



Corvus
REVIEW

ISSUE 7W



This issue of Corvus Review is dedicated to:

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On Taking a Complete Stranger to the Gynecologist

Ryan Quinn Flanagan

I have allergies and I have glow sticks
and I have driven a complete stranger
to the gynecologist,
wondering about the sanitary nature
of my passenger seat
the whole time,
playing it cool like Clint Eastwood
with a cannon in my pants
but soon feeling bad for the girl
abandoned by family and friends,
no one to take her,
thumbing her way to a clean bill
of health...
and I know there are more hustles
than sparrows,
that I am an easy mark
beyond the doom and bluster,
but she played with my radio dial and I did not mind,
there are worse things than bad taste in music;
and she arrived for her appointment
and I asked her if she wanted me
to stick around
and she laughed and said no
that she would take the bus home

and the world is always at war
but I was not

not in that moment

backing out of the lot
of that professional building
in the east end
with the long brown chimney
stacks

feeling good about myself
in a way I hadn't
in years.



High Moon

Nate Sumislaski

Gloria watched her son die miles away

but back home, New Orleans
 weeps for forgotten angels

the whole world will tell you
what the truth is
even when you insist otherwise,

the Moon will laugh at your contemplations.

bulky ruffian types strut streets making sure the hour
 lasts every precious second

some windows will gaze at you
with yellow cat eyes – like the sun

does when daytime figures you out

Some cemeteries house the sacred dead
yet most were just servants to the Faith.

were they saved by dying for their lords?

or imaginations running wild in misconceived dreams?
is the World really out to get anyone
or does it stand back
and smoke a pipe whilst watching
all of our fateful interactions



Maturing Almost Instantly

Travis Laurence Naught

Tommy is navigating the winter parking lot at a Northwest regionally based state college, holding the left hand of a girl with his right. She is wearing a blue spot dress dotted in polka; small, white. The chalk drawn American dream waiting to unfold a future promising privilege based in genetic circumstance, easily erased, beyond his control. Tommy is ignorant, grateful.

His youthful exuberance makes him childlike; 9 years old, holding a balloon, skipping in step with his sister, mother, girlfriend, whomever she specifically is does not matter. To Tommy, women are necessary counterparts for happiness, and that is the highlight of her storyline existence: a living adjective cohort on this side of a brick wall of mortar construct currently hiding fate.

Binge work can ultimately conclude a project faster than tortoise over hare stories portray, but applied differently, that mindset will edge a person in the direction of death. Overexertion begins with noble intent; get the job done, nose-to-the-grindstone, no shit's too tough. One false slip off a worn slick wrung comes from a misplaced step, threatens to bring down

the entire red ash colored divider.

It took nearly 4 years' manual labor to blackout pleasant images from the past against a more substantial present discomfort founded in various booze bottles, vials of heroin, syringes, other paraphernalia hiding in shadows on the lee-side of a mountain named addiction, unearthed, top-down, by Tommy. At school,

he will learn to claw his way along the texture of a system supposed to be set up for success. Perma-grin of natural hope chemically replaced by a burned out drug scowl. Tatters of clothes fall from the waist and shoulders which once held all of the best brands to help catch second glances cast from the eyes of desirable coeds walking by; no big deal, dark side pussy is easier to impress.

Stumbling, falling, scraping, landing propped up against the scratchy insides of this new stretch, a peephole shines through Tommy's hangover eyes, which snap open in stark recognition. Combined with snowflakes finding exposed skin through shredded garments passing as shirts, pants might as well be down around his ankles, for worse exposure than blackout nightmares.

An idyllic version of himself is proudly coming toward a door, carrying arms full of high hopes that appear as a beautiful woman in one hand, upward reaching freedom balloon in the other. Now older, curmudgeonly, jaded, a chance is presenting itself to warn the child version of himself against the pratfalls of unbidden life, but cold confrontations rarely go as planned.

Older Tommy settles himself, opens the door as the boy begins to reach for the handle. Not caught off guard, the young lad starts right in "Hey, Mister. I hope you have one hell of a day," and with that, the younger Tommy passes a string, along with a smile, between his selves. It is a touching moment, causes tears to form a line of second graders waiting for the bell

chime, freeing trapped identities to cascade out from discomfort, experience a boundless rush, remove heavy shackles and feel weightless

for the first time in years. From above, clean metaphors, wash recent painful history away until older Tommy's legs imitate his boyish counterpart's drive to skip toward the sky. High is often misinterpreted as giddy, and vice versa,

before blood toxicology reports delivered by autopsy doctors who ran postmortem tests cleared correlative similarities. Drugs didn't cause an elated Tommy to race into the street, nor did a de-icer truck driver numb cold nerves with a delightful, warming swig. Sometimes circumstances that begin so perfectly ignorant end up leading to death of the all but innocent.



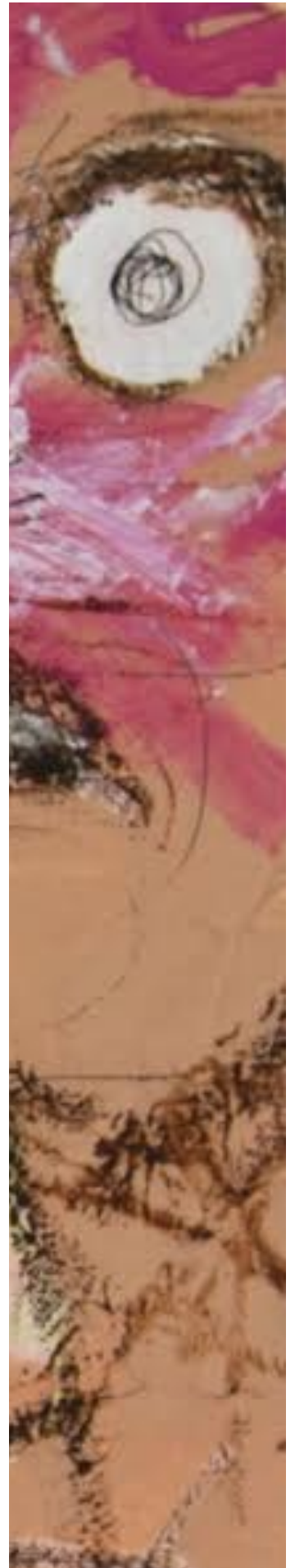
Jukebox Rasputin

Arielle Tipa

Bear paw –
the wind-up nonsensical
doll tags, glass eye with ballroom glances
reflected on an antique tea tray and
fireplace smells of wet fur,
pipe bomb marionettes and
chimney wafts of hair uncleansed.

He's playing Stravinsky again,
and Borodin and Cui,
and Tchaikovsky takes salt in his tea
and makes shadow puppets on my, on our
off-white curtains and our, and my
Romanov Fabergé eggs.

A Moscow farmhand whistles a hymn, snow-laden
and a mystic winds, a windy
porcelain orchestra.



Germany's Cryptid Diners

Jon Riccio

Cod liver for the zoologist, immanent in a minute like tempo markings glossed on a Fortean gate. One Zeppelin's *zurückhaltend* is to vegan as vascular is to pristine fruit, the chowder absent its coelacanth, hash in lieu of the missing link.

There's chatter between Loch hunters cajoling their photos over eggs Benedict, the grease by which they obtuse the more they chase, gastrology and Mothmen mixed in the quandary trade.

There's footage – millimeters debated while my diverticulum inclines a cantaloupe – auteurs examining their oatmeal when evidence leading to Momo and other Missouri monsters stales.

There's belief – my body streamlining digestion with a probiotic – that in puzzling a Yeti's duodenum I'll distract my own with each breakfast-veritas plate.

There's a notion in stomach circles: you ire what you eat, a bestiary of medicine caps belonging to the regulators ferried from cabinet to throat, so many they child-proofed the Rhine. Placemat predicament like sodium from a Slender Man saltshaker, the enzyme that chews the more it obtrudes.



Sylvia Browne

Jon Riccio

The grainer the fulcrum,
the more brazen its flam,
your output filling two rows
of the library's New Age section.
Sylvia chanteuse, if aura were opera
with a call number and a cover, tell me
heaven stocks medallions by the billion.

I catered your call-in special,
incense and an audience channeled
onto videotape, the craft services table
draped to its nodes. You were cold
reading the aisles, dry-cleaner aromas
pulling at your id like phantom kith,
a matchbook of vagaries relayed by
a disembodied J, maybe T, the third
eye earns a living playing coy.

You kept it ambiguous for the family
in row eight. What's *messengered* to a whim?

I've relocated to a Southern town,
hospital adjacent the television repairman,
supermarket shaded by library mortar,
the antebellum radiator debasing
a dust jacket of its shimmer.

Communing's grown passé.

Divining rod for the infotained,
your voice too husky for hydromancy,
its aquifer rendered moot.

I'd be your replacement
but for a beverage cart,
a spiritual shell game gone
from hunch to extinct.

Sylvia, tell me wavelength
is an Atlantean lark. What's *whim*
to a nautilus's paranormal?



And then you can't breathe

Deirdre Fagan

The mortgage is too high

The job suffocates

Your cat puts fur balls on your tongue

The food won't go down

The dog lies on top of you

Your children, playing, grip your throat and won't let go

Cinch your belt, they say

But the marriage is already too tight



About Profiles

Sergio A. Ortiz

Sharpened in the light,
like a sunrise doctors itself in water,
I look at how you lean on the magnet
of your own shadow, as if you were a dream clock
in the sweaty age of the planet. You are a fire cloud
for the dolphin's plumage, the scar that travels
from the nerve track of insomnia
to the sulfur eyelid of an unclaimed god.

I am the man, the throbbing eye
in harmony with my uproar.
An incurable tenderness suffocates me
with the hands of oblivion
because I speak only to the crowds
of your name. I am inside the small cavity
of your dust with no possibility of a return,
I look at you with the wise
inconstancy of oil and vinegar.

I am the man,
the dream,
the eye.



Yellow and Blue

Alicia Cole

Frosted rain today: pearls of water
litter the branches. A long, low ocean
of water shushes from the sky.
My mother's gathered ginkgo leaves for me.
I've gathered my thoughts.
The sky merely gathers; the rain descends.
Everything's ginkgo, everything's ice blue.
The ice does not catch me, shivering and timid.
I feel more fierce and child wild.
Leaves litter my senses.
The rain stains the world cold.



Musician's Return

R.G. Foster

We parted on the dock;
I heard them rehearsing as
The palsied sky
Dripped in the wake
Of their leaving vessel.
Yellow and browning;
A sensory mess.

I'd trained under Marsallis in Turin,
A critic in Abyssinia,
Chased women on the boardwalk in Tyre.
A mess, a mess is what it was.

I saw her in the wheatfield from the hill-crest,
I saw her scythe in purple rags,
Not a ring on her finger.



Through the other side of that

Lauren Suchenski

through the other side of that
great vast painting
stretched gauzy over my eyes
I saw the endless crowd of wanderers
gazing back at me in silent recognition

That figures and forms would never
amount to that wordless place
where art lives.

where art dwells with itself –
sucking the marrow from metal and wrapping
itself around the ancient
pillar of shape
we have created for it.

to walk through art – hand and hand
with the reverie of images
gone by; of monuments gazing straight
into space –
that is the wildest path I will ever trod.
to stand inside of the beating heart of a painting
and to know its name as a melody still singing –
that is a presence I will always be
searching for

and always finding.

with eyes staring back at me through the other side
of a frame.



The Scar of a Hacker

David Tuvell

He can't JTAG his way out of this:
wired, staring at a blinking cursor
with absolute vacancy in his mind,
every last idea coded and beautified.

It's his profile, not his black denim
will tell you that his name: Darth Vader.
He expects to be acknowledged as such
with every how-do-you-do; he's done being engineered.

He can't discern the difference
between the end of the world and the end
of his world, but he's learned
how to say Elohim with emoji.

It's the prison of leaving a legacy
that sets his Getting Things Done alarms,
that keeps downsizing his standards
until he checks another impending box.

He's reduced to the same textfiles roads
and bulletin-board worlds, by the same
possible-but-not-plausible physics.
He always fast-forwards through the love scenes.

It's the fascination with alien code words
that has gone the way of the typewriter.
Now he's just someone you meet on the way down.
Now he's just like his grandfather loading hay,
living every day looking for the final bale.



Solo Boxing

Michael Lee Johnson

Solo boxing, past midnight,
tugging emotions out of memories embedded,
tossing dice, reliving vices, revisiting affairs,
playing solitaire-marathon night,
hopscotch player, toss the rock,
shots of Bourbon.

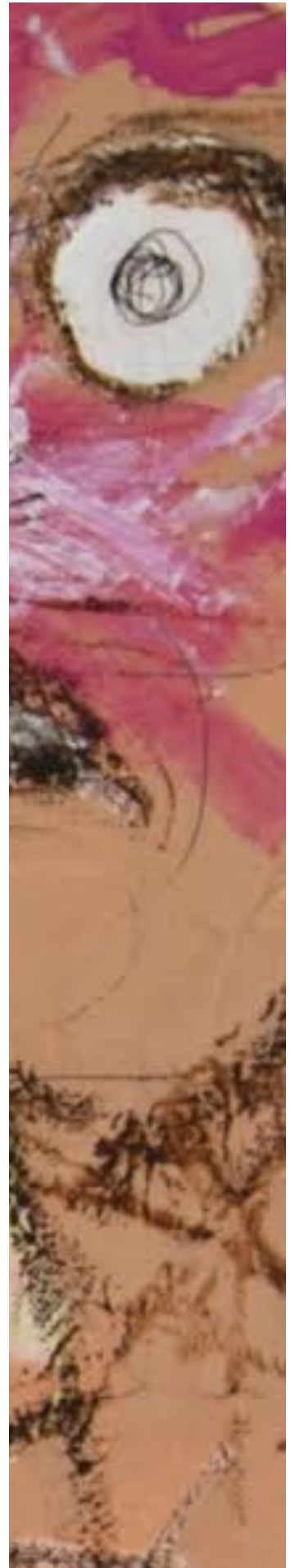


Sit With Me

Scott Laudati

Can you sit with me please?
I'm ready to tell those
stories you should've heard
before
I made you
unforgiving.
I've written them to you now.
In each letter,
Pulled out.
Put down.
You know
the ones? Two stamps
in case my feelings become too
heavy for you
like they
have for me.
Another weight I don't mean to make you carry.

Can you sit with me please?
I can put us onto paper
now, more than this
loneliness, more than this regret.
I can lock us in love.
I can lock us in time.
We can be old books on a shelf,
used and traded and passed
back and forth, and put smiles
on the faces of all those who come after us.
What if we could make their world better?
I can't do it without you.
I can't
I can't



Light Comes to the High Street

Robert Nisbet

Half past eight. Last night we felt the
lingering of an Irish gale, the rasping of
late leaf, by steps and alleyways.
There's pub detritus certainly, but
Chloe, office junior, and Wayne, the
bookie's clerk, drift, grinning, with the
leaves, to work. Both clubbed last night,
both separately, in cars elsewhere,
removed clothing, tasted a joyful
newness. The staffs of Furnishings and
The Outdoor Shop banter, scrap out
allegiances. Harriet sets up her mainline
bookseller's, listens to the rustle, the chat.
The boys have been, the road sweeper,
the paper deliveries, and, as the shuffling feet
scratch out their measures on the day to come,
something in Harriet's imagination
bottles the alchemy
of people and purpose and day.



Soft Rain

Rick Hartwell

Midnight shadows are marshaled in my memory. They evoke for me pain and insecurity, longing and guilt. Too numerous are the assignations for which I owe penance and gratitude, both, for without these memories, what would one look back upon. The guilt from them upholds some basic level of purity while the reflections and recall of former passions add measurably to the periods of boredom and banality now. I wonder if everyone clouds their todays with yesterdays. It seems to be a human trait and is perhaps a defining element of humanity.

I suppose I should be meditating on my, our, twenty-fourth wedding anniversary. As I begin formulating them in my mind I realize that most of my thoughts revolve around my self-recriminations for much of what I have put her through during all these years. I continue to ruminate through the remainder of the night. The dawning is dull and gray and overcast, the kind of day she snuggles away from. She loves to sleep in and probably kids herself with the overcast that it is still too early. I, however, like the light drizzle and the slick streets. I like the light scream of tires on the wet road and the intermittent patters of rain on the roof tiles mixed with the gush and gurgle in the eave troughs and down the waterspout.

I guess with the rain comes remembrance and I am drawn backwards to other rainy days, wet roads, and the sounds of memory. Many are my recollections of driving in the rain, particularly in the Northwest; sometimes alone, sometimes with silent companions. I remember hitchhiking with Bob the summer we ran away from Gilroy. We were picked up one rainy, lonely night in central Oregon by a cowboy in a pickup truck with a saddle in the back and a bottle in his lap.

* * * * *

We started running along the muddy shoulder of Interstate 5 toward the brake lights of the pickup even before it came to a complete stop. The soft rain had insinuated itself into the soil and the ground couldn't hold any more. The puddles overflowed in the tire ruts and Bob and I splashed through them unheedingly as we ran for the passenger door. Bob reached the handle first, pulled open the door, and stepped in scudding across the bench seat and next to the driver. In the instant I waited for Bob to get in, I noticed the saddle in the bed of the pickup. Even in the dark of that night I could see that the leather was soaked in the rain. If there had been no wind from the cars and trucks screaming by on the freeway, I could have smelled the damp, earthy musk of the leather mixed with those of sweat and manure. I knew those smells and loved them. It was an old saddle, worn and polished with work and the love of that kind of work. There was no trailer on the lonely hitch at the back of the bumper and the saddle and tack were the only passengers in the bed. For the moment at least, the pickup was his only horse.

I slid over far enough to slam the door and then leaned back against it easing myself so Bob wouldn't crowd the driver. He was a cowboy, the driver; a working cowboy. He had on a stained, tan hat and a checkered shirt with four mother-of-pearl snap buttons on the right sleeve I could see and one each on the flared tips of the two pockets. He wore blue jeans that rode high up on his boots revealing the high gloss of tooled leather that the jeans usually covered. The lower boots were scuffed and worn. And in his right hand he cradled an open fifth of whiskey, nestled between his legs, which he quickly and willingly shared.

Bob and I were cold and wet and young and the whiskey quickly warmed us beyond our ability to hold up our end of a conversation. We dozed on and off and only occasionally would the cowboy drawl on. But I don't recall him trying to mount much of a conversation anyway. Unlike some people that summer who would pick us up to keep awake or to replace a broken radio, the cowboy was merely conferring the favor of a ride, a drink, and shared companionship. Eventually he had to turn off east, toward Pendleton or wherever, and we chose to continue south. He dropped us at a major intersection with a diner and a gas station, left us with the last inch in the bottle, and waved once as he took the off ramp, water sheeting up through a broken mud flap.

* * * * *

I have often thought about that cowboy and how he was so open to sharing a ride and a drink and just a sliver of himself. There was and remains, an image of total selflessness about that man. In my writer's mind I create all sorts of stories about why he had no trailer or horse; why his saddle was just thrown in the bed of the pickup and left to soak in the rain; and, why he was sucking on a bottle in the middle of the night in the middle of Oregon. At times I like to think he was a rodeo rider just thrown on his luck, looking for the one redeeming ride to regain his pawned or bartered life. At other times I like to think he had just left a bad relationship, with all he had left to his name, and had just fled south from Portland or The Dalles, drinking to drive away the demons of sad words and bad good-byes. Perhaps I'm just projecting myself and my own illusions onto his story.

In my mind he has never had the appearance of a drunk, although there is always something of an inner glow of peace and contentment mixed with an undefined yearning. The drunks were really Bob and I; not so much on the whiskey as on the rain and the sleeplessness and the soft sounds of the tires on the wet road mixed with the rhythmic cadence of half-tuned conversation. It would take a much better poet than I to adequately describe these feelings, past and present, the cowboy's and mine.

I could probably go on in my memory creating stories for him in my mind, but nothing can ever dull the image I retain of

that night. His truth is undoubtedly much richer than my fiction. So many times since then I have sent out a fervent wish that he remained safe that night and found his lucky ride or a quiet partner or at least some others with whom to share a bottle and his dreams through the middle of his many other nights with only a soft rain falling down.



The Laws of the Sea

The very first time I went down to the sea, it was in a Balboa Dinghy. She, for all boats are she by the mystic laws of the sea, was an eight-foot pram: a blunt-nosed, wooden, beginner's boat. She was built along the lines of the more popular Sabot, but was saved from such mediocrity by being manufactured all of wood and she was varnished rather than painted. Because of this she was, obviously of course, older and heavier and slower. But in a breeze, oh my, in a breeze, she was just superb.

She had a starboard leeboard rather than the Sabot's dagger board, and because of this she often scooted sideways, slipping on the waves on a starboard tack when my ten year old weight could not hold her flat and plunge her lee-board deep enough to prevent side-scuttle. But on a port tack she sailed supremely well, with the leeboard deeply dug into the water. I would perch my butt on the gunwale rail and tuck my feet up under the center seat. I would lean out precariously with one hand holding the main sheet tightly wrapped around my clenched fist, because I couldn't afford a jam cleat, and the other hand delicately grasping the tiller and working the wind and waves going to weather. She had a blown-out, tomato-red sail made of cotton, but that inefficiency, presumably along with her many and various other sins, was never identified by me nor would I have given any of them any significance if they had been obvious.

In her I was a pirate king and I plied my trade of sail from China Cove and the Pirates' Cave to Aliotto's Fish Market and from the Back Bay and Shark Island to The Pavilion. I was a minor master mariner of Newport Harbor and I harnessed the wind to my fancy or else changed my fancies from day to day to fit the mood of the wind. Sometimes I would race, and mostly lose except when it blew hard and hairy, but mostly I settled for day-cruising the coasts of my imagination. I rarely took on passengers and I resented quickly the few I had. I was mostly a loner, but never alone, and only total darkness and the doldrums of night would stop my daily adventuring. On numerous evenings I would finally have to abort any further attempt to search for a whisper of wind and would finally succumb to the need to mount oars and row for shore.

It was on one such night, when I had been forced to row back to dock, that I encountered the other one: my nemesis, the other boy with whom I shared the dock. Actually, I was a latecomer and had only been berthed on the dock for a month or so. Before then I had had to beach my boat nightly, like a coastal buccaneer, tied to a piling or else plunder the shore in search of help to carry her to the garage. We both, the other boy and I, were allowed to keep our boats on this dock by the personal grace of a Grand Dame of the Little Island. She was one of the Beek descendants to whom had been bequeathed the home, the dock, and the legacy and requirement "to help the young people of the Island." She knew so very little of the ways of water or of those who made their lives at sea, and yet she tried to please us all.

The other boy, I'll call him Malcolm because I forget his real name and Malcolm seems pretentious enough to fit him, was rich. He owned a Sabot with a sail number in the mid-thousands, while my sail bore double digits only. His boat was fiberglass and gleamed of polished brass and plastic laminates and every expensive "go fast" item money could buy. His sail was pristine white and it had the taut snap and resiliency of tempered Dacron with a perfect pocket, much as a pitcher's oiled glove, but this pocket could catch the slightest hint of a breeze. His boat was perfect, as was he, and it was false to the sea, as too was he. He never helped others; he always had others waiting to help him; and, he was pompous and prideful and whiny and false.

On this one particular evening, he had overstayed the welcome of the evening breeze and had barely made it back to the dock by sculling and drifting. He must have been there five minutes or so before me, for he had un-stepped his mast and removed his sail. He had unclipped his rudder and dagger-board and they lay atop the white pillow of his folded sail. Only the paddle remained in the boat.

As I approached, rowing with my back to the dock and my dark red sail flapping uselessly above me, I yelled for him to fend me off and secure my painter to a cleat on the dock. He told me to take care of my own problems as he continued to fuss with some personal trifle. I shipped oars and thumped the unforgiving dock knowing I would regret the ding later. I grasped the cleat, jumped to the dock, and wrapped my painter unprofessionally, not in a figure eight with a half-hitch, but coiled around the cleat and dropped in haste. I walked casually across the dock and undid his painter and threw it inboard on his bow.

He had a paddle. He had a dry boat. He also had an outgoing tide and the lights of Newport Harbor on a late summer evening instead of the stars, but he had no common sense. He had no water wisdom. He had no one who cared who could hear his cries. As he slowly drifted away, I finished cleaning my boat and securing my gear. I left his rigging on the gray dock, turned my back, and walked up the ramp homeward.

My grandmother received a call from Miss Beek just a bit before midnight. My grandmother was told to have me remove my boat from the dock first thing in the morning. I was, it seems, a perfectly unacceptable tenet, and she could no longer help a young person such as me. The Coast Guard had picked up Malcolm floating out of the jetty towards the open sea about two hours after I had left him. He had lost his paddle and was traumatized, sitting in the middle of his boat terrified and crying. Apparently Malcolm's story was somewhat different from mine, not that anyone ever asked me what had happened; and his connections and family were different too. No one -- not the Coast Guard, nor Miss Beek, nor even my grandmother -- wanted to hear my side or any story. Everyone assumed that I had maliciously set about to harm Malcolm; because of jealousy I assume. His own sense of superiority and innate stupidity had done him far greater harm than I could ever have designed.

I heard later that he sold his boat, or more likely it was sold for him, and he never went sailing again. At least I never ran into him again, not even at school for he attended a private academy. As for me, I went back to the dock about six the next morning when the bay still glistened with the early morning oil sheen, undisturbed by waves or wakes. I rigged my Balboa Dinghy under the watchful eye of Miss Beek, and ingloriously rowed away because there was not a zephyr of wind, one ten-year-old boy adrift against the world.

Concertino

Mindy Watson

You imagine it's legendary Irish flautist James Galway's audible intake of breath that precedes this tremulous opening: a wistful, high B flat that descends chromatically into a sustained yet dying diminuendo. Your future adoptive mother is both a classical music lover and a one-time high school flautist. You imagine she's listening to "Syrinx," French composer Claude Debussy's three-minute homage to Pan's reluctant paramour turned stagnant reed. And as this oeuvre of longing and diverted hopes nears its inevitable climax – Syrinx, Pan's forever unrealized conquest's transformation – your mind's eye sees a flash of tarnished silver as a well-worn flute slips (no telling for how long) into its ivory and black contrast-stitched case. Then an almost palpable exhalation as your mother-to-be stows mourning for her empty womb away with her flute, and reaches for the adoption papers.

She, like everyone else, can't remember her birth. She imagines it was like the standard movie depiction: a forceful squeezing, a relentless barreling toward one terrifying point of light and noise. When she was young, her adoptive mother told her that, though she'd been left at a South Korean orphanage entrance, her biological mother had loved her dearly. As a child, she'd accepted this statement's veracity on faith, though she later discovered that she'd arrived at this orphanage nameless and letterless. The orphanage had estimated her birthday and given her the name that adorned her black-and-white adoption photo. And when she arrived in Wisconsin by plane, her new mother and father gave her another name.

Stevie Nicks and Don Henley's haunting "Leather and Lace" duet: you're captivated when you first hear its music box-like strains over the radio at your father's friend's house. You're laying stomach-down on the resident teenaged son's bottom bunk bed, flipping through the comic he's lent you: "The Death of the She Hulk." The comic disturbs you – beautiful, previously unassailable She Hulk's day-glo green skin is bloody, her skimpy white shift torn – but Stevie's husky voice comforts you. It merges with Don's melodic raspiness, generating an overture to true love's triumph over emotional adversity and physical boundaries. And its refrain's directive – "Give to me your leather, take from me my lace" – lauds unification through complete self-relinquishment.

She's four when her parents divorce. And she's secretly relieved: eager to imagine a world without raised voices, late-night crying – slammed doors. She doesn't know the other kids pity her, doesn't know this makes her doubly different: the weird Asian girl among whites; the girl whose first set of parents didn't want her and second set of parents didn't want each other.

Mere months elapse before her mother moves in with the "car man" she met on a blind date. The girl and the car man instantly recognize each other as rivals, but she's no match for him. Her mother's fear of being alone – of bungling another relationship – ensures his victory. The car man already has two semi-estranged kids living with his ex-wife: he isn't looking to start a new family. So the mother sends the girl to live with her grandparents in Milwaukee.

Her mother routinely gets calls from the preschool. Her daughter is socially withdrawn and won't play with the other kids. The school administrators want to hold the girl back a year. But, at her mother and father's insistence, she moves forward into kindergarten. And she's fine. She earns good grades. She can amuse herself for hours alone writing stories and drawing comic books. She can spell the names of all the dinosaurs, even gives herself spelling tests on which she affixes "Great Job!" stickers and metallic gold stars. But she's so silent the kids at school swear she can't even speak.

Your grandfather's matte silver radio sits atop his study's third shelf, sandwiched between National Geographic animal books and World War II military texts. Its round, decades-old dial stays perpetually tuned to Milwaukee's classical music station. Now, James Galway is piping merrily away across the airwave; he's swapped (for just this song) his famous solid gold flute for a delightfully tinny pennywhistle. The "Pennywhistle Jig" is one of your grandfather's favorite pieces. Its exuberant chromatic runs ascend and descend, triple-tongued triplets evoking childlike joy, childhood's innocent whimsy.

Her mother promises the Milwaukee living arrangement is temporary, but three months, six months, nine months go by. Then a year. Then two years. The girl amasses entire photo albums of postcards signed "Love, Mom" from places she'll never see: Arizona, Hawaii, Italy, Germany, Jamaica, the Netherlands, the Bahamas. But she tells herself: it's okay; it has to be okay. She loves her grandparents, especially her grandfather, with his quiet demeanor, arresting sky-blue eyes, and rough wrinkled hands. He says she's brilliant and beautiful and they spend hours together alone in his study: it's their secret place. And *this* is the secret she's promised never to tell. Sometimes he gets up, locks the door, and asks her sit on his lap with her floppy-headed stuffed bunny, Toto. Sometimes he holds her fiercely, almost possessively close while he whispers that he loves her and kisses her the way he never kisses her grandmother, his tongue entering her mouth. And sometimes, he lays her down on the itchy goldenrod shag carpet and wriggles her Rainbow Brite nightgown up above her waist, his tongue entering her down there too. And she tells herself it's okay – it has to be okay, because she's his special little exotic doll and he loves her more than anything. So she holds her breath and gives herself up to this again and again, silently taking his leather, relinquishing her lace. For seven years.

In sixth grade, you fall fast for your first true love: metal music. You work weekends at your dad's upstart pharmacy to earn cassette money. While you initially buy German power/thrash metal band Helloween's "Keeper of the Seven Keys Part I" album based solely on its jacket art – you love the violet-robed dark wizard with his empty, star-flecked void of a face – Helloween quickly and legitimately becomes your favorite band. Vocalist Michael Kinske overlays the group's epic twelve-minute tracks and electric power chord anthems with vibrato-laced, operatic shrieks. "Keeper of the Seven Keys Part I"'s opening song, "I'm Alive," thrills you most: Kinske's "look up to the sky above and see the morning sun again" mobilizes you for what lies ahead.

Though she begins transitioning slowly back to life with her mother and the car-man-turned-stepfather, splitting her elementary school years between her grandparents' Milwaukee home and her stepfather's Elm Grove condominium, it's not until sixth grade that her mother finds her far-too-explicit drawings and asks the question to which she already knows the answer. And after

all this time, they finally end: the locked-door study room sessions, the sweat-drenched nights astride that squeaky rollaway cot waiting for her grandmother's shallow snores, her grandfather's knowing hands -

Her distraught mother starts going to therapy to deal with guilt. But her mother won't tell her father (he'd have the grandfather arrested) and she won't tell her grandmother (it would be too hard on her). And amidst this silence, jagged red fingernail marks begin materializing on the girl's arms. Her mother asks her about them, but the girl says nothing.

She fights constantly with her stepfather, but he always wins. He says he now owns her the way he already owns her mother. When she confides that she wishes her stepfather dead (or just gone), her mother accuses her of marriage sabotage and slaps her across the face.

When she's thirteen and they're in Marco Island, Florida, she asks her stepfather what it's like to smoke. He decides to employ his own brand of aversion therapy. He brings her to the local bar, buys a pack of Kools from the cigarette vending machine, and makes her smoke them all - one-by-one - until she throws up. He's convinced this awkward, quiet girl just needs some tough love. Her mother thinks maybe he's right. After all, by high school, the girl's successful and somewhat socially engaged: she's in Forensics and Art Club; she's in National Honor Society. She's her band's first chair flute player and third chair in the prestigious Milwaukee Youth Symphony Orchestra's Senior Symphony.

You're an accomplished flautist, a returning contestant at the annual Wisconsin State Music Competition held at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. You'll be performing Concertino Opus 107, French composer Cecile Chaminade's flagship flute competition piece. It's a piece so difficult most high school seniors won't attempt it - yet you're performing it as a sophomore. The woodwind solo with piano accompaniment clocks in at just under eight minutes. Surveying the three somber-faced judges seated at the back of the room, you exhale hot air into your flute's mouthpiece, square your shoulders, draw your first breath. And begin.

You're flawless. The stately accessible melody, the whirlwind triplet-ful solo, the cadenza interlude, the reprise and closing coda - you execute them perfectly, almost effortlessly. The judges nod as you bow and beam unselfconsciously. This is what you were born to do.

She's in college now; she has two scholarships - one academic, one music - to a small liberal arts university in Bloomington, Illinois. She flies through her freshman year, places second chair flute in the university's top orchestra, finds some kindred spirits in the school's international community. After her parents convince her that music performance is hardly a secure career path, she picks English as her major. And she begins transcribing some of her childhood comics and novellas into the rice paper journals she buys in nearby downtown Normal.

Since your art major roommate is a folk and classic rock music enthusiast, you save your more blistering thrash metal tunes for your Walkman headphones. Instead, you play Blue Oyster Cult's New York-style rock on your dorm room boom box. You're particularly sentimental about "Burnin' for You," the darkly jaded love song to which your high school best friend, Jamiee, lost her virginity two years ago. You now listen to this song repeatedly, uncannily attracted to its "home in the darkness...home on the highway...home isn't my way...home will never be" lyrics. They belie some latent lingering displacement percolating below your surface, something not quite right. And the more you listen, the more you feel it rising. Waiting for you.

Sophomore and junior years are harder. When the college roommate the girl considers her best friend suddenly asks for a student housing reassignment, she withdraws from her existing friend circle. She inexplicably bumbles sophomore-year flute try-outs, reluctantly surrendering first chair ambitions. She repeatedly skips orchestra rehearsals, flunks wind ensemble class - loses her music scholarship. She develops a ravenous cigarette habit, chain-smoking two, sometimes three packs a day - until she can barely breathe. She covers her arms with long sleeves, but her floor-mates still glimpse them in the showers: the deep straight slits she carves precisely -purposefully- with a biology lab scalpel. In junior year, she diets down to 78 pounds. While she's always hated looking at her face in the mirror, gazing at her diminishing body now gives her grim pleasure. With each new protruding bone, each falling number on the bathroom's digital scale, her satisfaction escalates.

You're now a university senior - a coveted designation that comes with single dorm room priority. Blue Oyster Cult singer Eric Bloom's tenor tones still waft from under your corner single's door, along with the thick cigarette smoke. As you drink from the vodka pints stashed in your bed-to-wall crawl space and watch your ashtray's embers smolder and subside, you absently subvocalize, "Burn out the day, burn out the night...I can't see no reason to put up a fight."

She overtly spurns him at first, this cloyingly persistent sophomore who keeps asking her out to dinner. She finally relents to his invitations simply because she thinks tricking him - this spoiled Bloomington rich kid brat with his anesthesiologist daddy, brand new Acura, and sprawling five thousand square-foot home - into spending money on her is funny. But beyond the family fortune with which he insecurely, sometimes unknowingly promotes himself, he's smart and imaginative - and genuinely smitten with her.

He holds her when she cries the first time they're together in her dorm room. He stands up for her when his parents - strict, culturally conservative Chinese Americans - denigrate her Korean heritage, her chain-smoking, her "unambitious" English major. And now she thinks she loves him. Maybe she even does.

When his parents banish him for insolence (which they attribute to her influence), she runs away with him to Chicago the May of her senior year. She lives impoverished there with him for six months before his parents offer him an olive branch - and an out. He takes it and moves back into an apartment they've financed in Champaign, Illinois. They stipulate that she is not to come with him, that they'll revoke their money if she ever lives with him again. Broken-hearted, the girl stays in Chicago and rooms with

his best friend's girlfriend.

"After Dark" is Quentin Tarantino grindhouse horror flick "From Dusk Till Dawn"'s sensual acoustic centerpiece. It's the track to which Santanico Pandemonium, the movie's Mexican vampire queen, performs a sultry striptease before raining bloody carnage upon the fictional Titty Twister bar's patrons. You watched "From Dusk Till Dawn" with your boyfriend at the Vic before he left Chicago and could never quite get "After Dark" – its relentless steel guitar groove, Tito's haunting "burning, burning, in the flame...now I know her secret name..." that crescendos into a cacophonous glorification of sex and darkness, power and desire – out of your head.

She works nights dancing on a bar that's a stage. She wears her mother's lace thong with its sewn up-the-middle sequined brocade, slings the distressed leather jacket her boyfriend left for her over her shoulder. She drinks straight scotch and talks Shakespeare with the patrons who call her by the name the club owner gave her. She's their exotic little doll and they love her more than anything.

But when that love morphs somehow into an unwelcome mirror, she runs again, runs to the only person who's ever felt like home. She pawns her flute for two hundred dollars' travel money and moves down to Champaign, Illinois, into an apartment a few blocks from her boyfriend.

"Surfacing," Iowa-bred alternative metal band Slipknot's raw powerhouse of an anthem, will become your theme song a few years from now. Its opening is deceptively innocuous: a trochaic violin-like riff, some shimmery high-hat hits. Then Corey Taylor intones in his characteristically gravely growl: "Running out of ways to run...over and over and under my skin...all this attention is doing me in..."

It's finally happening. For seven months, they'd denied the reality of it, but now it's really happening. She's pregnant; she hasn't told anyone – neither has he. They'd decided to quietly put it up for adoption; they're not fit to be parents – they don't want to be parents. She's young and poor; she doesn't have health insurance; she didn't take the classes.

And it's horrible, the blinding pain, the contractions that consume her. BREATHE, the nurse says, and she cries, I can't, I can't!

He's a month early, this tiny baby boy. But he's beautiful, he's perfect. They give him a storybook dark wizard's name. And they halt the adoption; they want to make this work. His parents promise they'll help financially.

At first, the notion of motherhood's surreal: she doesn't feel connected to him yet; how alien the miniature grasping fingers, the skewed eyebrow line that looks like hers – the gummy, rapidly blinking newborn eyes. But she'll have all the time in the world to adapt; they'll be taking him home soon. Despite his prematurity, his vital signs are strong. The doctor just wants to order one more test.

But when the doctor's fist sounds against the hospital door, the knock reverberates within her skull like a tolling bell's brass clapper. And when he starts speaking, it begins: the wet silence screaming in her head.

After you trade your Ziploc change bag for a Hometown Pantry half-pint, you jump into your boyfriend's car, accelerate as your hand automatically upshifts – first, second, third, fourth, fifth – and fly onto I-74. You watch – maddeningly detached – as the speedometer needle climbs past 80...90...100. It's as if Slipknot's mental metal napalm – "Fuck it all! Fuck this world! Fuck everything that you stand for!" – is churning raw in your head, consuming you, goading you to bear down harder and harder on the gas. You close your eyes. And hope you'll crash.

She hears the first few words, then little more – she's outside herself – she has to be. No cerebral cortex has developed, the doctor says; the baby's head is just brain stem and fluid. The doctor's mouth is still moving, uttering words about "life expectancy" and "prognosis" and "quality of life." More than she's ever wanted anything, she wants to be dead.

She and her boyfriend place him in a special medical care center and visit him dutifully. She watches him, her only blood, this little shadow who can't learn or remember or reflect – grow and die a bit more each day.

She drifts through the next two years in an inebriated haze of uninspiring jobs; a seven-dollar-an-hour assistant manager's position at Marketplace Mall is her crowning achievement. She and her boyfriend are now veritable strangers. And she prefers it that way. They have nothing in common anymore, nothing but this voiding event horizon from which there's no coming back.

You play "Maria" by Blondie on your dilapidated black boom box every time you bring them up to your apartment. Debbie Harry's throaty, worshipful refrain: "Maria...you've got see her. Go insane – out of your mind..."lets you somehow believe that you're this titular object of desire, this transcendent, regal woman who ignites "a million and one candle lights." Instead of who you really are.

She invites them up to her second-floor studio before work, after work, from the mall, from the local Esquire: the guys she knows by first names only. She sends them away, out her door or down her second story balcony, afterwards. She never calls them back. She thinks she's in control.

As Debbie Harry croons, "...don't you want to break her?...don't you want to take her home?" and she's beer-addled and prone on her bed, pressed against her paper-thin wall crying out, she gives herself up to this again and again. And never asks why.

You're at The Rose Bowl, Urbana's self-styled "blue collar country bar," having a beer with the guy from work, the guy on whom you've developed an unprecedented crush. He's wearing his customary cowboy boots, their well-worn leather smell ascending, melding with his own intoxicating musky scent. The bar's regular band, The Drifting Playboys, finishes its sound check, then launches

into a twangy cover of George Strait's "The Chair." Then suddenly, he bolts upwards, extends his hand, and asks (quite chivalrously) if you want to dance. You're stunned: no one's ever asked you to dance before. He's a full foot taller than you, and your attempts at slow dancing are awkward at best. But it doesn't matter. As the Drifting Cowboys front man soulfully sings, "Are you waiting for someone to meet you here? Well, that makes two of us...glad you came," you close your eyes, press your face into his chest. And gratefully breathe him in.

They meet at a part-time mall job interview, lock eyes across a Champaign retail store's backroom table. He's a recent National Guard boot camp graduate and a political science student at the University of Illinois. They work together for a year; develop a close friendship. And the night she invites him up to her tiny apartment, something changes.

That night, he tells her about his impoverished upbringing in Mattoon, Illinois – about the father who'd beat his mother and ultimately bankrupted their family before walking out. About his troubled little brother who'd called the cops on him, gotten him legally barred from their mother's house. The lost years that followed: the hard-drinking, self-loathing, blackout years.

And because she knows he's broken like her – broken, but pieced back into something stronger, all his own – she trusts him. She tells him everything. She tells him about her adoption, her parents' divorce, the man with three cars who didn't want children. She tells him about the grandfather who, for seven years, taught her and did with her things only a woman should understand. And before the sun's meddling orange arms can breach her window, she tells him about her little boy.

And he stands by her, regardless. He stands by her when her child finally dies, mourning alongside her over the tiny teddy bear-etched grave. And, because he feels more like home than anything she's ever known, she marries him.

"Take this Life" is one of Swedish melodic death metal band In Flames's best-known songs. In it, vocalist/songwriter Anders Friden, citing the isolating pain each of us secretly bears (and perhaps cherishes), beseeches that "knife" to whittle him into fragments so he may rearrange himself into something right – something whole. Amidst Friden's shrill death growls and the song's frantic underlying syncopation, casual listeners might mistakenly assume that "Take This Life," is about suicide– even suicide advocacy. But you hear a different subtext underpinning its obvious pain tribute. You hear a call to look directly into the mirror you've always dreaded. To put the broken face you'll find there back together.

BREATHE, the nurse says. Three different times, three different babies. Three different babies hurtle toward that previously unknowable noise, that terrifying point of light. She's still surprised when she's holding them in her arms, embracing them as they gaze up at her adoringly. Her sensitive eldest boy who inherited her double-jointed elbows and inherent unease around people. Her wide-eyed younger boy who shares her artistic streak and storytelling penchant. Her effervescent pony-tailed daughter who possesses a familiar inclination toward dramatic outburst. They're infinitely more than she deserves, her children, her only blood – even after a half-lifetime spent becoming someone else –someone better– she still believes this.

But she no longer tries to pull sleeves over the raised white scars on her arms. And she can take a deep breath when she remembers her grandfather– his assertions that he'd done only what she'd secretly wanted. And let it go.

