginia, and now lives in London, where she works in wildlife conservation. Her poetry has previously appeared in print and online with Dagda Publishing, and her poem "Opus 6" will be published in a future issue of the DSCH Journal.

NOT EVEN THE DOG**Patricia George**

Various sources had spoken the truth
“They do not love you.”
She was heavy invested in the
words of childhood that
made up her life story
Long, boney white fingers of
false beliefs held a tight grip
that loosened over time
little by little
allowing the incomprehensible
truth to seep in

BACKSTAGE

Life is backstage where the truth happens
where we see the nerves and possibly hubris
Last minute makeup touches-
a pat to the unwieldy curl
a pin to fix a missing button
Wild thoughts happening midst
the panic of mentally rehearsing
the memorized lines for the
next moment on stage
A time to get ready for the
pretence of happiness when you
are not
A smile for the stage, whereas
backstage was only the expression
of worry of problems beyond the
backstage door
I can smile too and pretend that
the charade you perform on
stage fools me

Bio: Patricia is currently working as a piano accompanist for the high school choirs. She writes in her spare time and paints in the summer when school is out. She has taught in the public schools both in Colorado and in California. Writing is the art of life- the vessel for all the arts. Her publishing credits include Dark Matter, The Scapegoat Review, Anderbo, Empty Sink Publishing and others. Find her at www.patriciageorge.biz.

Black Box
Michael Prihoda

his German girlfriend
was afraid of heights

but that didn't keep
them from the bedroom.

i heard them some nights,
most weekends,

as i studied hard,
biochem and a pair of mental tits.

if we get on a plane
together, a plane that

malfunctions, and, going
down, i look over

to see he's pissed
himself first (his

penis misappropriated
at last) have i

won or only collected
less moans in my

little black box
of a soul?

Warming Up

they aren't real people.

they drink with spoons,
deal art beneath tables.
peel tangerines from
the inside out, every
mandible a gutted
turkey. they aren't
real people but
they breathe air
just the same and
if it takes the defense
mechanism of a ponytail
worn at half-mast to
see them as tangents
of the original creative
act perpetrated by God
at Starbucks under the
influence of unsweetened
cappuccinos then who am
i to say Noah didn't build
the ark? who am i to say

Reagan didn't survive
the attempt on his life,
itself a phraseology
passed from public
consciousness like the
plight of polar ice caps.
the world is warming up
and i am causing it.

sponges

each brick in the wall is
a sponge.

they say
the words of Jesus

are stuck in the bark of
olive trees

waiting for
technology to prove incarnation.

somewhere in the northern
hemisphere

i am
confident a Russian space shuttle

launches skyward without
cell reception.

somewhere a
toaster bursts with the static pulse

of the Challenger disaster seen on
Channel 7.

Bio: Michael Prihoda is an artist and poet, living in the Midwest. He is the founding editor of *After the Pause*. He tweets @michaelprihoda and loves animal crackers.

Apropos
Heather Mydosh

It takes me a minute,
 but sure enough
 they're piping
 "Losing My Religion"
 through the waiting room
 of the Sisters of Mercy hospital clinic,

and seated between
 a former student and a rest home denizen

I think,

"Yes."

Nickel to Ride

we have caged the bright ponies
 impaled them
 jerking
 up and down
 to bear us
 knuckles and knees abreast

the circular processional
 maypole bright
 besmirched
 faces, lunch, dirt
 grinning
 in our nouveau danse macabre

Blanchot

What else I read
of your corpus
I cannot always clearly recall
as I believe
was all in accordance with
your obfuscated design

but

there is one line
which, having cut
to the quick,
has etched
itself
into a vein
just inside my left wrist
beneath the men's watch
I lifted from
my dead grandfather's bureau
while his widow napped
in the adjacent room.

One line
which unravels itself
out into my quiet corridors
and tightening, binds.

One line:

“Who would believe
I am so close to you.”

Bio: Heather Mydosh, originally from southern Michigan, teaches composition and literature at Independence Community College in Kansas. She was the

2014 Kansas Voices poet and has pieces forthcoming in *Inscape Magazine*, *velvet-tail*, *After the Pause*, *99 Pine Street*, and *From the Depths*. She holds her Masters of Literature from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland in Comparative Literature and Thought.

