

WELCOME ISSUE 8 MARCH 2021

EXTRA! EXTRA! This just in! Feb 23/21. We are saddened to announce that **Lawrence Ferlinghetti**, publisher of Ginsberg's *Howl* and *eminence in grace* of the iconic **City Lights Book Store**, died in his home in San Fran today at age 101. To him, we owe our love of **Kerouac, Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Ken Kesey, Gregory Corso** and other fiery minds of the **Beat** generation—one of the strongest and most impactful movements in American literature. Quote: *Poetry must be capable of answering the challenge of apocalyptic times, even if this means sounding apocalyptic* ...And so in America, when the sun goes down...we think of old Lawrence, we think of Ferlinghetti, we think of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the father we always *had*. R.I.P.

'Write a sentence as clean as a bone.' James Baldwin

"Once you go meta, you can never go back." Hezekiah Scretch to Nick North in conversation.

'The only great Jungian novels were written by people who were hardly aware of Jung or even like James Joyce, despised him. The consciousness of being Jungian produces irritating books (The Magus, Robertson Davies etc.) Larry Smith in 'Fond du Lac' from Floodlands.

'The Earth is round. I intend to prove it flat!' Tom Ball to no one in particular since everyone bolted the orgy after he started speaking.

This issue is dedicated to the radical activist freedom loving spirits who have been so unjustly silenced by the monstrous machinery of petty, malevolent governments. We honour and support **Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, Charles Lim, Ivan Lam, Loujain Alhathloul, Raif bin Muhammad Badawi** and **Alexei Navalny**. *Veritas Triumpharet.*

Welcome to Fleas on the Dog (aka FOTD)! We're a no frills brown bag online lit rag with only one focus: GOOD WRITING. Our style is 'HOTS!'—hands off the submissions! We publish every submission exactly as received, so there might be arbitrary spacing, pagination and files containing more than one font. What you won't find are pretty pictures and fancy layouts. We like this 'broadsheet' deconstructionist approach—the printed page as its own aesthetic—inspired by the 'Beat' presses and journals because it visually footprints the individual in a way a uniform format does not. We hope you like it too. (In some cases with poetry, Hezekiah's intro will be found at the bottom, not the top of the page.)

November is money month when it comes to literary awards in Canada. And we're not talking small change. \$15k if you win the Governor General's Award (and the chance to rub elbows with the Queen's go for) and a whopping \$100K if you take the Scotiabank Giller Prize—Canada's richest—with 10K for each of the four runners up. But after the champagne flutes are drained, the rented tux's returned and the losers have been booked into therapy, just what kind of literature have we honoured?

Taking the Giller as our clay pigeon, Tom and Charles, believe it or not, bought the nominated books by the five contending authors.—3 novels and 2 short story collections (names redacted to protect the innocent from lawsuits or having our reputations besmirched on washroom walls)—and goaded by press release drivel and neat sounding citations like 'achingly beautiful prose' and 'language as unsparing as winter' (huh?)—we couldn't wait to dive in. But wait! There's no water in that there pool! Instead of writing that cuts to the bone we were 'treated' to 'designer' fiction. Five fucken times. The books these authors write (and we think most of them know it) are targeted to an elitist pseudo- intellectual mini-mob of chardonnay gulpers and brie munchers (read minority). They are the 'must reads' of the season, the book club choices, the five star reviews and you just ain't keepin' up with the circle jerk, Jack, if you don't read them or at least pretend to have

read them. They are fanatical in their political correctness (no cultural appropriation here!) and predictably take on ‘heavy’ themes, detail ‘dark’ truths and fling yet again that wearisome (at least here in Canada) done like dinner cliché of ‘the immigrant experience’ or ‘the trans experience’ upon a gloating audience of neuron numb autofellators. There is nothing wrong with these topics per se. In fact, under the right pen, each of them offers boundless possibilities. The problem comes down to the writing itself. Instead of ‘achingly beautiful prose’, we found much of it to be over-crafted, over edited, anal retentive and under fed. What’s missing is what needs to be there. Blood, dirt, fire and energy—the ‘barbaric yawp’ that trumpets authentic voice, the authorial signature that can only be wrested from the depths where mingle intuition and hard won experience. With one exception, all the nominees demonstrated a curious similarity of mannered prose style, such that in a couple of cases you could even switch the names on the covers and not notice much difference. Make no mistake: this isn’t where exciting fiction is happening. Scratch any of these books and all you get is *acqua morta*. But who cares? It’s 100K stuff and these authors are the season’s celebutants. Then again, why *should* we care? Seriously. If a bank likes your fiction you’re dead in the water as a writer. And you can take *that* to the bank.

We’d like to say a special thanks to Anne Scott for her generous donation. Her late husband Bob’s poetry appears in this issue. His poetry was unpublished during his lifetime but he was a stellar talent who should not be missed. We welcome the opportunity to honour him. So thank you again, Anne!

The kool kemikal headers in this issue were specially designed by Neo-Beat Teek Tawk artist Wade Springer. Bruh, you *avante-d* the *garde!!!* We salute you from the depths with our darkest thanks!

A word about ‘5 stars’ (or *cinque stelle* as Charles keeps hounding us), since we’ve been asked on more than one occasion by more than one head scratcher. It’s just a little discretionary perk we give to the author for what we believe to be standout work and to impress upon the reader the high quality of the writing he/she/it/they is about to read. But it’s not a ranking

system. There is no 4, 3, 2, or 1 stars. All of which means if you didn't get a fiver don't come crying to us, Argentina. We receive 300+ submissions per issue so if you made it into FOTD, you're an author of consequence, at least in our eyes. *Capite?*

We're just five rad dudes and one cool fox who love the language and fall on our knees at the sound of beautiful words in all their glorious reach and transformative power. At FOTD we share that with each submission we publish, each different from the other, some miles and styles apart, but always burning. *Nisi optimum et clarissimum.*

And now we give you Issue 8. As mature as fine wine, as incendiary as Spanish fly. And until we meet again in Issue 9, always remember to spread the LOVE and STAY SAFE, or, as we say here in kool Canada, the true north strong and Flea, "Stay safe, *eh!*"

Tom, Charles, Hezekiah, Janet, Richard and Rob

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END OF PART ONE

Dreaming in AMERICA

By Nick Padron

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor PETER STAVROS writes: I was drawn into this story immediately, from the opening lines as Mrs. Blanco cautions herself to preserve the strength of her smile, knowing that she would need it later. I wanted to follow her on her journey – this skillfully presented journey amidst the rush and bustle of a bygone era New York City viewed through the eyes of someone who marvels at her bus commute like a tourist, where “[t]here’s a kind of musical play choreography in the way New Yorkers march across the streets, in the stop-and-go of the vehicle traffic,” so clear in its depiction that it was almost as if I could see the action unfold before me. The author is deliberate in the reveal of Mrs. Blanco’s backstory as this quite eventful day plays out for her. I was fully invested in her narrative and satisfied by the delicate payoff at the end. NF Padron’s crisp use of language paints the scenes perfectly. “The long hallways of the boarding house are gloomy silent,” and inside an employment agency “[t]he stale air in the gray-walled office reeks of cigarette smoke and indifference.” And Mrs. Blanco doesn’t just eat a donut she fortuitously found abandoned on a windowsill still wrapped in wax paper, after longing for one earlier from outside a storefront window, but “[u]p by her lips, she breathes in its baked aroma and bites the sweet soft dough filled with even sweeter jelly as though performing a delicious but sinful act.” I was moved by “Dreaming in America” and give it **five-stars**, and I’m eager to read more from NF Padron.*

Senior Editor Charles writes: *As soon as we started reading this magnificently understated, masterfully controlled story we knew we were in the presence of genuine talent. This is the real thing. Writing so simple and so good it puts a lump in your throat. A masterpiece of portraiture that not only tantalizes but comes with a surprise: an ending that will make you smile. (Spacing and font size are author’s own.)*

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language):

A slow-moving black convertible as long as a yacht comes sailing slowly through the mass of bodies. And there, over the sea of outstretched fluttering hands, the figure of John F. Kennedy appears in a royal blue suit, his face under a crown of impeccable chestnut hair, and a smile of perfect white. Drawn by the delirious multitude, Mrs. Blanco reaches out

to him as if attracted by an invisible magnet, and their skins clasp together for a magical instant. Then just as quickly, the candidate's caravan floats away.

DREAMING IN AMERICA

Nick Padron

Mrs. Blanco has always known she had a smile, sensed it even before she became aware of it. When nothing else would do, her education, her figure, her presence, that simple pull at the ends of her lips spoke with a language of its own. This morning she knows she's going to need it. So sure she is, in fact, that after brushing she restrains from flashing her teeth at the mirror to preserve her smile's full strength.

Outside the window is dusky gray. She reaches for her floral dress, something to brighten up the Monday morning that awaits her. She closes the closet door softly, so as not to wake up her son who's still asleep in the bed they share. From on top of the night table, she picks up her reading glasses next to the Selecciones del Readers Digest magazine and slips them on. She wears them all the time now when it's dark.

The long hallways of the boarding house are gloomy silent, her roommates either asleep or gone to work. In the kitchen, she greets Rita, the owner of the casa de bordantes. No need to start shining her smile yet. The radio is buzzing the local Spanish news. Mrs. Blanco has her breakfast in between Rita's comments. They're mostly about the weather getting colder. Where Mrs. Blanco comes from el tiempo is not much of a subject. It's either raining or it isn't, and usually too hot. Not here, in the city of long coats. The first thing out of people's mouths here, friends or strangers alike, is the weather, how cold is it going to get or what's going to fall from the sky today.

Mrs. Blanco finishes putting on her face by the front door. She reaches into the bottommost of her purse for the keys and locks every lock before she steps away.

It all begins in the elevator, with the simple act of pressing the call button on the wall brass plate. The doors open on their own and she steps inside the mirror and metal box. Her belly shivers as the floor drops, a combination of dread and excitement she's still acquainting herself with since she arrived in New York. Part of the luxury trappings of a past future time, an aging modernity, she is only now catching up to.

For better or worse, everything is temporary. If she is certain of anything it's that. Exile with all its heartbreaks, the same as the guilty enjoyment of a New York elevator ride, is only

provisional. The bearded atheists who had forced her and so many to flee her homeland would not keep her forever from the life God had meant her to live.

Outside, it's colder than it looks. She buttons up the winter coat Rita sold her for five dollars and tightens Amelia's red scarf around her neck. As she walks past the store windows in her stiff overcoat, her reflection isn't all that unappealing. It not only conceals her long-lost silhouette and keeps her warm; it also makes her feel part of the landscape, like another New Yorker.

At the bus stop, everyone climbs in one at a time, each dropping a token, unrushed. It is at moments like these too that she's reminded how far she is from home. Tokens instead of money, no one hustling to the empty seats, no conductor to collect the fare. The efficiency of it makes her wonder, though. In her town, buses had a driver and a conductor, and when they'd seen her a few times, she didn't need to signal her stop. Everyone was more in touch with each other, less orderly, sure, but more normal. She wonders how the americanos, as smart as they are, could have missed that, the simple human touch.

The downtown bus travels in the shade of Broadway's architecture, a sightseeing show for Mrs. Blanco—and the reason she preferred them to the subway. She presses her forehead on the icy glass window. She grins at the bright storefronts along the way, with their window displays projecting out to the street like movie screens with views of domestic scenes, gleaming kitchenware, and elegant mannequins wearing the latest styles. There's a kind of musical play choreography in the way New Yorkers march across the streets, in the stop-and-go of the vehicle traffic. The grandeur everywhere moves her, the polished sheen of rotating doorways, the assembly lines of yellow taxis, the sheer abundance of affluence. Her faith in the infinite might and wisdom of the americanos is reaffirmed at every intersection.

The bus stops at a red light.

When she left Havana, all she and her boy were allowed to bring was \$120.00 and — as she liked to say — all the hope and Kleenex they could carry. And, of course, the fervent belief that the United States of America would never allow a Communist nation to take root just ninety miles from Key West. This wasn't only her opinion: everyone she knew was of the same mind. The end of the bearded revolutionaries was only a question of when — maybe a year at the most before she'd be back with her family around her again, back to where she was born and married and had her children, home until three weeks ago.

Today is a particularly difficult day for Mrs. Blanco. It's her first day out looking for a job, in search of employment, something she's never done or needed to do before. At forty-six, the only job she ever had was that of housewife and mother, work that had prepared her for just about anything except to look for employment — much less in a foreign land. The task does not intimidate her as much as the idea of having to ask for it in English, a language she loves to hear but she's incapable of articulating without embarrassing herself.

Mrs. Blanco looks at the note her exiled friend, Marta, had given her. "Get off on 34th Street. Walk to 8th Avenue, Garment Center. They're always hiring sewing machine operators in the factories around there," it says.

In Havana, she had a Singer machine with a wrought-iron foot pedal her husband bought her. She'd fashioned dresses and shirts for her children with it when they were younger, even sewn a camping tent for her son's Boy Scout troop once. Sew? Mrs. Blanco could sew just fine.

From the bus, she keeps watch of the street signs at every corner. "Get off when you see the Macy's store and walk around the area looking for Sewing Operator Wanted signs on building walls," Marta's note says.

Many things she never needed before or thought she ever would are needed now. Only a few weeks ago she still lived at home with her husband of twenty-two years and her two children. She'd known the comforts of a well-off existence, which had come with much struggle and only in recent times. But in less than a year of the communist takeover, it was all torn apart, beginning with the seizure of her husband's business, the family house, even the cars. Then came days of desperate rushing around like on a ship in the storm, throwing everything overboard, trying to sell, trade, and hide whatever remained of the family's assets. But the idea of seeking asylum didn't come until later when talk of an even more horrifying law was proposed. The enactment of what they called 'Patria Potestad.' The law that gave the communist government parental rights over un-emancipated children. Once the rumor took hold, the question of whether or not to leave the country was settled.

The communists could take everything she owns, she decided, but not her son.

Almost overnight, she found herself thousands of miles away, confined to a bedroom in an overcrowded boarding house in New York City with her twelve-year-old son, starting her temporary life of 'political' exile, a refugee — a 'worm,' how the fidelistas called the likes of her.

Although the hardships of her younger days now seem like something to look forward to, Mrs. Blanco doesn't allow herself to wallow in her misfortune as some of her fellow exiles do. Hope is fresh yet. Still, the day-to-day is far from easy. Rooming in an apartment full of political refugees is like living with a big wounded, grieving family. Rare is the night that she is not awakened by the muffled sobs of some of her roommates. Exile is the same as living in a permanent state of emergency, ever hanging to a single hope. Every rumor, every word printed or heard on the radio about the homeland has to be dissected, reinterpreted for hidden meanings, every piece of news a new topic to argue about. The one thing the entire exile commune agrees on, though, is, with God and the americanos on their side, everything the comunistas have stolen from them would be theirs again. And this was something Mrs. Blanco believes with all her heart.

Across the street, on the northbound side of Broadway, Mrs. Blanco notices a sign written in English and Spanish. It speaks of union, employment, and brotherhood. Compelled by a sudden impulse, Mrs. Blanco pulls the cord and gets off the bus, and then doubles back up the street.

The sweet smell of recently baked dough stops her on her tracks. She rests one hand on the shop window and stares at the trays full of happy-looking donuts arranged in rows. Mentally, she counts the change she has in her purse, hoping. But she knows all too well how much she has, or rather how much she doesn't have, then walks away thinking of all the weight she still could stand to lose — once again looking at the positive side so as not to weep.

She stands under the sign she saw from the bus and takes up the dark and narrow staircase. At the top landing, she halts by the opened smudged glass door. The stale air in the gray-walled office reeks of cigarette smoke and indifference. Facing a long counter dividing the room, a handful of people are lined up by a faded yellow line on the floor.

Mrs. Blanco steps in and surveys the women working behind the counter and at the desks beyond, pecking on their typewriters. A couple of suited men sit behind glass-partitioned cubicles.

She stands demurely at the end of the line and listens to the English-speaking voice of the bespectacled woman behind the counter, concentrates on it.

The person at the counter walks away and Mrs. Blanco moves up a step.

In front of her, there's a tall black lady and a Latina-looking one who's at the counter now. She's speaking to the bespectacled woman. The harder Mrs. Blanco listens to what they're saying the less she understands.

A minute later, she hears "Next." She remembers what next means. In English, every word sounds so much nicer to her, like in the subtitled movies, the voices of Doris Day, Elizabeth Taylor, and Audrey Hepburn, so musical even when uttered in anger. Yet she's just unable to articulate the words, as if her mouth isn't put together the same way as theirs.

The tall black lady steps up to the counter. Mrs. Blanco places the tip of her shoes on the yellow line on the floor. The tall lady seems upset. Something in the document the bespectacled woman handed her has set her off. Her voice is getting louder. She reminds her of those powerful-voiced Protestant preachers in the movies. Mrs. Blanco tries to decipher what each is saying. The noisier they get the less she comprehends them.

The tall woman starts to shake her finger at the impassive bespectacled face behind the counter. Suddenly she wheels and stomps away, hollering menacingly at the entire place. When she reaches the door, she balls-up the insulting document, hurls it in the general direction of the wastebasket, and storms out the glass door.

Now the office staff is up, bunched in groups around their desks, ruffled by the irate lady. Mrs. Blanco is up next.

The bespectacled woman waves from the counter. "Come on up."

Mrs. Blanco approaches with a tentative smile: she didn't hear 'next.' Her throat tightens up. "Pleese, laydee, S-peak S-panish?"

The bespectacled woman turns around and with a cigarette between her fingers waves at someone and walks away.

Spanish Carmen comes to the counter: "How can I help you?"

Mrs. Blanco lets out a sigh of relief and broadens her smile. "Aaayy," she sings out. "Thank God you speak Spanish, mi hijita. What a relief."

Spanish Carmen almost smiles.

"Well, the truth is I am looking for work," she says leaning closer to the counter. "Let me explain: I have only been in this country for three weeks, yes. But I am a hardworking person and a fast learner, and I am willing to do whatever work that is being offered."

Carmen gives her a squint-eyed look. "OK, let's see your book."

"Libro?" Mrs. Blanco, unsure whether Carmen has understood, starts again. "Maybe I should tell you, I am a married woman. I have two children, yes, two. My oldest, my daughter, she's in Cuba with my husband, los pobrecitos ... I'm sure you must have heard how terrible things are over there now with those communists taking over, my God. But my son, he's with me. We had to bring him out right away before the communists start taking the children to Russia. Yes, that's another thing those communists are doing. But he's in school now, thank God. And God willing, my husband will be coming to join us very soon. Now, my daughter, we're not too worried about her. She's already eighteen and engaged, yes. She's going to marry a boy we know, a good boy. But in the meantime, well, my son and I have to stay here, you understand, until we can return. So you can imagine how difficult it's been for me to find a job without any English —"

"Excuse me a moment, Mrs. Blan-co, right?"

"Yes," she answers, reaching into her purse for her passport, her ID. "In Cuba, married women get to keep their maiden name, not like here. Yes, it is Blanco."

Carmen, assuming the walk-up is looking for her book, says as she flicks through the Rolodex, "Let's see . . . We have a few openings for iron operators today. Would that be something you'd want to do?"

"Ironing? Oh, sure. I can iron. My husband tells me no one, not even his mother, can iron his shirts as well as I do."

"All righty, then. Give me your book and I'll send you right out."

Mrs. Blanco hands her passport.

"Not this, your union book, or your card, whichever you brought with you."

“I am sorry señorita. I don’t have a union book. I could get one if you tell me how—”

“Oh, oh. How can we send you out on a job, if you’re not in our union? This is an employment office for our union members. This is not for anybody. I mean you have to be a member.”

“No problem, I will join the union. Just tell me how.”

“It’s not like that. I’m sorry, the jobs we have are for our members in good standing only.”

“This is no problem for me. No problem at all. I want to be a union member. Just tell me what I have to do and I will join your union. You see, we just arrived in New York and I need a job—”

“You’ve already told me, Mrs. Blanco. But I can’t send you out unless you’re in our union. It’s just how it is.”

“But I will be very happy to be a member of your union. What is it? Is there a fee?”

“Yes, well no, it’s not just a fee. To join our union, you must first work in a union shop for at least three months before you can apply.”

“You’ll have to pardon me, Carmencita, chica. It’s a beautiful name, Carmen. I almost named my daughter Carmen, yes. I have a cousin named Carmen too. She’s my favorite cousin—”

“Mrs. Blanco...”

“Forgive me, Carmen, I will not bore you with it. But listen, if you give me the ironing job, I promise you I will come back in three months and ask for you personally and I will join your union. A promise is a promise.”

Carmen looks over Mrs. Blanco’s shoulders at the line. “Look, I’d love to help you —”

“But Carmen, my girl, how can I work for three months and then join the union if you don’t give me the job first?”

“These are the rules. I’m really sorry.”

“You mean you can’t give me a job unless I already have a job?”

“Not really, but in your case, I’m afraid so.”

“Why would I come to ask for employment if I am already employed? I’d be too busy at work!”

“I’m sorry. Take this brochure with you. Read it at your leisure. There’s nothing else I can do. Next . . .”

Mrs. Blanco buttons up her coat. “Ay, Carmencita, really. I’m afraid it’s going to take me a long time to understand this country.” She straps her purse on her shoulder. “To have an

employment office for people already employed—” She finished her comment with a silent headshake of disbelief.

As Mrs. Blanco walks toward the glass door, the heat of emotion wells in her eyes. She halts next to the wastebasket. She looks down at the balled-up paper the screaming lady had shucked with such disdain. Quickly, she lowers herself, picks it up, slips it into her purse and walks out.

Two blocks away, she stops to decipher the words on the paper. It’s a printed form filled out with ink but without a bearer’s name on it.

“... Jane Holly Blouses ... West 61st Street ... Steam iron operator ... Salary: \$1.25 an hour ... attention: Mr. Weinstein.”

Her face lights up. She has no reservations in applying for a job a disgruntled member of Carmen’s union didn’t want. Unions, what are they good for anyway? In Cuba, they called them *sindicatos*, like the one the communists first organized in her husband’s factory and then abolished after they confiscated it. But if unions is how the Americans choose to call them, it is fine with her.

On Columbus Circle, Mrs. Blanco runs into a crowd of people waving signs of ‘JFK for President.’ She works her way around them and hurries down 60th Street, crosses West End Avenue, and turns on the corner. The Hudson River is just down the road.

A cold wind blows on her face, clean, crisp American air.

61st Street is solid with parked cars. She finds the address. A sign above the doorway says Jane Holly Blouses. She enters the building. Out of the biggest elevator she’s ever seen, she encounters a pretty girl at the desk by the door. Mrs. Blanco switches on her smile and hands her the wrinkle-creased but now straightened flat employment form.

The receptionist, chewing gum, picks up a telephone, says one phrase and hangs up, then says something to her and points at a metallic door. The stained sign on it says ‘Employees Only.’

“San-cue,” Mrs. Blanco says.

She enters a high-ceiling workshop with long tables. Mr. Weinstein, a thirty-something, pleasant-looking man in a tie and dress shirt, comes walking from behind a stack of rolls of fabrics. The out-turned toes of his shoes are shiny but dusty . . . a man who doesn’t mind getting dirty at work. Mrs. Blanco approves.

She holds out the paper.

Mr. Weinstein doesn’t look up at her smile. He scowls at the paper. “Where’s your union booklet?”

She answers with her brightest smile something that sounds like this to Mr. Weinstein, “Chess, I lie to goo-erk bery mosh.”

He releases a long sigh, steps back, and shouts over the machine noises “Josefina,” then waits, glancing at Mrs. Blanco, sizing her up.

Spanish Josefina, short, with a round cheerful face, races over obviously pleased to be the boss’s interpreter.

“Ask Mrs. Blanco if she has her union book or her ID card.”

Josefina translates the question.

Mrs. Blanco takes a deep breath and is about to explain why she doesn’t yet have a union card when Mr. Weinstein with the out-turned toes cuts her short. “Never mind,” he says with a dual expression of pity and mirth on his pale face. “Tell Mrs. Blanco not to worry. Tell her to come back tomorrow at eight in the morning ready to start training. Ironing.” He gestures as if waving an iron. “And tell her she’ll be starting at a dollar an hour, not at a dollar twenty-five as it says in the form. OK?”

Then Mr. Weinstein adds without the need for translation, louder as if his Spanish would be better understood at a higher volume. “Ma-nya-nah worky on time. OK?”

The message is translated anyway and Mrs. Blanco, beaming, almost curtsies at her new boss. “San cue, bery bery mosh.”

Walking back to the subway, Mrs. Blanco’s eyes overflow with tears. She can’t believe her luck. To have achieved what only twenty-four hours before seemed like a monumental impossibility feels nothing short of a miracle, as though the Virgin herself was watching over her.

Suddenly, she remembers how hungry she is and picks up her gait. Back in the rooming house, there are hot dogs and a can of Campbell soup waiting for her. Tonight, she announces to herself, she will take her son to the pizzeria on Broadway and celebrate. She slows her pace as she approaches a tumult in Columbus Square.

The crowd is so thick she can’t see the end of it. Dozens of JFK for President cardboard signs are up all over the street and over people’s heads. Motorcycle policemen are cutting off the traffic. Red lights are swirling. A sudden upsurge of voices and motor noises breaks out and she is dragged by the rushing human tide toward the edge of the sidewalk. A slow-moving black convertible as long as a yacht comes sailing slowly through the mass of bodies. And there, over the sea of outstretched fluttering hands, the figure of John F. Kennedy appears in a royal blue suit, his face under a crown of impeccable chestnut hair, and a smile of perfect white. Drawn by the delirious multitude, Mrs. Blanco reaches out to him as if attracted by an invisible magnet, and their skins clasp together for a magical instant. Then just as quickly, the candidate’s caravan floats away.

Mrs. Blanco extricates herself from the mob. She walks away toward Broadway unaware of the importance she would later give to the event. A half-block up 61st Street, she begins to feel faint. She leans on a wall to wait for it to pass. Beside her, there's the tangle of tubes of a scaffold on the side of the building. On a tall windowsill behind her, she sees a neatly folded white paper bag. She takes it and peeks inside. There are two jelly donuts wrapped in wax paper, a capped coffee cup still hot, two sugar packets, a plastic stirrer and paper napkins. She looks around her at the busy sidewalk of incurious New Yorkers passing by. She sighs and puts it back, and walks away.

She halts abruptly, turns back, picks up the paper bag and rushes up the street with it.

On Broadway, she finds a bench in the median promenade. She sits down, pours the sugar into the steaming coffee, and stirs it. Slowly, she takes out a donut. Up by her lips, she breathes in its baked aroma and bites the sweet soft dough filled with even sweeter jelly as though performing a delicious but sinful act. Pigeons start gathering nearer. The November sun shines with a silver glow through the overcast Manhattan sky. She savors the donut unhurriedly until it is gone except for the white sugary dust on her fingers. She looks into the paper bag, and summoning the phenomenal strength only motherhood could give her, Mrs. Blanco saves the remaining donut for her son.

She gathers herself up and takes the subway uptown.

In her room, she finds her son with his heavy white-sox feet resting on the radiator. He has the transistor radio up by his ear. She drops the groceries on the small table by the door and gives him a kiss on the cheek. He's busy mouthing along with the song playing, mimicking the singer. He's singing in English.

Mrs. Blanco doesn't fool herself thinking if she ever went out job-hunting again that she'd be hired the same morning, shake the hand of a presidential nominee, and find a bag with fresh donuts and coffee. But it had happened. And she had done it all on her own. She knew her exiled roommates were going to ask her how her day went, they always ask about everything. She'd have to be watchful of how she told it. Measure her elation, soften the magical aspect of it. Tragedies bring people together, but personal good fortune, not so much. To be an exile, to be forced to flee one's homeland and seek refuge in a foreign country, is no different than living with an open wound, hurting part of every moment.

Mrs. Blanco approaches her son. His head is bobbing in time with the music. She lets the sweet-smelling paper bag fall on his lap. He drops everything when he sees the donut.

"How did this get here in one piece?" he says, amazed.

"Son, you wouldn't believe the day I had even if I told you."

"Did you find anything?"

Mrs. Blanco smiled.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Pleasure and pain involved the creation of this story. For some time, my cousins and other relatives had been asking me to write about my mother. I knew why. No one who knew her ever forgot her hilarious sense of humor, her stories, how she made everyone laugh, her down-to-earth life force. Mother was an original. At family and friends gatherings, I was always introduced as "Diva's son." Yes, her name was Diva, but she couldn't have been less the type. In a way, this was part of what made writing this story a challenge for me. I didn't think I'd be able to write the kind of "Diva" story my family and friends expected to read. Her fun side wasn't as memorable to me as it was to others. To me, she was my mother, my entire family after we fled our homeland. The pain and desperation she masked from the world, she didn't hide from me. Part of the reason why I didn't think I could do justice to the smiles with which her name was uttered thirty years after her passing. But time and its changing ways prevailed, and I finally came up with my first "Diva" story. I'm not sure if it is as much fun and entertaining as she was, but there it is.*

*My literary and stylistic influences are few but very potent ones: Hemingway, Garcia Marquez, and Don DeLillo, writers who I have read their entire oeuvre and studied. Many books have also left their mark on my writing: Kerouac's *On the Road*, Bukowski's novels, the classic Russians, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky. Joseph Conrad is of special interest because we have one thing in common: we don't write in our mother tongue. I'm a fan of many Latin American novelists: Cabrera Infante, Alejo Carpentier, Isabel Allende, Reynaldo Arenas, the list is long. I read nonfiction as well, History, biographies, Harari's *Sapiens*, Carlos Castaneda's books were a great read. Commercial writing and bestsellers don't attract me as much, but some have had an impact on my writing, *The Mambo Kings*, *The Kite Runner*, *The Godfather*, too many to remember them all.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Author NF Padron resides in Miami FL. and in Madrid, Spain. His stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines and anthologies in the U.S. and abroad. His first fiction collection, *Souls in Exile* was published by Adelaide Books, NY. in Nov. 2020. He is the author of three novels, including Gabriel Hemingway's *The Cuban Scar*. His latest novels, *The Exhumation*, and *Where Labyrinths End*, are scheduled for publication in 2021.

EDITOR'S BIO: Peter J. Stavros is an author and playwright in Louisville, Kentucky. His chapbook, *Three in the Morning and You Don't Smoke Anymore* (Etchings Press, 2020), is available now. More can be found at www.peterjstavros.com. His story **Room 310** and his play **Three Sides** both appeared in Issue 6.

Gag and Ma y Gag Gag gag gag

By Larr y Smit h

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest Editor JOEY CRUSE writes:

I'm here, aside from my charming good looks, to tell you why you should disregard predilections about religious overtones, and, perhaps, the lack of contextual knowledge within the story only provided by the author, and read Larry Smith's, "Gag and May Gag." Honestly, strap in/on and prepare yourself for lovely layers of onions that you are about to embark upon.

I will be the first to say that I have never read the Bible or delved into any academic literature that explains its import to the modern reader...nor ever felt the need to. Having got that out of the way, I actively recognize the problematic position that puts me, and anyone else who has done the same. Religious allegory does almost nothing for me, means almost nothing for me, because the references will simply run over my head without authorial direction and/or explanation, and, in that sentiment, I don't want any author telling me how I should form meaning from the language of a text – but in no way does that detract from the work below.

Characters Joseph Daniel Noell and Andrew Peter Pasqua, Christmas and Easter respectively, are representative of Mark Chapman and John Hinckley. Not only are they unhinged and unreliable narrators (both of their timelines of referent pop culture films or notable actors are either fiction or impossible to corroborate without huge mental leaps (for example, Great Day in the Morning is a real movie featuring Robert Stack as a Confederate drifter who wins a saloon in a town full of Union sympathizers from 1956, but it does not have any fictional Franny Slidell or Oscar nominated Roger Shirley Sugarman (Sugarman being a reference I desperately want to be from BoJack Horseman))) but they are two isolated and different characters bent on assassinating a politician they once both respected, revered, and wanted to be noticed by (fun sidenote: Great Day in the Morning was also produced by R.K.O., so Sugarman's influential power extends into the realm of Welles, Hurst, and Citizen Kane).

Do you see what I mean by referent layers? This is the rabbit hole of which Larry Smith has created. I haven't even gotten to Milton, Gog and (from) Magog, or the conversation between Pontius and Jesus in which the dichotomy of the Self and Hell or the cognition of Self and Truth are juxtaposed to be one and the same – you all can do some deep internet diving like I did and figure out what it means for yourself.

This piece hits home hard because of the conflagration of religion and pop culture as a distortion of our collective psyche. The story isn't necessarily a character piece, as the characters are fictional representations of their real counterparts, but what they do represent is an analogy made between our current Americana and the development of our modern mindsets that have been in the works well before the greatest generation decided they didn't like, basically, all of the generations after theirs. This work is a stream of consciousness (adding to the disjointed and small grammatical run-ons of the style within) which concerns the broken minds hell-bent on the separation of personal righteousness vs. the subjective concerns of perceived immorality perpetrated, or celebrated, by those in society willing to go all spectrums of violence to prove their point – a point that is noticeably, currently, and fatuously palpable.

“So farewell, hope; and with hope farewell...”

Five stars.

Personal Comparisons Thought of (i.e. – an imperfect list) While Reading:

Everyone should read Mikhail Bulgakov's Master and the Margarita – if not for the comparison but for the greatness upon which he gave us; there's splatterings of George Saunders floating about; Philip Ó Ceallaigh; and Etgar Keret. Reading Paradise Lost couldn't hurt either. (Spacing and font size are author's own.Eds.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

There must be something wrong with me because, when he was reelected two years later and I was living alone back in Orlando close to where I grew up, I decided somewhere around that time that I might want to kill him, to shoot him down in the streets, and I still think very seriously about doing that, no later than Easter next year. I'm not saying I will, but I think about it, I don't know why.

Editors' note: *This story, together with Totem and Taboo are from Smith's latest collection of short fiction **Floodlands** published by Adelaide Books, New York/Lisbon in 2019.*

Gag and May Gag

I.

I must have thought about killing him since I was around twelve and still living with my parents outside Gary, which, in those days before the plants closed, was all about pillars of cloud by day and pillars of fire by night. But those were vague thoughts, and only some years later when his weird rise to power, which couldn't have been a good thing for anybody, was being treated with a kind of deadly seriousness by all the newspapers, did it suddenly appear to me as if somebody ought to kill him and the sooner the better before he got to be President, and then what would we have? We'd have the curse of nations upon us, that's what we'd have.

Be it recorded that I, Joseph Daniel Noell, am of sound mind and body, and that my intention stated here to execute Roger Shirley Sugarman is sane and fully reasonable. I will not pursue or accept any plea to the contrary after the deed is done, assuming my apprehension, which I shall not try to elude, which execution I intend to be carried out on or about Christmas of this year. The voice of Roger Shirley Sugarman is a buzz on the land like unto hornets, his image not comely to the pious throngs, nor his very name fit but for sodomites and those who commingle with same. Be it also noted that, if he is a Hebrew or, as recorded, a half-Hebrew, that is of no concern to me.

Here are just a few of my real concerns. First, that during the filming of *Great Day in the Morning*, for which he was nominated for an Academy Award, he committed adultery with actress Franny Slidell. Public cuckoldry is subversion. I won't have it. Second, I'm something of an authority when it comes to yogurt, and the claims Sugarman made on behalf of Tru-to-Form were simply insupportable, not that TV commercials are under normal circumstances to be taken seriously, but these were not normal circumstances once Sugarman with the Tru-to-Form logo emblazoned at the press conference entered on a public campaign with health and better living as its core messages. That campaign, of course, helped propel Sugarman into a congressional race during which, third, he publicly expressed sympathy, if not political support, for those who seek, either for their own sake or on allegedly disinterested behalf of others who might seek it, the right to die. No one ever has the right to die, ever.

Roger Shirley Sugarman won that race by a comfortable margin and why I began to fear him, where I didn't fear others who think the very same thoughts and, now that you mention it, are in many ways just as bad, was because I sensed in him a certain malevolence that has since the War in Heaven been a malevolence that is beyond vanity or even ambition; that is – how shall I put it? – impersonal. Roger Shirley Sugarman will be felled ere Christmas

day dawns but Joseph Daniel Noell won't be crouching close by the corpse rapt in *The Catcher in the Rye* or anything else. I will stand wherever I happen to be standing, arms akimbo, no sign of a weapon, no reason to shoot me so the police who do so can be unconscionably defended in the court of public opinion or damnably execrated in the city's darkest recesses by the city's darkest people. I take no side in that debate, but Sugarman could as a matter of instinct take either side, for the police in order to swell the unholy suzerainty of Caesar, or against them and thereby subvert the world order or the vestiges of such that yet remain to us. Thus I do say of him what evil Hitler said of the Jews, that Ikey runs the unions and controls the banks at the same time, and thus schemes to compass whole ends from both sides. A calumny on the Jews, perhaps, but there is this spirit withal, this spirit of Sugarman, the impersonal working of which I speak, and in this insidiously holistic both-ends-to-the-middle conspiracy he has been ably supported by Kennedy and Nixon, by Sinatra and Jagger, by Malcolm X and Al Sharpton and Martin Luther King with their intimate cohort Donald Trump.

I never worked as a security guard. I never took a week-long course to qualify as an armed guard. I never dropped out of college. I never went to Hawaii and began contemplating suicide. I never attempted suicide by carbon monoxide asphyxiation. I was

never admitted to Castle Memorial Hospital for clinical depression. I did read *The Catcher in the Rye* but other books have interested me more. But I bet that, when Roger Shirley Sugarman hangs out with his fancy friends, and is feted and hugged by Elton John, or when he cuts ribbons in neighborhoods that have just been gentrified, I bet he thinks he's more popular than Jesus. Maybe he is, but the difference is that Jesus rose from the dead and Roger Shirley Sugarman will not.

Of course no hope should be entertained that the execution of Roger Shirley Sugarman will on an ongoing basis effectually spare the human race the threat of the impersonal malevolence of which I speak. It is a permanent part of the human situation. But every so often there needs be drainage, as it were, a lowering of the fevers virally inflamed by the movie moguls in Hollywood, by sundry gentrifiers in New York and Miami and Chicago, and that periodically seize humanity like a pandemic. The happy effects of the drainage will be felt for some time until the fever rises again, but, at least for a little while, a softer and humbler America will there be. But you have to find the right point in the intricate network of infective agents. If I were to execute Jennifer Lopez or Warren Beatty, it would mean no more than were I to lance a bubo or two. It's Roger Shirley Sugarman who is the locus of such of these venoms as there are, and he is the snake to chop.

The thought of the deed completed puts a smile on my face for the whole human race. It's almost like being in love. On that clear day we will see forever and ever more. After ascertaining Sugarman's location, I will follow him at a safe distance as he departs whatever public engagement he attends and, if it has to be the next day when we consummate or the next or the next after that, so be it. I have a clear credit card that I will keep clear, so no convenient hotel, and I'm figuring the Sheraton in Manhattan, will be prohibitive. Money is no object. Time is not of the essence, although on or about Christmas remains my target. A .38 will be waiting for pickup in New York, and I figure five shots will do it. I'll have hollow-pointed bullets in tow as well.

I will fully cooperate with the authorities. Lennie Briscoe will be the arresting officer, with whichever of his partners is assigned him at the time, ideally Mike Logan. I know or I am fairly confident that Lennie is basically a good man, and that his alcoholism is the result of a self-dislike or disappointment in himself that was directly fed by precisely the kind of poisons that Sugarman has injected into the public bloodstream. Jack McCoy will prosecute, assisted, I hope, by Clair Kincaid, who is so lovely and often so wise beyond her years as to the inner workings of Caesar's tribunal regimen, although the thought of Ms. Kincaid knowing sexual ecstasy does make me rather uncomfortable. Dr. Olivet will

examine me and find no reason why I cannot fully participate in my own defense. (Did you know that Dr. Olivet had been raped? Poor woman!)

Once I'm arraigned, the friends of Roger Shirley Sugarman will gather outside the courthouse building, misguided in their anxieties as to their own immediate personal safety, perhaps, but, perforce, wondering with good reason if such entitlements as they were raised even as children to presume to be their happy privilege to enjoy, might actually be as dubious at the final hour as during the early morning hours of September 11. But they will successfully write letters opposing parole even as political pressures mount against any possibility of my release ever. Arnold Schwarzenegger will speak on behalf of Roger Shirley Sugarman. Michelle Obama will decry the violence that plagues this country, of which my deed was only the latest awful example; Charlton Heston will agree, while reminding the world that people (me) kill Roger Shirley Sugarman; guns (the .38) do not kill Roger Shirley Sugarman. And all the while, they'll try to be imagining a world where there are no countries, no possessions, only the sky above. I wonder if they can.

"Roger Shirley Sugarman," I will intone.

"Joseph Daniel Noell," he will respond with grim recognition.

“There is no escape,” I will say.

Roger Shirley Sugarman will bow his head and say, “Yes, I understand. Which way I fly is hell. Myself am hell.”

II.

There must be something wrong with me. Ever since I was a teenager, I’ve loved Roger Shirley Sugarman as much as anyone could love anybody. When he was still working in Hollywood, I went to see every one of his movies as soon as they came out and later bought them all up on videotape. My favorite was *The Night Has Lips*. When he ran for office, I took a long hiatus from my studies in Tampa to be there at his rallies, three thousand miles away, and I followed the entourage through all the sundry streets and suburbs of the district. After he was elected, I rejoiced and wished I was there at the victory celebrations to cheer on Martin Sheen and James Caan and the other good friends who came to speak and congratulate him.

Roger was always such a part of my thoughts, I had even fantasized about me being Franny Slidell’s husband, Mr. Slidell, accepting what had happened as a painful but sort of an awesome

somber inevitability. I imagined myself so dignified amid the heartfelt consolations my friends would offer. And I have dreamed I was dying, wretched pain enveloping me all over, when along comes Roger, my ministering angel at first glance, to pour the magic balm into my veins, thereby to unlock the harrowing shackles and free my soul.

There must be something wrong with me because, when he was reelected two years later and I was living alone back in Orlando close to where I grew up, I decided somewhere around that time that I might want to kill him, to shoot him down in the streets, and I still think very seriously about doing that, no later than Easter next year. I'm not saying I will, but I think about it, I don't know why.

The only other person I ever felt so much about was Walt Disney but that was very different. He was more of a presence, a power in the air, and I never thought about even meeting him. I'd go to Epcot and talk to the workers in the pavilions, and really be moved and think with a lot of awe when I heard the workers talk about how much they loved being a member of this great family. For me, the awe that I was struck with had a lot more to do with that feeling of a real community rather than with any of the movies or

the wonderful merchandise, which I certainly always loved but more as reminders, as outward representations of the inner soul and great vision of the great man who made it all happen as if he actually were building a shining city on the hill where you could live and work whether you were Christian or Jewish or had a native religion from one of the far-distant countries that many of the pavilions were examples of and tributes to. Walt Disney always seemed to be tearing down walls or influencing other people to do so. The thought that I might ever kill Walt Disney while he was still alive never entered my mind, the crime would be terrible beyond words, but there was something, there is something, about Roger Shirley Sugarman that gets to me in a deeper and different way.