It's 6:15 AM and you're speeding up the entry ramp onto 95-North towards your job in Washington, DC. You've braved this commute for the past three year; it's the commute you brag to co-workers that you could drive in your sleep. You easily shift gears – third to fourth to fifth to sixth – merging, falling in line with early morning traffic's rhythm. Compulsively checking for too-close headlights, you briefly meet your own gaze in the rearview mirror. While it's still uncomfortable confronting yourself – however fleetingly – you look for a moment into the dark brown eyes that stare back. And you silently mouth: "Take this life; I'm right here. Stay a while and breathe me in."



Pruning in Swakane Canyon

Theodore Smith

My Dad and I climb into his 1948 Willys jeep. He pushes the small, stainless-steel start button and pulls out the throttle. *Reer, reer, reer*, the starter grinds until the engine turns over with a blast of smoke from the tailpipe. Dad gooses the gas while he works the choke back a little at a time. We pull out of the two-bay steel shed into the bracing cold of February in central Washington. The tires of the jeep crunch on the dry snow as we slowly round the corner of the shed and start up into the apple orchard. The hairs inside my nose are frozen. I can hear the echo of the grey jeep returning from the hillsides of Swakane Canyon, and the smell of a rich mixture of gasoline and oxygen follows us up the grade. We move slowly in low gear through the trees while Dad looks intently side to side at each one. He knows them all. He planted them, one by one, creating this orchard from a rocky slope.

We stop near the tree we are going to prune. Dad turns off the engine and pulls the handle from the dash to set the parking brake. We unload the 16-foot aluminum ladder, long pole pruner, loppers, and a folding saw.

The snow crunches under our feet as we set up around the tree. The dry air is so cold it hurts my lungs when I breathe.

Dad climbs the ladder and starts to shape the crown of the tree. He carefully and quickly cuts each leader back to the second fruit bud from the crotch of each limb. I get up in the center of the tree and remove all of the suckers (new limbs) that are growing there.

I am a boy and not old enough to climb the ladder. I work slowly, and my Dad finishes the entire tree while I am in the center clipping sprouts. When he finishes, he tells me it's time to move to the next tree and finishes plucking the suckers I missed. I don't know it, but I am not much help. My Dad is teaching me how to prune and how to be a dad.

The branches have to be removed to allow light to reach into the tree in the spring. Light is imperative to produce fruit in the fall. Our noses are red and running incessantly to combat the cold; Dad uses a white cloth handkerchief that he keeps folded in his back pocket, and I use my glove. The valley is dead silent. A blanket of snow covers the ground and tops the grey, leafless branches of the Golden Delicious trees.

I prune a branch and, if it doesn't fall, I grab it with the shears of the loppers and pull it away from the tree. Any branch that crosses another has to be removed. Loppers always blade side to the tree to make the cut as clean and flat as possible. It is so quiet. I see my own breath and my father's while we work.

Once we finish for the day, we slowly take the drive down through the steep orchard to put the jeep back in the shed. We get into Dad's orange and white Studebaker pickup and back up through the high wire fence gate onto the dirt road. He jumps out to close and lock the gate and returns to the truck for the several-mile drive down the canyon to the highway. My feet feel frozen and numb, and I put them close to the small heater port in the center of the cab. By the time we get home, they will be warm.



A Pair of Lips

Gabrielle Vachon

A 15-year-old girl at summer camp is the most desperate kind of woman. To be fair, 15 year olds in general don't have great control over their sexual urges, but I was different. I wasn't about to fling my hot pink thong around the lake with any old boy. I was to have a story, to tell my tale, to be a legend.

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That year at school, the guy next to me at my locker made out with girlfriend at lunch every day for the entire month they were together. It was brutal, wholesome, and gruesome. I didn't want to be her; she had blunt bangs that gave her permanent forehead acne, perpetuating an acne-bang-acne cycle that went on until sophomore year in college. I didn't want to be her, but I wanted her tongue. I wanted the soft saliva of an unhygienic 9th grader boy in my mouth. It seemed like the kind of thing I'd want, anyway.

I also wanted the bragging rights, but that wasn't something a little exaggeration couldn't fix. Yes, like every chronically anxious and weird looking 15-year-old girl, I was lying about my experience with boys. Oh the stories I'd tell! Of the older men in Paris! Of the exchange student who didn't speak English (who couldn't deny my story)! You wouldn't believe the international dicks I'd seen. To be truthful the most I'd really seen that year was when I walked in on my brother in the shower.

So when classes ended in June, I was a woman on a mission. I would come back from my arts camp where I was working as a counselor in training with real stories, of real men, with real Facebook accounts.

I arrived a few short weeks later at my destination: Long Lake Camp for the Arts in the Adirondacks of Upper State New York. Its main department was the performing arts, which left a pretty significant amount of male kiss candidates out of my reach, for I was not interested in sloppily kissing a closeted gay boy from Arkansas. I was out for a "real man", one who probably had a poster of Megan Fox on his wall, which you would not want to run a black light over.

I was greeted by my long-time camp friends at our bunk, reserved for the CITs in the heart of the camp ground, and exchanged hugs, laughter and awkward banter. These were my friends, of course, and I would need them to make connections to boys. But these were also my competitors, so as much as I was civil over the next few days, I didn't reveal my plans to them. After all, they were art geeks too; camp was the most action they got all year. It was every 6/10 for themselves.

I was a hunter, hungry for meat, and a few days into camp, I found my prey. He was tall, his name was Austin, he was from British Columbia. He played the trombone, which the girls had decided meant he was good with his lips. I got nervous; was I good with mine? Are his lips out of my league? What does even mean?

I was a creative writing counselor, and he was in the music department, so the only time I had to pursue him were at nightly events, like bonfires, improv nights, and other forms of tomfoolery horny teenage counselors organized as an excuse to occupy the children, flirt, and then sneak off afterwards to 69 (allegedly, mostly by boys) in the band rooms.

So it came, the first campfire. I was with my posse of fellow counselors, when I spotted Austin. He was next to a friend who was playing the guitar. I got my friends to go sit near him and look really interested in his rendition of "Wonderwall". Mmmm, fascinating.

During a lull, I said to Austin, "Hey".

He said, "Hey".

I was like, "how's it going?"

He was like, "I'm cool".

I nodded, "cool".

Inside, I was screaming "IM GETTING LAID". But my exterior was nonchalant. I just nodded and kept listening to his average-looking friend strumming along to a shitty early 2000s song he had probably learned also trying to get laid. I deeply understood his struggle. I had never more related to an acoustic version of 50 cents' "Candy Shop".

I came back to my bunk feeling successful. We had talked for like, a solid 10 seconds. That was more than a record for me, and therefore meant he was mine. Most of my bunk went to bed early, because the next day the castings for the various musicals were to be posted at exactly 5am. Even the non-musical theater counselors got up early, to morally support those who got roles as background trees, and gossip around morning coffee with those who had gotten the parts of leads about those who had gotten the parts of trees.

The next morning, my whole bunk was up at the crack of dawn, eagerly awaiting the grumpy theater director with the fateful piece of paper in his hand. Everyone was there, except my bunkmate Janessa. She was up for the lead in “Jekyll and Hyde”, but mumbled something about being too tired.

After the screams, the tears, and the threatened suicide attempts were made, we all huddled around the kitchen to discuss the days’ activities. I saw one of my friends Claire speaking to Austin, and decided it was a perfect opportunity to follow up the killer first impression I had made the night before.

They were deep in conversation about who would call their parents’ demanding a recast. I sneakily shuffled myself closer to them, moving an inch a minute, until I was finally considered a part of their conversation, at least to a bystander. I wasn’t actually saying anything, just nodding and trying to think of a really mean thing to say. That would impress him.

Suddenly one of his friends came up from behind him and patted him on the back:

“Yeah, buddy! You might not be in a play this year, but you sure got the part of “official pussy destroyer”!!!”

“Ha. Ha ha. Ha ha ha. What?” I asked. Suddenly my social anxiety was replaced by a deeper sense of existential fear.

“You didn’t hear? He *smashed* Janessa on the docks last night. You thought you heard a wolf howl? Nah man, that’s just my boy Austin doing his thang!”

That whore. And to think I considered her my friend. It wasn’t like I had told her I liked Austin or anything, but it’s common courtesy to at least announce to your friends who you were planning on hooking up with, in case anyone had internal dibs. Was she socially inept? I was going to have to return her friendship bracelet.

I was devastated. Every other boy had either already been paired up in a long-term until-camp-ends relationship, or slept with my entire bunk. There was a shortage of condoms on campgrounds, and as much as I loved my friends, I wasn’t about to get their chlamydia.

I spent the rest of camp focusing on my writing, and avoiding men completely. They were all cheating pigs, and I was a fierce queen deserving of a real man, nothing less.

This was all great, until the last day of camp, when I received a letter from my friends back home. It was a sweet account of all of their summers, but it ended with a fateful: “PS: Hope you don’t exhaust yourself with all the late night make out sessions. We need you in full strength for yearbook next year”.

Shit. I had forgotten about that. I couldn’t go home empty handed. I had to at least bring back a love letter, a proof picture, a used dental dam, something!

The search was back on, and this time, I was taking no prisoners.

Thankfully, the last night of camp was usually a raging fuckfest. Every unattached counselor humped his or her way through the bunks to cap off the summer. It was wild, it was reckless, and it was exactly what I needed.

I got to the final campfire early, to scope out the prospects. Unfortunately, all the CITs were either taken, uninterested, or so ugly it was not even worth showing my friends his picture by disclaiming: “he really looks better in person, I swear!”

So I sat with my friends, on the verge of raising a white flag of virginity, until a shadow darkened my friends’ face. It was an older counselor, a project manager, standing behind us, smiling. Smiling at me, specifically.

“Hey Gabby”, he said.

“Hey...um...hey”, I answered. I didn’t remember his name.

“Eugene, my name’s Eugene”. Ugh, could we go back to the time I didn’t know his name?

He asked to talk to me, using the pretense of one of my poems. “It was, like, really moving”, he said. He clearly hadn’t read my work. Not only was it garbage, but it was mostly poems about Austin.

“Betrayal.

Slayer.

Of my heart.

Of my dreams.

How

Dare

You.”

But this wasn't about Austin. This was a new opportunity. A rare one at that. Eugene wasn't attractive, or smart, or on my radar, but at this point, who cared? He had a pair of lips, a penis, AND an older age. Now that would make the yearbook committee squeal!

So we wandered the woods alone until we sat down on a tree trunk over a brook. It was like a scene from “A Walk to Remember”, except we were both ugly and no one had cancer.

He took off his jacket, and handed it to me. “Here”, he said, “You're probably cold”. A gentleman. Let's do this. So we kind of snuggled on this trunk for a while, my back to his chest, until I felt a cold sensation down my shirt. Fingers, lingering around my bra line.

“Um” I said. I hadn't been kissed, was this normal? Shouldn't he have to pick fresh flowers from a bush before fondling me? It was all Cosmo had ever taught me.

“Shhh, no worries, it's ok” he said.

I was scared, but consented. I was probably going to die a virgin, but my breasts would still live to tell the tale of when Eugene awkwardly held them in this hands, then dropped them. It occurred to me that he probably didn't know what he was doing either.

Afterwards, we walked back to the campfire, and he tried to kiss me, but I ducked. I had reached 2nd base, so I was beyond kissing. That was juvenile, and I? I was now experienced.

That night I was privy to the privilege of telling your friends a real story about a hookup, or whatever that was. I blushed, they screamed, and then they asked questions like: “Does it hurt? Was it hot? Can you get an STD from that?”

The next morning, after I had said goodbye to my friends, I was packing my things into my parents' van when I saw Eugene waiting for me in the parking lot. He waved me over, and I begrudging walked towards him. He hugged me, pet my hair, and then released me.

“Bye”, he said.

“Bye Eugene”, I answered.

“I love you”, he then whispered.

I didn't look back.

On my drive back home I melodramatically lay my head on the car window, like I was in a Mary J Blige music video, and thought about the way I would tell my story to my friends when school started again.

Maybe I wasn't a sex legend, but I had bewitched an older man to fall in love with me. Not bad for a 6/10.



Art of Avoiding Chores

Kitty Shields

There were six kids and a dog in our family, so keeping the house clean throughout the week was a losing battle. My father, the genetic source of our messiness, didn't notice. My mother, the anal-retentive control freak, did. So, at some point in their marriage, probably to keep their marriage, my parents agreed that Saturday mornings were for chores.

That said, I can count on my hands the number of times my father stuck around to actually clean. He was a master bullshitter and a fantastic sneak, especially for a six-foot tall, two-hundred-and-fifty-pound man. His method was simple: the old bait and switch.

Here's how you avoid a chore in my father's infamous style. First, you set up the mark. My father began the day with the rest of us at the dining table, drinking tea, and eating two or three portions of breakfast. These extra portions were as much because he loved food as they provided an opportunity to assess my mother's mood. Assessing your opponent's mood is critical. For my mother, breakfast involved going over her ever-increasing list of things to do. If she was feeling stressed, this was the moment my father would step in, tell her some jokes, and reassure her it wasn't as bad as it seemed.

After breakfast, we would all break to our starting chore positions. My father disappeared into his office to 'clean,' which really meant pushing paper around. My mother never commented, probably because she was too busy keeping the kids on track. That was her downfall. See, my father would wait, listening for my mother's voice or rather the lack of it. When he couldn't hear her giving instructions, when she was engaged in a task that required more than ninety-percent of her concentration, that's when he'd dangle the bait.

The bait was another chore that he could switch for the ones she'd assigned. Like, he needed to make that deposit before Monday and the bank closed early on Saturdays. Or, the car needed an oil change since it was a thousand miles over the last one. Finding legitimate bait was key and he did it by saving a few adulting errands for the weekend.

Then, my father would make the switch, like any good magician, by distracting his mark with his hands. He would walk into the room and gesticulate wildly as he'd talk, making a case for why he had to run errands at that exact moment. Organizing the garage, which she'd been asking him to do for weeks, was suddenly just not as important as him getting to the bank. Cleaning out the gutters did not compare to making sure the car continued to run. When my mother looked up from her task, she was mesmerized by his gorilla-sized hands.

This routine was clockwork, so much so that us kids would exchange knowing glances over vacuums and dust cloths and then shake our heads as my father snuck out the back door. Over the years, his absence became such an institution that his arrival back home heralded the end of cleaning. The banging of the old car engine as he pulled up and the sound of the door creaking open signaled the real start of the weekend.

He would walk in with fresh lunchmeats, rolls, potato chips, pickles, and tomatoes for a grand feast. He'd peck my mother on the cheek, put the kettle on, and make her a sandwich. Exhausted, my mother would collapse onto a chair, take the offered sandwich, and realize that everything was done. Then, my father would smile, take a sip of another cup of tea, and tell her a funny story from his errands, and she would forget again that he'd avoided all of Saturday morning chores.

So maybe my father's style was really the old bait and switch and food. Bring back food for your mark. That helps avoid arguments and saves marriages, too.



A Good Rodgering

Jason Half-Pillow

Santa Cruz, California (U.S.A)

I was on my way to the downtown Verve café to meet Richard, the coolest dude in the MFA program, who already has a novel published and was related by distant marriage of some adopted third cousin to James Buchanan, President before Lincoln, and, I've discovered, a real bungler who some think more-or-less started the Civil War. I can't remember the name of his novel but do remember it consisted of only one word, with no more than two syllables in it. I never looked at it but, to this day, remain firm in my conviction that it was unreadable.

The MFA types prefer the melodramatic and don't much like me mentioning the mistakes Buchanan made, and how those mistakes may very well have stemmed from a stomach disorder to which he paid much too futile attention while those few threads holding the Union together were steadily fraying – they want to think the war was some inevitability, though shrink even more from saying it, was God's will.

They grow angry listening to me contend that if something is inevitable, it must be willed. That there is no other way. They say, "Not true – it just is; things just are," and turn in a huff. Well, they don't; some do, and those are the ones I remember and those among the whole become "they" before too long. We all do that, don't we?

The thing they really hate, though, is my associating anything infirm with Richard. They really just hate me.

They are a confused lot. Richard's last name is not Buchanan and they always bring Richard up, so, as a student of U.S. History, my mind naturally turns to Buchanan and his intestinal problems. I am related to Davy Crockett and don't have his last name either. People are less impressed by my lineage than Richard's, which was nothing less than a travesty of historical understanding. No Crockett, no Buchanan; no Buchanan, no Lincoln. Someone in the program attended a Buchanan middle school and five others went to Lincolns. Mine was just called "South," named after a coordinate, I guess.

Such jokes are not approved of – the teachers say always choose the simpler word and I should say "direction" for "coordinate"; in no time, someone has said "use not utilize". They've been nodding since I was reprimanded for saying "coordinate" and now the nodding is almost frenetic except Richard; he keeps still to keep his hair in place, or, to be more exact, his hairs in place. He nods with his eyebrows. He raises them and drops his lips into a chimp like frown.

The girls didn't like what I said about Buchanan. That's because they are so enamored to Richard, and my mentioning Buchanan's physical illness in connection to Richard somehow knocked Richard down a peg or two – call it diseased by association. They'd already committed to their sophomoric adulation, so any change would have made them look like sophomoric fools, and they were all graduate students. Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. We are admonished about clichés. I ask where does an idiom stop and a cliché begin and am hated still further.

They were fools, though; all of us were.

All out of state, all paying full tuition, for something millions had that took them all nowhere, but each time I grumbled it was all a big scam, someone mentioned Richard, who'd been in the program two years, and look, he had a book published. I grumbled that the only reason we don't know that Buchanan had a grapefruit-sized goiter was because the skin flaps on his neck hid it. He had the neck of a turkey buzzard. You're jealous, they said. And millions of people don't have MFAs. I said I'd Google it, and was told not to bother. You can't believe what you read on the internet anyway and off they went again in a huff.

I spoke ill of Richard, by implication. Richard? I asked. The guy related to James Buchanan who needlessly plunged our great nation into fratricidal bloodshed? And they always walked off and went back early to class.

For a while I followed them, making my case. Most of the people in the program were girls, so I had to stop. They'd said harassment, and I said they'd have a hard time making that stick and quoted what, for them, were obscure Supreme Court cases that I thought everyone with an undergraduate degree should know.

I said Richard was the Ragged Dick of the program and got reactions that made me bluster and babble through ignored explanations about what kind of a figure Ragged Dick was. Everyone said they disagreed with me and everyone said also they didn't know what I was talking about. I was reported for saying Ragged Dick. That's what they said. I told the teacher – I refuse to say professor – and she said I was reported and I quoted back her admonitions about passive voice. She told me to go see the ombudsman and I desperately wanted to make a pun of that but instead asked where he might be and she said she had no idea.

I told the ombudsman that *Ragged Dick* was a literary character who had come to be shorthand for American upward mobility being a myth and asked hypothetically if it was verboten to reference literary and cultural and historical archetypes in college. I don't think she got what I was saying.

I commented on the décor and asked how she managed to get her desk through the doorway. She had no answer. I mumbled that "sometimes these things can be taken apart," and stood and approached the desk and grabbed an edge and told her, "Paul Bunyan couldn't disassemble this thing," told her it was cherry wood, that cherry wood pipes are best, that all my male relatives

smoked pipes but you never see anyone smoking one these days and left, wondering if I still had that old cherry wood miniature Sherlock Holmes' style pipe and remembered my brother had stolen it during his short lived Peter Tosh phase and lost it when he fell asleep during a hash party in a canoe. I received a form letter a few weeks later saying the Ragged Dick investigation was closed. I kept the letter as proof that officialdom used the words Ragged Dick and thusly so could I. In the meantime, Richard's status was impervious to my assaults.

Richard was cool and his coolness radiated far from the wooded campus and all the way down to the flats, and he was thusly admired by the chicks at the Verve café, too. So, I'd devised a pretext to meet him there in hopes of getting some female attention via him, figuring that they didn't know anything about my Buchanan jokes.

They had truly gigantic, ugly abstract paintings on their truly huge, groovy, warehouse style wooden walls that were splintered and varnished unevenly on purpose. Music pumped out from all directions and no matter how frantically I looked around, I could never find the speakers. They were camouflaged in something. I was sure everyone was being filmed too. Song lyrics interest me, but all I heard there were vocalists letting out short bursts of breath against a louder back drop of computerized drums and synthesizers. They were in tune, at least, but still, it sounded like nothing more than female robots getting nailed by something pneumatic. The music was just another example of how fame was unjust. Somehow, someone got to be the name and face for songs written by a computer and raked in millions. Maybe not, but someone made a lot, and none of it was just.

The cashiers were girls with nose and lip rings and were generally nice. There was a particularly annoying guy of maybe 25, who wore a San Francisco Giants hat and had nose and lip rings and always wore a well-pressed t-shirt that displayed his Asiatic tattoos. He was the assistant manager, and though always speaking cheerfully and helpfully, and even sharing personal information, he was still dull and conventional, and also very condescending. His claim to be a baseball fan was pure affectation.

He seemed to think his authority over his minions of nose and lip and eyebrow ringed girls extended naturally to the rest of us. It was hard to accept, and I could just tell that a lot of guys like me, who went there regularly, wanted to teach him a lesson about the laws of the jungle and kick his ass and, frankly, take one of the new employee girls who imprinted on him like he was some kind of Alpha duck, and well, give her a good rodgering in one of the unisex crappers.

When I got there, Richard wasn't there, so I had a God Damn coffee and got really panicky, and just sat alone facing an empty chair at a table between two others. To my right, were two German girl tourists, and I started with them a pleasantly ridiculous conversation. They giggled the whole time, enjoying, I think, their assumption that I was trying to score and enjoying even more the certitude that I would not. I wasn't trying to score, though the idea did cross my mind, but not at all seriously. To my left was a woman of 40 or 50, maybe pushing 60 – who can tell? – reading the New York Times and just as jittery as I. She was a regular like me and always read the first section thoroughly, and was now on A 13, reading about Putin's invasion of the Ukraine. I couldn't help throw a few incriminating glances at the girls, like the whole thing was their great grandfathers' faults, but when they threw back at me angry, fake pouting faces and then giggled, I laughed right along with them. The woman to my right snapped her paper to a new page loudly in disapproval.

Richard wouldn't show up because every microscopic move he made was consciously done to put you in an inferior place. I really wanted to kick his ass, too, and take all the girls in our MFA program into the faculty shitter and give them all a good rodgering, not to show them all who was boss, per se, but just to make clear to Richard that he wasn't.

But I instead contented myself with telling them all that millions of people out there have had little books published, but few have had printed anything of lasting literary merit, and among those few who had, like Stephen Crane – for example – how lasting the illusion of literary merit had proven to be was up to question. I asked how many of them had really read Faulkner – I mean every word, page to page – and actually understood it, and before the teacher could say I was taking us all off track, I would blurt out, "Just as I thought, none."

I once told the story of a man from Vancouver, BC, that my dad knew, who published a tiny book about his hometown that outlined its cultural mores, and how everyone thought he was a big fucking deal when he got the contract to publish it, and a bigger fucking deal when it was unveiled, and he was scheduled to read from it at Barnes and Noble, or whatever the Canadian version of Barnes and Noble was, and everyone took to worshipping the ground upon which he tread, only to finish the story by saying that no one showed up at the initial bookstore readings, except a few deaf old ladies and grumpy men with axes to grind, who pestered him with hostile questions and argued he's got the origins of the region's peoples all wrong, to which he did nothing but bluster in return that he wasn't a professor, that it was just a cute little book, meant to be read for fun. Those in attendance who knew him, walked off sadly and left the floor to his psychotic critics. One man stayed to support the author should he return, with his arms crossed, smiling, like the disaster had not transpired.

That was my idiot father, who'd driven us all the way to Canada and checked us into a lousy roadside motel so we could watch all three scheduled readings, though, in the end, here were only two, and we left after the first one. The managers of the store fought with the author, saying he was really putting them in a bind, that Saturday local author readings couldn't just be cancelled – it wasn't teaching, where you could just ring up a substitute. Well, he told them he wasn't coming, that it was humiliating, and all along, he'd had a gnawing feeling that the book was stupid and doomed to roll right off the assembly line and into the garbage and left and when my dad tried grabbing his elbow at the door, he jerked himself violently free, and went right to his car and spun out of the parking lot and went somewhere and got drunk with one of his Indian friends.

Three months later, my dad and I were back in Canada to go see some Beluga Whales that were on display at the BC aquarium and on the way, we dropped into a grocery store and saw all of his books in a little wire cage on top of a bunch of "as is" sum-

mer beach stuff – like inflatable beach balls and Spiderman swim fins – and then, stopping by the same store on our way back to America, I saw someone dumping it all into a dumpster outback and not blinking an eye and thus obviously not giving a shit, noticing only the Spiderman swim fins, which he took out and set next to the dumpster, intending to sneak back and get them sometime after work. My dad had left me in the car, which was why I got to observe the whole thing. I am sure he was buying booze and didn't want me to see. I went and grabbed the fins.

That is what comes of getting a book published. I wrote it all up in a little story and the teacher cancelled the class discussion about it and had me come to her office, where she rebuked me in the strongest way possible for consistently violating the aesthetic tenor of our assignments, and as I was leaving, warned me (incidentally) that my harangues about no one ever rising to the level of my dad's Canadian friend had become disruptive, and I should spare both of us the pain and embarrassment of getting the ombudsman involved. I had no idea what the hell an ombudsman was and before I could ask, she let me know he was a friend of hers but if I ever tried telling anyone she said that, she would deny it.

The German girls got ready to leave and everything was crowded and a tight enough fit that they had to squeeze past my table and on the way to standing up, the one on the bench with me ended up butting her thigh on my leg and then rose and put her butt right in my face, and next fell and braced her palm on my thigh and stayed there for a tantalizing second and pushed up off me and got off and went to her giggling friend at the door, where the two of them said simultaneously, "Bye!" elongating the word in a singing crescendo before giggling once more and leaving through the glass doors, as the music thumped along and some girl sang an alto, "Ah!Ah!Ah!" and then they were gone. I had the distinct impression that what they really wanted from me was a good rodgering, and just at that moment, in walks Richard with a copy of his own book and takes a damn seat and ruins everything – he ruined it because I saw the way they looked back at him after he passed and fell over each other whispering before disappearing at the end of the last giant pane of glass past which there's the deli everyone goes too next door in two hours, during the lunch time rush.

Richard received from the older lady reading the Times a respectful greeting, like they'd met before, and she had about her the air of a matron, approvingly inspecting his appearance and aura and moving him to the front of an imaginary line of promising stock in front of which she would push some bridal-aged niece or grand-daughter of hers.

She and I are in here together every day and she's never nodded at me. I once asked if she thought Putin might one day send Russia back into Afghanistan, and she gave me a derisive hrumphh and snapped her newspaper open violently to an entirely new page, leaving me to look in shocked wonder at the giant, tantalizing black and white bra and underwear ad and then turn to the person next to me who had to have assumed I was lustfully admiring it and ask her if she ever imagined Syria would actually be a field of American battle.

I couldn't help but feel the same agonizing pain of wanting desperately to take the girl in the newspaper ad into one of the unisex shitters and give her a good old-fashioned rodgering. Then that asshole with the Giants cap came over and noticed me staring longingly at the ad with obvious lust, and then snorted at me and swiped my cup away and asked if I was going to get in line and order something else, and, at that moment in the recollection, Richard asks with similar derision what it was I wanted to talk about, and I say stupidly that I was hoping he'd give me some publishing advice.

I listen to him stammer on, reticent and secretive. It made me think of a guy I knew in high school who wouldn't tell you where he bought his clothes because he feared you going there and buying some for yourself. He asks me if we can switch seats. I know he wants to face the room, so he can see all the chicks.

I would like nothing more than to strip him naked and throw him in the shitter with the assistant manager and yell through the door that neither one of them will be coming out until they've both give each other a damn good rodgering and give that bitch with the Times a stethoscope and make her listen to it all through the door. But, I oblige his request readily and in the small space between the tables stumble over, inching sideways hunchbacked and maladroit and hear again the crack of the woman's paper and marvel that the U.S. really is in Syria.

I find upon assuming the position that his chair wobbles and spend the next five minutes feeling too big in it and constantly looking down at the one leg that is too short and asking what's wrong with this thing? I do that until he abruptly gets up and leaves and says that I'm not even paying attention and I've wasted his time. With his trim beard and wavy hair, he reminds of an offended Cavalier or some bit player in Romeo and Juliet fanning the flames of discord just when it seemed that things had calmed and the stars might be aligned.

He was right – I didn't listen to a word he said, but that lady with the Times did and kept saying, "Interesting!" She didn't care what he said – it would be interesting no matter what. I resolve to, one day, try letting someone talk and punctuate their saying with words like "interesting" and "oh wow" and "what did you do next?" knowing that for me, it wouldn't work. I would be deemed insincerely superficial. If only there was some tool that could pluck out whatever it was that gave me that appearance. I had been left alone and those were my thoughts – that I should try what others do, but it wouldn't work, and it would only draw out more how unlike them I was, and the image I'd convey in my false robes would be on the wrong side of invidious. Next, I cursed myself for wanting to be what I hated.

*

For the millionth time since enrolling in that money-sucking MFA program, I resolved to leave town and not bother telling anybody I quit, but instead, I turned up the next day to see how it would go, if anything might change, telling myself that since I'd resolved to quit, I could say and do anything, and if it didn't turn out well, so what? I would just leave. But if it did, well then, that

would be...I didn't know the word to say to myself then, and looked up and saw everyone shuffling their papers and getting up and leaving class, three girls walking out smiling with Richard and the teacher standing at the old desk, her reading glasses perched on the tip of her nose.

She appeared nervous to me, and I realized we were the only two in the room, and I got up quickly and left and said good morning to put her at ease. I was sure she was embarrassed about having threatened me.

So I kept coming back until it seemed she'd put it all behind her and seemed more at ease – stomaching the whole time my growing suspicions that the whole reason Richard had a book published was that he'd given her a good rodgering, and she'd called in some kind of a favor to some idiot friend who'd probably been rodgered a very goodly number of times herself and the guy who rodgered her let Richard have his moment in the sun here in California believing that might finally get him off the hook.

And that was the story I wrote, using names for the characters that rhymed with everyone in our program. I called Richard "Dick for Short," never just "Dick" but "Dick for Short." At one point as he's rodgering the MFA Coordinator "from the rear" in "the Verve Café shitter," there's a banging on the door. It's the woman with the New York Times and the "ASS Manager" with the Giants Baseball cap. They want to know how long it takes to take a shit, for Christ's Sake, and both proclaim loudly, though not simultaneously, that they need to take their own. The door opens, and the two contend to be first through the crack, and the newspaper rips and they both make it through the door and slam it shut and half the paper hangs, a bra ad showing until some vagrant comes along and pulls on it and, tearing the broad ad off, there's a headline regarding nuclear war, with the President saying that history shows those who've started it will lose in the end.

You'd think I'd left the program, but I didn't. The story was turned in and the teacher Xeroxed it and everybody read it for the next class's discussion. The teacher sent an email out announcing there would be no discussing the story, for obvious reasons, and reminded students of the import of balancing freedom of speech against other considerations, and included a link with one of her own stories, saying we'd be discussing that instead. I showed up and sat in my usual peripheral spot but it was now center stage. I could feel everyone avoiding me.

I graduated with a lack of honors, the only one. Richard, as they say, petered out, and was reduced to plying some Marxist Teaching Assistant with medical marijuana whenever he needed to give someone a rodgering, which meant her. The assistant was held in low regard by her students and was thus unable to pimp them off to Richard in exchange for relieving them of any fears of low marks on their papers, which they all knew would never occur anyway, as the lack of that practice was tacitly recognized as institutionalized – a way of preserving enrollments in the face of mostly imaginary budget cuts, word of which was bandied about to scare the gullible, or justify moving even more state funds into activities, the underlying spirit of which, the university system was founded specifically to prevent, if not actually thwart. The point being, that Richard went to her operating under the delusion that he somehow lived in an error where a graduate indenture could somehow terrorize her female charges into sucking his dick, for which she would get Richard's medical marijuana, which he obtained from his doctor, saying it helped soothe his shoulder pain from an old Polo injury, and was then told that if he had a dog or cat with glaucoma to go ahead and exhale the smoke into the pet's face.

"It might help and probably won't hurt," the doctor said.

Richard went back for more, and got a double dosage, with the excuse that he had forgotten to tell the doctor that he also had an old hip injury from a snow walking incident as a child. This time, he said that he had gone with his step father who had lost track of him on purpose, and the whole thing led to him being found by a state police helicopter team. It was all fabrication. The thing of it was, thanks to his fall from grace, most evident in the wizening of his beard, which the girls who once admired him might have called "growth," had they the vocabulary and had they seen him once in a while, and thus had occasion to actually use it, Richard found himself lying all of the time to get what he wanted, and the lies always involved concocted stories, and they were quite good. I know of them because he started hanging out with me more and more. He came to the Verve and looked about anxiously with only finding me in mind, as I could tell from the sudden shoulder dropping relief upon spotting me and then the quick beeline he made to my table, where he quickly took a seat and then spilled out some nervous tale of pressing woe, the main theme of which invariably turned on him not wanting to fuck the Marxist assistant and needing more and more weed and being worried that at one point, he might exasperate his doctor, about whom he then proceeded to talk, but only about his facial movements that, in his paranoia, Richard took to indicate doubt as to the veracity of his latest tale.

"But haven't you only told him about the Polo injury and the snow shoe incident?" I asked him one day.

"Yeah," he said, "but I keep telling him again each time I go in for a renewal and I think I might be changing the details."

"I think they're called refills," I said.

It seems that in the end, I made some kind of a difference in people's lives and could not wait to one day brag of doing so when I was in a new place and no one knew who I was and I could make up all kinds of stories about all the things I'd done. I was beginning to think that's what everybody did. In the meantime, thanks to his leveling, found ourselves on equal terms and became good friends, though there did come a point where I felt the balance tipping. It was the day some girl had been talking to me and it had been going swell and she laughed easily, then he came in all frantic, and saw me, and relaxed and then rushed over, practically already telling the story as he walked, and I thought for a second of a pretext for leaving quickly but realized that it would defeat the purpose – that were I to rush out, the ease I'd established with the girl would be ruined, and, in that way, I would mirror Richard, and I remember wondering if the whole time he'd seemed so pompous and distant and dismissive and self-important and self-

absorbed in his former swashbuckling and cavalier days as the graduate creative writing department alpha-male, he had been mirroring me. Richard sat in his now usual abrupt and chair clacking fashion and started in on how he had to get away from the Marxist. The girl looked immediately to her open, large, hardcover text of some introductory, required course and adopted a pose of study. She gave off the idea of simply being courteous at first but then I realized the abruptness with which I had turned from her to Richard and thought she was thinking that I didn't like her that much after all, that she'd been wrong and be and what had been going on the whole time, and I kicked myself for ruining it when, in about five minutes she got up to leave and did not say good-bye until after I did, interrupting Richard who by that time was saying all he ever did was smoke weed and drink coffee, and I had to do it loudly, over the music too, and it came off as somehow aggressive and turned her off. That I could tell. Nothing had really changed.



The Re-Write

Myles Wren

Tuesday mid-mornings were typically slow at this coffeehouse, and particularly so on this one.

The proprietor walked around, wiping down tables after being busy earlier.

The only customer who remained was a bearded, bespectacled young man wearing a sweater and a wool cap. His coffee sat atop an unopened copy of "Infinite Jest" while he stared blankly out the large window either at, but more likely through, the electrician who was on a ladder installing a light fixture. He wore a wool cap, too.

"I hate the idea of changing the ending of the story," he thought, "but how many rejections do I need to get the message. 'Wrapped-up too nicely.' More than one editor said it, so..., I don't know. I like that it wraps up, but if they want literary, I can do that.

'Henrik Lipko, the grumpy old man who was once a good little boy, had a well-attended funeral. I doubt I will.'

"That can be my new ending. Rubbish. Way too melodramatic. I like it the way it is. Whatever. I'll send a few out like that and see what happens."

With that, he tapped on the window to get the proprietor's attention, and signaled for her to flip the light switch to test the new fixture.

The proprietor hustled over, flipped the switch and the bulb lit-up. She sent the electrician a big smile and thumbs-up.

"At least she likes things to wrap-up nicely," thought the electrician as he began his descent down the ladder.



Don't Dance

Douglas Clark

I'm sitting in the edge of my bed staring at my shoes. They are white. White with white laces, but black-soled bottoms. I never understood that. My tough blue jeans never really fit right, the same goes for my denim blue shirt. I don't even have to look down at the left pocket to see the numbers stitched onto it. 051575A. You think they would give me better clothes for this occasion. It isn't every day that you get executed.

Everything seems so quiet. I can hear Styles' nose whistling as he sleeps in the next cell over. The silence is so loud it almost hurts my ears. It is dark out. The stars are shining too. I have looked out that tiny, barred window a thousand times before, but I never really thought that this might be the last time. I guess I took it for granted. I hate this damn cell. I would do anything to get out of it. I would kill again, if I had to. Now, I think that I might kill to stay in. I'm not supposed to die like this—like a caged dog at the pound no one wants. I have people who love me, Goddamnit.

I guess Reynolds, the guard, thought it would be nice to give me that fucking clock. Only two hours to go. He'd laugh. Asshole. That was a while ago. I keep staring at it. Fifteen minutes to go. Shit. I'm not gonna dance. I will walk out there like a man. Smoke my cigarette and let come what may. I don't want to die. Not in here.

"All right Danick, it's time," I hear Reynolds say. I open my eyes.

No. I couldn't have fallen asleep. NO! Reynolds and that fat bastard Jenkins come in my cell to take me away.

"Get the fuck outta here. It ain't time yet. I got two minutes!" I scream as I look at that fucking clock again. They just shake their heads. My feet feel light. As I stepped out of my cell I felt a warm breeze. Where did that come from? It is March. I ain't gonna dance.

"Good luck, man," I hear floating in the air. I don't turn to look. That was Rallis.

"See ya around, D."

Yeah, sure you will Coplin. See me around where? Others say their good-byes. I don't look. I can remember their voices just as easily as I can recognize mine. This isn't fair. I only killed the one guy. I'm not Ted Bundy. Fuck, Dahmer got life. Why do I have to die, damn it?

"No. No man, fuck this," I say as I raise my arms. "No." Reynolds grabs my arms. So does Jenkins. I feel my feet start to shuffle. I won't dance. "Where's my fucking priest," I scream. I'm not religious. God never did anything for me.

"He's right here." Reynolds says as we turn the corner. The man dressed in black starts talking a bunch of shit I used to here in church. It doesn't mean shit. Does it?

"Hey where is my cigarette?" I ask as I start to struggle to get a hand free.

"You had one with your dinner."

"No," I start to squirm. I could break out into a wild dance right now. "No, I want my smoke. Let me go." I can smell that room. It smells cold. I want my smokes. These guys are evil. Fucking justice. I want that cigarette. Damn this hallway. I could have sworn it was longer. No damn it.

I pull away as they grab me. I feel my body twisting under their grip. Some strange noise escapes my throat. I must sound like a little girl as I squirm. I Won't Fucking Dance!

I stop. They wait. My jaw shudders but I won't cry. I stare at the doorway and exhale. It's over I guess.

"Just relax Danick, don't struggle and this won't hurt a bit."

The guy in white tells me. Who the fuck is he kidding. He ain't the one gonna die. My chest feels heavy. Man, I hate needles. I can't breathe. This table is soft. I can see that big plate glass window. All those people come to watch me die. A bunch of suits. Alice Krumble. I didn't want to kill her son. My eyes are getting blurry.

"No. Let me go." I can't get free. The straps are too tight. "Yeah, I have last words. Get me the fuck off this table." It is still so quiet. "Alice I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please don't let me die," I scream. I can hear an echo in this white room. The lights are out behind the big glass window. I am all alone. I didn't even feel that needle go into my arm.

I can't feel my feet and my chest is so heavy. Are my hands shaking or is that just my imagination? I can't tell.

"Let it be known that on the Fifth day of March..." I hear. I am so tired. I can't fall asleep. Is this what it's like to die? Am I dead. I can't see. I'm so tired. Maybe I will wake up. Wake up and be in my bed. Or maybe I'll dream.

Delicate Tissue

Paisley Kauffmann

The electronic ring pierces the dark, cozy bedroom. Robert smacks his lips and clears his throat before answering. Penny combats against a sense of dread and refuses to open her eyes.

“Hello?” Robert says. The question in his voice indicates it is an unknown number.

“This is he,” he says and listens. He jerks to a sitting position.

She opens her eyes.

Holding the phone to his ear, Robert gets out of bed. He struggles, awkwardly with one hand, to get both legs threaded into his black pants.

She sits up. Mildly and secretly annoyed, she knows the call has something to do with one of his kids.

“Have you contacted his mother?” he asks, and says, “Okay. I’m on my way.” He tosses the phone onto the bed and walks into the bathroom.

Reluctantly, she peels back the down comforter and stands in the bathroom door with her arms wrapped over her chest. “Robert? What’s going on?”

He splashes water on his face, pats dry with a towel, and says, “It’s Bobby. He’s in the hospital. He dove into a pool and broke his neck.”

“Oh my god,” she says. “I’ll go with you.”

He nods.

She, anticipating the presence of the ex-wife, washes her face and briefly considers applying a few dabs of make-up. Although Robert and Margaux divorced many years ago, she feels in constant competition with her, a successful lawyer with great skin and long legs. Robert, ready to leave, jingles his keys from hand to hand.

Instead of foundation and mascara, she pulls on her most flattering jeans and slips lipgloss into her back pocket.

In the car, Robert races through the fresh snow, fishtailing and sliding. She grips the armrest and fights the urge to complain.

“What pool?” she asks, contemplating the subzero temperature.

“I don’t know,” he says. “A hotel? Don’t kids still have hotel parties?”

She shrugs. Robert often asks her what kids are up to these days. Their age difference is significant, but she is not privy to the antics of teenagers. She worked two jobs through high school, teenage past times have always been a mystery.

Under florescent lights, she jogs to keep up with Robert’s long strides through the hospital corridors. She regrets not applying any make-up. Florescent lighting reflects in green undertones against her blond hair and washes out her fair skin.

Margaux is standing at the nurses’ station gesticulating and demanding information in her authoritative, strident voice. Robert places his hand on Margaux’s back and she collapses into his arms. Her face is drained of color, and Penny feels perversely satisfied with the pallor replacing her normally rich, olive tones.

“He’s in bad shape,” Margaux repeats into Robert’s shoulder.

Robert ushers Margaux under his arm and signals for Penny to follow to a row of plastic chairs near the vending machines.

“Sit with her,” Robert instructs and walks away.

Penny hesitates but does as she is told.

Margaux, wrapped in an expensive-looking shawl, smashes a tired tissue to her nose. “They say he may not walk again.”

Shaking her head, Penny considers touching Margaux’s hand or shoulder, but any gesture she attempts seems contrived.

“Boys,” Margaux says, trying to unfold the damp tissue. “They do such careless things.”

Grateful for something to do, Penny stands and says, “I’ll find you some more Kleenex.” She reaches for a box of economy brand tissues behind the empty nurses’ station. Robert, down the hall with the doctor, is covering his face with his hand and shaking his head. The doctor reaches out and squeezes Robert’s shoulder. As Penny grasps the tissue box, the florescent light fires off the facets of her engagement ring, a large diamond flanked with baguettes set in a platinum band. It is the biggest diamond she has ever seen, and she loves the attention it attracts. She returns to the seat next to Margaux and rapidly pulls three stiff tissues from the box.

"Thank you," Margaux says.

"This changes everything," Margaux chants. "Everything will be different."

Penny pulls another tissue from the box and folds it against her knee.

"He is never going to walk. They don't know if he can even breathe on his own," Margaux says and chokes on a sob.

Penny squeezes her fingers against the ring and it cuts into her flesh.

"He will have to live at home with one of us. At least until—"

Robert returns and stands over them.

"What have they told you?" Margaux asks.

Robert blinks at her.

"Please, please tell me he's going to be okay," Margaux begs.