For I can never say your name
Danni Garcia-Bassier

All men that I sleep with now, I care less for.
They're not you. And could never be you. For you are a magician.
Conjure something in me again. Conjure love from my loveless being.
They, those men can only conjure up wetness and then hatred, emptiness.
But, you inspire so much and so much and so much more.

It will be a year since I've seen your face, heard your voice and felt uneasy
when
Surrounded by people. When I talk of you, I know I am delirious. You've called
me crazy before.
But, you cannot see craziness unless you are crazy, yourself.

I sleep with men who will never love me.
I become disappointed at myself for my momentary weakness.

Self-hatred is what I know best, it's my expertise.
I swear I flourish best in a solitary state.

I am always in a solitary state longing for a connection.
Yet, I seek a connection with people who can never be you.
You are like the snowfall in July in Pomona in 1945.
That rare you see, so rare indeed.
I don't expect your replacement for years.

Bio: Danni Garcia-Bassier is an editorial assistant at Otis Books/Seismicity Books and a graduate student at Otis College of Arts and Design's Creative Writing program.

MORITURI**L. G. Corey**

Inside
the cloud of unknowing,
the known and the unknown,
and an acid rain
of preparing and forgetting
the names of the seasons
and the names of the uninvited guests
knocking at the doors, calling at the windows,
dangling from the rafters, shaving in the mirror.
Our vines, our tender vines have raisins
where there once were grapes
and the promise of wine
instead of vinegar and water,
and a drop of blood for every plague,
every first-born, every locust
in a feast of locusts
for we who are about to die.

QUADRILLE

Music is invisible to the eye,
but not to ears that hear
the voice of the shepherd
calling to his father
from behind a tree
with roots in heaven
and hands in hell,
digging for truffles
like a rutting pig,
or cabbages and kings
or walruses and carpenters

playing with each others' pearls
in their oyster bed,
inviting lobsters to the dance
from their oyster bed:

*"Will you, won't you,
will you, won't you,
will you join the dance?"*

Bio: L. G. Corey is author of the collection, *The Kalidas Verses*. His poems appear in such literary magazines as *Chaffey Review*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Empty Sink*, *Snapping Twig*, *Hot Tub Astronaut*, *Screech Owl*, and *Pif*. Over the years they've also appeared in *Evergreen Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Midstream*, *Choice*, *the Critic*, and *Zeek*.

Golden Triangle Snow

Jimmy Boom Semtex

Old skool rock and roll on the decks. Takes me back to before I was born. Smoking the best fucking weed in 'Nam. Swimming in the river. Worshipping dark Gods. Making love to even darker women. Those were the days. How I miss them. But they're not gone for I was never there. I go back and visit regularly. I take the green pill from the stream and off I go.

Piloting my Huey gunship and hosing Charlie down with my guns. Easy as listening to Hendrix and importing white magic from the Golden Triangle. Easy and profitable days. Got my own army in the bayou delta. Most of them girls who I fuck. Trained killers to a lady. My high level stateside contacts allow me to import my snow in bodyless coffins. Done it a hundred times. Easy as killing gooks.

Hard to believe that I've got my own drug empire, a fleet of gunships and billions in the bank. Everyone can be bought, even you. Name your price. Jane Fonda doing her work out with me and my troops. Anything goes. Fancy a trip to East Berlin? Fucking some Frauleins and importing drugs to top level Soviet diplomats and military? I won the Cold War.

Return back to the Golden Triangle with six brand new Soviet Hip choppers and Ivan, my new stooge. A bad Soviet, a Godless heathen bastard who loves drug profits. Making it off the back off American GIs and his Charlie allies. We don't care for them. We use their war for profit. They can't kill me. How can they when I've not yet been born? I'm invincible.

Eternal Happenings

Oh how my dreams wandered far and wide, not knowing why. Till I caught a hint of something more than nothing. A faint fragment of crystal caught in the eye of a woman, where? Existing or caught in the ether? Faraway and none existent?