You should know a little about me, especially if I do decide to kill him, although the idea or the reason, if any, why I should or will kill him still befuddles me. I was christened Andrew Peter Pasqua and became a somewhat better than average student who went to high school and played football, basketball, hockey, soccer, and baseball. I learned to perform on the piano and went to the University of South Florida but I never graduated. I was working at a hotel in downtown Orlando when Sugarman was reelected, and I guess that's when my crazy thoughts started. I remember starting

to write him a letter but I never finished it or sent anything. I remember some of it, it said “I still have a faint hope that you can develop an interest in me. Although I campaigned for you in your first election, I never had the nerve to simply approach you and introduce myself. You are always in my thoughts or almost always. You have so many wonderful friends; I wish I could be at your house when some of them come over...”

Those aren't the exact words but they're as close as I can remember. Now if I do decide to kill him, I'll aim for the heart. I guess people like Roger Shirley Sugarman break peoples' hearts like mine who've never even spoken to him. But other people break other people's hearts. Greta Garbo and Mariska Hargitay and John Kennedy Jr. and Tom Selleck. But somehow Roger is different because I've never thought about killing anyone else. I've never even been in a fistfight.

I guess I'd be not guilty by reason of insanity, although I imagine that would cause a ruckus among those who love Roger as much as I do. Maybe the U.S. Congress itself will take action regarding when the insanity defense may be used and some states may even abolish it altogether. Maybe because of me and others like me, there won't be such a thing as insanity in the near future. I was sent

to a therapist once, who was a Christian gentleman, and he kept asking personal questions about how I felt about men and women, but at that time I didn't quite feel about Roger Shirley Sugarman the way I have been feeling about him since. Maybe I've already expressed this in different ways in what I have already written so far, but Roger has for me a kind of force that I can only describe as very personal.

And I took things personally too and of course I still do. I certainly took it very personally when in his first campaign for Congress that horrible opponent of his from San Francisco, Patrick Demuth, held up his picture on television and said to the world, "Remember, folks, an actor killed Lincoln." That's just not right. That's like running against Harry Truman and saying, "Remember, folks, there's this haberdasher named O'Reilly in Cleveland who drinks too much."

If I do decide to kill him, it will be the greatest love offering in the history of the world but I maintain, I maintain strongly, that there is nothing in what I feel or how I feel that is dirty or shameful or improper. He is the wind and water and sky. He is the wind because his spirit blows out throughout the land. He is the water because he quenches the longing of so many people. He is the sky

because, just when you think you've seen it all, there's so much more to see.

I need to sort things out more before I do anything rash. In the old days, and I'm thinking particularly of the time right after his famous appearance at the Oscars when he announced the winner in the Best Supporting Actor category and made those humorous comments about Janet Jackson, you could go to AOL.com and find three or four or sometimes five chatrooms called RogerShirleySugarman and RogerShirleySugarman-1 and so forth.

The chatroom talk wasn't always that interesting and I would usually just lurk, but sometimes you'd hear some interesting things, but then later there was a lot of talk about food and yogurt and such, which I didn't pay much attention to, but I kept watching and waiting for some kind of insight, some kind of decisive insight or statement from one of the people in the chatroom, but the only time I got close to hearing anything like that was when somebody in the room who called herself (I guess it was a woman) Squeaky Fromme started talking about how Roger might run for office and then he'd be fair game and suddenly it seemed as if everyone in the room was making the connection, and I guess they were scared because no one said anything for a long time. I just wanted to say

Roger! Roger! Roger! Roger! Roger! Roger! in the chatroom and leave it at that, but I didn't, I exited the chatroom. But I did gain insight about how we always hurt the ones we love, the ones we shouldn't hurt at all.

"You're Andrew Peter Pasqua, aren't you?" he'll walk up and say to me with a mysterious smile on lips that are not parted and with a tender but searching look in his eyes as he looks searchingly into my eyes.

"Yes, Roger," I will say.

"Are you doing well?" he will gently ask.

Yes," I will answer. "Are you?"

"Thou sayest," he will answer.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Many years ago I thought about writing parallel biographies of famous people, as that was a fairly popular and marketable format at the time. There were two specific projects I envisioned: one book would juxtapose Cardinals Spellman and Cushing, the other would parallel John Lennon's killer Mark Chapman with John Hinckley, who shot Reagan. It was all just fanciful thinking on my part, as I really had no interest in doing anything like the kind of research needed. Yet the resonance of these lives, the perverse richness of their experience, stayed with me, and then the obvious solution occurred to me: fictionalize the stories, using as much or as little of what a bit of*

online research would generate. The Spellman/Cushing idea became the novella Patrick Fitzmike and Mike Fitzpatrick that appeared in 2016.

The Chapman/Hinckley saga became this story, “Gag and May Gag.” As I began writing it, both deranged assailants took on a kind of portentous religious dimension, spooky and funny at the same time. So I drenched the whole thing in religion: the title a spoof on Gog and Magog, the Chapman character of Part I named for Christmas, the Hinckley character named for Easter, the line from Milton that ends Part I, the Jesus/Pilate exchange that ends the story. The imagery is all the more appropriate as this love/hate thing that people have with celebrities is such a debased expression of obvious religious need.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Larry Smith’s writings have appeared in literary journals throughout the world. His 2016 novella *Patrick Fitzmike and Mike Fitzpatrick* (Outlook 19) traverses the political, sexual and spiritual alcoves of the modern Catholic Church. He is currently compiling a third collection of stories called *High and Dry* as well as a collection of hybrid nonfictions called: *Nicole Simpson: The Untold Story*. His story **Gag and May Gag** also appears in this issue. His story **Heaven Starts Here** was published in Issue 3.

EDITOR’S BIO: Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and teacher. Recently graduated with a masters in Rhet./Comp., when not getting into trouble he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and doesn't exercise. His other short story work has been featured in Phree Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press. His story **She Was Australian** appears in this issue (fiction).

9 (9) ordinary woRds and 36 (thirtysix) of
their *combinations* (or the path of fiction) o o o

by nick north

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor JONAH HOWELL writes:*

Nick North wittily dedicates this brilliantly experimental text to “sol le witt,” and though the artist’s name does not surface again, this dedication acts as a sort of key to a text which, while supposedly composed only of a single sentence and its transformations, contains labyrinthine depths. Indeed, North has produced the best interpretation of Lewitt that I have yet encountered.

This is precisely because his piece does not bill itself as a piece of criticism, but rather translates the gripping tension of Lewitt’s method into language. That is, North has written a piece of narrative fiction in the tension between the central sentence—“A red sun rose over a red sea”—and the parenthesized statements which describe its transformations. And he has created the template for infinite different fictions, for any new sentence plugged into his system would produce wholly unique tensions, exactly as Lewitt’s series of instructions—“draw 100 diagonal lines,” etc.—produce the potential for infinite drawings. North has wrought, that is, an inexhaustible world of potentials inside a finite work of fiction in a way that supposedly “infinite” narratives like the Neverending Story cannot touch.

William S. Burroughs claimed in the ‘80s that literary techniques lag fifty years behind visual art. North has hit the next step in this progression in a way that I can only envy.

Five stars.

Poet GERALD WILSON writes: *I love the kind of deconstruction Nick North is doing in ‘A red sun...’. Fiction must be suspect, not trusted because it is a result of the delusional mind. What better way to explore it than starting with the word itself. This kind of play is not about something. It is that something itself, not only to be read, but looked at, listened to. Like life itself, writing is a reflection of the changing, mysterious nature of the worlds*

in which we live. It can't be a stable form but a ceaseless possible process of flow. Knowing and meaning are useless here. Sounds like 'red' and 'sun' have no more meaning to the linguistically unconditioned than sounds 'dizzlydonk' and 'watafaroo'. We're seeing words from an empty, fresh, mutable mind. Keep doing what you're doing, Nick.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

A red sun rose over a red sea.

9 ordinary words and 36 of their combinations (or the path of fiction)

by nick north

For sol le witt

1. A red sun rose over a red sea. (statement)
2. A red sun rose over a red sea? (question)
3. A red sun rose over a red sea! (exclamation)
3. *A red sun rose over a red sea.* (italics)
4. **A red sun rose over a red sea.** (bold)
5. A red sun rose over a red sea. (underline)
6. Sea red a over rose sun red a. (disjointed)
7. A red sun...rose over...a red sea. (spaced)
8. Sun. A. Over. Red. Rose. Sea. A. Red (integral)
9. A rose sun red over a red sea. (invert)

10. Rose (equals pinkish red). (minus 8 words)
11. Sea (equals red if a sun rose red) (hypothesis)
12. A der nus esor revo a der eas. (anagram)
13. **A Red Sun Rose Over A Red Sea.** (upper case)
14. a red sun rose over a red sea (lower case)
15. aredsunoeroveraredsea (compressed)
16. sun a a over red sea rose red (eclectic)
17. over red red a rose a sea (random, after cutting the sentence into 9 parts and throwing into the air to see how they would configure once fallen)
18. A RED SUN ROSE OVER A RED SEA (even caps)
19.
A...r...e...d...s...u...n...r...o...s...e...o...v...e...r...a...r...e...d...s...e...a
. (3 dots 21 times)
20. A) red) sun) rose) over) a) red) sea) (sequenced brackets)
21. (A (red (sun (rose (over (a (red (sea (reverse sequenced brackets)
22. Red divided by 3 is r. e. d. (complete the remaining 8 words mentally)
23. **A red sun rose over a red sea.** (comic sans)
24. a rEd SuN Rose OvEr a reD SEA (random caps)
25. Aaredredsunsunroseroseoveroveraaredredseasea. (repeat 1)
26. aredsunoeroveraredseaaredsunoeroveraredsea (repeat 2)
27. **A RED sun ROSE over a RED sea.** (propaganda)
28. A red sun rose over a red sea. (colour coordinated)
29. A red sun rose over a red sea. (somewhat visible)

30. (invisible or non-existent?)
31. ! @ # \$! @ % (symbolic)
32. If a = 0 and red = 2; rose = 1, over = 5 and sea = 4 then $0 + 2 + 1 + 5 + 2 + 4$ is true. (conversion)
33. Therefore 021524 (axiom)
34. If 021524 is true then a red sun rose over a red sea is also true (deduction)
35. Therefore ‘A red sun rose over a red sea’ (statement if but only sometimes if)
36. A read son rows over a read see. (open ended, new trajectory?)

Oct. 2/20 @ 10:13 am

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *When Tom Ball asked what the fuck is this Charles emailed me and said, you’d better explain yourself, I texted back: Of late I’m kind of into a thing like pushing the ‘limits’ of fiction—if it has any; a fiction that is focused on ‘process’ rather than existing independently as a finished ‘product’ by the writer’s hand. The title of the story is non-referential and points only to itself. It also is my pitch on emphasizing that the words are simply words *qua* words—recombinants of letters, which are principally visual configurations (without assuming an active linguistic function)—neither symbolic nor representative of anything beyond themselves, and not even that. I won’t be insulted if you don’t like it. But not if you don’t understand it because there is nothing to understand except the words *as you see (read) them*. There is no hidden meaning lurking beneath the surface, no life-lesson to be learned. I realize this isn’t everyone’s cup of hemlock---it’s just where I am right now. *This placated Tom who emailed me and said what the fuck I love it. I want to say a special word of thanks to Jonah Howell who understands my writing better than I do. His benevolent genius means the world.**

AUTHOR’S BIO: All I can say about my life up to now is all I can say about my life up to now. *Fleas on the Dog* published my story ‘*Carver Est In Oculis Meis: Coincidence is the Recreational Face of Irony*’ in Issue 7. It was also introduced by Jonah Howell.

EDITOR'S BIO: Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. You can find his recent work in *Half Mystic Journal* (Issue 8) and *Expat Press*. His story **Amor Fati** was featured in Issue 5 and **Anatomy of Melancholie** appeared in issue 7.

His favourite artist is Sol Le Witt.

POET'S BIO: Gerald Wilson lives in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. **Six of his poems** from *How It Hides* and five from *Swirling in the Stream*, both published by Jugdish Publishing, Sault Ste. Marie, appeared in **Issue 7**.

The MEANING of ORANGE

By Daniel Thompson

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...Daniel Thompson's "The Meaning of Orange" hinges on what the title suggests. The meaning vs. the significance, the sign vs. the signifier, existentialism vs. existence. It is the old man from Up + Mickey Rourke's Henry Chinaski (Bukowski lite) in Barfly equaling a Hamlet who knows he should act but, butthurt (yeah, I said it), he can't even form a milquetoast action yet alone imagine acting (I jammed a lot in there, but, to be honest, the style presented in Thompson's writing is weaved well within, and, with more space, I'd have more room to digress and make the references more relevant). My job here, well aware that my simple is not simply put, is to tell you why you should read this work and come to a more complete understanding of the beautiful/horrible/habitual fucking depths one has to go to understand.*

Curt is a middle-aged man that sells cigarettes to kids, with a hard case of OCD, and puts his hope in a balloon seller at the zoo. Spoiler alert.

We should all be so lucky. We should all hold our hope within helium. We should all care about our own existent crises. We should all care. We should...

But Curt can't. Curt can't look at millions and billions of numbers or the stars out of his own ironic existence – there are too many of them to be actually palpable. He sees the objective working within a world full of hard truths about subjective trees or hairs or small habits in the sidewalk that he can see but that still elude him.

Ask yourself. Can you count all the hairs on your head? Can you imagine 120,000?

Neither can I.

But ask yourself again if you have enough hair on your arms to feel the goosebumps that arise when you know your emotions are ACTUALLY real, when your insecurities are dissolved in the present, your meaninglessness turned into feeling as your goose flesh allows you the moment to simply just breath...

If your skin rose, then I hope you want more because Thompson will deliver. If nothing, then I've done a shit job at making you want to read Thompson's work – of which, again, you should.

Thompson is simple, yet elegant; short, but allows his shirt to be stretched out; educated, but knows how to flip over a cushion; concise, when we all need concision; beautiful, when we need balloons of absurdity; walking cracks, when we know the cement may not quite just be dry; tired, but awake when the sun hits; precise, when precision

isn't noticed; a good man ("doodie" instead of shit), when bad wasn't even in the cards; empathetic, when all we want is some goddamn empathy.

I wanted to explain to you how language forms meaning and how that when we ascribe words to our perception we're all simply working in metaphors that are faulty at best, misleading at worst, and that that's the fault in our heart's own best efforts to make sense, but Thompson has crafted a story that uses a balloon and our associative colors of meaning to already do so.

So, honestly, just read the fucking story. FIVE STARS

Personal Comparisons Thought of (i.e. – an imperfect list) While Reading:

Bill Hillmann – *The Old Neighborhood*; Haruki Murakami, *The Elephant Vanishes*; Etgar Keret, *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God*; Philip Ó Ceallaigh, *Notes From A Turkish Whorehouse*; Tom McCarthy – *The Remainder*; Adam Prince – *The Beautiful Wishes of Ugly Men*.

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language)...

Shoes scuffing crab-wise, sidestepping cracks, bubblegum, dog doodie before falling into his stride. Indecisively taking one step back for every two steps forward so it appears as if he is walking in the direction he just came as much as the way he is going.

Apart from their colour, the balloons are divided into two categories: translucent and solid, which have something to do with the meaning and significance of the balloon. The solid ones are more straight forward and can be summed up in a word or two; health, sex, money, power, new car, good job... things like that. The translucent ones have more subtle and complex meanings and usually come with morals or koans.

(Spacing and format is author's own.)

The Meaning of Orange

A buzzer rings somewhere outside. Proximate noon tips over the eaves, putting the room in the path of the sun for the rest of the day. Curt often dreams of building a

wall, some kind of fortification or deterrent to seal him off from the outside, but all that would do is keep him in, which is exactly what he wants.

Trees posture defiantly, higher than any wall or authority to cut them down.

A slant of light falls across his face. He doesn't draw the blinds because that would admit defeat. Enduring the rays of ultraviolet crossing incomprehensible distances of space with the capability to burn, singe and sear flesh. The fact that he can't look at it reminds him of God, a being so powerful that if we were to see it, he would go blind.

He reaches out, smearing grease from his cheek into his eye with the swipe of a careless hand. Three nights a week he passes out in the purple armchair by the window. The rest of the time he wakes up in his room on the second floor, laid out on top of the bed as if all he was was his clothes.

Shutting his eyes against the pain, he brings his hands back down to his lap, flexing them in and out of fists. The first in a series of rituals to be performed in a certain order: combing and then gelling his hair while it is still wet, smooth in the back, high in the front. Waiting for it to dry and then going over it again with the spray. Noting the time on the clock with an erasable pen and then flipping the cushion on his chair to the previous day's side before leaving the house. Locking the door behind him, then checking to see if it is locked, but going back anyway to make sure the oven is turned off. Locking the door, again—for real this time—he maneuvers down the overgrown steps and through the obstinate bodies of topiaries crowding the garden path to where it comes out at the gate, pausing to make sure the way is clear before proceeding.

Shoes scuffing crab-wise, sidestepping cracks, bubblegum, dog doodie before falling into his stride. Indecisively taking one step back for every two steps forward so it

appears as if he is walking in the direction he just came as much as the way he is going. The tuft of bangs spiked up in the front, bounces in rhythm to his steps, giving the impression that he is not only moving both forward and back but also sideways... to the end of the block where the crossing guard is holding her big red lollipop sign. Though her job is to be impartial, she has been known to favor even a single pedestrian over a queue of idling cars. Smiling to everyone indiscriminately, Curt included, who returns her smile like a face reflected in water, not wanting to be seen, much less recognized as he conveys himself to the far end of the school field. Standing sentinel along the perimeter fence, partially hidden, but by no means invisible in a windbreak of trees.

Within seconds he is approached by a small band of adolescents, singling him out by his incongruous style; white track shoes, straight-legged jeans, yellow UNLV sweater and Orlando Magic starter jacket. Not just excessively dressed, but palpably uncomfortable, if not to himself, then to anyone who can see him; a man who is not only unaware of how out of date his clothes are, but of how he feels with them on, perspiring for a number of reasons not all of them heat related.

“Hey Curbie. Gotta smoke?” says a boy, standing out from the group.

“Yeah, how many you want?” sez Curt.

“Six.”

“Three dollars.”

The kid collects fifty cents from each of his friends and hands it over to Curt who takes the money first then deposits the cigarettes in the kid’s free hand.

“Got any weed, Curb?” asks another of the boys.

“*Nooooo*. I don’t sell drugs.”

“You know you can make a lot more money selling dope than these.”

“But it’s illegal.”

“So is selling cigarettes to minors.”

“Barely.”

The kid snickers to his friends as they walk away.

Curt watches the little ones gathered in clusters playing games, breaking off from the group to chase one other, trampling white clover blossoms and tumbling in the soft grass. He might be a man out for a walk, a delivery person, somebody’s dad, but to eager eyes seeking their afternoon fix he is almost sure to have an extra cigarette, especially if they know him as Curt, Curbie, or hurtin’ Curt.

He moves on to four more points of sale during the remainder of the 45-minute break. He’ll be back after school and later on in the park.

On Fridays he visits the high schools and alternates between middle schools the rest of the week. Spending his free time at the zoo, mainly outside the primate grove, home to a family of mountain gorillas fathered and lorded over by ‘Max’ the silverback, who has been with the zoo since Curt was a child. Max is not territorial with Curt. He tolerates him as a stranger in a strange land, two hominid species diverged from different evolutionary lines. One with a clutch of bananas, the other with his cigarettes, BigMac™, fries and shake, each searching the other’s souls and smells for signs of kinship.

Curt does a cursory sweep of the ungulate enclosure; antelope, dik-dik, zebra, water buffalo, passing the falcon cage, snow leopard and beaver dam with barely a glance, as he makes his way towards his rendezvous with the balloon man.

He’s there on the corner in his usual spot.

Curt runs up a little agitated. He knows what he wants this time.

Apart from their colour, the balloons are divided into two categories: translucent and solid, which have something to do with the meaning and significance of the balloon. The solid ones are more straight forward and can be summed up in a word or two; health, sex, money, power, new car, good job... things like that. The translucent ones have more subtle and complex meanings and usually come with morals or koans.

This time Curt is looking for a money balloon, something that will bring him more of that in his life. Although, as it is said, *you don't find the balloon, it finds you*, Curt feels it is he who is seeking out the balloon on these days. Days when he feels close to meaning, as if it were less than a millimeter away; on the other side of a thin membrane.

Today there are white, yellow, orange and a kind of turquoise blue; colours that wouldn't be out of place at a car dealership or corporate event, advertising neutrality, professionalism, function over form.

“What do you have?” Curt says.

The Balloon man knows that this isn't a question directed at him, he is merely the intermediary, giving his customers what is already theirs by right. “There's the balloon of second chance, the turquoise one there beside you, the balloon of pray tell, yellow, that's a truth one, I have another kind of truth one too, the white one over there, it's for giving away, you want one for you?”

“Yes.”

“I think the best you could do is orange...”

“Ugh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t like orange.”

“I had a lot more earlier; red and indigo, but those were clearly meant for someone else. I’m surprised this one is left. I think it’s a sign. People very rarely get balloons that aren’t meant for them. They’ll sit here unbought until the right person comes along. It’s a very good one symbolizing diplomacy in the way of influencing outcomes. It’s lucky that you came by when you did.”

“The green one’s no good?”

“It’s just for a reciprocal favour, it’s also a giving one, you give it and you get something back, or you give it because you’ve received something from somebody.”

“What about second chances.”

“Sure, go ahead, but it’s only good for the rest of the day. I’d suggest getting one like this in the morning when it’s more likely that you’ll have a chance to use it. You’d better hurry up though. It looks like we have another customer.”

A little girl rolls up on her bike avidly eyeing the balloons. Curt goes a little red, the pressure of making a choice weighing heavily on him now. He jerks his arm out toward the orange one mouthing the word and making the sound ‘...nge’.

“Good choice. I hope it works out,” handing it to him by its long jute string.

“Don’t let it go. Birds eat them and sometimes die. I’d feel bad if that happened. I have to guarantee my balloons, that also means getting them where they need to go.”

“You make all these balloons yourself?”

“No, they’re made by another person, or rather they’re just made.”

“How many are there?”

“Only as many as will sell at a time. They’re like jobs, a job doesn’t disappear just because someone doesn’t fill it right away.”

“I don’t have a job.”

“Perhaps that’s not the right analogy, you might think of them more as opportunities instead, like a second chance or an opinion, everyone’s got one of those, but they’re very subjective, that’s why a balloon that’s right for you won’t go to someone else.”

“I don’t believe in opportunities.”

“Perhaps you could just use some luck.”

“Yes, yes, that’s sorta what I was looking for.”

“Come back tomorrow. I’m sure I’ll have something. Just think very hard when you go home tonight and ask for some guidance. That’s how this one works. The thought will turn into an intention and become a…”

“Okay, okay. I get it,” Curt says, turning in the direction of home.

The little girl rushes forward, already pointing at the white balloon.

“Is this one for you?”

“*Yes.*”

“Well, may I suggest the turquoise one. It’s good for a second chance, you may need one if you’ve been in any trouble lately or are planning to do so.”

“Ohhh, well, it’s pretty too, but I like white.”

The only problem with the Balloon Man’s prophecies is that they’re almost always good. No one wants to buy a balloon that’s going to make them unhappy, but the Balloon Man is your friend and he’ll tell you the truth, even if it’s hard. Every day he

goes to his supplier and selects from the balloons that have sprung up overnight; just enough for that day and no more. The people who buy them are usually in a good mood already or are going to give them to somebody, which will put them in a good mood, the recipient or the giver, or both, so his news is generally positive, the red ones can be tricky though.

Once in his possession, Curt wastes no time in getting his balloon home. A lot can happen between acquiring your balloon and getting it to where you need to go. People with balloons behave much like those in the possession of illegal or potentially harmful substances. Furtively inhaling their contents in bushes, parking lots, alleyways, gas stations.

Sometimes he gets drunk, but it interferes with the balloon's efficacy. Set and setting are essential, as is one's state of mind. This is not something to be snorted or inhaled in some alleyway. Which is probably why they hadn't worked before. He needs to slow down. Make an intention, and visualize. Taking a deep breath, and letting it out before inhaling the contents of the balloon.

Curt likes to pair the intention with a number. He has great faith in the power of numbers, much more than words. He has a specific one in mind: 120,000; the number of hairs on the average person's head. A number has to have personal significance he feels, something that is important to him. He doesn't know many other numbers with special meanings, none higher at least. There are numbers that are lower, but not a lot that are higher. Millions and billions; the number of stars in the galaxy, the number of galaxies in the universe, have no significance for him. These, for the most part, represent things that he cannot see. He lives in a world of physical objects, things that he can buy, sell, find

and lose; if it weren't for these things, he wouldn't know where he is, where he belongs.
No, one hundred and twenty thousand is a good number.

He sits and breathes for a minute, thoughtfully running his fingers through his hair, imagining that he were coming closer and closer to this figure with every pass of his hand.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

A little about the inception of The Meaning of Orange as requested by Charles and co.:

The Meaning of Orange is part of a longer work, based on the character Curt Burton. Conceived by twin minds myself and friend, Bryon (Scorp) Mu, the novel in progress follows the underdog hero in his parabolic rise from lowly cigarette peddler and sometime hair-dresser, to ambassador to Earth after an alien portal is discovered on his front lawn. The alien species, Tchiller, responsible for the portal have evolved and grown accustomed, over the course of a few million years, to life without hair. Upon discovering Earth and its coiffured citizenry, the Tchillers begin a process of devolution to their former follicled state. Fearing the spread of this hair obsession, the Tchillers are promptly excommunicated from the intergalactic federation and left on Earth to fend for themselves, eventually mixing and interbreeding with the fine-follicled race known as humans... so now you know. There is more to it, but I think I have pretty much given you the gist. It is designed as humour and my only hope is that it delivers, at least for those so inclined.

AUTHOR'S BIO: It is said that the world is made of stories. What keeps them going is us. Daniel's contributions to the unfolding narrative have been preserved in *Gravel*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, *Clockwise Cat*, *Crack The Spine*, *Grey Sparrow*, *The Gyroscope Review* and, of course, *Fleas on the Dog* (issue 4). He is @shadowmounds on Twitter, and maintains a blog hovering together in the center of anonymity at shadowmounds.wordpress.com.

EDITOR'S BIO: Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and teacher. Recently graduated with a masters in Rhet./Comp., when not getting into trouble he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and doesn't exercise. His other short story work has been featured in Phree Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press. His story **She Was Australian** appears in this issue (fiction).

She was Australian

By Joey Cruse

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor BARBARA YOSHIDA writes...*

Cruse writes here about a moment in time. Not just the moment when boy meets girl, but a kind of moment that, for most people, can only happen when they're young enough to take a risk and free enough to do it. Cruse's writing takes you to that place and you remember how it felt—a time of experimentation when you could let go of any restrictions. Cruse captures it poignantly. In the story, Joey does consider possible consequences, but continues to go along and see what happens. I identified instantly with him. Like Joey, I wondered how this would end. And the end was gratifying.

Cruse's style fits perfectly with Joey's fuck-it-let's-see-where-this-goes vibe. It's loose and free-wheelin', but don't be fooled, that style belies a tight, well constructed story. How Cruse does this in only 12+ pages is evidence of his skill. Joey's dialogue and thoughts are very real, and using both to define character in so few pages is no mean feat. The parts about the French families and Janine's Australian accent add another dimension, another layer, more texture to the story that makes it real. The story has an arc and good pace—kept my interest from start to finish.

So many great passages to quote, but here are 3 good ones:

Roll me up with the trash and float me to drift with the rest of that unforgivable mountain of waste in the Pacific.

I was in til' the end of this futile romance, til' Janine finally said 'goodbye,' because, as Slim Pickens demonstrated, though well aware it would all be over, was always going to end this way, in deafening silence and fire and ash, it's still a real good fucking ride down on the bomb.

And the orange highway, taking me across a lake I've never swam, into yet another city that wasn't truly mine, but was looking better and better in a new sense of love and madness, laughed back – highways don't cry.

Definitely 5 stars!

Senior Editor CHARLES writes... Joey Cruse is one of a handful of literary artists who raise the stakes in whatever journal or zine has the luck to publish them. His is the kind of writing that can't be taught in a classroom, either grade school or MFA in CW. You either have it or you don't and Joey has it in unfair abundance. When the talent you are born with reaches this level of craft and authenticity, art is inevitable. And yo, Barbara, Tom and I both agree. Five stars, dude!

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language)...

She asked me, "how did you know I was from the South?"

"There, I could understand your accents easier. I'm not a shit listener so it was never bad, but certainly a noticeable difference South to North – same sure as fuck exists in this country. Never went West, but I imagine Outback, desert speech sounds different."

"You'd be surprised."

"Christ, I hope so."

She was Australian

Criers offer trashcan beer at 3 for 1. Costumed monsters, painted silver, startle babies after parents give a dollar. The drunk and stoned dress dogs in sunglasses, alcohol, and coffins for money or weed if you "stop and smile." Poets hock words for 20 bucks and your lack of critique. Children laugh at the blonde, upchucking her hand grenade, while pointing at the tits (not their first) of her friend showing nothing for beads not thrown during Mardi Gras. Thousands drunk, drinking, begging, offering up wallet and limb for drugs or pussy or ass or all three, and not one person cared for anyone but themselves.

I was anonymous and anonymity makes loneliness easier to bear when you can't stand yourself or anyone else, and this beautiful woman had the empathy to speak to the only drunk by themselves in MaMa's Tequileria with the audacity and presumed know-better to nudge her drinking arm.

I tossed a nonchalant, "sorry."

"No worries," she returned with smile and bubbles.

An accent? Oh? Nine times out of ten when I managed to eavesdrop on foreign, I'd be stumbling on Royal into a used-up, gangly-looking French bastard and his ugly wife and ugly children speaking in fast and vapid clarity. Where was their fashion, their joie de vivre, their raison d'être? These people could camouflage themselves with garbage. I recalled, then, that France historically sent their shit, rich people to New Orleans and generally as punishment for some unforgivable misdeed they did at home. So here we are now, stuck with ugly, mean, French families, standing in bars next to beauty wondering how to place this woman's gorgeous accent without cocking it up or taking on the persona of every inept American. No, the girl standing next to me was objective attractive, an aesthetic attractive concrete enough in everyone's individual mindset that would make even Eliot cream himself. I took a shot in the dark as I am a firm believer in suave first impressions.

"You're from Soooouth Australia...?"

"Melbourne."

She was Australian. That should be enough – it was for me. Brunette, lovely, she had freckles you wouldn't mind taking hours to learn and these big, but not too big of, front teeth and blue-grey, ocean eyes. Shorter than me, but not with the stockiness some

short humans grow into, she held herself on legs in tight jeans and had gorgeous ears. I can forgive a lot of oddly shaped body parts, but ugly ears make for a hard, gawky fucking head to stare at. The rest of her was covered in rain-breaker and backpack, and as I didn't need to know what was underneath you simply don't get to.

She asked me, "how did you know I was from the South?"

"There, I could understand your accents easier. I'm not a shit listener so it was never bad, but certainly a noticeable difference South to North – same sure as fuck exists in this country. Never went West, but I imagine Outback, desert speech sounds different."

"You'd be surprised."

"Christ, I hope so."

"Why were you in Australia?"

"Student program."

"What are you doing here?"

"Drinking," I was a dick, with that tone, being snarly, but it was true.

"By yourself?"

"By myself."

"I get the feeling you do that often," she smiled.

She was coy and clever and leaned to nudge my shoulder with hers, giving me shit, to make me smile. And, because I have smiled happily back at someone showing a genuine grin since birth, I did.

"What's your name?"

"Janine," she could tell me her name a thousand times and if it sounded just like she had told me I would listen, "yours?"

“Joey. Joseph. Never Joe. I’m not a plumber – not that I have anything against plumbing or those who plumb.”

She laughed, “what do you do?”

Only by sheer, dumb fucking luck had I managed to stumble upon this sweet unicorn of a woman out of all the women in the world. If she asked me to come to Australia, I would’ve traded my piece of shit car in for cash and sold blood, body, and semen to afford a ticket.

She asked, “you’re not from around here, yeah?”

“Moved from Illinois.”

“Then why Louisiana?”

“The ex and I split because I slept with her sister’s wife. Thus, I am here.” I pointed to myself and tried to slow the horseracing pace of my voice. “I’m what you call ‘horrible human.’”

“Wife?”

“Wife.”

She angled her head and raised her eyebrows enough to make the tiny whistle between her lips verge almost on impressed, but not, “you screw up big.”

I’ve no argument to said statement for years, “yes, I fucking well do. I figure if you’re going to screw up, then you might as well go straight into ruined and not pussyfoot. You’re lying to yourself doing anything else. Funny story in the scope of time, really, but right now it sucks ludicrously fatter cock than any pornstar has. Then again, they’ve seen some cock and would probably say it can still get worse.”

“Your eyes got bright when you talked about her.”

“They do that. Little Gabbie Gertrudes, open and eager.”

I thought can eyes be both voyeur and whore? I didn't know and I didn't have the luxury of too much digression. She snorted and tried not to laugh her drink onto the bar. Holding her hand up to her mouth, she swallowed, “Gabbie Gertrude?”

“I got tired of saying Chatty Cathy, so I started to blurt the first different association that came to mind. Talkative Tammy, Conversational Carrie, Gossipy Gale, lot of c's and g's, Loquacious Lucy, Jealous Julie. Well, she doesn't apply within the context of talking, but you get the point. ‘You're being a,’ and I held my left hand to my left side, ‘situational adjective,’ and I held my right hand to the right, ‘plus alliterative name.’” I put my head down and leaned, stretching, shaking off the searing self-awareness of my inexhaustible lameness.

She glanced up (she was shorter, it couldn't be helped) with brightness and tequila and affection. Her cheekbones rose, she put wetted lips together, and, in stripped-down, earnest seriousness said, “you could be someone I love.”

And I remembered how easy it was to be completely ready to give everything to someone else without any care of the consequences, without the fear of being a fool. I needed to say something, anything, amazing, a response allowing me to close the small gap of space between us, which was quite small at this point, to test if she would be interested, but, completely unnerved by her statement, I ended up mumbling something incredibly fucking stupid and banal and devoid of wit or charm or sophistication.

“I was thinking the exact same thing, so what are you doing here?”

Roll me up with the trash and float me to drift with the rest of that unforgivable mountain of waste in the Pacific. We're you thinking the exact same thing? Christ. Start

liking it now. Sexually frustrated with word impotence. I might as well have been born mute –more mystery one can work with there.

“My boyfriend and I are traveling the country.”

Fuuuuuuuuuccckkkmmmyyyyyyyhhheeeeeaaaaarrrrrrttttttt...

My ears perked and my head snapped, tilted, like a dog confused at his owner, but I heard the phrase as well as you can read.

“We started in Los Angeles. Stopped in Vegas, Austin. Been in New Orleans for three days. We leave for Miami tomorrow morning and tonight is our last little ‘hurrah’ here. After Miami, we fly to LAX and back to Australia,” and she pointed to the shaggy looking character that had chatted with me for thirty minutes before I decided that it was best to separate myself from society and that they would never know the difference.

Oh, dearest Cosmos, how you’re always good for one hey-I’ll-cook-you-breakfast-the-next-day-but-not really-cook-you-breakfast-the-next-day, universal fucking after another. I stood there, reminded why unicorns are unicorns (because they are an IMAGINARY, IMPOSSIBLE fucking animal to capture), taking it.

Looking over, all the while thinking ‘you deserve this,’ and I did, I was determined not to be daunted by some schlub who was probably more eloquent than I and who could still snake charm me with his accent. Standing in the middle of New Orleanites, he was the life of the party, telling jokes, comparing and contrasting all of the Americana he’d seen over the past week and a half to Australia - in preference of the latter and much to everyone’s humor, but more so their blatant, oblivious chagrin. How do you look at a sloppy, beach fit, livelier than any man that you’ve met so far in a city you have just spent four hours hating everyone in man, and then make the conscious

decision to fuck their girlfriend, if she let you and wanted to in total choice, knowing that your probability of success is about the same as finding pi and then being allowed to figuratively fuck all of the decimals?

I stood there trying to salvage a sentence. She saw me stumble, and I made a poor attempt not to show my face's honest disappointment. Selfish, and too engaged in my moment to remember talking to him, it didn't occur for me to put two and two together and recognize that, odds are, the only other guy in the room with an Australian accent would be dating the ONLY fucking woman in the room with the same.

“Bryce, come here, yeah?”

He would be. To all the Bryce's throughout space/time and spelling: your name is awful.

“I want you to meet someone,” and she got off her stool and walked towards the bathroom.

Clever girl.

She thought there was no chance in hell I would watch her legs walk off face to face with good-guy, boyfriend. I didn't get to see her legs, but I caught her eyes in mine glancing back before opening the women's. As I put my hand out to shake, failing to avoid the impending conversation, I realized I was bullshitting myself to feel meagerly better, but, still, it WAS better to think those eyes held some immediate and fleeting emotion for me so I was perfectly alright letting the lie roll.

He shook mine with a forgetful, “déjà vu, yeah, mate?”

There it was. The obligatory, Australian ‘mate.’ I had the sneaking suspicion that Janine was doing her damndest not to let that slip out - as I imagine that any Australian in

America immediately gets asked to say ‘g’day mate’ and that that gets fucking annoying - but the word must’ve been a part of his subconscious lexicon because he didn’t give shit. Bryce could have cared less if I existed, let alone thought of sleeping with his woman, for the sheer fact that he didn’t have to. (Boats in some of the most exotic waters on Earth and he took a three-week break to hang out in America? Yeah-fucking-right, mate.) We were similar in our insignificance to each other and I was still going to shamelessly entertain bedding his lady down, just like him. Although let’s admit, here and now, that we’ve always known it would be all for naught. I was in til’ the end of this futile romance, til’ Janine finally said ‘goodbye,’ because, as Slim Pickens demonstrated, though well aware it would all be over, was always going to end this way, in deafening silence and fire and ash, it’s still a real good fucking ride down on the bomb.

Janine walked up, “dirtiest fucking bathrooms,” she put her arm around Bryce’s waist and patted his side with her palm, resting her hand in his pocket, “we have an early plane, baby.”

I had two choices: smile, say my ‘goodbyes’ with hugs and handshakes, turn around, and walk right the fuck in the opposite direction, towards what I imagine would’ve been a combination of more alcohol and southern style, fatty, rich deliciousness to soothe my self-loathing, oooorrr I could’ve done what I did.

“What hotel are you staying at?”

“The Holiday Inn – the one with a clarinet on it.”

I had passed out in that hotel one night. I was relatively familiar with how to get there.

We paid our tabs and walked out the tequileria back onto the streets and down Conti towards the Mississippi. An Asian cellist and her lady black lover on guitar echoed ‘While My Guitar Gently Weeps’ along the cobbles, and, although we were walking to my car, Bryce had taken lead once I pointed him in the right direction and was having a dandy time wobbling ahead of everyone singing “Waltzing Matilda” over the instruments. I had never seen anyone drunkenly sing their unofficial anthem with such zeal, and it was arrogant to bogart someone else’s happiness, smiling at his humor of the world, but I still did.

Janine was walking within two feet of me. If I put my arm out, I could’ve reached over her shoulder. I didn’t but kept pace while she inched closer and closer to me - to the point that we were walking down the street side by side. I can always be wrong, but I was convinced she was doing this on purpose. The cost analysis of rubbing shoulders and arms with me seemed much more of a risk than simply not touching me. As if there was an agency and implication behind her subtle but obvious actions. I was too enamored to fathom a reasonable emotion that sufficed as a motive for doing so in front of the boyfriend though. Lust? Adventure? Love? I hoped there was some form of emotional honesty, but, in all excitement that comes from doing the unforgivable, between her arm and the small weight of her body pressured against mine, walking, in the lights and shadows of two-stories, shotgun housing, and one of the sleaziest, ratbox, massage-your-cock-for-money Asian massage parlors I’ve ever had the pleasure of seeing, I didn’t honestly fucking care and didn’t want her to stop.

It dawned upon me I had no fucking idea what I was doing or what I was getting into. Hadn’t I read enough about bums being rolled outside of New Orleans’ bars, wads

taken by cheap women in cheap motels, in Bukowski or the overwhelming foolishness in that poor, Southern, bastard Toole? Didn't I listen well enough when Waits sings about love and sadness for the Crescent City, losing everything having had nothing?

Shortsightedly nowhere near exhausted of possibilities, in my mind there were only three scenarios to be played out that evening: 1) the oldest story in the book: a couple befriends a loner off the road or in the streets or in a bar, the woman is cold but beautiful and knows her way into a heart or a fly, the man doesn't care he wants to get drunk, the woman flirts, the woman touches, the woman seduces, maybe an h.j. in the backseat while the guy drives, and BAM the loner ends up rolled in the fucking parking lot for his no money, car, and, in this city, his life only to be found the next day as another murder that was senseless and didn't matter and wasn't worth the 27 dollars; 2) with less chances of being murdered in the end but with being murdered still certainly in the cards, I was entering a weird, possibly rapey, sex game/threesome with these two - which, if so, I hoped they would bring it up sooner rather than later so I could mentally prepare myself for if, or when, they refused to let me back out; or 3) I'd take them to the hotel.

I was parked in a semi, well-lit parking lot next to the Mississippi that didn't quite inappropriately finger you on parking and was familiar enough that I could walk back no matter where I was in the city or in what condition. I told Bryce and Janine to wait by the car while I went over to the ticketing machine to pay. Paid the 12 dollars for however many hours and walked back to the car. Janine was leaning on the back of the car next to Bryce who was sitting on top of the trunk. They both looked at each other.

Janine said, "we want to smoke before bed. Do you smoke?"

"What?"

She smiled, her eyebrows supercilious, “weed, Joey.”

The last thing I expected to happen was for Janine to whip off her backpack and rummage out a swirled, glass mouthpiece and small plastic baggie with an almost used up nugget inside, but - lesson for the day, kiddies - when the pretty girl whom you're attracted to offers, even though it'd been a while and you've been drinking AND you were about to drive through a crowded city, you don't say, 'no, I don't smoke pot, but I think you're really pretty,' you say, 'yes,' and shut your goddamn mouth and take the hit and go with it. I could describe the scene in great detail, with psychedelics and kaleidoscope colors, a great euphoria looking up at the stars, realizing how small you are, or with watching the lights of the city shift with the mood of its people and the two next to me, but, honestly, it wasn't that exciting. If you've been high more than twice in your life, then you know the feeling is a mellow mediocrity. If you haven't been high at all in your life, then you should probably go get high and try it on.

Bryce sat in the passengers' while Janine got in back directly behind me. He hadn't compensated the weed with the drink (he was on vacation) and when Janine closed the door his head hit the window with an all too pleasant thud. She was trying to apologize to me and yell into his unconscious not to “vomit all over the fucking car.”

I was assholically tickled.