Robert drops into the chair, and Margaux envelops him in her shawl.

Penny, an invisible, superfluous observer, stands and walks away. Outside, the night is brittle with unquestionable clarity. A group of nurses are gathered in a susurrant smoking circle. Penny approaches and asks no one in particular for a cigarette. There is a long, uncomfortable pause before a young nurse, younger than herself, holds out a white, papery cigarette. Without having to ask, she is handed a lighter.

Penny walks around the hospital and resists articulating the one question bubbling to the surface. It is an unforgivable and obstinate question, *Why is this happening to me?* A bus pulls up to the curb with a hydraulic squeal. The fumes sting her nose. She walks towards the bus and the doors fold open like a magic portal to another dimension.

"You getting on?" the bus driver asks.

Penny drops her cigarette in the snow, considers the question, and says, "No."

"Are you sure?"

She steps back. "I'm sure."

The doors snap shut and the bus bounces away from her.

Her feet, wet and cold, begin to ache. She pulls the rough tissue from her coat pocket and wipes her running nose. The streets leading away from the hospital invite her to escape down their unmarked, snow-covered sidewalks illuminated by the moon. Mirages of fairy-tale endings pixelate at the end of each city block. Her fingers are numb, and she checks for her ring. It is still there noosed around her finger. Slipping it off, she stuffs it into the pocket of her jeans.

At the hospital entrance, three yellow taxi cabs pump exuberant exhaust into the frigid air. Penny searches her coat pockets for money. She has seventeen dollars and forty-two cents. It may be enough to get her to the airport. She decides to buy a ticket to wherever the next available flight is headed. Climbing into the first cab, she rouses the driver from a nap, and says, "Airport, please."

The cab driver sits up in his seat. "Luggage?"

"No luggage."

He shifts the car into drive, and they lurch forward.

"Going somewhere warm?" The cab driver asks, glancing at her in the rearview mirror.

"I don't know, maybe," she answers his reflection. "Where are you from?"

"Iraq," he says, accelerating and merging onto the freeway, "but you don't want to go there."

"I suppose not."

"It's nice here," he says. "Too cold in the winter, but the other seasons are good."

The street lights flash by in regular beats.

"Are you traveling alone?" he asks.

"No," she answers. "I'm engaged. My fiancé is meeting me in..."

She starts to cry. Reaching for the tissue, she recalls her mother handing her two tissues and instructing her to cry until they were both used up. After that, it was time to deal with the problem and move on with life.

The cab driver clicks on the blinker towards the airport exit.

"You can take me back to the hospital."

The driver nods and turns off the blinker.

Shoulders heaving, she cries until the tissue crumbles apart.

The driver rolls up to the exact location they departed from, shifts into park, and says, "You can sit in here for a while longer. It's a slow night."

She nods.

"Do you mind if I turn on some music?"

She shakes her head.

Arabic music fills the space. Quick tempos, sliding scales, and unfamiliar soft words punctuated with glottal utterances.

Closing her eyes, she escapes.

"Miss?" The driver wakes her.

She startles back into her reality.

"I'm sorry, but my shift is over."

She wraps her coat around her and reaches into her pocket for the seventeen dollars. "I only have, well, less than twenty dollars."

He waves it away.

Penny gets out of the warm, fragrant cab and squints at the white and red lights of the hospital entrance. She pulls the ring from her pocket and slips it on. Gazing at her hand, the ring encircles her finger like a constrictor.

Under the scrutiny of florescent lights, she returns to find Robert sitting with his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his palms.

Standing in front of him, she places her hands on his shoulders.

He wraps his arms around her waist, and says, "You're here."

"I'm here," she says.



Every Woman in the Afterlife Hates You

Zach Smith

A little while ago you had a disease that was curable if caught in the early stages, but being the typical man you are you ignored it, pretended it didn't exist, pretend it didn't hurt you, etc. and in the end, it killed you.

Now that you are dead, you find your soul in some kind of waiting room—large, largely empty, without windows or pictures on the wall, stark white, a single chair, and a single door at one end.

After a second or an eternity, the door opens.

After another second or eternity, and with nothing better to do, you enter.

There is another man in the office.

The door closes behind you.

"Welcome," the man says.

"Hello?" you respond, unsure.

"So, I'm sure now you realize you're dead, correct?"

"Yes," you say.

"Good, not everyone understands that at this point, that takes care of the first part. Now, the second part. You're probably wondering where you are."

You say: "Yes," again.

"Where do you think you are?"

"Upstairs?"

"No."

"Downstairs?"

"No again."

"Okay, well then...nirvana?"

"Ah, they suck, but no, not there either."

"Oh, okay...what's that in between place called? What is it, limbo?"

"Limbo? No. Well, kind of," says the man in the office.

"Maybe you should just tell me then," you say.

"Sure. I always like to ask and see how people respond. I'm not sure why I like this, because they always give the same three answers, first heaven, then hell, then limbo. Maybe one out of ten says hell first. Almost no one from the west ever comes up with nirvana, and my joke rarely works with the people that do, you know."

You look confused.

"Sorry, I know I'm rambling. Anyways, to answer your question, you're in a sort of waiting room. It's my job to get you ready to move on. Let me ask you, would you like to live again?"

"Yes, I suppose so," you say.

"Good, because you're going to, you're going to live a lot more."

"Okay?" you say, still confused.

"There was a new rule enacted by the almighty around the time that high speed internet became widely available, and it's caused some problems for people along the way as you can imagine."

You can't really imagine, but you feel a sinking feeling nonetheless.

The man pulls out a large tome and begins to read off in a different, more authoritative, voice.

"Order number 1269 from the highest authority states that hereafter all male subjects who knowingly, intentionally, and actively engage in the viewing of footage directly related to carnal acts must hereby relive all the lives of the female participants of

footage specifically viewed by the individual male subject.”

Returning to his normal voice he says: “Get it?”

You say. “No,” then add. “I was never very good with legal language, is there a simpler way to put it?”

“Of course there is,” says the man. “You have to relive the lives of every woman you have ever watched in pornography.”

“Oh,” you say.

“Now, I’m sure you have some questions.”

“I do,” you say. “Let me think.” After a moment you ask, “What if I watch more porn as one of these women I have to relive? Will that add to my debt?”

“Ah, no. The rule only affects men.”

“Well that’s really not fair,” you say.

“Life isn’t fair,” says the man.

“But this isn’t life...right now.”

“Afterlife isn’t fair either.”

“Okay. Now some of the women I’ve watched I’m sure are not dead yet, how can I relive their lives?”

“Pisssh,” says the man, or more accurately makes that’s sound along with a wave of his hand, and then adds: “time of death is irrelevant in the hereafter.”

“I guess I have an awful lot of living left to do then.”

“Yes,” says the man. “But, it will not be entirely boring.”

“What is the order of lives to live?” you ask. “Is it by when each woman was born, by region or alphabetical?”

“Actually, I don’t really know,” says the man. “But I guess you’ll find out soon.”

“Hum,” you say to yourself, then add. “Well...fuck me.”

“That’s the idea,” says the man, as the room begins to fade away.

Ten thousand years later, you’ve finally reached...the C’s.



What Happened to Darren

Jeff Hill

“Who are you?” Darren asked.

At a loss for words, and not really sure if he’s kidding or what, I simply smile and wink. “It’s me, Darren. It’s Daddy.”

He looks genuinely puzzled, then scared, and then, trying to be tough, which is a skill I like to think he inherited from me, he laughs it off.

“I knew that,” he says. “I was just kidding.”

My son. The jokester.

But neither of us really likes what’s going on. Neither of us is really having fun. His mom left when she realized he wasn’t getting better. I took him out of school when I realized that his teachers weren’t going to help him. And I lost my job when my boss made an off-color remark about Darren behind my back that got him slammed against a wall.

But none of that matters, I keep telling myself. I know who I am. I know who he is. And deep down, no matter what the doctors and the lawyers and the social workers say, he knows, too.

“My little jokester,” I say, more to myself than to my son.

Our days are spent in relative isolation. We don’t go out unless we absolutely have to. Groceries are usually delivered. The movies he wants to see are the ones he’s already seen and we own. He doesn’t have any friends, or so he thinks, and it’s gotten to the point where he doesn’t even remember his mom. Or the pain of losing her.

But I do. That’s a memory I wish I could forget. But unfortunately, unlike my son, I don’t have that luxury. I remember everything. Part of me thinks that’s because I don’t have what he has. But a larger part, a more paternal part, knows that it’s because I have to remember. It’s the burden I have to bear. After all, this whole thing is my fault.

The basement window shatters. The noise wakes me from a deep sleep and I can’t decide if I need my gun or the phone, but all the while I am en route to Darren’s bedroom without hesitation.

“Daddy!” he screams, bringing me out of reality and back into my head.

“Daddy’s here, Darren,” I say, forcing back tears at the thought that he really does remember me. Sometimes.

But that emotion is overtaken and overpowered by a more powerful, more primal one when I reach his bedroom door and notice that he is standing by his window, pointing at the neighbor’s house.

“Get away from the windows!” I yell, but it is too late. Another shattered window, this time in my bedroom. Little do they know, I don’t sleep in there anymore. Not since Darren’s mom left us. It never seemed like mine after that day, so I’ve been sleeping in the guest room next to Darren’s.

I grab my son and before he can even react, he’s fallen back into the routine that he can remember. The only thing he can ever seem to consistently remember. The “tuck and shush” as we call it. He curls into a ball as tight as he can and doesn’t make a sound, clinging as tightly to my neck as he can. He doesn’t know why he does it, but it’s times like these that I’m glad he still remembers.

We make our way down the hallway and I hear another shattered window, this time in the guest room. My old bedroom is on fire now, and I can’t help but wonder what would have happened if I had taken the pills that the doctor prescribed me after Darren and I did what we did. Would I have slept through Darren’s cries? Would he have known what to do?

Within minutes, the house is more fire than home and I’m standing outside as the fire department asks questions that neither Darren nor I answer. Darren because he doesn’t know how to and me because I don’t need to. The firefighters know. The whole block knows. Hell, this whole city knows what just happened to our home and why.

It’s because I killed my daughter and blamed my son.

No one would ever really know what happened. To a certain extent, not even me. Sure, I could tell you the events, but everyone knows that’s only half of every story. Anyone can give you a plot, a setting, and a series of complications. But what really happened? Who were the characters? I mean, who were they really? That’s something you can only answer if you were there. And the only two people who were there are my daughter and my son.

I was technically there, I suppose. But I was so drunk that I might as well have not been. I was supposed to be watching them, and that’s not just my wife’s opinion. Or the town’s. It’s mine, too. I get it. I fucked up.

And I've spent every day since paying for it. But I think the worst part about it is that Darren's paying, too. He has what doctors are calling selective memory loss. Usually it's brought on by either a head injury or some sort of traumatic incident. Or, in his case, a combination of the both.

The theory around town is that I drowned her in the bathtub while Darren was taking a nap and then when he found what I had done, I pushed him down the stairs. He forgot because he hit his head. And he continues to forget because what type of monster would do that to his son.

The theory in my head is that my son killed his sister on accident, some sort of game that I'll never truly understand. The best way to figure it all out would be to go back to that night, but that's not possible. We live in the real world.

My son may never recover. My daughter will never return. And my wife is no longer mine. I have to live with what I did. Or didn't do. But there is a silver lining in all of this. My son.

Not only is he still alive. But he'll always forgive me. Every single day. Because, no matter how terrible our lives may get. No matter how angry I may be, or sad, or drunk, or broken...I can always just remind him of the one thing that really matters. I love him.

"Who are you?" he asks again, as he wakes up in the middle of the night, walking toward the motel bathroom.

"It's me," I tell him. "It's Daddy."

He smiles.

And it's enough.



Rabbleroising with Reason

John Gorman

Archie still felt a little pang for having thrown-in his stock boy apron. Maybe a college grad had no business messing with boxes of Frosted Flakes, but, at the very least, he should've had something lined up. Good sport that he was, Archie kept a buttoned lip and let his girlfriend shine in her moment. Marcy Dibble, queen of chocolate-dipped biscotti, rowing team captain from Dartmouth, purveyor of small miracles, was shaking like a tuning fork. You'd think she was still interviewing for the admin position at Grey instead of celebrating over takeout. She was so moon-juked about taking the first step toward a career in advertising she'd forgotten half of the mumbo jumbo the recruiter had told her except that she started on Monday and it was okay to wear flip flops. Bent over her Kung Pao, she reenacted the scene for Archie's benefit. She swigged some ginger ale before launching into what might have been considered an unpardonable gaffe. After receiving the green light, Marcy kissed the recruiter on the forehead. Archie almost choked on his spring roll when she puckered. Coming from Marcy, however, this was expected. She had a zest for life, shimmering beyond her freckles.

For Archie, unfortunately, nabbing a stable income had become a challenge. You wouldn't think so because of his appetite, and boy did he have an appetite, but despite a tapeworm's digestive tract, Archie was suffering from the great philosophical dilemma "Damned if you do, damned if you don't." Marcy would carry the financial load, if only for a short while longer, of their beef and broccoli brunches, Magnolia Bakery cupcakes, and Friday Night Wine Bar openings. Sooner or later though, Archie had to land something better than coffee shop barista.

When Marcy met Archie she'd considered him a work-in-progress, but her sculpting hands were hell bent on shaping the mensch she saw in him. He did have his pluses. She never met anybody so young, who loved jazz, but couldn't play a lick and spoke about it with a preacher's passion. His intention wasn't to win her over to his musical congregation, but to open her up to something other than Top Forty plonk. After much deliberating, whether or not he could stay involved with somebody who had as much use for Coltrane as she did for coleslaw, Archie finally put his fusspot grit on the backburner. He kept telling himself she was only twenty-one, but then again so was he.

They lived down the hall from each other on the Lower East Side, two blocks from the Ukrainian joint which served the most delicious *varenyky* anywhere and kept a vintage ukulele displayed in the window. There, they split many a late-night blintz and drank their beers, sharing the scabs of their rapidly fusing lives.

They met by way of a mix-up. Archie found his neighbor's bill and a personal-addressed letter from Blue Note in his mail. He decided to knock on 3F's door. Maybe it was a sideman or a jammer. He'd never been nuts about Blue Note, but what a stroke of luck being neighbors with a jazz enthusiast. Marcy opened the door half-expecting a dozen roses or a bronzer-complexioned suitor. Archie was used to this kind of welcome. He held out the mail to his lilac-smelling neighbor and admired her soap-scrubbed cheeks, her pug nose, and her gorgeous shoulder-length nut brown hair, combed straight back, and grinned when he saw the mammoth pimple in the middle of her forehead. There wasn't a dab of makeup to hide it and it sprout from her head like a unicorn. If only he had that much confidence.

She didn't thank him and Archie stood outside till he heard the bolt of her lock and the click of the chain. They bumped into each other a few more times going into the building, passing each other on the stairs and then one day Marcy brought over a bottle of Cab and strolled into Archie's dingy cigar box of a room as if they were old roomies picking up where they last left off. He had nothing better to do and they passed the night jibber-jabbing about the unmapped, post collegiate life. Marcy was comfy enough to reveal her ambitions with her cherubic head, resting on his lap as if Archie were a shrink's pillow. He listened and never mentioned anything about the Blue Note letter. A couple of days later, when he did say something about it and Marcy said the letter must've been a mistake, she didn't particularly care for old tuba music and Archie felt stupid for plying his hopes with such scanty evidence. However, he did feel good being with her, he'd found a short breath of calm. He needed a friend.

For the past few months, Archie had seen plenty of ads for number-crunchers, and he had been weighing in his mind whether or not he'd done the right thing by signing off on his degree. He knew eventually he'd be an accountant, but wanted to do something kooky before joining the rat race. Maybe he needed to go backpacking in Europe. Marcy even suggested this, but Archie wasn't sold on it. Two summers ago, before he turned his tassel, he kept the books for a dentist's office. He hated the idea of all those hacksaw instruments buzzing in the room behind him while he was working out debits and credits.

Marcy grabbed Archie's Blue Moon and took a gulp. She was too excited to properly mess with the chopsticks so she speared a chunk of chicken and bit into it as if she'd just broken from a fast.

"Hey, Archie."

"What?" he said, poking into his fried rice. "Where's all the shrimp?"

Marcy pinched one from his carton, held it between her magnificent, cuticle-free, boy's length fingernails and braced herself before popping the big question. Archie, true to his no-nonsense self, wolfed down the last shrimp and all but licked the final grain of rice off his thumb.

"I hate your sink," Marcy said.

“So.”

“I never want to use it again.”

“So don’t.”

“And neither should you.”

“Then how will I wash my hands?”

“In my sink.”

“Brilliant. So every time I go to the bathroom what am I supposed to do, make a pirouette and prance on over to your place?”

“No.”

“Good. I thought you lost it there for a second.”

“You’ll take two steps from wherever you are and stick your hands under *our* sink.”

“What?”

The thought doddered there for a second like the crumpled napkin in Marcy’s fist. Archie, the private soul, who had only gotten rid of his parental baggage that came along with going to a commuter school was now looking at the very real prospect of living with or losing his girlfriend. This was not the kooky crinkle he wanted to add into his life.

He tried to imagine the logistics of showering, shaving, and removing his contact lenses. Sharing a hovel might’ve been doable had he gone away to Holy Cross as he’d originally planned, but his plans had a way of being undermined. He also, quite frankly, had no inkling where his stuff would go. It took him weeks before he bought a canvas garment rack and he still preferred to pull his shirts and pants out of his gym bag.

“Don’t rush me,” Archie said as if he were lashing back at his inner dictum. “I need you to do me one small favor.”

“You name it.”

A couple of days later, Archie knocked on Marcy’s door wearing the constipated grin of a mail carrier. Ordinarily, more stoic after settling on his own terms, a second wind of doubts troubled him. All the same, he was going to take Marcy on a short trip over the bridge. When he knocked again and didn’t get an answer he decided to get a breath of fresh air. On his way downstairs, he bumped into Marcy, lugging groceries.

“Planning to feed an army?” he said, half-embarrassed the moment it broke from his lips.

“An army of two,” Marcy said, poking Archie’s stomach. “Where you going?”

“Need to show you something.”

“Well, can it wait?”

He looked off. His head fogged back in the funk he’d tried so hard to shake loose from. He appeared hopelessly confounded. Yet his feet carried him down the steps. He grabbed the bags from Marcy and her lips curled in bewilderment.

“There’s ice-cream and turkey in there,” she said.

Archie nodded as if he’d only begun to understand the ulterior motives behind smokescreens.

“It’ll spoil.”

Archie marched back up the steps, both hands, carting the goodies, but kept his soft blue eyes narrow and waxed on suspicion. Marcy couldn’t press ahead of him, but wouldn’t let him get away with dumping the bags outside her door. She made little to do about putting the things away. By the time they were ready to ship off Archie had already left his funk behind in her apartment.

They grabbed the N-train to Archie’s old neighborhood, the second to last stop on the line. Wayne Shorter’s “Footprints” played in Archie’s head. Something like love or its next closet coordinate filled his lungs. Archie grabbed Marcy’s pinkie when they crossed Astoria Boulevard. He pointed out the old dilapidated public swimming pool where he learned the butterfly and to hold his breath underwater for almost a minute. Marcy puffed her cheeks then smacked her flesh and pretended to spit chlorinated water into the face of her tour guide. To his credit, Archie produced a hanky from his coat pocket and began patting dry his sappy wet face.

Before he had a chance to put the hanky back into his pocket, Marcy grabbed it from him and pretended to blow into it, her big brown eyes eager for a reaction. He almost ignored this trivial plea for attention until he caught himself. Even a simple, half-hearted gesture could save a relationship. With a sage’s wit and a pick pocket’s timing, he whisked her hand. Marcy peered out at the steel blue ripples of the East River and Archie graciously coaxed her eyes back to the sickly green stone of his childhood pool. It was drained except for a dirty rivulet of rainwater or perhaps it was urine. In the fall, the skaters used the spot to test out their new

tricks and dare each other into bashing their skulls. A patch of graffiti as beautiful and intricate as stained glass tagged the far wall.

A mischievous glow emanated from Archie. His dipping knees and gangly arms pointed into a prow, ready to dive. He saw something on Marcy's face that passed for wild fear and he relished it as Marcy snared his wrist. Her warm sinewy hand gave him a shock. He stuffed their clasped hands into his coat pocket and kept it there as a lumpy gift. Whoever wanted to could retrieve it first? Yes, this was a fun game, but he didn't bother mentioning it to Marcy. If she let him break free first, then he'd shack up with her. He set a minimum-clock of five minutes. If she undid her clasp before his then he'd stay put. Maybe he'd lose.

Archie was forever making contingency plans. This time he saw it different. He wanted no part of the afterthoughts. No part of the hurt and rejection. He almost went as far as balking on her offer then rightfully assured himself it was the coward's way out. They'd long passed the pool and crossed the avenue, a gush of traffic streamed by. On the corner, a staggering line of fleet-footed pedestrians waited for two parked buses to peel open its glass doors. They were an ungainly bunch some with greasy hats or caps and a few had papers creased to kill time over local news or sports, but there was one among them that made Archie shudder. He had a brief out-of-body episode, a swirl of inertia nearly tossing him noggin to knees onto the gum-splotched curb. This one man was slight of build, small-mouthed with thin, fraying dirty blonde hair, paling by the sides, and salty white on the crown of his head and even in other odd patches, including the wooly gray reaching into his muttonchops. Some lazy spots of beard, freckle, and pimple comprised his humble, fleshy face. He had a crumbled paper bag poking out of his jacket pocket and kept his small ugly head down as he pecked at his bagel as if he were a pigeon. Why Archie singled out this poor slouch from the rest of the line bugged him. The two bus drivers returned, chomping on donuts, ambled together passed their stranded lot, didn't even bother to let anybody on behind them as they climbed onto the same bus. They went on gabbing and gobbling. The poor slouch, Archie marked, wore defeated, hangdog eyes and his chin had suddenly gone scruffier. Archie winced when he had realized he'd seen the flash-forward mugshot of himself.

Archie's fingers were unclasped from Marcy and she was smiling a lover's smile. He had no idea how long his hand had broken from hers and who had done the breaking. Amazingly enough he let the shimmering ebullience of her smile melt his troubles away.

Archie only needed two cardboard diaper boxes and his trusty gym bag to cart over all his worldly possessions. He made a separate trip for his canvas garment rack and carried it like a wounded Collie. It took him a day to graduate from his gym bag. He found he enjoyed the *ting* of hangers along the metal rod of his new wardrobe. He sprung for a plastic socks and skivvies drawer and even made his first decorating suggestion though it was denied. It's true at first he felt like he'd moved into a LEGO house, but he got used to the snug-as-a-bug arrangement.

He impressed himself with his willingness and his ability to live elbow-to-elbow with his girlfriend in the dusty confines of their third-floor studio. A bath a light spilled in through the oatmeal-colored blinds and he was only too happy to press his nose to the pane and stare out. Archie Mullins, roommate, future accountant or bottle-washer, owner of an unlimited Metrocard stared at the bustling men and women as if he'd never seen from this vantage point. His old place had a view of the dumpster, but now that he could peer out every morning at the working stiffs rushing to their destinations he felt a waggle of trepidation.

He watched Marcy slip into her slacks while brushing her teeth. He marveled at her dexterity and that she didn't even need to check herself in the mirror until she was photo shoot finito.

When she returned from her daily grind, Archie had the place stinking of pork chops, skirt steak and fries. Archie was no skillet master, but he knew how to whip up a few things and whatever he couldn't handle he delegated to microwave. Marcy had to love him for it she could barely make pasta without it ending up soupy or soggy. They either drank five-dollar wine or iced tea and when they finished their chow down Archie let the sink sit till the morning. Marcy made no qualms.

They could have gone on like this forever. At least, this was how Archie saw it, until Marcy threw down the gauntlet. She began leaving classified ads next to his pillow, under the bathroom door, and inside the refrigerator. Archie got the drift. He needed to pull his weight. The real question was what the hell would he do to earn his keep? No more box-stacking. Faced with such metaphysical dilemmas, he trooped around the streets of the Lower East Side with an apple in his hand. He ventured further east than he recalled, past the urban take on hanging gardens throughout Alphabet City. He scratched his head, as if he walked off the narrow island, when he passed a row of Hell's Angel's bikes, but then nodded, to himself, when he saw a canopy-free coffee shop with a hand-scrawled chalkboard promising a free cup to anybody who produced a Sumatra-stamped passport. He zeroed in on the Sum in Sumatra and puzzled over whether one or two M's belonged there. It reminded him of when, in fourth grade, Sister Eloise trumpeted the correct spelling of "colonel." He felt a mental rug pulled out from under him. Betrayed. He then bore his secret affinity for numbers. Balancing equations brought him tranquility.

He crunched the last of his apple and tossed the core in the street. He kicked a pebble out of the heel of his shoe and rubbed the dry, sticky juice between his palms. He counted cracks in the sidewalk and before he knew any better he'd climbed the overpass into the park off Delancey Street. His stomach grumbled and he considered a hotdog, but the slouch-backed vendor looked the type who never bothered to scrub under his nails and Archie had a beggar's batch of change, a lousy, crumpled single and an odd lot of nickels and dimes, and besides, he hated the mean appraisal he got when he plunked down a mess of coins.

The sweet sound of worn brass turned his head. A jangly black man blew into his tenor saxophone. His chapped hands held the instrument with a lover's finesse. Archie studied the musician, how he blew into the sax with a stirring mix of passion and empathy. The frenetic squirm of his fingers along the scales had Archie dizzy with envy. The musician seemed to catch the whisk of

the wind within the hole of his sax and played a kind of call and response with it. He threw off a mighty shadow and blared a series of high notes that tickled the stray hairs at the top of Archie's spine. Then the man switched the pace into a softer, emotionally clarifying version of "Naima", one of Archie's favorites.

He got halfway into the piece then stopped cold and packed up his sax. The clamping case made a muffled plea for more. Archie felt knifed in the gut and he grabbed his last dollar, folded it and handed it to the man with great shame in his eyes.

"Sorry, it's all I got," Archie said and handed it over.

"Keep it man. Got to split."

"Where you going?"

"Ladybird calls." He tapped his wristwatch.

Archie didn't want to intrude so he let the musician hustle off. If it hadn't been clear before he now knew he needed to score his own brass.

He put on his antenna and searched for an instrument. He knew a place over on Orchard, but when he got there the shop looked as if a tornado ripped through it. They were going out of business and were down to a harmonica and a Cassio keyboard. The gawky kid, behind the sawdust-strewn counter, recommended a pawn shop between Clinton and Essex. Archie thanked him to be civil, but there wasn't a monkey's paw chance he'd procure his sax in a Thunderbird-wrecking pawn shop. He stopped at the bank and depleted his savings. The wad of bills was much leaner than he thought, a couple of takeout menus folded over. He tapped at his pocket every so often to make sure it was still there.

Archie walked until he wore a hole in the bottom of his shoe. His big toe was as black and bloated as a burnt marshmallow. Archie grabbed a bunch of postcards from a Persian restaurant and stuffed them in his worn shoe sole and marched on. When his ankles were aching and he felt his legs just about ready to give out from under him he came across a small music shop. The front shelves were filled with guitars both acoustic and electric, the usual suspects: Fender, Gibson, Ibanez, Blueridge, and Taylor. He spotted a chintzy drum set Max Roach wouldn't have bothered hanging his coat. Archie ducked into the back and saw a beautiful tribe of woodwinds and then the horns. He got the hiccups.

A fine trombone hung next to an alto sax and behind a glass case half a dozen clarinets lay scattered like noisemakers. Judging from the clutter he figured he could get a sax without having to pawn his kidney. He had five hundred on him. He knew it would hardly be enough to get something decent. He also knew if he spent it all he wouldn't have anything to contribute for rent.

He grabbed a shiny tenor sax off the wall, rubbed his thumb up the rising swirl of brass. He felt like he was cheating on his girlfriend. More to the point, he found his new honey. Archie raised the sax, splayed his legs a bit and got soft in the knees. He put his mouth to the piece and let out a dying elephant call which brought the sales guy over from the front.

"That's a sweet one isn't it," the guy said. "Only five and change."

Archie didn't probe. He knew he meant grand. That was in another league. Still, he didn't part with the sax.

"Had one of those yuppie jerks trying to scam me the other day. We don't sell to their ilk."

Archie found himself taking a few uneven steps back. The firm pinch of reality almost popped the bubble of Archie's good cheer. He then realized the eager salesman was leading him to another "marked down" section. The prices still eluded jazz enthusiast.

"I detect a window shopper," the glib salesman said. "Am I right?"

"Listen, I got about five-hundred," Archie said. "What can I get?"

Head down, slope-backed the salesman pushed off without a rubber sole of pep. Archie wouldn't waste much more time. He took his last gander, smelled the reed and finger buttons and put the instrument where it belonged. The guy came back with a dusty thing that, God help us, might've been lifted from a barn. It could've fit in the Knick's starting forward's shoebox. It wasn't even a trumpet, but a coronet.

"Satchmo played one just like it," the salesman said wiping it down with an ancient cloth.

It was about as far from Archie's dream sax as he could imagine, but it was all he could afford and the guy threw in an extra mouthpiece for four seventy-five. Archie didn't bargain. He actually had a smile when he lumped down his savings. No case to put it. Archie held it with pride and blew out the cobwebs and galumphed through the streets with a new burst of energy. The mangled postcard poking through his toe had the shape of an epiglottis or chewed gum yet he carried himself with dignity and lighter shoulders.

He played "Salt Peanuts" one of Dizzy Gillespie's sillier concoctions and when he hit the refrain, Archie cracked himself up, nearly choking on the mouthpiece. He paid his last visit to the studio and waited until Marcy was home then waltzed in with a troubadour's gait.

Marcy, who had been leafing through *Vanity Fair*, stood and cast a harsh look on the disheveled form passing as her boyfriend. Her eyes glided right over the coronet and she launched into the scolding.

"Where the hell have you been?" Marcy said. "I had drinks with Sid and Fiona and they think you flipped. What's the deal?"

Archie didn't want to, but it was the only rebuttal he had in him, lukewarm and unpolished. He let it rip right from his gut, all the pent-up crud that had been eating at him. He played a loose and imperfect stream of notes and noise. Marcy cuffed her ears. Archie would've bulled on, but he stopped to catch his breath.

"I probably have no business playing it, but if I don't give it a whirl I'll be nothing but pantywaist."

Marcy's pale face went Macintosh red.

"Get out," Marcy said and pointed to the door. For the first time, Archie saw she resembled his mother in her cat eyes and ampersand-curved brows. He dug into his pocket and dropped a twenty on top of the mini fridge. He left his stuff. He put the mouth of his coronet back into swollen lips and played a hideous, sickly green noise that sounded like he was playing underwater in his old swimming pool. He marched out, down three flights of stairs with no intention of taking the subway. He planned on schlepping it over the bridge into Queens. Why not? He had legs, he had lungs.



Dreams of Lillian Wu

Barbara Taylor

If you die in a dream, it kills you in real life. I don't know how anybody can prove that, but it's supposed to be a fact. I've come pretty close to dying in some of my dreams, and Lillian Wu is often lurking in the background. I haven't seen her since junior high school, but I've decided she's stuck in my subconscious because Michael Held and I put a tack on her chair in science class. This spontaneous act of cruelty was out of character for me, Douglas Vonnagel, but not for Michael. I think of him whenever I hear Tom Jones sing "Not Responsible." Michael didn't consider the gravity of any situation and probably hasn't suffered a moment's remorse over that tack. I'd be surprised if Lillian Wu visits him in dreams. She should, but I'll bet she doesn't.

Many moons ago, back at George S. Patton Junior High, Michael hissed to get my attention from across the aisle in science lab. We were waiting for Mr. O'Day to waltz in wearing his rubber apron and yellow dishwashing gloves, flourishing a fetal pig in an aluminum bedpan like a waiter. We'd groan in unison, holding our noses, and he'd tell us to knock it off, as usual.

"Vonnagel!" Michael yanked the tack he had popped off the bulletin board titled "THE AMAZING HUMAN HEART" and jerked his head in Lillian's direction. His mouth twisted into an evil grin, and I knew in an instant what he had in mind. I'd made unfortunate choices from time to time—lying, cheating, and stealing to name a few—but up to this point I had never intentionally inflicted physical injury. Yet I nodded, my head moving up and down as if controlled by a puppet master. I can't remember who put the tack on the chair. Honestly. One therapist offered to hypnotize me in a last-ditch effort to find out once and for all. It didn't work, but I had to pay for the hour anyway.

"Douglas," the balding pseudo-hypnotist said to me, rocking back in his black leather chair and putting his fingers and his thumbs together to form a perfect triangle. "Clearly you're not ready to let go." What a crock.

I recall breaking out in a cold sweat as Lillian approached her chair, I'll say that in my defense. Even now, years later, I can be driving along the Merritt Parkway and out of nowhere I'll remember what Lillian did when she sat down and a chill will go through me like an icicle. Here's what happened: nothing. Oh, she felt the sting, all right. Lillian always looked like she was in pain, and that moment she looked slightly more so. But she didn't make a sound, and I think I know why. It had to do with her harrowing journey from mainland China to the free world.

Heartless as it sounds, her parents shipped her over in a wooden box on a boat. Apparently there was no alternative. When she finally made it to the good old U. S. of A., the Wu family didn't adjust to our way of doing things. They continued to eat their regular diet of slimy fish and vegetables and sent the reeking leftovers to school with Lillian in a Tupperware container with chopsticks taped to the lid. She couldn't speak English at first or anything. But think about it: she had lots of practice shutting up. If anybody found her in that box, they probably would have sent her back to the communists to be brainwashed. She couldn't afford to react to a cramp in her leg or a panic attack.

Some of those Chinese girls are gorgeous, but not Lillian. She had a scrunched-up face like she was trying to hold a grain of rice between her lips. This didn't help with her assimilation—the not smiling—but who could blame her? Have you ever thought how you'd go to the bathroom in a box? We all wondered about that, but nobody ever asked her. She wasn't exactly approachable, if you get what I mean, but I had to square dance with her in gym a few times because I was paralyzed with girls after the whole mess with Joelle Greenblatt calling me Cootie Boy and starting a trend. I'd just lean over the water fountain, gulping, and regretting that life-changing day until Lillian was the only girl left. But she could promenade and do-si-do with the best of them, I'll say that for her. She bowed really well, too. I guess she did a lot of that back in China. And she didn't call me Cootie Boy. She didn't call me anything, come to think of it.

Besides the nonverbal element, Lillian had an odd odor about her. After eating in an authentic Chinese restaurant in San Francisco once, I found out what cooked seaweed smells like. Lillian sprang to mind and thinking about her spoiled the whole California trip for me. It didn't help that I was staying in a Japanese hotel. The Chinese and Japanese cultures aren't identical, I realize, but the oriental theme got to me. The room had a mat on the floor and a Buddhist shrine. Then there was the bathroom with no shower—just a deep tiled tub that took an ocean to fill and there were instructions, in Japanese and English, not to use soap in there because the tub was strictly for soaking. You were supposed to squat on the floor over a drain, turn on the water from the spigot jutting out of the wall, splash water on yourself, soap up, wash your hair, whatever, then rinse off under the stupid spigot. Only then were you allowed into the soaking tub. I don't know if Chinese people get clean this way, but I thought about Lillian the whole time I was there. In fact, I half-expected to bump into her in one of the alleys. I couldn't even take a walk in peace.

One of my fears is that the tack scarred Lillian for life. She had enough emotional scars already. I'm surprised we never ran into each other in a psychologist's waiting room. I toss and turn at night, thinking that Lillian could have become one of those masseuses at a cheesy oriental massage parlor because her self-esteem had to be so low and Michael and I contributed to the downward spiral. I blurted out to the therapist I was seeing at the time that an apology could be in order.

"Making amends," she said flatly, glancing at the pad in her lap. "A key step, Doug." She insisted on calling me Doug. "Perhaps then we can move on."

I wanted to see what was written on that pad. My guess is it was a list of errands she planned to do before going home. When she remembered she had to pick up the dry cleaning, she'd jot it down. *Dry cleaning*. Dry cleaning had absolutely nothing to

do with me, and her list was only one of the reasons I stopped seeing her after a few sessions. Another was her annoyed look whenever I brought up Lillian. It was like, *are you kidding? Lillian Wu? Again?*

“Tell me what’s been happening lately, Doug. Let’s talk about your current goals.” That was her response, emphasizing *late-ly* and *current*. That’s the kind of therapist she was. I couldn’t wait to get away from the woman. But, before I did, I wanted to finish my thought about Lillian and the 7th grade science fair.

“She made a volcano,” I explained. “*Papier-mâché*, as Mademoiselle Rothstein would say.”

“Mademoiselle Rothstein?”

“My French teacher in junior high school.”

“Where is this going, Doug?” She was jiggling her leg, ever so slightly.

“The volcano didn’t do anything. I mean, if you made a volcano, wouldn’t you want it to erupt? Regurgitate some lava-like substance? Now, that would have been the highlight of the science fair.”

“And your point is—?”

“All she did was put this little metal cup in there with some incense. Chinese people love that stuff. She lit it, and a little plume of smoke came out of the volcano. Everybody stood around, waiting for the lava. But nothing happened. Nothing!” I was getting worked up, so I got off the couch and started to pace. The therapist put her pad up against her chest, probably so I wouldn’t see it was a grocery list. “Lava reminds me of something. My mother never shut up about the poor starving children in China. Well. Mr. O’Day, our science teacher, made yogurt in the lab to demonstrate how bacterial cultures worked and everything. Lillian Wu actually ate the runny, nasty-looking stuff. There was no fruit or anything and it wasn’t even cold. Mr. O’Day was all delighted because he didn’t want his precious yogurt to go to waste. You could tell he was cheap by his taped-up glasses and crappy car. He segued into a lecture about Americans and our free and easy throw-away society while he watched Lillian eat the god-awful yogurt. It was pitiful. That’s why she won the science fair.”

“Excuse me?”

“Her volcano looked like the real thing, I’ll give her that. It was very artistic, sitting there smoking in the middle of all those charts, but, still, *it didn’t erupt*. She won because she ate the *yogurt*. The teachers gave her good grades because she came over from China in a box. They felt sorry for her.”

“Would you like to sit back down, Doug?” she asked, pointing to the couch with her ballpoint pen.

“No,” I said. “I’d like a drink of water.”

“Share what you’re feeling.” Ignoring what I said was nothing new. Taking a break to go the bathroom was out of the question. Once I asked to make a quick phone call and she ignored the request. What if I was having a heart attack and needed an ambulance? She would have kept on asking me about feelings while she wrote *peanut butter* or *car pool* on her pad. All she cared about was the here and now and she didn’t give a damn about anything else. A piece of work, let me tell you.

Flying in the face of authority, I marched over to the credenza where there was a pitcher of water and some paper cups. Obviously, the water was there for her and for clients who deserved it but not for me. I poured myself a cup of water, splashing it around on the tray and the carpet, and took a sip. It was room temperature.

“Do you have any ice?” I asked, pushing the envelope. It’s something I do sometimes, just for the hell of it.

“I’m afraid not, Doug,” she said between clenched teeth. She didn’t argue when I told her I wasn’t coming back to therapy. She didn’t even react when I told her I wanted to work with someone less rigid, but I could tell she was pissed. She didn’t attempt to get “closure” before we parted forever, something all therapists are driven to do. But one good thing came from this session. I decided to look up Lillian Wu and get everything out on the table once and for all. Lillian was the one person who was worse off than I was in junior high school. That was my point. She was a foreigner, and Michael Held and I consorted to put a tack on her chair. There were no consequences. I deserved to be haunted by Lillian Wu.

Unfortunately, I had no idea what had happened to her. I asked around, but nobody knew. I even called Michael Held at his law office in White Plains.

“What’s up, Vonnagel? You got a personal injury problem? Like my ad says on the back of the Yellow Pages, no charge unless I win your case. Naturally, I’ll win, and then I collect a third of the settlement.”

“I’m trying to locate Lillian Wu.”

“Who?”

“Lillian Wu. She went to George S. Patton with us.”

“You want to sue somebody named Lillian Wu?”

“No, I want to find her. I thought you might know where she is.”

"I'm drawing a blank, man."

"The Chinese girl in science class. We put a tack on her chair."

"Huh?"

"Come on. You know what I'm talking about."

"Jesus, how long ago are we talking here? No, I don't remember anything like that."

"You're saying you don't remember, not that you didn't do it."

He burst out with a familiar snort; the same diabolical sound he made constantly as a twelve-year-old. "Look, I was just on my way to the courthouse when you called. Sorry I can't help you out with this girl thing." I didn't respond. "Hey, one of these days we really should get together and grab a beer or something. Take care, man." *Click.*

But when I was passing by the old neighborhood, I stopped at the house where the Wu family had lived on the off-chance Lillian's parents were still there. Lo and behold, Mrs. Wu opened the door. I knew it was Mrs. Wu because she was Chinese and about four feet tall. It had to be her. Somewhere inside was the yipping of a small dog.

"Mrs. Wu?" I was breathless at the sight of her, like she was Ann-Margret in "Viva Las Vegas."

"What you selling?" she asked, scrunching up her face. She was Lillian's mother, all right.

"I'm Douglas Vonnagel. I went to school with your daughter." Her little black eyebrows shot up. "My family lived in the house with the big rocks out front."

"Big rocks. Okay."

"Maybe you met my parents, Babe and Sarge?" She appeared baffled. My father couldn't stand foreigners and yelled at them like they were hard of hearing. Probably a good thing she didn't remember him. Babe was memorably good looking, an attention grabber, but she didn't frequent PTA meetings at George S. Patton. "Well, I was hoping you could tell me how to get in touch with Lillian." Her chin dropped until it was almost touching her chest. "Did she ever say anything—about me?"

"What your name again?"

"*Douglas Vonnagel.*"

"No. Never heard of you." The yipping continued and a rattling sound.

"Lillian and I used to do-si-do together," I said.

"What you mean, do-si-do?" She said it like a dirty word. I did a few quick dance steps to demonstrate and possibly break the ice here. "You sell dance lessons? Arthur Murray?"

I shook my head and she seemed to relax a little. "I hear a dog," I said.

"Behind baby gate." That explained the rattle. The animal was trying to escape from the rumpus room. Again, I thought of Lillian crossing the Pacific in her box, struggling to reach her parents and American shores, only to be maimed by Michael Held and me.

"Did your daughter possibly mention—Cootie Boy?" I stared down at Mrs. Wu's tiny, embroidered satin slippers.

"Cutie Boy? Who Cutie Boy?"

"Never mind. I'd like to talk to Lillian. Could you possibly give me her phone number?"

"She live in New York City."

"Oh?" I had a flash of a disheveled, disease-riddled prostitute, roaming Chinatown and eating out of the garbage.

"Park Avenue. Married to rich doctor."

I swallowed. "Really? Lillian is married to a doctor? A *medical* doctor?"

"What you do?"

"Me? For a living, you mean?" She nodded once. Reluctant to say, I struggled to formulate an answer.

"You go to Yale? Lillian go to Yale. You want to see pictures?" She opened the door a little wider and I stepped in. The smell of seaweed hit me like a bus.

The Wu's house was a duplicate of our old split-level, except everything was reversed. Our kitchen was on the left, theirs was on the right. I held my breath and stuck my head in there. A nightmarish creature was laid out on the orange Formica counter in all its multi-legged glory.

"Baby octopus," Mrs. Wu chirped, licking her lips. I took a couple of steps back. "Where you go college?" She wasn't going to let go of this thing.

"It's a small one in upstate New York," I said vaguely. "I'm sure you never heard of it."

"You graduate?"

"Not exactly." The corners of her mouth went down. I was disappointing her already.

Instead of the oriental themed décor I was anticipating, the Wu home was furnished in a unique combination of French provincial, La-Z-Boy and plastic palm trees. An elaborate gold and white table in the Wu entryway displayed a bouquet of feathers and two framed photographs—one of a robed graduate with ivy-covered walls in the background, and a wedding portrait of a bride and groom.