Then I woke up, no; I never slept that night. Yes, no sleep then. Hindered by that, guided by 'something', unsure of what. My Pagan Goddess as my co-pilot? Showing me the way to where you are. That took time. A long time.

Longer than far off continents being formed. Longer than painting the clouds in the sky. Longer than melting candle wax to make the moon. Longer than her fingers performing magic, making the stars. Longer than...

Then I was there, by your side. There I've remained, through the seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years. Lifetimes and forever will be added to that. Legend says we must seek our other half. Do we?

I have found the answer to my great eternal mystery. What I have looked for all these decades. That answer is simple. Do you know what it is? The answer is you, my dear wife. No more searching or yearning for you, my Carole.

Bio: His name is JIMMY BOOM SEMTEX. This is a name he's written under for a couple of years. Jimmy Semtex was thought up by one of his tattooists. He added the Boom. He writes varied work as you have read here, but he also writes short stories on varied topics. He used to write under his real name, but felt he needed liberating from himself. Jimmy likes writing, reading, tattoos, warplanes, alternative music and living life.

Sometimes Sadness
Sonya Plenefisch

Sometimes Sadness comes.

Sometimes Sadness comes and leaves the bedcovers unmade. It walks down the yellow dotted highway line and cuts up apples without removing the cores. It buys too much aspirin from the Walgreens off Main Street and slips it crushed into cakes. Sitting in flat fields, it watches the sun dials spiral and looks to the west.

Sometimes Sadness rips up a grandfather's broken tractor with bare blistered hands and turns the garage to a scrapyard. It takes four metal sheets to build a good boat. It takes only one to build a raft. Sadness nicks four packages of crackers and practices goodbyes it'll never really say.

Sometimes Sadness drags itself to the riverbank and coasts off along the Ohio. Midwest ghost towns flicker apparitions in the high noon, concrete and water towers. Sadness sees its cousins crowded under extinguished lamplight and waves as it crests the head of Kentucky.

Sometimes Sadness meets the Mississippi, the Missouri. Buffalo herd in Nebraska, lost and heading east. The urge to run its fingers through thick brown fur, bristling with extinction. The raft breaks up in some rapids just short of Montana, screech of metal and rocks and foam. Sadness travels to the Idaho border facedown-drowning-man, eyes wide open and counting the wishing coins.

Sometimes Sadness gets diner at a McDonalds, dripping wet in red-yellow paradise at the headwaters of the Snake. Full-belly climbing the west scar of the Rockies to see where the pioneers had to shoot twelve oxen. Begging an inflatable boat off the couple with one broken ankle between them and two tickets back to their home. Casting off after dawn.

Sometimes Sadness holds its breath all through Idaho, Oregon, Washington. The river pulls its great heart faster, pine trees bristling with the sting of salt air. Finally the rocks split open, pouring out into the coast mouth. Sadness leaps to the shore as the boat goes under in the first swells of the surf.

Sometimes Sadness sees the Pacific Ocean.

Sometimes Sadness stays up on the bordering cliffs, builds a cottage of bones and white-washed weatherboarding. Has a rotating schedule for who does the dishes and forgets to sweep under the sink every other day.

Sometimes Sadness sees the Pacific Ocean.

Sometimes Sadness goes.

What We Found in Hiding

On a rainy Sunday we found a bucket
 of all the lies we've told and
 cruelties we've imposed,
 hidden under our beds.
 They clung to our hands when we scooped them out –
 we forgot to wear gloves when the bucket tipped over.
 We tried to forget.
 We tried to bury our sins, but the ground spat them up.
 We tried to drown them deep, but the water wouldn't take.
 What are we left with now?
 No gloves and a messy room.
 Handfuls of mistakes, of dirt, of dripping water.
 This is how our father stood,
 and his father,
 and every father before him.
 This is how they posed before the great sculptor of Time as he
 carved out our image.
 This is our buckling back, our dirtied knees.
 This is red-blossomed shame and an ocean not deep enough to sink in.
 The vanquished king's cartographer burning the map only to find it
 etched in stone.
 We finally hid the bucket again,
 a new place this time,
 just behind the clothes dryer.
 Warm and secret behind towels and sheets.
 We still have our hands, we still have no gloves.