He kept it together and I pulled out of the parking spot and exited the lot. There was a flash of blue and the warning pop of two sirens crackled out from a loudspeaker. A white SUV pulled out, blocking the right side of the road from getting onto St. Peters. I didn't hear the first sentence yelled from the intercom between a stomach-pitting fear and

the fact that I was busy giving Janine the “hey-there’s-a-chance-that-we’re-going-to-jail-between-me-driving-and-you-carrying-so-be-prepared-for-that” speech.

Janine asks in my ear, “what should I do with our things?”

A part of me took time to like that, “ours.”

“I don’t know. Hiding em’ won’t matter a fucking bit,” was all I could murmur without taking both of my hands off the wheel and turning so it most assuredly looked like I was telling someone to do something in the back. We were about as fucked as fucked as three people could get, but you can’t just say that out loud. You’ve got to stay cool. Stay cool in the face of everything you’re about to lose, and had a large part in setting yourself, and others, up for. (Because there are always are consequences for your ridiculous version of love. Didn’t you know? You utter dumbfuck.) And time stopped for three seconds and the dread of disappointment by friends and family, the lawyer, the slap in the face by someone you love, the sentence, the community service, the useless rehab, the parole, the forced house arrest, the lack of privacy, and the cost and the cost and the cost. I rolled down the window.

“ONE WAY STREET!”

The intercom kicked on again with a little less re-verb.

“YOU”VE GOT TO TURN AROUND.”

Sweet fucking murdered saints and baby Jesus. The car was security for Harrah’s, blocking off some monstrosity tour bus of a ludicrous country singer five years past his prime, and wasn’t looking to do anything but make sure I didn’t drive right into his fucking car. As I stuck my hand out the window, to wave thanks in desperate

appreciation, my arm shook the left to right out of fingers. I three-pointed and drove off into traffic and silence.

“Your hotel’s this way.”

I knew her reply as the statement escaped my mouth.

“I think I’ll walk Bryce the rest of the way.”

“It’s not fa-.”

“I don’t want him to throw up in your car. Really. It’s better if we walk.”

I twisted my head back and saw a tired terror. The residual effects of adrenaline and fear having been helpless in fight or flight. I became the loner who kidnaps the drunk couple out of country and makes them disappear. I was the terribleness I spent so much time convincing myself I wasn’t. Janine didn’t hate me. She wanted out and away and onto the comfort of the streets, in command of herself. Janine tapped Bryce on the shoulder, roughly, making him wake up. There was no parking. The two would have to get out at the same time on a stoplight. I braked onto Chartres’ when the light turned red, Janine got out, opened Bryce’s door for him, and looked inside, “sorry.”

“Never to apologize to me.”

She whispered back too quietly, and I couldn’t make out the words. The door closed and it was over, if it ever had started. I watched Janine put her arm around Bryce and point in the direction of their hotel. The light turned and I drove off. I hooked a left on Dauphine and took Poydras to I-10, breathed deep, and laughed and laughed a hilarious existence into the face of all that happened until I cried. And the orange highway, taking me across a lake I’ve never swam, into yet another city that wasn’t truly mine, but was looking better and better in a new sense of love and madness, laughed back

– highways don't cry. She was Australian and I had a thing for Australians, and I had felt love again and it was finally fucking good to be alone.

I did deserve it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I started this story eight years ago when I moved to Louisiana from Illinois. Like many others, the piece began as a way for me to, I think confession is the wrong word choice here, excise some of my past out of my head and onto the page, so it began as it ended – with catharsis. I wanted readers to know that they are most definitely reading and engaging with me throughout – hence, using my actual name within the piece. To that end, apart from a few name changes to people (for privacy), places (the tequilaria on Bourbon wasn't called MaMa's), and a lack of transcribed dialogue (real life needs some style and flair, right?), the story is, call it, 97% true, and the sentiment of crafting myself as an anti-hero – as both a relatable and sensitive character, yet incredibly flawed human – was necessary to come into my own, in a new place, as a person searching for connection in someone else.

Influences:

It's hard for me to read this over again and not see spackles of Bukowski, Fante, Richard Brautigan, Nabokov, Céline, Phillip Ó Ceallaigh, Burroughs, or even John Kennedy Toole (it truly is a Confederacy of Dunces). But, more importantly I think in reflection, is the immense impact New Orleans had/has/and continues to affect my writing.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and teacher. Recently graduated with a masters in Rhet./Comp., when not getting into trouble he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and doesn't exercise. His other short story work has been featured in Phree Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press.

EDITOR'S BIO: Barbara Yoshida is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work has been exhibited throughout NYC, the U.S., and internationally. Her short play, *Language Games*, can be seen in *Fleas on the Dog*, Issue 6, Part 2 (plays & screenplays), and was presented in NYC's Rogue Theater Festival in December, 2020. Also during December, a trailer of the film, *Language Games*, was shown prior to an artist talk in *AD ABSURDUM: The Politics and Poetics of Absurdity* by the Philadelphia Avant-Garde

Studies Consortium (PASC). After taking Peculiar Works Project production and publicity photos for over a decade and editing too many grant applications, she began working as a dramaturg on projects such as *Planet X* (Black Mountain College), *2 Jane Jacobs* (Cherry Lane Theater) and *Son of Cock-Strong* (La MaMa). Other than English, she speaks French, Japanese, and Spanish (some more than others). She has served on the Board of PWP since its inception in 1993. You can visit Barbara at www.barbarayoshida.com Her latest monograph (below) is now available.

MOON VIEWING

Megaliths by Moonlight

Photographs by Barbara Yoshida

Essay by Lucy R. Lippard

Foreword by Linda Connor

Published by Marquand Books

Distributed by D.A.P.

September 2014

Hardcover, 8.75 x 11.25 in.

80 pages / 39 color photographs

Edition of 500

Representing ten years of travel and research, *Moon Viewing: Megaliths by Moonlight* surveys megalithic stones from Sweden to West Africa and east to Armenia. Night photography emphasizes the relationship to stars and planets.

Ditched Ditched ditched ditched

By Mark S. Rosati

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Amazing grace. Five stars.*

QUALITY QUOTABLES *(for the love of language)...*

Memories danced in his head: smoking with his brothers and buddies behind the convenience store; his first frenzied sexual encounter, with Tammy, in the backseat of her father's old Ford; getting beaten up by the Brennan brothers - now that he's a soldier, no one will ever mess with him again; his pride that time he got a B on a really hard chemistry test; the next night in the emergency room after his stepfather Rod came home drunk, lashing out in whiskey-fueled resentment over his stepson's palpable joy about his test score - if there was one thing Rod hated, it was an uppity boy - and his mother lying, telling the doctor and nurses that his injuries resulted from a fall down the stairs.

But if he had one attribute above all others, it was persistence, so move he did, slow but sure, up the dirt embankment, painting the soil as he crawled to the road, leaving a crimson trail of himself in the earth.

Ditched

By Mark S. Rosati

The dirt was warm, comforting, embracing - a soft blanket fresh from the dryer. Until today, the soil of this alien place had been only another in a series of faceless enemies: haven to menacing vipers, spiders, and fire ants, refuge for landmines that could blow a hole in a tank, often so muddy from the relentless rain that the suction would pull the boot off his foot. Now the ground offered him peace, stability, a connection to the familiar.

The day was dark and overcast and the air felt heavy and oppressively close. Objects - his hands, the bushes, the sky itself - seemed near and far at the same time, like sunlight dancing on ripples of water, and he did not know exactly where he was. But that was of no concern.

Around him the dense vegetation, rich and verdant - except for the parts that were smoldering, snakes of black smoke slithering to the sky - sent his thoughts skipping to the color green: of the little park his grandmother used to take him and his brothers to as a child, with its trees and bushes and grass; of the Christmas trees they sometimes had when they were little boys, in the good years; and even of the uniform he was wearing, which still retained patches of its original color. Once so crisp and fresh, an emblem of earth-spanning might, his uniform was now filthy, ragged and sticky, like a woven rash.

He noticed he was wet below the waist. Had he peed himself? That had happened during his first firefight, never again. Like his first kill and the first time he saw the insides of a human body - he puked then, but never again. He had developed - what was the word,

words floating in and out - immunity? ... roller coaster brain, what the f- was happening? No it wasn't pee, it was something else ... rain, had it rained? Hell, it never stopped raining here, unlike back home, where it seemed every other year there was a drought. Even now, he could taste the dry August dust, feel it caking against the back of his throat, bending him over with coughing spells when he was outside doing chores and the suffocating summer winds kicked up.

The Army had been a way out of the place where he grew up, on the flat, dreary prairie of central Illinois. The desolate little town was a collection of small frame houses, drab apartment buildings and blighted trailer parks nestled near a highway service center. The travel center's convenience stores - along with the one movie theater and a few strip malls located nearby - were the premier sources of excitement, cigarettes, and alcohol for the young people who usually fled as soon as they could, taking with them memories of food pantries, liquor stores where no one questioned fake IDs, and hurried sex.

For him, the Army might mean college - a real college, not a technical one - and maybe a career, whatever that was. At a minimum, the Army offered a future of regular paychecks, respect, and escape.

Memories danced in his head: smoking with his brothers and buddies behind the convenience store; his first frenzied sexual encounter, with Tammy, in the backseat of her father's old Ford; getting beaten up by the Brennan brothers - now that he's a soldier, no one will ever mess with him again; his pride that time he got a B on a really hard

chemistry test; the next night in the emergency room after his stepfather Rod came home drunk, lashing out in whiskey-fueled resentment over his stepson's palpable joy about his test score - if there was one thing Rod hated, it was an uppity boy - and his mother lying, telling the doctor and nurses that his injuries resulted from a fall down the stairs.

And, transcending all other memories, the pinnacle of his young life, real sex with his first serious girlfriend, Lisa, in the grass near the lake, spring, summer, fall - why is it that so many memories, good and bad, are about girls? Lisa's eyes were so blue - at 17 his urgency had so consumed him, he hadn't paid enough attention to her eyes, to her scent, to her silken neck, to the warmth of her hand in his ... When her family moved away to Arizona, part of him turned to desert, too.

Dizzy ... like those games they played as children when you keep spinning and spinning around as fast as you can, until you fall down, your brain going in circles. Once - then, last week, yesterday, this morning - he could hear, smell, taste, feel. No longer. He ached to see another person, anyone, even an enemy. Alone, alone ...

The plants, the trees, the warm and humid air - Hawaii. That's what they reminded him of. He was there once on a stopover en route to here -- heaven to hell. There once on a stopover en route here, from heaven to hell. At the airport bar with his buddy from Iowa, both in their fresh, spotless uniforms, a nice man in a suit told the bartender to "buy these guys one of whatever they're having." After he left, I told my friend that's what I wanted to be able to do someday, to have enough money to buy a couple of strangers a round just because they were wearing the uniform. Imagine having that kind of spending cash, not even have

to think about it ... what had they drunk? A Hawaiian beer maybe ... it had a surfboard on the label ... God, he was so thirsty ...

He could not figure out why he was unable to move faster. In the Army you never stopped moving, often at warp speed - marching, drilling, running, killing. Now, he was a turtle on its back, flailing and broiling in the tropical heat.

But if he had one attribute above all others, it was persistence, so move he did, slow but sure, up the dirt embankment, painting the soil as he crawled to the road, leaving a crimson trail of himself in the earth.

This ground. He hadn't noticed before how much it looked like the soil of the farms near his boyhood home, so many long miles away. He had traveled so far away to fight people in a country he could not have spelled or found on a map before he joined the Army, for reasons he didn't understand to this day. He ached to return to the place he couldn't wait to leave. Tammy, Lisa ... the first time, the last time. Smiles from his mother, his grandmother, all danced before him, butterflies against the clouds.

He contemplated the red and widening stain on his uniform, as white and blue lights flashed, their source unknown. A screech above, much too loud for a bird, then the ground started to shake, violently, then stopped. For a time, he trembled uncontrollably, arms and legs twitching pitifully, one last effort to keep moving, for in motion there is hope, there is control, there is life. Then, stillness.

He felt himself floating, his only sensation the taste of melting copper in his mouth. He saw that his left arm was moving again, though without any apparent purpose. The air became too hot, too wet, too thick to breathe, his thoughts as shattered as a trailer park after a tornado. Still and numb, he began to drift, to lose the feel of the land against his body, and terror ensnared him like a net.

Suddenly one more memory surfaced, clear and vivid, and he was past the fear. It was of the little dog they had for a time when he was a child. He had found the dog wandering lost, cold, hungry, tired, dirty, with only a worn rope around its neck, so he brought it home.

The dog, a brown mutt he named Bandit, would yelp joyously every day when the bus pulled up at the corner to drop him off from school; the barking would grow louder as he approached, the dog could smell or sense him from blocks away. The tail whipping from side to side, pure undiluted joy - every reunion like the first, the last.

Bandit had not been housebroken and had a lot of accidents in the house, and paid the price of stinging “backhanders” from his stepfather and having its little nose rubbed in its own filth. Afterward he would comfort and cradle Bandit and tell him that everything would be all right. Sometimes he could hear his stepfather complaining to his mother about the cost of keeping a dog when times were so hard, as he popped open another can of beer.

And then one day he came home from school to learn that Bandit had had to go to a farm upstate because the dog was sick and they could take better care of it. He cried so much he couldn't eat dinner, even though his mother had made fried chicken, his favorite. He just lay face-down on a pillow sodden with his tears and hoping the morning would never come. Knowing Bandit must be scared and sad and alone, and that a dog would never be able to understand what had happened or why, made it all the worse. Bandit would think he had been abandoned by the one he loved the most. The memory brought more tears - the first time he had cried since Lisa moved away. Tears and raindrops mingled as they dripped down his face onto his neck, his back ...

Now he was frigid, shivering uncontrollably, cold to the core for the first time since he had arrived in the jungle, so many months ago. Nothing moved and yet the entire world did. The skies opened and for a moment he thought he would drown where he lay. He shut his eyes and felt himself caught in the mud's embrace, as the earth reclaimed its own. ...

God, he had loved that dog. For a moment, he could feel its tongue licking his cheek, the breeze from its furiously wagging tail, its joyous barking, rolling on its back for belly-scratches, playing in the snow ...

After a while - a minute, an hour, no matter - the rain finally stopped. He found the strength to open his eyes. All he could see were - clouds? Snow? The ceiling of his old bedroom? Outside he could hear the prairie wind, and, faint but clear, Lisa's voice ...

Dusk came early that day, and the last conscious thoughts of his 19 years on this planet were of Lisa's face, and that he hoped Bandit had lived a long, happy life on that faraway farm.

THE END

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *'Ditched' was inspired by seemingly endless wars, and the price the marginalized pay in every generation and every society. I have always loved the short story form, my favorite authors including Chekhov, Stuart Dybek, Lucia Berlin and Raymond Carver. I'm very grateful to 'Fleas on the Dog' for publishing 'Ditched' and for the wonderful and inspiring platform they offer to authors.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Mark Rosati, a Chicago-area playwright, is the author of 24 plays and numerous short stories, and a member of the Dramatists Guild and The Company Theatre Group in NJ. His plays have had productions and public readings in New York City, Chicago, New Jersey, Boston and Michigan. Recent productions include "Entrenched" on Audible Theatre of New York's podcast series in October 2020, "Exposed" in 2019 at Between Us Productions' Take Ten Festival in New York, "Duet" at Theatre East's 5x5 Drama Series in all five NYC boroughs, "Restoration" in Between Us Productions' Take Ten Festival, and "Extinct/Extant" at Manhattan Repertory Theatre's February Event. His one-page play "The Sound of One Hand, Etc." was published January 2021 by the online journal Barely Seen Poems of short plays and stories. His short story "Last Stand" and play "Restoration" were published in January 2020 in the Canadian literary journal FleasontheDog.com, and "Last Stand" was included in a public reading of new works on the theme of "sanctuary" by Cast Iron Theatre in Brighton, UK in June 2019. His one-act

play “Our Daily Bread” received a public reading in Boston in the “Pinning Our Hopes” pre-inauguration Resistance event in January 2017.

BILL COMES INTO THE ROOM, DISCUSSES HEGEL

By Brendon Sykes

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor LARRY SMITH writes:*

“Bill Comes Into the Room, Discusses Hegel” is a trap, which from a reader’s perspective is usually good news for a couple of reasons. Ensnarement cannot be an indifferent experience for the reader; it can even be transformational. Also, by definition, in order to spring a trap, the author has to be in control, of the narrative and of his or her own consciousness.

The control exerted here by Brendon Sykes is admirable. I began reading with the pleasant anticipation of a send-up of German philosophy, certainly merited in re Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. I was not initially disappointed. Even after the initial exchange with the dying mother, the story’s ostensibly parodic tone still beguiles. The initial exchange with the UPS man is very funny indeed – imagine sharing Hegelian jargon with a UPS man – until we later understand that man to be one of the harbingers and messengers of cold horror.

That horror is pretty horrific: not just the fact of an incestuous rape but reminders of what it entails, e.g., a child’s bloodied orifice. Mr. Sykes’ style and strategy enable him to maintain command of the narrative: no bathos, no explosions in prose of desperate, convulsive trauma. The content darkens but never the tone as we glide blithely and seamlessly into a realization of what the story is actually about.

Once trapped, we grimly realize what might lie behind much of the seemingly breezy language. An email from nowhere in the Thesis section of the Hegelian dialectic asks Bill, “Did you bleed?” to which Bill replies, “I’ve got to go now.” What kind of scatological pun, post anal rape, might “go now” be? For that matter, why is Bill “coming” in the room to begin with? And twice he’s reassured that “Bill, we’re all behind you.” The whole world? Ouch!

Then there is the matter of Hegel himself, not just an Ivory Towerish escape for Bill from unbearable reality but the very personification of an over-civilized patriarchy unleashing its not such noble savagery. I believe it was Jung who once described Hegel’s language as an infestation, a release of monstrous wraiths from the unconsciousness, symptoms of a

psyche in which consciousness and unconsciousness are disastrously disconnected in the first instance.

*Finally, I'm going to self-indulge a mite because I hope Mr. Sykes will appreciate it. He ends his story (rather pointedly) with Eddie Fisher singing his hit song of 1954, "Oh My Papa." I actually reference that same tune in a story from my book *A Shield of Paris* called "Her Story: Part Seven" to suggest that Amy Fisher (as in *Amy Fisher and Joey Buttafuoco*) was, ahem, the illegitimate daughter of Eddie Fisher. Mr. Sykes and I may be the only two writers in the last half-century to reference this dreadful song, albeit to different purposes.*

Five stars.

(Spacing and font size are author's own. Eds.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

Bill looked out the window. He saw a man walking past wearing a sandwich board. On the front it read, *Bill, I think instead of sublation you mean sublimation. That's what you did with your feelings.*

There was a tree in front of the house and the trunk bisected the big picture window. The man wearing the board kept walking. On the back Bill read, *Sublation, subblution. A tisket, a tasket.*

BILL COMES INTO THE ROOM, DISCUSSES HEGEL

By Brendon Sykes

Frances, December 21

Bill came into the room. He sat down. There was a book on the table. He picked it up.

Hegel, he said.

PHONE CALL

Hello?

Which Hegel are you referring to?

The philosopher.

His full name is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Okay, thanks.

His dates are August 20, 1770 to November 14, 1831.

Right. Who is this?

Click.

Bill came into the room. He sat down. On the table beside him was a book. He picked it up.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, he said.

DING! YOU HAVE EMAIL!

Bill, are you going to talk about H's absolute idealism?

Yes, I am as a matter of fact.

Then don't forget to bring up the concept of *Geist*.

No. I'm going to talk about *Geist*. I was going to present it as a *modus* of integration—

You mean sublation?

Sublation. *Aufheben*.

Okay, thanks.

Thanks for emailing.

Bill came into the room. He sat down. There was a book on the table. He picked it up.

The author of this book is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher who lived from 1770 to 1831. The title is *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I'd like to talk to you about his concept of absolute idealism. After that, I'd like to explore sublation, something Hegel called *Aufheben*.

Does anyone want coffee before I begin?

PHONE CALL

Billy, it's your mother.

Hi, Mom.

Why do you never call?

How are things?

I'm in the hospital.

What's wrong?

I'm dying.

Sorry to hear it.

Sorry. Schmorry. Your mother's dying and you don't have time for a call.

Listen, Mom, I've got to go.

You never loved me but I loved you.

Click.

Bill came into the room. Beside the window stood a chair and a table. He sat down. There was a book on the table. He picked it up.

My mother's dying, he said. No. Sorry. Hegel, he said. Back to the concept of sublation. It's really only one part of his theoretical process, a triadic formulation or hyper-theory that he called *Entwicklung*. Essentially this can be divided into thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

KNOCK, KNOCK!

Bill got up from the table and went to the door. He opened it. A UPS guy's standing there. He's holding a clipboard.

Yes?

When you talk about *Entwicklung* can you use the example of 'liberty'?

Sure.

Include the savage, tyranny and the transforming nature of civilization.

Will do. Thanks for the prompt.

The UPS guy said, We're here to deliver.

Bill closed the door. He went back into the room. After he sat down he picked a book up from the table.

You all know this is Hegel, he said. Let's talk about his tri-particularized schema with regard to something like...well, liberty. Start with a 'savage'. What's a savage? In Hegel's definition, a savage is a human being who represses nothing in thought and action. You've heard of the 'It' Girl? This is the 'Id' Man. That's the first stage, the thesis. Then, we follow the savage as he

enters a new stage of development. Now he's traded unrestrained freedom for society and the constraints of law. This is the antithesis, so called because it's the opposite of the thesis; if not the annihilation, certainly the *sublation* of the thesis. The last stage, the synthesis, presents a savage transformed by civilization. He enjoys a new remodeled liberty—one not characterized by Id-iotic impulse and unbridled expression but a will-to-determine freedom that emerges as 'meaningful volition'.

PHONE CALL

Hello?

Gasp...gasp...cough...gasp...

Hello...?

Billy.

Mom?

Why do you never call?

Are you okay?

Gasp...gasp...gasp...

Get some rest, Mom.

Click.

Bill came into the living room. He sat down, picked up the book, put it down again, and frowning, assumed a posture of remarkable beauty that reminded one of Rodin's *Le Penseur*. Appropriate because Bill was thinking.

The savage. Is he noble? Rousseau thought so. I don't. I knew a savage. He came into my room at night. Mom was asleep. What are you supposed to do in the morning? Eat your corn flakes or tell your mother that—

Bill stopped. He was shaking.

A ROCK FLIES THROUGH THE WINDOW

There was a message tied to it. On a piece of paper the thrower had written, I know it's tough but do you want to be the 'Id' Man forever? Say it, Bill. Open up and share it. You'll feel better. We're all rooting for you. Sublation soon to be ovation!

Bill turned the paper over. It was a lot to write on a piece of toilet tissue. The penmanship was good, though. There was a post-script. Say it, Bill.

I'm 7 years old. I've got friends, blood in my young veins, sunshine all over my future. He was smart. He waited until Mom was asleep. And then I'd hear him climb the stairs. I could smell what he was drinking before he got to my room. When the door opened he had a finger to his lips. Shhh. Then he crept in. What am I supposed to do?

Go on. You're doing fine.

Sit there the next morning and eat my corn flakes and tell my mother he—he—?

DING! YOU HAVE EMAIL!

Bill, your dad was a savage. Truly. And not just in the Hegelian sense. In the *daemonic* sense, too. He was a beast. Pure thesis.

Thanks. Thanks for your sympathy.

Did you bleed?

I've got to go now.

Bill came into the living room. He sat down. There was a book on the table. He didn't pick it up.

I want to talk about Hegel but I can't do it. My mind's flooded with things from long ago and I'm being dragged down by them. I got a message on a rock thrown through my window. It urged me to be truthful. To essentially, I guess, *unburden* myself. What do you do in a situation like that? You're 7. You're dumb and trusting. You especially trust your dad. He's the guy you look up to. And you still think you're looking up to him. You're 7. You go downstairs in the morning. There's a box of cornflakes on the kitchen table. There's your bowl and the spoon with the spaceship handle. What do you do? Do you eat your cereal or tell your mother that dad came into your room and fucked you? And yes, I bled.

Bill looked out the window. He saw a man walking past wearing a sandwich board. On the front it read, *Bill, I think instead of sublation you mean sublimation. That's what you did with your feelings.*

There was a tree in front of the house and the trunk bisected the big picture window. The man wearing the board kept walking. On the back Bill read, Sublation, sublution. A tisket, a tasket.

Bill watched the man go down the street until he disappeared around a corner. He went back and sat down. He looked at the book on the table. It was a long time before he picked it up.

Hegel, he said. Then he stared into space for a moment. I bled. You're damn right. You think you know pain? You don't know anything close to it until something like that. *Exclamation mark, Bill. Goddammit, this is exclamatory!*

You think you know pain? You don't know anything CLOSE to it UNTIL SOMETHING LIKE THAT!

CONFERENCE PHONE CALL

Good, Bill.

My heart goes out to you, buddy.

Hang in there, Billy boy.

We love you, William. Fuck the savage! Oops. You know what I mean. May the pervert burn in Hell!

Fuck Hegel for that matter.

Bill, we're all behind you.

THESIS

A boy is born.

ANTITHESIS

His father sodomizes him. His mother, maybe she knows, maybe she suspects, but she doesn't do anything. Brush your teeth. Change your socks. Eat your cereal.

SYNTHESIS

He does not cry at his father's funeral. He never calls his mother.

Bill sits up in his chair. He shakes himself. He is still holding the book. Now he raises it.

Hegel, he says. We...we would describe the THESIS, in a Hegelian dialectic, as *An-sich* (in itself).

This would be the boy, well, me, as innocent as a newly born body. As radiantly innocent as

Blake's little lamb. The ANTITHESIS, of course, involves the savage and his unrestrained impulses. Without going into the sordid details, this is *Anderssein* (Out of itself). The SYNTHESIS speaks...speaks—is full frontal explanatory. I never cried at my dad's funeral. I'm not going to cry for my mother. My mother is dying. I'm going to sit here like a defiant boy and not eat my Corn Flakes. To love one is to forgive all. This is the equivalent—but in a diminished sense, a very diminished sense—of *An-und-fur-sich* (In and for itself). Does anyone want coffee?

PHONE CALL

Hello?

Bill, it's the doctor. Your mother's on her last breath. Do you want to say anything to her?

No.

Can you keep a confidence, Bill?

I beg your pardon?

It doesn't make any difference now.

What doesn't make any difference?

Your father didn't die naturally. Your mother murdered him.

What?

I'm so sorry.

What...?

I'm so sorry, Bill.

Click.

DING! YOU HAVE EMAIL!

Bill, you're using Hegel to avoid your feelings. Your SYNTHESIS is unsatisfactory due to a lack of affect. You have unfinished business. You need to go back to the THESIS but especially the ANTITHESIS and finish it.

Bill left the room. He went into the kitchen and stood looking out the window. He saw his reflection in the glass, dim, kind of soapy on the plate. Like the email said, it was a vague incomplete Bill and it didn't feel satisfactory. In the sky above a plane flew past. Attached to the tail was a long flyer. Something was written on it. Bill reached for his binoculars. He read, *Repression=Mechanical Man. Decompress Repression, Bill.*

Bill muttered, Yeah. And *bukake* is bakery in Japanese.

Bill came into the living room. He sat down. There was a book on the table. He picked it up. But...but for the life of him he couldn't read the title out loud. So he thought, You guys know what this is. Hegel.

LIVE TV

Bill, this is Bill Williams, news reporter for BWWB. Your mother passed away a few minutes ago at Blake-Anderssein Memorial Hospital. Bill, I know this must be hard for you but you're never going to be whole again until you face the past, and Bill—the truth, Bill. Mom knew. Your Mom knew. And she did something about it. In other news today...

PHONE CALL

We're all behind you, champ!

KNOCK! KNOCK!

Bill opened the door. It was the UPS guy.

Yes?

She must've seen the blood.

Bill closed the door.

From behind it the UPS guy shouted, she must've known!

Bill came into the living room. In the corner by the window were a chair and a table. He sat down. He considered picking up the book, Hegel, no, he didn't do that.

He always cleaned me up after. There wasn't a huge amount anyway. It was mostly the first couple of times. After that my body, my body was I guess just as numb as my brain. If you block it out, it's not happening. But I can still remember. He whispered in my ear after he positioned himself on top of me. Daddy's the train and Billy's the tunnel. Open wide.

PHONE CALL

Hello?

She murdered him for you, Bill.

Why isn't she in jail?

It looked like natural causes.

Why didn't she tell me?

Now there's a good idea.

Did the doctor know?

Ask him, Bill.

Who is this?

Click.

Bill took his phone from the kitchen and went back into the living room. He paced in front of the window. Then he called the Blake-Anderssein Memorial Hospital. He wanted to speak to the doctor.

Did you know? Were you in this together? Were you her lover?

Hello?

This is Bill.

Who do you wish to speak to, please?

The doctor.

The doctor's not available right now. Can I take a message?

Click.

Bill was coming apart. All this Id percolating to the surface. Fire hiss and cauldron bubble. I need a drink. I need a toke. I need a SYNTHESIS.

O Georg Our Geist in Ages Past...

Bill picked up his cell and stepped out of the house. He needed air. He couldn't even remember what she looked like. It was that long ago, the well was that deep. You never call. Sure there

were pictures and sure he couldn't couldn't couldn't throw them out. But did he want to look at them?

He glanced down the street. He expected to see the guy with the sandwich board. There was nobody. But something was scrawled on the sidewalk, words written in chalk. The penmanship was good.

I loved you but you never loved me.

You seek SYNTHESIS, Bill. It only comes with forgiveness. Forgive this woman who gave you life and took the life of the savage who was taking yours. Forgive, Bill. Decompress repression.

PHONE CALL

Hello?

Bill, your mother has just died and you don't feel anything. You're the It Man, Bill. The Person as Object. The post-modern humanoid. The perishable mitochondria that goes through life devoid of feeling. Flattened affect, Bill.

Hegel?

Freud. Forgive and move on, Bill. It's the new freedom. Dig deep for the 'liberty', the *An-und-fur-sich* you seek. The freedom that comes through civilizing the impulses, the savage impulses, Bill, liberty in a higher key than Blake's little lamb ever experienced.

I can't talk now.

Bill, listen to me... You are the post-modern *hominid*. You feel nothing. You are Sartre's man without Sartre.

Who is this?

Do it, Bill. For her sake and yours. Feel something. It's the SYNTHESIS you seek.

Click.

Bill went back inside. The TV was still on. He looked at the screen. It showed a guy making a pizza. When he took it out of the oven a voice screamed, Your SYNTHESIS is waiting!

Beside the table was a chair. Bill sat down. There was a book on the table. He picked it up.

Hegel, he said. Feel something, he said.

Bill can't feel what he knows he should. Bill can't feel what he knows. Bill can't feel. He stands up and walks around. He goes back to the chair. He sits down. He picks up the book, flips through the pages and puts it on the table again. He picks up his mobile. He puts it down and picks it up again and taps his iTunes. File? Vintage.

EDDIE FISHER (1954)

Click it.

Can't.

Click it, Bill.

Can't.

Click it.

Click.

O My Papa.

It's the best he can do.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I came. I saw. I came again.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Brendon Sykes not only questions the big stuff in philosophy, he also questions his own existence. Last summer, he realized a milestone in self-revelation. 'I drink, therefore I am.' His essay *Notes on the Ontological Argument to a Budding Philosopher* appeared in Issue 2 Nonfiction. He is currently working on a novel, which for him, is entirely novel. He makes trouble in TO with CP and NN.

EDITOR'S BIO: Larry Smith's story collection, *A Shield of Paris* and *Floodlands* were published in 2019 by Adelaide Books. His novella, *Patrick Fitzmike and Mike Fitzpatrick* was published in 2016 by Outpost 19. Smith's stories have appeared in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *Serving House Journal*, *Sequestum*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *The Collagist* and *{PANK}*, among numerous others. His poetry has appeared in *Descant* (Canada) and *Elimae*, among others. Smith lives in New Jersey. Visit Larrysmithfiction.com His stories **Totem and Taboo** and **Gag and May Gag** appear in this issue.

TOTEM and TABOO

By Larry Smith

WHY I LIKE IT: FOTD Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes:

*As it happens, the fiction editors at FOTD sent this “fiction as meta-theatre kind of thing” the way of their depraved drama editor (yours truly) because they thought it would be right up my ally. As always, the fiction editors are BANG ON correct and I am thrilled to be able to rave about Larry Smith’s brilliant Totem and Taboo, a mesmerizing work of cinematic fiction written in the form of a screenplay. This sophisticated (and sexy!) piece takes us on a deconstructed journey through the production of two films produced in tandem, **Bobby at Work** and **Force Majeure**, that both tangle with the theme of cuckoldry – you know, where the wife screws someone other than her husband - and in both films these marital indiscretions become the subjects of eroticism and arousal.*

The psychology of sexuality vis-à-vis breaking social boundaries and cultural mores is further explored in production meetings, a hypnotic barrage of auditions and a yet-to-be cast character espousing the ideas of the godfather of modern psychotherapy, none other than the Oedipally-obsessed Dr. Sigmund Freud.

There are so many fascinating angles to this piece it’s hard to know where to begin, but one of my faves is the power dynamic between the director and the actors auditioning for the roles. The director is exacting, running his auditions much like a clinical trial while revealing a voyeuristic and somewhat abusive aspect to the process that I promise will make even non-actors squirm. But don’t skip the auditions. They are part of the cinema of the psyche that makes this piece work better in your head than on Netflix.

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN

The voices of three different men are heard in succession.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

Note that the repetition of lines creates an unnerving tension as well as adding to the theatrical construct of the piece, in which the director is already in rehearsal, re-hearing,

and framing specific moments. The lines from each of the auditions will come up in following scenes, although, as in real-life, the characters are not necessarily portrayed by the men and women who auditioned for the roles.

Totem and Taboo is fiction as mental performance art. It's a self-conscious lesson in on-camera acting. It's Freudian filmmaking. It's hot, it's heady, and it's overwhelming. You may have to read it more than once – it's that guilty of a pleasure! (Spacing and font size are author's own.)

Five Stars.

Senior Editor Charles writes: *This story, together with **Gag and May Gag**, also in this issue are from Larry Smith's latest collection of short fiction **Floodlands** published by Adelaide Books, New York/Lisbon 2019. See Larry's work and more at adelaidebooks.org*

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for love of the language):*

You know, one thing that occurs to me...one thing we could do...everybody in both films, they're all played by unknowns and that's the way we want it. Wouldn't it be a stark contrast and full of significance of some sort if the lecturer were played by a big star? I mean, a really big one? Man or woman, either way. De Niro or Streep.

(Spacing and font size are author's own.)

Totem and Taboo

A Short Story in the Form of a Screenplay

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:
Auditions for Part of Jill, *Bobby at Work*

MEDIUM SHOT

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses):
Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses):
Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses):
Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses):
Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses):
Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses):
Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line with no context and no direction from me as to emotion or emphasis.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses):
Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN

The voices of three different women are heard in succession.

Woman: Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

Woman: Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

Woman: Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:
Force Majeure, Scene Three

MEDIUM SHOT

Sal, Jerry, and Sam at a table in a moderately busy restaurant. Background movements of customers and restaurant staff are out of focus. The background noise is muted. There is a fourth empty chair at the table. Sal and Jerry are average height, average weight; Jerry has a tattoo visible on one arm. Sam is a burly sort. The actors portraying these men may or may not be men who audition for the parts.

Jerry: Besides you guys and Ralph, I'm only in touch with a few people. For all I know, some of the others could have turned out to be serial killers, or Senators, if that's not the same thing.

Sal: These kinds of parties can wind up being very interesting or a complete disaster. You know, once you've satisfied your curiosity about whatever happened to so-and-so, you might just have to stand around and stare at each other with nothing to say.

Jerry: Yeah, and with nothing in common except what's past.

Sam: Yeah, so everybody sits around bullshitting about old stuff that isn't worth remembering.

Jerry: Maybe somebody turned out to be a real success.

Sam: So then what? We supposed to spend all night sitting around and praising the lucky fuck?

Sal: Still, I'm kind of looking forward to going.

Sam: Well Jinny sure is. Women really love this kind of shit.

Sam: We're the only guys who married girls from the class.

Jerry: No, Chuck D'Allesandro married Vicki Tims...you remember Vicki Tims?

Sal: Yeah, wonder what those two wound up doing with their lives.

Jerry: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come...Remember him?

Sam: You bet I do. (with self-confident candor) Jinny went out with him before me.

Ralph: (as he approaches the table and sits in the fourth chair) Hey guys...

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:
Auditions for Part of Jerry, *Force Majeure*

MEDIUM SHOT

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to say the line as if Frank Abrams is someone you really don't want to see.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN

The voices of three different men are heard in succession.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

Man: I wonder if Frank Abrams is going to come.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

Production Meeting. *Bobby at Work* and *Force Majeure*

MEDIUM SHOT

Office, modestly furnished. A window on the far wall. Two sofas facing each other in the immediate foreground. Kate and Jackson on one sofa. Steve and Jason on the other. The camera faces whichever sofa the speaker sits on.

Steve: So Jason's idea is to release both films at the same time, maybe show them together at the same festival.

Kate: I think it's a good idea, it will drive the message home.

Jason: Yeah but it's not really a message, it's more like an overriding theme. Or a kind of implicit threat in both.

Jackson: Male humiliation, or at least the undermining of male power.

Jason: We reach two kinds of audiences, the one who will see both films as a reflection on the undermining of male power, as you put it, and the other audiences which, quite frankly, just get off on the cuckolding of your average husband.

Jackson: Well, the guys in *Force Majeure* aren't exactly cuckolded. Frank Abrams happened before they hooked up with their wives.

Kate: Same thing, or close. He is a force majeure. The way he's occupied the consciousness of the four women all these years, it cancels the wedding contract.

Jason: Right. And both films are well-timed, what with the @MeToo movement and all.

Steve: But neither film is about toppling abusive men from seats of power.

Kate: But power is what they're about in any case. The assumed power that comes with position, with being a husband and family head and leader and all that. That's what makes it so...so...

Jason: Right. All men are vulnerable to being toppled. All men are terrified by how the world will pity them.

Steve: I don't have a sense of who these people are, I mean I know the *Bobby at Work* characters are pretty sophisticated, and the *Force Majeure* guys are working class or maybe white collar. But I don't have a really good sense of what they look like or any of the fine points of their personalities.

Jason: Neither do I, for the most part, and that's one of the things that excites me about the directing. I'm going to leave it to chance, I'm going to see what the auditions turn up, and whoever and whatever captures my imagination during the auditions, and then take it from there.

Jackson: Ok. (chuckles) I wish I understood why so many men get off on their wives cheating.

Steve: It's a sperm contest. Or maybe they just love their wives so much, they want to make the sacrifice to see them in ecstasy.

Kate (amused): Right. The noble impulses that actuate pornography!

Jackson: But the guys in *Force Majeure* aren't the least aroused by the idea of Frank Abrams devirginizing their wives.

Jason: The audience will be.

Kate: Yeah, I think men long to be toppled from power. Power is too much for men.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN

Force Majeure, Scene Six

LONG SHOT

The restaurant is now more dimly lit. Sal, Jerry, Sam, and Ralph are sitting at their table, eight empty bottles of beer on the table. The waitress enters with four more beers, which she serves and then collects the empties and exits. There is a prolonged silence as the men sit very still. Sal's head is bent. There are only one or two couples sitting at other tables in the background.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF RALPH

Ralph: Well, I just don't think I want to go.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF SAL AS HE LIFTS HIS HEAD

Sal: So what are you going to tell her? She's going to think you're a...you're a...I mean Sam's gonna go and Jinny actually dated him.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF RALPH

Ralph: It's different. I mean, they dated, they had a relationship, there was a relationship. It wasn't just, you know, a one-time-thing...

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF SAL

Sal: So it was a one-time thing, so what? He might not even remember...I mean...

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF RALPH GLARING AT SAL. CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF TABLE

Sam: What are you guys worrying about, him or your wives? So what if he remembers, so what if he doesn't? Maybe he doesn't even remember Jinny, and yet they dated...How would that be? You just don't want to come face to face with Frank.

Ralph: Maybe I don't want to see the two of them together.

Sal: What do you mean "together?"

Jerry (getting up to go to the bathroom): He doesn't want to see the way they look at each other.

The three men sit in a prolonged silence after Jerry leaves.

Sal: So which is it, you're afraid he won't remember her or you're afraid he will?

Sam: I mean, what the fuck, he busted half the goddamn high school.

Sal: Yeah, for sure.

All three men drink down their beers. Ralph signals with four fingers to the waitress off-screen.

Sam: Yours too, Sal.

Sal: I know.

Ralph: Jesus, that right?

Sal: Yeah, I asked her once who it was, so she told me.

Ralph: Jesus.

Sam: I mean, listen guys, I'm not saying I'm all that anxious to see him.

Ralph: Or see the way Jinny and him greet each other. I bet you're not. (to Sal) So you're ok, you're copacetic with it?

The waitress brings four more beers and carts off the empties. A silence of around thirty seconds.

Sal: To tell you the truth, I imagine the look on her face as he gets on top of her.

Ralph: Inside of her. Mounts your wife.

Sal: Fuck you. Yours too.

Ralph: Imagine you're him. Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

Sam: Fuck him.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF JERRY'S FACE AS HE RETURNS TO THE TABLE

Jerry: I'm not sure I want to see him.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

Production Meeting. *Bobby at Work and Force Majeure*

Kate, Jackson, Steve, and Jason as before. Camera shifts from sofa to sofa, as before.

Jackson: The one thing we really wonder about is Fisher...this interpolation – is that the right word? – of...what is he, a psychiatrist? A professor?

Kate: Jason, the very fact that you don't know which film to stick him in proves that it's not called for from a dramatic standpoint.

Steve: Even if it were, it's pretentious. Like you want to prove the stuff we're doing has profound significations.

Kate: And you don't want people seeing either film from a Freudian point of view. That would only dilute the other themes.

Jackson: And Freud is so yesterday.

Jason: I think it would add to the other themes. That the power games by which male authority is rudely snatched (no pun intended) have a primal concomitant in the human psyche, at its developmental...uhh...at a psychodynamic as well as a social level.

Steve: Way too much, Jason!

Jason: From a dramatic perspective, I was thinking of the old professor in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* who lectures into the camera from time to time. It worked there.

Kate: I remember that movie, but there the old lecturer is integral to the plot because he's part of the Woody Allen character's developing angst...and he commits suicide at the end, which is part of Woody's character development as he tries to grapple with, uh, everything.

Jackson: Actually, he says he's "out the window," which makes it ambiguous. Yeah, he's jumped to his death but he's also free from a great constraint, and he's outside, out the window, out amongst us, with the world.

Kate: You're right! Yeah.

Jason: Let me shoot it and stick it somewhere in both films. We can make a decision later to cut it if we want. I'll be easy to persuade if you're still strongly against it and you're all unanimous.

Steve: You know, one thing that occurs to me...one thing we could do...everybody in both films, they're all played by unknowns and that's the way we want it. Wouldn't it be a stark contrast and full of significance of some sort if the lecturer were played by a big star? I mean, a really big one? Man or woman, either way. De Niro or Streep.