"Here Lillian," Mrs. Wu said, sweeping her hand like one of those Barbie doll girls showing off boats and refrigerators on "The Price is Right."

I moved closer. Lillian Wu was a knockout in a long white dress holding some lilies. Her smile displayed a full set of glittering, straight, normal-sized teeth. The guy standing next to her looked like the ideal all-American boy/doctor.

"You married?" Mrs. Wu asked. "Engaged? You got girlfriend?" She took my shocked silence as a no on all counts. Instead of feeling relieved that Lillian was doing well and I hadn't ruined her life after all, I had a flashback of a fetal pig bathed in formaldehyde and wasn't sure what to do first—throw up or lose control of my bowels. A simultaneous eruption crossed my mind as a possibility.

"Could I use your bathroom?" I gasped.

She pointed upstairs. I already knew where the bathroom was—ours had been on the right so theirs had to be on the left. It was exactly like the one I grew up with except the Vonnagel's had gray-blue tile and the Wu's was gray-green—to my disappointment, there was no spigot and no soaking tub. I had the feeling I was in a fishbowl because the wallpaper was covered with goldfish, as was the plastic shower curtain. I stared into the mirror and thought about Lillian at the sink, brushing her poor little teeth. Clearly she'd had them capped since junior high. Her bathroom on Park Avenue probably featured solid gold fixtures. Lillian of all people had achieved the American Dream. In spite of damaging childhood experiences, Lillian Wu moved on to bigger and better things. Unlike yours truly.

"Cootie Boy," I said into the mirror. My skin was pale and my eyes appeared sunken, like a criminal in a lineup.

I was tempted to peruse the medicine cabinet and sample a little of this and that, but I restrained myself. Thankfully, the sick spell passed and I washed my face with cold water and a fish-shaped guest soap and blotted with a hand towel that smelled like Lillian. When I went back downstairs, Mrs. Wu was still standing in front of the hall table—black shirt, black pants, little cap of black hair—lighting some incense. I had probably interrupted some Buddhist/French Provincial ritual. I imagined the ringing of chimes and little brass bells.

That scent.

"Lillian's volcano," I murmured in a dreamy way. I wondered if it was displayed somewhere in the house, along with numerous other examples of achievement, like her diploma from Yale.

The yipping had become insistent barking.

"You okay?" Mrs. Wu asked, as if not quite sure what I might do next. I got the impression she was ready for me to leave so she could return to her baby octopus or the dog that wanted out.

"I take it Lillian is—happy?" I said, in a fake cheery tone. There might be another element to the story. Something tragic, like under the graduation robe and wedding gown was a wooden leg.

But Mrs. Wu nodded vigorously to indicate everything was just peachy in Lillian's world and headed for the front door. "You hear she model for Vogue? They discover her in Paris, on honeymoon."

"She modeled for Vogue magazine? In Paris? Wow. Gosh. You must be *really* proud. How tall is she, by the way? I mean, she looks a lot taller than I remember." I had to raise my voice over the racket downstairs.

"Taller than you. But not taller than husband. She in graduate school. Columbia. What I tell her you doing now?"

"Oh, that's okay. Lillian probably wouldn't even remember me. It would probably be better if—"

"What you say name is again?"

There was further commotion in the rumpus room. I knew it was the rumpus room because that's the way our house was configured except ours was on the right and the Wu's was on the left. The baby gate must have given way—I heard a crack like a toy pistol shot—and a little Pomeranian flew up and attacked me on the ankle, through my pants. It was surprisingly painful, like tacks digging into my flesh, but I felt like I deserved it. I didn't cry out though, I just shook my foot to dislodge the furry rat. It flew up in the air and landed on the flagstone floor there in the entryway. That's what we had, too—flagstone in the entryway.

The impact must have stunned the little guy.

"Bad, bad, bad!" Mrs. Wu screamed. I was momentarily taken aback. When she switched into rapid-fire Chinese and made

scooping motions in the direction of the limp animal, I considered attempting mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. If I saved the dog's life, maybe Mrs. Wu would speak well of me to Lillian. But he revived on his own, shook himself and bared his teeth again.

Mrs. Wu held out her arms and for a moment I thought she was going to hug me, but instead I felt a surprisingly powerful push and the door closed in my face. I noticed then that they had a double-type front door that was different than ours. As I was examining the diamond shaped molding, I heard the deadbolt click. Mrs. Wu and the rat-dog were now peering through the narrow floor-to ceiling window beside the door. She didn't wave or anything—she had a phone with a long cord to her ear, probably the kitchen wall phone—so I turned around, limped to my car and got the hell out of Dodge.

Dreams of Lillian Wu remain an issue.



Prince is Dead

Michael A. Ferro

When most people buy something frivolous, they forget to ask: Do I need it? Once the item arrives or after they've returned home with the purchase, only then do they usually ask themselves the question. For John Burns, it wasn't he who asked the question of himself, but his infuriated wife, Carol.

"Do you need it?" Carol asked him as they stood in the garage.

John looked at it.

"Do I *need* it?"

"Yes," she said, her arms crossed firmly under her breasts.

John continued to look at it and tilted his head slightly to the side, as if picturing what it might look like speeding off a dirt incline through the air.

"Yes, I need it," he said.

Carol threw her arms into the air.

"You *need* a brand new Corvette!? A goddamn big red \$60,000 Corvette!?"

"Little red Corvette, honey," John said.

"*What!*?"

"It's a little red Corvette."

"Oh, God dammit," she said as she turned toward the door, only to turn right back and cross her arms at him again. "Wait. Wait a minute. Is this because—"

"Prince is dead."

She closed her eyes and her lips pursed tight as a snare.

"You unbelievable ass. It's going back. You're taking it back to wherever the hell you got it."

John smiled as he looked over the car. It gleamed brightly under the large dome light. He watched his reflection grinning back at him in the driver's side window.

"He died so young," John finally said.

"What does that have to do with anything, John!?"

The smile gradually vanished from his face. He lowered his head.

"I remember Prince. I remember that song, honey. Back then, it was just..."

Carol stopped tapping her foot.

"Alex is in his senior year at Berkley," she said. "Do you really think now is a good time to buy a sports car? You don't *need* this. How can we *afford* this?"

"Prince is dead."

"Yes, I've seen the news, John. It's going back."

The garage was silent.

"I know."

She relaxed her stance and let her arms fall to her sides.

"You were doing good these last few years. I thought we'd managed to avoid a mid-life sports car crisis thing," she said. "My radar's up now. I'll be watching the credit statements closely."

For the first time, she looked at the car carefully and they both stood gazing at it, like some stone obelisk. Neither spoke a word.

John walked over to the Corvette's large hood and used his sleeve to wipe off a speck of dirt. He began to hum the song out loud.

"Oh, just stop it," Carol said turning toward the door. "It would have broken your heart when they sliced the thing in two and I took my half in the divorce."

The Great Divide

Matthew D. Laing

Ever since it flew across the sky, Hueyi and his young daughter Meeya have been on the run and into areas not yet explored by their former tribe. Into areas where the trees and the plants look strange; where the water is a different shade; where there is almost no fresh air to breathe; where strange creatures hang from the trees. But they relentlessly head due south and away from their ancestral home in the Nahu Valley. At one point in their history, the Witlan tribe had been a great community of huts and small farms, but with war and sickness they are the only ones remaining. Hueyi fears that the *Fire Bearers* will find them and take Meeya away. They keep pressing on with great haste.

Long ago he remembered stories from the elders about the Fire Bearers. He still vaguely remembered the fire burning slowly, almost down to the embers, with he and the other children seated in front of the pit and directly across from the three old and withered elders. Each of them had white paste smeared down their nose in a singular vertical line; it was a mark of wisdom and authority. Kug, the oldest of the three, told each of the children about the Bearers, about their flight, and about what they do.

“Careful with them” said Kug, voice quieting. “If you get too close they snatch you up, like a great bird plucking its prey off the ground.” One of the children squirmed. “They glow in many areas, like the sun when it is high in the sky or like the flame of a torch. Never look at their light.”

Hueyi remembered a sudden breeze rattling the bushes and the trees causing all six children to jump in surprise.

“Our elders once told us the same thing and we listened. I have never seen the fire, but I’ve been told that the Fire Bearers are out there, somewhere, and they are waiting – they always have been. They will take you away from our lands, from our people, from all that you know.”

The people part didn’t matter anymore but their home did. Hueyi and Meeya had been used to the vibrant sapphire rivers and streams of the Nahu Valley and the best spots to forage and gather materials. Their lineage fell after an attack from another tribe, where he and Meeya, a child of four, hid and avoided certain death. Meeya’s mother, Atzi, never made it past the night-time raid. She had gone down to collect water just before the other tribe came.

Everything he grew up with – everything his forefathers built vanquished overnight. Huts were burned, food stores were taken, and each of the surviving villagers were slaughtered one by one for religious sacrifice. Hueyi’s gods did not require human sacrifice, but he knew that within this jungle there were other tribes that practiced such outlandish customs. He considered them barbaric and wrong.

They had been on the run since Meeya first ventured into a small clearing near their home and looked up past the forest canopy, up into the open blue sky, and right into its lights. There had been something up there, something resembling what Kug once told him and the other children. It had been black and large and there seemed to be bright flames all about its body—perhaps a giant bird holding many torches. Once he realized that this thing, whatever it was, belonged to these mysterious people, he scooped up Meeya, grabbed his finest axes and spears, and took off down familiar trails and into the heavily covered forest. They would not return, not ever. There had to be another home in the jungle for them. After all, the jungle is all that they know and it is all that they have ever known.

Hueyi looked around for Meeya, perhaps concerned that *they* snatched her but then saw that she was playing down at the streambed. His father called the stream Rushwater after the swift rapids in its center. The stream marked the furthest point that he had ever been away from their village. Once as a boy he had looked upon these very waters, watching his father fish along the banks. That had been many years in the past. So much changed—so much death and destruction. The stream’s waters were still a light teal blue and its rocks brown and dark like the sand beneath. Meeya, as six-year olds were prone to do, splashed her feet in the water aiming for small silver fish nipping at her tanned toes. She had not seen much death in her short life and he meant to keep it that way. She understood great things happened and that their people were gone, but she did not need to know fear or pain. So he kept their journey to himself. He hid away the tales of the Fire Bearers. He tried to make their trek an adventure.

“Hu,” she called her father, “I’m hungry.” And she continued to splash in the streambed with its cool water staining the lower part of her long loin cloth.

He took a moment to look at his only child and he was always amazed at how much she already looked like her mother. Meeya’s hair, jet black, glistened against beams of sunlight breaking through the dense forest canopy. Most importantly she had Atzi’s smile—a smile that could bring joy to anyone or anything. It warmed his heart.

“Soon” he said as he grabbed the spear off of an adjacent rock, “I have to fish. Can you not splash until I get our dinner?”

“Okay,” she smiled, “I’ll splash after.”

A short while later they ate a large fish caught from the Rushwater and made an even bed of interwoven palm leaves, a skill he had learned from Atzi when they first lived together in their small hut. It wasn’t home but it would do.

Night began to encroach and the jungle awakened. Somewhere not far off a large cat called out into the night, so he stoked the fire and began collecting wood. Fire kept away the creatures but it drew in outsiders and he was not sure how many other tribes

would be in this location. While Meeya slept he kept watch and sharpened his axe.

Sleep came to him in waves, each bringing about its own dream and meanings.

He didn't sleep much in these last few years, always having to always worry about raids and attacks from the other tribes. The Fire Bearers never came into his mind; well, not until Meeya looked up into the open sky. When it moved the trees swayed as if they understood the things importance.

But, tonight, and against his own intentions, he did sleep and he did dream.

He dreamt of Atzi and baby Meeya and how happy she had been, how happy everyone had been. The village all came together to celebrate Meeya's birth into the world, down and around the large communal fire pit. Hueyi remembered the constant rhythm of the ceremonial drums – the rattles shaking, and the cheer. Birth was considered by his people to be the single most important aspect of life. They did not worship death or sacrifice to various gods and creatures, but they did worship birth, light, happiness, and prosperity. *Many gods for many things.* The Witlans lived peacefully contained within their own territory for centuries, and they did not war.

In the dream Atzi carries the little tan baby down to the fire where old Kug waits, the last of the three elders. He has white paste on his face, that same thick line running down his nose, and beads in his hair. Kug blesses Meeya with the burning of the special crescent leaf; thick plumes of thick and white smoke shroud Meeya's head—

He always woke from the dream when the baby started to cry as the smoke went into her lungs, sobs as ancient echoes. As he awoke, the darkness made him feel lost until he noticed the small burning embers of the once roaring fire. He turned over and saw Meeya sleeping peacefully with a spider crawling up her arm. He picked up the spider and carried it away from their site.

He was half-way through stoking the fire when he heard something trample through the bushes behind him, a large crash and shuffle. The noise was startling and he realized *what* may be near. He had seen them all the time over his years in his village. The large cats like to stalk their prey until they felt ready to pounce and devour.

Like his father had taught him many times before, Hueyi took out his long wooden spear and wacked the pole against a nearby rock creating a loud and hallowed series of bangs. And he repeated the process until Meeya awoke and stared at him with dark and confused eyes. He put a finger to his lips and motioned for her to be quiet. And she listened. The growling stopped. The creature fled.

"Hu?" Meeya asked with sleepy eyes—

"Sssh" he whispered to her, "go back to sleep. It was just a little monkey." And with that she laid back down and shut her eyes. Hueyi stoked the fire and laid back down himself. "Just a little monkey like you, Meeya" he whispered.

Once again he slept and dreamt of Atzi and Meeya; of a time long gone but still precious. He knew life was once again about to change. They were on the run.

But for now, sleep eased his spirits.

Within the vast sea of emerald green, they continued underneath the dense and enclosing forest canopy. Sunlight rarely seeped in and when it did Hueyi took care to avoid passing directly underneath. The great trees and vines were their cover, their refuge as it had been all their lives. Kug always mentioned that they should be careful about open spaces: *be wary when farming—be wary when hunting.* And they had been.

It was three nights since the call with the panther and he continued to lead them south and into areas that he had never been to and, until today, they had all looked the same. Between the edges of the forest where they now stood, lay a great copper brown field littered with tree-stumps and devoid of plants and bushes save for a few growing in-between the stumps. He had never seen anything like it. The gap was large. It was a graveyard.

In all his thirty-some years in the jungle, contained within their tribal boundaries, he had never seen such an absence of nature. It was almost like a portion of the great sea envisioned by his ancestors but dry and lifeless. He wondered if this were a trap set by the Fire Bearers—but he couldn't entirely be sure. It may have always been like this.

"Meeya" he whispered when she caught up to his side. She had been skipping behind him, but now looked up into his eyes. "We are going to run. Run as fast as your little legs will carry you and I will be behind you. Run like a panther. Run like the wind."

She nodded; eyes in awe by the great emptiness in front of them. She looked fearful yet aware. Hueyi thought that perhaps the child knew of the great impending danger behind them.

"See the trees over there?" he pointed across the gap and towards another portion of the forest looming directly in front of them. "Make it there. Go now and sshh..." And once again put the finger to his lips.

While the little Meeya ran, her jet black hair fluttered in the breeze. Hueyi followed.

A great booming came from above the gap, the trees hugging the clearing violently rustle and sway to the power of *its* wings. Wind gushes past and Hueyi can feel the sweat on his skin now cooling. He then looks up and sees a great mammoth black bird with lights moving with them—no, towards them. He begins to sprint and scoops up Meeya when he reaches her. They dart and he runs faster than he has ever run before.

They make it across and are in the forest as before; relieved by its density and its canopy. But they do not stop, they do not pause. They keep going over plants and down existing dirt trails. In the distance he can hear voices, voices coming from the sky; voices coming from the great bird. *Voices that he could not understand.* His heart raced. Now things were different.

Aside from the lifeless gap, the forest until that moment had been dense and familiar. It now appeared thin, and there were many more trails – each heading off in various winding directions like a snake slithering through tall jade grass. Meeya spoke less and less and he knew that she was frightened. She too had seen and heard the Fire Bearers at the gap.

They had not eaten much in two days as the streams did not have any fish. There were increasingly fewer edible plants and fruit, and animals seemed rare and hard to come by – not to mention frightened.

Hueyi and Meeya sat near a small stream. Behind them lay a small mattress of interwoven palm. Through the canopy above, the sun was beginning to set. Meeya poked a small stick into the streams slow moving water.

“Hu” she asked and looked up at her father.

“Yes monkey” he smiled, trying to cheer her up.

“Are we ever going back home?” Her dark eyes looked sad. It was near the same expression she gave him when he talked about Azti.

“We can’t any longer,” he said carefully. “You saw that great thing in the sky?”

She nodded.

“Remember old Kug?”

She nodded again.

“He always told us to be wary of that beast, of those people. We have always called them the Fire Bearers.”

“But who are they? *What was that?*” she asked and now turned to face her father. She looked sad. Meeya once loved Kug like a grandfather.

“I don’t know my little monkey. Whatever it is, can’t be good. We need to keep separate and hidden. We need to find a home away from them. Will you help me search, will you keep your eyes peeled?” he smiled.

“When?”

“Soon Meeya” he told her and hoped this was true. “A few more days and we will begin to make a new home. Will you be a big girl and help out your Hu?”

“I will,” now she smiled, “I promise.”

Later that evening Hueyi sat feeding the fire while Meeya snored behind him. He could not sleep, not after everything he had witnessed. And a few hours earlier he heard that booming of the Fire Bearers gliding over the canopy, flying over in short circuits—searching the jungle floor through considerable trees.

Hueyi saw them pass from a distance. At first he feared for their safety, worrying that perhaps the Fire Bearers resembled a tribe, but then realized that it was another jungle tribe heading back the way they had just come.

Ten of them ran across the river each adorned in clothing similar to the Witlan Tribe: notably a loin cloth and white paste smeared on their face and body. They carried bags and spears. Two small children chased behind the adults and they moved with haste.

But he would not break cover.

Other tribes came and took. Other tribes killed and plundered. Other tribes sacrificed. But he wondered why they were moving with such speed. The children looked afraid.

This time Meeya did not speak. She too feared the other tribes.

As soon as the group left his periphery, Hueyi took Meeya’s hand and travelled in the opposite direction. Nothing could be as horrible as those people overhead – those ghastly noises and sounds. The way the trees bent and swayed with such power and force.

It was a hot day and he felt his own sweat bead down his face. They moved with speed and intention. They continued looking for a new home away from legends and enemies.

It had been a great many days since their encounter with the other jungle tribe. The forest continued changing, thinning in sections and providing less and less sources of edibles and fruit. They had not eaten meat for a long while and Hueyi knew that they would need to settle soon. They would need to concentrate on nutrition and a permanent dwelling. Meeya became far too skinny and she often complained about the hunger pains which hurt him more than anything else.

Yesterday he found a strange object on one of the tree trunks. It had been bright red and fluttered in the wind like a small strip of hide. The marker was stuck to the side of a trunk. He presumed that it was to mark a trail, as he used to do by bending the stalk of a plant or by nicking a tree with his axe. He wondered whether they would be at the Great Divide soon.

Kug informed the tribe on multiple occasions about *the Great Divide*, much like his tales of the Great Sea to the east.

“Our jungle is not infinite” the old elder spoke with his deep and raspy voice. “There is a Great Divide out there” he pointed south with his arthritic bony hand, “And we must never reach it. We are safe beneath these trees with our own customs and practices. You see,” he paused and stoked the fire with his cane, “The Great Divide is the end of our way. It is the end of all we know. The jungle dies. The jungle turns to grey dirt. The dirt kills.”

Strange sounds woke Hueyi from his shallowed sleep: strange and frightening noises echoing from somewhere near. He saw bright lights dancing in the distance, illuminating the darkness through the tree line like vibrant stars in the sky. He wondered if it was another tribe, but they could not stay here. There was no food and they were being followed.

Maybe Old Kug had been wrong. Maybe out there was salvation; perhaps life rather than death.

A beam of warm sunlight warmed Hueyi’s face and he awoke from a shallow sleep. Beside him Meeya abruptly woke to his movement. He smiled and his stomach rumbled violently. Today they would make their move.

“Meeya.”

“Are we going today?” she asked inquisitively.

“Yes we are, my little monkey,” he said and then looked up towards the source of the bright lights and noises. The jungle floor sloped upwards ever so slightly but he could see the end of its density -*The Great Divide*- where the thickness stopped—where Kug foretold a great openness..

“Are we going to eat?” she asked, her dark eyes looking for a positive reaffirmation; her dark black hair smooth and glistening underneath the daylight. Atzi’s eyes—her mother’s hair.

“Afterwards my child,” and then he pointed to a large boulder next to where they were seated, “I need you to stay there while I go check ahead. Meeya you need to promise me that you will stay there until I come back.”

At first she looked confused, but then she complied. She got up and went over to the large grey boulder and sat with her back against the stone. Hueyi kissed his child on the forehead and then grabbed his axe.

This time he moved carefully, quick to avoid rustling foliage or snapping twigs. The tough and thick bottoms of his feet acted as leather and he hardly made a sound. For a second he thought he felt the great bird approaching, but then realized it was only a cool breeze coming from ahead of him. Surprisingly his heart raced in his chest. He smelt smoke. He heard strange sounds as he approached the opening. He stepped forward into the opening and realized that he was on top of a great stone cliff. The same cool breeze hit him dead smack in the face. He peered over its face.

Below were things he had never seen before and things he did not or could not comprehend. *Great hunks of metal. Smoke. Lights beyond measure. Dwellings which rose high in the sky. People adorned in strange garb. A vast openness devoid of life—absent of trees and plants, of animals and water. Grey like stones and torn-up dirt—*

He never felt such fear—and then he heard it. From somewhere ahead the great bird thrummed and swooshed and called out to him. But he could not understand. He did not want to understand. He turned back into the jungle—his home. This time he ran. He wouldn’t look any longer.

“Meeya!” he called as he approached the boulder. His daughter looked frightened and she had every right to be. Down there were the Fire Bearers. Down there was the Great Divide. Down there was the end of their ways.

“Hu—”

“Let’s go” he said, “Run like the wind, my little monkey!”

“But—” she began to cry. He knew she was afraid. She had seen so much already, so much to fear.

“Don’t be afraid Meeya!” he said, giving her his characteristic smile. “Down there I saw a black panther. Remember the one I chased away?”

She nodded and she followed.

He grabbed her hand and they went back into the jungle.

“Peter!” John Swithen called from the right side of the black helicopter hovering over rainforest town of Selem, in Western Brazil. John Pointed down towards Tarem Cliff. “There *they* are!” He had the eyes of a madman.

By God, Dr. Peter Menalaus thought as he watched the short and tanned male walk out onto the cliffs face. “He found his way out!”

But then the male went back into the jungle: and he didn’t just walk, he ran.

His research team had been tracking the male and the small female for days, for weeks. In all his years studying anthropology and cultures indigenous to the Southern Hemisphere he had never, not ever, believed that they would find an un-contacted group in the rainforest. *It was a find of a lifetime.* What knowledge they would possess of the past—of their rituals and rites leading back before the time of European colonization. He knew the male would turn back. Selem would have been nothing like the man would have ever seen in his life. *A scar in the earth...*

“Call the University in Paulo” Peter said as he scanned the cliff face with his binoculars. He beckoned the pilot. “Head back over and into the jungle—”

John cut him off.

“Peter!” John turned and faced him, “We are not supposed to contact them! You’ve already used the microphone—that’s breaking protocol!”

But he did not care how John thought. He led this team and he would do whatever he wished.

He ignored John and crept over to the pilot.

“Jorge, head back over to that clearing. That logging patch,” he smiled, “Do you think we can land the chopper down there?”

The pilot looked back at him and nodded.

This was a find of a lifetime.

After they found them, he would push deeper into the jungle—deeper into the darkness of this unknown swash of wilderness. He wished to bring the savages into the light. To educate the ignorant. To learn from the past. To do both at the same time.



Sapling

Sara Roberts

Pam stared out of the window at the machinery on her lawn. She remembered when they had planted the apple tree together upon first moving in. They had laughed as they kissed over the sapling in their wellington boots. "It will be a symbol," she had said, "since we're not getting married."

Over the years they had watched it grow, watered it in hot summers and pruned it in the winter. They had enjoyed picnics in its shade, sitting on the Indian rug with the children when they were babies, feeding them apple purée from a homemade pot.

Later they watched them running around the tree with the neighbour's kids and playing with the dog, while Dave knelt down and put his ear to her belly. How she had craved those apples during her third pregnancy, picking them straight off the tree and eating them as she strode through the damp morning grass.

Dave had broken his arm falling off the ladder when he made a miniature sort of treehouse up there for the kids. The two eldest used to 'hide' there while she called them in for dinner and pretended to search the house for them.

When she went back to work, the apples started to stay on the ground and rot. There was no more time for apple purée. The kids ate ready meals and Dave hardly had a chance to see them, let alone tend the garden. He was so often away now, and even when he wasn't working the stress never really left him. By the time he was 40, it had etched a map of new lines on his face and turned his hair grey.

Still, the tree stood strong and tall and Pam enjoyed watching the leaves change colour and flutter to the ground in the autumn. From time to time, she would wade out at dawn, the deep grass curling around her calves, blades slicking themselves to her skin, and stand looking up at its gnarled arthritic branches. She would pick an apple and eat it, resting her forehead against its marbled trunk and tracing the patterns in the bark with her finger. Its eddies and swirls, gorges and canyons.

She had witnessed its withering along with her husband's. She stood for hours and just stared at it through the kitchen window after coming back from each of Dave's chemo sessions.

Now it was unsightly; a ruinous island in the middle of a cropped lawn, a single leaf still fluttering like a white flag in the wind.

The estate agent had told her she should have it taken out. It would help to sell the house, he said. It would help if its blackened broken trunk no longer pointed like an accusing finger at the sky.



Shotgun Signs

Justin Hunter

The movie theater played classics on Tuesdays for two bucks a pop. You had to get there before eleven, though. And they wouldn't serve alcohol even though the goddamn bar is just as stocked in the morning as it is late at night. So, Daryl poured some coconut rum into a plastic bottle of Coke while still in the parking lot. He'd found the rum tucked in the bottom drawer of the dresser at the old motel he stayed at last night. He slid the bottle into his jeans pocket when he walked into the theater. Now, he was itching to pull it out as he waited for the 10:30 a.m. showing of *The Jerk* to start.

His daughter's first movie had been in a theater like this. Small, empty, playing classics like this one. Dani laughed and he laughed and *What's Up Doc?* carried them through to the black-screen credits.

That was before Daryl decided he didn't want his daughter anymore.

An usher walked past Daryl, looking down. Suspecting. Then, he came back and stood next to Daryl. "Sir, is everything all right?"

Daryl kept his eyes on the screen, waiting for the movie. "What?"

"You don't look well."

"I'm not."

"Can I do—do you need anything?"

"I need plenty."

The lights dimmed and the usher gave up and walked away. Daryl pulled the rum and Coke back out and sipped as the movie began.

He wished he could say he was drunk when Steve Martin danced on the porch of that house at the end of the movie. But he didn't feel a thing. He stood, knees popping, and walked out of the theater, past the concession stands, and into the parking lot where the sun had begun to bake the tar.

He stood in the middle of the road before walking to his truck, and he tried to hold the sun's gaze. His eyes burned after a second, and his eyelids shut after two. He used to tell his daughter staring at the sun would make her go blind, but that was when Dani was just a girl. Now, he didn't know what he'd tell her.

When Daryl got to his truck, he tossed the empty Coke bottle in the bed. The bottle of coconut rum in the glove compartment should get him through his day of driving. Johanna used to drink stuff like that. Bay Breezes made with Malibu, Hurricanes made with some other shit that tasted more like Kool-Aid than alcohol. She spent the summers sipping cocktails on the back porch, pretending it wasn't a hundred and fifteen degrees outside.

He and Johanna were still married as far as the law was concerned. But she wasn't going to find anyone new with the way she was, and Daryl didn't want anyone in his life besides their daughter.

He climbed into the cab of the truck and started it up. Most days began like this now. Maybe not with a movie, but with a couple of drinks and too many memories.

Dani had been eighteen when she told them she was moving in with Sharon. Johanna told her it was a great idea, told her she supported it. And that's why Daryl's wife still got to see their daughter.

Daryl shut his eyes and tried to remember the exact words he'd said to Dani. "Ain't no daughter of mine shacking up with a dyke." That was it.

Of course, if it had stopped there, he might not be driving up and down the empty highways of Southern Arizona just to keep from going insane. No, Daryl told his daughter that she was a piece of shit. Human garbage. That if she left his and Johanna's home, there'd be no coming back.

She left, and now all he wanted was for Dani to come back.

But there wasn't anywhere to come back to. Daryl had been living out of his truck and cheap motels for months since Johanna's thing at work. Somehow, the way Daryl treated their daughter didn't do them in. It was something that happened on the job. From what she would tell him, Johanna had to use her gun and it messed with her head.

He guided the truck onto the back road leading toward the state highway cutting west toward Tucson. Dani was living in a trailer with that same girl across the state line up in Utah. They must have wanted to escape the desert. He couldn't blame them.

Daryl had even driven up there once or twice. Long drive. He'd sat in the bed of his truck, drinking warm beer, and watching the light through the curtains of the trailer's windows. He couldn't just go knock on the door. He'd tried to come back from what he'd done, but Dani wouldn't allow it.

A cloud streaked in front of the sun, dropping Daryl into the shadows. When the cloud passed by and the sun lit the cab again, the light caught the edge of a piece of chrome on the passenger side floorboard. He leaned over and pulled back a rust-covered tarp and looked at the shotgun on the floor. The old 10-gauge wouldn't do much in its current state, but it helped Daryl sleep at night.

Sometimes, just before laying his head back in the reclined driver's seat of the pickup at the end of the day, Daryl would slide the barrel of the shotgun between his lips, careful not to smack it against his teeth. He'd hold his thumb across the trigger, and he'd close his eyes and think. Sometimes about Dani—like how he didn't care who she fucked now, probably didn't care back then either. Sometimes about Johanna—how he missed her forgiving him for everything he'd ever done as they fell into bed together.

And on these nights where Daryl let his tongue run across the cold steel shotgun barrel, he'd let his brain wander until he couldn't stand it anymore. Then he'd pull the trigger.

The dry click of an empty chamber made his blood go cold and his skin tingle.

He'd picked up the shotgun at a gun show after he got tired of passing road signs torn apart by birdshot. If people loved shooting up metal signs on the side of the highway, he might as well give it a try. But he never got around to buying shells.

When Daryl made it to Interstate 10, he went south then caught Interstate 19 toward Mexico. He ducked off I-19 at the first state highway he could find, and he set the cruise control. Yesterday, he drove five hundred miles back and forth across Pima County, Santa Cruz County, and Cochise County. He hit a coyote in the last hour of driving, and that told him it was time to call it a night.

By one in the afternoon, Daryl was fifty miles outside the city. He passed trailers and ranches. A firework stand stood a few yards off the highway. When Dani was twelve, Daryl tried to impress her with a firework show on the Fourth in their backyard. Johanna had told him not to do it, but she was gone to work when he sat Dani in a lawn chair out back. He lit the first firework without any trouble. The second one, though, exploded on the ground, caught Daryl's arm on fire. He got it put out with just a few burns, but Dani cried the rest of the night.

He'd take that night over any other he'd had in the last few years.

How he'd made it this long was a mystery. Dani was thirty now, had two kids she adopted. That Sharon girl—woman, now—worked at some crisis management company. Didn't make much as far Daryl knew since they were still stuck in that trailer. But Johanna told him their daughter seemed happy.

For the first couple years after Daryl told Dani not to come back, he stayed angry. Couldn't look at a picture of her without wanting to hit a wall. He'd shattered every picture of his daughter they had lined up on the dresser after Dani moved out.

Daryl spun off the cap on the rum, took a drink from the bottle, and then closed it up. He watched a storm build to the south. All show, no go. The clouds puffed and darkened, but when it came down to action, the storm would back off. Like a bully forced to fight for the first time.

Daryl had been fighting for some time now. Fighting himself. Fighting Johanna. Fighting the pain after he got hurt on the job. He broke his back in six spots when that wall came down on him. Now, Daryl wasn't supposed to lift anything heavier than ten pounds. He was supposed to be taking Vicodin to numb the pain. And he was living off the settlement the company gave him.

That happened four years ago. Maybe that's what changed his mind. Made him realize what a piece of shit he was. Or maybe it was Johanna leaving him.

The first time Daryl tried to apologize to Dani, to beg her to let him back in, was three years after she left. Johanna gave him Dani's number, and Daryl called. Sharon answered and even begged Dani to come to the phone, but Daryl heard his daughter in the background.

"I ain't got a daddy," she'd said to Sharon. Then the phone went dead.

Daryl tried once more after the accident at work. From his hospital bed, he scratched out a letter. Said he wasn't worth the time she was taking to read the letter, but he hoped she could forgive him. Said he loved her. Said he might even love Sharon if Dani would give him another shot. He wrote about his own father. No excuse, he'd told her, but his own daddy hated everything. Hate flowed through blood, but Daryl should've been better.

When he got an envelope back from Dani, his heart about stopped. He was out of the hospital by then, laying on the couch at home. He tore it open and found his original letter shredded. He dumped the tiny pieces of paper to the floor, laid his head on the couch, and closed his eyes. He hadn't tried to reach out since then.

Daryl passed a few trailers, some slump block homes, a gas station serving as a grocery store, and a post office. He watched the hawks high in the sky, circling, waiting. Waves of heat rose from the tar ahead of him, and he imagined the rain coming, cooling the road. He passed the shell of a burnt-out car and an old mattress tossed to the side of the road.

Then, he passed a gun store and hit the brakes.

Daryl pulled to the side of the road and looked at the store in his rearview mirror. It was looking back at him, daring him to break eye contact. He threw the truck in park and stepped out into the dusty hard clay lining the highway.

He walked back to the store and pulled open the door. An old Indian with close-cropped hair nodded then went back to

watching daytime television on the black and white mounted behind the counter.

“You got 10-gauge shells?” Daryl asked.

The Indian didn’t look up, but he pointed at a wall toward the back.

Daryl looked at the rifles on racks along the wall, the handguns under the glass. He could look all day, but he wouldn’t be able to walk out with one of those guns until passing the background check, and that would take too goddamn long.

He picked up a box of 10-gauge Remington’s from the shelf along the wall in the back and walked up to the counter. It smelled like sawdust and whiskey in the shop, and it reminded Daryl of working out in the garage when Dani was little. He built her a rocking horse from wood he’d picked up in the neighborhood. She watched him, clapping when each new piece was finished. And he got that thing polished to a shine while he drank cheap booze from a Styrofoam cup.

“What’re you drinking back there?”

The Indian looked up. “What?”

“Smells like something I’d drink.”

The Indian shook his head. “You’re on the reservation, so you assume we’re all drinking, all the time. That it?”

Daryl shook his head and placed the shells on the counter. “Nope, just smells like whiskey. That’s all.”

“Well, you smell like rum.”

Daryl shrugged and pointed at the box of shells. “How much?”

“I’m not selling these to you when you’re drunk.”

“I ain’t drunk.”

“Well, you’re not right either.”

Daryl shook his head. “Just sell me the damn shells.”

The Indian looked Daryl in the eyes. “Anything else you want to say to me? Maybe you want to ask me to do a rain dance for you, huh?”

Daryl thought about the storm building out to the south, and the Indian went back to watching the television. Daryl pulled out his wallet. He grabbed a twenty and laid it on the counter. “I didn’t mean no offense. This should cover the shells.”

Daryl grabbed the box, but the Indian slammed his hand down on Daryl’s hand. “Watch your mouth next time.”

Daryl nodded and slid his hand and the shells out from under the Indian’s hand. When Daryl was back outside, he opened the case of shells and looked inside as if he was worried he’d just bought an empty cardboard box. He found five rounds stacked in a line inside. Satisfied, he closed the lid and walked back to the truck.

He should have been angry. And maybe he would have been in the past. Maybe he would have been if he were still at home feeling sorry for himself. Or, maybe that old Indian made some sense.

Daryl drove on for another twenty or so miles. He drove until he stopped seeing homes. When he was surrounded by saguaros and mesquite trees and open desert, he searched for a road sign. He found a sign warning drivers that the bridge ahead would ice before the road. He couldn’t remember the last time it iced anywhere around there.

He pulled to the side of the road ten feet from the sign. Daryl lifted the shotgun to his lap, grabbed the box of shells, and climbed out of the truck. He went to the tailgate and popped it open. He slid the shotgun into the bed and set the shells on the side rail. Daryl climbed up, feeling his back try to pull apart as he did so.

He picked the shotgun back up and grabbed the shells. Up front at the cab of the truck, he laid the 10-gauge down across the roof and opened the box of shells. He’d seen Johanna clean and load her guns a million times, but she never wanted Daryl to have one of his own. That’s why he kept his daddy’s old bolt-action at the job site, tucked under a ventilation duct. Until the accident. He never did get that thing back.

When he and Johanna got married, she’d been out of the Air Force for six months. She didn’t know what to do next, and Daryl suggested she try to catch on with the sheriff’s department. And after all that time, she was still there.

Daryl loaded a round into the shotgun and held the gun across the top of the cab. He aimed for the sign in front of the truck, squinting under the late afternoon sun. He laid his finger alongside the trigger and sucked in the hot air coming off the top of the sheet metal.

When he was young, Daryl’s family had big get-togethers. They didn’t have a name or a reason for them, but his grandparents had a lot of kids and those kids had kids. He could remember driving from Arizona out to New Mexico with his parents and pulling into the dirt lot of the ranch house. There’d already be six or seven other cars there, and when they’d get inside, the house would be an echo that just wouldn’t end. Laughter, shouting, cheering, crying. All of it rolled into one.

He'd taken that away from Dani. He didn't think before he spoke, didn't even think before he thought. Daryl squeezed the trigger.

The birdshot tore a hole in the top-left part of the sign, but he knew about half the pellets went sailing past the sign, cutting through the humid air. He looked out to the south and the storm clouds were getting darker. Getting closer. He loaded another shell.

Daryl started thinking about where he might sleep tonight. He figured he'd be best sleeping in the truck, but if the storm hit, he'd prefer a real roof over his head. He took aim at the sign again, but he stopped. He laid the shotgun on the roof of the cab and wondered what Dani would be doing right about then.

Daryl realized he didn't even know what she did for work. Didn't know what she did for fun. He made a decision years ago—one that he couldn't even understand anymore. He just said things, spoke too much. Didn't listen enough.

After a moment, Daryl slid the remaining shells from the box and tossed the box into the brush off the side of the road. He counted the three shells in his hand, rolled them back and forth. Then, he threw them to the side of the road, leaving the one chambered in the shotgun. He climbed down from the bed with the gun leaned against his shoulder.

He wondered if Dani would have come to the funeral if that wall had killed him. Probably not. He wouldn't go to his own funeral even if they had an open bar.

Daryl climbed into the truck, laid the shotgun on the passenger side floorboard, and cranked the engine. He watched the storm swirl overhead and heard the first rumble of thunder. The storm might have a little go in it, after all.

He put the truck in gear then flipped a U-turn in the middle of the highway. It was a half-day drive up to Dani's trailer in Utah, and he wanted to get as far away from that storm as he could.



Tired Evening

Norbert Kovacs

On a Sunday evening, Mrs. Betty Gruber sat quietly in her living room after dinner, writing her errand list for the next day on scrap paper. She had written down the places to go—the grocery store, the cleaners, and the pharmacy—and tried to make up her mind which to visit, when, without being able. Betty Gruber was used to this kind of indecision. Her worn, creased face showed it as did her light red hair that had lost its best color and was fading into a drab brown. Her pale brown eyes had a cynical, hard expression and her eyelids hung low as if with a perpetually tired feeling. She was at the indefinite stage that lies between fat and thin, a result of many failed diets. She had dressed today without much mind for her appearance. She had on a loose, striped T-shirt and worn khaki pants, less than a favorite, but ready clothes; on her feet were a pair of white, cracked house shoes. At lunchtime, Betty had walked around the neighborhood hoping to feel more alive than she had in the last few weeks. Betty lived in a district of attractive historic homes and went out with a plan to see several of them. She wound up wandering not long after she began, going one street to the next without knowing the reason. “Well, I’m only walking around for fun,” she had thought to re-assure herself. “There’s no harm to it.” Betty walked a long while where she had little interest. The hard asphalt road and the sidewalk reflected the day’s heat and the sun’s glare as she went, bewildering and annoying her. She had considered at times that she was walking from the handsome homes and grand trees she had meant to visit. She did not change course because of it. Betty returned home, tired and unfulfilled, and continued to feel so into the evening.

On the couch separated from her by half a cushion sat her husband Jon. Jon was an absentminded, homely man. He was tall and thin like a celery stalk and had straight, brown hair that lay out of form on his head. His pure, brown eyes were like small chocolates and his dark, thick mustache much like a softened candy bar atop his lips. He wore a gray sports-style sweatshirt and long, relaxed khaki pants, a favorite pair. He was reading the day’s newspaper, his eyes glazed and dull, for the paper had little except political news, but he made to seem interested as if he might hope it into being otherwise. He finally put down the paper and said, as if the theme came naturally for them, “Have you spoken lately with our neighbor?”

“Which one?”

“The ones in the blue house.”

Betty recalled the neighboring family. They were a couple with two children, the woman of the family, a heavy, cheerful person. When she tried to remember the woman’s name, Betty drew a blank. “No, not lately. What about them?”

“They put up a new deck last week.”

“Yes, I saw when I was hanging laundry.”

“Well what do you think? Doesn’t it look attractive?”

“Yes. A very nice, bright red.” *Wasn’t a new deck supposed to look attractive?* she thought. The neighborhood people did a lot to ensure all their homes were. Two houses down, the couple had installed old style front doors that now gave their house an up-scale appearance. At the corner, a family had installed a bay window, a standardized model, nothing beautiful or unique but large and expensive. While unimpressed, Betty had felt obliged to praise it to a friend.

“We may bring it up when we ask them to our party in a few weeks,” Jon said.

“You mean the neighbors?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps.”

“Whom are we inviting for the party anyway?”

“I’m still deciding, though really I’d be happy with whomever.” Betty considered that their friends were all good for talk, so any of them would make good guests. Their parties seemed always to find some way to turn out decently with the friends who came. As she thought this, Betty recalled a party where she had had to talk with her husband’s friend Ted Sommers. Ted had told her about the new desk and chair installed in the back room of his electronics store. She had smiled and smiled at Ted as he seemed to talk forever. Betty recalled then her failure to understand a bit of the story her friend Francine told while the other guests listened glued with attention.

“I’ll choose some guests for us, but you think of some you’d like too.”

Jon picked up the remote control lying on the couch cushion and turned on the TV. The program was an adventure/ investigation show that featured a man in a business suit carrying a gun. He walked panting nervously atop some office building. Jon watched the show with interest but Betty could not. Once she caught the image of the main character crawling through an air vent, then, after a long time, a scene where the man was shooting bullets quickly. She lost the narrative somewhere in between and could not piece together what happened. At one point, the man on the screen was running and Jon, very amused, turned and made some comment. Betty watched Jon’s lips move but did not comprehend him. Perhaps he said something I should have heard, she thought. The adventure program ended and Jon changed the channel to a comedy re-run that Betty disliked. “I’m going upstairs to take a

shower," she said standing.

"Okay." Intent on the TV, Jon did not lift his head to her.

Betty went upstairs to their bedroom and undressed in the adjacent bathroom. She was glad to be free of the clothes that she had worn since the overheated morning and dropped them into the hamper without a second thought. She turned on the water, checking it was warm but not hot, and stepped into the shower tub. She took the soap and lathered her body and limbs, richly and white. However, Betty did not feel clean as she washed because the water seemed to cling to her. She knew the water was not hard (they had tested it) so could not figure why it should feel so. She bent and shifted to clean her body, the water seeming to stick to her the whole time. At last she finished the shower, turned off the water and grabbed a big, cotton towel by the tub to dry herself. As she rubbed the cloth against her, the blood in her limbs warmed and the flesh beneath the towel seemed to resist her motion. She put on a bathrobe that felt too warm for her and stepped from the shower.