Bio: Sonya Plenefisch grew up in Sylvania, Ohio, but as of recently lives and
 studies in Cardiff, Wales. Her work, sharing her attachment to a sense of place,
 has previously appeared in Words Dance, Epigraph Magazine, Driftwood Press,
 and Clover, A Literary Rag. More of her work can be found
 at shppoetry.tumblr.com.

*he failed to seal
the window
his wife had called
she was leaving him
for an airline pilot*

Life #10

Sitting in her shabby bedroom
Maggie points at an old tabby
“Put puss down,” she intones
“I’m yours once anyway you like,”
I can barely disguise my shock
she shrugs at my reaction the girl
is a lifelong pursuit of mine
the cat a fur ball counting minutes
I watch it sun lazily in a window
his tail whips back and forth
the feline stares at me as if to say
“Its fine I understand I’d do it
to you if it was the other way around,”

Bio: Dave Gregg is older than he thinks with less time than he believes but continues to pursue the noble poem. He was born in southwest Missouri and after living in many parts of the country has returned. He reads all authors of poetry but always relies on Bukowski, Rilke and Kooser.

**A JEHOVAS WITNESS TOLD ME: BEFORE THE WORLD IS DESTROYED
THERE WILL BE DIVINE INTERVENTION AND I ALONE WILL SURVIVE
Michael Brownstein**

--because Richard Corey is the true Jehovah

We walk down the blue-lined streets of litter and tension,
the sky exhausted and white.

They told me the earth was a living beast
riding a tortoise shell across the light of space,
the shell old and degraded, the tortoise long gone,
only the tusks of an elephant spiking its center.
No elephant. No tortoise. The shadows of dawn
calm, a poodle mating with a shepherd, the house
on the corner bright with lights of unhappiness.
Can you not smell the carcasses of thick gray skin,
the acid in the water taking out a memory of fish,
everywhere a hand torments itself with touch,
the ears the noise of poverty and disuse,
taste a matter for another time, now the poodle
lets go and the shepherd rushes to the alley
in search of the smell and the bones piled there.
"This is the will of my world," Richard Corey says,
a bullet in his hand, a gun in his desk drawer,
the lights in the bad-luck house flickering. "Let go."

BROWN PANTS

I am wearing the brown pants of dead men, old men, men lost in the current of
cotton and boiling mud:

men who watch the clouds or rain and never look for the rainbow, men who
know snow and frostbite:

men who grow gray and dark as summer expands its hold on autumn, men
who never eat organic apples from the grocer:

men who knew to smile once a long time ago, men who forgot to brighten their
teeth, men who are never caught naked--

the skin of these men

a broken nose of men

the shallow breath deep within men

a silence of shadow and men--

and so it goes, the horse before the cart, the hen before the chicks, I in my
brown pants

crossing the bridge over the pool of koi and turtles, the water green blue/blue
green,

the bridge thick with stone and metal. concrete dust, strength and sweat,
a blood-worthiness, a holy ship, a path, a series of steps to the place of men
with brown pants.

Bio: Michael H. Brownstein has been widely published throughout the small and literary presses. His work has appeared in *The Café Review*, *American Letters and Commentary*, *The Pacific Review*, *Poetrysuperhighway.com* and others. In addition, he has nine poetry chapbooks including *The Shooting Gallery* (Samidat Press, 1987), *Poems from the Body Bag* (Ommation Press, 1988), and *A Period of Trees* (Snark Press, 2004.) He is the editor of *First Poems from Viet Nam* (2011). He is currently the English Specialist at Lincoln University, an historical black land-grant college, located in Missouri.

APHONIC
Carl Scharwath

She is the lament

of the voiceless

consuming silence

onto parchment

into the psyche,

histories skirmish

chains of the enslaved

loosen their duress

to

the pendulum

to rebuild our most treasured

commodity-

hope.

her words-

we together manipulate

Bio: Carl Scharwath's work has appeared internationally with over eighty publications selecting his poetry, short stories, essays or art photography. He won the National Poetry Contest award on behalf of Writers One Flight Up. His first poetry book "Journey To Become Forgotten" was published by Kind of a Hurricane Press.