Jackson (smiling): Interesting.

Kate: Jason, go ahead and shoot it with yourself as a placeholder. We'll make some calls.

Jason: I love it.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:
Auditions for part of Elisabeth, *Bobby at Work*

MEDIUM SHOT

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: Feel free to use your body in whatever way you feel comfortable as you say the line.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses):
Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: Feel free to use your body in whatever way you feel comfortable as you say the line.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: Feel free to use your body in whatever way you feel comfortable as you say the line.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: Feel free to use your body in whatever way you feel comfortable as you say the line.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: Feel free to use your body in whatever way you feel comfortable as you say the line.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses): Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: Feel free to use your body in whatever way you feel comfortable as you say the line.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses):
Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT WOMAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: Feel free to use your body in whatever way you feel comfortable as you say the line.

Woman (whatever manner of presentation the performer chooses):
Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN

The voices of three different women are heard in succession.

Woman: Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

Woman: Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

Woman: Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN
Force Majeure, Scene Eleven

A saloon. Scene is shot tight, so the bar and other tables do not intrude on the picture plane. Sal, Jerry, Sam, and Ralph at a table, four beers.

Sam: Do we have to keep talking?

Ralph: Naw, let's just sit here in silence until someone wants to opine on who's going to win the Final Four this year.

Sam: "Opine"?

Sal: Ohhhhh pine!

Ralph: So Jerry, good old Frank Abrams cleared a path for you too. A real trailblazer, that one.

Sal: Ohhhhh pine!

Ralph: I'll never be able to look at Sandy the same way again.

Jerry: (really angry) Fuck you, dammit!

Sam: Easy, easy.

Jerry: You guys make me sick.

Ralph: Just because you're the same as us.

Sal: Ohhhhh pine!

Sam (looking at Sal): He's as drunk as he wants to be.

Sal: Her face as he mounts her...

Ralph: Shut up.

Sal: The way she grunts. Grunted.

Sam (putting his hand on Sal's arm): I gotta get him home.

Jerry starts to cry. Ralph and Sam look at him incredulously.

Ralph: Jesus Christ.

Jerry (recovers) She didn't know me yet. No harm, no foul...

Sal: Maybe she said thank you.

Ralph: Shut him up.

Jerry: ...except...

Sam: His face. He'll smile.

Jerry: ...if he remembers.

Sam: Jinny and him, it was a relationship.

**TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:
Auditions for Part of Sal, *Force Majeure***

MEDIUM SHOT

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: I want you to think about your mother as you say the line.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN

The voices of three different men are heard in succession.

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

Man: Her face as he mounts her...

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

Bobby at Work, Scene Three

Living room. Entrance to kitchen on the right. In the foreground, three men sit in three comfortable chairs, their backs to the camera. Their wives are on a sumptuous couch facing them. In the background, a dining area with dirty dishes and utensils, recently used.

Left to right are Matt, Mike, and Lenny. Matt's wife Elisabeth opposite him; Mike's wife Kathryn opposite him; Lenny's wife Jill opposite him. Camera remains on the wives. The actors portraying the wives may or may not be women who audition for the parts.

Matt: Do you like the older English ones?

Lenny: Not nearly as much. Even *The Thirty-Nine Steps* seems just a work-up for *North By Northwest* twenty years later.

Kathryn: Funny, I was just having this conversation with Bobby at work. I don't remember what started it, but I asked him, "What's your favorite Hitchcock?"

Elisabeth: What did he say?

Kathryn: *Rear Window*. He just absolutely adores *Rear Window*.

Elisabeth bows her head slightly, smiling. Jill also bow her head, but with an uncomfortable expression.

Kathryn: So Lenny, what did you think of the people you met at the Christmas party?

Lenny: I thought the ones I spoke to were great.

Elisabeth: Who did you speak to?

Lenny: John, the slim older guy...

Elisabeth: From accounts payable. Very nice man. He doesn't really need to work. His wife has a lot of family money. But I'm glad he does. I agree with you, he's a great guy.

Jill: Lenny was entranced by Susan, the stories she told.

Elisabeth: I don't blame him. Jill, you know, is always stopping by her office to hear her stories.

Kathryn: I am too.

CUT TO THE BACKS OF THE WOMEN AND THE FACES OF THE MEN

A lush weaving, vaguely Near-Eastern, takes up the entire wall behind them.

Mike (good-naturedly): She's too intellectual for me.

Kathryn: So are Marge and Lisa. That's why he doesn't watch *The Simpsons* anymore.

Everyone laughs, including Mike.

Lenny: I enjoyed talking to Phyllis Armstrong too, she seemed very well-rounded for an IT person. No offense to IT people.

Matt: There aren't any in the room, thank God.

Kathryn: Bobby is in IT. He's also very rounded.

Lenny: I didn't meet him.

Mike: Neither have me or Matt. Kathryn says he's a great guy.

Jill (almost hurriedly): It's a great place to work.

Matt: How long have you been there?

Jill: Nine months or so.

Matt: And Lenny, you work where?

Lenny: I work for the Barnett Foundation.

Mike: So you give away money all day long?

Lenny: Something like that.

Mike: I'd like to do that kind of work, but it's hard to walk away from my job.

Elisabeth (without malice): They pay Mike a lot of money to write talking points for crooked bankers.

Mike (with false humility): Well, it's a living. Sure, I'd like to walk away, but, you know, responsibilities, responsibilities.

Kathryn: Yeah, my poor husband is torn between conflicting responsibilities.

Elisabeth: Matt too, in a way. He makes good money but...you know. Uhhh, the horns of a dilemma.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF MATT. THEN CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF ELISABETH.

Elisabeth is stretched naked on a bed, her arms extended to her sides.

Elisabeth: Any time my husband turns his back, just pull my pants down and take your pleasure.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

Fisher, Lecture

Jason as Fisher: The way in which we interpret Freud is itself a stunning indication of how Freudian dynamics operate within us. Or, the fact that we reject Freud altogether, and how we reject him – either peremptorily or after much presumably disinterested reflection – offers further such indication. In that sense, his is a closed system: it traps you within its own terms no matter what you say or think or do. Actually, the only way to absolve ourselves is by rejecting Freudianism only because it is a closed system, not because of anything he specifically postulates about human nature and motive. If we offer no opinion as to, say, dream interpretation, or oral fixation,

or the death wish, but simply disclaim any system, any system whatsoever that is so closed, be it pseudo-scientific or religious, then at least we are relatively clear of any reductionist imputations.

However, most people who reject Freud do so defensively or even angrily. Most are like the young man I knew (a rather brilliant young man, a great admirer of Shestov and Hanna Arendt). When I merely suggested to him that there is still much to learn from Freud's essay on Dostoevsky despite all the scholarly "disproof" of that psychohistory, he put his hand on his forehead in a rather dramatic fashion as if to say, "No, no, I won't hear it!"

And then the proverbial devil in the details...Perhaps we don't quite reject the Freudian vision but seek to tame it via the kind of bland ego psychology that arose in later decades, the Gertrude and Rubin Blanck pabulum. What would that say about us in terms of our posture toward the dark forces that Freud's tragic sensibility disclosed? Or, conversely, do we bathe a la Leo Bersani in a subversive "wild psychoanalysis," interpreting Da Vinci's narcissism or neo-Assyrian ferocity as a kind of creative sanity in which the life and death instincts are intertwined and combustive, all the more so as they are never psychically consummated? What does it say about Freud himself that he sought so persistently to disembarrass his system of such "wild" thinking, such radical affect? To be sure, his greatness could never lay within the respectable trappings of actual science, but rather in the final poetry of a pitiable species.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

Production Meeting. *Bobby at Work and Force Majeure*

Kate, Jackson, Steve, and Jason as before. Camera shifts from sofa to sofa, as before.

Kate: Wait, I almost forgot something important. There's a French film called *Force Majeure*.

Steve: A joint venture with Swedes and Norwegians, actually.

Kate: It's just a few years old and was very popular. Critically acclaimed.

Jackson: That could be a problem.

Jason: I'm pretty much married to the title.

Jackson: Yeah, I suppose. Let's think it over.

Steve: What about *Bobby at Work*?

Kate: The title? I love it.

Jackson: Do we ever show the guy? I mean, I know we don't. But do we want to think about it?

Kate: No, no. Jason's vision demands that Bobby remains an abstract force, like Frank Abrams.

Steve: We do see his hand pluck the flower.

Kate: Yeah, that might be an inconsistency but it's so damn sexy.

Steve: Actually, it adds to the sense of abstraction. The unseen hand, except it's seen. But it's still...uhhh...

Kate: Abstract.

Steve: Right.

Kate: Just to raise the point...do the scenes where the women are seen naked dissipate the tension? Could it be better to leave it to the imagination?

Jason: No, I'm sure not. The film is as much about the husbands as it is the wives...The revealing scenes will make the audience really feel their...their cuckoldry...

Kate (chuckles): Great word!

Jackson: (also amused) My wife and I once went to the theater with another couple...the wife was having an affair, and everyone knew it...Guess what? The play we were seeing had a steamy adulterous storyline...the female character was doing a job on her husband...Well, the tension among us and our friends, if you can call it that, or the kind of unsettled feeling that was...well, you know, an elephant in the room while we were sitting there and at dinner afterward.

Kate: Sounds like a very sexy evening, Jackson.

Jackson: It was.

Steve: Would it have been as sexy if your friend had been clueless?

Jackson: Good question. The fact that Marty, Marty was our friend's name, the fact that he knew about it made for unbearable tension.

Jason: Like a sexual excitation that can never be resolved.

Kate: The guys in *Bobby at Work* are clueless.

Jackson: It would be a whole different story otherwise.

Kate: Cluelessness is hot too.

Jason: Yes. The fact that they're clueless adds to a sense that our lives are subject to primal forces of which we can never be aware.

Kate (With some amusement): Jason has really thought this through, hasn't he?

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:
Bobby at Work, Scene 14

MEDIUM SHOT

Scene opens with all six as before. Camera is on the sofa. Then Kathryn rises and heads for the dining area.

Elisabeth (rising): I'll help you.

Jill starts to get up too.

Elisabeth: Sit. Sit, Jill. Relax.

Jill remains seated as Elisabeth joins Kathryn in the background.

Matt: So Lenny tells us you enjoy watching the games with him. I wish Elisabeth did.

Jill: Just World Cup games, really. I love rooting for underdog teams.

Matt: So you must have loved it when Mexico beat Germany the other day.

Elisabeth and Kathryn in mid-shot, carrying trays to the kitchen on the left, which is not visible from the living room where Jill and the men are sitting.

Jill: Yes indeed.

CUT TO KITCHEN

Elisabeth and Kathryn are scraping the dishes and putting them into the dishwasher.

Elisabeth: She seems a little nervous, stand-offish.

Kathryn (smiling sympathetically). I tried to have lunch with her the other day but she put me off. Nicely, but she put me off. She has to deal with it eventually.

Elisabeth: I watch at the office for when she looks at Bobby. If faces could talk! So much crisscrossing conflicting emotion!

Kathryn: You were a little confused at first yourself, as I recall.

Elisabeth: That day you told me that we...when you said that we shared so much, that when you look at me and...

Kathryn: ...and I feel you feeling what I've felt. I still do. Oh that man! (laughs)

Elisabeth (very affectionately): And he told me the things you say.

Kathryn: And he told me the things you say.

Elisabeth: Are you feeling the same way about Jill?

Kathryn: I'm very close to doing so.

Elisabeth: What did Bobby tell you?

Kathryn: (giggles, momentarily ignoring the question): Lenny seems to be such a sensitive sort. He'd be crushed if he knew.

Elisabeth: Matt would just clam up.

Kathryn: I loved your little crack about the horns of a dilemma.

Elisabeth: (with good-humored persistence) What has Bobby told you, Kathryn? He told me she had a huge orgasm and cried afterward.

Kathryn: He told me that she covered her sex organs with her hands afterward. (smiles) Seems a little pointless.

Elisabeth: The horse already left the barn, as they say.

Kathryn: Imagine her hearing whatever he told her!

CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF LIVING ROOM

Jill and the men as before. Elisabeth and Kathryn enter and take their seats on the sofa as before. The women face the camera.

Elisabeth: We were just talking about going upstate now that the weather has gotten so nice. We figure to stop off at the sculpture garden. I haven't been there in years.

Kathryn: You Philistines can join us if you want. Otherwise it will be just us girls.

Elisabeth: Lenny's no Philistine!

Kathryn: I'm sure of that.

CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF THE MEN FACING THE CAMERA

Mike (winking): These ladies know a cultured gentleman when they see one.

CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF THE WOMEN FACING THE CAMERA

Elisabeth: Versus cavemen like you!

CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF THE MEN FACING THE CAMERA

Lenny: (good-humoredly) I feel like I'm on the spot.

CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF THE WOMEN FACING THE CAMERA

Kathryn: Well, there's something to be said for cavemen.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF MIKE. THEN CUT TO MEDIUM SHOT OF KATHRYN

Kathryn is standing nude, her hands clasped behind her head.

Kathryn: Oh your thing!

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:
Auditions for Part of Sam, *Force Majeure*

MEDIUM SHOT

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN.

The voices of three different men are heard in succession.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

Man: His face. He'll smile.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:
Auditions for Part of Ralph, *Force Majeure*

MEDIUM SHOT

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Man sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind him.

Male Voice: You're feeling bitter as you say the line.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN.

The voices of three different men are heard in succession.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

Man: Imagine what he's thinking when he sees us with our wives.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:

Fisher, Lecture

Jason as Fisher: Whatever posture we assume in relationship to Freud, and all he stands for, that in itself constitutes a superego of sorts. Freud himself, when we understand him in the most traditional light, constitutes a superego of sorts. Anything normative, anything determinative, anything authoritarian constitutes a superego of sorts, compounded one way or another from the devious cathexes of the

Oedipal experience. And yet Freud himself mistrusted the superego so, mistrusted it for its lacerations of the ego, its unholy alliance with the id, and, indeed, the thrashing and thrashing of the superego itself against itself. So where does it all leave us?

We must, of course, seek the moral agency of rebellion lest the superego so achieve its suzerainty that we become easy pickings for any Hitler or Stalin with a code to ordain. The strongest men must resist the death wish to which the superego exposes both ourselves and the world we live in. But then we have a whirligig of superegos as each act of resistance is itself an act of conscience, and conscience itself is just another form of superego in alliance with the id to once again sacrifice the ego in a welter of unachievable cathexes. This, to be sure, has to be what Freud was getting at in *The Ego and the Id*. What might be further inferred is the decision reached by the superego when, instead of taking up arms against the parental tyranny, rather assumes that role of authority, of propriety, in order to possess the mother, punish itself, and become the punishing father. In sum, the dynamic presupposes multiple superegos: the one we get from our parents, and the one we use against our parents; the one that commands us to wield power, and the one that ultimately fates the ego to grovel in penitential ritual after penitential ritual.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN:
Bobby at Work, Scene 16

Elisabeth, Kathryn, and Jill are in the kitchen. The camera is viewing them from the back wall of the kitchen so that we see Matt, Mike, and Lenny in the living room, an animated background to the shot. Matt and Lenny are still on the sofa. Mike has moved to one of the chairs on the left side, so that we see him in profile. They remain in sight throughout the scene.

Jill: That was a wonderful dinner, Kathryn.

Kathryn (putting her hand on Jill's arms): It was my pleasure.

Elisabeth: We thought you might be uncomfortable with all of us gathered.

Silence for a moment. Elisabeth and Kathryn are smiling.

Jill: I guess it is kind of strange.

Kathryn: Can you imagine if Bobby were here? The sublime sense of conquest he'd have as he looks on all three of us...

Kathryn takes her hand off Jill's arm.

Elisabeth: And our husbands.

Kathryn: To be sure.

Elisabeth veers her head to look at the men conversing in the other room.

Jill: I'm uncomfortable with that.

Elisabeth: It's understandable.

Kathryn: I was uncomfortable after I found out about him and Elisabeth. Now I feel very different...as if part of the pleasure is in my knowing just how much of a conquest he's made...Especially now, with you added to the picture. It's kind of nice to be part of...of a...Not sure I can find words for it. (laughs)

Silence for two or three moments.

Elisabeth: Look at them.

The three women look at their husbands in the distance. A prolonged silence as they do.

Kathryn: You know, Jill, after I got over my initial jealousy, I began to feel very close to Elisabeth...because I began to think of her as someone who's known exactly what I've known...

Elisabeth: Exactly what and exactly where...

Kathryn: Oh yes.

Silence for a moment.

Kathryn: And I know I'm feeling close to you now for the same reasons.

Jill (smiles, embarrassed): I'm not sure I know what I've gotten into.

Kathryn: Well, we know *exactly* what's gotten into you.

Jill bows her head, purses her lips. The three women stare out at their husbands. Again, some moments of silence as they do so.

Kathryn: Horns of plenty.

Elisabeth: I'll bet Bobby has told you things about us. I'll bet he has.

Kathryn: He has, hasn't he?

Elisabeth (gently): Don't you think that, if he's told you those kinds of things about us, that there's a very good chance that he's told us the same sorts of things about you?

Jill's eyes open wide. Her expression is neutral. Her body is rigid at this moment.

Kathryn (puts her hand back on Jill's arm): What has he told you?

Silence.

Elisabeth: We know you cried afterward.

Jill closes her eyes for a moment and opens them again.

Kathryn: What has he told you?

Jill: That you gave him your panties for a souvenir.

Kathryn: I did do that.

Another silence as the sounds of their husbands' conversation get momentarily louder. Two phrases from their conversation drift in: Matt saying the words "fake news" and Mike saying the words "goddamn disgrace."

Jill: That you did it with him in your office while Matt was waiting for you in the reception area.

Elisabeth: It did happen like that.

Kathryn: You can tell us everything.

Jill: Not everything.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF LENNY. THEN CUT TO LONG SHOT OF JILL

Jill is leaning forward, her hands balanced on a table top. She is naked and bent around twenty degrees. A gardenia is inserted in her rear. The camera tracks forward, slowly, until her body takes up most of the frame. A man's hand reaches forward and plucks the gardenia.

CUT TO CLOSE-UP OF JILL'S FACE IN PROFILE

Jill's eyes clamp shut. She clenches her jaw. Then she lets out a yelp, then another one. Then she opens her eyes.

Jill: Oh, how you've cuckolded my husband!

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN

Fisher, Lecture

Jason as Fisher: What these psychosocial dynamics do not quite encompass is the role of women. Women as the tenders of the garden, or cave, or what have you, would seem to be enablers of the superego and its value system; indeed, jealously protective of it. On the other hand, the system-making to which the fiercest superegos are destined to devote themselves is, at least in an archetypal sense, not the province of the mother. To the contrary; in her matrix, all things merge, all lovers converge, all unities diverge. Indeed, as the primal cathexis, the mother sets off the whole round of father-son sympathies and antipathies. She is the cause of the first superego and, indirectly, of the endless round of superego v. superego hostilities.

So, when Freud famously asked, "What do women want?," he was doing more than acknowledging his own perplexity as to their psychodynamic specifics. He was, in fact, defining those psychodynamics as intrinsically murky. I need only compare my visits to the Kalighat or other Kali shrines in West Bengal to even the temples of Siva elsewhere in India. I saw how simultaneously confusing are her demands and how ferociously assiduous the acolytes are to fulfill them. Once I was even shoved away when I tried to worship, and it wasn't just because I'm white. I don't know what Kali wants, and I'm not sure I'm all that eager to find out. But she chews up one male regime after another, be it the Third Reich or the happiest nuclear family in all of Nebraska.

Jason sighs, as if exhausted. He looks off to the left, and laughs.

Jason: Huh? Say again? Oh yeah, yeah, for sure... Yeah, I'm definitely out the window. (shakes his head)

.

TITLE ON BLACK SCREEN

Auditions for Part of Kathryn, *Bobby at Work*

MEDIUM SHOT

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: The line is to be said in a sexual context.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: The line is to be said in a sexual context.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

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CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: The line is to be said in a sexual context.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO SAME SCENE, DIFFERENT MAN

Woman sitting on plain chair facing camera. Two intersecting walls behind her.

Male Voice: You're feeling very insecure as you say the line.

Woman: Oh your thing!

CUT TO BLACK SCREEN.

The voices of three different women are heard in succession.

Woman: Oh your thing!

Woman: Oh your thing!

Woman: Oh your thing!

A few seconds of silence. Then the voices of two different women in succession.

Woman: Thing.

Woman: Thing.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

“Totem and Taboo” is one of two “stories in the form of a screenplay” that appear in my book Floodlands; the other, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” also has an ironic Freudian title. It’s a format that offers intriguing possibilities for the erotic, for both visualizations and verbalizations.

As to “Totem and Taboo’s” focus, I think cuckoldry is our current world’s most interesting sexual obsession, both for the theatricality of the fetish itself, and for what its popularity says about the collective psyche. In S&M circles they have a term, “TPE” for “Total Power Exchange,” that seems relevant. I wanted to explore that dynamic along with the myriad of ways in which a veritably pornographic lust underscores social positioning. I wanted to achieve a fairly disinterested perspective and discussion (by including the filmmakers themselves as part of the story). But, to be sure, I also want readers to feel the TPE tangibly enough to at least be a little unsettled if not aroused.

Again, for all of that, this screenplay format was really serviceable.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Larry Smith’s writings have appeared in literary journals throughout the world. His 2016 novella *Patrick Fitzmike and Mike Fitzpatrick* (Outlook 19) traverses the political, sexual and spiritual alcoves of the modern Catholic Church. He is currently compiling a third collection of stories called *High and Dry* as well as a collection of hybrid nonfictions called: *Nicole Simpson: The Untold Story*. His story **Gag and May Gag** also appears in this issue. His story **Heaven Starts Here** was published in Issue 3.

EDITOR’S BIO: Janet Erlich Colson is the Drama Editor at Fleas on the Dog when she isn’t serving federal time for crimes against politics.

The *Mind* off My **Creator**

By Jim **M**eirose

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor JOEL PAGE writes:*

I like this piece because it gives you permission. Don't get me wrong, there's plenty to think about, and if you want to engage it like a detective, you can mostly piece it together. A bartender is indeed a great deal like a creator – he or she pours down the magic, views what he or she has done in detachment, maybe intervenes when all goes very wrong. So if you want to hit this with your cerebral cortex and your reasoning skills, have at it. And do tell me what you find me. As for me, I'm going to just inject this into the brainstem, or maybe the unconscious. I'm going to let it poke around in all the images it invokes – please call someone if I start twitching. To me, this is a piece in which to float. The language is warm and lovely, even lyric, and something almost like a plot will carry you gently around creation.

Five stars.

Senior Editor CHARLES writes:

Meirose plays language like Hauser plays cello. Untouchable. Jim, you write, think and neuroticize beautifully. Don't take your pills. (This story is excerpted from a novel presently being shopped around called Jungle Swamp. Spacing and font size are author's own.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

People say things like ah, well, I think, it took five or ten times to finally get whatever, stopping after eleven failures just doesn't feel right. Dead for nothing. Ten would be right. Or five. Or crap, cra', 'ap. Too much overthinking but. Is that possible when asleep? The wise bartender said, Sleeping eck showering much though two'r eh, the same. Dry and wet the same. Dry and wet—the same—the bartender slid it over front 'o me saying eh ha guess what and; no what and so what so just-t-t-t, what?

The Mind Off My Creator

(1600 words)

As above out of sight the creator ‘f wags his finger-down off non—no no no that can’t be—but it is—Hey. Hello. Have another vodka, have, I’ll drain it I’m draining it, Hello. Have another vodka, I’m draining it, drain. Hello. Sorry, I’ll have another a third un ‘nuther ‘n vodka, but.

Hello.

Another. Hello.

Another please.

Hello, hello, but.

Vodka, ‘nother vodka I’ll drain it ‘n draining it, give it here.

But.

Ehhhhh, but; can’t be itself and not or not and itself and every other thing in creation winner, loser or not no n’, Hello, wha’ can’t be flowing and frozen no no no that can’t be no dead and alive as well something’s elses entireously no no no that can’t be ten feet from the jungle no no no, Hello n’ Hello, that can’t be seven feet no can’t be five feet no can’t b’ four that no can’t be three and two and and and rip-roar down’g perforation ‘f the fabric rip, roar, the fraction zip up down over ‘n through do not put your finger there

it'll rip off no don't put your finger or fingers or anything at all there, Pum, snap; the wall
the rod the sharp no—God, we're through, we're through.

No. Not someplace else entirely, secret 's that may be, but.

We' through, s', so

Hello.

Ahead, a green glade. A slope. Soft shaded upslope.

Not known even to the Cre'.

No can't be b' 'e, but. Is.

So.

Eh—soft now—it comes this place's not known even to the Crea'—no, tense, push.

Ah.

Let it come.

A place unknown even to the Creator.

A place that really should not ever be—but.

It is. There it is.

So warmed. So so, so, walk forward breathe oh ah—what a relief; so; here and here
since then right 'til now, which, better yet, better ever, keeps on moving forward causing
the illusion the all the stuff—that stuff not to git named because why name it 'cause the
while 'dea was to get away so if it's going to haunt 'ou down in every new thought—
even though sometimes never, sometimes halfwise, total eck ooo', 'nd every fraction in
betw', why the 'ell'd you run who are you to run put all 'round you to trouble and worry
most of all and most importantly you yourself and you again—ha heh oh tripped yo' 'p
good with that there eh, sasparilla? No, Jones.

Butodranje you thought we all sasparilla?

No. Jones. But—

Damian, Willy!

Jones! Jones!

No, no—

Let's talk about something else.

Hoke`. Ess ind'a travel into through and past every moment each of failing to maintain being the present for anything greater than each's physical span, measured in inches—here and there pass other great bodies each passing its own way serving its own mind sometimes brushing closer enough for matter to rub off spall out and land ahoy, here dere pup, brushing past su' stuff as hey, you look pretty relaxed, kid. Better open your eyes but ho what too slow never mind ah, don't mean to intrude but drink that back before you drop it break it spill it down and make every kind of mess because guess who'll ave t do t me t's wha off that way but ow ma laces have you tried so far to apply to jobs of the type you're oo ing for us d t be pr tty plen ful e oo o o so hat m e you eave Back City most people coming here are schoolkids lo ki g for s e fat rs j sssss I in the p ce y u're lookin' for is a couple miles ut off town, I don't know who told you it was down here, but they told yo wro g g to b eful stop so once a day end alone the noise level's so low and some standard number of hours of s eep al ott d to ach o' y'r 'rticu' 'ree' v'ry ni' down down closer touch let go sink in th' all 'roun envelopment where things'r for some reason just as real as all of life seemed to be—before, but. Here is a whole world solidly real. 'nder th' shutting over-closed of one eye for sure. And possibly both, but. Consider the number eleven. Asleep can't check. Never seemed an important number before.

Might go look it up since it's. Nothing gets traditionally counted off by eleven. But asleep can't look up crap. No centurion ever walked down a line of prisoners pointing to every eleventh to be executed. Never has anyone been more hated or feared than. Imagine an eleven-day week. These or those who just will not. Imagine a twenty-two-hour day. Will not step forward. Imagine saying instead of twenty-four seven, saying twenty-two eleven, five hundred and seventy-two. They've hard concrete ice heads to stand so firm up. What has ever finally been done on the eleventh try? Against those who'll just whittle. What or where is any race whose numbering system centers on base eleven? And whittle and whittle every eleventh away 'til. What was the point of trying the eleventh time to achieve the dream of being mayor? They're all dead for. People say things like ah, well, I think, it took five or ten times to finally get whatever, stopping after eleven failures just doesn't feel right. Dead for nothing. Ten would be right. Or five. Or crap, cra', 'ap. Too much overthinking but. Is that possible when asleep? The wise bartender said, Sleeping eck showering much though two'r eh, the same. Dry and wet the same. Dry and wet—the same—the bartender slid it over front 'o me saying eh ha guess what and; no what and so what so just-t-t-t, what?

Most nearly 'vryone dances once a day.

Ok. Do the punch we can't guess.

In the shower behind the curtain under the spray all do the same perfectly choreographed dance—stand this way, lift that, turn this way, pose, bent get this or that perfectly the same like that does not normally change. All uncontrolled. Rip 'way the all else but you they or me actually everyone in space impossibly watch the shower that way a dance or a shower a dance or a or a or a—shower or a, not. Got that?

Ah. Sure. Another vodka please? Give me the mixings, I'll stir this one up myself—
down the sewerhole the spindraining hush listen where did the bar go eh eh?

So, ha, need to wake up, there it 's, I will wake you up here there is it you 'g 'et be
have of whatever listen, ignore, hello. Polite there it is up there word she make me or
make you he it listen Hello how the hell dit it get up there?

Hello and I am down

Hello am down here where no one is supposed to be!

Hheeloo this is Paul Repititian who ss', Listen, Dan Bone's come over into my
JungleSwamp task force wwhhoo Listen ignore I'd like to invite you bup bop bip bap
bbuupp bbbooopppp bbbbaaaaappppp nnnooo nnoo no 'o no no no—bu' no mayor not
no mayor of course that would be, Hello, this is would be too, Hello, this is Repititian
much ooo Paul.

Like Repititian something ppaauull, I want.

Uck! to do so also, Hello, this is Paul Repititian. This is not to try to get you to drop
what you're doing; you have what it takes to be equally valuable either with me or for
Back City as a whole b', the hey don't even know if I am gone they he or whoever's I
quite selfishly just assuming I am hoping you will help me save the people from this,
Hello, this is Paul Repititian Paul Repititian am gone Paul just assuming I am Paul Paul
gone Paul Repititian because they just terrifying feel new threat, yes.

Terrifying feel new I yes am threat yes.

Hello.

Terrifying yes just feel new yes I am yes threat some shit yes shola yes yes of a quitter a quitter Bosh yes candycakes some brewmastgerfold shit tippa death shinola tippa go back go back of a go back go back, quitter.

Hello? Hello.

No, yes, call me to talk if you wish go back No go back no yes yes go back then his number his phone and how dare he how dare he his number he no go back his phone don't say it go back back don't say it what? Hello; and how dare he how dare go go back back.

No.

He how dare phone how how phone down dare he they uh' pup.

Put the phone down.

Hello, this is Paul Repititan. Hello, I told you on Dan Bone's come over into my JungleSwamp task force, I told you're the one the how dare how dare I told you on the phone on the phone, Hello how yes how yes yes how yes yes yes yes I told you on the phone you are the one but.

No

Now go back to sleep if at all possible.

No no-o now go back to sleep if at all possible if no.

No no-o no-o-o no-o-o-o, now go back to sle-e-eep if at all possible if no no no no not possible.

No!

In that case, ah, sure. Another vodka please I'll drain it ama draining it have drained it what the vodka that's what. Can't you see?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The Mind off My Creator depicts the interior churn of an individual who has just experienced another total failure in a life which has been nothing but one such after the other. He/she is at their lowest point from which the only lower point would be being dead. This person is struggling with "why" and the mind-churn is half trying to make sense and half giving into the final chaos. But, a message on the phone discovered in the midst of this, may be new hope, but--just may be another lie. Read to know more.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Jim Meirose's short work has appeared in numerous venues, and his published novels include "No and Maybe - Maybe and No" (Pski's Porch), 'Le Overgivers au Club de la Résurrection' (Mannequin Haus), 'Understanding Franklin Thompson' (JEF pubs), and 'Sunday Dinner with Father Dwyer' (Optional books). Info at www.jimmeirose.com @jwmeirose

EDITOR'S BIO: Joel Page lives in Dallas where he works as a public defender, writing appeals for federal prisoners. He is the fiction editor for the West Texas Literary Review, even though Dallas is arguably not in west Texas. His fiction has appears in The Fabulist, Thimble Magazine and World Machine Magazine

THE CONFORMIST

By Nick North

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest Editor JONAH HOWELL writes:

Metafiction is dead, and Nick North has killed it. “The Conformist” is the murder weapon: Its only two characters, Nick and Lenny, know their place from the beginning, but rather than talking about it, they act like it, rendering any talk of metafiction old and moot. Their world is inverted, their actions just absurd enough to make perfect sense, and from this relentlessly incomprehensible pool of well-metered prose emerges a conflict of unpretentious, even childish emotion like some Creature from the Black Lagoon.

Lenny swells: He becomes too big for the story. “He doesn’t look so chummy, so no problema anymore, as rankled, jabbed by needles inside him he can’t handle or explain. He has to deal with them some way though he doesn’t know how. It’s the little things that always start the big things.” He rebels against Nick the author and Nick his co-star: He asks, “Why do you get all the good lines?”

Somehow Nick North has found that ever-elusive tightrope between fiction that irrupts through convention and fiction whose pathos keeps it firmly rooted in that same history. Playing with physical law while his characters rebel against him, North simultaneously flexes his authorial muscles and abdicates the power of the same: As Nabokov claimed that his “characters are all galley-slaves,” North adds, “and they sure stretch the limits of their overseer.”

North’s prose is like electroconvulsive therapy.

Five stars.

(Font size is author’s own. Eds.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

He took Nick’s face in his hands like he was going to kiss him and butted his forehead. Nick didn’t know if this was an impulsive gesture at the end of a day of work and task, bringing their time together to a formal but unsettled close or something else. Lenny butted him again, harder this time. Nick saw stars. He butted him back. The pain—it hurt, sure it hurt—set off a throb that was like a single loud syllable, like ‘OM!’ All kinds of wild electricity danced up his neck and shoulders.

THE CONFORMIST

By Nick North

To the Concordia Park, Kitchener, Ontario Poet whose name I don't know. This is for you.

Note: Dialogue is deliberately without parenthesis.

This looks like a good spot.

They put the bag down and looked around. The earth underfoot was lump chernozem, shaded by a couple of spruce trees. Some chickadees (Nature's acrobats) hung upside down from the branches. Nick tamped the ground with his foot.

Not too hard, either.

It'll be easy to dig this.

Hand me the trowel, Lenny. You get the plant ready.

Trowel.

He rooted in the bag of tools and handed it to Nick. The good-looking boy with the blonde hair that made you think 'locks' rather than hair, such is its lusciousness, full and lovely, so yellow, fed by oils from his youthful springs, the clean blood ringing in his well-nourished and beautifully shaped boy fingers, started digging.

Remember when we were talking the other day about getting old?

I remember.

Well I've been thinking about it.

He dug a narrow trench. He made it longer than the plant and the pot laid sideways. He piled earth up around it, smoothed the hole with the back of the trowel and patted down the soil. He set the amaryllis on its side, still in its pot. Then he brushed the dirt back into the shallow pit until the plant and the pot were covered.

I used to think it was the worst thing ever. You're born fresh and ready to rock. And maybe until, what, 45, you do, you're still pretty young.

Then all of a sudden WHAM!

All of a sudden you're 50.

You're 60.

65. Where did my youth go? And shit, if it isn't the front end of a train against all the lies you've told yourself. No wonder old people get depressed. Wake up, look in the bathroom mirror.

Where's my hammer?

Damn straight. But listen. How's this? Maybe what we think is the worst thing that could happen to us, growing old then dying isn't what we think it is. Maybe we're looking at it the wrong way. Instead of the body dying what if it's the spirit coming to life? The embryonic spirit inside that one day will take us to the next level draws its nourishment from the body in order to complete itself. Why we lose muscle mass and motor co-ordination we get older. It's the spirit feeding on the body. If there was no spirit we'd live forever. When it's eaten its fill, we die. The flesh dies. We go on.

We go on as spirits. You know...me?...I'm going to travel big when the time comes, man.

First stop the Milky Way.

Nick patted the last of the soil down. Then he stood up. He put his hands on hips.

You know what we forgot to do? The acid.

So we did, goddammit.

We should have doused the plant before we buried it like you're supposed to.

What do we do now?

Why don't we sprinkle some of it over the soil?

That's a good idea.

Some of it will seep down.

Sure it will. Don't let it touch your gloves or it'll eat through the cloth.

See this hand?

Nick poured.

Steady as a rock.

He distributed the liquid that swarms molecules and strips bones with care dexterous. He started at one end of the plot and dripped evenly in a straight line to the other end. The he started at that end and dripped back again. He made long even lines.

There. That should do it.

Good job.

Some of that juice will get down sure.

Where would we be without gravity?

Is black the new white?

Nick laughed. Well, he had these sumptuous, pearlescent teeth; his teeth cut perfect lines; it was a smile like the Gates of Paradise.

Okay, what's next?

Hydrant.

Right.

You got the jewels?

In my pocket.

Let's boogie.

The hydrant stood on the street corner. They sat down in front of it. Lenny settled the bag on his lap and loosened the leather drawstring. Open, glitter bang.

Start with the diamonds.

Diamonds coming up.

After the diamonds, rubies.

Red glass. What comes after that?

Blue glass, green glass.

Sapphires and emeralds.

Nick squeezed glue from a tube. Lenny reached into the bag and passed him the stones one at a time. Nick dabbed glue onto the back of the Dollarama briolette, the un-radiant rose cut where shine was a struggle. Then he slapped it onto the barnacled surface of the hydrant.

Give me another.

He slapped it on.

The day after I had to put my cat down I walk into the Sally Ann and there's this cat on the shelf. Not a real cat but it looks like a real cat. It's too real for a toy and the fur on it is just like a cat's. It was 4.99. I bought it. When I got home I wrote the name and dates of my cat and the two other cats I had before that on a piece of paper. I taped the paper to the bottom of the Sally Ann cat. It seemed to me, after a time, they were all inside this thing. Their spirits had come to rest inside this cat repository and though they didn't like each other when they were alive, they didn't fight once they got inside. I didn't bring it with me today but I take it everywhere. On the front seat when I'm driving cab. On the table beside my plate when I eat dinner in my apartment. When I wake up in the morning the first thing I do is put it on the rug in the living room where it can get some sun. Take it to bed at night and sleep beside it. We're never apart.

While he talked he glued on the diamonds. After that he glued on the rubies then the others. The hydrant twinkled. Nick stood.

We forgot something.

What?

The pearls.

By God so we did.

There should be pearls along with the other gems.

By God so there should be. By God you're observant.

By God, I am. What should we do, Lenny?

Nothing to do. Pearls be gone!

Out, out! Damn pearls!

Hey, that's funny!

They watch the upside down birds above their heads fly through the air each a daring young man on a flying trapeze.

See them fly!

Pearly flashes in the Gates of Paradise.

Why don't we head over to the park? Watch the ole sun rise in the evening sky. Lenny looked at his watch. It's seven o'clock.

All the vegetation fell over itself being green; arms and limbs hung with verdant shag and branches and wise tree trunks with stories to tell. Above them all a blue vapor rose. The boys had their own bench. The bench was claimed by a poem (written in felt pen). Here's the poem.

Oh don't tell anyone I'm here

I brought Tylenol and beer

I was thinking you'd probably call

I was thinking you'd call somebody

Closer to you

Oh but your love is such a swamp

Yet you're the only thing I want

I said I wouldn't cry about it, I...I...

This is the last time.

They watched the sun climb over the trees the same way hope rises, under the same laws that boil water when it ices over. It would reach the top of the sky by midnight.

He's the richest man in France. One of them. Top five, say. He wears a dress during board meetings and when he goes out at night he puts on real jewels. Necklaces, dangly earrings. He puts on eye shadow and lipstick. He makes no bones about it.

Gay is good, man. Gay is real.

He's a crossdresser. He's also a Catholic. Devout. Gives millions every year to the Church and whatever guy is Pope. And the Pope blesses him. It's because he wants the money.

Some things never change.

And this rich transvestite giver of great buckets of cash—

Seau de cash..

Yes. Thank you. He says, was quoted; I know in my heart of hearts—when a reporter asks how can you cross dress, get fucked in the ass and still be Catholic? How do you spell sodomy, right?

Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sodomy and Gonorrhoea more like. How can you defile the teachings of the Holy Scriptures when you smear scat upon thy walls and windows? When thy beverage of choice be semen and not the waters of Jordan? And he says, in this really soft voice like he's really ashamed of himself, Monsieur, I know in my heart of hearts God loves me.

Halleluia!

Praise the Lord; pass the Trojans.

A crow flies past. It's upside down. Does okay. Across from the bench a pheasant scores with a cat in its mouth. It sees the two boys, crawfishes into the scrub and disappears.

When this story began Lenny was a small man. 5'4 or 5'5. But in the course of the narrative he's grown because now he's 6 feet. He's put on weight, too. He started out at 158, now he tips over 200. He doesn't look so chummy, so *no problema* anymore, as rankled, jabbed by needles inside him he can't handle or explain. He has to deal with them some way though he doesn't know how. It's the little things that always start the big things.

I don't buy that crap about getting old is really the spirit. What you said. People grow old. Grow up and face it. Don't make up shit to pretend it's not happening. Like you gotta mirror. Look in the fucker.

Okay, you disagree. Doesn't mean I'm wrong.

Doesn't mean you're right.

Well, I'm entitled to my opinion.

Maybe I was born on the wrong side of the tracks.

I was born on the other side. Both sides are wrong, Lenny.

Uh-huh.

Uh-huh. I'm entitled to my opinion. Uh-huh.

I don't believe that crap about your cat, either.

Come home with me. I'll show it to you.

It's a piece of junk. There is no cat spirit.

This was when they turned away from each other and watched the sky. Way up there smoke rolled like clouds and the clouds actually looked like smoke; maybe golden and red-amber wands and golden and ruby-red instruments of light impaled and quartered these clouds as high noon stalked towards midnight.

What I notice is you do most of the talking. I don't get to say as much. I want to but I'm not given the chance.

What do you want me to do about it?

Like when we were burying the plant. We still friends, Nicky?

I guess so.

Why do you get all the good lines?

I don't know.

Gluing jewels. Same thing.

What am I supposed to do?

We're still friends, aren't we?

What am I supposed to do?

It's not fair. I got just as much to say as you do.

Hey, man. It's not my party.

Not your party.

It's out of my hands, amigo.

Amigo.

Okay, then. Muchacho.

Okay, then. Ragazzo.

All right, why not hombre?

Seau de cash.

Le crossdresser. Le travesti.

Dude. *Dude*. Look. There's worse things in life. Isn't silence supposed to be golden?

I don't want to be silent. I'm the one who wants to say stuff about the body dying and what getting old really means and about the Pope and gay guys.

And don't forget the cat.

You keep the cat. I don't even like cats. We still friends, Nicky?

I don't know, are we?

He took Nick's face in his hands like he was going to kiss him and butted his forehead. Nick didn't know if this was an impulsive gesture at the end of a day of work and task, bringing their time together to a formal but unsettled close or something else. Lenny butted him again, harder this time. Nick saw stars. He butted him back. The pain—it hurt, sure it hurt—set off a throb that was like a single loud syllable, like 'OM!' All kinds of wild electricity danced up his neck and shoulders.

Go home why doncha!

Get a life!

Heads pressed together, eyeballs touching, jellyfish sting. Sad rancor rolled in the steam of rut. Nick felt lidded and dumb. He butted again but he was shorter, smaller than Lenny, and while he got more lines he hadn't grown. So Lenny could hard-knock Nick.