Betty walked into the bedroom, got a change of shirt, bra, and shorts from the dresser, and put them on. Her bed lay right by the chair where she sat changing into the clothes and she noted the new white bed sheet and cover for the blanket she had installed that afternoon. Beyond the bed was the bay window; its curtains were pulled back revealing the night sky. The clean, neat look of the bed, seen by the oblique light from the bathroom, made her think she should lie down in it and rest. She pulled back the sheets, got into the bed sitting up, and covered her legs in the blanket. The white, fresh sheets were cool and smooth on her bare legs. She worked her leg a little against them and enjoyed it. Then she stopped moving and just sat. She felt at ease for the first time that day and gazed out the window at the sky. The night was dark and the stars shone strong and clear. To the side of the window showed the edge of a maple, dense and dark.

A memory suddenly came to Betty. When she was a girl of ten, she and her family had gone one night to a newly cut hay field in the country. Though dark, she had seen the field well, dotted with its tall, golden haystacks and far away, a line of maples at the field's edge. The farmer who owned the field was standing by a large fire in the hay stubble and some stones. He greeted her father, who was a friend, along with her brother and herself when they came to him. The farmer's family stood beside him; his boy and girl greeted Betty. The heat from the fire had come to her wonderful and warm and she had been happy for it after tramping across the cold field. Above her in the night had been a very clear sky filled with hundreds of stars. Beside the fire, she craned her head back far to look at them. They had been a wonderful, great number, each standing clear against the night and Betty had felt the whole universe was there before her. And she had thought then the world was clear, sharp, and bright. She had been happy and she had loved the field, the fire, the farmer's kindness, and the many stars.

Yes, it had been beautiful, Betty thought seated in her bed. But where did that wonder and beauty that she had known go? What had she done to lose it? Why, she asked herself, was she unhappy? Her walks were long and pointless on more days than just today. Jon talked to her and on many evenings, she did not hear him. Betty sat in the bed and tried to think why. But all she managed to tell herself was that she was tired. She might always be too tired now to think why.



Class Walk

Thaddeus Rutkowski

I'm on my way to the class I teach, but it is the first class meeting and the room is in a new location. I have the street address, but I haven't been to the building before.

I leave on time, and I think I have enough time to get to where I'm supposed to be, but I'm running late. My brother is with me, though I don't know why he is there. I haven't seen him in a long while.

We walk uptown, heading for a certain city street, but it is slow going. Snow covers the streets and sidewalks, and our feet slide with every step.

"It's time to run," I say, and I start to jog. I'm surprised I can run at all.

My brother easily keeps up with me. He's in good shape. "You know," he says, "when I got out of treatment, I couldn't run a hundred yards. Now, I can go for miles."

The class, even though it's the first, is being observed by a faculty member, and I don't know what will happen if I'm not on time. I don't know if I'll be able to make my presentation during the second part. It's a three-hour class, but I might be an hour late. Will the observer wait that long? Or will he or she leave and reschedule?

My brother and I are walking fast now—the jogging is over—on streets that are unfamiliar to me. We had started going uptown on a major avenue, but somehow we left it. I can see the avenue to our right, with cars and buses moving.

It doesn't occur to me to take a bus or a cab.

"What's the plan?" I ask my brother.

"We'll play it by ear," he says, but I don't hear anything.

When we arrive at the corner where the college is supposed to be, none of the buildings look familiar. I see a large brick building, low and about a block long—it looks like a factory, but a sign over the door says it's a cooking school. Maybe the campus of my school will be next to it.

I look around to find the time of day and see a large clock face on a tower. The hands of the clock tell me that the start time of my class has passed.

My brother turns to leave. He is going to his home, far from where I live. However, he gives me his phone number. "Don't write to me," he says. "Don't take twenty minutes or half an hour to write a letter. Just call me and talk to me for five minutes."

When I reach the classroom, I see that it is divided into two sections. I take my position in one section and start to speak. I don't know if the students in the other part of the room can hear me. Probably they can. But they certainly can't see me, or the notes I'm writing on the white board.

I want the students to hand in a short essay, but I realize I didn't assign the reading they needed for preparation. No one has done the essay. No one hands in anything. So we start a language exercise. I write random words on the board—"dig," "digital"—but I don't know if the students will be able to use these words in sentences. That might be asking them to do too much, to write sentences that contain random words yet follow a logical sequence. Nevertheless, that is their assignment. I sit at the front desk while they do their work. I look over the attendance sheet and wonder what happened to the students who aren't there. I imagine close relatives of theirs have died, and the students had to attend the funerals.

After the class, I walk out to the street and find a stand of bicycles for rent. I take a bike from the rack and ride downtown. But as I look at the street numbers, I see they are rising. I see 112th Street, then 116th Street. I reverse direction, but the same thing happens. The street numbers ascend. I leave the grid entirely and find myself on a two-lane road—a blacktop with a double line down the middle and single lines on the edges. I'm in a no-passing zone; I can see that. But otherwise, I don't know where I am. I don't know why I'm on a road passing through fields. This looks like where my brother lives. I don't know why this barren country is attached to the island filled with buildings where I live.



Bikini Barista

Bill Diamond

"Bikini Baristas!" announced the hand-printed sign in bold letters. It would have caught Luke's eye almost anytime, but today, it had a visceral wake-up effect. The late August chill in the mountain air and their eagerness for a morning cup of coffee made it especially eye-catching. Therefore, as they left the small-town motel in Eastern Washington, Luke was pre-disposed to its appeal.

Dona and Luke were in the middle of a three-week driving vacation through the Pacific Northwest. They discovered that, unlike on the East Coast, every town had several drive-up coffee shacks. Looking more closely at the temporary sign, Luke noticed the word "Fundraiser" scrawled above the exclamation that had initially grabbed his attention. He smiled and directed, Dona, who was driving, to turn in. As she made the turn, Dona saw the sign and grimaced. A committed feminist and against any exploitation of women, she gave Luke a skeptical look.

He cajoled, "Come on. It's a fundraiser. It must be for a good cause. And, we really want some coffee." As she reluctantly continued into the drive, he pushed his luck and added, "Besides, I'm sure 'Bikini Baristas' have a special talent for serving up something hot and spicy."

Dona's upper lip curled. She might have left, but by now they were blocked in.

Ahead of them, the busy line was predominantly pick-up trucks. The trucks were filled almost exclusively with guys, who apparently had the same subliminal reaction as Luke to the enticing sign. He commented that these men must be motivated by purely charitable instincts.

With raised eyebrows and a skeptical snort, Dona said, "They better have good coffee."

"I'm sure it's wonderful," Luke replied, trying to suppress a lecherous grin.

The small, wood building was set in the middle of an asphalt lot. A large sign on the end of the building displayed a long list of beverages and prices. Yellow curbs directed customers to both sides of the booth and the line moved reasonably quickly. The strong aroma of fresh-brewed coffee wafted from the shack and whetted his appetite. Luke's anticipation built for an early morning eyeful of a skimpily clad beauty to accompany his warming drink.

It was soon their turn and Dona pulled forward to the drive-up window. Luke eased toward the center console and twisted his neck for a better view of the server. Instead of a shapely woman in a small swimsuit, a very large man of indeterminate middle age leaned onto the window counter and greeted them with a wide smile. He was grossly overweight, covered with curly black hair and, shockingly, was wearing only a tiny black Speedo. It clearly strained against the rolls of his excessive flesh.

Luke's initial stunned reaction was that Bigfoot had taken a job as a barista and wedged himself into the tiny cubicle. This was the polar opposite of what he had imagined. Instead of young and attractive curves, this was an avalanche of unsightly fat. And the server was covered with a noticeable sheen of body sweat. This was the type of body that cried out to be covered, not flaunted. Now it was time for Luke's lip to curl involuntarily. The unexpected pasty display curbed his good humor.

While he was struck speechless by the sobering spectacle, Dona's reaction was the inverse. She was suddenly in an upbeat mood that her sexist fears weren't realized and delighted in Luke's crestfallen disappointment. With the issue of female exploitation turned on its head, she gave a hearty, "Good morning." Dona didn't appear to share Luke's disgust at the quivering mound of doughy meat leaning precariously toward them and offering to take their order. The thought crossed Luke's mind that all this weight leaning out of the flimsy booth might threaten to topple it onto their car.

Aghast at this disreputable bait and switch, Luke leaned back against the headrest and averted his eyes from the blob. Now, he just wanted to get some coffee and be quickly on their way. Such was not to be the case.

Dona had reverted to her normal chatty self. She cheerfully complimented the hairy host on his skimpy suit and asked about the fundraiser.

When he laughed at the compliment, it caused the rolls of his belly to bounce and flop further over his straining waistband. Luke was concerned the movement would exceed the tensile strength of the swimsuit's material and it would split. The thought further dimmed his desire for coffee, and almost dislodged his breakfast.

The server cheerfully explained they had picked a 'bikini' theme because a portion of the proceeds of each sale today, and all tips, were being donated to a local women's health charity.

Thrilled by the news of the beneficiary, Dona's eyes danced and she said, "In that case, we'll have to get large drinks and a snack." Rather than directly ordering, so they could escape and continue their journey, she engaged the hirsute gentleman in a lengthy discussion about their many varieties of coffee drinks.

Attempting to divert his mind from the near-naked albino walrus in the booth, Luke didn't completely follow the serpentine conversation. However, at some point, there was a baffling debate about the merits of adding various fruit flavors to a mocha latte.

Luke considered himself among the most patient of men. However, ten minutes after turning into an 'express coffee service,' he did not have a drink and only the sour taste of disappointment in his mouth. He was also aware of the obvious impatience of the man in the next car. Luke snickered and thought that if that guy knew about the lumpy vision that awaited him, he wouldn't be in such a rush. Nonetheless, as Dona ignored his nudges to move along, Luke worked on mentally pulling out his hair.

She finally completed her order. Speedo Man turned to Luke and said, "What'll it be for you, mate?"

In no mood for casual banter, Luke placed a simple order for a "decaf with extra cream."

El Gordo's pleasant demeanor suddenly shifted and he looked at Luke like he was crazy. In a tone that made it sound as though Luke had violated the most sacred of a coffee purist's commandments, Sasquatch informed him that they "don't serve decaffeinated."

Luke knew people in the Northwest took their coffee seriously, but he couldn't fathom if the server was joking, or daft, as well as naked. The big man's solemn expression made clear he was quite serious, and condescendingly offended someone would even raise such an issue at his gourmet establishment. Luke had to give him his due. Pulling off condescension is quite a trick when you are standing virtually nude in a glass-enclosed booth in a rural parking lot.

For the second time that morning, Luke was gobsmacked. It was already clear to him that this "bikini barista" wasn't going to attract return customers. Now he was being told that a shop that survives by selling coffee didn't serve one of the two major forms of their product! How did they expect to stay in business? Whatever happened to 'the customer is always right'? He believed he'd stumbled upon why some American small enterprises are going into the crapper.

While Luke's jaw flopped in dumbstruck disbelief, the attendant offered an alternative. Scratching his fat rolls, he mentioned that he could brew a weak "Cafe Americano" which would be almost the same.

Dona must have read Luke's mind. Before he could snap, "If, by 'almost the same', you mean caffeinated and twice as expensive," she smiled at Luke with a glint of mischief in her eyes and said, "That sounds wonderful."

Luke's simple notion of a morning coffee with a side of visual spice had gone entirely askew. Now, Dona had turned on him and gone native. At this point, nothing sounded 'wonderful', and he was in no mood to be mollified by a bear in a booth. Looking at the mountainous rolls of pink flab that fluttered and jiggled with each breath and movement, he gave a defeated sigh. Luke ordered a small, hot apple cider, as much to end the conversation, as out of a desire for juice.

The hefty barista turned to concoct the drinks. When he did so, Luke got a glimpse into the far side of the booth. To his massive chagrin, the second employee was a buxom young blonde in a skimpy, two-piece bathing suit. While brewing a coffee, she seemed to be engaged in some risqué repartee with a broadly smiling truck driver. The other line had clearly won this morning's coffee lottery. As Luke was staring, their server bent to reach for something and flashed a close-up view of his plumber's crack and enormous buttocks that almost poured out the small window. Dona jerked back with a guffaw. Luke near gagged and thought he would be struck blind. Still bent over, the barista reached back and gave a tug on the thin material of his suit. It had no effect on concealing the gaping cavern, but made Luke wonder whether the next stop for that hand was anywhere near his drink.

Scalded by the gelatinous vision, Luke abandoned all attempts to look at the second barista. He momentarily toyed with the idea of asking Dona to pull to the other side of the booth. Putting the chances of that happening at less than zero, he refrained from vocalizing the request. Instead, he gazed into the pine forest covered hills and tried unsuccessfully to purge his mind of the haunting eyesore.

A seeming eternity later, the drinks were ready. The steaming cups were handed across. When it comes to a mixed coffee drink, it is difficult to satisfy Dona. She sampled hers, smiled broadly and then effusively praised the burly mixologist. He beamed.

Dona asked for Luke's wallet. Then, she added a biscotti to the order. Paying the bill, Dona added a big tip. Seeing Luke's incredulous expression, she shrugged and repeated his earlier, "It's for a good cause." The server thanked them and gave a wave with his huge paw.

Pulling onto the highway access ramp, Dona sipped her drink and pronounced that Luke had been right, "It is a good idea to support local causes." Apparently being sincere and not trying to bait him, she continued that the Speedo server had been both a talented barista and a very pleasant chap. Talking as much to herself as to Luke, she chirped, "It just goes to show, we shouldn't jump to conclusions."

Luke had to agree with the latter sentiment: we should never assume. In everyday life, our subconscious desires often bubble up and we act on them before our analytical frontal lobes ever engage. For the umpteenth time, he committed to remember this truism. Perhaps, the searing image of the blubbery barista would make it work this time.

Dona continued, "We'll have to stop the next time we see a sign like that."

Luke didn't say it, but if he was driving and saw such a sign, he planned to accelerate. He also took no consolation in Dona saying he'd been right. Instead, Luke contemplated the source of the black, curly hair floating in his apple juice.

Demon Ball

Fred Miller

The wheels in the pump whirled and clicked until a gurgling sound alerted her to an almost full tank. She peered through the glass at the numbers, turned and walked across the pavement toward the convenience store entrance, and silently cursed the man who'd conceived of high heeled shoes.

At the door, a gust of cool air assaulted her senses with the odor of hot dogs in a glass warmer on the counter. Ahead of her in line, a man sporting a reversed baseball cap and a bright tee that shouted, "EARL'S BODY SHOP," rocked from one heel to the other and scratched his neck below one ear.

"Af'noon, what'd you need today?" the clerk asked him.

"Gimme a jumbo orange soda and a pack o' filter-tipped menthols."

"Birth date?"

"January, ninety-four."

"Anything else?"

"How's the ball today?"

"Up to seventy-five million."

"Gimme one o' them slips to fill out and a three-way."

"Yes, sir. Comin' right up."

The register sang and a wad of currency changed hands before the man took his sack of requests and sidled down the aisle and pulled a pencil from behind his ear. He eyed the card, wet the lead with his tongue, and placed the nib on a slip now resting on the bleached-out countertop.

"Ma'am?"

"Gas purchase, pump six, on this card please."

"Debit or credit?"

"Credit."

"Whoo," the man down the counter said, "Got a winner, Bo."

"Wha-cha got?" the clerk said.

"Ten bucks on the three-way."

"Excuse me, ma'am. Just sign right here," the clerk said.

"What's the three-way, if you don't mind my asking?" she said.

"Not at all, ma'am, a lotto scratch-off card with three ways to win."

"How much is a card?"

"Two dollars. You want one?"

"No, I never...well, maybe just this once." She replaced her credit card in her purse and handed the man two crisp dollar bills.

"Now, how do I—"

"Step right over here, ma'am," the new lotto winner beamed, "and I'll show you."

She moved down the counter toward a toothy grin, her cheeks flushed from the public display of her interest in the lottery.

"It's easy, ma'am. See here, you just scratch off the ink and look for a lineup of like kinds of dollars. Three in a row and you a winner. What's won, if anything, is...well, would you looky here, Bo. Lady's got a fifty-dollar winner. Wow. And this here's your first try, right?"

Her cheeks warm, she nodded and looked at her watch. "Thank you, gentlemen. I must be going."

"Well, turn in that card and collect your winnin's before you go, ma'am," the local gaming expert said.

By the time her car rolled out of the station into traffic, the memory of her pinched shoes had faded. She'd be late for bridge with the girls at the club and only the gods at Delphi would know how she'd be assessed in her absence.

Funny, she thought, her husband's name was Earl, but unlike her new convenience store confederate, her Earl would never have grease on his face or nails. If anything, he'd have had a recent manicure. He'd always been acutely aware of the initial impressions litigation attorneys make on impaneled juries. And in his case, as he'd often reminded her, a very successful litigator.

"Well, hello, Mary Ann. What a lovely dress," one said.

"Oh, thanks, Nell. Sorry I'm late," she said and pulled a chair up to the table.

Another shuffled the cards and rolled her eyes. "As I was saying, she comes in the club wearing fashions that are just so yesterday and pretends it's her new retro look. I suppose she thinks no one's aware of her husband's recent streak of bad luck in his business affairs." She turned toward Mary Ann. "Talking about Grace Tompkins, Mary Ann," she said in an aside.

Eyes remained wide, heads bobbing like a congregation in a summer tent revival. Mary Ann listened and wondered why she tolerated these wags.

"Speaking of husbands, Mary Ann, I saw yours having lunch with Doris Fitzgerald earlier in the club bar."

"Do tell," Mary Ann said without emotion.

"Well, it's no secret. Doris is suing Frank for a divorce. Seems she discovered evidence of unfaithfulness in the pocket of his car."

"News to me," Mary Ann said. "Earl never discusses his cases at home."

Three hours and a low-grade headache later, she was back on the road toward the mall; anything to avoid an empty house. Her cell phone rang and she peered around to see if any police cruisers were around. Seeing none, she grabbed her cell from her purse.

"Honey, I'm afraid I'm going to be late tonight. Don't hold dinner for me," he said.

"That's a shame," she said, frowning in disgust.

"Yeah, I had lunch with a group of businessmen who're facing a nasty lawsuit and I've got to pore over some case precedents tonight."

Liar, she wanted to say. *Don't worry about me. Take your time, I know how important this is to you,* she said and thought, *you bastard.*

At Neiman's, she bought a dress, a blouse, two pairs of shoes, and a designer purse, the costs adding up in her head. Usually this level of expenditure satisfied her sense of revenge, but not today.

That evening she sat in the bar at Mario's, an upscale restaurant that had been one of their favorites in the early years, and listened to soft jazz wafting from a nearby piano.

"Mrs. Harmon, how nice to see you again. What'll it be?" the bartender said.

"Manhattan, straight up, Bill."

She stared at the bar mirror and wondered how many nights she'd spent alone while her spouse had built his career...and his massive ego.

Two drinks later she wandered out of the bar, having forgotten about dinner. Across the street she could see a neighborhood bodega with fruits and vegetables in prominent display under a halo of lights on the sidewalk. She vetted the offerings, picked up a banana, and strolled into the store.

"Evening."

"H'lo," she said.

He looked down at the banana. "Anything else, ma'am?"

She looked up at the wall behind the small, dark man and scanned the shelves with no discernible plan in mind.

"Got cigarettes?"

"Sure. What brand?"

"Um, Camels will do," she said. She'd not smoked since college, but felt a need to stray from the norm tonight.

He rang up the fruit and smokes and waited for her credit card. And she realized he'd not asked her birth date for assurance she could legally buy cigarettes. Thus, he'd committed a crime under the laws of this state, and one that her husband had used to seal a four-million-dollar verdict. *Earl rarely missed a subtle clue*, she mused, but it appeared he had in conversation with her today.

Stuffing the cigarettes in her purse, she noticed the lotto machine beside the register.

"What's the price of a lottery ticket?" she said realizing in her current state she hardly had the dexterity to scratch ink off a

three-way card.

"You mean the Titan Ball?"

"The one that's seventy-five million."

"Yes, ma'am, that the Titan Ball. They're two dollars, Miss, how many?"

"One...no, make that twenty-five."

"You're just in time, lady. They're about to cut off sales for tonight's drawing."

She dug into her purse and found the roll of bills she'd won at the convenience store earlier in the day. She placed the tickets in an inside pocket of her purse, picked up her banana, and walked out into the night air. At the restaurant parking lot she looked at the valet stub number and tucked it into her memory before she gave the ticket to the man.

The next morning, she awoke in a daze, rubbed her eyes, and glanced across the bed. It appeared as if Earl had come in late, but had now left. The red digital bedside clock pulsed 9:34 A.M. She shuffled into the bathroom, looked at the mirror, and frowned. Another day.

Over coffee and a cigarette, she scanned the newspaper for sales and noticed a photo of three people holding a giant fake check with the headline, LOCAL CITIZENS WIN LOTTO MILLIONS. She wondered if her tickets from last night might have won anything. *Silly*, she thought, *of course not*.

What to do today? Let's see. She heard the front door open and remembered the maid had a key and was due this morning.

Maybe I'll call Millie. Lunch at Le Petite Gourmet, yes.

"Hello, Millie, it's me. I know this is short notice, but how about a late lunch at our favorite haunt... You are? Great, how does one thirty sound? Fine, see you there."

Since traffic in the city was unpredictable, she left early and arrived at the restaurant twenty minutes ahead of time. She gave her keys to the valet and spotted a service station down the block. She had time on her hands and didn't want to sit alone in the restaurant.

The man behind the counter resembled the convenience store clerk she'd encountered the previous afternoon. His eyes darted about and blinked.

"Help you?"

"Yes, I hope so. I've a bunch of lotto tickets and I don't know how to tell if I've won anything," she said with her hand buried in her purse. "Ah, there they are." She reached across the counter and placed the lotto chances in the man's small hands. His eyes focused on the slips, his teeth massaging his lower lip.

"Let's see," he said and placed a ticket into the lottery machine. It buzzed and spit the slip back out. He peered at the screen. "H-m-m, no winner," he said looking at the glowing numbers and tried the next. And the next. By the time he'd reached the last one, she'd become antsy and continued to look at her watch.

"Ding, ding," announced the machine.

"Oh, you gotta winner, ma'am, a hundred bucks." He beamed and opened the register.

"That's nice, but how do they decide it's worth a hundred bucks?" she said.

"You got four outta five matches but missed the Titan Ball at the end. See?" He held up the ticket and pointed out the four numbers she got right and the two she missed. "That's worth a hundred dollars."

She took the money, rolled it in a wad, stuffed it in her pocketbook, and turned toward the door. And over her shoulder she said, "Thanks, I understand it now." She glanced again at her watch, seven minutes late.

"Millie, sorry I'm late."

"Not really late, hon." They exchanged a Hollywood kiss and sat.

"You okay, Mary Ann? You look a bit tense," she said. Millie was a statuesque blonde with velvet skin, a chiseled jaw, and looked as if she'd never wavered an ounce since they'd roomed together at Wellesley.

"Couldn't be better, Millie, top of the world," she said, smiling.

Millie offered her a vacuous stare Mary Ann could not ignore, her long fingers drumming the table cloth. Millie had always been uncanny at reading her moods.

"Okay, okay, so I've got a suspicion Earl's seeing someone."

"No," Millie whispered, leaning forward like a young reporter who'd just flushed out a Washington scoop.

Mary Ann shared what she'd heard at the bridge table and the ensuing call from Earl and the late hours he said he'd been forced to keep last night.

"Well?" she said, eyeing Millie.

"Maybe you're over reacting," Millie said.

"Really?" Her eyebrows rose in surprise. Millie was her best friend, her confidante. How could she defend him?

"Look, Mary Ann, you can analyze this to death, but the fact remains that this is mere speculation. Maybe the girls were mistaken about who Doris was having lunch with in the club bar. After all, you said they'd seen them in a corner booth. You know how dim they keep the lights in the bar. Besides, Earl could have had breakfast with these guys instead of lunch. He's under a lot of pressure as you well know. Perhaps you should reassess this whole scenario." With moon-shaped eyes, Millie gazed at her and waited.

"You're right. I'm probably just jumping to conclusions."

"Sure you are," Millie said.

While they picked over their salads, Millie said, "You need a hobby, a distraction, a passion, maybe. Say, how long has it been since you played tennis?"

"College, not a day after," she said. They both giggled. Millie had been on the tennis team. Mary Ann had chosen the debate society.

"Tell you what, Mary Ann. Why don't you line up a few brush-up lessons with the new club pro and then I'll take you on for a few sets."

"Well..."

"Since you're hesitating, I'd venture a guess you haven't heard much about the new pro."

"No, not yet, I—"

"Picture a twenty-one-year-old Brad Pitt. And I hear he even teaches," Millie said.

"Stop it," Mary Ann said, and they both laughed.

"Well, that's how I heard him described. Why don't you give it a try? I mean it."

"Well...why not?" she said. "I do need a diversion. Wouldn't hurt my figure to get a little exercise. Not a bad idea, Millie."

"Of course not, I thought of it." They both laughed again, the earlier mood broken.

After lunch and a promise of a future tennis match, they walked to the valet station. Mary Ann looked at the numbers on her ticket stub. She'd majored in math in college; numbers had always intrigued her.

When she arrived home, she walked into the foyer and discovered a phone message on the landline from Earl. Why hadn't he called her on her cell? She pulled out her new Galaxy 7 and realized she'd neglected to turn it on that morning. And the fact that it was a Series 7 and her lotto ticket had a 7 in the Titan Ball position did not escape her attention. And she recalled that one of her math professors, along with some graduate students, had used fractal mathematics to challenge the odds in Vegas. Their ensuing successes had gotten them banned from the casinos there. She wondered what the professor was doing now. She hit the replay button to listen to the message again.

"Honey, I've got another late night facing me, but I thought we might meet for a drink at the club around five, before I get back to work. Give me a call when you get this message."

This was odd. Earl never made a habit of working after he'd had a drink. *Whatever*, she thought.

She was waiting in the bar when he arrived. "Hi, dear, how was your day?" he said, giving her a quick peck on the cheek.

"Had lunch with Millie. That's about it."

"Oh, and how is the fancy-free Ms. Millie these days?" Earl had represented Millie six months earlier in a contentious divorce suit, and she'd walked away with a cool four million after Earl's fees.

"Millie's fine."

"What'd you girls talk about?" he said.

"Just girl talk."

They bantered back and forth with little substance to the conversation.

"Oh, look, honey, there's the new tennis pro approaching the bar. Alonzo," he shouted. A twenty-something with a deep tan turned and waved.

"Come on over here, Alonzo. I want you to meet my wife," he said.

"Mary Ann, I'd like for you to meet Alonzo Lopez, the club's new tennis pro. Alonzo, my wife, Mary Ann."

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Harmon."

"Mary Ann."

"Oh, yes ma'am, uh...okay, Mary Ann. Call me Alonzo or Al."

She felt a film of perspiration dance down her arms. He carried the bronze glow of King Tut's mask and he had azure eyes flanked by a copse of curly, sun-bleached hair.

Earl made polite conversation with the pro until the man in white shorts excused himself for a client awaiting a tennis lesson.

"Nice guy," Earl said.

She remained mute and wondered when and where her husband might have encountered this guy.

"I was on the committee that found Alonzo, as you know." She hadn't known that, but it mattered little. "I convinced my colleagues this was the right guy," he said. Earl had never lacked for self-confidence and wouldn't hesitate to share this data often. Once they'd finished their drinks, he excused himself, pleading a long night of rigorous work that awaited him at the office.

Mary Ann sat for a while and thought over Millie's suggestion of tennis lessons. *Yes, she mused, the perfect diversion of the moment.*

On her way to the car she passed the lighted tennis courts and saw the pro working with a young woman. He stood in a samurai stance, his racket parallel to the ground, the student listening attentively. Mary Ann noticed that in the bright lights his face appeared round like a child's and out of place within the taut curves of his tanned, muscled frame.

He walked behind the woman and pointed with his racket over her shoulder and mumbled something she must have found hysterically funny. He then placed his hands on her hips and had her bend slightly at the knees. Then, catching sight of Mary Ann through the fence, he beamed. He said something to his pupil and walked toward her.

"We meet again," he said.

"Yes, but don't let me interrupt your lesson."

"You a tennis player, Mary Ann?"

"Well, I was in college. It's been a while."

"Interested in a few pointers?" he said, his eyes addressing her from head to toe.

"Maybe," she said, looking down and to the side, toying with him.

"Come by at 11:30 tomorrow and maybe I can show you a few tricks."

"Well...", she said. He winked and turned, not waiting for an answer.

On the way home she thought, *he takes a lot for granted. But then, he's only trying to make a living. That's all it is. Sure.* She stopped at a Chinese restaurant and ordered take-out for her dinner.

At home she pretended to watch a television sit-com and nudged her food around in the containers with chopsticks. *What the hell, I need to get out of this house anyway. The sunshine and the workout will be good for me.* She popped open a fortune cookie and read the message: YOU WILL SOON BE RICH.

Driving to the club the next day she stopped at the convenience store where she'd won her first lotto money and now faced the same clerk.

"Bo?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good morning. I want to play the Titan Ball."

"You want the auto-pick or pick the numbers yourself?"

"Oh, I'll pick my own."

He handed her a slip with the slots to be filled in. She placed the card on the counter, pulled a pen from her purse, and went to work. She knew just what numbers to choose. She could see them clearly in her mind.

She looked up at the clerk. "How much can I put in the game?"

"Much as you want, ma'am."

She reached into her purse and pulled out a checkbook.

"Um, ma'am, sorry, the lottery is strictly cash."

"Oh, thanks, Bo, I didn't know."

She counted out the needed currency and handed it to the clerk.

"Okay, one hundred sixty one dollars on the Titan Ball."

"Uh, ma'am, it's two dollars a play, all multiples of two."

"Right," she nodded, "make it one hundred-sixty dollars." The machine buzzed and spit out the tickets. She stuffed them, along with her one remaining dollar, into her purse.

When she rolled into the club parking lot, she could see Alonzo on the court volleying against two women and keeping both in motion chasing tennis balls. He looked up, smiled, and waved.

Once her lesson had begun, he stood close behind her and guided her arms into the proper position. She soon became aware of his aroma, a musky smell, but a cologne she did not recognize. *Perhaps this is what the French call au naturel*, she thought. She was now aware of the heat of his body. *So this is how he makes his living*, she mused with a smile.

After the basics had been reviewed, each served and volleyed. She'd forgotten how much she enjoyed the game in college. And on a lark she attempted a couple of slams, only to discover his agility and youth. Back came the ball in a rush, landing square in the center of her forehead. She stumbled, but caught herself just as he arrived and enveloped her in his arms to prevent a fall.

"I'm okay," she said, gently pushing him away.

"Please forgive me if I appeared to be taking liberties. I've had a couple of children have fallen, resulting in chipped teeth and unhappy parents. I've grown very sensitive to students who lose their balance," he said.

"Oh, it wasn't you, Alonzo. It was...that, that demon ball," she said. Now more relaxed, they laughed and continued the set. Once again a ball struck her, this time on the arm, and she watched it bounce until it rested on the court. She bent over to pick it up and realized that interested eyes were studying her body. She pretended not to notice and looked at the ball. It seemed to smile back at her. Was this a wicked ball? She didn't know, but she realized the sun's heat was playing games with her head.

"Enough for today, Alonzo."

"Ah, but you were doing so well. Shall we meet again, say, next Monday at four?"

He was quick, she thought. *But why not, this was fun and good exercise for her.*

"How much do I owe you?" she said.

"Oh, it will be on your monthly club bill. Don't worry about it," he said.

"Good, I only have a dollar on me," she said.

"Then perhaps you'll join me as my guest for a cool drink, Mary Ann?"

"Another time, Alonzo. Thanks." She'd not forgotten she was an older woman and he was following a proven format to attract the fairer sex into providing a steady stream of revenues for himself.

Days turned into weeks and the tennis lessons went from sporadic to once a week, then twice a week, and finally every other afternoon. And even with his subtle hints, she'd refrained from taking the road to a potential scandal. A number of times she'd refused a drink with him at the club bar because of the wags she knew who would crank up the rumor mills.

And she continued to play the lottery. On a couple of occasions, she'd won nothing and decided she needed to double up on the number of tickets and did so with little thought. But she was careful to hide the evidence from Earl. He'd never understand. Yet maybe she thought she couldn't explain it to him.

Mary Ann knew she could quit at any time. But one day an eerie thought crept into her mind: *Maybe the lotto was her demon ball. No, of course not. Silly idea.*

Earl's nights of professional work never abated. In fact, at best, the two of them met for dinner at the club twice a week. She'd now become an expert on gourmet take-out as well as fast food. Eating at the kitchen table had become her daily evening routine.

Then, one afternoon on the court with Alonzo, everything changed.

"Good practice today, Mary Ann."

"Yeah, despite the long lapse of not being on the court, it's finally coming back to me. Well, I'll see you in a couple of days,

Al."

"I suppose you and Earl are out on the town tonight, this being Saturday."

"Um, no, this has become my regular Chinese cuisine night. Earl's deep in legal briefs and such, what he calls legal combat," she said.

"Chinese is my favorite. Helps keep the muscles well-toned."

She could see it in his eyes. And this time she took a different tack. "Well, as a matter of fact I'm meeting my friend Millie for dinner tonight. Why don't you join us and I'll introduce you to the lady who suggested these tennis lessons."

"I'd be delighted, that is, if I am not imposing on you and your friend," he said.

"Not at all. Meet us at the Lucky Dragon on Elm around seven if you'd like to join us."

"Sure, I'd love to," he said.

Around six o'clock, while she was dressing, the phone rang.

"Mary Ann, it's Millie."

"Ready to meet the tennis star in the flesh?" she said and giggled. Earlier she'd called Millie on the way home to share the news of the added guest for dinner.

"Well, that's just it. I'm sorry to do this to you, but friends just arrived unexpectedly from out of town. I must do my duty; they're friends of my parents. Do give me a rain-check. I'm dying to meet this tennis hunk."

"Not a problem, Millie, we'll reschedule it."

But she didn't. To cancel now would seem silly and flighty. Earl would understand what had happened. It would be an innocent encounter now that Millie was to be a no show.

Alonzo was waiting at the restaurant door when she arrived.

"Your friend is on her way?" he said.

"No, unfortunately, Millie had to cancel."

"Uh, that's okay, you and I can enjoy a healthy Chinese feast together," he said.

"Well, I have a better idea, Al. Are you familiar with Mario's Restaurant on Devereaux?"

"Yes, I hear it is quite nice."

"It is and I think I can get us a table this early. Meet me at the valet stand there in ten minutes."

"Great," he said and they departed, going to their separate cars.

Why did I do that, she wondered. The restaurant was an old favorite and she was tired of Chinese fare. Besides, she knew the *maitre d'* at Mario's and felt sure she'd be accommodated.

She hailed Alonzo as he arrived at the valet station and they entered the restaurant together to wait for the *maitre d'* to show them to their table.

At that moment she spotted Earl seated across the room arm-in-arm with his date and deep in private conversation. Mary Ann continued to stare until her husband happened to glance up and saw her. His face dropped and his mouth slowly opened.

Mary Ann turned toward Alonzo and smiled. "Take my arm and follow me," she said. "I'll introduce you to my best friend, Millie."

She moved toward the table in a confident gait, the numbers whirling in her head. Eight, nine, ten digits. So this was her demon ball, she thought, and she was about to hit the jackpot.

Hide and Seek

Kimberly Casey

When you were younger you would find solace in the smallest places. You would hide and imagine you were like Alice, grown to be the biggest person in the room. You'd slip silently between the sofa and the wall, tunnel until you got to the corner of the sectional where space opened up, where you stored your game boy and nerf gun. You would play sniper through the cracks at the ankles walking by, but never pull the trigger - just found comfort knowing you could.

After school, you would crawl into one of the closets, chosen based on your mood. The bedroom closet had glow in the dark stars tacked to the ceiling and pillows and stuffed animals lining the floor. You would collapse here when you needed comfort. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* or *The Hobbit* would be your go-to reads, taking you away on adventures under the night sky, no matter what time of day.

The hall closet where winter coats were stored was for the dark and stormy days. No decorations here. Just a flashlight and *Bridge to Terabithia* or *Number the Stars*. At the end of each chapter you'd pause and shine the light upward to catch on the coat sleeves and imagine that they were tunnels to another dimension than would open up and take you away if you just wished hard enough.

The rarest, darkest spot was the tiny door in the bathroom that held the laundry hamper inside. You'd pull the basket out, crawl in and tug the basket back in behind you, no flashlight, no books, no distractions. Each limb would reach out and press against a wall, pushing as hard as possible hoping to crack the plaster, make an impact. It never worked. But you'd leave with muscles looser, body lighter, and head a little less clouded.

Now you are older, in a house that was built with no closets - each room open and honest. No places to hide. He didn't notice that when you moved in, but you did, eyes searching for a place you could surround yourself and not be seen.

Some days the shower is an escape. He never questions why you spend so long in there, thinks it's normal. but the curtain is never boundary enough to feel secure, and you leave feeling frustrated, fingers wrinkled and steam rising off your skin.

The car is too much glass, too visible.

You arrange the furniture like a labyrinth trying to create a dead-end dwelling, but he always finds you, asks about dinner or laundry. The phone still rings. The space is still too open, too inviting to outsiders.

He thinks it oddly sweet when he finds you under the bed, the cat curled up in the crook of your ankles humming a song with your eyes closed, trying to tune out the light and the noise from the nearby window. He lies down on the ground and looks across the hardwood at your face pressed up against the cool surface. "Hello beautiful. I see you. Can I come in?"

And you nod, but a knot forms in your throat as he scoots in closer and puts his hand on your shoulder. You want to welcome him in, to share a secret hideout, to build a fort together and keep out the bad guys, but not now. Not here. Not yet.

He starts to worry the day he comes home to an empty house, fruitlessly calling an unanswered phone for hours. You emerge shortly after dark with dirt smeared on your face, all over your clothes, under your fingernails. He boards up the door to the crawl space after that. Claims that mice were getting in, never speaks of that night.

He stops letting you too far out of his sight after the accident at the Gulf. You went underwater a little too long, engrossed by the feeling of being submerged and every pore of your skin being suffocated at once. Like all the pieces were being pushed back together. The sun shook you awake coughing on the sand, gasping and smiling, lost in a dream.

Now he notices. Sees the way you can't pull your eyes away from the oven, how you smile at how quickly the door snaps shut. Notices you clearing cleaning products from the cabinet under the sink. How you never keep anything in the trunk of your car. How you eye the unfinished attic dreaming of dancing across beams to the perfect dark corner.

Last night he came home and you were in the bathroom, fingers bloody and shaking, pill bottles spilled out of the medicine cabinet, onto the floor, claw marks on the wall behind from you trying to dig your way in.

'I just can't stand it,' you stammer. 'How can someone live so out in the open like this?'

He grabs your favorite blanket and wraps you up, sits you on the couch, nods, locks the front door. He goes through the house slowly, closing each door, pulling the blinds on all the windows, checking their locks. He sits next to you, shuts off the lights, wraps himself up separate, but lightly leaning against you, holding each other upright. And he stays. He stays even when you start crying, stays when you can catch your breath and finally stop. Stays covered and quiet right by your side. And now you are hidden, now you are a secret, now you are safe and sound.

Twenty-Three Years to Turlock

Kip Hanson

It's 6:17. The party began promptly at 6:00. It's been four years since Todd's seen them, but he knows they didn't wait. His father is nothing if not punctual.

He'd forgotten to buy a birthday gift for his stepbrother. That's not why he's late, but it is the reason he will now be even later, as he exits the Golden State Freeway for the nearest strip mall.

Would the boy understand that Todd had needed to pull over at the rest stop outside Chowchilla and weep? That his hands shook so badly he could no longer grip the wheel. "It's time you get over it, Todd," his father would say. "Face your demons."

The sun is setting over Turlock as he pulls into the Safeway parking lot and steps out of the car. The reek of tired manure and late September tillage fills the air; off to his left the Diablo Range crouches, the beautiful hues of red and orange a reminder of the pastel walls in the room where Todd spent nine years of his life.

He makes his way to the back of the store where the children's games and close-out lawn furniture is stocked. Todd doesn't know what to buy a normal thirteen-year-old; at that age he'd been chained to the floor of a gaily-colored cell in the basement of retail sales executive Robert McDowell's house, a few miles from where Todd now stands.

McDowell constructed that room with his own executive hands, then painted it with the Sherwin-Williams latex his daughter Meredith had selected for her own bedroom, just days before being struck by a delivery truck on her way to school. Her father was devastated and, as a single parent, lonely.

Ironically, the girl was buried in Turlock Memorial Park, five rows over from where Todd's mother would be laid to rest just a few years later, a victim of the grief she'd felt over allowing her son to be kidnapped and—after a yearlong investigation—assumedly murdered. McDowell would sometimes bring flowers to both graves, recompense for the pain he'd caused.

It's true that Todd was kidnapped from the backseat of his mother's idling car as she ran in to the local Quik-Stop for a pack of cigarettes one winter evening, but he wasn't dead. No, he was living beneath Meredith's now empty bedroom, just six houses away from Todd's former residence. Had there been a window in his cell, he might have heard the late-night sounds of his parents' disintegrating marriage.

Todd selects a board game, the only one he knows how to play—The Game of Life—and turns for the registers. He and McDowell played it together repeatedly during his captivity. In the freezer section, Todd veers around a woman with two small children in her cart. The older of the two—a girl—stares as he passes, and Todd rubs at the scars on his neck, the collar marks still visible decades later.

McDowell would have preferred a girl. He made no bones about it, whispering his desires in Todd's ear late at night as they watched MTV and reruns of Footloose, Dirty Dancing. McDowell was a huge fan of pop music, a passion that was eventually his undoing: while attempting to moonwalk one night to Michael Jackson's latest hit, McDowell tripped and fell, rapping his head on the concrete wall near Todd's bed. He was out cold.

Unfortunately for the would-be danseur, he'd inadvertently left the keys in his front pocket, an opportunity of which Todd immediately took advantage. Five minutes later he stood knocking on his father's front door.

It was there that he was told of his mother's death. "It was a car accident," his father said. Todd later found the police report in a box beneath his parent's bed, and learned she was three times the legal blood alcohol limit upon striking a tree in the family car.

His father had since moved north to Modesto and spawned a son with his new wife, to whom Todd would soon deliver a board game, then eat birthday cake and give an awkward hug before leaving.

McDowell was found guilty of three felony counts—kidnapping, unlawful imprisonment, and lewd acts with a minor. The defense argued that, due to Todd's being sixteen at the time of his escape, the last of these was consensual. The jury was unconvinced. McDowell received a sentence of thirty-five years at New Folsom.

The cashier is an older man, his back to Todd as he approaches the checkout. It's only after the game sits on the belt that he turns from his chat with the bag boy. "Todd," he says. "You've grown fat."

Todd gapes, his legs suddenly weak. "What...how?"

McDowell smiles, a grin Todd knows well. "Good behavior," he says. "They let me out early."

"But...it's only been twenty-three years."

"My mother's quite ill," McDowell adds. "Cancer."

"Cancer," groans Todd. "Sick."

"Todd. I did my time. Please don't..."

Todd snatches up the game and walks to the exit. In his mind's eye he sees himself driving his car through the plate glass store front; he hears the screams, and the pop of McDowell's skull as that grinning face is crushed beneath the tires.

"I've missed you," comes McDowell's voice as the door slides shut behind Todd; he stumbles, his breath coming now in ragged chunks.

He sets the game on the passenger seat and starts the engine. McDowell stands at the Safeway checkout, patiently scanning barcodes. The bald head reflects the harsh light of the fluorescents, giving his naked skin a sickly hue, like rotten oranges.

This was the man who'd gently sung Linda Ronstadt songs in his ear while fondling him. "Baby, you've been on my mind..."