Civil Rights
Tom Bacher

Rosa Parks Avenue was detoured. People in the back of the bus took the R over to Martin Luther King Drive and changed over for the Q and sometimes A especially when U and C weren't running to get to Ralf Abernathy Way or the CC to Shirley Chisolm Trail without an extra fare except for the usual graffiti interiors and missing seats. We stood separate but equal on legs and arms outstretched before curving along the intersection of Ralph Stokes Street and Dwight D. Eisenhower Boulevard where the T never caught on but housekeepers did waiting for gardeners and odd-job men climbing aboard the B or M for Calle Christopher Columbus, Pinta Parkway, Santa Maria Street, and Nina Way. Rosa Parks disappeared in the dust above rusted nails and Olde English 800 cans and a new spur to White Pines Estates for the brand new Y.

Bio: Tom Bacher was born in Japan before moving to Minnesota, the coldest spot of his life. His formative years were spent in the southwest suburbs of Cleveland listening to rock music and live bands. He grew up when he moved to Brooklyn, New York in the early 1980s. At present, he is maturing in Akron, Ohio. His work has appeared in *Anon Magazine*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Blind Oracle*, *Haggard & Halloo*, *Mead: The Magazine of Literature and Libations*, *Requiem Magazine*, and *Stepaway Magazine*.

Absalom
Owen Vince

*A grating, hard sound woke
 the neighbourhoods
 of a city all but deserted at that hour.
 Soon, time itself
 broke. And space. And the slowly-made
 sculptures of angels and penitents
 around the mouths
 of the chapels. St Martin's. St Rose.
 St Asaph. God himself. Noise*

*became the sky
 and wore it. I said,
 "this is clearly
 the end". Nobody heard me. I walked
 the aisle of the room
 which gives way to a profound mountain
 that in its appearance is both
 Mt Fuji and Olympus
 Mons. There the first man to walk
 and go mad on another world
 first knew himself. He was lost.
 There the character from some programme
 on television, his eyes snakes,
 his mouth a line drawn
 in pen, was clasped shut
 by his own hand as he, drunk,
 mouthed in a voice like his mothers.
 "It's in the air. It
 is in the air". The sound, at last, became full
 like a belly on milk. I said, "who
 will record this thing?"
 And the world, like an axe
 swung against me.*

Bio: Owen Vince is a poet, music journalist, and poetry editor of HARK. He currently lives in Norwich, UK and tweets @abrightfar.

1/3/58-12/6/14

Amy Soricelli

I should remember more of you.

More than blurred shadows/spots of teenage bullshit
like acne scars.

You hated most people/they scared you into white-bread crumbs/their crusty
edged

brown dreams followed you down my block.

You spent the summer on my doorstep - a cloud of smoke circling halo-like in
the senseless

clouds of car alarms and lonely fanged dogs sliding sideways across your
vision.

You never saw me but I was there.

I should remember more of you.

More than random shadings of deep mindless blank bus rides.

I climbed up the side of your building like a pipe.

Wordless tunes in my head wrapped tight/a long rope of anger - wore
it around my neck like a cross.

Our black "underneath the heart" makeup dragging the eyelashes down our
face.

I could not love anyone more than your posterred walls with tape
curling off the edges like a snicker.

Your father left your mother in a puff of suitcase slammed shut.

We drank a bottle of wine in the back alley and I held your hair and sang
Motown.

I should remember more of you.

More of what filled your boots/crawled up the length of your legs wrapped
tight around your belly; the fleshy part of some lake fish.

You blew grape bubbles of gum-snapping-pop full loud in math class.

We bent over laughing like folded paper - the size of our words foreign in our
mouths

like borrowed tongues.

I should remember more of you.

Bio: Amy Soricelli is a native New Yorker who has spent 35+ years assisting people with finding employment. While this presents a fair amount of challenges, she handles the stress by writing poetry and taking candid NYC pictures from her trusty phone.