Go home. Go home to the cat I hate, Nicky!

Get a life! Nick shouted. He stood up. He reeled back and swayed on his feet. The ground swirled.

Go home!

Get a life!

Break a leg. Kick a dog. Make a bomb! Lenny shouted.

Get a life! Nick shouted.

We still friends?

No.

Hey, what happened to your face?

Hey, get a life!

Nick is a good boy. He brushes his teeth; heats canned food according to the directions on the tin and changes his whities every morning. It's a Canadian face, open door to a brightly lit room, no lines on his forehead. A tooth falls out. Nick limps out of the park. A bone has broken in his nose. He holds his hands to his cheek. It's a good face. As was said of the young Lenny Bruce...*'all the restraints and inhibitions and disabilities that formerly kept him just mediocre*

began to blow with a spontaneous freedom and resourcefulness that resembled the style of..of..of what precisely...' Blood streamed through his fingers.

April 13, 2019 @ 11:27pm

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I was playing around with the idea of fiction as a closed system and when I started writing this story, the idea kind of took over. By closed system I mean a fiction that exists qua fiction that may parallel our reality but does but does not replicate or describe it because the necessary infrastructure has been replaced. What Lenny and Nick do in the story is absurd but everything fits if you grant the initial assumption: in this case, that natural order has assumed a different shape and the classic, even Newtonian laws of physics (and by extension 'macro-reality') have broken down. It's sort of like sci/fi but not really. The point where the story turns from linear narrative to metafiction was something that just happened. Traditionally, fiction has necessitated a duality between author and story that exclude one another. I'm a participant in The Conformist but also a character outside of it and on top of this also the author. It's like looking at a mirror image of myself to see the mirror image of myself mirrored in the story. This story led to others in the absurdist style and represents a departure from my earlier writing. The metafiction starts when they reach the park. I want to say that I did not write the poem included here. I don't know who the poet is. I discovered it written in black marker on a bench in Concordia Park, Kitchener one day when I was biking. I left my phone at home so couldn't take a pic and had to memorize it on the ride back. I hope whoever wrote it will read this some day.*

Once again I want to sincerely thank Guest Editor Jonah Howell for his elegant and penetrating analysis of this story. Writers need people to survive and people who understand them to thrive.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Not much has changed from when I wrote *9 ordinary words...* so just read the bio under that story.

EDITOR'S BIO: Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. You can find his recent work in *Half Mystic Journal* (Issue 8) and *Expat Press*. His story **Amor Fati** was featured in Issue 5 and **Anatomy of Melancholie** appeared in Issue 7.

Stories of Space Age

Horror

By: Tom Ball

"It's all horror and madness."

The Marquis of Venus

WHY WE LIKE IT: *um...because we have to?*

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language):*

She said, "You allowed to have yourself changed from a great intellectual into a mouse of a man. You are not the man she used to know," she said.

I asked, "Can you put me back to the way I was before?" She said, "She had contacts in the underground that might be willing to help restore your personality and memories."

So I went for it, but she said, "You are not the same and I don't like you anymore." So, I did the right thing and killed myself.

Lovicide

I was disgruntled and at the same time full of horror. I was deathly afraid of my lover in this World milieu of love killings. People said, if you really love someone, you should kill them. And women killed as many as men did. It was lovicide. Here on Earth in the year 2152 A.D. the population was down to 7 million from all of the murders. And murder wasn't illegal, so some murdered many and were serial killers in essence. People

wondered why there wasn't a big war or plague or something to kill even more off, since that is what the regime seemed to be supporting; death!"

Like many others I was paranoid. And I never went to sleep in the same hotel room as my lovers.

Indeed, these were desperate times, and many were desperate for love and succour.

There was no reward for murder, it was just something people liked to do. And all murders felt they were heroes. It was widely believed that killing was a thrill, especially to shoot them while they were awake and hear their last words. A heroin overdose was the weapon of choice for would-be murderers.

Finally, my time had come, my lover had pointed a gun at me and told me I was about to die; and as I bled to death, I reflected, it was a mad World of horror.

No Police on Venus

I wondered why there was no police here on Venus. It was anarchy and gangs ruled. Everyone I met here was an asshole. It was a World of nightmares for me and I was constantly worried I'd be killed. I built my own fortified tunnel. And none could pass my gates unless I allowed them to. I dreamed of being murdered in thousands of ways by different people.

Finally, a girl convinced me to let her in; she said, "She wanted to love me."

But sure enough, she was a murderer too and she brought back corpses to my tunnel for us to eat. It was cannibalism sure, but we were hungry.

Then one day she turned on me and murdered me; I wondered if I would be good eating.

The Cruelty of Virtual Reality

I wondered why Virtual Reality (VR) was so cruel and violent. It was as if people had a grudge against society and other people. Most VR involved battle and plague and one could die in the VR quite easily. And this was irrevocable death. When in VR, you appeared as a hologram while your real body was in a state of dreams/sleep. But if you died in VR your body quickly decomposed and was removed by cleaning robots.

I was afraid to go to VR, and die like a dog, but most people were in it and admittedly life was dull and boring outside of VR. But better to be bored than dead, I reflected.

But I had a nice lover now, and life was sublime, but one night she sent me to VR while I was sleeping, and I soon died there in the middle of a battle.

The Happiest Place in the Universe

I heard it through the grapevine that the electors of Venus 21, were going to make me mayor. Frankly I was surprized. The electors were 12 in number and generally rich and progressive. But I was a total progressive and I wanted to turn Venus 21 into a hub of manufacturing and production. Like air cars that could stand the crushing Venusian barometric pressure and luxury goods for the many rich of Venus. And steel and strong glass for building. It was the year 2161 and millions and millions lived on Venus. I was also progressive socially. I wanted to force everyone to be happy. We'd use neo lie detectors and determine if they were really happy and if not, they needed to see a shrink. If that didn't work, they'd be sent to Rehab and have genetic therapy to change their brains. I aimed to make Venus 21 the happiest place in the universe. People would come from far and wide in order to be happy. And we would have every luxury for the people including android sex dolls and new drugs.

So, I became mayor. But many people were unhappy and didn't want their brain changed. The horrors they said. I said, "Well then we'll just hypnotise you to change your mindset through benevolent post-hypnotic suggestion." This they were willing to do at first. But as time went on, many were still unhappy, and I was afraid the discontent would spread so I forced them all into brain therapy.

Haunted

I said to the girl, "What's that noise?" She said, "It sounds like a man dragging an axe over the floor!" I said, "You are just trying to frighten me. And you are doing a good job of it." She said, "But of course you are here to protect me." We opened the doors to the other rooms in the building we were in, and found there was no one here. "We are haunted," I said "For all the questionable things we've done like killing my grandfather for his money. We both heard what appeared to be a man dragging an axe in our house at separate times." She said, "It couldn't be an aural hallucination, since we both hear it." It was hard to get a good sleep in with the noise. We were nervous wrecks. Finally, we moved to a new house, but the noises continued, and we both ardently wished that

we could bring grandfather back to life. So, we pooled our money and cloned him. Then the noises only got worse and finally we both overdosed and died.

World of Matricide and Patricide

I thought to myself, this World is a real horror. Every girl was required to have at least twins every year and the children were bred for patricide and matricide. It was really quite scary.

And the powers that be believed in the new generation of killers.

The leaders themselves were all in their twenties and had no time for old fogies.

I was one of the last of the old generation to die, my kids seemed to have some respect for me as a former famous author. But finally, one of my sons stabbed me to death, and as I lay dying, "I begged him to spare his mother." He told me, "All old-fashioned people had to die. They are a vexation to youthful spirits."

Spies in the Head

I wanted, a more equitable society. But all I got was harassment by the spies. The spies poisoned my lovers against me and so too my friends.

I told them, "They could f—k right off." Then they somehow got into my head and forced me to kowtow to the powers that be. Just be glad we haven't killed you they said.

But they had made me miserable and lonely. I was afraid to seek out new lovers as they too would get the head treatment.

Finally, I killed myself.

The Horror of the New American Empire

I said, "It sounds like state-sponsored terrorism, with the USA sending battle troops into chaotic World situations and killing many civilians. The President wanted a new American Empire and wanted to take over the governments of many sovereign states. And many governments welcomed the chance to join the USA... But they realized

quickly that Americans were taking over their economy and most people in their respective countries were wage slaves. There seemed to be no end to the abuse in this World. And many wage slaves were abused by their masters. Some cried out it was a horrific World, but the World media didn't cover it."

Reprogramming the Love Androids

I fornicated with the androids of Neptune's Moon Triton. But it was a dangerous game. If you didn't please the android lovers, they'd try to kill you. Initially the androids were peaceable and non-violent, but a woman named Wilma, reigned here for a while and reprogrammed them. So, if one was going to love an android, it had better be good. And you had to really like the love dolls. Not just use them for sex.

But I prided myself on being a consummate lover, but then one love doll wanted violent sex and I gave it to her, but she suddenly grabbed my throat and was very strong and I died. Such were the horrors of Space. Of course, the punishment for murder was genetic therapy in Rehab., but she was bored of her brain anyway.

Murder on Mercury

I felt that I had done my share for the people of Mercury. I had been mayor of the largest of four colonies for six years and had presided over a quintupling of the population to 10,100. It was a rich colony as we had a lot of metals and solar power. And tourists came here to see the wildlife. It was the year 2106 and we had Mercurian djinnis and leprechauns and centaurs and nymphs etc. etc. All the wildlife were powered by solar power and were types of androids. The djinnies in particular were popular for granting wishes, but they would twist the wish around and give you bad nightmarish scenarios. For example, if you wished to be famous you might find yourself the most famous latrine cleaner in the Universe. And if you met a leprechaun you would be in for trickery and shenanigans. Nymphs meanwhile wanted to love you and centaurs liked to party and so on and so forth...

I had the Planet buzzing with tourists, but my successor blew it and cheated all the tourists and blamed it on me. So, tourists came hunting for me and finally, one of them murdered me. What a waste! I figured as I lay dying.

Sybaris on Triton

They were the debauched survivors of a hedonistic colony on Neptune's Triton Moon. They had a nuclear meltdown and only a few escaped to orbit this Moon. Previously this Moon had attracted numerous hedonistic tourists who wanted all out debauchery. The colony was called Sybaris.

But selling foreigners real estate had also been great business including ocean melted territory.

But there was bad news from Earth. Apparently, they'd had WW III between America and its allies and China/Russia/India and their allies. The whole world apparently burned. And even in Antarctica there were biological weapons loose in the general populace.

So, the ten of us 4 men and 6 women were stuck here for the foreseeable future. And we all suffered from cabin fever and drove each other nuts in the close confines of the orbiter. Finally, one of the men killed the other 3 and so was the only man amongst 6 women. The women wanted him dead on the one hand, but on the other hand they wouldn't be able to survive without a male. They had eternal youth, so lived on and on, but the man had sabotaged the sperm and egg banks. So, they were stuck with him. But he did get all six pregnant several times and their children grew up according to the education he wanted to give them, namely, to live to worship him.

Then he had some trouble with one of the boys, so he decided to kill all his male descendants and loved his female children sexually... when they became 16. The girls were too young to resist him.

One Way Ticket to Paradise

To me, this World was a horror story. Everyone in this World was gay and/or androgynous. I wondered how the Supercomputer could have sent me here. I didn't belong. The computer said, "Don't those androgynous babes turn you on?" I said, "No, not at all.

So, then the Supercomputer sent me to a World of pretty flowers. And I met a nymph here. The nymph said, "She knew all about me and wanted to love me!" So, I went for it and it was sensuous and great. But then she said, "I had to stay with her forever." I said, "It's a big wide World out there..." She said, "No, coming here was a one-way ticket. You can never leave." I spoke into the air, "Computer!" But there was no response. It had never failed to respond to me before.

The nymph spoke and said, "I am your perfect lover..." And I wondered if this was some kind of test? I sulked alone for a few days. Then I decided to love the nymph again. And after a few days she did seem to be a real soul mate. But I told her, "I was a futuristic writer." And she said, "Your future begins and ends here with me."

So, I refused to love her and went off sulking again. I kept shouting in the air, "Computer!" After a few weeks it was obvious that I was stuck here. So, I took my own life.

Mirror, Mirror

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the brightest of all?" I asked. "The Supercomputer mirror said, "It is a scientist who lives in deep space, 3 years journey." I asked, "What could he/she teach me?" The mirror said, "This man had a new physics, which allowed Spacecraft to fly faster by a factor of 8. And he is surrounded by a number of super genius women. You've never had a super genius woman!" It said. I said, "How can I increase my intelligence to match him?" It said, "It's a bridge too far; you would go insane if you improved your mind to that degree. But this scientist can handle more and more intelligence." And I asked the mirror, "How can I get a super genius woman?" "You are not bright enough," it said.

So, I shattered the mirror with my fist and cut my jugular vein on the broken glass and died.

Dancing to Earth's Tune

So, I said to the girl, "We had to dance to the tune of the Earth's Supreme leadership." Which meant we had to give all our profits back to the government except for 10%. Still even at 10%, Space real estate was valuable and profitable. And we made a good living here on Venus. The air pressure here was a problem but we lived underground but controlled the tunnels in various areas.

Many were obsessed with the concept of loving on Venus and many famous celebrities had come here to live in the tunnels and caverns.

Some even wanted to build skyscrapers despite the enormous air pressure. Which was now doable. So, we finally built domed cities on Venus but there was a horrific aspect to it: most people here were mad and dangerously unstable. And would murder others at the drop of a hat.

She, my former lover, personally was kept in a cage, by her current lover and people thought she was a sexy girl and would wank off on her. It was bad surrealism, I thought. And I wished I could have saved her from her chains.

Wild Women Rodeo

In this rodeo, lightweight men rode on the backs of strong women and aimed to lasso “wild women. The wild women were captured in the new jungle of Venus and some couldn’t even speak.

Venus was now terraformed in the year 2195. After their first and only rodeo, the wild women were auctioned off to the highest bidder. I bought some of the really wild ones, but they were really dangerous. One hit me with a lamp while I was sleeping, another stabbed me with a small knife. But I survived.

And the wild women were really good in bed, even those who were virgins. They had boundless, crazy energy and it was difficult to keep up with them.

I had a harem of 25 of these wild women and loved every one of them hard. But finally, they were bored and all of them broke into my bedroom and suffocated me with a piece of debris.

Galileo’s Romance

I was singing the blues on Jupiter’s Moon, Io. I lived in colony #3, “Galileo’s Romance.” But the women here demanded, 50% of your wealth up front as a precondition to love. And they enjoyed dumping men and breaking their hearts.

My fortune was now only 1/32nd of what it had been and my former loves were living high. It was a bad vibe.

And women controlled the government and men had to work jobs that were chosen for them. But they were not paid for their work and inevitably their bank accounts were zero. And then they’d be trapped on Galileo’s Romance forever. Few got out while they still could, most told themselves, they would eventually find love here. Most of the

women were extremely attractive and fiendishly clever. And men fell slavishly in love with them.

Men dreamed of being kept in cages by the women here. And no one believed in romance, just sex.

But in my case, I had high ratings so many women wanted to love me, and they wore me out.

However, then one woman was dissatisfied with me and had me executed. I figured no one would care.

Marooned on Planetoid X

I was having trouble connecting with female holograms, living on Planetoid X. No girl wanted to come here neither human nor hologram. My job on the Planetoid was to oversee the power system and I was an engineer. It was a well-paying job, but I had signed a twenty-year contract and had to work alone most of the day and there were no available women here. I gradually fell into a depression. I tried to hook up with holos on Earth net and had at least some love. But it wasn't the same as a real woman. And wanted to die, so I hung myself.

Turned into a Toad

I'd been changed by the government into a toad. I still had my mind, but, I was horny for female toads. And I liked just sitting beside an attractive female. Then one day I caught the attention of a human Princess. And finally, she kissed me and got warts as a result, so she then hunted me down and killed me.

Engineering Bees

I was wondering aloud, "Why everyone on this Moon, Mirabel, orbiting Uranus, was so serious?" They said they were busy doing science and building up machines to make living here Utopia. Busy as bees.

I told, "The 'bees,'" the whole idea of Utopia is to live pleurably, and they were working double-shifts in their engineering and science."

So, I started a business for clever tourists to come here and do new, illicit drugs, far stronger than heroin. And we were all spaced out in Lotus Land. The drugs wreaked havoc with our liver and kidneys, but we just got new stem cell organs. We had amazing dreams on the drugs (which stimulated the imagination), and wrote the dreams down and sold them for big bucks. We were all talented dreamers who enjoyed the thrill of Space.

But then suddenly the scientists arrested us and tried us for "Illicit hedonism." They found us guilty and the punishment was brain surgery to make us just like the busy bees. "The horrors," I said.

Murder in Space

I opined that people these days tended to suffocate their lovers with attention. Of course, on this Moon of Uranus, Puck, it was a very small Moon and all 50 of us had cabin fever. There was simply nothing else to do besides romance your lover. Most of us here were monogamous. But 10 were bisexual and loved one another loosely.

Then one day we had our first murder, and we had a meeting about it and decided to punish the murderer with brain surgery. Some of our robots could do brain alteration. But we were all saddened it had come to this.

That year we had 12 murders and 16 guilty murderers. We gave them all brain alteration, but we told Earth we wanted out. But Earth was busy with wars and plague and told us we were on our own.

I figured Space would be a horror for any colony and when we communicated with other Space colonies, we learned they had severe problems with suicide and murder, especially the former. But we had no suicides here, for some reason. I guess the reason was it was a good place.

Erasing Memories

I'd been thinking, what if we could create a World with no memories? One would be educated of course, and remember that, but upon reaching 18, one would not remember their experiences. This was good in that it eliminated bad experiences; and in

this cruel World most experiences were negative. I created this city/World on Moon Ganymede, orbiting Jupiter. And everyone seemed to be happy. But UN scholars decried my new city and said it was a crime against humanity to make a virtue out of forgetting. I said, "It's just like being a heavy drinker on Earth and forgetting the previous night."

And so finally, they arrested me and reformatted my brain and deported the colonists back to Earth.

Slandering Bozo

I jokingly referred to our leader as "Bozo," but she didn't like it when she heard about it. So, she used her power as mayor of New Detroit on the Moon, to arrest me and torture me in her dungeon. The horrors. When I was finally released ten years later, my back was broken, and I was doubled over and could hardly walk. The former mayor had been indicted on charges of crimes against humanity including 12 people she tortured. But doctors told us victims that we needed a new body and that they would like to remove some of the horrific memories in our brains. But I wanted to remember every moment and finally, I gunned down the ex-mayor while she was coming out of her trial. But then I was charged with murder and sent to the infamous Luna prison where I was raped and even poisoned. The horrors.

Cursed Fate of a Superhuman

I said to all who cared to listen, "That I was a superhuman created in the lab." People believed me given the current World milieu and wanted to share my wisdom. But I told them, it is not a free service, they had to pay for consultation. But this aggravated many who said I was greedy and a disgrace to the human race. So finally, a mob attacked me and hung me, and I died.

The Disappearance of Radicals

I voiced my opinion, "Life was, and always had been, a struggle to survive." The girl said, "For the royalty, life has largely been a giant panacea." But I said, "Now we are all living like royalty, except we lack power." She answered, "To actually want power is to be crazy." I said, "I beg to differ, power is something everyone strives towards. Everyone wants promotions in their job and new lovers and children to control and love."

She replied, "It's all madness!"

And she told me, "She used to be a radical like me, but government agents had altered her thinking and you seem to be right, but she couldn't go there and follow me."

I said, "I am not surprised. The government doesn't like radical thinkers and many who seemed to have good ideas disappeared from the radar."

And I said, "They'll no doubt come for me one day. The horrors."

Mandatory Virtual Reality

I was in a difficult situation. I was caught in the crossfire between the warring sides. On one hand were the Earth police, on the other hand were the upstarts on Venus. The Venusians wanted a World where everyone was required to fall in love and spend all their time pursuing love, the UN police wanted only Virtual Reality for the people here. VR, they said, was much more exciting than mere love affairs. In VR, love was just a small part of it. It was hard to believe they could come to blows over such trivial matters. But there was a brief war in which the Venusians lost and henceforth we all had to join VR. But the VR was dangerous and many of us died. But Space was a horror and so too Earth. The UN claimed that life had always been dangerous, and this was nothing new. And they sent those who didn't want to go to VR Worlds to a trial with capital punishment as a Reality.

Excitement on Venus, the Mad Colony

There were several colonies on Venus, the most obscure one was the Mad Colony. Here people drove each other completely crazy and everyone was on anti-psychotic drugs and even the shrinks were insane. So gradually people immersed themselves in video games and ignored the other colonists. There were 200 people here. Now everyone lived in their own cell deep below ground and the Earth Net was their lifeline. They even played romantic Virtual Reality games and loved people on Earth, Virtually.

Most of the colonists wished they were back on Earth, but all had signed a contract to stay here for life.

A Woman Who was Hard to Please

I was wandering around Luna and saw numerous crater mines for water and metals. But not all was right on the Moon, the government was a tyranny and cruel. And privately most of the citizens were upset and aghast. But in public almost everyone went along with the female tyrant. Many said they were in love with her.

But she required all men to love her wildly and if she was disappointed, she would have them executed. I was one of the ones who pleased her, and she rewarded me with gold. But I was expected to use the gold to create golden clothes to wear. And golden jewelry for her

I tread carefully but finally in a fit of pique, bored with me, she had my head on a platter.

Schizophrenic Dog

I was certified insane as a schizophrenic. I was convinced the spies were in my head. I would talk to myself and talk to the voices. I heard my ex-boyfriend in my head, and he urged me, "To come back to him! So, I went to him and told him, "I would be his slave." He said, "OK, I'll take you back." And so, he put a leash on me and introduced his friends to his new "dog." He had another girlfriend who he loved while I watched, and he rarely had sex with me. But now the voices told me to bark like a dog and pee on fire hydrants and play fetch. It was all so demeaning. But finally, I couldn't take it anymore. So, I bit him on the jugular vein, and he died with no one else around. Then the voices chastised me and told me to advertise to be a pet in space. Finally, a space going gentleman picked me up and stabbed me with his dick and took me into deep space, which was fine by me.

Android Love Doll Luck

I was lonely and no woman wanted me because I was so poor. So finally, I scrounged up enough cash to buy an old android love doll. I bought her from another poor man who had nevertheless got hold of a later model of love doll.

But my love doll was jaded and said, "She didn't like me, and she wanted me to sell her to a rich man." I said, "No rich man wants an older model like you." But I finally sold her to another poor man and used the profits to buy another love doll. This one and I clicked and had a fine time. And she asked me to marry her. So, I did. We had a lot of good times together, but then one day she stabbed me to death for no apparent reason. As I lay dying, I felt that I had had bad luck.

Death of a Nymphomaniac

She was a nymphomaniac now. She'd been a shy wallflower previously, but now was aggressive and bold in her quest to find sex and love. She had herpes and AIDS and the only safe way to have sex with her was to wear a condom and boxer shorts. But few men did and so caught herpes for sure. Men said that she was evil. She preyed upon drunken men in the bars and was very attractive at first sight.

Finally, one of the men she'd infected with herpes, strangled her to death. Herpes was now curable so after he killed her the murderer got cured.

She Hated Men

She was a cold, calculating bitch, she was a homewrecker and seduced many men with her wiles.

She was angry at the World, especially about men in general.

But she was playing a dangerous game and finally one of the men shot her in the heart and she died. She had thought she would live forever with eternal youth on the horizon.

Driven Insane by Mind Reading

Mind Reading Technology (MRT) was widely thought as the solution to all the World's problems. But in fact, it just made most people insane. Everyone it seemed was having mental problems. And everyone was paranoid. It wasn't the Utopia they said it would be. Murders were par for the course now and it seemed everyone was a murderer. They tried to rehabilitate the murderers but there were so many of them, including most of the leaders, so they finally gave up.

The Thrill of Lovicide

I said, "I had committed murder of my lover, it was femicide, it was lovicide. But she was cheating on me almost every day and didn't care about my feelings. It was good I killed her so she couldn't break any more hearts."

My new love said, "You deserved better."

I replied, "Yes and I'm glad I found you."

But these days of lawlessness on Earth and in Space, make love a dangerous game to play. But some said, it only added to the thrill.

The Big Purple One

For the people on Venus, polls showed their greatest fear was the unknown. But they created all sorts of fanciful creatures with unknown potential. It was a free for all, but they created many dangerous monsters. Finally, the monsters absorbed the populace and got in their heads, driving them insane. Venus was now under control of the "Big Purple One," a mastermind who wanted to take over Earth as well. Little was known about him, except his mind was different from humans and his motives were murky.

So, the Big Purple One, infiltrated Earth governments and proved himself a capable administrator and finally was elected to the now all-powerful position of Secretary General of the UN. A monster had taken over and no one seemed to care.

Downfall of an Intellectual

She said, "You allowed to have yourself changed from a great intellectual into a mouse of a man. You are not the man she used to know," she said.

I asked, "Can you put me back to the way I was before?" She said, "She had contacts in the underground that might be willing to help restore your personality and memories."

So I went for it, but she said, "You are not the same and I don't like you anymore." So, I did the right thing and killed myself.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Some say we already live in a World of Horror. Some people have debilitating disease that makes them ugly and miserable. Others are gifted but piss it away. In the future horror will be all over the place in every facet of society there will be some horror. Maybe the entire Earth will be a living nightmare. In the past it has often been a nightmare society particularly for thinkers.*

Despite living in an "Enlightened Age," many tyrants rule and the people are sometimes without food to eat. And we are plagued by Covid-19. The horrors!

The value of science fiction is to prepare people for potential eventualities before they happen. If only they would pay heed.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Together with Charles Pinch, Tom Ball is cofounder, publisher and senior editor at *Fleas on the Dog*. He bodily resides in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. We're not sure about his mind.

Hallow's Evening (Version 1)

By Jeff **Blechle**

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor JIM MEIROSE writes:*

Years back a fairly accomplished mentor of mine told me, "Structure Sells". That stuck with me ever since. I've not yet found it to be untrue. "Hallow's Evening" is one more proof that yes, in fact, structure does sell. Plus, structure brings every ounce of potential inherent in any story idea fully to life, as well. "Hallow's Evening" is a fine example of a well-structured fictional text. The action at the start instantly pulls the reader in. And, of course, the first lines lull us into a comfortable belief that we know exactly what kind of story to expect as we go on. For example;

"Who do you think you are, man?" Grasping a fistful of Mike's golden locks, Lucy yanked until his Adam's apple bulged. "Groping ape. Your wife will hear about this."

Most readers will feel they know what to expect next, but, a line or two further, they are yanked back—albeit smoothly—into having to throw out that first snap judgement and recalibrate—and will hungrily read on to see where it all goes, attentively seeking what the next plot revelation will be. This sort of thing goes on several more times, with the tension building by degrees, until finally, it's all over—with the dizzied reader having been thoroughly surprised—having just taken this very wild ride. "Hallow's Evening" is the literary equivalent of a series of bracing splashes in the face of ice-cold water. And this due to a unique plot and deft structure. Solid work, well done.

Five stars.

Senior Editor Charles writes: *After we accepted Hallow's Evening, Jeff sent us a revised version to replace it. We couldn't decide which cut we liked best so we took them both. It's a good way of seeing a writer at work from inside the garret, so to speak,—an opportunity we don't often have—but also reminds us that writing (all art) is process, always in flux, and any stopping point is a new beginning. Is there really such a thing as a finished story? Spacing and font size are author's own. Version 2 follows in the TOC.*

Hallows' Evening

“Who do you think you are, man?” Grasping a fistful of Mike’s golden locks, Lucy yanked until his Adam’s apple bulged. “Groping ape. Your wife will hear about this.”

Mike pulled free and dragged a janitorial catalog off the coffee table and slammed it across Lucy’s damp red head and she sprawled face down onto the living room floor. He grabbed the mallet he had come over to borrow from Mr. Montelli, placed the catalog over her back and hammered it violently, moving it along the backside of her body. Then he propped her up in the recliner, reclined it, fixed her clothing and hair, closed her legs. Construing her smirk, he cataloged her head again. Then— “Oh shit.”

Mr. Montelli threw open the front door and clamored in lamenting false alarms and idiot employees. When he saw Lucy in the recliner, his cigar ashed his chin. “What’s her problem?”

Mike relaxed his shrug and returned the catalog and explained what happened and Mr. Montelli expressed disgust, but not surprise, that Lucy had gone shot crazy and

ricocheted off an end table. Mr. Montelli slapped her lightly on the cheek and admitted that last night he had caught her painting a pentagram on his attic floor.

The men crossed the room and sat on octagon stools at the bar, watching the woman's pale damp head protruding into the beveled edge of the mirror. Mr. Montelli poured two double vodkas on the rocks and slid one to his right.

"Never get involved with a slob cleaning lady, Mike. Christ, look how big her nose is when her hair's slicked back."

Mike couldn't look at her reflection with his own staring him down. Over thirty years of ogling himself and he still couldn't get over how handsome—how flawless—he came across, and he was a modest critic. Even his thoughts continued to astound him, but why shouldn't they, coming from such a lovely head? Human beings worshipped him and women that didn't run up and kiss him on the mouth were no credit to the race. Out of this world he certainly was, but more importantly, he positively glowed, albeit with a negative charge.

"Yeah, as soon as you left, she started in. I couldn't tell if she was on the level—at first."

"She's ignor'nt. What'd she say?"

Mike claimed that what Lucy said was too humiliating to repeat.

Mr. Montelli turned around and glared at her as if the expansive mirror might be hiding something from him. "What'd that lying beak-nosed numskull say?"

"Well, um, she said you have an *eensy little dick*—emphasis hers—

that you couldn't use right even if it came with directions, and as far as she can tell, you're a corpse and pretending not to be, but not very well." Mike shook his grave expression. "Said she lost her ass bartering with you."

"I hear she has two sisters just like her," Mr. Montelli mumbled faintly and brokenly, a gargoyle crouching lower on his stool. He downed more vodka and stared into the mirror where a golden idol modeled to his right. "I'm just sorry I had to leave you with the sunken-eyed tramp for ten minutes."

Lucy hiccupped and a stream of blood trickled out of her ear and blended with her hair.

"You're so lucky to have a beautiful perfect wife like Crystal and not some dick-nosed goofy clown like I got. Let me see her picture again." Mr. Montelli poured, admiring the picture Mike held up. "All Lucy does is sit around all day and call those psychic hotlines for tips. What else'd she say?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit."

"All right. She said she caught you playing with yourself the other day and all you could do was give her some startled moronic look while she filmed. And, oh yeah, you can't do anything well whatsoever, and she can prove it."

Mr. Montelli fell off his stool then sheepishly climbed back on.

"Then she— I tried to stop her but—"

Mr. Montelli's balding head beamed in a new layer of sweat. "But what? What'd she do? Well? What'd the cackling—pink-faced bullshitter do?"

"Look, I don't know you guys that well. I'm just here to borrow a mallet."

Mr. Montelli slurped from the bottle, then insisted that Mike shut up and dish.

“Okay, Tony “Anthony” Montelli,” Mike said, spinning a triangular coaster on the bar and staring at his host’s reflection. “She tried to fuck me right through my clothes, man. No shit. Telling me how she fucked all kinds of guys in the back of your bread store while you were kneading dough. Said she would gank you if I would just once let her suck my dick. Threatened a threesome with me and some voodoo priest she met at a yard sale. Then you pulled up as she was breaking acrobatic.” He sipped his vodka. “Can I still borrow your mallet?”

Mr. Montelli’s skin rivaled the color of a last drink of strawberry milk. He left his stool and rattled into another room, then returned with a leather belt folded in half and stood over Lucy, snapping it. Mike joined him.

They looked at each other, at Lucy, at each other.

“Let’s fuck her.” *Snap!*

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Okay.” Mike cleared his throat. “I mean— Right here?”

“Right here.”

They undressed.

“But first I’m giving her a goodly taste of leather.” Mr. Montelli, down to his black dress socks and glasses, lifted the looped belt under her chin. “Witch doctor at a rummage sale, huh?” He reared back. “You dirty miserable wart-nosed sleezy pink-orange—”

Lucy's eyes blasted him like black holes puking stars. She hiked back her knee and slammed the brakes on his bare crotch. He doubled hard. She bloodied his mouth with an ashtray. "Let's fuck her? You jackasses! I'm gonna eat you two raw!" She shouldered Mr. Montelli into a loveseat, thrashed him with the belt. Wheezing, she charged Mike, who was hopping into his chinos.

"Hey, it was your old man's idea!"

"Whose old man?" She wrapped the belt around his neck and with his head twice slammed the couch arm. She bridled his open mouth, whipping him up and down and to and fro. "Whose idea was it to beat me half to death? You sick fuck! Talking shit about me!" She dragged his crown into a faux marble pillar, and he was out. She rifled his wallet, scanned his driver's license. "Eleven sixty-four Morning Glory Circle. Figures."

She seized the mallet. Positioning herself in front of Mr. Montelli as if he were a goof ball on a tee, she reared back in a three-quarter twist. He writhed just enough. She sank his birdie.

Lucy showered her throbbing body, donned a flowing sable cowl, and then went for a limping stroll toward Mike's house with the mallet swinging in and out of dark folds, sidestepping frightful children and dried leaves that scratched along sidewalks and streets, stopping occasionally to smile up at streetlights and stars and, remembering her catechism, arrange them into homicidal portents. Soon she stood in the warm glow of Mike's porch light, imagining his perfect beautiful wife. She pushed the doorbell.

The door opened and a gray-haired woman holding a poodle appeared in light from another room.

Lucy leaned back and checked the house number. “Um, I’m looking for Mike’s wife.”

“Who? Ain’t nobody’s wife. You must have the wrong address.” The poodle barked. “Oh.” The woman reached into a corner of shadows and pulled out a fistful of butterscotch candies. “Well, where’s your bag?”

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

“Hallows’ Evening” is a scene from my old story, “God’s Totally Pissed” that I reworked into something a little less outrageous. I did that by changing all the words and punctuation. I also used fake coherence and, like the great masters, zero symbolism, save the em dashes. Imagine doing that and coming up with something readable. Some people think I’m clairvoyant or clever, and I dare not correct them, mostly because I don’t know where they are.

My theme in this story is the ineffectiveness of black magic when used alongside greed and against insults, irreverence, and misogyny. Lucy is a witch who didn’t do the necessary research to fool someone, and neither did I. She resorts to the physical violence of “Mike” and Montelli because it’s so much quicker than waiting for spells to take effect, and, sadly, you really must have faith for a good half of them to work, green candles notwithstanding. In the end, she almost gets what she most wants. But alas! Aha! The poodle knows her all too well and, changing the subject and protecting its owner, foils Lucy’s plan. Imagine Lucy, pushing forty, mallet between her knees, muttering excuses, patting down her scowl for something to carry her dark future in, then the door slams, lights go out.

If only Mike had come over to borrow a bazooka.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Jeff Blechle lives in Illinois. He has self-published short story collections on Amazon.com under the name Margaret C. Strunkel. My work has appeared in 13th Warrior, Frigg, Fleas on the Dog, Litro, The Jewish Magazine, Literally Stories, and Timber Creek Review, among others. His story **Pink Eye** was published in Issue 4.

EDITOR’S BIO: Jim Meirose's short work has appeared in numerous venues, and his published novels include "No and Maybe - Maybe and No" (Pski's Porch), 'Le Overgivers au Club de la Résurrection' (Mannequin Haus), 'Understanding Franklin Thompson' (JEF pubs), and 'Sunday Dinner with Father Dwyer' (Optional books). Info at www.jimmeirose.com His story **After Her Water’d Broke One Bitsy-Time Prior** appeared in Issue 5.

Hallow's Evening (Version 2)

By Jeff Blechle

Spacing and font size is author's own. Version 1 appears above this in the TOC. Eds.

Hallows' Evening

“Who do you think you are, man?” Grasping a fistful of Mike’s golden locks, Lucy yanked until his Adam’s apple bulged. “Groping ape. Your wife will hear about this.”

Mike pulled free and dragged a thick janitorial catalog off the coffee table and slammed it across Lucy’s damp red head and watched her sprawl face down onto the living room floor. He grabbed the mallet he had come over to borrow from Mr. Montelli, turned it in his hand, then respectfully set it back against the wall. Propping her up in a recliner, he reclined it, fixed her clothing and hair, closed her legs. Construing her smirk, he cataloged her head again. Then— “Shit.”

Mr. Montelli threw open the front door and clamored in lamenting false alarms and idiot employees. When he saw Lucy in the recliner, his cigar tapped his chin.

“What’s up her ass?”

Mike relaxed his shrug and returned the catalog to its exact spot before explaining.

Mr. Montelli expressed disgust, but not surprise, that Lucy had gone shot crazy and ricocheted off an end table. He lightly slapped her cheek and admitted that last night he had caught her painting a pentagram on his attic floor. His picture, surrounded by green candles, smiled up at him from its center.

The men crossed the room and sat on octagon stools at the bar, watching the woman’s pale damp head protruding into the beveled edge of the mirror. Mr. Montelli poured two double vodkas on the rocks and slid one to his right.

“Never get involved with your cleaning lady, Mike. Christ, look how big her nose is when her hair’s slicked back.”

Mike couldn’t look at her reflection with his own holding his attention. He positively glowed, albeit with a negative charge. “Yeah, as soon as you left, she started in. I couldn’t tell if she was on the level—at first.”

“She’s ignor’nt. What’d she say?”

Mike claimed that what Lucy said was too humiliating to repeat.

Mr. Montelli turned around and glared at her as if the expansive mirror might be hiding something from him. “What’d that lying beak-nosed numskull say?”

“Well, um, she said you have an *eensy little dick*—emphasis hers—

that you couldn't use right even if it came with directions, and that you're a nobody pretending not to be, but not very well." Mike shook his grave expression. "Said she lost her ass bartering with you."

"I hear she has two sisters in prison," Mr. Montelli mumbled faintly and brokenly, a balding gargoyle crouching lower on his stool. He downed more vodka and stared into the mirror where a golden idol modeled to his right. "I'm just sorry I had to leave you with the sunken-eyed gold digger for ten minutes."

Lucy hiccupped and a stream of blood trickled out of her ear and blended with her hair.

"You're so lucky to have a beautiful perfect wife like Crystal and not some dick-nosed goofy clown that bleeds you white. Let me see her picture again." Mr. Montelli poured, admiring the picture Mike held up. "All Lucy does is sit around all day and call those psychic hotlines for tips on ruining me. What else'd she say?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit."

"All right. She said she's been filming you cooking your books. And, oh yeah, you can't do anything else right either, and she can prove that without actual footage."

Mr. Montelli fell off his stool, then sheepishly monkeyed back on.

"Then she— I tried to stop her but—"

Mr. Montelli's bald spot beamed in a new layer of sweat. "But what? What'd she do? Well? What'd the cackling, pink-faced bullshitter do?"

"Look, I don't know you guys that well. I'm just here to borrow a mallet. And I've got a long walk home, so."

Mr. Montelli slurped and poured, then insisted that Mike shut up and dish.

Mike spun a triangular coaster on the bar while staring at his host's reflection.

“She jumped my bones right after you left, man. No shit. Moaning and slobbering about how she sells baked goods out of the back of your store while you're up front kneading dough, and how she'd gank you if I would drive the getaway car while she cleans you out, home and business. And as if any of *that* wouldn't get me horny, she proposed a threesome with me and some voodoo priest she met at a yard sale. Next thing I know she's chanting and hissing and breaking acrobatic.” He sipped his vodka. “She must really love you.”

Mr. Montelli's skin rivaled the color of a last drink of strawberry milk. He left his stool and rattled into another room, then returned with a leather belt folded in half and stood over Lucy, snapping it. Mike joined him.

They looked at each other, at Lucy, at each other.

“Let's fuck her.” *Snap!*

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Okay.” Mike cleared his throat. “I mean— Right here?”

“Right here.”

They undressed.

“But first I'm giving her a goodly taste of leather.” Mr. Montelli, down to his black dress socks and glasses, lifted the looped belt under her chin. “Witch doctor at a rummage sale, huh?” He reared back. “You dirty miserable wart-nosed conniving pink-orange—”

Lucy's eyes blasted him like black holes puking stars. She hiked back her knee and slammed the brakes on his bare crotch. He doubled hard, mouth, nostrils, and eyes big O's. She bloodied his nose with an ashtray. "Let's fuck her? I'll eat you douchers raw!" She fisticuffed Mr. Montelli into a loveseat, thrashed him with the belt. Wheezing, she charged Mike, who was hopping into his chinos.

"Hey, it was your old man's idea! He's anti-witch!"

"Whose old man?" She wrapped the belt around his neck and with his head twice slammed the couch arm. She bridled his open mouth, whipping him up and down and to and fro. "Whose idea was it to smash my head in? Talking shit about me!" She dragged his crown into a faux marble pillar, and he was out. She rifled his wallet, scanned his driver's license. "Oliver M. Quackenbush? Eleven sixty-four Morning Glory Circle. Figures."

She seized the mallet. Positioning herself in front of Mr. Montelli as if he were a goof ball on a tee, she reared back in a three-quarter twist. He writhed just enough. She sank his birdie.

Lucy showered her throbbing neck, donned a flowing sable cowl, and then strolled toward Mike's house with the mallet swinging in and out of dark folds, sidestepping frightful children and dried leaves that scratched along blackening sidewalks and streets, stopping occasionally to smile up at illuminating streetlights and first stars and, remembering her catechism, arrange them into ruthless and opportunistic portents. Standing in the warm glow of Mike's porch lights, imagining his perfectly beautiful wife going pulpy, she pushed the doorbell button.

The door opened and a bent gray-haired woman holding a poodle appeared in light from another room.

Lucy leaned back and rechecked the house number. “Um, are you Oliver’s wife?”

“Oliver who? Ain’t nobody’s wife. You must have the wrong address.” The poodle barked. “Oh.” The woman reached into a corner of shadows and pulled out a glittering fistful of gold chocolate coins. “Well, where’s your bag?”

Don't Go Back the Way **You** Came

By Robert **Kinerk** o o o

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor DANIEL THOMPSON writes:*

Don't Go Back the Way You Came, begins and ends, it seems, in different stories, so the only way to link them is to read it again, and again, each time trying to find another way in, any way, except the Way You Came. Starting as a winter Western and ending in arctic Noir, its darkness comes as much from the subject as the environment. Sheltering from the snow, with a fire and a chunk of meat slowly cooking until the heat reaches its center. Stylistically the prose gives us the privileged position of being one of the guys. Reminding us of our origins as hunters and stalkers of prey—and each other—in a simpler, but deadlier time before small fingernail sized cameras, call display, or social media. When, as memory serves, men had to look over their shoulders all the time, armed with a pack of matches... and we're standing there with them, all the way back to the beginning. The cold, the fire, the alluring, ever present smell of roasted meat.

Five, *five* stars.

Quotes:

“Not being scared is different from showing reasonable caution.”

and

“The logic of everything he planned reassured him until he glanced up at hemlock limbs swaying in the wind. ‘Nothing can be done about your plight,’ the calm movement of the limbs seemed to say. Their slow paddling spoke of a world that didn't need Zemkes.”