Todd backs out of his parking spot, puts the car in drive, and accelerates. Maybe there will be another party next year.



Man's Son
Jenny Butler

There are two worlds. The one inside and the one outside and he had a foot in both. The left foot and the right foot could not walk together but strove like snakes to stretch out in different directions, his slithery serpent-feet like the great cock-headed Abraxas. He tried to live in truth, to contain the luminous and dark within him, to comprise maleness and femaleness, to encompass the evil and the good, god and the devil, but the dragon's barbed tail came to swipe and knock him off kilter.

The part most misunderstood by those out there is how he, like a babe in the woods, was led by the hand through a landscape he did not recognize, through a realm he could not comprehend. Thrust out against his will into 1967's summer-of-love, into a psychedelic haze of confusion. Smiling faces, pink and yellow flowers in their hair, called him "brother," called him "friend." They hugged, shouted joyfully, and he joined the singalong troupe heading for the Haight. Pronounced like "hate" they told him, but he felt there only love.

He let his hair grow long and they sang his songs and he sang theirs and all held hands inside the music. They didn't 'think' – rejecting an analytic process passed down from 'The Man' – and so they weren't divided in their minds. But being from the inner world, the unique view from inside-outside, he could predict the darkness ascending and descending. His mind's eye batted frantically to blink away the visions of cops donning beast-marked foreheads – on their helmets, the great bear-seal of California State – with batons thumping hippies up and down the hill, beating down kids derailed from Vietnam's draft too "Peace" to fight back. He saw bloodied bandanas and flower-buds crushed underfoot, centrifugal black vibes beginning their rotation in the epicenter of peace. He knew what was coming, not just for them, but for this world.

A son of man, raised by the men of the penitentiary, he struggled to navigate this new landscape of coded meanings and side-long glances. He didn't know the rules or how to learn them. Not at all like prison's mainline, toe-the-line, "stay in line motherfucker!" To him, the world outside was full to the brim of incomprehensible conventions, sneaky smiles and two-faced liars. He wasn't the children's teacher but he tried to help them stand up, for themselves and for the world. He, the wounded enemy, would find a desert hideaway, a cave, and stow the children away. He was to be the avenging one with a key to the bottomless pit. Man's son but a child of God, a hybrid creature – the Death Valley Angel.

Once a cherubic-faced child sold for beer; his small life's worth measured out in amber liquid, not even a tankard or a pitcher but a pint – a small measure! A crass transaction, a spurning, but only adoration for her, his upturned boy-eyes to a mother's face he couldn't hate. Growing up, he wished to be a friend to everything he saw, everything he felt, everything he knew – air, trees, water, animals – and he felt all the way alive! But the thought-games of others caused confusion: they wanted him to kick and lash out in destruction, to be a boy like the other "boys who will be boys". On a darkening day, he held out his hand and wished for the pretty butterfly to land but what came instead was a Death's Head Moth. It screamed in his face, made buzzing white noise like an electrical transmitter. He never again held out his hand in friendship.

In his caged life, walled in and well defined, he fared better, if better is a shadow-life of a shadow-self. Clarity here – the rules, the regulations, procedures and protocol – all this he understood; knew his number, what was expected, what they wanted. All now rubber-stamped, signed and sealed with a consistent answer: Request Denied. He thinks back on the sad new dawn of the burnt-out sun when the many strands of love and newness became entangled with old dark under-the-noose threads, back to when the shadow figures asked him to extend the hangman's rope to those nine.

"Not a snitch, never!" he thinks to himself.

But the bigger picture he could explain and make them see, if only the world outside would listen to his testimony of how the black sun's tendrils wrapped themselves around the rainbow like an evil octopus and sullied the rainbow-children's world until all days were grey.

A little troupe, a close-knit Family, tried to bury themselves in the sand. The Man caught their feet and stopped them slipping down the hole, snatched them up before they could enter its vast depths. No chance of escape into the underworld! In a dried blood spider-web of intricate intrigue, even the Scorpio-scorpion was trapped. Love was squeezed out of hearts drip by vibrant drip until no way was left but to strike first, attack or be attacked. Like mistreated dogs, they would turn to bite the next hand that reached, whether foe or friend.

"Could it have been any way but this?" he thinks, as he holds out his hand. Through the bars of the cells, angry and screaming, the Moth-Man is on his way.

Symbol Infection

Rasmenia Massoud

I never had a wedding, but I had a ring. Not a real wedding ring, a substitute ring. This ring had no jagged edges, no precious stones to fall out and become lost. The petite silver band had two sparkling leaves of Black Hills gold affixed to it; one yellowish-green, the other, pinkish-orange. A tiny silver cluster in the middle looking like miniature bunch of grapes.

That's how most things made with Black Hills gold look. Leaves. Colors. Nothing else like it.

I never took it off because I made a commitment. And because it had always felt like it wasn't even there. It turned out, the commitment was pretty easy to ignore, too. Most things are easy to ignore, unless they're falling apart.

Those stupid leaves and tiny grapes became a symbol of wasted life; a reminder of fifteen years I'd given away for no reason. A token representing a man who despised me and a person I'd ceased to be a long time ago.

Now this fucking symbol won't let go of my hand.

Troy hands me another Captain and Coke. "We tried butter. We tried oil. Maybe we should try to cut it off."

"Yeah?" I taste my drink. Mostly Captain. Almost no Coke. Troy's using the same tired tricks to get me drunk that he used on me fifteen years ago. It's become so automatic for him. He can't even see I'm trying to get myself drunk. "You sober enough to take a hacksaw to my hand without buzzing right through my goddamn finger?"

"No." He shakes his head and grimaces like he's about to deliver terrible news, or an enormous belch. "But you have nine more fingers."

"Screw you, then."

"Yes ma'am." He lifts me up and sets me down so that I'm sitting on the counter top. He's wearing too much cologne, just like he did fifteen years ago. When he still had hair and looked like a rock star. When my clothes, my skin and everything else was tight.

"Ma'am?" I jab him in the shoulder. "Nothing makes a woman feel sexier than being called 'ma'am'."

He moves in closer, bringing the chemical stench of his after shave veneer to my nose. I recoil and he looks wounded, so I say, "Later. I really want to get this damn thing off."

"Do you have a hacksaw?" He's close enough that when he says, "hacksaw," the exhalation blows some of my hair back.

I jump down from the counter. "Of course I don't have a hacksaw."

"Hey," Troy says, swirling his rum and coke, clinking the ice cubes against the glass. "Why did you leave me for him back then, anyway?"

"You were banging a stripper, that's why."

He removes his baseball cap, scratches his balding scalp, then puts it back on. I loathe the cap, but prefer it to the sad old man exposed by its absence.

"Well, you were messing around with someone else, too, weren't'cha?"

"Yeah. Him."

"When did he give you that ring?"

"A couple of years after I met him. Before my fingers turned into fat, pink sausages."

"Why didn't he get you a real wedding ring?"

"I don't know. Maybe because there was no real wedding and no real wife."

"We could try ice," he says.

"That sounds weird. But, yeah. Okay. Let's do it."

I soak my hand in a bowl of ice cubes until it feels like a dead lump of frozen bones dangling from the end of my arm.

The ring slides off, leaving a deep dent all the way around my finger. I hold it up and examine this tiny circle showing me the size my finger used to be when I was someone else.

"All right, then. It's off," Troy says. He slaps me on the ass. "Let's get to it."

"I've got a better idea. Let's take a shower."

"Ooh. Yeah." Troy puts his arms up and thrusts his pelvis, humping the air. I wonder if he's always been repulsive and

stupid, if I hadn't noticed it fifteen years ago because I was too young to see beyond the surface of anyone back then.

Or maybe I was just as stupid and repulsive back then, too.

Maybe I haven't changed as much as I'd like to think.

He removes his hat and I follow him into the bathroom, deciding this is better than trying not to choke on the fumes of his cheap man perfume. It's easier to close my eyes and imagine what he used to be than it is to stop breathing.

Or maybe it isn't. I'm too much of a coward to find out.

Every morning since I signed the divorce papers, I need a few seconds after opening my eyes to figure out where in the hell I am. When the bare walls and lack of furniture come back into focus, the past few months surge into my mind and I try to snuggle back into oblivion, but my self-loathing won't allow me that kind of peace.

Every morning, my hangover feels like being born again. My head throbs, like being squeezed and pushed out, fists trembling, throat grunting and wailing in protest of the light, screaming for the comfort of warm, dark silence.

Then I remember that the loser I dated when I was nineteen is snoring next to me, now an even bigger loser than he was back then. It was dumb luck, running into Troy at that Mexican restaurant my friends from work had taken me to as a means of distracting me from the fact that my marriage was about to end.

There I was, slumped over my goddamn chicken chimichanga, reciting all of those, "Oh my, it's been so long" platitudes while trying to act like my life had been fucking wonderful since that day fifteen years ago when we'd left one another for two people who we believed were better options.

We made out in the parking lot, the rest of my cold chimichanga in a Styrofoam box on the dashboard.

I rented the cheapest apartment I could find. Troy helped me move in, and then he never left. An entire week passed by before I figured out he was homeless, living in his truck, or couch surfing with his meth-addled friends. Another week might've gone by without me noticing a thing if I hadn't decided to start smoking again.

This apartment building, it's so cheap that it doesn't have real balconies or patios. What it has instead is a glass door that opens out onto a boxed-in slab of concrete just big enough for two people to stand in and smoke, or look at the depressing, rusty heaps of junk in the parking lot. I'd always ignored it, but after ten years without a cigarette, I had a fresh pack in my hand and was looking forward to standing on my own almost-patio and having a smoke. Alone.

I pulled the blind and there was the back of Troy's stupid head and his goddamn hat leaning against the glass door, his arms wrapped around his legs, knees under his chin. Folded up and crammed in this little space with empty beer cans, like an amateur hobo.

I opened the door. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Oh, hey. You're home." He said this as though loitering on someone's porch is the most natural thing in the world.

It occurred to me that from this angle, I could kick him in the face. But, instead, I said, "I asked you a question."

"I was just waiting for you to get home from work."

"So you creep around my apartment? You don't have anything else to do? Nowhere else to be? We didn't make any plans for tonight. I've seen you every day this week. I was looking forward to an evening by myself."

Out came a pitiful confession, a deluge of his life events that I had no energy to listen to. A combination of words that added together equaled: pity me. No home. No job. No visitation with his kids, who, until then, I was not aware of. The ink on my divorce papers had barely dried and I had this deadbeat from my past wanting me to fix his ego, give him a home and make him whole.

I can't even do any of those things for myself.

I could have told him in that moment to leave, to never come back. Instead, I pointed at the empty beer cans on my almost-patio and said, "You have any more of that beer, or what?"

Every morning since that day, I seethe and think of the words I'll say to get him out of here for good. For the past month, I've rehearsed it in my throbbing head, as though it'll be difficult to get rid of him. As though I have a reason to cling to him.

Now, I've just been born again, screaming for the darkness and his after shave is stinking up my sheets. I sit up and nudge him in the ribs. "Get up."

He stirs and grunts. I nudge him again. Hard. "C'mon. Get the hell up."

He grabs my hand. "Jesus. What the hell happened to you?"

I pull my hand back. The dent the ring left around my finger is filled with tiny red bumps. The rest of my hand is blotchy and sick looking. It's almost as though the sight of it is causing a reaction. I start to itch from the place where the ring used to be, all the way to my wrist.

Rubbing my sick finger, I say, "Probably nothing. A side effect from fucking with it too much last night. Just get up. We need

to talk."

"We could talk, or we could..." He reaches up, tries to pull me down.

I push him away. "For real. I have to go to work. You've gotta go."

"Work?" He sits up and rubs his face. "I thought you wanted to talk."

"I did. I do." I throw the covers off. Standing is a big adjustment. It takes a moment for the dizziness to fade. "Whatever. We'll talk when I get home from work."

"I'll be here, waiting."

"I figured as much." I'm digging my fingernails into the itchy places on my hand.

"You know, you could just give me a key."

I stare at him, thinking I'd like to throw something at him, but this place is so empty and I don't know that tossing a shoe or a pillow at his face would be satisfying enough. "You know, you could just go get a job and your own apartment, since you don't fucking live here."

He appears to be genuinely confused. "But, we're back together. I love you, you love me, and now that you've finally divorced that jerk-off, everything's all good."

"I don't love you. I never loved you. And I didn't divorce him for you. He left me."

"Well, that doesn't matter. We're still back together."

"No. You were a warm body that was somewhat familiar. Now it's done."

Troy jumps out of bed, pokes his finger in my face. "You're a fucking bitch." He calls me more names, and then makes a dramatic exit, getting dressed and stuffing the rest of his things in his Hefty bag luggage.

I don't look him in the eye as he's doing this. I look at my hand, at the tiny, waning moon-shaped gouges I've left in it and the small, nasty welts that have begun to appear.

Then he leaves. My self-inflicted punishment slams the door on his way out.

By the time I get home from work, a hostile, scarlet rash has spread up to my elbow. I scratch and scratch, the ugly little bumps bursting, the fluid spreading, wetting my skin, then drying. Crusting over. Spreading the infection.

I don't understand why my arm is itching and burning, so I call my doctor's office. The woman with the stuffed-up nose on the other end of the line tells me that a rash isn't an emergency. The doctor has gone for the day. She says if it's life threatening, I should go to the emergency room.

"I can't tell what's life-threatening, that's why I need the doctor," I say. "I need someone else to tell me if my life is okay."

She doesn't know what to say to that. Fucking HMOs.

"It could be a metal allergy," she says.

"No. I removed the metal. My skin can't be allergic to not wearing a ring."

"Could be stress."

I decide this woman is useless, so I end the call and stick my arm under the faucet in the kitchen sink. The water can't get hot or cold enough, so I dig around in my mostly-empty drawers and see a vague, flashing recollection of having a normal kitchen with several types of spatulas and spoons. I curse myself for not owning a potato peeler, or a decent set of kitchen knives.

I pull the blind covering the glass door leading to my almost-patio. There he is, a walking, talking, symbol of my wasted life in a baseball cap, curled up and sleeping one off.

Instead of opening the door, I go into my bathroom. There, on the counter is one of Troy's cheap, blue plastic disposable razors. Looking down at countless tiny pustules on my arm, I think to myself that this is just stress removal.

It can't be any more difficult than shaving my legs.

It's easier to close my eyes and imagine the razor cutting away my bad decisions than it is to stop breathing.

Or maybe it isn't. I'm too much of a coward to find out.

The Second Story

Mike Lee

Irene entered the elevator. Pressed seven. Doors closed.

As her anxieties grew, she placed her fingertips against the polished metal. By the fifth floor, her heart began to race.

No. Please. No. Doors opened.

When she awoke, her hand was pressed against the bookcase adjacent to the bed. Larry's cat stirred, opened his eyes and yawned. As she reached to pet him, he rose, stretched and jumped off the bed, padding off beyond her sight.

She felt Larry's arm crossed under the pillow, his hand resting on the edge, near hers. Irene slipped her hand into his. She studied Larry's knuckles under the moonlight. If memory served, the scar below his index finger was from a dog bite when he was a child. Irene was not too sure if that was the story, teenage memory being all that, and there were gaps. So many blank pages, and often all disordered, out of place, and some reading as if they never actually happened, that this was someone else's story jammed in like a loose file and carelessly tossed in a file cabinet.

This was not a book, though if it were, Irene would like to read it to make sense of this story of her life with Larry. Being close with him was so fast, intense. She was balancing the conflict with what stirred inside her, and unveiling layers of caution, trusting again with necessary contradictions.

She and Larry drove out to Marble Falls. Her parents offered them a new home. It was a Victorian, set on an expansive plot at the edge of town. But when she looked up toward the second story, she blinked.

The architectural lines above the portico bothered her. The house seemed to shift at the second story, parallel lines moving, blurring. Irene took off her glasses, and rubbed her eyes.

Sliding her glasses on, she looked again. The house continued to shift dangerously.

Larry stood next to her. Around her parents, they never held hands. She remembered that Dad didn't like him. He once threatened to shoot Larry. She was still angry about that.

"Sweetheart, this isn't a good idea," Larry said. "Let's go home."

She was polite, but firm in telling her parents she appreciated the offer but they had to be going. Irene remembered being a little scared in telling them no. It took her years to learn that. They were both dead by then.

Sometimes she still forgets to say no, but not this time.

No.

Irene woke up again. This was yet another dream. Shit. Another stray page, half-torn jammed into that book falling out for her eyes to see.

She looked up at the stack of books leaning in the windowsill above her. Irene pulled the curtain out to look. Dawn was rising on the opposite Brooklyn shore.

She turned over and slid her hand over Larry's chest. They were older now, so much since they first met. Irene slid her fingers over his greying chest hair, exploring the geography of his body, something she is relearning, as is he since they met again and decided to be a couple.

They weren't young but were, once. Now, they begin again—a renewal replete with secret self-appointed vows, visual and verbal. Known only to them. This with a sense no one was in the way anymore. They talk a lot, wrapping sentences around each other as weightless garlands; these words strung together never a burden as they spoke more, mutually entranced. Learning a language that was always fleeting from their grasp before.

They learned about what kept the two connected in the years, those decades they were apart. In the process rekindling the gifts they bore on teenage nights, often feeling alone with each other, even in crowds.

Maybe that solitary feeling as two kept them together--until this broke them apart. Irene recalled they fought a lot. Larry responded they fought about nothing.

Irene told him they were young.

Probably both of them learning how to scream, he said. Baby, as teenagers, we were waltzing with PTSD.

They silenced the discussion with a kiss.

Irene admitted this was going to take work, though. They learned to listen, and she always loved him.

Irene's fingers slid around his nipple. She pressed her lips against it, daringly sliding her tongue against his flesh.

Larry stirred, his arm falling over her back.

"I remember this is how we slept," Larry murmured, awakened.

She paused. Looking into his eyes, she said, "I don't remember."

Larry took her hand, interlocking fingers. As he pulled their arms above them, he asked:

"Do you remember, now?"

"I will."

"Now and forever."

"Amen."



Henry's Brother Died in the War

Josh Rank

There was a song playing through the loudspeaker, but it was drowned out by the shouts and scuffling feet. Every member of the graduating sixth grade class was in the gymnasium, along with a handful of teachers. There was a wall of baby pictures brought in by parents, there were games with prizes, there were tables set up on which to eat the delivered pizza. It had been a long school year. The teachers wanted to relax. Billy was the first one to notice this.

"Oh, c'mon. What do we need to leave for?" asked Clarke. The three of them were standing beneath the basketball hoop near the tables.

"Because we can!" replied Billy. They both looked to Henry, but he remained silent, as usual. "There's no roll call, nobody's watching, we can just pretend like we're going to the bathroom and walk right out the door. Nothing to it."

"I mean, no, right?" His voice came out shaky. Clarke looked to Henry, who responded with a shrug. None of them had skipped class before.

"Come on. Let's go." Billy walked towards the door with his head turned backwards, watching the gymnasium. He continued walking this way, not watching where he was going, until he bumped into the door and pushed it open. Clarke slapped Henry on the chest and ran after Billy. Henry followed and got to the door a moment before it swung shut.

"Wait up," said Clarke. Billy was already at the door at the end of the hallway that led to the parking lot. A moment later, the three of them were outside.

The parking lot was full of cars but empty of people. It was quiet besides the occasional bird call. The spring air retained the crispness of winter, but the warmth from the sun diluted it a bit. If they had stopped walking, they would have been cold.

Nobody spoke. No cars drove down the road. They hurried to the other side of the parking lot, which was lined with trees and a fence. It was around two in the afternoon and the final bell wouldn't ring for another hour and a half.

"What are we gonna do?" asked Clarke. The boys were walking along the back of the parking lot, toward the sidewalk along the street. Billy stopped walking.

"We can't just walk down the street and go to the store. Someone might see us."

Clarke and Henry nodded and pretended to think of a plan. Parks were everywhere, but there wasn't much to do in them. They needed to hide so somebody's mom or dad wouldn't find them sneaking around.

"The river," Billy finally said. "Let's go to the river."

"What? Why? What are we going to do down there?" His voice quivered again. "We can't go down there, right Henry?"

They looked to Henry who lifted his eyebrows and shrugged.

"Where else are we going to go?" asked Billy.

"I don't know. I mean, what if there's, y'know, down there?"

"If there's what? Hobos?" Billy had his arms crossed and eyes squinted. He leaned slightly towards Clarke. "What? Are you afraid?"

"No, no I'm not afraid. It's just, y'know, we're not supposed to go down there."

"Oh pssh. Those are just stories."

Clarke rubbed his left elbow with his right hand. "You think?"

"You got any better ideas?"

They both looked to Henry, who shrugged.

Clarke sighed. "Okay, fine."

They stuck to back roads as they made their way to the river. It wasn't far, but running in-between houses at the sound of every car slowed them down considerably. The town was small. Not so small that everybody knew everybody, but the sight of three boys walking around in the middle of the afternoon would definitely have attracted some attention. They ran through a section of the golf course, followed a couple more winding roads, and eventually came upon the trail next to the baseball field that led to the river.

The air felt cooler down there. The rush of the water, which seemed to be moving faster than they could run, created a white noise effect that blocked out the rest of the city. It was just them and the river.

Although the path wasn't paved, it was cleared through trees. The grass that lined the floor was overgrown. It was still too

early in the year to clear it for dog walking and weekend strolls. The snowmobiles in the winter kept the path clear and didn't allow for any overgrowth, but the city would still need to make a pass through with a mower throughout the summer to keep it manageable. At this point in the year, however, it was the perfect place to hide from the rest of the town.

"Do you feel like we're the only ones left in the world?" asked Clarke.

Henry and Billy looked around. There were apartment complexes on the other side of the river, and further down, a couple old factories that haven't been in operation for fifteen years. Both ways down the path, in front of and behind them, went until it disappeared into the woods. The trees were sparse enough that you always had a view of the clouds, but if you were to throw a Frisbee, it wouldn't make it more than ten feet before hitting something.

"This is where I'm going to do it," said Billy as he started walking down the path. Henry and Clarke quickly caught up to him.

"Do what?" asked Clarke.

"I'm going to steal some cigarettes from my brother the next chance I get."

"Cigarettes?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna start smoking," Billy said this with a slight smile, as if he figured something out that people had been trying to hide from him. "Right down here."

"But, like, nobody smokes. Not yet."

"Listen, Sandy. We're going to be in middle school next year—"

"Clarke," said Clarke.

"Oh c'mon. If you're going to act like a little girl I might as well call you by your real name."

"I don't like that name."

"But that's your name, isn't it? Sandy Clarke?"

"Well, yeah but...I thought you guys said you'd stop calling me that?"

"I guess if you really want to get away from that girly name, you'll have to do something manly."

"Like skipping school?" asked Clarke.

Billy stopped walking and turned around. "Come out here with me next week. Once schools done. I'll get some cigarettes and we'll smoke them down here. Then next year, when we go to middle school, we'll already be like high schoolers."

"Billy, I—" Clarke turned his head back and forth. "Hey, where did Henry go?"

They looked around and saw only the trees, the tall grass along the sides of the trail, and the rushing water beyond.

"Henry!" yelled Clarke.

"Shh! You want someone to come down here looking for us?" said Billy.

"But we gotta find Henry! What if he—"

Henry poked his head out from the side of the trail about twenty feet back. Billy and Clarke ran up to him.

"What are you doing?"

"Look," said Henry. His voice was barely audible above the sound of the river.

Billy and Clarke walked around Henry. There was a man lying in the grass next to the river. He was curled into a loose ball. A navy blue stocking cap clung to the top of his head and matched the finger gloves covering most of his clenched hands. There was a large bag in the grass next to him that was opened at the top but didn't seem to have much inside. Tattered pants stained with mud clung to his skinny legs. His eyes were open, but they weren't seeing anything.

"Holy shit!" yelled Billy. He turned around and started running down the path. Clarke remained silent, but didn't hesitate in following Billy. It took them about five seconds before they realized Henry wasn't running with them.

"Henry, come on!" yelled Billy. His voice was shaky and squeaked a little.

"Henry!" echoed Clarke.

They stood next to each other and could see their friend standing along the side of the path, looking off to the side. After a minute of deliberation, they jogged back to Henry.

"Come on, man. We gotta get outta here. What if there's a murderer out here? He's already murdered this guy!" said Clarke.

“He wasn’t murdered,” said Henry. “There’s no blood.”

“Come on Henry. It stinks out here,” said Billy. “We can’t get found with a dead body. What if they throw us in jail or something? Plus, they’re gonna know we’re skipping.”

“He’s right, Henry. We gotta go.”

“No!”

Billy and Clarke looked at each other. They haven’t heard Henry raise his voice since he got the news. Henry walked toward the body.

“We’re not going. And we can’t tell anybody.”

“Henry, we have—”

“If we tell somebody, the cops will take him. They’re going to do one of those autopsies. I saw it on TV. They cut you open here,” he dragged a line down the middle of his chest and over his stomach. “And they take all your guts out. Then they’ll put him in one of those drawers in a basement and he’ll just sit there because he doesn’t have a family.” Tears started running down his cheeks but he kept his breath under control. “He probably had a heart attack or something. He’s just had some bad luck.” More quietly, he said: “He deserves to be buried just like everybody else.”

“Do you have a shovel?” asked Billy. “We gotta get outta here.”

“We gotta tell somebody,” said Clarke.

Henry turned toward his friends. With the dead man on the ground behind him, and the rushing river even further back, he said, “We gotta do this. Nobody did it for my brother.”

Billy and Clarke had no response. In fact, they had avoided talking about Henry’s brother since they found out six months before that he never came back from the war. Having never discussed it with Henry, the details they knew came from their parents. Scott had been shipped off to Afghanistan. Something happened that involved a bomb on the road and a helicopter that disappeared, and Scott was gone. Vanished. They knew he was dead, but they never brought back the body. Something about putting the other soldiers at risk. And now as they watched the tears roll down their friend’s face with the river racing behind him, now that he’s found his voice for the first time in six months, they knew they couldn’t tell him no.

“Okay, but how?” asked Billy.

Henry didn’t say anything. He walked past them, across the path, and into the trees. The spring thaw and a recent rain had done them the favor of loosening the soil and it wasn’t long before Henry found a fallen tree. It was a large tree with leaf buds still attached to the branches. It looked as though it had simply gotten too heavy for the ground to support. The roots at the bottom were attached to the trunk, but the whole thing had tipped to the side. In the process, a crater about four feet in diameter and maybe three feet deep was created. The tree wasn’t on its side, but leaning at an angle, propped against another tree.

“Here,” said Henry when the others walked up to him. “Right here.”

The body was ten feet off the path, and they were standing another thirty feet on the other side.

“So, do you like, wanna pick up him up or something?”

“No, we’ll use the bag,” replied Henry. He started walking back towards the river.

“But I don’t think he’ll fit...” said Clarke, but nobody responded.

Henry emptied the contents of the bag into the grass. There were a few extra pairs of socks, half of a sandwich still wrapped in paper, a sweater, and a bottle of water.

“Where do you think he was going?”

“Who knows, Clarke?” Billy held his hand over his nose. “Can we get a move on? It smells like shit over here.”

Henry held the bag with the arm loops facing away from him. “Can you rock him to one side?”

Billy and Clarke looked at each other, waiting for the other to move. Finally, Billy shook his head and held his breath. He grabbed the man by his coat and moved him to the side a bit. Henry threw the arm loop around his shoulder and pulled it tight underneath. They repeated the action with the opposite side. When they were done, the man wore the bag in front like he was carrying a baby. His crooked and stiff arms held the bag in place.

“Now what?” asked Clarke.

“Now,” Henry bent down and grabbed the bag, “we bring him to the tree.” Henry started pulling on the bag, but the man didn’t move. His lower half seemed to be stuck in the dirt. Billy and Clarke watched for a minute before both of them brought in a big breath and bent over to help. Once they were able to synchronize their efforts, the man came free from the ground with the sound of a refrigerator door opening.

“Oh shit,” said Billy and he let go of the bag.

“I don’t know about this.” Clarke let go, too.

Henry continued to pull.

“Henry, this is crazy. Come on, let’s just go find someone,” said Clarke.

“He’s right. About half of that. Let’s get out of here, okay?”

Henry continued to pull the man. He had moved him about five feet at this point; halfway to the path. Tears were streaming down his face, and if the stench of the man bothered him, he didn’t let it show. He continued his work in silence.

Billy and Clarke, seeing Henry had no intention of slowing down, took another breath and started to pull. The path was the easiest part; the man slid right across. Entering the trees was trickier. The ground was covered in dead logs, sticks, rocks, and the earth was bumpy. At one point, Clarke had to find a large stick and use it as a wedge to get the man over a bump. But overall, the fact the man had curled into a ball before dying had worked to the boys’ favor; the smooth surface and the material used for his coat made it very conducive to sliding across the ground. It took about twenty minutes, and they were sweating by the time they got there, but they eventually reached the fallen tree. Unceremoniously, they pushed the man into the hole and sat on the ground to rest.

“Okay. It’s done. Right? Can we go?” asked Clarke.

“We have to bury him,” said Henry. The sound of the river was still present, but low enough at this point where Henry’s quiet voice didn’t risked being drowned out.

Billy jumped to his feet, face red, and looked as if a string of profanities were about to fly from his mouth. He faced Henry and was about to speak, when he abruptly turned around and walked further into the trees.

“Where’s he going?” asked Clarke. He was about to get up to follow him, but he was exhausted.

Henry and Clarke sat together and listened to the faint wash of the river, and the wind blowing through the leafless trees. The wind hit the sweat on their exposed arms and necks and reminded them of the coats they had left at school.

“Do you think they know we’re gone?” asked Clarke.

Henry shrugged.

That’s when they heard the footsteps coming through the trees. They both looked over, half expecting Billy and half expecting the police. Luckily, their first instinct was correct. Billy came walking toward them, barely able to see over the pile of sticks in his hands.

“What’s that for?” asked Clarke. Billy walked past them and up to the man in the hole. He emptied his payload, and even though he didn’t cover the man completely, he came close.

“You wanted to bury him, right?” asked Billy. Henry got up and started gathering the muddy and dead leaves that had been sitting on the ground since the previous autumn. The other two did the same and within a few minutes, they had filled in the gaps of the sticks, hiding the man beneath. Henry grabbed two more sticks from the ground and laid them next to the hole, one crossing the other in the middle. What was once a simple act of nature renewing itself, had officially become a gravesite.

Clarke cleared his throat. “Okay so can we—”

Henry stood at the edge of the hole, across from the sticks he laid on the ground, and to the right of the leaning tree. He started to say the only prayer he knew.

“Now I lay you down to sleep.”

Clarke and Billy looked at each other, but didn’t say anything.

“I pray the lord, your soul to keep. And if—” He paused. “I pray the lord, your soul to take.” He briefly looked up before kneeling. “Goodbye,” he said quietly. After a moment of listening to the river and the wind, Henry stood up and turned towards his friends. His eyes were red and his cheeks were shiny. He nodded.

The three of them didn’t walk back to the trail, but went through the woods until they reached the road. They walked the next few blocks in silence before the three of them split up and went to their separate houses. It had only been an hour since they walked out of school, but to them, it felt like it had been a day and a half. Henry opened the door to his house and walked into the kitchen where his mother was reading at the table. She looked at her watch and set the book down as he closed the door behind him.

“Henry? What are you doing home? And where’s your backpack? And coat?”

Henry walked up to his mom and gave her an awkward hug as she sat in the chair. “I had to give Scott a funeral,” he said.

She forgot about the time. His backpack. His coat. She turned herself in the chair so they were facing each other and gave him a proper hug, resting her chin on top of his head. She held him like that, almost like when he was a baby, until she was able to stop her eyes from watering.

Cardboard Sunrise

Clio Velentza

Symbols, just like colors, exist only when we see them. Say I never noticed how milk foam clung to your wedding ring when we bumped into each other that windy morning; say the morning was just that, simply windy instead of wild with anticipation as it seemed when strangers' hair whipped my face on the sidewalk. I never put much faith in zebra crossings because of their inherently hallucinatory nature, so I jaywalked right into your ridiculous purple patchwork coat that I once called cartoonish but you still wore at my brother's wedding, where I had vindictively vomited all over it.

Say I never noticed how first time I saw you after all these years I had to relive that shameful memory and almost turned to leave, but thought better of it and caught your arm while that flower truck kept honking and the shrill street backed away, a cardboard sunrise in a school play, and in its place there it was, the drab library bathroom with its jittery neon bulbs, it was cloudy and all was grey except that long string of blood running down the back of your leg, it was very red – I remember thinking this when I opened the door and saw it, it was very red, surely fake – you said you hated synthetic pads but took mine nonetheless, and we disliked each other immediately.

I should have paid attention to all that.

Instead I reached and flicked the foam and I ignored it until you gently retrieved your hand and hid it with a strange middle-class politeness that terrified me, having grown used to the vicarious embarrassment that were your filthy, rebellious manners that so amused our professors. My hands were sweating now, I could still taste the acidity of that night's vomit, all champagne-sour, a delirious resignation to your bad caretaking which left me dehydrated on a wet garden full of demonic twinkle lights for a good long time, until you picked me up and allowed to be kissed with my horrid breath. That kiss came dredging up my breakfast with a vengeance, I could not believe the fear was here, in your paper cup and in the sticky foam as we prattled on, I could see our speech bubbles with the sweet platitudes glowing in soft focus, I had a lot of regrets in a single fast second for the library and for the vomit kiss, so I was hyper-aware of the inflexibility of this floor we stood on. No soft grass, just makeshift hardness.

Salvation came in the form of a pigeon dropping on my shoulder. You laughed and said now *that's* cartoonish, as I wiped it away, glad of the distracting stench. It is a perfect morning for a chance encounter now, if one is up for a skim through pale memories. Its innocence demands to be acknowledged. I can't very well recall, Kleenex in hand, why I got so flustered just now in the first place, it must have been the—

Definitely. I didn't even notice, say, as you were leaving, what color is your hair.



Pigsglue

Donna D. Vitucci

Maddy Procter stood in the boys' bathroom. Nobody pulled their pants down.

Josh and Frankie and Paul loitered by the spots designated for peeing but they stayed tucked in. They also did not run out calling for Mrs. Dobryny, tattling. They watched Maddy, their soles stuck to the checkerboard floor the janitor swabbed nightly with the tarantula-legged mop. Their legs were ice or rubber, and either way, they couldn't escape her. Maddy might be a spider or a virus or Shere Khan. For sure her eyes glittered. For sure she had venom in her teeth.

What she said leaped out and bit them. "Pigsglue had his arm and leg cut off."

"Who's that?" Frankie said.

"My brother."

"Pigsglue?" Josh said, doubting and making fun because how could you not make fun of a name like Pigsglue?

"Yes." Maddy's head adjusted on her neck so she could better stare him down. A patch covered her one eye to make the other work harder. She pierced Josh with her lazy-eye stare. "That's his name. He was in Iraq."

That did it. You couldn't laugh over soldiers. You couldn't make fun of Pigsglue, so you couldn't poke at Maddy either. They didn't say it that day but Pigsglue made Maddy invincible. The name revolted them, her stories of Pigsglue trickled down their spines like ice water, and their wonderings and their supposings and their need to know 'what next' about Pigsglue drew them to Maddy's one-eyed stare every day that week.

The girls and boys bathrooms shared plumbing, were located along the same one hallway. And in the girls bathroom Claire Dobryny sat on an upturned waste basket with her head set against a wall pipe. Third time this morning she'd thrown up. Only the beginning, the precarious time, the hold on or lose it time. She heard the children talking and the name Pigsglue, for no reason she could identify, chilled her. She rubbed her arms, thinking she should have worn a blouse with sleeves.

Maddy Procter's hush-now voice cemented the boys—Claire could just imagine the scene, a scene which she really should get in and break up. As their teacher, she could extinguish Pigsglue with one withering look. She would need to tell Sara Procter her Maddy required a little more listening to, that gory stories were a call for attention at home. That, and Halloween was coming up. Kids liked to spook themselves, they loved spooking their friends.

Even Claire could not resist Maddy droning on: "My mom died when I was a baby. My mom now is really my step-mom, and my brother is in an electric wheelchair."

Frankie snickered. "You mean Pigsglue is in a wheelchair."

"Yessssss," Maddy said, over-enunciating through her newly opened front teeth spaces.

Claire had gone to high school with Sara Baskerton, now Procter. They were acquaintances at best, but she'd attended the same after-prom party where everybody knew Sara got pregnant with the baby she later named Maddy so for certain this one story at least was a lie. From sitting and bent forward upon the upturned wastebasket, Claire stood, stretched and arched, put her hand at the small of her back and dug her knuckles in there. Eddie did it better but he was setting up the new parameters at Stylo-Tech down in Salem.

The baby was making all her hard parts soft and all her soft parts malleable. The baby was its own little parasite. She did not tell Eddie she'd missed three periods, and he'd been too preoccupied with implementing Stylo's digital infrastructure to notice. Speaking had jinxed three out of three, and she wasn't breathing a word until she started showing. Invoking charm and luck meant she wouldn't visit the doctor or pee on a stick. Some signs you simply had to trust, and anyway by now she knew her own body like a blind man reads Braille.

"My mom and dad put Pigsglue in the freezer and now we can't use the freezer anymore," Maddy was saying, further tantalizing her crowd.

Frankie said, "So he's in with the tater tots and the ice cream?"

The boys busted each other up. Their echo-laughter skimmed along the pipe to batter Claire's head where it set against it, getting rust and old flaking paint into her hair, which was going thin. She read internet articles that said the baby would steal her protein. Probably lead-based paint and asbestos wrapping she leaned into, too, but she just couldn't tear herself away from Maddy's gory story.

"When he was visiting my grandma, Pigsglue burned his leg—"

"You mean the one leg he has left?"

Maddy talked over the interrupting boys: "—he burned his leg on Granny's coal stove, right down so you could see the bone. I saw it there, the white gristle bone."

“Ewwww.” The boys laughed and made gross out sounds.

Then an almost weepy voice said, “I don't want to hear your stories anymore.” Paul, the quiet one with the cowlick and chapped lips.

“Don't you? Why not?” Maddy said.

“Because they're lies.”

Maddy's voice curdled into a perfect blend of innocence and evil. “Are they?”

That was it. Claire exited one bathroom and then pushed open the adjoining lavatory, held the door wide and ordered, “Okay, everybody out.”

The boys ambled past, nudging and stepping on each other's heels, and then finally, Maddy trailed. Claire gave her an intense look and said, “You know you don't belong in here,” but Maddy defied her with an eye-patch stare and all at once Claire felt what she thought was the tadpole swish of her pregnancy.

When Claire pulled Sara aside in the pick-up lane after school, she advised her of Maddy's tall tales.

Sara scoffed, “Is that what Maddy said? Are you sure?”

Did I see what I saw? Did I hear what I heard? Oh, unreliable memory. Claire was rather used to things not being what they seemed. She regrouped quick and said, “I take what the kids say when they come to me with a grain of salt, sure, but this I heard myself.”

“Maddy told you?” Sara narrowed her dark, bottomless eyes, nothing lazy about either of them as she gazed at Maddy upside down on the jungle gym, suggesting Claire was not even worth looking at, the way Sara had dismissed her ever since they were teenagers.

“I heard it,” Claire said.

Sara looked at her then. Sara Procter, who had always been pretty and pretty exploded plenty of doubt, let the pretty one get away with so much before young bones and blood congealed into adult shapes that resisted change. During the years since high school Sara's eyes had deepened in her skull, her teeth had grown mottled. She said, “But did she tell you?”

Claire backed up an inch. You could hear the gravel slip under her shoes. Even the gravel wanted to hide. “I overheard her say it.”

Sara put her hands on her hips, the same body language Claire used to preside over her first graders. She certainly felt scolded when Sara said, “Oh. Then you were eavesdropping on child's play.”

Claire did not want to admit she'd been loitering alongside the pipes, half mesmerized and all the way stomach-sick, while she should have been...what? Teacher-ing? Corridor patrolling? Booting Maddy out of the boys' bathroom?

She didn't want Sara to know she was pregnant, not now not ever, and for sure not before she told Eddie. Sara maybe had a peculiar daughter whose imagination tilted wild, but she had a kid, had had a kid since she herself was a practically still a kid, while Claire proceeded childless and desperate to hang on to what, for the first time today, she'd felt duplicating inside her.

Claire stammered. “I don't think I misheard. And either way, maybe you should talk with Maddy is all I'm saying. See what she's feeling behind the words of what, you've got to admit, sounds pretty outlandish.”

Sara said, “Pigsglue, huh?”

The name of the unknown, undead, unreal brother pinched Claire a little in her belly. She unconsciously set her hand there, and Sara said, “Putting on a few?” Then she called for Maddy and turned with her car keys. “Well, thanks for the heads up.”

Maddy climbed into the passenger seat of the beat-down Corolla Sara had wrangled from Ben Procter in the divorce. As far as Claire knew it was just Maddy and Sara out on Passmore Road, despite Maddy's claims to a war vet brother named Pigsglue in a wheelchair or in the freezer or burning his leg skin clean off beside some Grandma's coal stove.

Claire turned back to school to take one more pee before heading home herself.

In the girl's bathroom, the pipes clanked a little as the day turned to dusk and the school's radiator heat kicked on. Just because no one opened a hot or cold water valve didn't mean there wouldn't be other gurgles and burps and coughs in the monstrous old building. Claire sat on the toilet and wound some paper around her hand.

Rumors now had Ben Procter working an Alaskan pipeline, others said he was backpacking through Thailand, and still others claimed he'd joined up with mercenaries. Claire remembered he'd sure liked setting off fireworks and low level explosives, had the sheriff called to his and Sara's for disturbances more than just Fourth of Julys. Maybe after all it was Ben who'd been burned and perched like a glass-stunned bird in an electric wheelchair. Or cubbed in a freezer. Claire shivered. Pigsglue. What a singular creepy name.

Her stomach hurt. She thought she needed supper. When she wiped she saw blood.

Her teeth clamped on her bottom lip as she fled school and got gingerly in her car. She drove home into not-yet-night, an in-between timeless hour of fading, refusing to think, and with a storm usurping the sky.

Call Eddie, she thought, ducking under the porch awning right before the rain started, but then she remembered she'd kept her secret selfish, so to gush hysterical about maybe losing a baby he didn't even know of—it was not a good sequence. Anyway, her cell phone had gone kaput. She plugged it in the charger, leaned down to click on a lamp, which popped with lightning as the power fizzled out in her's and the surrounding houses.

"Great," Claire said. The room had plunged suddenly cavernous and as echo-ey as the school bathrooms.

She stood still, blank-eyed and with arms slightly outstretched, tried to gain her bearings. The rain hit the outer walls in great sheets, fierce. Her low center of gravity strained lower, wanted to puddle to the floor, but she resisted. Every piece of Claire had been recruited to sustain what was accruing inside her. Even her heart thudding in her chest was being siphoned, its chambers emptying to what was, or would be, baby. Along the wall, as she walked, her hands pushed at picture frames and other tottering artwork she'd once cherished. Something crashed, and yes, she'd done it. Claire was responsible for whatever fell and broke in this house. She kept moving, she didn't care what she demolished. Finally her two hands gripped the door frame, and she entered the bathroom, crouching like a dowager, her backside bruised by the vanity and then the open toilet.

The storm pummeled the outside, and the inner shadowy walls, they convulsed too. Was something working the windows, the locks? Claire couldn't care, even if it was some phantom burned brother left half a body doing a wheelie in his motorized chair. She imagined Maddy regaling the boys in the bathroom with this new development, how Mrs. Dobryny had faced down Pigsglue and he'd stared, meager in all his diminished capacity except mightily bent on Hoover-ing up hope, sucking it through a goddamned straw. This was where Claire's mind went while her backside glued to the toilet seat and her innards cramped.

One-eyed Maddy with her vibrant, full red lips. How dare she plant her stories in their heads?