Amy has been published in small magazines, a couple of anthologies here and there and was nominated for a "best of the net" award for a poem about the Boston Marathon bombing.

Withdrawal
Sy Roth

His magniloquence a scalpel of bombastic utterances
 Slices the flesh helter-skelter
 Like a Sherman's march through Georgia.
 It destroyed détente with cloying coolness.

It advances in the face of rebels.
 Gives birth to a rebellion of internal rights and wrong
 Fusty in their inky displacement of
 Judgments--
 Supine,
 Snorting at the fetid air.

Dying of life,
 Festering sore, canker in the firmament of existence
 Calumny of chattering teeth
 Wrapped in silent, sibilant verbiage
 Confusion resting warily behind a dentate forest of snagged teeth.

Like an undulating Remington keyboard, he bides,
 A silent, broken, twisted lead conglomerate,
 Askew.
 Lets loose a bombastic a parade of invective
 Like the Unabomber's tirade
 Across the white pages of their faces
 Tabula rasa of unscripted brains.

They wait outside,
 Expectant Stasi soldiers
 Playing footsie in a KGB world;
 Checking for verities
 Where none exist.

His words eons dead along with his soul,
 Drowned in the wash of water
 along with the horde of other lemmings
 Who dreamed of their own piety
 Sunk in their own river of words--Cradled in their aloneness.

Bio: Sy Roth is a pliant soul, bereft of petulance. So he writes soulfully, he thinks. And many publications have deemed him readable. It is his pleasure to share this work.

Valediction from the Train West**R. W. Haynes**

My part of the death train chugged on past
Your bright resort some time ago, and someone
Threw a bottle at it just for fun,
For fun does entertain, but does not last,
And its empty bottles, the hilarity
Of senescent fools' ominous forecast
That stupid exuberance evaporates fast,
Gather, with the miles, ponderous gravity,
And the dark tunnel which concludes the run
Welcomes the mind to its opacity,
Saluting this last desperate dignity,
And this last departure from the sun.
We've left some silently, waved to the rest,
Relieved to leave, finally rolling west.

The Owl Soliloquizes a Ghostly Good-Bye

The owl of wisdom wakes as sunlight dies,
And, as the forest fades to ghostliness,
Confidence yields as the light grows less,
And the bird of darkness eerily cries.
And now the stars show truth unto the wise,
Who know the rarity of commonness,
The secret perfection of invisible process
Of the devoted algebra that shapes the skies.
And, as I think of ghosts who came to me
In brighter times, drawn by mad attraction
Set mysteriously into careless action,
Kind darkness hides a crushing sympathy,
And comfort quibbles now that wisdom lies,
And that some quiet kinship never dies.

Bio: R. W. Haynes writes and teaches in South Texas. He is working on a second book on playwright/screenwriter Horton Foote. A list of some places he has published is online at http://www.pw.org/content/r_w_haynes.

If You Find No Poem (V3)
Michael Lee Johnson

If you find
 no poem on
 your doorstep
 in the morning,
 no paper, no knock on your door,
 your life poorly edited
 but no broken dashes
 or injured meter-

if you do not wear white
 satin dresses late in life
 embroidered with violet
 flowers on the collar;
 nor do you have
 burials daily
 across main street-

if no one whispers
 in your ear, Emily Dickinson-
 you feel alone-
 but not reclusive-
 the sand child
 still sleeping in your eyes-
 wiping your tears away-

if you find
 no poem on
 your doorstep-
 you know
 you are not from New England.

Bio: Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era: now known as the Illinois poet, from Itasca, IL. Today he is also a freelance writer, photographer who experiments with poetography (blending

poetry with photography), and small business owner. He has been published in more than 875 small press magazines in 27 countries and edits nine poetry sites. He has authored *The Lost American: "From Exile to Freedom"*, several chapbooks of poetry, including *"From Which Place the Morning Rises"*, *"Challenge of Night and Day"*, and *"Chicago Poems"*. He also has over 71 poetry videos on YouTube.