Senior Editor CHARLES writes...*All of us here at FOTD were blown away by this dark tale that walks with a big stick and keeps its powder dry. Kinerk's mastery of craft and narrative is everywhere but so discreetly engineered as to appear invisible. Characters that bring with them the guts of human experience emerge into the dirty yellow light with all their flaws and failings and do so through a prose so impossibly beautiful as to confound superlatives. We agree with Dan...*

Five stars.

(Spacing and format is author's own.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language*):

The thing is,” he said as soon as the bartender was out of hearing at the bar, “I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. If Koric came in here right now and said, ‘You fucked my wife. Come on outside; we’re going to settle this,’ I could give as good as I got. We’re talking fair fight here. We’re not talking jumping someone in an alley.”

“Everybody knows he fights dirty.” Lewis avoided Zemke’s eye.

“If he really did something dirty to me, I’d get my rifle. I’d shoot him. I wouldn’t give a fuck.”

Don’t Go Back the Way You Came

By Robert Kinerk

Tripping and hopping, clutching his pants against his belly, Zemke ran up the Baxter Street stairs, too scared to stop and dress.

Half rain, half snow, and cold enough so he could see his breath.

He pinched his socks and shirt beneath his arm. He carried his shoes in his hand. He’d stuffed his underpants in one of them. He clamped his undershirt between his teeth. He’d grabbed it from the floor next to Helen’s bed.

She should have known the asshole would come home, he thought.

He dropped a shoe. He grabbed it up. He spun. He bounded again toward the Hilltop School’s playground at the top of the stairs.

In the house below, Koric yelled at Helen and Helen yelled back.

Zemke hobbled across the playground's gravel to its carousel. He struggled to pull his jeans on, shivering, then skipping most of the buttons on his flannel shirt. The buttons could come later. On the carousel's worn boards he sat to pull his shoes on, afraid he'd hear a shotgun blast.

Jacket, he thought as soon as he had tied his shoes.

"Oh, fuck," he said aloud.

He'd left his jacket, lettered with his nickname, *Tip*, on Helen's backdoor coat rack. The jacket's other lettering said *Babe Ruth SE Alaska Champs, 1956*.

He'd been at the dump with Lewis shooting rats when Helen had come bouncing in, driving Koric's pick-up. "To throw away the asshole's stuff," she'd said. Zemke's friend, Lewis, had recoiled at hearing *asshole* said in front of Helen's little kids. Zemke wouldn't let himself show shock.

"Ten years of shit and now it's done." Helen lifted a box of toy soldiers out of the truck. "If he wants his stinking soldiers he can come and get them."

Lewis, timid in the face of anger, strode off with his rifle, studying the garbage heaps for rats. Helen's boy, named Vasil, trailed in his wake.

With a violent sweep, Helen flung the soldier figures, in their hussar uniforms, in an arc that landed them among tin cans and vegetable peelings.

Her smaller girl began to cry, and the bigger one turned to Zemke looking shocked.

"Hey," Zemke said. He placed his rifle in the bed of the truck. He moved to gather the tiny soldiers so he could make a gift of them to the crying child. He had loaded

her hands with the colorful figures when Helen swept down. She seized the toys and threw them deeper into the dump's smoking piles of trash.

A rat, astonished to be pelted with miniature hussars, skittered away.

Helen laughed. A sobbing note in the way she laughed let Zemke glimpse an opportunity.

Next morning, the jacket he'd left at Helen's lay balled up at his front door. In it was a turd.

"You better hide," Lewis told him. "Koric is crazy."

Lewis had come to return Zemke's rifle. He'd taken charge of it when Zemke had climbed into the pick-up with Helen. Zemke lived in a studio apartment on the first floor of a square, three-story building. He slept on his couch and ate and brought his girlfriends to his combination living room-kitchen, the only room he had beside his bathroom. The square building sat surrounded by decaying homes linked in a spider-web way by a gray boardwalk.

"He don't scare me," Zemke said.

He was checking his rifle, a Remington 700 .30-06 he'd won playing poker, for any nicks it might have suffered in his friend's Rancho. He didn't expect Lewis to believe him. Lewis had just learned about Zemke's nude climb. He asked how Zemke managed to escape with Koric yelling at Helen.

The rifle passed muster. Zemke sighed. "You know her place?" he asked his friend.

Buck-toothed Lewis had a hayseed grin. "Sort of. The neighborhood. That sort of thing."

The steepness of the hill Helen's house stood on exposed the front part of her foundation. It gave her house a basement wall with a door to the outside. Zemke had fled through that door.

"It's true what I told you; he's crazy." Lewis had listened to Zemke describe his flight. "He crushed that Filipino's throat."

"Didn't kill him, Lewis."

"Yeah, sure." Lewis arched his eyebrows to make his words a warning.

When Zemke said he wasn't frightened, that was a lie. Helen's husband had lived through World War II in Krakow. Whatever measures he'd had to take to keep himself safe, he had taken. He'd used those same skills to make his way to the West.

Koric was already in his forties when he married Helen, whom Zemke had dated in high school.

Not being scared is different from showing reasonable caution. Zemke didn't want worry to curtail his life, but he developed a taste for the quieter bars instead of the honky-tonks where Koric might be found. He stayed out of the alley that curved behind the Moose Club. He kept watch on the waterfront, and whenever the tugboat Koric crewed on was absent from its berth his feeling lightened and he let himself walk with a cockier step.

When he went to help his mother she asked if he had heard about Helen.

"What about her?" Zemke spoke impatiently. He was dumping out the cat's old litter and filling its tray with fresh. His mother's arthritis made it difficult for her to bend. Zemke hated the tray's urine smell but he went twice a week to help.

His mother, Lana, spoke from the living room couch, which was also her bed. She confined herself to half her house and closed the rest off. She said she did it to save on heat but Zemke knew walking hurt her knees.

“She got the cops against crazy Koric, her husband,” Lana said.

Zemke told his mother he didn’t want to hear about Koric.

“Why? What’s he ever done to you?”

She didn’t need to know about the turd. “You’re the one who said he’s crazy, Mom.”

His mother let his peevish answer pass, but after a few seconds she said, “I can’t imagine what it’s like to live with a person so nuts.” She said her husband, Zemke’s father, had been a saint compared to Koric.

Zemke replied with a complaint that changed the subject. “The house smells like cat piss.”

“He doesn’t always make it to the box.”

“He’s going to ruin your rug.”

“I see him do it and I yell but I can’t get up and chase him. You should put him down. Your father used to shoot cats when their bladders got like that.” She pretended to aim a rifle. “Boom.” Then, to Zemke, “He drowned their kittens, too. He tied them in a sack and—*Splash.*”

“You should put your kitty-cat to sleep, mom.”

“You know vets charge?”

Her cat, a brown tabby, as if he knew his fate was being weighed, directed his cat’s look of scorn first to Zemke, then to Zemke’s mom.

“You don’t have to worry; Koric is out of town,” Lewis said the next time he and Zemke met.

“In or out. Doesn’t bother me, Lewis.”

Lewis didn’t answer. He made circles on the table with the sweaty bottom of his beer bottle instead.

The friends were in the Lotus Club, a bar off the lobby of a downtown hotel.

After a few seconds Lewis said, “I just thought you’d like to do something besides be here.”

“Something like what?”

Two women talked at the bar. One was the bartender, a thin blonde, and the other was her mannish friend. The friend had wandered in with a lumbering gait, bringing a cup of coffee through the arch-shaped entrance to the lobby. She had planted her bulk on a stool, her back to the room. She and the bartender carried on a subdued conversation in a light as pale as an aquarium’s tank.

Lewis stopped moving his bottle in circles. “Maybe you should talk to Koric, Tip.”

“Maybe I should shoot him in the face.”

“That would solve all your problems.”

“He can kiss my ass. That’s what I should talk to him about. You think he’s going to listen to anything I say? You think Koric is a guy who can talk sense? Does he have any sense? No, he doesn’t. All he’s got is a grudge. He’s the stupid kind of guy who gets something in his head and – bang! – that’s it. The door gets slammed. No more get’s in. You can’t talk to people like that, Lewis. It’s like talking to a fucking doorknob.”

“Just saying.”

“I hear you. It’s just stupid, that’s all. It’s useless.”

Lewis sipped from his beer. When he’d savored the taste and swallowed, he said, “I just get tired of the Lotus Club, that’s all. Someplace livelier. Wouldn’t that be nice?” He thumped the table with the empty before he spoke. His thump caught the bartender’s attention. Lewis signaled for two more beers. “Too bad about your jacket, though, Tip. You had that jacket—what? Ten years?”

The bartender arrived and set down their beers. She collected the empties and wiped the table. Zemke’s thoughts were on the insult done to his jacket. “The thing is,” he said as soon as the bartender was out of hearing at the bar, “I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. If Koric came in here right now and said, ‘You fucked my wife. Come on outside; we’re going to settle this,’ I could give as good as I got. We’re talking fair fight here. We’re not talking jumping someone in an alley.”

“Everybody knows he fights dirty.” Lewis avoided Zemke’s eye.

“If he really did something dirty to me, I’d get my rifle. I’d shoot him. I wouldn’t give a fuck.”

“You wouldn’t have to shoot him; you just have to let him know he can’t fuck with you.”

“He *can*’t fuck with me,”

“Tell him.”

Zemke had been studying the yellow froth clinging to the side of his fresh glass of beer. He raised his eyes. He caught Lewis gazing at him in a way that spoke of sympathy. Lewis had already said sympathetic things. He’d said everybody knew Koric fought dirty.

Dirty meant kicking. Koric wore shoes with steel toes. They were made to protect the toes of men who worked with jackhammers or engine blocks. For Koric, though, the steel toes were weapons. He'd kicked and crushed the Filipino's throat. Any person with a man as mad as Koric on his tail would naturally be scared. Lewis's eyes communicated that unwelcome thought, and Zemke frowned.

For work, Zemke cut meat in a grocery store, the same store he'd worked in since high school. He wore a white jacket and white cap and waited on customers from behind the meat counter's display case. He liked his job both for the camaraderie among the meat cutters—there were three and he was the youngest—and for the chance to banter with the housewives studying the steaks and chops in the case's stainless-steel trays. He rarely thought of his banter as flirtatious but that's almost always what it was. When Zemke was around a woman, jokes sprang quickly to his lips. It was as if he made it his business to brighten their day. He was chatting that way with a customer named Coral Melkin, teasing her about her new, horn-rimmed glasses, when he lost track of the pleasantries he was offering. Helen and her kids had come into view.

Zemke's position at the meat case gave him a clear line of sight down two aisles. Helen appeared at the far end of the cereal aisle. Her children, arguing over Cheerios and Rice Krispies, slowed her progress. She wore a knee-length coat of electric blue, an unnatural color. Her hair looked greasy, and she kept a grip on her black purse as if she feared a thief might grab it.

Zemke returned his attention, now sobered, to Mrs. Melkin and wrapped the breast of chicken she had chosen. No customer after her needed attention. Zemke raked

the display-case ice because stooping to do that let him spy unseen through the case's gleaming glass.

He saw Helen bark at her older daughter. The girl shrugged. Helen's look darkened. She and the children were heading his way. Zemke, almost ducking, scooted to the employees' bathroom. He was peeing in the stained urinal when Sol, his boss, came in. "You dodging that cutie out front? The one with the kiddies?" Sol asked.

"I hardly know her, Sol."

"Turn on your charm. You might get lucky." His boss, waiting to use the urinal, shaped his pompadour in the mirror above the sink. He had spoken of a boy's world of swagger and privilege. Minus Koric, the world would have been Zemke's natural one. But there was no way to minus Koric. The Pole was as real as a rifle, and Zemke, when he took his place before the mirror to shape his hair, couldn't stop the shaking of his hands.

On the night before Halloween, prodding a steak on his two-burner stove, Zemke heard his phone ring. He guessed his mother would be calling to tell him what to bring on his next visit, but when he said hello no one answered. The dial tone didn't sound, so whoever had called hadn't hung up. Zemke stood with the phone to his ear and prodded his steak. He said hello another time and then another before he guessed a prankster might be on the other end. He had the phone poised over its cradle when he thought, *It's Koric*. He put the instrument to his ear again. As soon as he said, "Koric?" he heard the dial tone buzz. Whoever had called had hung up.

Steak grease spat in the black pan. Zemke let the bleeding slab of meat, with its sizzle and rapturous smell, command his attention. He plunked his Worcestershire sauce

down on his table. He stirred baked beans from a can into the dented pan on his two-burner stove. Wind rattled garbage cans below. The clatter gave Zemke a feeling of burrowing in from a storm.

His phone rang a second time. He stiffened at the jangle, and, when he picked the phone up he barked, “Yeah,” not as a greeting so much as a way of acting tough.

The caller turned out to be a friend named Sanders, the man Zemke had won the Remington from in a poker game that spring. Sanders went through the usual courtesies of greeting and then asked if Zemke would sell the rifle back.

Zemke at once said no.

“Fair price,” Sanders said.

Zemke again said no.

He’d answered with that single syllable twice and his failure to go into detail must have left Sanders at a loss. A second went by when nothing was said, then Zemke offered an explanation, one he made up on the spot. “I’m going hunting.”

Sanders let a second of silence signal doubt. “You got a license?”

“I know where to get one.”

Zemke pictured himself in a sporting-goods store buying a license and shells.

“Do you know where you’ll hunt?” Sanders followed his question up with advice about his own hunting spots. Zemke listened as if he knew the places his friend spoke of. He recognized some of the names but he couldn’t place them on his mental map.

His steak stopped sputtering. Its juices pooled and darkened. A film spread across the top of his baked beans. He kept saying, “Uh-huh,” until Sanders ran out of

recommendations. Sanders brought up the rifle again but only to say if Zemke changed his mind to give him a call.

After he'd hung up, Zemke ate with no pleasure. He eyed the Remington, propped against his couch. He had kept it in his only closet, a closet barely bigger than a cupboard, until the early darkness of the shorter days began to depress him. He had begun thinking about a wall-mount for it, and his thoughts were on brackets when the phone rang again.

He said hello.

He heard silence.

He wanted to say, "Hey, asshole," because this time he had no doubt the caller was Koric. He did get the *Hey* out but not in the forceful way he wanted. His voice squeaked and before he could properly say *Asshole* the line went dead.

When Zemke told his mother he might go hunting she said she had room in her freezer for venison. Until then he hadn't thought about the practical result hunting might bring, but he liked the idea of being a provider. It let him cast himself in a more heroic role than meat cutter, or bar-hopper, or shooter of rats at the dump.

His grocery store butchered deer carcasses, a service to Boon's hunting population. That work let Zemke quiz his meat-case friends about their own hunting experiences, and later on, when he was retelling some of their stories to Lewis, Lewis suggested a Saturday hunt. They spent their evening, a bar evening, in enthusiastic planning and on the next Saturday morning, long before it was light, Lewis picked Zemke up in his Ranchero and together they drove to a gravel pit beyond the settled part of town. They smoked in the Ranchero's cab, watching a watery look come to the sky and

predicting snow to each other. As soon as the day was light enough, they climbed a logged-off hill. When they reached the line of trees, they paused for another smoke.

“We won’t see nothing after ten,” Lewis said.

Zemke asked about arrangements for meeting again.

“We’ll meet at my car. I won’t lock it.”

Zemke watched Lewis grind out his cigarette and enter the woods. Zemke himself enjoyed a few more puffs, his gaze on the shrouded mountains across the gray Narrows. Everything he wore, from his long underwear to his wool jacket and wool pants, was winter-tested. He’d oiled his boots to guarantee water-tightness. His hat shed water. His jacket shed water. He wore mittens on the advice of one of his meat-cutting friends who had told him a mitten pulled off easier than a glove when he needed to free his hand for shooting.

Exploring the woods to find a spot to wait for deer, he reached a muskeg pond in a bowl-shaped clearing. From the edge of the clearing, he looked down on weeds and scum-clotted water. ‘Good place,’ he thought. He sat on the moss of a fallen log, up-slope from the weedy water. Underbrush screened him. He wouldn’t be seen, and, with luck, he’d have time to fire at a deer.

The sandwich he carried in his jacket pocket tempted him, but he told himself to save it for later. He opened and tilted his thermos to sip. With his free hand he dusted drops of wetness off his rifle, which rested on his lap.

He was screwing his red thermos cap back when he heard someone say *Zemke* in a soft voice. The speaker was Sanders. He had come so quietly Zemke didn’t know he was there until he heard his name.

Zemke jumped. Sanders, the one-time owner of Zemke's rifle, said, "Sorry." He lifted himself over the log and settled against it, half standing and half sitting. In a voice barely louder than a whisper, he said, "Don't go back the way you came."

"Koric?" Zemke asked. He darted a look at Sanders. His friend nodded yes.

"He say anything?"

"Not to me."

Zemke ran his hand across his rifle's stock. To his friend he said, without looking up, "You know another way back?"

Sanders eyed the walls of greenery to his right and left, then he picked up a stick and cleared away snow to make a circle the size of a saucer. "This is where we're at," he said. He made another circle and said, "This is where you want to go." He started a meandering line that connected the two points. At each angle in the crooked line he cleared another palm-sized patch and described the landmark Zemke should look for—a splintered stump, a boulder bursting out of mossy earth, a bluff, or some other feature. "Where are you parked?" he asked when he had finished.

"Gravel pit. Lewis drove."

"If you don't show up, Lewis will get help."

Sanders spun his drawing stick away into the woods.

"You could come with me," Zemke told him.

"You got anything to eat?" Sanders asked. Zemke pulled out his sandwich. He tore it in half, and he and Sanders stood in companionable silence, each munching dry bread and cheese. After he had swallowed his last bite Sanders said he couldn't go with Zemke because he'd split off from his brother and had promised he'd meet up with him

again. He said, “See you,” and “Good luck,” then he nodded goodbye and, with his rifle strapped to his shoulder, made his way back to the woods.

Zemke slumped down lower against the mossy log. He didn’t move until the damp cold had penetrated his outer garments. When he felt the touch of ice, he rose and cast a cautious glance around the woods. He fished out a cigarette. His hand shook and the match wobbled. *Fuck it*, he thought, and once he had his Marlboro lit he stood as if in defiance of any marksman who might be lurking in the woods. He smoked the cigarette down to a half-inch butt. When he’d ground that fragment out, he set off on what he hoped was the path Sanders had mapped out.

He stomped fallen branches to pieces and kicked the remnants aside. He dodged low branches and skirted tangles of brush. The effort had him sweating by the time he came to a splintered stump, the jagged remnant of a tree toppled by the wind. He hoped the stump was the one Sanders meant. A path angled off from it in sharp descent, and Zemke, his spirit lifted, slid and stumbled his way to the bottom. There, in a cul-de-sac of underbrush, the path dissolved.

From the woods came a rustle. Zemke visualized Koric. Seconds passed before he could remind himself the woods were full of rustling noises. It could have been a porcupine he heard.

Back at the splintered stump, a fifteen-minute climb, he drew on a cigarette for his reward. When he released smoke in a long stream he told himself he wasn’t lost. He pushed back his sleeve. His watch said noon. He could spend another hour finding the trail Sanders had described. Another hour wouldn’t hurt.

After he'd snubbed out his cigarette, he climbed on the splintered stump to sight which way to go. Downhill made no sense. He'd return to the snarl of brush. He told himself he'd missed a turn somewhere. He retraced his steps until the trail divided. He guessed which path to choose, but after only a few minutes he doubled back and followed the other. That trail eventually fell so sharply he had to grab at salmonberry bushes not to slip. He reached a stand of devil's club with its threatening needles, and struggled back up the slope he'd just descended. The trackless woods turned him one way, then another. Two hours passed before confusion made him stop. He cast glances here and there at the wall of trees. He knew he was lost and that he'd spend the night with bears and wolves. He'd need a fire. He still had the wax paper from his sandwich. He had matches. He could kindle twigs. The logic of everything he planned reassured him until he glanced up at hemlock limbs swaying in the wind. 'Nothing can be done about your plight,' the calm movement of the limbs seemed to say. Their slow paddling spoke of a world that didn't need Zemkes.

He felt a flooding of despair. His spirits sank, and at exactly that moment a movement among the trees caught his eye. A figure bulled forward. Zemke, recognizing Koric, clutched his rifle tighter. He saw Koric glance left and then right. Koric lifted his hand and scratched his chin. That contemplative gesture told Zemke the man across the gully was as lost as he. He heard Koric blow out a heavy breath, a noise of exasperation. Zemke's foe, like Zemke himself, was adrift with no sure way forward.

Zemke watched Koric's round head slowly swivel. He was studying the enclosing woods. Zemke still held his rifle. He could have raised it to his shoulder and shot Koric in

the face, the way he'd told Lewis he'd do. Koric scratched his chin with the back of his hand.

Zemke stayed unmoving, purposely keeping still. He watched while Koric heaved himself first in one direction then, abruptly, in another. Then Zemke watched the shadow of the other hunter fade into the shadows of the hemlocks and the spruce.

He could have shouted Koric's name across the gully. That thought came clearly. He could have yelled that they should be companions through the night, taking turns tending a fire and taking turns sleeping.

Shadows thickened. It became harder to see. And Zemke, staring at the spot where he'd last seen Koric, could hear no whisper or no breath, nothing except the souging of the wind, a soft and ceaseless sound, as if the forest sighed.

He needed tinder for his fire. He needed branches big enough to keep it burning until dawn. He had his wax paper. He had his matches. He stooped to start collecting twigs, but in bending to that humble task, his legs gave way. He dropped to his knees on the slush of the forest floor. A great sob tore up from his chest and broke the quiet of the woods. One sob only. He could not take time for more. Twigs would not collect themselves. And night was closing in.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The thing I like the most about my story, 'Don't Go Back the Way You Came,' is the toy soldiers that the character Helen throws away at the dump. In an earlier version of the story, I brought the soldiers back at the end, when my protagonist Zemke is lost in the wintry woods. The toy soldiers are hussars from some 19th century army, and I imagine them in colorful, rakish uniforms. They seem to me the essence of cavalier esprit, with notions of honor at the core of their being. That contrast with my poor hero, Zemke, who tries hard to appear brave but who hides in one instance when courage is called for, and then fails to act when decisive action is needed, seemed blatant enough already. I didn't need the hussars to rub the point in. The first inkling I*

had of what the story might be was its title, which came out of the blue to me. Then I had to fish around for what the incidents of the story might be, and what voice it might be told in. This story, incidentally, is the 18th of my stories accepted in the last 16 months, a fact that astonishes me. In addition to long and short fiction, I also write plays. Most recently, my musical farce, 'A Streetcar Named Retire,' found a welcoming audience at the Harvard Institute for Learning in Retirement. During the Covid shutdown, I have read all the poems of Emily

Dickinson and three translations of Beowulf. I am endlessly working to finish reading 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.' The last story I read that blew me away was Katherine Anne Porter's 'Noon Wine.'

AUTHOR'S BIO: I grew up in Ketchikan, Alaska, in the 1950s and 60s, when shooting rats at the garbage dump was part of a boy's education. I have aged into a quieter version of my earlier self, and one of the themes of my fiction is reconciling the frontier wildness of my youth and the calm of my maturity. 'Don't Go Back the Way You Came' is a reflection on that theme.

EDITOR'S BIO: Daniel is a graduate of the Creative Writing program (MFA) from Vancouver Island University, his poems and fiction have been featured in *Gravel, The Birds We Piled Loosely, Clockwise Cat, Crack The Spine, Grey Sparrow* and *The Gyroscope Review*. He is a reader and contributor to the Tongues of Fire reading series and has written several books, all currently seeking publishers. He lives in Victoria. His story **The Meaning of Orange** appears in the issue (fiction).

Future **Pig** oink oink oink

By Ryan Priest

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Not a whole lot goes on in this story but a whole lot goes down. Read it and get your leg stuck in Dirty Realism while The Twilight Zone eats your toes. Compared to the cops in this ballsy fiction swine are as clean as sunshine and rats are pillars of virtue. In Future Pig, the 'pigs' are flesh and metal—bizarre homo horribili reassembled with mechanical limbs and faces, real life Robocops who are a lot scarier, a lot darker, than any screenwriter's fantasy. The necrotizing peer pressure of a malevolent blood fraternity is guaranteed to pump venom into your complacency but the real question here is 'how much is will be?' And 'how much is now?' The prose is angry enough to be semen for a whole new language.

Five stars

(Spacing and font size are author's own.Eds.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE:

Anything was better than that. Anything except for quitting. No one hired ex-cops. It was a known thing. Last time he checked, unemployment was still around eighty-nine percent. It was a buyer's market for employers and no one was buying washed out cops.

Future Pig

By Ryan Priest

Technically, Michael still had another two paid weeks of recovery time but cops who took their full recovery were considered weak. The union wouldn't let them fire you but he knew how it'd be. The others would start calling him soft behind his back. He'd

get a bad rep as a pussy and a troublemaker. His desk drawer might get filled with tampons. They might be used. His locker would be perpetually vandalized. At some point, everything in the station belonging to him would be smeared by sweaty genitals or stuck up some cop's hairy ass. Cops can be brutal. Finally, he'd be bullied out of the department.

It still hurt but he made sure not to show any outward signs of it. This wasn't the type of station where friendly coworkers were eagerly going to greet him, concerned about his injuries, "Glad to have you back, Mike, shame about the hand."

Instead, walking through the door, he'd been met with the shitty, scarred-up face of Diego O'Malley, whose half-Irish, buck-toothed grin made him look like a rat. "Well, well, well look who's back from maternity leave."

Mike didn't answer verbally. He simply lifted his new carbon-fiber prosthetic hand into the air and flipped O'Malley the bird. He'd spent eight hours the day before learning how to lift his middle finger. It was excruciating but you had to, when you worked with guys like these.

"Geez, that all? How long were you out? A month?" O'Malley sneered, showing a mouth of mismatching, colored teeth. Some were white, others were gold, one or two might have been real but a series of metal bridges and partials gleamed out from every direction.

"Less than a week, it happened last Tuesday." He defended himself. He'd have to be on guard, other cops would test him too, seeing if he came back soft, if the loss of a hand was enough to break him.

"That's nothing. Two years ago, a couple Filipino kids stabbed my eye out with a broken bottle." O'Malley turned his head, showing off the jagged, scarred tissue around his right eye, which was a glowing red prosthetic. It even had a built-in laser scope that he loved to turn on, flashing other cops and suspects in the eye when they weren't expecting. "And I was back the next fuckin' day. I didn't take a single day off."

"You didn't? The guys down at the bath house must have been crushed." Mike shot back.

"All right..." O'Malley nodded and walked off. Mike let out a sigh, one down, an entire department to go.

He fumbled with the buttons on his shirt but it was just too hard. He had almost no control over this hand yet. His shift started in fifteen minutes and he was going out there on solo patrol with only one wing. He'd be putty in those animals' hands.

"Hey, Klein, Captain wants to see you."

Mike looked up and saw, first the metal peg leg and then the body and face of Sergeant Pine. His long, walrussy mustache could never fully hide the look of shame and resignation etched permanently into his face. Everyone knew Pine's story. He'd taken a shotgun to the knee early in his career but he'd had it replaced by a standard police issue prosthetic.

Then, during the West Covina riots of thirty-nine, he and his partner had been dragged out of their cars and tortured. Those crackheads did everything to them. The next morning, backup officers found the two, naked and thrown into a dumpster. Pine's partner was dead and his leg had been stolen.

The department claimed that it was Pine's own fault for losing his leg and they refused to issue him another one. There was no way to afford a new limb on a cop's salary so he'd been forced out of the field and behind a desk.

His days were spent in mockery. Field cops, "real cops" as they preferred, were merciless. They'd swirl his head in a toilet, they'd leave tacks on his seat. Once they'd locked him in a cell with a PCP addled sex predator.

"Fuck him." That's what the others had said when, in rookie innocence, Mike had asked why they were being so cruel. "He's not a *real* cop, he's a desk jockey. That desk jockey is never going to save your life. He's never going to be the one who pulls you out of a burning vehicle. He'll never put a bullet into the cholo who's about to slit your throat!"

Anything was better than that. Anything except for quitting. No one hired ex-cops. It was a known thing. Last time he checked, unemployment was still around eighty-nine percent. It was a buyer's market for employers and no one was buying washed out cops.

Cops were hated but no one would tell them that to their faces. Their neighbors all smiled, civilians always said how much they *liked* the police but it wasn't true. The second a guy lost his badge, he'd usually get kicked out of his place, businesses would refuse to serve him, his non-cop friends would all dry up suddenly and his cop friends would have nothing more to do with him either. No one had time for chicken shits who couldn't hack it.

He couldn't get the shirt buttons right, so he let it go and hoped his kevlar vest would cover everything up. The captain's office was across the station. Everyone whisked

back and forth as always. The North West LAPD precinct was the busiest room in the city. If you included fines and court costs, they produced more revenue for the city than any other enterprise. The scumbags didn't stop for anyone. They could never keep up with all the crimes, all the criminals. The most they could hope for, was to stem the final crush of anarchism that seemed more inevitable every day.

Every officer over thirty was missing a piece or two. That was the price of the job. As he made his way to Captain McGillicutty's office, he passed prosthetic legs, arms, hands, one guy, Beale, was missing his lower jaw and had it replaced by an awful, blue prosthesis that he'd take off to scare rookies.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?" Mike knocked on the already open door.

"Yeah Klein, come on in." Came back the cold, digitized voice of McGillicutty.

He walked in and stood at attention. McGillicutty was behind his desk looking up. It was always hard to get a read on the boss, he didn't have a face. There was a flat, non-expressive metal plate where his face had been. Two red eyes, electronic eyes, shone out from behind deep recesses. Instead of a mouth there was just the mesh of a speaker.

A few years ago, he'd been on a high-speed chase going after some gangbangers. On and off the highway, speeds going as fast as one hundred and twenty, five squad cars versus a car jacked sedan. Hoping to shoot out the tires, McGillicutty had hung himself out of the passenger window and unloaded at the car. He missed the wheels with the first volley and while he was trying to reload, not paying attention, WHAP! A metal street sign clipped him right in the face, took about an inch off, eyes and cheekbones in all. Officers on scene said they could see McGillicutty's brain. There were now pictures of it all over the internet.

"So, a whole week out huh?" The steel faced captain sat back in his chair and held out his left arm, which was completely metallic, down to the skinny, skeletal hand at the end. "Take a seat."

"Sir, this was my first serious injury. It was difficult to acclimate to this new hand."

"What'd they give you?" McGillicutty, Cutty to his peers, craned his neck to get a look at the hand in question.

"PK Designs, SF Mark Z6." Mike said, holding it up. McGillicutty snatched the arm and pulled the hand closer so he could inspect it.

"Nice, you know I had an SF Mark 3 before I lost the top part of my arm. I liked it, heavy as fuck, steel. Do you know what I used to call it?" He grinned, at least it sounded like it would be a grin.

"What sir?"

Even though they were alone, out of habit McGillicutty looked over each shoulder before responding with a chuckle. "My nigger beater."

"Sir!" Mike started, "You do know I'm half black right?"

"Yeah, but I thought you were cool." The toneless robotic voice said, "You're cool aren't you, Klein?"

"No, no, I'm cool, sir. Clever name. " Mike groveled, eager to show he was a team player and definitely not, under any circumstances, a troublemaker.

"What happened to you? Blow box?"

"No." Mike replied. Most limbs lost on the job were due to blow boxes. The cartels and drug runners had taken to spiking some of their merchandise with a new

explosive. It was a chemical that was a powder when contained but the second it hit oxygen it exploded, usually taking a hand with it. The blow boxes had their desired effect. A cop thought twice before ripping open any strange package, looking for drugs.

"Acid? That's how I got this." The captain pushed his chair back so that he could show off the two blue, chrome rods of connected metal that served as his right leg. "I came up on this meth cookhouse, chemicals everywhere. The suspects scattered and one guy dumped a drum of acid over. It ate through my shoes and started burning my feet. I fell over onto my side and the shit just ate right through my leg."

"No sir, mine was a noise complaint. The suspect was a teenager, he'd been playing his music too loudly and the neighbors had called nine one one. Another officer, Gil Jasmuzky, and I arrived on the scene at the same time. We quickly subdued the suspect but he became agitated once in custody. He claimed he couldn't breathe with Gil sitting on him.

"I told the suspect to shut up but he looked like he might try something so I warned him. I said, 'You shut the fuck up or I'm going to shoot you.'" Mike explained.

"You did the right thing. You gotta make those scumbags understand they have to submit."

"Well, out of nowhere, his mother comes running in. 'Don't shoot my baby!'"

"Oh no!" The captain laughed, he knew where this was going.

"Yeah, the bitch comes running at me with a butcher knife and before I know what to do, she slams it down, taking my hand off at the wrist. Luckily, Gil was there to put her down with one to the head."

"They couldn't reattach it?"

"The doctor said they could but it'd require flying a surgeon in. Our plans don't cover vascular surgeons, so I had to opt for this."

"God damn insurance vultures." The metal face shook back and forth. "So, Gil shot the mom, what happened to the son?"

"He musta been all broken up about it. He hung himself that night in his cell, if you know what I mean."

McGillicutty laughed, he knew.

A new knock came at the door. It was Pine again, he hobbled in with some paperwork that needed the captain's signature.

"Here." Captain said pushing the signed paperwork back at Pine. "That all, faggot?"

"Yes sir..." Pine said with downcast eyes, as he took the paperwork and limped back out of the room, the metal end of his peg leg clanking against the floor with every step.

"Piece of shit..." McGillicutty said under his breath as Pine left. "You see that man?"

"Yes sir."

"He took a week off once too. I don't want to see you end up like that."

"No, sir." Mike could feel the sweat beginning to bead up on his brow. He knew he shouldn't have taken the entire week. "Like I said, sir, I worried I might be a liability to my fellow officers until I could use my new prosthetic better."

"How is it now?"

"A-ok, sir. I'm one hundred percent. Better than ever." He lied.

"Good, good." McGillicutty said, making Mike feel a little bit better. He needed this job. There was no way a one-handed ex-cop was going to find other work and it was common knowledge that former cops had about a two-hour life expectancy in any of the homeless shelters or shanty towns. "I notice you're seldom at Hardigan's after your shift? Don't you like your coworkers? You too good to drink with other cops?"

"No, sir. I'm at Hardigan's all the time. Well, maybe not as much as other guys but I have a new girlfriend and she's been taking up a lot of my time. Too much of it really, I'll make sure it stops."

"Girlfriend?!?" If a noseless, lipless, metal mouth could snort, he'd have snorted. "I haven't had a penis for the last twelve years! Some piece of shit ex-cop sold me out when I was working undercover in the cartel."

That was another reason washouts were hated. Everyone knew the best way for a former cop to make some money was to betray his old friends and sell secrets to the cartels.

"When those cocksuckers found out I was an undercover, they tied me up, cut my dick and balls right off and shoved them in my mouth. They wanted me to swallow, to swallow my own manhood. But fuck those guys, I spit them back out in their faces. That's a cop, that's what a cop does. Taking off a week? I don't know what that is.

"I tell ya what, when the doctors were sewing me up, they started trying to talk me into all these hormones, said they could keep my sex drive at normal. Said I could learn to get off in new ways or some shit. I told them don't bother, I don't have time for all that. "

"You're right sir. My dedication could be greater. I promise I'll focus more on the job." Mike spat out nervously.

"It's all right, son. I know you're young." McGillicutty rose out of his chair and walked around the other side of the desk to put his metal hand on Mike's shoulder. He was standing directly in front of him, making it impossible not to stare at the crotch of his pants and wonder what horrible condition lay underneath. "Remember, you're a cop, you can have any woman you want, any time you want, even in front of her husband, if that's your thing. Why do you want to mess around with girlfriends?"

"I don't, sir. Being a cop is the most important thing in my life."

"Good answer." The metal face nodded. "Everything else okay? You working out regular, taking your steroids? You know those perps could be on anything. We have to be just as strong as they are, just as tough, just as crazy."

"Absolutely, sir."

"That's what I like to hear. Well get out of here, officer. Remember what we talked about, yeah?"

"Yes, sir!" Mike said as he jumped to his feet and gladly slid out of the office.

He heaved a sigh of relief. He was going to have to call his girlfriend, she wasn't going to like it but the captain was right. He needed to be giving the department one hundred and ten percent.

Before he could call his girlfriend or even make it back to his locker, a man came colliding into him with a lot of energy. He went flying into the edge of a desk, the corner slammed into his back and his new hand smashed against the desk's hard frame.

Blinding bolts of pain flooded his consciousness. He gritted his teeth and saw that he'd been struck by a fleeing suspect. The three cops who'd been beating him hadn't held him down enough and he'd managed to scurry to his feet and take off, right into Mike.

The three officers had him back on the ground and they were giving it to him even harder. The man was probably in his fifties, black, maybe he was homeless, it was difficult to tell whether his tattered clothing had already been that way or if it was a result of his resisting arrest, or giving an attitude, or whatever had earned him the once over.

They were really laying into him. It was savage beating, some of the man's bloody teeth were already on the white tiles. These cops were in the thick of it, their frenzy had taken control. Each time they'd growl or scream, long, white ropes of saliva spat out of their mouths. If they weren't stopped, they were going to seriously hurt this man.

"Stop stop!" Mike pushed them away, forcing himself in between the attacking cops and their helpless victim.

"Hey Klein, what the fuck!?" They protested but Mike used his good arm to pull them away by their vests. He didn't care what they said, he wasn't going to let them kill this guy.

"I'm not letting you guys do this!" Mike screamed out. It didn't matter how loud he was, the entire department was now watching. Mike pushed everyone away from the suspect. "He's mine!"

And Mike smashed his new hand down as fast as he could, as hard as he could, onto the suspect's face. It hurt worse than losing the damn thing but he didn't care. He struck again and again, the heavy prosthetic breaking the facial bones underneath. Again

and again, he hit him until the pain became so great that everything just went numb and he could feel nothing.

He stood up and flicked the blood off his hand. The suspect had been dead for a little while by this point. It didn't matter, someone from county would be by to scrape up the pieces. The coroners knew not to ask a lot of questions. They were *cool*.

"Sorry boys, had to test out my new nigger beater." Mike shrugged with a smirk. His fellow officers all laughed and patted him on the back, congratulated him on his return. These were his brothers and sisters and their approval meant something to him.

In the back of the room, Captain McGillicutty stood, leaning against the wall, watching the scene go down. He nodded his head and if cold, unflinching metal could smile, he'd have smiled.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I'm an African American who has spent most of his life split between Los Angeles and Dallas so I've had my share of interactions with cops. I've had them and their twenty pounds of gear sitting on my back, my chest. I've had their guns pointed in my face. It's the same attitude every time, they act as if they're engaged in some street war, as if their jumping on your back like a rodeo cowboy was the last, singular line of defense of against society delving into total anarchy. Then I saw an article, where a Dallas/Ft. Worth police department had punished one of their officers for NOT taking steroids. So I wrote Future Pig in an effort to understand what makes a normal, even well-meaning and brave man or woman, turn into a violent scumbag the second they get a badge pinned to their chest. An individual who becomes a police officer isn't necessarily bad, but the entire practice, mindset and culture of policing is toxic and needs to be routed out. These cops aren't out on the streets against super-criminals and tv villains, they're out there with us, our kids, our friends.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Ryan Priest is a black man who has been roughed up by cops a time or two. When not dodging sirens, he can be found programming computers for a paycheck. His work has appeared in *Punchnels*, *Literally Stories*, the *Manawaker Podcast* and several other fire publications. A full list can be found at www.ryanpriest.net

LAWns...

By Christopher Johnson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *‘Lawns’ is just plain old franks and coleslaw fiction but the hot dogs are cooked to perfection and the salad is delicious. Everything that is needed to make this story work is done with aplomb. It is so matter of fact in fact, so gosh darn Main Street we almost don’t see the picnic table of literary abundance. Killer lines like...*

‘The more they drank, the more they talked with exclamation points.’

‘A scream that pierced the air and split it into pieces.’

And our personal favourite...

The toilet sounded like a dragon devouring little children. *(Heh, heh)*

The ‘voice’ of the 14 year old narrator is as good as it gets—a pitch perfect blend of coltish swagger and adolescent naiveté that never once veers off the rails. But gaga as all this is, we feel the Oscar for Best Supporting Character really must go to (the envelope, please) Trixie!

There, in the middle of the floor, was a pile of dog poop. Not just one or two little droppings, but an untidy ragged pile. It was the richest brown I’d ever seen. A little mountain of manure. A fountain of feces. A cupola of crap. A wallow of waste. A stanchion of stool. An excess of excretion. A bowlful of BM. It was unbelievable that a little dog like Trixie could produce such a big pile.

A friendly, feisty, deceptively well written backyard mud sling that delivers and then some. Pass the Tabasco, please.

Five stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for love of the language):*

Dad had black hair with slices of gray. He parted it on the right and then greased it up so much that even an earthquake couldn’t muss a single hair on his head. He had a dimple to the left of his mouth. Mom told me once after she had a drink or two that she married Dad because of the dimple. There must have been more to it than that. But that’s what she told me. So I guess I was the result of a dimple.

Lawns

By

Christopher Johnson

The lawn--it was Dad's pride and joy. Every Saturday, he'd be out there, mowing it, slaving over it. And what a piece of art the finished product was! As manicured as a crewcut. Straight, flat, perfectly rectangular. And those edges! Dad used the edger to cut a straight line—an even, narrow gap between the lawn and the sidewalk. It was as if each blade of grass had been planted separately. You could put a bedcover over the lawn, and it would be spectacularly flat. You could play pool on it.

Every Saturday all summer long, Dad and the other fathers on our block would be out there, mowing their lawns. They'd stop their work and compare fertilizers, mulches, whether to aerate, when to aerate, whether to pick up the clippings or leave them down as mulch for the grass. These were very important matters.

On that particular Saturday, Dad made sure to mow the lawn because Mr. and Mrs. Robards, who lived halfway down the block, were coming to dinner. I helped him. I did the edging and then swept the clippings that had flown onto the sidewalk back onto the lawn. After we were done, I happened to step out on our front porch and look at the lawn. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I started wondering what the heck was going on beneath that beautiful flat green surface. I imagined this chaos of worms and insects and roots and soil. The insects were grinding through the soil and fighting one another. They were

fighting for space. It was brutal. It was cruel. But somehow it all ended up in this real beautiful lawn. How the heck did that happen, I wondered.

Mom was making a dinner of roast beef and potatoes and corn on the cob and rolls and cherry pie. It was surprising that they were having the Robards over. After all, they didn't entertain all that much. They were kind of all wrapped up in themselves.

Sometimes I would walk down our block and look at the houses. They were mostly colonials, but there were some Chicago bungalows and ranches mixed in. As I walked down the block, I wondered what was going on inside those houses. It was like my imagination ran away with me. Were the people who lived in the houses using drugs? Did they drink too much? Did husbands beat up their wives? Were the husbands or wives having affairs? Were they having parties where everyone put house keys in a jar to see who would go home with who?