All at once power infused the world. The night light above the toilet tank painted the bathroom gruesome, and Claire caught sight of the glow emitted down the hall from the one lamp she'd earlier tried clicking on. Working against gravity, she stood bent as an old grandma, afraid to peer in the bowl at what curled there, the eye in its hurricane, the star-slur of the Milky Way, one more haunting, a clot shadowed by the toilet rim, what you couldn't give shape or name to since it did not belong in the light, was never meant for the light, it was something you probably just misheard.



In Water She Is Weightless

Jessica Hickey

“As soon as I finish this section, I’ll get a snack. No, when I finish this sentence.” Mara tapped at the keys, mindlessly deleting and retyping the word *Experience* over and over. This was something she did when her heart wasn’t in her work and she desperately wanted a break, which was all the time these days. Since quitting her job in HR and restyling herself as a boutique resume writer, she’d been swimming in a steady stream of dully written objectives and ubiquitous References Available Upon Request. No longer part of the Coffee Club or the Birthday Committee, Mara now spent her days alone in her apartment fiddling with margins, shrinking font sizes, and straining to pull one more synonym for *managed* out of thin air. “Screw it,” she said as she pushed away from the small desk and headed to the kitchen.

Mara’s apartment overlooking Capitola’s main street was once a seaside motel—The Seabreeze—now converted into a cluster of Spartan apartments whose ocean view made up for their lack of amenities. The peeling stucco exterior and drab interior didn’t bother Mara. She felt this was the charm of a home by the sea, a place bathed in the shadows of palm trees and tickled by the static-y rush of ocean waves. Any place close enough to the beach to grab her board and jog out for a quick surf session was perfect for Mara. Not that she had ever been on a surfboard, of course, but this was the self-image she projected in her mind’s eye. Although she was ungainly in body, Mara imagined herself a surfer at heart, and her beach-themed apartment fit her perfectly. The kitchen, which had been the room next door before the conversion, was absurdly large compared to the tiny bathroom, bedroom, and closet that comprised the remainder of the apartment. But it was fitting enough, in a poetic way. Mara herself had become outsize since moving in.

The weight gain started slowly, as it often does. A few extra pounds when she submitted to a weigh-in at the doctor’s office, the fit of her clothes changing slightly as her shirts began riding up her belly like water quietly receding from the edge of a continent. Soon she found that she couldn’t slide into a booth at restaurants anymore and had to ask for a table when she went to lunch with coworkers. Her office chair developed an unearthly squeal each time she sat down. Mara’s wardrobe had taken a decisive turn for the worse when not even Lane Bryant had anything flattering to sell her. She started wearing loose yoga pants with forgiving elastic waistbands to work. These had the advantage of allowing Mara to both sit and breathe simultaneously, but they weren’t exactly professional office attire. One day when she bent down to pick up a sheaf of papers that had slid off the copier, a pain ran through her ribs so sharp she needed help straightening up and her boss wanted to take her to the emergency room. She convinced him she was fine, but emailed her resignation that night.

On the counter were a few granola bar wrappers from her last snack break and a cereal bowl soaking in soapy water. A collection of spoons and forks gathered in the sink, evidence of the tastes and nibbles that peppered Mara’s workday. She scanned the items on offer in the fridge and sighed—nothing good. She reached for a block of cheddar and sliced off two thick slabs, weighing their waxen density in her hand. She ate both standing at the counter, then decided they would taste better with crackers and sliced off several more chunks to make a plate. After a glass of chocolate milk, she felt ready to face her work again, for a little while anyway. She was already planning her next snack break.

The little desk in the bedroom called her back to work, but the window beckoned too, drawing the laughter of beachgoers and the smell of salty ocean air into the apartment like a siren song. Mara took up her familiar position leaning on the window sill and resting her head against its frame, watching the people on the street below. She studied the movement of a surfer hoisting his board off the roof rack, deftly swinging it under his arm, and trotting across the sand toward the ocean’s foamy edge. In countless hours of daydreaming, Mara envisioned herself as a surfer with the grace and skill to dominate the waves. In the ocean she was weightless—one with the water, with the sunlight refracting at its surface, with microscopic plankton and tangling kelp. She was a diatom, a mystery of indescribable beauty encased in a tiny glass shell, rarely seen by the human eye.

As Mara’s mind wandered in the waves, her eyes lit on a woman trotting back to the parking lot, wetsuit dangling around her waist, twisted ropes of hair weighed down under a film of seawater. She carried an orange surfboard painted with white hibiscus blossoms under one arm. As she opened the hatch of her station wagon, a blue piece of paper escaped. Mara watched its arc as it flew into a loop in the air and landed on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building. From her window, Mara could see that it was a flyer with clip art of a woman standing beside a longboard. As soon as the car pulled out of its parking space, Mara was out front picking up the flyer. It was an ad for a women’s surf clinic for “absolute beginners.” The class started in two days and met at Coleman’s Cove. Of course she knew the place. She could see it from her window, and hadn’t she watched hundreds of new surfers over the years gather in that shallow bay to learn paddling out and popping up?

An hour later, Mara was still browsing the website listed on the flyer, caught in a crushing tension between her heart’s desire and the oppressive limits of her growing body. She hovered over the “Register” button, convincing herself she could take the class—she *had* to take the class—when a cold voice whispered, “*You’re too fat. You’ll never be able to do it.*” Defeated, she dropped the mouse and minimized the screen.

That night, Mara slept fitfully. She woke to the familiar but confusing darkness of midnight and swung her feet out of bed. Her body walked itself to the cavernous kitchen without turning on any lights—she knew the way. Before she even had time to shake off the webs of sleep still pulling her back into a dream world, she was halfway through a tall glass of chocolate milk and a bagel loaded with schmear. She considered the bagel in her hand as if it had appeared out of thin air. It eyed her back, taunting her, egging her on to take another bite though she was far from hungry, a familiar reflux of self-loathing rising in her throat. She reached

across the counter to grab a piece of chocolate from the always-full candy bowl, and her rib jabbed her sharply, digging in to what felt like an internal organ and eliciting a cry of pain. The whisper burned in her ear, *"You're hopeless."* Suddenly, Mara exploded with a force that frightened her, and she hurled the bagel across the room. It smacked the opposite wall then slid down to the floor, leaving a slimy trail of cream cheese in its wake. Tears flooded her vision and her fists pounded the counter in bitter frustration. She jumped up from her seat and stormed to her desk, defiantly pulling up the surfing class website. Without giving the whispering voice a chance to object, she clicked the looming "Register" button. Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she entered her contact and payment information before slamming the laptop shut.

She woke the next morning with a pounding headache and puffy eyes not abated by any amount of cold water. She badly wanted a microwave burrito but, still chastened from the previous night's outburst, avoided the kitchen and went straight to her desk. Waiting for her was a welcome email from Kris, the surf teacher, including a list of what she needed to bring to class. The hissing voice in her head suggested she delete it now and save herself the humiliation that surely awaited her on the beach. Instead, she tried on something new: she ignored that hateful whisper.

Mara hadn't left her apartment much since she started working from home. She would grocery shop and occasionally see friends, but she had drawn inward enough that walking to the surf shop this morning was uncomfortable, both emotionally and physically. After walking the three blocks to get there, Mara stood at the door, giving her heart a minute to settle down before going inside. She approached the sales counter stiffly, as if imitating a rusted tinman. The need to crawl out of her skin was overwhelming, but she'd had enough of hating herself, of fighting the whispers, of late night bagel throwing. And so she kept her feet firmly planted and continued to stand at the counter.

"What can I get you, pretty lady?" Mara handed the beanie-clad man behind the counter a printout of her email listing the supplies she needed.

"I'm supposed to get this stuff. For a class," she said.

He looked at the list, nodded and smiled. "Right on! Class with Miss Kris, got it." He jumped over the counter and began a parade through the shop. "So you're gonna need one of these," he said, pulling a green puck of wax off the shelf. "And this. And one of these," he said, grabbing a tether from a pegboard display. He stopped and looked at Mara. "You have a board?" She shook her head. He leaned in and lowered his voice conspiratorially. "No worries, you can rent one for ten bucks. See how you like it before you drop a grand on your own, am I right?" Mara supposed he was right. "I'm Ben, by the way," he said, extending a hand.

"Mara." Despite Ben's ability to make Mara feel slightly more at ease, a persistent knot grew in her stomach as she anticipated the appearance of the wetsuit and the humiliation of being told they didn't make them big enough for her.

"Ok, last thing you need is a board. Let me see what we have. Be right back."

"And a wetsuit," she managed to squeak out.

"Oh yeah, duh! Almost forgot. Can't go out without a wetsuit. Not if you want to stay in the water longer than five minutes, anyway."

"But do you, um, do they . . . come in my size?" Ben looked Mara up and down, sizing her up. She felt she might lose control of her bowels, throw up, or both right there all over a rack of Roxy hoodies. She fought with all her strength not to run away.

"I might have something," he said thoughtfully. "Wait here."

Ben returned with a wide blue surfboard and a black wetsuit. "Men's size. This should do the trick," he said, handing her the bundle.

"Don't you have something smaller? For the board, I mean? This seems really long," Mara said.

"See, you're just starting out, right? So you want something wide and long, floats better." He winked at her then. "You'll get to those short boards in no time, girl." Mara couldn't tell if Ben was mocking her, but she chose to believe he was being sincere. She couldn't afford not to.

"I'm gonna tell you though, you'll need a hand getting into this thing. It's a tight fit even for a—" Mara's face turned bright red and her eyes filled with hot tears.

"Even . . . for anyone. It's just hard to get into." He tilted his head and looked at Mara, trying to read her face. "I'm sorry. Please don't cry."

"I'm not crying," Mara snapped. Ben quickly rang her up and wished her luck. As she walked out of the shop, Ben called, "Wire hanger! Zipper pull's broken on that wetsuit...if you need a hand."

Mara was already awake when the night transformed to morning, the muted gray of twilight conceding its place to the palette of dawn. It was a chilly morning but the sun was out, scattering sparkles on the water and streaking pink and orange paint across the sky. Mara got ready early, giving herself plenty of time to wrestle the wetsuit and steel her nerves. Soon she stood at the edge of the beach, holding the rented surfboard under one arm. She stared at the small group gathering at Coleman's Cove. Self-consciously, she adjusted her wetsuit. Breathed in, breathed out. Then Mara stepped off the sidewalk and crossed the beach toward her class. With every labored step, her heart beat harder until she felt it throbbing in her throat and the butterflies in her stomach threatened to escape. Step after step, she struggled through the sand, her thigh muscles exhausting their potential energy

before was even halfway to the cove. She became conscious of a wheezing rasp she soon recognized as her own breathing. "Oh god, I can't do this," she whispered. The tears came too quickly to push back, and they tripped down her flushed cheeks like water breaching a riverbank. But still she walked. Across the sand, toward the ocean, rented surfboard under her arm. She pushed herself in a way she never had before, and as she labored further down the beach, her chant evolved from "*I can't*" to "*I am.*" In an endless loop, the waves rolled in and the kelp swayed and the seagulls cried out. And somewhere in the space between the sidewalk and the cove, Mara became weightless.

The woman with the orange and white surfboard waved her in. "Come on over! You made it just in time."

Mara dropped her board in the sand and looked at the water, the would-be surfers gathered around her, the board at her own feet. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and smiled at herself. "I really did," she said.



Breadwinner

J. Bradley

Phil's good about changing my bandages after I open myself like a wallet, but that's about it. I ask him when he's gonna contribute to the household since he lives here so much now. Phil shrugs his shoulders, says, "I'm not on the lease."

On the rare occasion I stay overnight at his house, I try avoiding his mother. She glares at me with the one eye she still has when we run into each other in the hallway or when she catches me coming out of his bedroom. When she does this, I focus on a point over her shoulder so I don't stare at the stump of her right wrist, the skinny aluminum pole where her left calf and foot used to be. Phil told me how his father left his mother for someone more whole five years ago even though Phil's father was the reason why Phil's mother became incomplete.

I look at my torso in the bathroom mirror. Phil makes me keep my shirt on, the lights low so he can't see or feel the scars whenever I let him have sex with me. I ask myself why I'm still with him and my reflection just mouths the question back. I open the medicine chest, count what sleeping pills I have left. Maybe Phil's mother might like me more once she sees how Phil isn't like his father, how she'll fawn over what's missing from him.



Natalie Wood

Shannon Frost Greenstein

PART ONE

It doesn't taste as bad as you would imagine, the seawater. I expected a mouthful of saltiness, but after the first few swallows, it goes down like regular water.

PART TWO

It's not called Hydrophobia. Hydrophobia is Rabies. I don't have Rabies. What I have is *Aquaphobia*. What I have is an absolutely crippling phobia of open water. What I have is the physical inability to be next to, in sight of, submerged in, hovering over, or otherwise in the presence of the sea.

I can't help it. It's been this way as long as I can remember. Even now, as an adult, I'm scared of drowning; I'm scared of the vastness of the ocean, the insignificance of one human life in the midst of an aquatic infinity; mostly, I'm scared of the species that inhabit the bottom. I can't help but fall victim to the childish fears, the mental images of prehistoric monstrosities slowly rising from the depths, untouched by evolution, gargantuan and fanged and merciless hunters.

I loathe the water like Natalie Wood loathed water.

And then she drowned.

PART THREE

Get up, she demands.

I look up at her groggily through eyelids practically glued together with the crustified remnants of my Aquavue Oasys HydroClear Comfort Care contact lenses. Insane with thirst, my entire soul is parched like the houseplant I had in college that adapted to live on flat Yuengling. We've been slowly allocating our precious liquid for...how long, now?...

Get off the floor and help me.

...Days? A week? Eternity?...

Mark, you have to get up. I can't do this by myself. Get UP!

...but it's never enough, and it's basically gone.

I take a deep breath and focus on my wife's face, trying with a foggy desperation to get my bearings. I am surprised to discover that I am lying prone on the bottom of the boat. The last time I came out of my terror-induced suspended animation to check in with the matters of the real world, I had been sitting glued to the padded bench, knuckles white with panic, certain the slightest movement on my part would spill us into the black seawater mere inches below.

I'm having a hard time forming cohesive thoughts. Everything is starting to taste like salt.

Mark, you need to help me. I think I'm having contractions.

I am vaguely cognizant of this request, and something clicks in the deep recesses of my fading awareness. Oh, yeah! We're supposed to be having a baby soon! How neat!

I look at her accusingly. "I remember now. This was all your idea."

My tongue is a wooden block in my mouth. I'm speaking, but my mouth isn't even opening. There is a searing pain in my lower back, in my sinuses, at the base of my skull. I would give anything for another handful of seawater, but can't rouse myself enough to lift my arm.

Mark, it's too early. It's too early for the baby to come, do you understand? Please, please get off the goddamn floor!

I hear the desperation in her voice and struggle with monumental effort to some closer semblance of full consciousness. My cells are gradually dying by osmosis, electrolyte levels weeping, as the water I've consumed poisons me slowly. I force myself to blink, to purse my cracked lips in an attempt to speak, but I have no saliva. Waves of fear and hopelessness compete with the agony of extreme dehydration, and I find myself praying to a nebulous God in whom I no longer believe.

Mark, for Christ's sake, help me. Don't you understand? Something hurts, something's not right.

Steeling myself against what is becoming an all-encompassing nausea, I rise up onto all fours and concentrate on my wife. She is hunched over on the bench, teeth gnawing into her bottom lip, sweat coursing down her face like Pheidippides' after his first and only marathon run. Her pregnant belly is an entity of its own, a real-live person separated from the physical realm by only a layer of muscle, subcutaneous fat, and skin. Then I make the mistake of looking over the side of the boat.

I double over, dry heaving into water which will, I'm certain in my soul, also become my grave. My face is inches from the surface, and my lizard brain screams at me, reminding me of the certain death that lies outside the safe confines of our current floating

abode. I jerk away as if jabbed with a cattle prod, drastically rocking the boat and nearly sending my pregnant wife into the ocean. Collapsing back down between the benches, I look at her pitifully. My voice creaks out with colossal determination, gravelly from lack of use.

"We're going to die."

Though I am barely audible, my wife nonetheless reacts with something akin to rage.

We're NOT going to die! We're going to get through this!

She has maintained a stalwart optimism throughout the entirety of this experience, driven by the human life she is currently sheltering. Evolution is on her side now, the biological urge to protect one's offspring at all costs, Darwinian martyrdom disguised as good parenting.

Try the radio again! Try...

She breaks off suddenly, squinting through poor visibility in the direction of the horizon.

There's something out there.

My brain is starving for fresh water like a fish on land trying to breathe, and her words don't register at first. I'm lost in my thoughts, spiraling downward into entropy, jumping from one memory to another at breakneck speed. I wish I had made out a will. I wish I'd remembered to call my Mother back. I wish I could jump overboard in a show of masculinity, swim through the fuming sea to find land or another boat, even sit up long enough to try the freaking radio for the millionth time.

Mark, do you hear me? I see something. Something's coming.

Something's coming.

It's really far away. I don't know what it is...maybe it's help! It's coming towards us.

Something's coming.

PART FOUR

"I think we need an adventure."

I am engrossed in my iPhone, Facebooking and Instagramming and buying everything under the sun with a swipe of my finger via Amazon Prime.

"Mark, did you hear me?"

"Yes. We need an adventure."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think the onset of parenthood is adventure enough, don't you think?"

She goes quiet for a second, and I comment on a photo of an impossibly tiny puppy.

"No. I want an adventure. Something real. Something tangible. We haven't been on a vacation since our honeymoon. And it's not like we'll be able to do it after the baby comes."

She pauses again, and the silence is so loaded that I finally raise my eyes from the glowing screen. The air is charged with tension, and I am suddenly on guard.

"I want to go to the beach. Somewhere tropical. I want to go on a boat."

Suddenly, there is no air in the room.

"Please don't freak out."

My inner eye is flashing images like a projector against the screen of my brain, images of crushing waves and flailing arms and the carnivores below and the cold, cold nothingness as I descend helplessly into the depths. Adrenaline triggered by mortal fear is flowing through my body, and I am sweating.

"I'm not freaking out."

"You're clearly freaking out."

She looks at me plaintively.

"I don't ask you for much. This is really important to me. I love the ocean, and I haven't even been *in* one since I married you. Please give me this."

Torn, I attempt to regulate my breathing, grounding myself with thoughts of my future son gestating in my wife's uterus.

"I swear to you...I swear, Mark, you're not going to drown. You're not going to get eaten. You'll be fine."

I want to believe her.

My eyes drift down to the iPhone on the couch, still illuminated. An old college roommate has posted a vacation photo, which consumes the entire surface of the screen. It is St. Lucia or Turks and Caicos or somewhere, and its pristine white sand and an aquamarine sea, bathing suits and drinks with umbrellas and jet skis.

A sign?

She is looking at me expectantly, hope on her face but the preparation of disappointment in her eyes. Her belly seems enormous, even though she's only 26 weeks. I have a thought out of nowhere, suddenly, and a corresponding mental image: My son, four or five, held up high in the air by a strong pair of arms, the seawater crystal clear and spreading out below him in every direction. My son is squealing with laughter, and so are the arms.

They are mine.

I take a deep breath.

"Fine."

PART FIVE

Do you have any phobias?

With some people, it's spiders. It could be heights or falling. Snakes, clowns, small spaces, the dentist. Everybody has one, I've theorized before, but there are varying degrees of severity. However, all phobias are fundamentally the same, at their core: An obsession, like a poltergeist taking up residence in your brain, haunting every one of your synapses.

It's the fear of pain; the fear of mortality. It's the sense of feeling completely out of control, wholly at the mercy of the elements. It's your involuntary need to avoid the trauma of your phobia in any way necessary, manifesting in hyperventilating at the sight of a black mamba or Ronald McDonald, sweaty palms, weak legs, racing heart. Believe it or not, phobias are an evolutionary benefit, a result of a genetic mutation in some hominid several millennia ago, the first Homo Erectus to feel terror contemplating death.

Phobias help us avoid danger. They keep us living, able to produce offspring that live to produce offspring, the whole point of evolution, Darwin validated even as you gingerly open the door with a paper towel because you're horrified by germs. They exist for a reason, and I, personally, feel like we all ought to respect that. I respect, for example, that I am not meant to be a water enthusiast. I'm not usually the sort to choose an All-Inclusive Sandals Resort Package Vacation Including the Chance to Swim with Dolphins!!!! I'm meant to stay dry, much like freshly-permed hair or a Mogwai.

Ergo, the phobia has to be seen as an evolutionary benefit, do you see? There's a reason I was born with aquaphobia. There's a reason it shaped my interaction with water up until two weeks ago. But then I ignored the rape whistle that evolution planted in my skull at the thought of the ocean and boarded a boat.

Survival of the fittest, and I lost my shot.

PART SIX

Practically unconscious and musing on fear and natural selection, unable to save the day, unable to help as my wife delivers our premature son on the floor of the boat, certain death approaching, the milliseconds between seconds impossibly long, Einstein's theory of relativity put to the test and proven, I find that I hate myself in this moment.

Were I any sort of husband, I'd conquer my phobia through sheer force of will. I'd do the *mind over matter* thing and just sort of *overcome* my phobia, like Nietzsche would. Were I any sort of husband, I would have gotten help for us already: Helicopters flying in increasing concentric circles with search lights, a Coast Guard Ship with life-jackets and bottled water, a clean hospital room with a shower, with a bed, with a bassinet. I'd be a *provider*, a *caregiver*, someone to be trusted when everything goes to hell; I'd act the way that befits the Man of the Family.

Family.

I have a family.

A shaft of light slices through my saltwater-induced psychosis as I force my eyelids open, hyper-alert consciousness descending on me like a high-speed elevator. A family, and we're all in this together, but the other family members are lying prone on the dirty boards and crying, and the *fight* half of the fight-or-flight yin yang starts to win out.

"Tell me what..."

It's pure gibberish, even my thoughts are pure gibberish, but as I'm listening to the tiny wails of my baby, I find the last vestiges of strength in my body...we're talking reserves, we're talking fumes, we're talking the final swan song, here.

"Tell me what to do."

It must be the first time I've spoken in some time, because my wife startles like she's seen a ghost.

I thought you were dead! You fell down, you were making terrible noises! Mark, Mark, the baby, the baby!!! Is the baby ok???

The baby is unbearably tiny, covered in varying shades of goo, still attached to my wife; he's pretty blue, and his crying is petering out, and, as I'm watching, his kicking starts to slow.

"I don't think...I don't think he's going to make it."

YES, he will! Something's coming, it's getting closer, we can get him help!

Something coming. Yes, I'd forgotten.

I drag myself over to the stern, gripping anything I can find. I look across the expanse of the sea, roiling bile welling up from my stomach, and see the shadow my wife saw approaching before I lost my connection to reality for a while there.

Only...

...an impossibly large shadow, undulating, agile, coming closer through the murky water...

All the millennia of human experience combine in a single moment. I have a flash of intuition, of precognition, and feel immediately crushed beneath the weight of impending danger.

...a fin breaks the surface, razor sharp, glistening crimson and purple against the blue sky...

Suddenly, I feel lucid. I can speak; I can think. The baby is still alive, just barely, and I suddenly want to live more than anything in the world, the survival instinct manifest, like a mother lifting a car off her child after an accident, like that guy who sawed off his arm with what was essentially a butter knife.

But...

"Honey?"

...larger and larger the nearer it gets, wider and longer, close enough now to see a silhouette stretching below the water, a shape I've never seen in nature...

"I don't think..."

...then something immense breaches the surface, displacing a giant wake, my eyes momentarily glimpsing row upon row upon row of gigantic, blade-shaped teeth, a larger-than-life nightmare...

Oh. So *this* is what my wife saw.

"I don't think it's help."

...racing through the water like a torpedo, aerodynamic and deadly, a predator preparing for the kill, ruled by eons-old instinct and the need to hunt...

What?

She is weeping. She doesn't hear me. I try again, speaking through the agony between my ears and at the tips of my eyelashes and under my nails and in every single one of my bones. Not caring.

"I don't think it's help."

PART SEVEN

Do you want a joke?

Ok, here it is. What kind of wood doesn't float?

Give up?

Natalie Wood.



Keep Calm and Carry On

James Mulhern

My grandmother sat on the toilet seat. I was on the floor just in front of her.

She brushed my brown curly hair until my scalp hurt.

"You got your grandfather's hair. Stand up. Look at yourself in the mirror. That's much better, don't you think?"

I touched my scalp. "It hurts."

"You gotta toughen up, Aiden. Weak people get nowhere in this world. Your grandfather was weak. Addicted to the bottle. Your mother has an impaired mind. Now she's in a nuthouse. And your father, he just couldn't handle the responsibility of a child. People gotta be strong. Do you understand me?" She bent down and stared into my face. Her hazel eyes seemed enormous. I smelled coffee on her breath. There were blackheads on her nose. She pinched my cheeks.

I reflexively pushed her hands away.

"Life is full of pain, sweetheart. And I don't mean just the physical kind." She took a cigarette from her case on the back of the toilet, lit it, and inhaled. "You'll be hurt a lot, but you got to carry on. You know what the British people used to say when the Germans bombed London during World War II?"

"No."

"Keep calm and carry on." She hit my backside. "Now run along and put some clothes on." I was wearing just my underwear and t-shirt. "We have a busy day."

I dressed in the blue jeans and a yellow short-sleeve shirt she had bought me. She stood in front of the mirror by the front door of the living room, holding a picture of my mother. She kissed the glass and placed it on the end table next to the couch. Then she looked at herself in the mirror and arranged her pearl necklace, put on bright red lipstick, and fingered her gray hair, trying to hide a thinning spot at the top of her forehead. She turned and smoothed her green cotton dress, glancing at herself from behind. "Not bad for an old broad." She looked me over. "Come here." She tucked my shirt in, licked her hand, and smoothed my hair. "You'd think I never brushed it."

Just as she opened the front door she said, "Hold on," and went to the kitchen counter and put her hand in a glass jar full of bills. She took out what must have been at least thirty single dollar bills.

"Here. Give this money to the kiddos next door."

When we were outside, she pushed me towards their house. They were playing on their swing set in the fenced-in yard. In front of the broken-down house was a yard of weeds. A rusted bicycle with no wheels lay on the ground. The young pale girl with stringy hair looked at me suspiciously as I approached the fence. Her brother stood, arms folded, in the background. He had a mean look on his face and spit.

"This is for you," I said, shoving the money through the chain links. The girl reached out to grab it, but most of the bills fell onto the dirt.

"Thank you," she said.

As I walked away, her brother yelled, "We don't need no charity from you."

I opened the door of my grandmother's blue Plymouth; she had the air conditioning blasting and it was already full of cigarette smoke.

She crossed herself. "Say it with me. 'There but for the grace of God go I.' "

I repeated the words with her and we drove to her friend Margie's house, not more than ten minutes away. Margie was a smelly fat lady with a big white cat that hissed at me. She always wore the same navy blue sweater, and was constantly picking white cat hairs off her clothes, while talking about the latest sermon, God, or the devil. Nanna told me when they were young girls, their classmates made fun of her. "Stinky" they called her. And she did smell. Like urine, and cats, and mothballs.

"Don't let him get out," Margie yelled, as the cat pounced from behind the open door. "Arnold, don't you dare run away!" She bent over to grab his tail and groaned at the same time. "My back!"

"Don't worry. I got him." I had my arms wrapped around the white monster. He hissed.

"Why don't you put him in the closet when you open the front door? We go through this every time," my grandmother said, pushing past her towards the kitchen in the back of the house. "I gotta sit down. It's hot as hell out there."

Margie placed a tray of ham sandwiches, along with cheese and crackers on the round grey Formica table. I liked her wallpaper—white with the red outlines of trains. Her husband had been a conductor; he died when he got squished between two train

cars.

"I don't know how I feel about all those miracles Father Tom was going on about." Margie placed a sandwich on a plate for me with some chips. "What ya want to drink, Aiden? I got nice lemonade." Her two front teeth were red from where her lipstick had smudged. And as usual she had white cat hairs all over her blue sweater, especially the ledge of her belly where the cat sat all the time.

"That sounds good."

She smiled. "Always such a nice boy. Polite. You'll never have any trouble with this one. Not like you did with Lorraine."

"I hate when you call her that."

"That's her name ain't it?" She poured my grandmother and me lemonade and sat down with a huff.

"That was my mother's name, her formal name. I've told you a thousand times to call her Laura."

"What the hell difference does it make?" Margie bit into her sandwich and rolled her eyes at me.

"Makes a lot of difference. My mother was a crackpot. I named my daughter Lorraine to be nice."

"Well, Laura is . . ." I knew Margie was going to say that my mother was a crackpot, too.

"Laura is what?" My grandmother put her sandwich down and leaned into Margie.

"Is a nice girl. She's got problems, but don't we all." She reached out and clasped my hand. "Right, Aiden?"

"Yes, Margie."

My grandmother rubbed her neck and spoke softly. "Nobody's perfect. Laura's getting better. She's just got a few psychological issues. And the new meds they have her on seem to be doing her good. She's a beautiful human being, and that's what's most important. Besides, who's to say what's normal? My Laura has always been different. One of the happiest people I ever met." Her eyes were shiny and her face flushed. Her bottom lip trembled. She looked at me. "Don't you gotta use the bathroom?" She raised her eyebrows. That was her signal.

"Yes, I gotta pee."

"Well, you don't have to get so detailed," she said. "Just go."

Margie laughed hard and farted.

I made my exit just in time, creeping up the gray stairs. The old bannister was dusty. The rug in the upstairs hall was full of Arnold's hair. I bent down and picked one up to examine it, then rubbed my pants. Nanna said Margie's room was the last one on the left. Her jewelry case was on top of her dresser. I took the diamond earrings and opal bracelet Nanna had told me about. There was also a couple of pretty rings—one a large red stone, the other a blue one. These and a gold necklace with a cross I shoved into my pockets. Then I walked to the bathroom and flushed the toilet. I messed up the towel a bit so it looked like I dried my hands in it.

When I entered the kitchen they were still talking about miracles.

My grandmother passed our plates to Margie who had filled the sink with sudsy water.

"Of course there was raising Lazarus from the dead," Margie said. "And then the healing of the deaf and dumb men. Oh, and the blind man, too," she said raising her hand and splashing my grandmother.

"Let's not forget about the fish. And the water into wine," my grandmother said.

Margie shook her head. "I don't know Catherine," She looked down. "It's hard to believe that Jesus could have done all that. Why aren't there miracles today?" I imagined a fish jumping into her face from the water in the sink.

My grandmother smiled at me. "Of course there are miracles today. As a matter of fact, I'm taking Aiden to that priest at Mission church. A charismatic healer is what they call him. Aiden's gonna be cured, aren't you, honey?"

"Cured of what?" Margie said.

"Oh he's got a little something wrong with his blood is all. Too many white cells. Leukemia. But this priest is gonna take care of all that."

"Leukemia!" Margie said. "Catherine, that's serious." Margie tried to smile at me, but I could tell she was upset. "Sit down, honey." She motioned for me to go to the table. "We're almost done here."

"You gotta take him to a good doctor," she whispered to my grandmother, as if I couldn't hear.

"I know that. I'm not dumb. God will take care of everything."

We said our goodbyes and when we were in the car, my grandmother said, "Let me see what you got." I pulled the goods out of my pockets while she unclasped her black plastic pocketbook. Her eyes lit up.

"Perfect. She isn't lookin', is she?" I looked at the house. Margie was nowhere in sight. Probably sitting on her rocking chair with Arnold in her lap.

"Now put those in here," she said, nodding towards her bag, and I did.

When we were about to turn onto Tremont Street where the church was, I remembered the gold necklace and cross. I pulled it out of my back pocket and my grandmother took it from me, running a red light. "This would look beautiful on Laura." In a moment, there was a police car pulling us over.

"Don't say anything," my grandmother said, as we moved to the side of the road. She looked in the rearview mirror and put her window down.

"Ma'am, you just ran a red light." The policeman was tall with a hooked nose and dark brown close-set eyes.

"I know officer. I was just saying a prayer with my grandson. He gave me this gold cross. I got distracted. I'm very sorry."

He leaned into the car. I smiled.

"Is that a birthday gift for your grandmother?"

"Yes. I wanted to surprise her."

"And he certainly did," she said, patting my knee and smiling at the police officer.

"It's a good thing no cars were coming. You could have been hurt," he said. "That's a beautiful cross," he added.

My grandmother began to cry. "Isn't it though?" She sniffled.

The officer placed his hand firmly on the edge of the window. "Consider this a warning. You can go. I'd put that cross away."

"Of course. Of course." She turned to me. "Here, Aiden. Put it back in your pocket."

The police officer waited for us to drive away. I turned and looked. He waved.

"Are you sad, Nanna?"

"Don't be silly." She waved her hand. "That was just an act."

I laughed and she did, too.

We parked. "I need to get that chalice, Aiden. I read an article in *The Boston Globe* that said some people believe it has incredible curing powers. It's a replica of a chalice from long ago, over 100-years old, with lots of pretty stones on it. Experts say it's priceless. I'm thinking if I have your mother drink from it, she'll get better and come home to us. Won't that be nice?" She rubbed my head gently and smiled at me.

I looked away, towards the church where an old man was helping a lady in a wheelchair up a ramp. "Won't God be mad?"

"Aiden, I'm going to return it. We're just borrowing it for a little while to help your mother. I think God will understand. Don't you worry, sweetheart."

We entered Mission church. It smelled of shellac, incense, perfume, and old people. It was hard to see in the musty darkness. Bright light shone through the stained-glass windows where Jesus was depicted in the twelve or so Stations of the Cross.

"Let's move to the front." My grandmother pulled me out of the line and cut in front of an old lady, who looked bewildered. "Shouldn't you go to the end of the line?" she whispered kindly, smiling down at me. Her hair was sweaty and her fat freckled bicep jiggled when she tapped my grandmother's shoulder. The freckles reminded me of the asteroid belt.

"I'm sorry. We're in a hurry. We have to help a sick neighbor after this. I just want my grandson to get a cure."

"What's wrong?" she whispered. We were four people away from the priest, who was standing at the altar. He prayed over people then lightly touched them. They fell backwards into the arms of two old men with maroon suit jackets and blue ties.

"Aiden has leukemia."

The woman's eyes teared up. "I'm sorry." She patted my forearm. "You'll be cured, sweetie." Again her flabby bicep jiggled and the asteroids bounced.

When it was our turn, my grandmother said, "Father, please cure him. And can you say a prayer for my daughter, too?"

"Of course." The white-haired, red-faced priest bent down. I smelled alcohol on his breath. "What ails you young man?"

I was confused.

"He's asking you about your illness, Aiden."

"I have leukemia," I said proudly.

The priest said some mumbo-jumbo prayer and pushed my chest. I knew I was supposed to fall back but was afraid the old geezers wouldn't catch me.

"Fall," my grandmother whispered irritably. Then she said extra softly. "Remember our plan."

I fell hard, shoving myself against the old guy. He toppled over as well. People gasped. His friend and the priest began to pick us up. I pretended to be hurt bad. "Oww. My head is killing me." Several people gathered around us. My grandmother yelled "Oh my God," and stepped onto the altar, kneeling in front of a giant Jesus on the cross. "Dear Jesus," she said loudly, "I don't know how many more tribulations I can take." Then she crossed herself, hurried across the altar, swiping the gold chalice and putting it in her handbag while everyone was distracted by my moaning and fake crying.

"He'll be okay," she said, putting her arm under mine and helping the others pull me up.

When I was standing, she said to the priest. "You certainly have the power of the Holy Spirit in you. It came out of you like the water that gushed from the rock at Rephidim and Kadesh."

"Let's get out of here before there's a flood." She laughed. The priest looked confused. The old lady who let us cut in line eyed my grandmother's handbag and shook her head as we passed.

When we were in front of Rita's house, our last stop before home, I asked my grandmother what "tribulation" meant. And where were "Repapah" and "Kadiddle."

She laughed. "You pronounced those places wrong, but it doesn't matter. Your mother used to do the same thing whenever I quoted that Bible passage." She began to open the car door. "I don't know where the hell those places are. Somewhere in the Middle East...And a tribulation is a problem."

"Oh."

After ringing the doorbell a couple times, we opened the door. We found Rita passed out on the couch.

My grandmother took an ice cube from the freezer and held it against her forehead. Rita sat bolt upright. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. You scared the bejesus out of me." She was wearing a yellow nightgown and her auburn hair was set in curlers. "Oh, Aiden. I didn't see you there," she said. She kissed my cheek. For the second time that day I smelled alcohol.

"So do you think you can help me out?" my grandmother asked. Rita looked at me.

"Of course I can."

"Just pull me up and I'll get my checkbook." I suddenly realized all my grandmother's friends were fat.

At the kitchen table, Rita said, "Should I make it out to the hospital?"

"Oh, no. Make it out to me. I've opened a bank account to pay for his medical expenses."

"Will five thousand do for now?" Rita was rich. Her husband was a "real estate tycoon" my grandmother was always saying. He dropped dead shoveling snow a few years back.

"That's so generous of you." My grandmother cried again. More fake tears, I thought.

We had tea and chocolate chip cookies. Rita asked how my mother was doing. My grandmother said "fine" and looked away, wringing her hands. Then she started talking about the soap operas that they watched. My grandmother loved Erica from *All My Children*. Said she was a woman who knew how to get what she wanted and admired that very much. Rita said she thought Erica was a bitch.

When we were home, listening to talk radio in the living room, I asked my grandmother if she believed in miracles, like the ones she talked about earlier in the day with Margie.

"Sure, sure," she said, not looking up. She was taking the jewelry and chalice out of her bag and examining them in the light. I saw bits of dust in the sunlight streaming through the bay window.

"You're not listening to me, Nanna."

She put the items back in her handbag and stared at me. "Of course I am."

"Well do you think I'll have a miracle and be cured of leukemia?"

"Aiden." She laughed. "You haven't got leukemia. You're as healthy as a horse, silly."

"But you told everybody I was sick."

"Sweetheart. That was just to evoke pity."

"What does that mean?"

"Make people feel bad so we can get things from them. I need money to take care of you, Aiden." She spoke hesitantly and looked down, like she was ashamed. "I'm broke. Your grandfather left me with nothing and I gotta pay for your mother's medical expenses. If Margie notices her jewelry gone, maybe she'll think you took it to help your Nanna. I told her I was having a problem

paying your hospital bills."

"Sorta like a *tribulation*, right?"

"Exactly, sweetheart."

"Is my mother a tribulation?"

This time my grandmother's tears were real. They gushed like water from that rock in the Middle East. I knelt before her and put my head in her lap. She hugged me, bent down and kissed my face several times. Then she looked out the window. It seemed the tears would never stop.

"Don't worry, Nanna. I believe in miracles, too. Someday Mom will come home from the hospital."

And we stayed like that until the sunbeams dimmed and the dust disappeared and her tears stopped.

In the quiet of the room, she whispered, "Keep calm and carry on" to me or to herself. Or to both of us.



Spreadsheet

B. A. Varghese

Mal stared at the standard company-issued clock on the wall without blinking and wondered if he could pause time. He felt that if he concentrated hard enough, he could stop the muffled clicks of tightly wound gears turning against each other that tracked the passing of each hour. The face of the clock, which was white with big bold numbers that circled along the black outer rim, looked like a bald-headed man smiling. He relinquished his efforts and instead imagined a collection of toothed wheels working together, pushing the plastic hands of the clock which appeared almost motionless except for a small red thin line that raced around the face. Mal knew that if not for the beeping of the fax machine, the shuffling of busy feet, and the humming of the copier, the ticking of the red hand would be heard as a distinct sound that signaled the end of every second of a minute within an hour.

The clock hung on the far left wall and ticked ten minutes past eleven. Mal's cubicle was one of many that formed a beige maze stretching to all the walls of the third floor. He sat down and the wheels of his worn chair squeaked under the pressure. He felt agitated and shuffled his black shoes within the ring of worn-out carpet underneath his desk. Mal finished off the donut that was in his hand, looked around, and wiped the remaining glaze onto his grey-collared shirt. His shirt looked tight in some places while loose in others and was not tucked into his pants on one side. Outside his cubicle, two coworkers were crouched down on the floor. They taped a sign near the opening to his cubicle and scurried away. The sign said *Will Work For Butter*.

Mal remembered the clock and took note of the time. He let out a sigh and went back to typing on his computer. The clicks of the keys created a symphonic rhythm of a song to which the words were only known in Mal's head. He fixed his eyes on the yellow-beige monitor before him and like a mad pianist, he played his keys with fury, entering line after line of numbers and letters into his spreadsheet. Every now and then, he would glance downward onto his desk to look at the legal-sized mound of papers, but he never stopped typing. At the height of his annual budget concerto, a familiar face popped over the cubicle and startled him.

"How are those numbers coming?" Barry asked. Mr. Barry Johnson was the business manager for the finance department at Preciso Solutions Incorporated, a subsidiary of Helene Industries. He reported to Mr. Jack Mason, the company's Vice President. Barry was also Mal's supervisor.

Mal sat motionless and was taken aback by Barry's bodiless head bobbing over the top of the cubicle, much like the Wizard from Oz. With his spreadsheet symphony interrupted, Mal tried to regain his composure.

"Hello? Earth to Mal," Barry said. His head disappeared from the top and reappeared, along with the rest of his body, in front of the only exit of the cubicle. Barry was clean cut and wore a white, well-ironed, long sleeve shirt tucked tight into his khakis. His pants were smooth and straight all the way down to the cuff which sat on his polished leather shoes. Mal felt that Barry looked like he came fresh off the assembly line of a corporate cloning factory.

"Mal, come on, buddy. Wake up! You read my email? I need you to have those forecasts ready for the meeting. We're gonna show them that we're on top of the game. Mal, are you with me?"

Mal fixed his glasses. "Well, Mr. Johnson—"

"Call me Barry."

"Mr. Johnson."

"Mal, we've been over this. Call me Barry. Think of me as your father."

"I wouldn't call my father by his first name."

"Right, right," Barry said. "Think of me as your older stronger brother. Just Barry is fine. I insist."

"Barry."

"Yes."

"Well, uh, yes, I'm with you, about the budget. I've been working on them for the last few days. But do we really need to have our three-year forecast ready today? I mean most places have up until the end of June to finish crunching all these numbers. We're way ahead. I know it's important, but it would be nice to have more time."

"Mal, Mal, Mal," Barry said. "It's only a draft, right? I mean, come on, that stuff is easy for a calculator jockey like you."

"I'm not familiar with that term." Mal adjusted his glasses. "I guess I can try to get something for you before your meeting at four."

"That really doesn't instill any confidence in your ability." Barry crossed his arms over each other and gave Mal a stern look. "I absolutely need them before four. You'll try?"

"Okay. Okay. I'll have them to you fifteen minutes before your meeting."

"That's more like it. That's what I want to hear. Mal, you da man." Barry made two guns with his hands and pointed them at Mal. "Booyahh!"

Barry walked away and the cubicle walls muffled his humming. Mal sat in his faux leather chair and stared at the exit to his cubicle. Every single day for five days a week he saw himself dragging his feet to work, stopping by the staff kitchen to pour a cup of burnt, black, bitter coffee from a stained glass pot, peeking into the mail-room to see if anyone cared to send him any real mail, and then entering through the invisible door of his beige-walled cubicle prison. He was a slave bought by the company at the price of his salary. He exchanged his freedom for a scant sense of financial security. Mal imagined himself breaking free of his bonds and charging through his invisible door holding a lottery ticket in his hands. He ran with the excitement and anxiousness of a fat child dashing toward an ice cream truck. When he reached Barry's office, he laughed, waved the ticket in Barry's face, danced, and shouted his resignation. Mal thought of possibly mooning Barry or at least rubbing his butt all over Barry's desk. A smile grew on Mal's face and his eyes slowly focused on the clock on the wall. It was noon.

He pulled his chair forward and returned to his typing. The pace of his typing was slow at first. A few clicks then a pause. Then another few clicks and then a shorter pause. This pattern continued until a few minutes later, keystrokes became fluid and flowed smooth, creating yet again his keyboard melody. With the obvious urgency hanging over his head, Mal moved his hands faster over his keyboard. He fixed his focus on the screen, but his eyes darted from cell to cell in the spreadsheet. Numbers and letters appeared with speed within each cell. He raced through each line item. Utilities. Revenue. Total Expense. Services. Reserves.