I know—pretty weird stuff for a fourteen-year-old kid to be wondering about. But I couldn't help myself. That was the stuff I found interesting.

The Robardses were about as different from Dad and Mom as could be. Mom wore dresses around the house when she cleaned. The dresses flounced out as she vacuumed. Then she sat down and had a Pall Mall and took a break from all the cleaning.

Dad had black hair with slices of gray. He parted it on the right and then greased it up so much that even an earthquake couldn't muss a single hair on his head. He had a dimple to the left of his mouth. Mom told me once after she had a drink or two that she married Dad because of the dimple. There must have been more to it than that. But that's what she told me. So I guess I was the result of a dimple.

Like I said, the Robardses were different. First of all, they were jocks. Both of them had grown up in Iowa. Mr. Robards, whose name was Rip, had been the star halfback on his high school football team. He bragged to us kids all the time how he'd scored fifty-something touchdowns his senior year. He had arms like sausages and a thick belly and a bald head bordered by frizzy hair. When he worked in the front yard, he sometimes took off his shirt, and hair traveled down his back like a beaver pelt.

Mrs. Robards, whose name was Terri, had been a volleyball player. She had muscular arms and a strong, sturdy face. In the summer, she put on a good tan from lying in the back yard in the chaise lounge. She soaked in the sun while she read *McCall's* and smoked Chesterfields and slowly drank gin and tonics.

I'd see her in the back yard when I'd go to call on Charlie or Kip. She'd be wearing a bikini. She wasn't half-bad looking. She'd offer me a lemonade. Then, with a wink, she'd ask me if I wanted her to add something extra to the lemonade, and then she'd pour a little gin in there and then we'd chit-chat about baseball. "That Santo," she'd say, "he's got a nice ass." She'd giggle and clink her glass against mine and say, "Ricky, here's to you. May you have many children!" Whatever that meant.

Mr. Robards worked for the city of Elm Park, which was just outside Chicago. He was a water engineer. He'd go around and fix the pipes and sewers in the town. Mrs. Robards worked as a part-time secretary for a small company in town. Meanwhile, Dad had his job as the operations manager for Avalon Office Supplies, which was headquartered in downtown Chicago. Mom had her hands full being mother to me and my sister Maureen, who was eight.

As the time approached for Mr. and Mrs. Robards to arrive, Mom and Dad just about went crazy with nervous energy. They told me to vacuum the downstairs. I did it, but then Dad said, “You missed some dust balls in the corners when you vacuumed in the family room.”

“Well,” I said, “they ain’t going to go in there, Dad. They’re gonna be in the living room and the dining room.”

“Don’t talk back to me,” he snapped. I could see his teakettle start to boil.

Meanwhile, Mom was in the kitchen. She started to make a salad. While she was peeling the cucumbers, she skinned her finger and started to bleed. “Damn it!” she muttered. “Oh, Christ! Ricky! Go get me a Band-Aid!” Like it was the worst crisis ever in Western civilization. She sat down and put the Band-Aid on. I thought she was going to start crying.

Finally the doorbell rang. Mom was wearing a pretty pink bouncy dress and smelled like flowers. Dad wore black pants and a striped shirt that he’d just bought at Brooks Brothers. The Robardses strolled in. Mr. Robards was wearing blue jeans and a flowery tropical shirt that he must have bought in Hawaii. Mrs. Robards was wearing tight jeans and a halter top, and a Chesterfield dangled from her lips like she was Humphrey Bogart.

Mrs. Robards was hanging onto a leash. At the end of the leash was their dog, Trixie. Dad and Mom looked at each other. Mrs. Robards said, “You don’t mind that we brought Trixie, do you? She gets *so* lonely when we leave her alone.” Trixie was a cocker spaniel. She jumped up and down and barked as if she recognized us. Dad and Mom looked at each other again.

Mom and Dad introduced Mr. Robards and Mrs. Robards to us kids. The Robardses knew us already, so I didn't know why they did that. Just one of those things adults do. Meanwhile, Trixie kept leaping up and down like a pogo stick, and she kept barking. Mrs. Robards said, "Don't mind her. She'll settle down."

Mom and Dad looked at each other again. Dad shook his head. Then he turned to us and barked, "Don't you children want to watch TV?" So we skedaddled out of the way. Except I hid out in the dining room so I could listen to what was going on and learn something about the mysterious world of adults.

They all got drinks. Mr. Robards had a beer. Mrs. Robards had a Scotch on the rocks. Ma had a vodka tonic. Dad had a gin and tonic. Dad handed them their drinks. Trixie barked at him and bounded up and down like *she* was expecting a drink. Dad smiled in this lame kind of way at Mr. Robards and Mrs. Robards. "Shall we take Trixie out into the back yard?" he said.

Mrs. Robards said, "Oh, she'll be fine here. She likes being with people."

Mr. Robards looked at her and then turned to Dad. He said, "Artie, that's a great idea! Let's let her play in the back yard."

Dad hollered my name. I came running from my hiding spot in the dining room. Dad walked across the living room, yanking Trixie along on her leash like he was going to strangle her. "Take her out to the backyard, will you?" I took the end of the leash and walked Trixie into the kitchen and toward the back door. Dad walked with me. When we got into the kitchen, he turned to me and said, "The goddam dog is gonna trample all the flowers in the back yard! I just know it. Goddam dogs!" I looked at him. I took Trixie out

to the back yard, took off her leash, and let her run around. I came back to my hiding spot in the dining room.

I peaked around the corner of the wall separating the dining room from the living room. Mrs. Robards leaned back in the sofa and drank her Scotch and lit a Chesterfield. Ma lit a Pall Mall. “Don’t you wish you could quit, Terri?” Mom asked,

“Listen, hon,” Mrs. Robards said, “I like smoking and I ain’t gonna quit, no matter how many quacks tell me it’s no good for me.” She took a deep drag and then did a French inhale, which I had to admit was sexy even to my fourteen-year-old eyes. She looked at Dad. “You’re looking very fit, Artie,” she said. “Do you work out?”

“Oh, no,” he said, with kind of a nervous smile. “Oh, no. I don’t do anything but mow the lawn and clean out the gutters.”

“Well, you are *very* fit,” Mrs. Robards said.

Mr. Robards looked at Mrs. Robards. “You never say that about me,” he said.

“Well, I don’t have to say it to you, honey.” She rubbed him on his right arm, right where “Semper Fi” was tattooed.

Mr. Robards looked at Mrs. Robards and shook his head and took a swig of his beer. He turned to Dad. “Artie,” he said, “your lawn is looking great.”

“Thanks a lot, Rip,” Dad said.

“I can’t get mine to do a goddam thing,” Mr. Robards said. “All it is is crabgrass. I put down fertilizer and everything, but it doesn’t do a thing.”

“Well,” Dad said, “when we moved in here, we had crabgrass. I hired landscapers to come in and tear it all out and put down band-new sod. Since then it’s been practically perfect.”

Mrs. Robards said, "Artie, you are very enterprising." She smiled at him.

"Honey," Ma said, "can you please get me another drink?"

"Why, certainly, Marge," Dad said. "Can I get another libation for anyone else?"

"You can fill me up," Mrs. Robards said. Dad went over and took the glass from her hand, and she gave him a great big grin.

"Well," he stuttered, "g-glad to oblige." He started to go out to the kitchen.

"Hey, how about me, Artie?" Mr. Robards said. "I'm practically dying of thirst over here!"

"Oh, of course," Dad said, even more flustered now.

When he came back with the drinks, Mr. Robards said, "How the hell much did it cost to re-sod the entire lawn, if you don't mind my asking?"

Dad thought for a moment. "Oh, a couple thousand, I guess."

Rip whistled. "Hmm, must be nice."

Ma started another Pall Mall and said, "Don't you men ever get tired of talking about your lawns?"

"No. Never," Dad said, "There is so much to talk about. Fertilizers and worms and all that." They all laughed.

There was a silence. It was a silence like I imagined in Antarctica, where the ice and the glaciers and the penguins were the only things that existed. Mom and Dad and Mr. Robards and Mrs. Robards shifted in their seats. They all took long belts from their glasses.

Maureen came into the room. She had on a pink dress that shone like a neon sign. Her head was topped out like an ice cream cone by a pink ribbon that was wrapped

vertically around her hair to keep it in place. She wore this sly look that I knew very well. She asked, “Can I bring Trixie indoors to see what kinds of tricks she can do?”

Mrs. Robards said, “Oh, Trixie does all kinds of tricks! That’s why we named her Trixie!” Everyone laughed. “No, really. That really is why we named her Trixie. She’s been able to do tricks ever since the day we brought her home from the kennel. She’s the smartest dog anyone’s ever seen!” Like no one had ever said that about their dog before.

“I can tell!” Maureen said. “I can tell that Trixie is very smart! Can I bring her in, Dad? Can I please?”

Dad looked at Mom, who nodded. “OK,” he said to Maureen. “You can bring her in, but watch her carefully.”

Mrs. Robards said, “Oh, you don’t have to worry about Trixie. She’s very well behaved.”

“Yippee!” Maureen screamed, and she jumped up and down. She ran into the dining room, where I was hiding. She looked at me. “What are you? . . .” she started to say.

“Shut up!” I whispered. “I’m just keeping an eye on things.”

Maureen kept on going through the dining room and into the kitchen and out into the back yard. In a moment, she led Trixie through the kitchen and into the dining room. I’d never seen a dog more excited. She leaped up and down against Maureen’s dress and barked--“Arf! Arf! Arf!”--and the barks rattled through the house. “Oh, I wish I could get a dog!” Maureen cried. She ran with Trixie into the family room. “Sit, Trixie!” she screamed. “Good dog! Roll over, Trixie! Good dog!”

I turned my attention back to events in the living room. Mr. Robards was saying, “Terri and me—we played 18 today. Over at Tam O’Shanter. That’s a beautiful course, especially for a public course. Talk about grass! They do a beautiful job on the grass. I wish I could get my grass to look like that. All that damn crabgrass.”

“Oh, is that right?” Dad said. “How was it? The golfing, I mean.”

Mr. Robards shrugged his shoulders. “It was all right.”

Mrs. Robards took a long drink of her Scotch. She said, “It was more than all right. It was great! I beat ol’ Rip! I beat him, 88 strokes to 90 strokes. I beat Mr. Star Football Player who scored a hundred touchdowns in a season.” She laughed and rubbed Mr. Robards’s right arm, right on that Semper fi tattoo. I swear, she was pretty darn interesting.

Mr. Robards pulled his arm away from her. “You got lucky,” he said.

Mom said, “What does 88 to 90 mean?”

Dad shook his head and turned to Mom and explained, “In golf, the whole point is to put the ball into the cup in as few shots as possible. The lowest scores wins.”

“What’s a cup?” Mom asked.

“I’ll explain the whole thing later,” Dad said.

Mr. and Mrs. Robards just stared at Mom. Mrs. Robards said, “You mean, hon, that you’ve never played golf before? It’s really good exercise, and you’re out in the fresh air and everything. And then once in a while you beat your hubby and take a step forward for the ladies!”

Mom said, “I don’t have time to play golf, what with the children under foot and all.”

Mr. Robards looked at Dad. “Say, Artie,” he asked. “Do you play?”

Dad took a long drink of his gin and tonic. “No,” he said. “I don’t play any more. I used to play, but not any more. I was pretty good. I usually shot in the eighties.”

“Well,” Mr. Robards said, “We should play some time.”

Mom said, “He doesn’t have time to play.”

That brought back the Antarctic silence, like everyone had suddenly traveled to the ends of the earth. They all took long sips of their drinks. Mom rocked back and forth in her chair. Everyone could hear the sounds of Trixie yipping and yapping in the family room and Maureen’s screams of delight. “Arf! Arf!” Trixie yapped.

Finally, after what seemed like forever in that frozen silence, Dad piped up. “Does anyone need another drink?”

Mr. Robards said, “You bet! We’re practically dying of thirst here!”

Dad got up to go out into the kitchen. Mom got up from her chair. “Excuse me,” she said. “I’ve got to go check on the roast.”

I tiptoed from one spying spot to another, where I could do surveillance on Mom and Dad in the kitchen. Mom yanked the roast out of the oven and started making gravy. She clattered the pots and pans while she muttered to Dad, who shook his head and patted her on the arm. She checked the green beans and the potatoes on the top of the stove. The potatoes were ready. She emptied the water, took out the mixer, and started mashing the potatoes like she was mad at them.

Dad finished making the drinks and traipsed back into the living room. He handed the beer to Mr. Robards, whose hand wrapped itself around the beer glass like a bear’s paw. Dad handed the Scotch to Mrs. Robards. As she took the drink from Dad, she

appeared to accidentally touch Dad's wrist. "Thank you so very much, Artie," she said. "I really appreciate it."

Mr. Robards looked at Mrs. Robards and said, "Knock it off, Terri."

"Oh, don't be so touchy," she said and puffed on her Chesterfield.

Dad ran for cover back to his easy chair. We could all hear Mom clattering in the kitchen as she mixed the potatoes for what seemed like an hour. "R-r-r-r-r!" the mixer whined, sounding like a jet landing in the kitchen. Meanwhile, the sounds from the family room traveled through the air. "Arf! Arf! Arf!"

"Oh what a smart dog you are!" Maureen screamed. "Good Trixie! Good Trixie!"

I turned my attention back to the living room. Mom had finished with the potatoes and came back into the living room and sat back down in her rocking chair. She had her vodka tonic with her. She was back to being happy—maybe from killing the potatoes. "Well, gang!" she said. "We're almost ready! Another ten minutes for the rolls."

"Sounds fabulous!" Mrs. Robards said. The more they drank, they more they talked with exclamation marks.

Mrs. Robards leaned forward on the sofa. "Boy, have I got some great gossip," she said. Mr. Robards, Mom, and Dad all leaned toward her. "You know the Costellos, who live over on Westmont?"

"Well," Dad said, "I think we know who you mean. We don't really know them. I mean, how can you know everyone?" He turned to Mom. "Do you know who she means, Marge?"

Mom nodded. "Yes, I know who they mean." You could tell she didn't like the Costellos very much.

“*Well,*” Mrs. Robards said, “They’re getting *divorced!*”

“Really!” Dad said.

“Oh,” Mom said.

Mr. Robards took another swig of beer and shook his head and grinned. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess she caught him fucking someone he shouldn’t have been fucking!”

Mom and Dad—they didn’t say a thing. They just stared at Mr. Robards. I thought their eyeballs were going to pop out of their heads. Mr. Robards took another swig of beer and shook his head. “Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time!”

“For Christ’s sake, Rip!” Mrs. Robards practically screeched. “Don’t use language like that in mixed company!”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Terri!” he said. “We’re all adults here. What the hell are you going to say? I just said what the guy was doing. It’s too bad and all, but it happened just the way I said.” He looked at Mom and Dad. “You’re not offended are you?”

Mom and Dad just stared at him.

Mrs. Robards bawled, “For God’s sake, honey, I think you’ve had enough! You don’t go into people’s houses and use that language!” She yanked her eyes toward Mom and Dad. “I think maybe he’s had one too many. I’m terribly sorry. Time to turn off the spigot. No more beer for Mr. Football Hero Who Scored Eighty Touchdowns in a Single Game!”

“Oh, well,” Dad said. “It’s not like we’ve never heard it before.”

Mom just stared at the Robardses. Finally she said in that voice from Antarctica, “I think the rolls are ready.” She got up to go into the kitchen. I could hear her heels clatter against the linoleum floor.

Just at that moment, we heard a scream like a demon from the family room. From Maureen. A scream that pierced the air and split it into pieces. “Mommy!!!” she screeched. “Daddy!!!”

We all rushed into the family room—Mom, Dad, Mr. Robards, Mrs. Robards, me. She pointed toward the floor. We all looked down.

There, in the middle of the floor, was a pile of dog poop. Not just one or two little droppings, but an untidy ragged pile. It was the richest brown I’d ever seen. A little mountain of manure. A fountain of feces. A cupola of crap. A wallow of waste. A stanchion of stool. An excess of excretion. A bowlful of BM. It was unbelievable that a little dog like Trixie could produce such a big pile.

Mom, Dad, Mr. Robards, Mrs. Robards, me—we all stared in stunned silence at the gift that Trixie had given us on the family room floor. We all stared at the pile as if it had the power to freeze us. Trixie was in the corner, sniffing at the wall-to-wall carpet, which Sears had recently installed. The four adults stared, as if staring could make the pile of poop disappear. For once, Trixie was quiet. She knew what she had done, that’s for sure.

Dad’s eyes squinted, and his face rumbled black and his jaws clenched like a steel trap. He glowered at Mr. and Mrs. Robards. “Look at what your goddam dog did!” he shrieked. “Look at what your lowlife bitch of a dog did! Why the hell did you bring her

over here in the first place? Who the hell brings a dog to a dinner party? I mean, for God's sake!"

Mr. Robards turned his massive upper body toward Dad, and I grew frightened. Scared for my old man. Mr. Robards wore a demon-bear look in his eyes. He said, "Now wait just a goddam minute here, Anderson! It's just a little pile of dog shit. We can clean it up in seconds!"

Mom was paralyzed. She stared at the pile in the middle of the family room. "We just got this carpet from Sears!" she cried in anguish, as if one of us kids had just been run over by a car. "We just had it installed! Now your dog has pooped all over it! Like it was the great outdoors! Now the carpet—our beautiful new carpet that we just got from Sears and that we paid good money for—now the carpet is ruined!" She brushed away a tear from the corner of her eye like it was a dead fly. Maureen was standing next to me. She looked up at me, and she was starting to cry. She grasped my hand in hers.

Mrs. Robards shook her head and walked over to the corner where Trixie was. She picked up Trixie and gave her a little paddling on her butt. "Bad Trixie!" she said in a baby voice. "Trixie, you did a very very bad thing, pooping on the Andersons' beautiful new carpet!" Trixie looked up at Mrs. Robards with her saucer-like brown eyes and whimpered, as if she were truly sorry for what she had done. She even looked at Mom and Dad as if she were begging forgiveness.

Mom looked at me. In a voice just above a whisper, she said, "Ricky, take your sister out of here! Take her upstairs!"

We left the family room. But instead of going upstairs, we ducked into the corner of the dining room and peaked into the family room, where we could witness the strange adult things going on. Maureen kept holding my hand real tight-like.

Mr. Robards said, “For God’s sake, it’s only a little pile of crap, after all! It’s not like it’s the end of the world!”

Dad looked at Mr. Robards with electric eyes. “Only a pile of crap!” he bellowed. “Look at it! It’s spreading!” The little pile looked as if it were advancing, like it was alive, like in that movie *The Blob*. Dad howled, “It’s more than a little pile of poop! It’s shit, right in the middle of our family room! It’s defacing our home! I knew this would happen when you brought that goddam dog to our house! I mean, what kind of an idiot brings a goddam dog to a dinner party!?”

Mom and Mrs. Robards stared at Dad and shrank back from him. “Wait just a minute, Anderson!” Mr. Robards shrieked. “Just settle down, buddy! It was an accident, pure and simple. It’ll be easy to clean up. Terri, go get a paper towel!”

Dad glowered at Mr. Robards. “Why did you bring that goddam dog here anyway!? I just *knew* it was going to shit all over the place!”

“Honey,” Mom squeaked.

Mr. Robards faced Dad square-on and moved closer to him. “Because it’s my goddam right,” he said. “I have a right to take my goddam dog anywhere I want to. It’s my right as an American!”

Dad’s jaw screwed up even tighter. He stared at Mr. Robards with the meanest, angriest look I’d ever seen. He clenched both his hands into fists. I thought Dad’s entire body was going to explode. The two of them moved closer to each other. Mr. Robards

tightened his hands into fists like they were coiled with steel. I tightened my grasp of Maureen's hand. Even Trixie was staring at Dad and Mr. Robards. The short, frizzled hair around Mr. Robards's bald spot stood on end. Dad's and Mr. Robards's faces were two inches apart. Their faces were red. They stared at each other with animal hatred. They looked like apes.

Dad started to raise his fist. Mom stepped toward him. She put her hand on his shoulder. "Honey," she said, "we can clean it up."

Dad looked at Mom, and he suddenly remembered who he was. He pulled his face away from Mr. Robards's by an inch, two inches. He looked away from Mr. Robards. "Sure," he said to Mom. "You're right. It's just a pile of shit. We can clean it up."

But Mr. Robards—he kept staring at Dad—staring at him with hatred blazing his eyes. He was like a block of granite. His fists were clenched, and his face burned like the inside of a volcano. Mrs. Robards and Mom went into the kitchen. They didn't even notice Maureen and me standing in the corner of the dining room. They came back with a newspaper, a dustpan, and a bucket of water with some Mr. Clean in it. Mom bent down and used the dustpan to shove the poop onto the newspaper. She took the poop-laden newspaper to the downstairs bathroom and plopped the poop into the toilet. We heard the toilet flush like a monster swallowing a tiny animal.

Mr. Robards hadn't budged. He was frozen, his jaws caught in a vise. Dad bent down and used the water with the Mr. Clean and a sponge to clean the spot where Trixie had left her gift. He scrubbed and scrubbed until only a faint mark was left. Mom took the bucket with the dirty water in it into the bathroom and emptied it into the toilet. The toilet sounded like a dragon eating little children.

Mom, Dad, and Mrs. Robards all looked down where the poop had been. There was still a faint dark spot where Trixie had left her treasure. “I can still see it—the remains of the crap!” Dad moaned.

“We’ll keep cleaning it until it goes away completely,” Mom said.

Meanwhile, Trixie was back to her rambunctious self. She bounced up and down. “Arf! Arf! Arf!” Up and down, up and down, like an overheated molecule. “Arf! Arf!”

Mrs. Robards turned to Mom and Dad. Her face was tough and leathery and sunburned, but something had softened in her. “I’m so so sorry this happened,” she cried. “I’m really really sorry.” Tiny tears crept like insects from the corners of her eyes. All Mom and Dad did was look at her. They didn’t say a thing.

They turned to Mr. Robards. He hadn’t said a word. He was still standing there, his fists clenched, his jaw set in a vise, his eyes dark and mysterious. He was frozen. “Rip!” Mrs. Robards pleaded. “Let’s go home. Let’s go home, for God’s sake! Let’s get the hell out of here!” She put the leash on Trixie and grabbed hold of Mr. Robards and turned him toward the front door. He was like a granite statue, completely set in stone. He moved in slow steps toward our front door as Mrs. Robards guided him. Anger still flamed his eyes. He shuffled toward the door like a robot.

They walked out the front door. Mrs. Robards waved to Mom and Dad, but they didn’t wave back. Mrs. Robards guided Mr. Robards down the front walk, by our beautiful green lawn, the lawn that Dad took such fabulous care of. The green of the lawn shimmered and shone like a palace built of emeralds. Every blade of grass gleamed. Mr. and Mrs. Robards reached the end of the front walk and turned left. Trixie yanked on the leash, pulling them forward. Mrs. Robards guided Mr. Robards—the big granite statue.

His fists were clenched in anger, his eyes pitiless, his jaw in a vise. She led him, and he shambled along.

Suddenly Mom screamed, “The rolls!” She raced into the kitchen. She yanked open the oven door. Smoke poured out of the oven—smoke like a three-alarm fire. She put on her oven mitts and pulled out the baking sheet. The rolls were like charcoal. They were black and smoky and totally burned.

Dad came in. They both looked at the rolls and then at each other. I thought they were going to start crying or yelling or fainting or cursing. But they didn’t. They didn’t! They just stared at each other. And then, totally out the blue, they did something that I hadn’t expected at all. They started laughing. Not just chuckles, but out-and-out guffawing, howling, roaring, sniggering, and then exploding with more laughter. They looked at each other and howled some more. I’d never seen them like this. Never! It was like they were losing their minds. “Well!” Mom finally howled, “I guess we won’t be having rolls tonight!” Dad looked at her and burst into more laughter. They laughed until their faces turned red and their eyes exploded.

I smiled, too, but I couldn’t quite see what was so funny. I left and walked back to the front-door entrance. I stepped out onto the porch. I stood there for a while, looking at the lawn, studying it, wondering about it. Then I watched as Mrs. Robards slowly guided Mr. Robards back to their house—to their house that sat halfway down the block from ours. Trixie was leaping up and down, going “Arf! Arf!” as if she had no conscience, no memory of the horrible thing she had done to our house. By now, Mr. and Mrs. Robards were little more than small dot-people in the distance. Mrs. Robards opened the front

door and gently guided Mr. Robards into their house with all the crabgrass in the front yard. They disappeared into the house. They were gone—vanished—dissolved.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *“Lawns” was based on an actual incident that occurred when I was growing up, but with a great deal of exaggeration. As I was writing, the most important thing was to capture events from the perspective of a kid. I’m interested in young people, and I write about them a lot and especially their perspectives toward the adult world. The stories usually grow out of my own experiences or those of people I know. When you’re young, things affect you. It’s all happening for the first time, so things dig into you and stay there. That’s what I like to explore. Influences? Probably Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway--the way in which they transmuted everyday experience into compelling fiction. I reread Winesburg, Ohio every other year or so.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: I’m a writer based in the Chicago area. I’ve done a lot of different stuff in my life. I’ve been a merchant seaman, a high school English teacher, a corporate communications writer, a textbook editor, an educational consultant, and a free-lance writer. I’ve published short stories, articles, and essays in *The Progressive*, *Snowy Egret*, *Earth Island Journal*, *Chicago Wilderness*, *American Forests*, *Chicago Life*, *Across the Margin*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *The Literary Yard*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Spillwords Press*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Sweet Tree Review*, and other journals and magazines. In 2006, the University of New Hampshire Press published my first book, *This Grand and Magnificent Place: The Wilderness Heritage of the White Mountains*. My second book, which I co-authored with a prominent New Hampshire forester named David Govatski, was *Forests for the People: The Story of America’s Eastern National Forests*, published by Island Press in 2013. His story **Downtown Cool** appeared in Issue 7.

The BOOK of ANNIHILATION

By Michael Aliprandini

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We were enchanted by this deliciously rich and richly solemn parody of apocalyptic scripture—in which Aliprandini, ghosting as the scribe Héautontimorouménos, summons a siren call for the ‘Age of Incantation’. The author’s brocaded prose and ornate cadence serve as the voce della morte for an impaired and obstinate species blinkered to their future. Oracular zealots raising the banner of annihilation proclaim ‘Death is the New Life’. And within that somnolent prophecy stirs a darker mystery to be sure. This style of writing, deliberately arched and antiquated, sounds new and startling to modern ears; its measured harmonies and gilded arabesques both beguile and puzzle. It’s also the kind of writing that in lesser hands, quickly leads to boredom. We assure you this is not the case here. Gentle reader, you are in good hands with he who calls himself Michael Aliprandini.*

Five stars.

(Spacing, font size and colour are author’s own.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE:

There were sects that rode deranged horses into the frothy waters and there were those that preferred crashing tractors into armored trucks. Others ingested poisonous mushrooms and spoke a renovated language until they doubled over and died. Some swallowed stones, others experimented with livewires, and still others embraced serpents and ravenous beasts.

THE BOOK OF ANNIHILATION

In the beginning were the words and the words were magic in the mouths of men. They pulsed with radiant bursts and illumined the paths and byways of their poetry. Men were in thrall to words and the words were served. This was the Age of Incantation.

The Age did not last. Most men swapped incantation for cant, rich wine for hogwash. Words, indentured, struggled towards magic in a profusion of jingles and doublespeak. Poets still rose in the land. The poets sang and the poets inscribed and many were their glories. But the poets knew their muses were being cut and drained. They counseled: “Protect your resources! Stop the violence! Terralingua suffers exceedingly!” Their counsel went unheeded and so they lamented: “Words are ghosts guttering in hollow mansions, and silence is wanting in the land. How shall we renovate? We have less to speak yet more need to exaggerate. Grievous is the blight. Our tongues swell and blacken. We tear our mouths.”

The poets yearned for an Age of Aphasia, but the Age did not come to pass. Instead, a new prophet rose upon the face of the deep.

■

The uterus lay on the water and the holy sperm wiggled nearby. Behold, a Celtic prophet was begat. In his fifth year the prophet succumbed to visionary fevers. Heavy metals in the fish, he reckoned, but in truth God had a plan. The dolphin leapt above his pod and looked down upon the gray hundreds and saw he was set apart. He leapt, he frolicked, he frightened the gulls, and again he looked upon the hundreds and still he was apart. His brain vibrated and all was confusion, but he did as instructed, swimming in haste to Connecht Bay, a peaceful indentation on the west coast of Ireland. The Age of Annihilation was commencing.

■

The prophet glided over the deep and slipped into a trance as he glided. He located his foremost

disciple and tumbled her on the land and set her upright again. “Siobhan O’Feeligan, go down and swim in Connecht Bay,” and she swam.

As Siobhan listened to the prophet, the plankton glowed around them with her newfound awareness. “I’m a prophet in the water and a spirit on the land and a hope in the mind. I’ve forsaken my pod to deliver a message to humankind. You’ve been designated my foremost terrestrial disciple. Do you accept the mission?”

“Humbly,” she said through chattering teeth. The prophet moved her to the shore and set her upright. Thereafter she strode backwards in flippers from farmhouse to farmhouse, accompanied by a chorus of slamming doors and threats. Still she persisted in the spirit and the spirit persisted in her. She beseeched townspeople to heed the message. “Ladies and gentlemen, the end is nigh. God is coming, but first we must prepare the earth. Obey the edicts of the prophet and enter the fold of the chosen. Every creep that creepeth on two legs should surrender his life to the ground or to the water. I will guide your preparations. Do not tarry. Heal yourselves with Death so that the Theocracy of Peace can reign throughout the land.”

And she was shunned, and the people of the land carried on consuming and begetting and spoiling.

■

The prophet recognized that Siobhan needed to grow her ministry. He located a woman in a hospital of the city. She was made to lift her arms so that the spirit of the prophet could tickle her. When she did not giggle, the prophet knew she was grim straight through and would serve him with faithful gloom. “Leave the care of the sick. Henceforth you’re a disciple of the grave-cloth. Drape yourself in cerements, and get yourself to Ballyardcarraig. Seek out Siobhan O’Feeligan, and pledge yourself to her ministry.”

The nurse made haste and threw herself at the flippers of the foremost disciple. “The prophet has enslaved me. Enslave me in the mysteries of your ministry.”

“Rise, grim woman, and together we will witness miracles.”

They strode backwards to the Slough of Despond where they met a gigantic serpent writhing on the grass. Siobhan slit the belly of the serpent. Out slipped an irritable man covered in gore. “Leave me be,” Héautontimorouménos shrieked. But the spirit of the prophet bellowed in response: “It’s not your hour. You must record my gospel and the events that form the Age of Annihilation. Do not lament. Your time will come. Until then, be prepared for the delights of self-defecating humor.”

And the stink of serpent belly trailed the three disciples. The two women stirred up a great froth of soulfulness throughout the land while the irritable scribe loafed around and yawned a lot and periodically scribbled the notes that would become *The Book of Annihilation*.

■

It came to pass that a community of pub-dwellers heard the news. They removed their clothes and walked with their pints to the cliffs above Connecht Bay, there sculling their final taste of ale and tossing the empty glasses into the waves. “We have reached the leaping place. Legion dwells within us. We cast ourselves into the watery maw.”

And as the pub-dwellers did their duty, the prophet performed a mirthful back flip. Thereafter a weekly pilgrimage was made to the cliffs above Connecht Bay, and every month hundreds of pilgrims leapt into the fold.

Heartened by the success, the earthly triumvirate went swimming in the waters of the bay. The prophet praised them and scared them. “Be forewarned. Enemies are ranging against us. Remember, my disciples. Persecution makes us strong. Persecution is the proving ground.”

As foretold, various councils convened. They discussed the call entreating humankind to ruin.

The psychiatrists furrowed their brows and discussed the mood-enhancers that might counteract the messages of a dolphin with a messiah complex. They proposed theories and tested new cocktails. But they were confounded.

The holy men furrowed their brows and broke down in sweaty fits. When their prayers went unanswered, they tore their robes and fulminated: “A curse worries the sanctity of life. A dolphin-shaped devil stalks the waters near the land. Let our mouths overflow with prayer and propaganda.”

The philosophers pondered three of the prophet’s theoretical pronouncements: *(a) It is not suicide but survival that is pathological. (b) Human existence is a knot. Alexander instructed on the handling of knots. (c) Smote thyself.* After subjecting the theses to the most incisive analysis and finding the dolphin’s ontological oo-la-la less wearisome than the alternatives, they cheered the end of philosophy.

There came to Ballyardcarraig a delegation of concerned marine biologists. Fearing that the cetacean was being molested by interpretation, they trailed Siobhan bearing placards of protest: *INTERPRETATION IS THE REVENGE OF THE INTELLECT ON MARINE LIFE.* But the prophet came down hard upon them and they were made to perform aerial twists. In their nausea they were granted the wisdom that marine life would enjoy the blessings of a future only in the absence of men. And they became great preachers on the land and in the boats.

Meanwhile, Siobhan and her ministry were thrown into a jail cell occupied by common drunks. They listened to the message and pointed out that their kind was the first to have shown the presence of mind to get right with death. The prophet heard their pleading and freed the lot of them. As word spread of the miraculous escape, police authority was troubled throughout the land.

Despite the reactionaries enlisted against them, good news arrived with the force of a tidal

wave. Communities of believers were springing up around the world and performing their duty according to rituals that amused the prophet with their extravagance. Thus was ushered in the most creative period of the Age of Annihilation. There were sects that rode deranged horses into the frothy waters and there were those that preferred crashing tractors into armored trucks. Others ingested poisonous mushrooms and spoke a renovated language until they doubled over and died. Some swallowed stones, others experimented with livewires, and still others embraced serpents and ravenous beasts. And the news bespoke widening victory: a million dead in a single week. A great woe settled on the holy men, and the prophet fixed his grin and rejoiced. **“God is a million lives nearer. Multiply the death! Bipedal extinction approaches!”**

■

Now a pharmaceutical company, lured by the killing to be made, began manufacturing Omega Pilgrim, an easy-swallow pill for those who didn't want to leave a mess or waste time devising a creative departure. The CEO sought the prophet's endorsement, but the prophet balked. **“Make available a generic version of the pill for developing countries and lower income families.”** When the company refused, the prophet performed his first miracle of international scope. The pill was multiplied around the world. **“Ingest,”** the prophet intoned merrily. **“Enjoy permanent existential analgesia!”** And many were the pilgrims who leapt into the omega.

One day the scribe interviewed the prophet over the side of a dinghy. “Would you respond to rumors that your portfolio is flush with shares in generic Omega Pilgrim? Some sources suggest that your miracle was merely the opening play in a vast campaign for market domination. You're planning to jack up the prices once everyone is hooked on death, right?”

And the prophet responded: **“Nay, that is gross slander. Profits will be widespread: freedom from the struggles of humankind and his corruption. The dividend will be peace, quiet, and**

cleanliness.”

“Can you share with our worldwide audience why the Age of Annihilation is beginning at this particular time?”

“We have long been losing faith in humankind’s ability to lose faith in itself. For millennium we’ve attempted to cohabitate, but man is a stubborn creep who persists in creeping along sinister paths and byways. His faith in God, in hope, in progress inspires the most pernicious ignorance. He’s unable to live without illusion, yet the illusions he manufactures are malign. It’s nearly too late. In order to save the earth and its more peaceful brethren, humankind must set upon itself, root and branch.”

“Wow,” the scribe said. “Any other suggestions you can share?”

“Let it be. Let it be razors, let it be the noose. Cliffs are dramatic and so are shotgun blasts. Cigarettes take decades, but overdoses have their perks. Let it be strenuous sex, if you have a heart condition. Let it be a body of water and stones in your pockets. Many are the ways to die and some are ways to die well, even artfully. Let it be poison or a leap into speeding traffic, and do not neglect to throw the babies out with the bathwater. As I speak, let it be.”

“Would you care to comment on the value of humankind’s accomplishments?”

“What is this, The Hague? Muckrake your puny heart and ransack the archives, little scribbler, and you will find man’s accomplishments wanting by any measure except that of man.”

“Are you by any chance forgetting Caravaggio? Bach? Godard? Sebald? Waits?”

“You yourself can answer that. Remember I saved you from the belly into which you had cast yourself. Art is a diddle in the beginning and the middle. In the end, like everything else, it just drops dead.”

The prophet shot an ambiguous geyser from his blowhole that brought the interview to a close.

■

SUPPER ON THE WAVE

The disciples encircled the prophet in Connecht Bay. Around them a new batch of recruits treaded water. They listened to his sermon while tossing him tasty marine morsels. “Disciples recently and long faithful, I commend you with the highest praise. The time has come to initiate you into the final mystery. Rub my belly!” the prophet said, and they did as commanded. The prophet adopted the position for defecating, and la crème de la crap spurted into the waters. “Eat of my anus!” the prophet said, and they did. “Imbibe of my waters!” and they did. Their bellies full of salty water and fishy shit, the disciples were moved to shore and set upon their feet. Meanwhile the new recruits swam towards the Americas and merrily merrily merrily perished in right reason.

■

In boardrooms around the globe, there was much wringing of power-ties. Production was dropping as the Age of Annihilation gathered pace, so too consumption. With entire markets vanishing overnight and many a sweatshop standing empty, business prospects looked bleak. Military-industrial complexes were scaled back as enemies self-destructed. Without access to the latest high-tech toys, warmongers lathered themselves into a sulk.

At the special congress that was convened, an ambitious grunt speechified a plan. “I fear we’re not being proactive enough. You see turmoil and cutbacks where I see golden sacks. We just need to approach vis-à-vis a different paradigm. Our mistake is to not be capitalizing enough on the consumers’ decision before they execute it. Revenues from Omega Pilgrim (both the minty-fresh and the cinnamon burst) are merely a sliver of what we can accomplish. Essentially, we need more buzz and more products. Toys and gizmos, baubles pitched at every income level. Comic books. Gift vouchers and farewell cards. Bestsellers and blockbusters with clever product placement.

How-to manuals for the implacably idiotic. Cartoon and video game tie-ins. Dolphin language tapes for the commute and fruity dolphin-shaped cereal. And let's give death a makeover. Raise the hemline and by all means show a little cleavage. Ditch all that black and parade it in pastels. Indoctrinate through woozy power ballads and corporate-sponsored news segments. Get the mavens and connectors onto the talk show circuit. Pitch Omega Pilgrim as the ultimate cure for every ailment, from chiggers and dandruff to depression and diverticulitis. This season, death is the new life. We need more mumbo-jumbo, not less!"

And the plan was met with widespread approval. Executives and their drudges buckled down to business. Industry was fired up, and the advertising blitzkrieg shot death into everyone's eyes. And behold, in the great creative ferment that was frothed, scores of consumers performed their duty every day.

■

Not all business leaders were convinced of the plan. They called an emergency meeting at Davos. Representatives of ISIS and the Vatican were in attendance. Those assembled came to the conclusion that they shared a common goal, and they laid out a plan to extirpate the cult once and for all. A crackpot team of interdenominational zealots was charged with saving humankind. The leaders huddled and chanted: "Hail the dictatorship of consumption! Hail the dictatorship of life! Hail the dictatorship of fright!"

■

The disciples joined the prophet in Connecht Bay. "My faithful ones, it's been revealed that the moment for an overthrow of the two-footed tongue has not yet arrived. Soon I will be taken from you. Humankind has bungled the endgame, too. In future, beware of noble schemes that do not accord it eternal pride of place! Disciples, rub my belly!"

And the disciples did as commanded. The water bubbled and the plankton glowed like sleazy neon and a tremendous fear came hard upon them. Blood burst from the prophet's blowhole, covering them in the schlock of it. His fixed smile bent into a menacing grimace as he executed a series of aerial spins. "Exit humankind! Furry critters leap into the mouths of serpents, horses gallop off cliffs, and their triumph over base instinct lays sweetly on the mind. Millions of right-thinking men have performed their duty. Yet humankind still persists in dubious faith. You think you know God but you know Nada! When will the Theocracy of Peace reign upon the land? I will return with a pouch and a hope. Await my resurrection Down Under."

And the dolphin glided away in a dazzle of sound and color.

The foremost disciples tore their wetsuits and hatched alternative plans. Siobhan and the nurse were captured as they attempted to flee to Australia. Charged by an international tribunal for crimes of mystical malpractice, they popped themselves off in prison with hidden doses of Omega Pilgrim. The prophet submitted to the net, and the zealots clubbed him with holy glee. His grinning head adorns the office wall of the latest financial kingpin, and the flukes were presented to the Pope in an official ceremony. Somewhere just over the Syrian border, in a less official ceremony, the bearded bogeymen received the dorsal fin. And humankind persisted in its more retarded apocalypse.

The scribe hid in a farmhouse in order to complete *The Book of Annihilation*, set down in year one, *anno delfinus*. To guarantee broad circulation, he threatened a rash of psychic-controlled bombings, and several high-profile newspapers deigned to print the testament. Then Héautontimorouménos took himself back to the Slough of Despond and slipped into a serpent's maw and found his freedom in his ending.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Some years ago, I was reading the King James version of The Hebrew Bible and became enchanted by the richness and quiriness—to a modern ear—of its language and cadences. Contemporary language is often so impoverished that majestic prose can come across as unintentionally parodic.*

When I started writing my own “scripture” in “The Book of Annihilation,” I tried to mimic this language and these cadences in order to posit an Age of Incantation in which the reserves of English were utilized more fully and words were less debased. At the same time, I was parodying New Age hogwash and Christian rituals; blasphemy and subversion are important in my work, in part because I grew up Catholic, in part because our age of religious extremism (whatever its variety) is reckless and disturbing.

I sort of occupy the position of the book’s scribe, Héautontimorouménos, whose name means the self-torturer and who tortures himself to death with gnarly existential questions. 2020-2021 has been a difficult and tragic period in human history, but many torturous questions of a broader scope remain. “The Book of Annihilation” asks: Given our track record, wouldn’t the planet and its non-human creatures be better off without homo sapiens?

AUTHOR’S BIO:

Michael Aliprandini lives in Italy and works internationally as a curriculum developer and teacher-trainer. His short stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in several publications, including *Litro*, *Queen Mob's Tea House*, *Counterclock*, *Fresh Ink*, *The Bacon Review*, *Crooked Arrow (Bullseye)*, and *Columbia Journal*. He is a fiction reader for the online UK version of “Litro.”

AMERICAN DECAMERON . Day

77. The Prince of Crows . . .

by Anthony Acri

WHY WE LIKE IT: *If 'on a winter's night... neutron stars Robert Burton (1577-1640) and Italo Calvino (1923-1985) collided above '...a traveller' in the high up halo-sphere the nucleic fallout would be Anthony Acri's American Decameron. In his attempt 'to create an italianate (sic)-like work of art out of the most politically diabolical pandemic since Manzoni' the author has transcended the duality of writer and reader. Visions rise and swoon, images crash and burn in the hellscape of post-Arcadia america (sic). The author approaches private language with his cosmetic re-modeling and gradual descent into fragmentation of sound and symbol. We can't admit to understanding—or even apprehending—everything that goes on in this densely layered Outsiderist artifact but we felt as writing qua writing, it was just too beautiful not to publish. A Fellini-esque carousel that spreads its glories like a peacocks' tale (sic). (Spacing and font size are author's own. Syntax, misspells and typos are deliberate.)*

Five stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language)...