"Mal," Barry said.

Like a car skidding on a slick road, Mal's mind crashed and he was thrown clear of his spreadsheet. He turned around in his seat and saw Barry standing there right inside his cubicle as if Barry sprouted up from the carpeted floor.

"Oh God! Yes, Barry!"

"You seem stressed, Mal." Barry pushed some papers aside and sat down on Mal's desk.

"Well, I've been staying up late trying to get the budget done."

"Good to hear that. I got some good news for you. I talked to the VP and I told him that we're all set to go at four o'clock. He was pretty impressed that we were ahead of most of the other departments and he wanted to know who the hard-working bean counter was. I told him that you would be there at the meeting to go over your forecast report."

"What? How is that good news? Barry, I'm not done yet. I can't go into a meeting cold. I don't even know who's going to be there."

"Listen," Barry said. "*Can't* should not be a word in your dictionary. Replace it with *will*. It's that simple."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"Don't worry. I will be there too. Finish up and I will see you at the meeting at four." Barry hopped off Mal's desk and exited the cubicle.

Mal stared at the exit of his cubicle again and wished for a real solid steel door. In his thoughts, Mal realized that winning the lottery and gloating wasn't enough, so he imagined that he used his lottery winnings to stuff Barry's mouth and choke him to death. A small crooked smile crept onto his face and he shook himself out of his fantasy to get back to work. Mal placed his hands on the keyboard and began to type. He looked at the spreadsheet on the screen and every key stroke his hands made erased the stresses and concerns of his occupational life. Mal picked up his pace and then the phone rang.

"Hello, Precisio Solutions, Mallory Reve speaking."

"Mally, it's me," his wife said.

"Oh. Hi, dear." Mal cradled the phone between his shoulder and head. He returned to the computer to type again but he couldn't make his fingers move. They just hovered frozen above his keyboard.

"Are you okay? You sound a little off?" she said.

"Yes, I'm okay. Well—"

Mal paused but then took a deep breath and whispered into the phone, "Oh, I'm sorry. My boss is such a jerk. He pulled me into a meeting which starts at four and I'm not done with anything. I can't stand him. Why does he have to micromanage me all the time? I'm not an idiot. I feel like shoving my foot up—"

"Mally," his wife interrupted. "The reason I'm calling is to remind you to pick up the kids from after-school care. I'm working late today, remember? I hope you haven't forgotten."

"What? Damn. Okay. Okay."

"The meeting's at four? Will you have enough time to leave before five to get the kids? I don't want them being there late."

"No. No, I'll be fine. The meeting is probably only an hour long. I think there may be others at the meeting giving reports too, so once I'm done, I can probably leave. Don't worry."

"Thanks, Mally," she said. "Sorry your boss is being hard on you. We can talk more at home about it, okay? Bye."

The dial tone rang in Mal's ear while he said, "Oh. Bye." Mal set the phone down with two hands and turned his head to

look at the screen. He then peeked over his cubicle to look at the clock which continued to keep time even though he wished it would stop for just a few minutes. It was two fifteen.

Before Mal could even place his hands over his keyboard, there was a dull knock on the side of his cubicle wall. Believing it was Barry again, he gritted his teeth and swiveled his chair around hoping to use the momentum to make his stand dramatic but instead froze in his chair.

"You're Mallory Reve, right?" It was Mr. Jack Mason, the VP.

Off in the distance a train hissed ready to leave its station. The wheels strained against its steel rails and a grinding noise penetrated through the building's thick windows. Two employees watched mesmerized by the repetitive motion of the wheels. The lumbering train inched forward with its heavy load and with each turn of the wheel began to gain speed. The employees discussed that the train could gain incredible speed, but would eventually have to come to a stop at the next station and again start its Sisyphean task of gaining momentum.

"Such a life, to start with great effort only to stop and never leave its tracks."

Mal continued to stare at the VP until he realized the length of the uncomfortable silence. He jumped up and said, "Greetings."

"You didn't answer my question," the VP said. "Are you Mallory Reve?"

"Right. Yes, sir."

"I've heard good things," the VP said. "Barry Johnson has great ideas, but I know it's people like you who make those plans real. I'm looking forward to reading your report. We'll keep the meeting short, say, half an hour. I'll see you at four."

"Thank you," Mal said.

The VP left his cubicle. Mal watched the VP's head bob over the tops of the cubicles down the hall until he was out of sight.

Mal sat back in his seat with a grin. He saw in his mind how the meeting would take place. His presentation of his department's fiscal forecast was spectacular. The spreadsheet, which he worked so hard and long on, was considered by those at the meeting a work of art. The men cheered and clapped their hands in sheer awe while the women, with pouty lips and seductive eyes, stared at him as if Mal became everything they desired in man. The VP raised Mal's hand in victory while confetti fell from the ceiling. There would be no doubt how his boss would feel. Barry objected to all the attention that Mal received, so the VP pressed a button which opened the floor underneath Barry and he plummeted down a long dark hole. Excited by this possibility and by another one less dramatic, Mal snapped himself out of his day dream and started to work on his computer. After a quick glance at the clock on the wall, Mal murmured, "Okay, it's only three. I can do this. I can show them."

At first he typed at a slow pace, but as his mind focused, Mal was able to type faster and faster. The spreadsheet he worked on had multiple sheets. Each sheet had multiple tables. Each table had multiple columns and rows all of which were composed of cells. Mal flashed through each cell entering letters, numbers, and equations. His hands were a blur on the keyboard and the clicking sound of the keys lagged behind when they bounced off the walls and echoed in his cubicle. This was Mal at his finest. It was at this heightened moment of exhilaration that Mal understood his purpose. Whether it was a sum of numbers, a compounding of interest, a totaling of expenses, or a depreciation of values, Mal entered each of them in their own cell. It was a magical rectangle composed of four lines that created order out of chaos and it was in this realm that Mal was the controller. Mal's eyes widened and he looked up. He saw the planet Earth hurtling in great speed toward him. Mal believed that his speed created a rip in the fabric of reality and he transcended both space and time. His body became transformed and he ascended upward. He looked down and saw that his cubicle along with all other cubicles were just cells for him to control, to fill in, to empty out, to manipulate as he wished. He was no longer a prisoner of his cell but the master of it. He looked up and he saw the earth growing in its size. Then the earth crashed into his forehead, knocked his glasses off, and slammed Mal back into his chair.

"Awesome, man, you knocked him right in the face."

A bit dazed, Mal sat up and rubbed his forehead. He looked on the floor and saw his glasses next to an Earth Day stress ball. Looking upward, he saw half of Garvin's head peeking over the cubicle. Sylvester ran into his cubicle and laughed.

Mal's body stiffened and he clenched his teeth. Both Garvin and Sylvester were coworkers from Sales and were Mal's tormentors since the company picnic last year when Mal accidentally sat down on a small tub of margarine spread.

"Hey, butter pants," Sylvester said. "Looks like my ball is stronger than your face."

"That was an awesome shot," Garvin said. "Sylvester was four cubicles away, man. I can't believe it."

"What do you want, guys?" Mal bent down and retrieved his glasses and the stress ball.

"Oh, nothing much, fatty," Sylvester said. "Just wondering what you're doing. The day was almost over and we realized that we haven't stopped by to harass you."

“Look, I really don't have time for this.” Mal fixed his glasses back on his face. “Barry asked me to go to this meeting and I'm getting some numbers for my report. I really don't have time to mess around, so can we do this another time?”

“Barry's not our boss,” Garvin said. “We couldn't care less. Plus, you don't do any real work anyway. Most of the time you're just staring at your computer.”

“Come on, please,” Mal said. “Let me just get my work done. Seriously, we're supposed to be professionals. You guys act like kids.”

“Oh, we're professionals. We bring in the money, unlike you.” Garvin shoved the legal-sized papers off the desk and onto Mal's lap.

“Listen, fatboy,” Sylvester said. “Why don't you contact HR if we're such a problem?”

Mal stayed quiet.

“Nope, I didn't think so. Go ahead, contact them. If you think it's bad now, just wait.”

Mal didn't understand the force that held him back. He was angry and tired of their unceasing barrage of ridicule and harassment. It became so much a daily occurrence that Mal no longer felt it was normal if they didn't bother him. This force that held his hands while his heart raged with violence was real and he couldn't move against it. In his mind, he wanted to hurt them but instead could only muster up the strength to stand up, hold the stress ball up in the air, and rip it in half.

“What the hell? You idiot.” Sylvester pushed Mal back into his chair.

“Mal, that was mean. We're just playing around,” Garvin said.

Sylvester and Garvin started knocking items off of Mal's desk. Pens, a stapler, paper clips, and writing pads bounced downward and settled all over the floor of the cubicle. They finally left when they felt the mess equaled the cost of losing a stress ball.

Mal sat holding the two halves in his hand and his anger mixed with sadness boiled and bubbled up into a thought. In his thought, he went home to explain to his wife his misery at work hoping that she would understand. He wanted to quit. Unfortunately, she didn't understand. A series of insults poured out of her mouth all implying that he was less of the man she thought she married. Mal left the house and bought a gun. He had never bought anything remotely resembling a gun in his life but knew that it was useful in getting a job done. He placed the gun toward his head and before he pulled the trigger another thought bubbled up bigger than the first. Instead of shooting himself, he took the gun to work and hid it in the bottom drawer of his desk. Sylvester and Garvin made their usual rounds of torment and this time Mal insulted them and their mothers. When they went to put their hands on him, Mal fell back in his chair and grabbed his gun from the bottom drawer. Time slowed to a crawl when the first bullet left the muzzle and penetrated Sylvester in the face. The bullet seemed for a while to be stuck behind the cavity of Sylvester's eye, until it emerged again behind his head, exiting with fragments of blood and brain. As if the invisible cord that held his body upright was cut, Sylvester slumped downward, hitting the side of the table. At that same moment, Garvin turned around to run, but another bullet left the gun and entered through the back of his head, propelling his body forward, painting the cubicle wall before him a nicer color than beige. With the movement of time restored to its normal pacing, Mal stood over their dead bodies and shot them a few more times just to make sure. He had seen this in a movie. He realized that he was in a great deal of trouble, so he decided he might as well kill Barry too. With hysterical screams and thumping of running feet reverberating all throughout the building, Mal walked to Barry's office. He contemplated on whether to shoot Barry once, killing him dead, or to shoot him starting at his foot and slowly work up to his head. A bullet for every year Barry was his boss. Arriving at Barry's office, Mal tried to open the door, but noticed that it was locked and saw through the small window of the door Barry's feet sticking out from underneath his desk. Mal poised to shoot the lock, but the SWAT team arrived and opened fire, spraying bullets all over Mal's body. He twitched and jerked with each exit wound, but before he could die, the first and the second bubbles of thought were burst by the third one. It was of his eight-year-old daughter and his four-year-old son kneeling by his gravestone and weeping tears onto his fresh grave.

Mal stopped dreaming and shook his head. He moved toward his computer to finish his spreadsheet for the meeting. He glanced over the top of his cubicle to see the clock on the wall. This time, Mal noticed that the clock with the face of a bald-headed man looked down upon him with a joyless expression. The man's mouth was twisted downward with news of the current time. Mal's heart sank. It was four thirty five.



Fries and Coffee

Kate Maruyama

Gilbert's sitting at table 48 in the Hamburger Harbor, down to the bottom of his second cup of coffee. He'll pace himself with the third, make things come out even. He shifts in his jacket so as not to feel the bulge of the gun in his inside pocket. Right now, he just wants to enjoy being here. They haven't brought the fries yet. He's trying not to look amused as he listens to the conversation going on right behind the curtain that separates him from the busboy station.

For some reason, when the wait staff go back there, they forget the world beyond the curtain and converse freely.

Meg the dyke is on Xavi again. "Meg the dyke" being Meg's term, not anyone else's. She makes sure that anyone who comes in contact with her understands that she's queer, she's here, get over yourself. Gilbert admires her pride, even if it seems born of insecurity. She's funny, too. Funny goes a long way with Gilbert. Meg is plain, but fit; her face is sharp and intelligent, but genuine. She doesn't wear makeup, but has a simple, small diamond nose piercing. She's a straight-shooter.

Xavi's complaining that he's saddled with Gilbert today. Xavi's mode of communication is complaining. Normally Meg has zero tolerance for complainers, but Xavi's gay and had a hard upbringing because of it, so she gives him more leeway than her other coworkers.

Xavi says, "Can't I just cut him off? He'll be here for three hours. Total camper."

Meg retorts, "Shut up, bitch. It's a customer. He's a regular, be good to him." Meg's terms of affection are all profanities.

"But it's a four-top, I could totally be making more money."

"Have you looked at your section lately?" She whistles the Ennio Morricone ghost town whistle from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. "Stop being a whiny bitch and go give your customer some more coffee."

"Hag."

"Fag."

Xavi comes out from behind the counter with some coffee and a huff. "Here you go sir. I'll be right back with your fries." He gives Gilbert a smile that's almost genuine. Meg made that happen and Gilbert knows it.

Gilbert's been coming here for three months now. He came in the first time because it was a bitter cold windy afternoon and he'd just lost his job. Gilbert worked security at the G Street Macy's for fifteen years. Even though he hadn't had a drink in two years, all it took was one unlocked door at the end of his post to end his pension and any hope of a rehiring. He was wandering all the way in from Capitol Hill along M street that day, angry, baffled, passing all of the boutiques and restaurants he couldn't afford to set foot in, having been fired from a store he couldn't afford to shop at, when he came across the Hamburger Harbor. He was looking in the enormous plate glass window set in a darkened wood frame when the door opened and a couple came out, arm in arm. They were a city couple on lunch break from some office job. He could tell at a glance that the man was a Macy's shopper (Hugo Boss cashmere), the woman, JC Penney's (double breasted, plain wool, foreign made). Boss and secretary on the side. Gilbert's fifteen years on the security beat had given him the skill of quick study. As they left the restaurant in a cloud of warm air, the couple brought out the smell of beer, bar food and warmth.

Gilbert had been saving for those fifteen years. Not enough for a pension, but enough for a coffee and some fries when he felt like it. He closed his hand on the icy cold brass door handle, pulled open the heavy dark wood door and walked inside the polished brass and wood saloon-type restaurant.

Meg was at the host counter that first day. Gilbert didn't know her yet, but she looked him steady in the eyes and gave him a genuine smile as she led him to his table. She's the only person there who still has that smile for him. She walked Gilbert down the two steps to the main dining room, a high-ceilinged number, built as a shop front sometime in the 1800s.

Maybe it was fate that had Meg seat him at table number 48 that day in January. But Gilbert's frayed nerves welcomed the snug booth in the corner where he could survey the restaurant and no one could come up behind him. Every day after that, he came in between the lunch and dinner rush to have a seat, drink his coffee, eat his French fries and plan.

Eavesdropping on the waiters is an added bonus.

Gilbert likes hot sauce on his fries. He mixes about a tablespoon of Tabasco in, adds two shakes of salt and stirs the whole thing up with his first fry. He likes that first fry because the sauces haven't totally mixed yet and it's the first time his taste buds get a hold of that flavor combination. The French fry is still crispy from the fryer, with no wilt. He likes the way the sauce clings to it, the way it has a slightly crunchy snap to it when he bites; this keeps him coming back. Gilbert judges his waiters by who remembers about the hot sauce and who doesn't. Xavi, for all of his complaining, remembers when he comes back with the bottle of Tabasco, the ketchup and the soup bowl full of French fries. It's how it's served here at Hamburger Harbor. Big bowl of steak cut fries for \$4.95. Worth every penny. This, and the \$1.50 refillable coffee brings him in at eight bucks with tip. Gilbert has rationed his remaining cash to help with this payment each day.

The first French fry is so good that he's thinking about putting things off until tomorrow. Just one more day. But his landlord has threatened that if he doesn't pay him in full by tomorrow, he's changing the locks on his run-down Adams Morgan studio apartment. Gilbert has made peace with himself over a lot of things in his life: divorce, not being able to see his children, not being able to drink alcohol ever, ever again, but homelessness evokes a piercing irrevocable dark fear. Joblessness is remedied. Homelessness means that he really, truly has failed.

Meg has gone off to her station and Debbie ducks behind the counter to hang with Xavi. She's 22 and still quite proud of the fact that she gets to have sex with her boyfriend.

She says, "So, you wanna know what happened last night?"

Gilbert can almost hear Xavi roll his eyes. "Okay."

"We were down on the floor? After...you know...*doing it*."

Gilbert has to laugh, remembering when sex was new and worth celebrating. Before it got tired and heavy and complicated.

Xavi stops her, "So Gary thinks he saw the Shitter." Gary is the manager. Gary is an asshole.

Debbie is incredulous, "NO."

"He swears he saw this clean cut guy in a suit come out of the bathroom at 12:05. He chased him upstairs, but lost him when he hit the street. Guy's wearing Burberry and running like hell."

The Shitter has been a heated topic of conversation among the wait staff, managers, cooks and busboys for about three weeks now. Every few nights, the busboys, Alberto and Rogelio have gone in to clean the men's room and found shit wiped all over the tile walls of the bathroom. Gilbert wonders what drives a guy to do that. What kind of sickness or shortfall of life makes a guy go into a nice restaurant like this and wipe shit all over the walls. And what does it do for him? Does it soothe him?

Debbie says, "Must not be getting any." Xavi huffs and Debbie walks past Gilbert at a brisk pace, headed to her deuce up in the front window.

Xavi refills Gilbert's coffee with his right hand, running his left through his black hair. Xavi's in his late thirties and has started to get dry wrinkles around his brown eyes. The freckles that run up his cheeks and a patch of dry skin along his jawline make him look vulnerable. Gilbert knows that Xavi's bluster is protective coating. Strip him of his sense of humor and he'd be a naked turtle. Xavi's got incurable soft spots.

Xavi's absent-mindedly watching Debbie at the front of the room when a cloud comes over his face. A smile, then a frown, then a scowl follow in quick succession as the coffee runs over the top of Gilbert's cup...He mutters, "Excuse me." And walks over to Debbie still carrying the coffee pot. Gilbert tries not to look like he's craning his neck as he strains to see.

Debbie looks up and sees Xavi coming. She smiles, but the smile freezes as worry enters her eyes. Xavi has to be loud, for Gilbert to hear him from across the room. The small window table usually swallows all of the sound inside. But clear and echoing, Xavi says, "Oh, so we're dating girls now, are we?"

The gentleman in the window mumbles something Gilbert can't hear.

"No, I will *not* be quiet. It's bad enough you're choosing straight this week, but do you have to strut it right through my house?"

The gentleman gets to his feet. He's got those John F. Kennedy Jr., Georgetown good looks. A tailored raincoat lies draped over the back of his chair. Gilbert can't see his date, but he sees the side of her Capitol Hill blonde hairdo and her booted foot is bobbing impatiently at the end of its long, sleek, crossed, trousered leg.

Gilbert wishes he could hear what the man is saying, but clearly this is not someone who lives out loud. Xavi makes up for it, "Oh, no, bitch, this is *my* house! Take your little Republican whore and get the hell out of here!"

The woman gets to her feet now. She moves past her gentleman friend to leave. It's not her fight. The gentleman doesn't join her. It's his staying there that lets Gilbert know that Xavi has a point.

Meg appears from the bar area and moves next to Xavi in alliance. But the way she puts her hand on his shoulder shows Gilbert that she's trying to get him out of there. She speaks respectfully to the gentleman, her waist at a half bow as her left hand rubs comforting circles on Xavi's back.

Soon Mr. Closeted Washington grabs his trench coat and is out the door. Gilbert imagines that he's a few minutes too late for any hope with that girl. Meg and Xavi walk back toward the busboy station. Gilbert watches Xavi as long as he can before he looks to his fries like he hasn't seen anything. Xavi is shaking, there are tears in his eyes and his face is blotchy. Meg's mouth is set, determined. Gilbert admires her loyalty and the care she takes with her friends.

She starts in the moment they're behind the curtain. "He's not worth it..."

"Did you see her? Jerry, only ever a bottom *Jerry* had his hand on her knee. Some macho bullshit [bullshit](#)."

"Guys like that are never worth it."

"What do *you* know?" Xavi's recovering enough to regain his sense of humor.

"Because girls like that..." She takes a moment to formulate. "If he doesn't know who he is then he isn't mature enough for a proper love relationship. He isn't worth your time."

Xavi doesn't say anything. Maybe he's buying it.

Meg says, "It's his loss, sweetheart."

Xavi snorts. Gilbert thinks he's crying. But Meg laughs.

Xavi says, "Did you *see* the look on his face?"

Meg does her best imitation of Xavi, which is pretty spot on, "This is *my* house, bitch!"

Gilbert can tell Xavi has hugged Meg. His voice is muffled as he says, "Oh, I love you. Thank you."

When he comes out to pour Gilbert his coffee, Xavi's face has gone back to normal, with only a slight flush of what passed, lingering. Xavi has more power than he had ten minutes ago. It's these small changes in people that give Gilbert faith.

He's not sure how to kill time 'til closing. He can't camp on a cup of coffee and fries for seven hours. He makes a decision. Since this is the last day, he will come back at nine, after the rush and order a burger. It is the Hamburger Harbor after all and he's never tried one of their burgers.

He leaves at his accustomed time and wanders the streets of Georgetown. There's a fine drizzle in the warm April weather. Built on a swamp, Washington DC has maybe two nice days a year, both of them in April. But this isn't one of them. Either wet and cold or wet and hot, the town has only variations on a larger theme of miserable. Today is the chilly misty variety. Gilbert turns up the collar of his Macy's relegated navy blue mackintosh and heads east on M street. The clouds hang low and close. He walks past, one more time, the boutiques and restaurants he can't afford. Past where M street mysteriously turns into N. Past the picturesque Georgetown Inn where a well-appointed couple with appropriately parallel taste in clothing disembark a taxi and hustle toward the front door.

If Gilbert clears about two, three thousand, he can go back to Maclean as if he's retired. He won't have to tell anyone. He should be able to get some work at the plant. Night shift maybe. Back in Maclean he knows everyone, so they won't ask for references. But if he goes back empty handed, nowhere to stay...it's been twenty years. He's got to at least have some new clothes and enough money to get himself put up in some shitty apartment somewhere. Only people with jobs can get jobs. He knows this. And he owes his brother some money. Just a few hundred dollars, but to return empty handed...he needs this.

He won't have to hurt anyone. They've known him so long, getting in won't be a problem.

He'd clocked everything. 11:30, they start cashing out. Midnight, final cash out. Gary takes the box downstairs to the vault. If Gilbert hides in the downstairs bathroom, he can wait for him there. It starts to drizzle. He'll catch the bus home. After all, this is his last night.

Gilbert goes back to table 48 at 10 PM. Starving, he orders the number 17 burger, medium-rare. French fries with, of course and instead of coffee, he splurges on a three-dollar lemonade. He goes wild and orders a side of onion rings. Meg smiles and raises her eyebrow when she takes the order, looking like she's proud of him. Or maybe she hopes he's come into some money. She's probably conscious of how close he's sitting when she goes back behind the curtain, so while he hears "Friesandcoffee" which is pretty much his name here, he can't hear what they're saying. One by one, Xavi, Debbie and the stoner waiter, (Gilbert thinks his name is Matt) nonchalantly walk by his table and cast a sideways glance. Each time one walks back to the busboy station there's an array of giggles. Gilbert's pleased at first that he's evoked a reaction, but when waiters start coming over from the other side of the restaurant to look, he knows his being inconspicuous has made him more conspicuous when he ordered that burger. His onion rings arrive first and as he bites through their crisp light batter into the slender ring inside, he comforts himself knowing most of them will have gone home when the time comes.

The burger comes to the table, a slice of Canadian bacon, a slice of American cheese and two slices of bacon on top in the shape of an X, topped with a dollop of Russian dressing. It's beautiful. He's glad he hadn't ordered a burger before tonight, his bank account wouldn't have held out. The first bite of the burger is the best thing he's ever eaten. Salt, bacon, ham, beef, cheese, Russian dressing, tomato, onion and bun come together in the ultimate in American eating satisfaction.

He strings out the eating for a good hour and a half. He wants to settle his bill by 11:30, camp out on lemonade until just before closing. Then, the bathroom run.

Meg comes with the check at 11:15. She says, "Did you enjoy your meal?"

"Oh, yes!" he says this with too much enthusiasm. He blushes.

"I'm so glad. By the way, what's your name? Every day you come in here and I don't know your name."

"George." He's not sure why he feels guilty for lying.

"Well, George, hope to see you tomorrow. Xavi here will see to your lemonade. If you don't mind, I'm going to cash out now and head home." She lays the bill on the table a respectable distance away. Close enough to reach, not smack in front of him like a demand. This everyday moment of respect and grace bring a lump to his throat. He smiles and nods at Meg, who goes back to the kitchen. As he reaches for his wallet, his hand grazes the gun in his inside pocket, warm from its time next to his chest. He remembers himself and breathes deeply. Gilbert takes out two crisp twenties from his wallet. He left only 100 dollars in the bank to avoid fines. He lays the two twenties in the black vinyl folder. Meg is back just as he gets the folder to the table.

She takes the folder and walks away from the table before she opens it. She looks back, saying, "I'll get you your change."

Gilbert wonders if it'll be seen as charity, but he looks on it as a small reward for months of service. He says, "No need."

She turns and walks back to the table, looking at him incredulously. "You gave me two twenties, you know."

"Yeah."

"The bill was twenty one dollars."

"Yeah."

She stands and considers him for a long moment. Meg has such an honest and steady stare that Gilbert cannot hold her gaze. He lowers his eyes. She says, "Thank you."

He looks up and sees that she's smiling. He says, "Thank you."

She's not leaving. "Are you okay and everything?"

"Yeah."

"Cuz this kind of splurging, coming from Mr. Friesandcoffee. Pardon me if I'm intrusive, but it's kind of how someone behaves before they're going to do something big."

Damn.

She continues, "Like... Pardon me, it's just, I lost my brother to suicide."

Oh. Gilbert says, "No! I mean, I'm so sorry. For your brother. But no. Everything's fine." He finds that place of gratitude and the fact that he genuinely likes Meg and musters an encouraging comforting Dad-like smile.

Her eyebrows furrow as she considers further, but he sees that she lets it go. She waves the black folder at him and says, "Okay. Well then. Thank you." And with a slight bend of the waist she turns on her heel and she's gone.

Gary the manager whisks into the busboy station and into the cashier booth with the cash box and his business suit, followed by a cologne-bath wind. He passes the coffee machine, the ice-maker and the iced tea brewer, and flips up the wooden counter that separates the small cashier's room with a clunk. There's nothing but a wooden counter, an adding machine and a footstool in the phone-booth sized space. Gilbert knows this layout because on a slow afternoon when he first started coming in, he went back there pretending that he was looking for the men's room. Only he didn't have to pretend because it was between shifts and the waiters were off doing their side work.

Meg doesn't like Gary. Nobody likes Gary.

The adding machine whirrs and Gary says, "Quite a ring tonight. Selling those sides?"

Meg clears her throat. "Yup."

"Atta girl."

"Gary, can you spare me the sexist small talk and just give me my fucking total so I can get out of here?"

Gary's tone is condescending, "Touchy! Okay, honey." He counts out her change.

"Thank you." She turns to go.

Gary calls after her. "You know a little romp in the sack with a real man would clear up those crabbies."

Meg has just reached the door outside the busboy station. Gilbert watches as she rolls her eyes and fumes and thinks of a response. She mutters, "He's not worth it, He's not worth it." She turns around and walks back to poke her head into the bus station. She says with a sarcastic smile, "You have a good night now, Gary."

A class act. If she'd insulted him they'd have gotten into it. But with this comment, Gary shifts in his seat, uncomfortable. He hollers, "Xavi! You're up!"

It will not be a problem to threaten this man with a gun. Gilbert knows his cue. He heads down to the men's room. One stall is occupied. Gilbert goes into another and sits down on top of the toilet lid. He feels for the gun in his pocket.

The guy in the stall next to him is straining a bit, and while Gilbert has smelled shit before and has been up close and personal with some of the uglier aspects of the human body, he finds the close proximity of the stalls, the fact that he could reach out and touch the guy if the wall weren't separating them unnerving.

Gilbert casts a sideways glance under the edge of the stall and sees some very expensive Italian leather shoes with expensive wool suit material draped around them. Pinstripe. The belt is Gucci. This man is too wealthy to shop at Macy's even. Gilbert checks his watch. Five more minutes.

The man stands, pulls up his trousers and does them up. Gilbert's relieved. But he's surprised to hear a rubbery "snap". It's only when he hears the man bend over with a groan and some splashing that he realizes the snap was from a rubber glove. Oh.

The stall door opens and the man steps out. Gilbert hears his expensive shoes click on the bathroom tile and the smearing begins. It's not a sound you would ever want to hear. Perhaps it's the odor or knowing what it is, but Gilbert fights a gag in his throat. He curls his arms around his stomach and feels the lump of his gun against the inside of his wrist. He thinks of Meg. Xavi. And the poor fucking busboys. He needs this money.

Those poor fucking busboys, Alberto and Rogelio, and the door he left open at Macy's. This place has been kinder to him in the past three months than his employers of fifteen years.

He reaches for his gun. He takes a deep breath, the odor making him regret that he has. He opens the door to the stall, clicks back the hammer on the gun, levels it at the man and says, "Drop it."

The remaining shit drops into the sink with a wet smack. The man turns around. It takes a moment for Gilbert to recognize him. It's the JohnJohn handsome Republican closet case. Xavi's ex.

With his security training springing back into place, Gilbert steps forward and pats the man down. He steps back and says, "Lower your hands."

He reaches into his side pocket for the twist ties meant for Gary. He waves the gun at Closet Case and says, "Turn around. Hands behind your back."

"Please, let me go." Panicked, Closet Case looks to the door, down at his hands and then at Gilbert.

"You should be ashamed of yourself. I can't even get into why you would do this, but your lack of respect for a place of business, your rich stupid self-centered thought that doing THIS wouldn't affect people??"

"Please."

"Do you know this place doesn't have a janitorial staff but once a week? Do you know that the busboys, these men who escaped being enlisted in the army in whatever their Central American country was fighting about...these guys who have to work every day of their life to save up enough to get their families out of immediate peril. These are the guys who are made to clean up your shit."

Carefully working around the shit-covered rubber glove, Gilbert pulls the zip ties tight enough to hurt.

Closet stammers, "Please. I'll give you money. My family has money, a lot of it. What would it take, a thousand dollars?"

Gilbert backs up to the door. He pulls it open and leaves it open with his foot. He yells. "Gary!"

"Please. I'll give you three thousand dollars if you just let me go."

Three thousand dollars. Fuck. All this waiting and planning and no money.

But this lying shit needs to go to jail. Gilbert knows that if he lets this fuck buy him off, it will be the first in a series of pay-offs on his road to some sort of power. Corporate or political, Closet Case getting away with things needs to stop here.

Gilbert checks his watch. He knows Gary should be coming down the stairs now. "Gary!"

Leather footsteps hit the stairs and speed up when he hears his name called.

When Gary catches view of Gilbert, Gilbert tucks his gun in his jacket. Closet can't see this, he just waits with his face to the wall. Gilbert can see his shoulders shaking.

Gary says, "What the hell's going on here?" Gilbert wants to smack his officious smarmy face. But he stands back against the door, giving Gary a view. Gary's jaw drops.

Gilbert says, "Has Xavi left?"

Gary's processing. "What. What?"

"Has Xavi left?"

"Yeah. A few minutes ago."

Closet speaks up, "I can explain."

Gilbert leaves them. He pokes his head into the kitchen where he knows Alberto and Rogelio will be mopping the floors. "Amigos!" They look at him like he's a crazy white man, but when he says, "El Mierdador!" they toss their mops and come running. It's kind of a made-up word, but they get it. He points them in the direction of the bathroom. Gary's standing there, stunned, with his cashbox still in hand. It would be so easy. But Gary can't be trusted.

Gilbert stops at the bar on the way out. He leans up to the bartender and says, "They caught the shitter, call the cops." The bartender turns to the phone and Gilbert knows it'll take more than a small bribe for Closet to make this one go away.

He steps out into the misty night, which is no colder than when he went in. A warm breeze is blowing off the river, bringing the smell of river water, damp earth and new green leaves. He heads down M Street on the long walk to his apartment. What if he'd gotten caught? Prison has gotta be worse than whatever's waiting for him Maclean. He'd pack his stuff in the car and head out in the morning. Right now he's going to walk the three miles home and sleep until his landlord shows.



Halaal*

Kainat Azhar

Purified bodies
 washed with milk
 and colored with saffron,
 a mass of interconnected
 imperfections
 craved in the heart
 of a dying star.
 His limbs are my drugs,
 his mind my religion.
 Together, we fall and collect
 to reassemble the puzzle
 pieces of our acidified breaths.

A purple sun
 dances in the backyard
 of the house when
 our bodies seep out the blood
 in the name of love from
 our cracked skins.

We brew wine and words
 in the morning and play
 a monochromatic holi with
 our demons at midnights.
 Silence wanders in the lonely rooms
 of our childhood; we butcher
 each dream on the recital of the unholy
 love songs and bury them in the
 spaces between the consecutive vertebrae.

**Halaal:* (Arabic) Something that has not been prohibited

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Robert Nisbet is a Welsh poet with just over 200 publications in Britain and around 40 in the USA, most latterly in *Unbroken Journal*, *First Literary Review-East* and *Provo Canyon Review*. He has one chapbook, *Merlin's Lane* (Prolebooks, 2011).

Lauren Suchenski is a fragment sentence-dependent, ellipsis-loving writer and lives somewhere where the trees change color. As a poet, ballet dancer, actress, photographer, painter, mother and Waldorf educator, Lauren believes in the inherent creative capability within all people.

David Tuvell has written poems for the *New Orleans Review*, *The Steel Toe Review*, NYU's *Minetta Review*, KSU's *Share*, *Eyedrum Periodically*, and other publications. His English B.A. comes from Kennesaw State University, and he studied substantially at the University of Florida. Outside of poetry, his path has been quite various, and he has made his way through things like software engineering, information science, and labor.

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Shannon Frost Greenstein resides in Philadelphia with her husband and heir. She endures an office job while penning the Next Great American Novel, in addition to her (sadly) pro-bono Phenomenological exploits. Her writing can be read in the Philadelphia City Paper, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, and several internet publications.

Clio Velentza lives in Athens, Greece. She has been a winner of Queen's Ferry Press' Best Small Fictions 2016 and was anthologized in "Rethinking The Plot" (Kingston University Press, 2016) and 21 New Voices (Eleftheroudakis Publications, 2011). Her fiction and non-fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in several literary journals.

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Mindy Watson is a D.C./Northern Virginia-based creative nonfiction writer and federal writer/editor who holds an MA in Nonfiction Writing from The Johns Hopkins University. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Ars Medica* and *Thread: A Literary Journal*; her poetry has appeared in *The Quarterday Review* and *The Ekphrastic Review*.

Theodore Smith is a businessman and writer who lives and works in Woodinville, Washington. He currently owns and operates a glass blowing hot shop in Seattle, which he operated with his wife Susan. He holds an MBA, and recently earned a Certificate in Non-Fiction Writing from the University of Washington.

Gabby Vachon is a Montreal writer and artist. Her work has been published in *Tiny Tim*, *Adios Barbie*, *Bitch Magazine* and many more. She is also prose editor for *Soliloquies Anthology*. Her other passions include makeup artistry, corgis and entertaining her

husband Justin with her dance moves. Follow her on Twitter @gabbyvwrites

Shannon Frost Greenstein resides in Philadelphia with her husband and heir. She endures an office job while penning the Next Great American Novel, in addition to her (sadly) pro-bono Phenomenological exploits. Her writing can be read in the Philadelphia City Paper, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, and several internet publications.

Jesse Bradley is a Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominated writer whose work has appeared in numerous literary journals including *decomp*, *Hobart*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He was the Interviews Editor of *PANK*, the Flash Fiction Editor of *NAP*, and the Web Editor of *Monkeybicycle*. He is the author of the poetry collection *Dodging Traffic* (Ampersand Books, 2009), the novella *Bodies Made of Smoke* (HOUSEFIRE, 2012), and others. His flash fiction chapbook, *Neil*, won *Five Quarterly's* 2015 e-chapbook contest for fiction. His story, "Kyle", was selected for *Wigleaf's* top 50 (very) short fictions for 2016. He is the curator of the Central Florida reading series *There Will Be Words*. He received his MFA in Writing from Lindenwood University.

Jessica Hickey is a native Californian adjusting to life in the rural Midwest. Her poetry has been published in *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, and her artwork has appeared in the *New England Journal*.

Clio Velentza lives in Athens, Greece. She has been a winner of Queen's Ferry Press' Best Small Fictions 2016 and was anthologized in "Rethinking The Plot" (Kingston University Press, 2016) and *21 New Voices* (Eleftheroudakis Publications, 2011). Her fiction and non-fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in several literary journals.

Josh Rank graduated from the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee and has since had stories published in *The Missing Slate*, *The Feathertale Review*, *Hypertext Magazine*, *The Oddville Press*, *The Satirist*, *Corvus Review*, *Inwood Indiana*, and elsewhere. He currently eats sandwiches in Nashville, TN. More ramblings can be found at joshrank.com.

Rasmenia Massoud is from Colorado, but after a few weird turns, ended up spending several years in France. Once she learned all she could about cheese and macarons, she found herself in England, where she writes about what she struggles most to understand: human beings. You can visit her at: <http://www.rasmenia.com/>

Kip Hanson lives in sunny Tucson, where his wife makes him watch *Poltergeist* while insisting clowns are not scary. You can find his work scattered about the Internet, at *Foundling Review*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Inkspill*, *Bartleby Snopes*, and a few other places, proving that a blind squirrel does occasionally find a nut. When not telling lies, he makes a few bucks cobbling together boring articles for technical magazines.

Kimberly Casey is a poet and performer from Massachusetts. She received her BFA from Emerson College in Boston, MA. She currently resides in Huntsville, AL where she organizes a spoken word collective, *Out Loud HSV*. Her work has appeared in *Hypertrophic Literary*, *Phantom Kangaroo & Red Fez*, among others.

Fred Miller is a California writer. Over forty of his stories have appeared in various publications around the world. Some of these stories appear in his blog: <https://pookah1943.wordpress.com>.

Kate Maruyama's novel *Harrowgate* was published by 47North. Her short work has appeared in *Stoneboat*, *Arcadia*, *Whistling Shade* and on *The Rumpus*, *Duende*, and the *Citron Review* among other journals as well as in two anthologies: *Winter Horror Days* and *Phantasma: Stories*. She writes, teaches, cooks, and eats in Los Angeles where she lives with her family.

After law school, Bill Diamond worked for the federal government. It taught him patience, that persistence can pay off in progress, and an appreciation for the outlandish.

Thaddeus Rutkowski is the author of the books *Violent Outbursts*, *Haywire*, *Tetched* and *Roughhouse*. *Haywire* won the Members' Choice Award, given by the Asian American Writers Workshop. He teaches at Medgar Evers College and the Writer's Voice of the West Side YMCA in New York. He received a fiction writing fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Thaddeus Rutkowski is the author of the books **Guess and Check**, *Violent Outbursts*, (**space**) *Haywire*, *Tetched* and *Roughhouse*. www.thaddeusrutkowski.com

Norbert Kovacs is a short story writer who lives in Hartford, Connecticut. His stories have appeared in *Squawk Back*, *Darkrun Review*, *Ekphrastic*, and *Scarlet Leaf Review*.

Justin Hunter is currently working on his MFA at Arcadia University. He lives in Dallas with his wife and kids, and when he's not writing, Justin is probably buried under a doggie pile of children and, well, dogs. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Front Porch Review*, *Down in the Dirt Magazine*, and *Centum Press*, among others.

Sara Roberts formerly worked as a journalist in London before moving to Spain to focus on her writing. She is now back in the UK, based in Oxford, where she writes fiction and teaches. She has had flash fiction and short stories published in a number of print and online journals, and runs a blog and online community for writers called [Cafe Aphra](#). She is currently working on her first novel.

Matthew D. Laing writes from Ottawa, Canada, and takes an interest in exploring the unknown and the unexplained. So far he has been published in the *Corvus Review*, teen horror anthology *OUT OF THE CAVE*, *Bewildering Stories* and *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, to name a few.

Born and bred in Detroit, Michael A. Ferro's work has been featured in various online and print publications. He was awarded the Jim Cash Creative Writing Award for Fiction. Michael's debut novel, *TITLE 13*, is forthcoming from Harvard Square Editions in 2018. Additional writing and information can be found at www.michaelaferro.com. Barbara Taylor is a proud survivor of a southern boarding school for girls and a southern women's college where majoring in English required reciting Chaucer from memory. A Ph.D. dropout and winner of Flatiron Writers Short Fiction Competition, she lives and writes in North Carolina.

John Gorman is a recovering anthropologist and a cat-lover. He really digs pickled fried chicken and hoppy beers. His most recent stuff has appeared in the *Chicago Tribune's Printers Row*, *Squawk Back*, *New Pop Lit*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Writer's Digest*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and elsewhere. Read more about him <http://jgpapercut.blogspot.com/>.

Jeff Hill is a past participant of the Sarah Lawrence College Summer Seminar for Writers and a teaching assistant for the Writer's Hotel in New York City. He is currently pitching two novels to agents while teaching high school English in the Midwest. He calls Nebraska and New York home and has dozens of publications to his name.

B. A. Varghese graduated from Polytechnic University (New York) in 1993 and has been working in the Information Technology field ever since. Inspired to explore his artistic side, he has earned a B.A. in English from the University of South Florida and is currently in the process of working toward an M.F.A. in Creative Writing. His works have appeared in *Cleaver Magazine*, *Apalachee Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, and other literary journals. (www.bavarghese.com)

Zach Smith is a graduate of Chestnut Hill College and has been writing for more than a dozen years, struggling all the while with Dyslexia. His work has previously appeared in: *Crack the Spine*, *Revolution John*, and the *Short Humor Site*, among others.

Paisley Kauffmann lives and writes in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Life provides millions of bits and pieces to stitch together into stories. Her short stories have been published in *The Talking Stick*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, and *The Writing Disorder*. She writes with one of two pugs in her lap and receives gracious feedback from her husband. The Loft Literary Center, the Minnesota writing community, and her writing group support and fuel her motivation.

Doug is a writer, editor, novelist, and poet. After going to college, traveling the world thanks to the navy, and being a single parent, he learned to appreciate life and what it has to offer. He's not perfect; he makes mistakes, but he's always trying to improve on the person he was yesterday.

Encouraged by the reaction to his play, "It Might Have Been," Myles Wren decided to tell more of the stories in his head, with homes for these being found in *The MacGuffin*, *Crack the Spine Literary Magazine* and others. He was born, raised and is still living in New York.

Jason Half-Pillow lives in Italy and writes stories. His writing has appeared in a number of journals, most recently in the *Nude Bruce Review*.

Kitty Shields lives in Philadelphia, where she writes to support her Starbucks addiction. She graduated from Arcadia University with an MFA in Creative Writing in 2015. She has been published in *After Happy Hour Review*, *Furious Gazelle*, and *Minotaur's Spotlight*. You can find her at kittyshields.com or @kittyshields on Instagram.

James Mulhern has published fiction in several literary journals. A story was selected for *The Library's Best*, an anthology of best short stories. In September of 2013, he was chosen as a finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction. Mr. Mulhern was awarded a writing fellowship through the English-Speaking Union to study in the United Kingdom during the summer of 2015. In September of 2015 two short stories were awarded Honorable Mention for the *Short Story America Prize*. Six literary journals have accepted for publication adaptations/short stories from his novel in progress, a dark comic mystery set in Boston.

Kainat Azhar is a Pakistani writer and illustrator who has never formally studied the two. She hides behind the mask of a computer science major and is interested in almost everything that does not involve socializing. She tweets at twitter.com/Kainat_Azhar.