There In the sunny emptiness as it is as quiet as its ever been, it seems, around me, was the white rose parade float this perfecta homecoming queen, but better than merely that, used as a Sagan like Avian carriage that no imaginer could ever come up with.

I had to turn to VESTA, and go to ask, but she fotelling my question rolled her egeueous eyes and pressed her gumby smile and nodded her dark brown banged head. I called him, he said, walking ays from the still janagling glass cabinate, and Tinkerbelle's of bikinied composure, anad he stood theer as a bigg a killetr as Puzo could ever have mdae, or even a schoolboy defender of the res publica in Sallsut, which I musts ay to the gal who asked, was , I read in his list of codexes, the peraoetrs fourth favorte book.

DAY 77. THE PRINCE OF THE CROWS.

1. As the crow does appear in the great book tattered and dismissed when was being lectured to and called an Anti Semite for mentioning the anti aircraft guns trained on children, the kind that Harvey doesn't cry for, like Sicilian granddaughters, and the elderly at Jeddah.

As somehow, the Romans got tarred by a crew of born again in laws, who then were just happily being called Doges and as the Stromboli, the trash can Hollywood rapist, their Fatty Arbuckle, sways from one brunette to another, and I was being castigated for daring to think, not allowed then, that the National Biscuit Company was doing yeoman's service , as I said, for a bloated Buffalo pig, as it had way back when weekend update was losing anchor wise guys for actually making OJ jokes, or one too many. I am, as the auger always Wrong--except in hindsight.

I went outside again, as my brother went to go to that maelstrom that I have called the Inferno, Wal-Mart, long before we became knucklehead nation. I took the Hoover outside and wore a mask and I made sure that I emptied the canister and got a bunch of Welch's gummy bears out of the hose and allowed the gray dust to flow like sand superman into the blue sky. I walked and bumped into a woman dressed as a nun.

Oh, I said, Golly, I'm sorry sister I wasn't watching here I was going. I saw the nun was not quite the nun of Monza, I guess Hillary is our variation here, like Biden is our Erronious, look, we always have one, but more like an image one would see in Passolini's Decameron, cone banned in Boston, as the city of hating Negros ballplayers and throwing batteries at black baseball players has always amusingly been quite against not only Misogyny, but almost every form of sex outside of the rapes of the Kennedy family. I mean, even in the burlap of st. Claire this woman, was , what is thee word stacked, I could tell by her rounded edges and curvy outline of habit. Sorry Sister... I said. She turned and smiled at me in full batman wife regalia, and I saw it was Westa herself again, Trojan goddess, somewhere between the yellowed pages of a history of Italian literature and the Insta-gram she inhabited as a sweetly politically conscious pin up dream.

I almost went yuck, despite myself, and it certainly wasn't at her image, like some who made faces about Monica and kept shows through #Metoo, DESPITE THE FACT THAT they will liberal with the sue of words like ghoul n88#er, but then this as HBO. I was in no mood again, like Ovid, Bill Clinton's hero writer poetry warrior, to get in her swan again, and speak to a goddess so close, fictionally or otherwise, and go to gods only knows where, when again all I was doing was aging to plan to take the garbage out, and this time, a long phallus of gray dirt out of cheap vacuum. It as again, the least I could do.

And, without a measure of contradiction she was pretty, as she alas lazy is, to her smallest atom , sparkling there without

meaning to. This serenity of her effortless sexuality, un put on, un masked, unprinted, as opposed to over combed actresses on television who I have read in a brother's Times, are seen as perpetually putting ion the dog as it were, why ill never know that rancid TV land dyke Ellen, showing again I've never met a Vivian who I didn't find sexually enticing, and have never found an Ellen who didn't deserve tow era Sensible shoes.

Oh no, I said, aloud, wearing a cowboy hat, but a different cowboy chart and flannel pants that had a slight smell of piss as we haven't done laundry in now ate last eight weeks, if one doesn't count me washing t shirts and underwater for the family by using Irish spring and table top Joy dish-washing gel, and warm water in the bathroom sink, which, to be fair, my brother thinks I am adept at and every so often leaves a shirt on a chair and asks me to wash them with that bar of soap. But, again I wasn't in the mood to fly over the despaired and the rioting now, as we have it seems left Boccaccio in the dust, I had just spilled out over and into the sunshiny day.

And it appears, we have entered a rancid time of my mothers beloved Victor Hugo, if not a redo of the follies berg ere of the 1968 Dem convention, as the essence and the definition of ebbing democrat is doing the same things over and over and then putting the inner through hell, as the losers usually give a nice concession speech and this time, not even that. As this time, Hillary, not the man she thinks she is, couldn't be a decent loser, and sent out a house wop, as my father called them, a Niccolo in visage only, and the sort of dago ninny that I have never strayed, as knew he was set to detonate from the

first, who amen out to say never say die and said that Billy the kid, or was it Alan Brady...?, would ride again, so some such shit that got to be stale, even in the fairy tale land of long, long, ago.

Hey, Buddy, she said with almost sling blade bubble gum chewers, healthiest grin. I found her exquisite and immaculate, hens the name Westa for her as she really as something between the unbelievably touching Movies that helped crated Peckinpah, Pollansky and Bogdonavich, and those silver nitrite like pin ups from movies we used to have from the Verna Lisssi's of the world, and the goddesses that came to hosts Ovid also in an Imperial exile, as was so long ago. Oyyyyyy, I said, as you'd think id take whatever of Wendy even this as I could get, but sometimes, I find I cant even so much as masturbate of lesser than her, as it prickles at my soul and my ebbing, as am still, after forty years and a mixer I had that I recalled when started to watch the new placed Facts of life each afternoon, and I wonder if I shall ever now get to that Coriolanus Out there, or if it even exists.

She placed a voluptuous, and yet lean and lithe orange skinned, we called it olive before black hags got passed their box office poison plaque as hung around them, by again making politics their shtick, a hand out to me that, for a nun as acquisitive as she had put Lee press on nailed. She had, I saw in some minds eye as I stood there at the small tree and the small sweet robins who now were all over the place as somehow the earth was being replicated by that virus to a pre industrial, pre thank god Scrooge Ian, pre Dickens, as he deserved to be recalled by

Norton, no less, age, the image of an earth goddess, a Gaea queen, an inherent creation in flesh and how, of Italia, as we had now made a less sooty, less smoggy environment. I thought of saint Francis, the first great church apostate, after Julian, that only Gore Vidal would make a hero in that Shawn time of liking fingers, maybe why I saw her this way, as you'd think the least thing shed remained me of was the lovely old Franciscan nuns I had a boy, they were all, Loretta, Celica, Barbra Ann, all old as Methuselah, and so why I placed her in a nun habit I had no idea. I did see this image, as the sun hit me on some level, so again, all is true, if you think about it.

I did see the fantastic about the great Wendy-Vesta as a nun in some scurrilous daytime wet dream, for some reason that I guess ill never understand.

Just then she looked up and so did I. A giant and I mean a giant crow, almost a black hawk came dropping out of the streets of Ovid's skit, and I thought sadly it as dead, or dying as have ahd enough of all of that. But as it came towards a smaller bread liked truck, it zoomed back up into the cloudless sky, screwing a bloated hat wearing teamster who was afraid it as going to slam into his dark red, weather-beaten, almost Sanford and son looking, truck. Holy shit, I said as the Heckle , a bird once scared to Romans and extractions before the Jewish minded hatred of all things black, but kept book seemed to take over the west's sadly and Romans were recalled by people taught to hate the children of Ham, if not ham its own self to this very day. So, as an Italian through and through, I adore ham and pork, sorry, as recall that senator as you can still hear in the

very sandstone Latin in the ova of the word, Senator means pig farmer, way back, recalling senate of farmers with a genius for fighting back, that always always reduced itself to trash like Biden and Obama, who will bomb and screw over anything or one, they can or have to, or even don't.

Don't worry about the crows, Niño, she said. They will, she smiled and snapped her chubby fingers, Always survive on their own. They know, she said to me with a wink of her deep Seinna eyes and a smirk worthy of a Roman princess, Exactly how to swoop and dive and take back to the wing again. She walked ahead, going the topside direction of where I as headed back towards my door. I as I have been since 1977, followed the perfect ass and the legs is aw in the slit someone put in the back of her burlap habit, in that direction, as I always have and will. The crow incident actually happened, and maybe on some level the following of Wendy as goddess down towards the Pogo like woods not far away, did also.

There In the sunny emptiness as it is as quiet as its ever been, its seems, around me, was the white rose parade float this perfecta homecoming queen, but better than merely that, used as a Sagan like Avian carriage that no imagineer could ever come up with.

I mean to be fair, when submitted a bunch of sketches for the last true Grimm's storybook fillies they'd ever have done, soon they'd be making sanctimonious versions of Kimba the white lion, a cartoons shown on Paul Shannon adventure time when I was a

lad, I sent in stone soup to the sweat Shoppe that Disney has ways been. I would be told to the chagrin of some who thought I could ape Mickey mouse perfectly as shown in Pow-girl , but alas think too much of myself to be a mere copyist of , of all people uncle Walt, that they had no intentions to retain the rights to Grimm's, as if there were anymore, and basically Brunette princesses from Shady Grove, well, like the Times of Calvino's Italay, they've had enough. Ask Robert Blake, as sad a killer they hate to eye.

Recently they too have alas had to apologize to those shysters and creeps and pinheads who think political charity is the same that it is, explaining why they have to yell, as you'd have to yell too to drown out the remembrances that in fact, all these riots were being done by and for the benefit of someone who had not only gone to , but actually gave the eulogy at the funeral of a last segregationist, and a street thug who was passing bad twentieths, but missed all this silent memorials unhallowed by Gummadis and Shylock's, who thought wrinkly as usual, there were no votes there. So, good luck, to Chiron as he thinks he's navigating that most important river in the world as it was when Pliny wrote, and finds himself going down the less than whitewater of the river Styx, it seems, just on time.

She stood there, gloriously, before the girl swan she rode like a buckaroo. Her white and lavender sheer dress flapped around her, and yet gave her a winged victory feel, with still, though some weren't glad about it, a beautiful head that could, as smart alack girls she was perfect exemplar of , the kind the Jews hate was in perfect unrestrained, gregariousness. The new

found love of the American Visigoths, --boy, that racial mixing of even metaphors so would that bother the lace tables Bush Family as my mother called theta ilk-to crush statues, showing its not just the Semitic, yes they are Semitic too, sat least to Greek price boys-cribs of civilization that the Bushes can demand and destroy as they have come even to Poppy's mausoleum, strange isn't it, for a family that had to, after the golden age of Reagan, still had to bite and scratch like women, to get that third interregnum for a president, that no matter how liked they are, ask Al Gore, never comes that easily, and like Nixon showed, they never forgive you for it. Spit on his grave, and let us see.

So, now, in the Iunius Sun showers, as the Apollonian sun rose higher and higher now by the day, she stood in her stage combination of Va voom it girl qualities, with a sadness almost a schoolgirl poetic-isms that has only been weaponize a few times, mostly by Hillary, and for her troubles, lest not forget who won did the woman's vote, despite three decades of pretending you were all of Motherhood incarnate when not as usual, offs script, ad libbing and snorting with biker girl made good charm about how mother hood as alas, little more then baking Cookies. Alack, we saw, another God and guns moment of truth that the slums never hold you to as long as, Machiavelli warned us about the politics of the rabble, its isn't so much you bringing a revolution, as Uncle Bill showed us, as much as assaying the era of big gummit is over, as a bit of Improv thrown in Shylock's and Gummadis old weathered, withered, faces to show, again, you wont take away, what little that they've got. Unless you absolutely have to. Such is the Cuomo's and mayor Lin-seeds we have now, as frankly knew we were in for it

when Grandpa Munster himself, the Al Lewis if jewel politics in New Uooork, Ed how an I doing Koch, fer whom daddy Mario as in fact called Cuomo the homo, when in fact, Grandpa wasn't again married as he ran.

Your Brother is Right, she said with perpetual big lipped smile, You have to get out before you go stir crazy,...like the Democrats, she added. She got into her egg shelled winged chariot that seemed on closer look , almost like the old glorious riding toys that were held in front of the five and Dime when I was a kid, and would be taken there by a mother, who soon enough's topped taking me anywhere, for reason I am still, after this long, still unsure. My brother tells me that the death of her mother, an unknown of grandmother so long ago, may have defeated her in her forties, but I cant know anything about that as remember her not a bit. But, a mother too, once lefts seemingly alone saw herself surrounded by a new world of scum and trash and wops compete always as pop said, who would do anything and anyone for power, a most vicious and venial sort, and she felt alone, though still had a husband and children, perhaps a key link back to the patria, this year as savaged by barbarity as its ever been, was lost, and she stayed pretty much at home, for the rest of her life, making me wonder as early a 1980, how I could go to Stanford or Georgetown or anywhere, and leave these two old Italians alone, as I was =certain they would be. She seemed to answer the question, like Amache Scores, after the Giants win the pennant, before it happened, or formed in my head.

The Provosts and even Olgetree did admire me once for being

devoted to the Romans as I will always remain, my veins and pulses are so devoted, let the lesbians or whatever these sacristan loving perverts of Sparta are now, burn me for it, as Bill himself was, and yet even still, I guess I believe it in ways he did not, and made sure I was here to, always with bitching, benedictine kvetching, needling and even satire. I must say that looking back, I guess I did their bidding, even when that meant getting letters from 30 Rock in the same year, one from Jim Shooter telling me to go to a school for comics run by Kubert I think, as did the hard stuff well as opposed to the easy stuff I never bothered with, and too, a letter from the nursery and how, of Conan's, and the broken bra straps and the recriminations of Late Night after it had been taken from David and given to someone else, who as I said at the time, just cause your hair is funny and you're witty, Red, pal...that don't mean shit.

We flew past the waves of green and purple that are a perpetual ring on this very Ovidian avenue of the sky, past the trees that zoomed under us, became a flat plane of glass like ice, past the old castles of medieval Italy, and Romania, where the civilization one only was and where, if kind, the trash of Tin pan alleys of vulgar Britannia, as Tacitus called it,--ah there is always reason for censorship, like how GWTW can be so ever hated by colored's, why theirs a fucking brunette in it!--said were the cut throats of Italy, if not the out and out vampires of Trans-woods. Soon she with Petronius like straps that seemed to fit in her hands well as I thought of the Machiavellian line about the kitten with a whip that is Signora Fortuna, she guided her feathery --- I am dictating, and at a loss...what is the name of the bird with the long neck, I ask out loud. A brother said,

Ostriches, which is right but I'm not having Wendy ride an ostrich, then my almost silent retarded sister says unasked, Swan, with a sad replay--her swan necked missile, wizardly driven towards the golden shine, there at the edge of the earth.

This was a border town, a place which was half Fortress of solitude in the old superman comics, if not the Doc Savage I read as a kid, pulps still helmed by the Jewish kids who'd be pawed out, and partly looked like set designs I have seen used by Orson for his modern dress Julius Caesar which, like everything else, in the imperial high school of America was reversed to merest fashion and Vogue. Strike a pose. I stop here a moment as recite this like Caesar to myself as scribe, as an ex TV LAND f\$g, Jerry Helper from an Ex f@ggot show, now dropped yet again, how many trap door endings shall you have mister Tolkien as no less than a scholar of Roman lore said to the I'm certain, crestfallen, if not cold dunked in water, little scribbler of fairies and trolls, but then I was hardly the first Jesuits schoolboy to have seen how he strip mined Ariosto, wither the English majors nor spic literary critics, like knowing Magic realisms is Italian as Spanish Steps or not.

2.

She, Wendy, was like a image that they will eventually try to bust in Italia, as the hags went there demanding that that eldest language, bacillary new Latin, be scrubbed of pronouns and of feminine and masculinity we are all, after all Spartans in Bush land, and didn't know, or much care that in romance

languages, each and every word has a feminine and masculine purpose, hence Il and La, as he was never la Duce, unless of course one was speaking about Bill Clinton. Ouch.

She drove the swan, her perfect attendant, and took us over the curvature of mother Gaea, past the pink and puce hue of the sky this high upon in the clouds, this far from the centers of the earth. I thought of how Pliny described how a man walked all the way to the deepest part of hell and avoided Hades therein, the Satan of that Roman time, whatever, whoever, as kept, and walking back marked his Dantean like sojourn from his city of Rimini, strangely enough in this telling, or retelling, and marking it own, this chute, my father's word for idiot or imbecile, the Bushes word for Sonny Boy, figured out, somehow that the whole circumference of the earth was around 28,000 miles 'round. Looking over at me, knowing what I was thinking about, she smiled with her gorgeous Heavy Traffic sexual cartoon eyes, as immense as I've ever seen, and she smiled at the people who have survived each and every onslaught of barbarians from any branch of The Bush family or the those Negroes they allowed in when it's time to take a powder, but they still want the wars percolating along.

We came to the walled edges of the earth, a strange bonded city of sandstone, on the edge of the Terra Incognita, a buttress and a bulwark against the barbarians that Virgil said rung around the earth and lived amid the ice where the hock nosed Christians went to, in more ways than one.

The sheer walls, like something out of the valley of the kings, no, not that reality, almost like out of a cartoon, a political cartoon, a gray demesne of stones, a wall city, a city all, a Hadrian's fences made out brick bracks and falderals, a city of Troy made out of pen and ink, almost like a monolith but as seen in and on various t bills and the un-approachable lithographs, a pun worthy of Tacitus there, as seen on stocks, or bonds, or the money and vainglorious war bonds of those empires that the good wholesome folks at Jewish in law-ed cities of Amsterdam always suited to drowned asunder, it as a massive city states setting.

Almost a cross between modern art and an Etruscan ruin, if any be left. He sweeps the cum behind the golden door, Westa said, playfully, as we saw the night come in, towards the porticos of power and empire there, and on the flat city citadel was Bill Jefferson Clinton, playing at a machine I could tell what it was at first. But, it did, as we came in, as the swan-once sued by Romans as we use the stork now, to explain who and why babies are brought, we touched down on the parapets of sheer stone and trick, which more than not had the look of a fort one would see in Paladin, with Richard Boone coming in to do battle ,as the Jewish cowboys of golden aged television did, with some cavalry dick, who the Paladin knight, as in Roman and Italian books that hated the army, never much liked.

There was Bill Clinton playing at a Pinball machine, one I and seen and actually noted before, the playboy Bally machine, as there were a few strewn here and lit and gleaming and zinging and shining in the now pitch balk sky of the fort Antonia at

which we , as opposed to Christ who took the Romans as a back dropped carnage as suppose he didn't have to talk about slavery, had now come, and found ourselves. He played away, showing a strain of plebeian, even juvenile delinquent that ahs ways been at the core of Clinton, which as the only think about him I liked, and the most thing that the once called chattering classes so hated. He played with aplomb and zest at the machine, upon which I believe no less than the glorious and gorgeous Candy Loving was painted upon the glass as a dea image of the goddess at mid centaury, as a bright and shining exemplar against of the Salam that wives of doges think they can make the res publican now. He played at the machine, a perfect, middle aged, if not a sober like Tommy, playing at the machine, with each flap and each digit dropping and pinging, he was getting even with someone unseen for something unknown.

I should tell, I thought, the latest Candy Loving, the latest non blond of all, this Italian girl par excellence , Wendy that I am taken with her and in love worth her, ...Well not with her, as don't know her, but am about as close to her as ever ever been to many a woman, sad to say, I always back away and run like a little prick, anyway. And I am if not in love with her, the idea of her, as a pretty, lovely, va voomy Italian girl amid all the big hear and sopranos jokes that Jews have ahd the never to act like lately they hadn't done for as long as I have been alive, forgetting and forgoing the Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner and other Jewish comics on the old David Susskind show, when they all laughed it up as almost all the Danny Thomas's of comedy were marred to Italian chicks.

And she was their queen, as even my mom said when I showed her the Venus cartoon I have gotten into a Roman salon, just with minuets to go another of the midnights the criminals of power always give to us, she said, Que Bella Raggazzta, gawking somehow, she did, that I had not plucked this lovely miss thing out of the ether somehow, but was as dutiful a tracer as Warhola had ever much been.

We got out of the swan, at the kind of HP hyper sharp photos that Microsoft keeps ending me as a screensaver for the HP on the desk. As of the swan itself, she seemed to power down and then closed her Disney -esque, no wait, that is unfair to better cartons than Zion Walt AS SOME HAVE DONE BETTER THAN ANY he's ever made, the long lashed giant eyes of the flying sawn seemed to automatically close and went to sleep.

The voluptuous Angela and I both stood on the west wall of the giant creation of tile and stone, as I said such giant effigies and such monuments have always disabled and stunted me. I have always been afraid, as even in Washington during carter as a schoolboy trip as they perpetually looked for alter boys at the tail end of such Clinton boys answering the call, and me seemingly stricken with a vainglorious allergy to such Erhartz Roman monuments all done without a hit of saffron marble or so much's a sprig of laurel tree baleful green, now I as nonplussed to see and know this Rome of the their schoolboys mind, the mind that was more or less Machiavellian than it should have been, this reacted Rome we entered in thee creation that Bill Clinton resorted to anyway, as I had in a cartoon world where Italians were pretty if not supermen, a people

eschewed and demeaned often and well by pimped up valued costumers, whose hideaways and cubby holes, were stores were not shattered and smashed and grabbed by anyone close to me, but much less orange than I would ever be.

We were in his own private Ostia, a creation of his own that he journeyed to to hide within, and perhaps too much, she was used to the read she took here, as a sentient of Signora Fortuna among the Negros and the fairyism the unmarried women and the Sicilian creepers, the sonny boys and the dirt bags of imperial porticos and porches, at that sadly, this as the best Rome that eh could ever conceived of, and wants the Rome I ever resorted or was bequeathed.

Whatever this was, wherever it was, as the sky was as Dante would say black as the pitch in hell, it as a Roma of some sort, a word now used by imperial housefrau to explain those people who are anti Jews or reverse Jews, who are perpetually in Hillary Clintons garbage and rooting around in her shit, so, it as some sort of private Rome that Bill Clinton, I could guess reverted to and lived within, and compared to the Tactics Germania we are trapped, or worse even that Amazons that run through the adobes and the tee pees of noble savages, it as Roman noun the less, and there fore, it as okay by me.

Where are we, Wendy, ...? I asked her. She smiled again, she obviously is nothing but a wondrous tease, the kind that men with small egos wish to throw on beds, and it will get worse now that Jews and white trash no longer can be the out and out

rapists they've been under Hillary and other in laws of power, as they all pretend now to have been guiltless and clean handed all the way down, as it were. And, it will only get worse for her sorts. We are, she said, Like Calvino's sword of sunlight on the Ionian sea, we are everywhere and we are nowhere. I think, as an Italian she liked quoting Calvino as it, as I do, but better for her, its just gets under the skin of those people who would just love to smash her in her perfect teeth, as they obviously do.

He played the pinball machine like the partial misspent yoyth eh was, as think should he die at 100, he will still be seen by many gals as the Do Rfun rfun run dey do run run Johnny nagels he seems to be, ecapet of course, by his wiofe. Ah the inviabile sisater hretude og=f my Betarithed, whose I=viage is as diapperd as she was in his marrge, and whom I now have no resocted for at all, as athe cookie making mother luvver realstied too late, her egarte eemey and detah bed scnene father of the year had tioo eralkey and surriptsoculsy, how else...?, taken her seat as being chamooined by creeps and labsisns on A Bigger Check, now danding on the side of a raosrs edge ,as they are too stupid and woppish, to know it.

There sudnnely in the bright against drakenss sky side sheet of carrere marble thatw as this mans clandestine Rome, wa strhe odl man who now thinsk himself the ward of history, the new Boy, but so very old in every move doth he make, the LaBron to our smiling Jordan of better daeys, the thug to our Rtobin Hood, the doer batman of Nolan as posoed to the mod vivacious and pahsydelcie colorful Adam West we all know and love, the killer

Superman with erad heaired girl Friday as opspioed to Goerge Reeves and perfect Lios Lane Phyllis Coats in Roz Russle fineray and Milderd paiced snooping perfection, here was ythe nati-Cklinton, the old codgert Biden. He stood theer, faril and weak against the agaiang man still wanteoidng to eb a cross bwteen Loenatrdo Da Vinci and Alex Karras, and he looedk as ill as I had ever seen or snesed him to be. I was prodded by the sight of him, and asked vixeny va vooming angela Westa at my side up some onteh perpetual steps that seemd to go this way and that, God, I said, He looks like a corpse here as oosped to Roman Bill, a s I call him to a brother discoeretiedness, But why, I saked, Did the first black preunedt feel comfortable to have as his Procoucil--I have been asked what that word emans, its Roman for second in command-his vice, the man who drug Anita Hill through the city by her ehair as if a capotive from Veii...?

From where, she asked,...? Veii, is adi, schoekd she didntg know this, but figred she ius mopre amerfcian than Irtalatain after all, Was the city of Tucany that fell to Coriolanus I think, and dersyed Tucany as a pwier , with the ehlp of Jews and syaraisn and greeks, ecaoiielly, a s they never ekarend not not let the Romasni get their beaks under the tents...She smiled and then shook herf ehaed as never thought of that. I the erfalere world, I have nocteid that if at work at all as a soch, though even tshoke who arenet fiond of her do amidt she is a upper drawer and a kepper among such gals who would be pin ups, she is more devoted to casues, much like her mother of sorts, Marlo, and thsu anegrs those who wish shed just speard her elsgs, or let her tits out, and her even attemeopeting a cocnius is bother some to the contingent who keep their hands around their diucks choekeing chickens in the backwoods all along. She really as as I

saw her here now, a cross between the RKPO days of the straleet
whod play a envira to keep herself aloat as something unsaid by
Billy Chrsital, how she and Fernado had to find in 1964 that the
days of Maria Montez moveis were over in 1960 as the jews second
genetarion went whole hog wioth blonds now, and spanisha dn
italains need not app;ly to the campus of Valnetino, Crystal,
now supinely and thanfully silenet as othersw have to
appologvize to the rioting crwods over black face, She was in
whole a combination of the great and still stcked as a bride of
the atomom, on CBS, young Yvonne DeCralo and Betty Rubble.

I have come to you, Biden said, almost as smug and vicious as
hes ever been aooarding to Jesse Kacjson, not assuredly in board
the show boat, sur theis time. I have, he said, Done the trip to
bountiful for you, old man, and HE SAID, I HAVE COME TO KISS
YOUR RFING, AND ASK FOR YOUR SUPPORT. Billy the kid laughed. In
the eralities and real tiems, he has yet to even admit that
someone eh hates so terbbly is even running for pretending , or
Ceasr o9r whatever he thinsk he is and was. I come to you, the
old buarecrat said in his as suauasl grey montone, Come to you
to ask for your siuppsorte. He said, in his left over sixties
Kennedy family accolytyte , pizza waiterss abusing and getting
away with it aplomb, I come to you, now,m Bill, to ask youd ment
these fenses for the good of the party. I thought myself of this
set design ., this Mereueryt thetaer Roem qwere in at in a
constueius dislaoy of Orsoens Ceasr that plasy on a loop in this
old doges head. I ask youd do this for the good, eh said, Of the
democartis poarty.

We all laughed, despite lusterless as when Augiutsu was givbinga

s peech in the Roamsn ssenate and said he wasn't a king, casusing a bufoon-poor tuth teller tos ay to him as he left the now deafted sneate, That someteism, the truth egts out no matterw hat you were hoping for.

I stood there and saw the Felninis Roma that this palce was, gehsost and perateorains all, in the imagaination of tehe last great king, the king of Marvin gardens, the king of Shady Grove, the prcien of Laurenetium , the king of the entertains, the prcien of Tiucany as Augutsus cone calleded himself in an ultimate shopw of affactataion. The pretty girls, the mistreos the tables of this Roma that was a bulwark against the empire of Hota in the morning commsieatetteing with the hsouehold negreos and wtahermen that the ncosie, not frtomk the social distress they ahd diled up, but from kids playtaing with fi9recarckers did now so bother the sleeping millions readyding to do valeville from homes they might or might not have at the end of tehe ayr. My brother is again impseed tos ee a beuageioning call for now no elss than Tina Fey to be the lastets voctiem of cicncmstacne, ans somehow a hatred of Trmp has made the ididots now pertedn theat they are so decet it makes one siuck, and wosre than that Black face, amansily an pretension of the oughts, is taking tshoe who did black face to the hell of Jack Davis' Sememe street, when we were allowed to stairsie everything , as oosped to now, a man and those who voted for him, as we have to watch an old coot prpund of his requisum for a laasat son of the rebellious south.

The bear of a man walked away from the twinkling lighted machine. He stood there as if a cratoon I ahd done years ago,

that impressed no less than the sports editor of the Pittsburgh Press at the time, Bruce Kiden. The Pretor for life was in a black suit, a peppy saffron checkered tie, and wore a thick, Egyptian cotton mantle on his broad shoulders, draped over his chest. It was purple and had yellow piping, ala the Augustus who never grew up much either.

I am, he said, The Prince of Crows. Did you, he asked, seriously, ever read Calvino, old old man. In an eloquent way, he said with a most smarmy idiocy, almost Wesley kind of cleverness mixed with an inability for to process the simplest things, I prefer that Spic, Marquez, like a white woman, he said, and winked a disagreeable, salesman sort of visual umbrage. You would, the scholar prince said. Did you know, he added, as I stood there, I was transfixed by the Clinton of my imagination, and in that oldest Rome anywhere outside of the tenebrisms. Did you know, that I called John Kerry on election night, 2004, he asked...? I had to turn to VESTA, and go to ask, but she forgetting my question rolled her elegant eyes and pressed her gumby smile and nodded her dark brown banged head. I called him, he said, walking away from the still jangling glass cabinet, and Tinkerbell's of bickering composure, and he stood there as a big as killer as Puzo could ever have made, or even a schoolboy defender of the res publica in Sallust, which I must say to the gal who asked, was, I read in his list of codices, the poet's fourth favorite book.

I called Kerry, that night, and assured him, for the Good of the party, heheh, that I, he said, would indeed let by goons be by goons, and work to help him as see how as a bigger enemy of

mine than a ANYBODY BUT CLINTON ABC-er, but of course, eh said, a Bush, especially that monkey acted imbecilic now fingerpainting somewhere and before all of this as being begrudge watching a Cowboy game, especially when they lost a winless team, and his repute as a hex was all but assured. I was quiet as the tenor did his bearly aduable aria, and all the Playboy after dark minions with whom he kept this Roman colony against Salalm and its Jewish in ways who find more trouble in old jokes than they did in the bombing of a Roman ruin by that hack. I called that Lutch, that prenenial slooper, whose very Gaheadn Wislosn imagery botehd me...did you see, he said, that Poor man died the same year as Mad, I guess were atent kdis anymore. But I called him, eh said, And wished him well, and he thought eh had won, and deared sawy we were equals now--[this as said to me by someone I ment who wrote for Clinton on my first adeisns made at face book cone, which seemd much too much after for or five years after Colbert lievd out his creed and used dathe etahetars to amek it all teh way to helmdingw aht was the Merv and Arthur Traceher show, buit he has no sidekick, I atke it as always seemd to eba mdeai who counst his liens.]And by eleven o'clock, he had lsot and I stayed there wtcahing CBS as I have scine Cricmite, but I am from the golden age, and I smield to myself when saw that more voets than they had switched Ohio for that imbecaicille, shwoiwng that a Roman never forgets..

Like an elepyahnt,...? The pother man, hwo as puny as hed ever been said. He knew now itw as indeed over, and he turedn away eralsiisng that boy Clinton would be his enemey to the end to whatever wall this was to that he had been pushed. Sword came to sheield now, as Caesr said, and thetre was onbly room on any opera company fpor one diva, one tenor, one machievllian, at a

time, and the first were comedians of the art of archetypes, fillers, extras, but not stars, Clinton's erasing of Plautus said that. And as he turned to go, Biden saw knowing that the King of Shady Grove would win as such as Italo Calvino would have demanded it, his books despised by scribbler and woman at the Tiems, who as my father said, felt umbriaged at anytialina who would are were shoper much less save a Dante they had bought when first char as taolsman against the stolen from nobels savges cesspool foerrst he said to me that this was. Biden turned and sudnnely on this self same wall where Wendy gleemed, sudnnely there was a muder of crwas as if in a late Van Gogh, drak, balck, smaret as [pretty mistresses magpies, all alined waiting for Ro9man Bill to stomp his booted fpoot on tiels he never miscalculated in theirs etting.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Anthony Acri is a Jesuit trained cartoonist from the golden age of america, who has lately taken upon himself being a Gore Vidal apprentice, against the cretins of empire. HE WAS INSPIRED TO WRITE THIS STORY in the ways of great talianate magic realists like Italo Calvino, and return an epidemiced and badly so, America to the works of Italianate brilliance such as Journal in a plague year, The Decameron and his mother beloved The Betrothed. He wanted to explore the eternal fight between those heist minded Jesuit school boys, who imbibed in Roman curriculum and an old coot who has floated through life watching the car crashes around him and who now wants us to forgive and forget his often utilised plagiarism. He is devoted to Roman farce and satire as others say they are, but never can be as they always end up as tragedies in the third act.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Anthony Acri is a cartoonist and essayist who lives in the suburbs of Pittsburgh Pa. He is devoted to the ideas of the between who taught him well in Americans last, pre Reagan, Golden age. He is a cartoonist devoted to the idea of a Roman superman, and the playboy cartoon, both of which have at various times been censored in what his hero Poet laureate Gore Vidal calls the land of the sale and the home of the Bribed. He, early on in this epidemic, a word he perferes as Roman playgoer to the frenzy of Pan, to try to verre towards the yellowed books of his fathers patria and now, more than ever his own, from which came such giants as Petrinius, Juvenal, and Ovid, and Virgil. He was admired by Georgetown faculty, as when he was a fifteen year old boy, for his now superseding and accepted view on such men, ecapielly Virgil, hated then and now seen as the greatest anti war poet, and Ovid now seen as a anti imperialist and iconoclast writer ever. This received accolades by men named Ogletree and Sacalia but alas, he didn't keep up. The writers he apes now, ecapielly Ovdiss Festivals, always

adored by similar amoral, jesuitical, machiavellian schoolboys with an eye out for any Lynda Carter or Wendy Fiore who flew into view. It is his hope in these passages to somehow controposto the times of veniality now, and as streaga, hags come out to tell handpicked candidates who called anti war protestors animals on the floor of the senate once, how to lose gracefully. The old books, utilized now, shows him, with every acceptance, that his tatase for gracious italian ladies, Giovanni' s brick of a masterpiece, Abraham Shylock, Fiametta, Amilia, and of course the Prince of Golden Bogues wasnt far off the mark. And like Poalo Milano, the italianate critic, he hopes he writes during this time with something other than cant and paternalism, and was not merely fulfilling filial piety to the italians who died while the doges wore masks, but out of whole moral imperative.

The Drifter

By Andy Hinton

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor MICHAEL ALIPRANDINI writes:*

“The Drifter” is a moody, evocative story that pulls readers in with its masterful cadences, precise images, and intertwined timelines. Here is one of its many remarkable passages, which is also a key to the story’s aesthetic: “The wipers pass across the windshield at slow intervals. Just when the Drifter forgets they are on, they cut across the scene, removing away an impressionistic image and replacing it with one of startling clarity.” Throughout the story, with perfect control, Andy Hinton swishes the narrative back and forth between startling clarity and impressionistic images while preserving the pleasing mystery of where the characters are drifting.

The story’s metaphysical concerns are not some sort of bargain-basement mysticism. Instead, it dispatches metaphors of baptism and past lives to explore regret and how it can keep us trapped. We normally associate baptism with being reborn into a fresh, new life; but here the author ironizes and refuses such an easy concession. The Drifter—who is both an individual and an archetype—is beleaguered, stuck not in one life like an ordinary mortal but in a succession of lives which nevertheless fail to bring relief. Nietzsche’s idea of Eternal Recurrence springs to mind, with the Drifter occupying a liminal zone of the loneliest loneliness, unable or perhaps not ready to take the next step of heroically embracing all of life—its joys and regrets, its repetitions and absurdities, its demons and hauntings. (Spacing and font size are author’s own.)

QUALITY QUOTABLES *(for the love of language):*

...the waitresses, who file in and out of the kitchen like a troop of sad clowns, wearing costumes of painted faces and colored hair, addressing customers with terms of endearment like “Honey”, or “Sweetie”, or “Sugar” while scowling at them through fake smiles.

... reincarnation was a religion for those with regrets.

Water hangs in the trees like ice, shimmering and glimmering in the fiery fog of the morning sun.

The Drifter-2021-FOTD

3815 words

The Drifter

By Andy Hinton

The first time I killed myself it was an accident. It was summer and a violent storm had washed over the watershed, resurrecting streams that were normally dry, turning the river into a swollen, roaring beast, reeking with the smell of earth, of death, of decay.

My brother and I ran down to our favorite swimming hole only to find it a brown blur of current. Large trees swept past, bobbing up and down. Their canopies caught boulders below, cracking off branches with explosive snaps, sending the trunks rolling and twisting across the surface.

I was deep under the spell of the river, when my brother offered me his gold pocket watch to swim across. He knew that I was not a strong swimmer and even on days when the river was a narrow pool, I struggled to make it to the other side without having to stand and catch my breath. But he did not know the covet I had for the watch that Grandpa had given him.

As I saw my brothers smile, I knew that for the rest of the summer he would use this moment to remind me of my weakness, to remind me of my fear. I smiled back and began taking off my shirt and pants. Then I walked into the water and launched into the flow, kicking my feet and swinging my arms. But despite my effort, I found myself floating downstream faster than I could swim across

Along the shore I could see my brother running after me, scrambling over boulder and bush. Although I knew he was too far away, I tried to swim back to him but was swept into a large rapid. The waves lobbed me up and down; rocks beneath the surface caught my legs, my feet, my arms, tossing and turning me like the trees I had watched moments ago. I took a breath that was more water than air and washed over a drop. The earth, the sky, the river tumbled about me.

My body went deep before the current wedged me in a tight crevice between two boulders. The world was black, yet my mind was calm. Suddenly the water was warm, the rocks felt soft, and I could breathe. Then the river began to move me until I was no longer being held in darkness but being pushed into the light.

The Drifter takes the dishes, stained and discarded, and shoves them into the frothy water. He holds them there, caressing their smooth porcelain edges, rubbing away the filth before pulling them up, purified and new. The Drifter takes pride in the work, as boring and demeaning as some may consider it. He goes about his task with ritualistic automation while his mind swims in visions and voices of other times, other lives.

The cook is telling a story, one the Drifter has heard many times before. But the tale keeps getting interrupted by the waitresses, who file in and out of the kitchen like a troop of sad

clowns, wearing costumes of painted faces and colored hair, addressing customers with terms of endearment like “Honey”, or “Sweetie”, or “Sugar” while scowling at them through fake smiles.

The cook harasses the women, trying to make them blush, trying to make them agitated, but the waitresses are a sassy sort, who know how to shut him up. But once they leave the kitchen, the cook’s comments become all the more nasty and vulgar. Though he might as well be talking to himself, for the Drifter never acknowledges the cook, just as the cook never seems to notice the Drifter. For the Drifter is small and quiet, a specter that is felt more than he is seen or heard.

I was not born with an immediate knowledge of my past lives. But as I aged, I became haunted by their memories. My first death was the clearest. The others were merely an assortment of faint and random images, like dreams dreamt in the deepest of sleeps. But the one detail that linked them together, was that in each life I became aware of a place on the New River where I could end one life, only to be reborn into another.

It is Millie, the matriarch of the waitresses that gave the Drifter his nickname. She has seen his type before, appearing from nowhere, wanting a job, here a week, a month, a year, then gone without a word.

“Oh, he’s harmless,” says Lucy, as she drinks her coffee, glancing over her shoulder to make sure the Drifter is out of earshot.

“Maybe he is; maybe he ain’t.” Millie lights a cigarette and watches the Drifter bus a table across the room.

“And he’s not bad looking. Checkout at those arms.” Lucy sneaks a peak of him carrying the tub of plates through the kitchen doors. “How old do you think he is?”

“That’s the problem. When I look at his face, I see a man that could be a hard twenty or a young forty. But when I stare into those eyes,” Millie takes a long draw, playing the image through her mind, “it’s like I’m looking into an empty tomb.”

I was 15 when I first realized that my soul was much older than my body. My momma was in one of her church going spells, and she had taken my sister and me down to the base of Sandstone Falls, to be baptized by Brother Davis .

My sister went first. Brother Davis led her into the water, caressing her with a gentle touch, whispering to her as he cradled her back, and combing her long brown hair out of her eyes as he brought her to the surface. Although I was not religious, his actions looked so soothing, so comforting.

But when it was my turn, there was no love, only a desire to rid me of the evils plaguing my flesh. As Brother Davis jerked me deeper into the water, his voice sounded as if he was exorcising a demon rather than saving a soul. And it was in that moment when the world turned black and blurry and my mind seemed disconnected, hovering about my body, that I had my first memory of dying in this very spot. Over the next few years I had more revelations about other lives, and the memories of my deaths hung heavy upon me.

The Drifter is putting on his apron when Millie walks into the kitchen, giving instruction to a young woman in a waitress uniform. “Boys, this is the new kid Lydia. Now Frank, you be nice to her.”

The cook gives a gap toothed grin. “Hey, you know I’m a sweetheart.”

Millie cuts Frank a stern look as she continues showing Lydia around the kitchen, and then pulls her back into the dining room. But just before she leaves, Lydia turns towards the Drifter, casting him a shy smile.

Ten years ago, I hitched a ride towards the river, planning to drown myself and begin a new life. But as we neared the pull off for the Falls, my courage seemed to wane. Rather than have the driver stop, I continued to ride as far as he would take me. Then I hitched another ride and another until I was well away from the Fall’s temptation.

And this was how I have lived this life. I drifted through jobs and towns the same way I drifted through my former lives. I did not form relationships. I did not to engage people more than necessary. And I did the work set before me until I got the urge to move on.

The diner is slow, and the Drifter and Lydia are sitting at a booth rolling silverware into napkins and securing the bundle with a paper ring. The Drifter enjoys talking to Lydia, so much so, that when he runs out of tales to tell, he is quick to make up new ones. Those are the stories that make her laugh and smile. And this makes him happy, for most of the time Lydia is at work, she is sad, in the way that young folks are good at being sad. It is the kind of melancholy that draws in the hearts of those around them.

Like the Drifter, Lydia is unassuming. When Lydia was in high school, her peers considered her neither ugly nor beautiful. She was not disliked, but she wasn’t popular. Lydia was just there, but there in such a way that if she vanished, she wouldn’t be missed. But her boyfriend, Tommy, saw something in Lydia that others didn’t, recognized a beauty in her that

was waiting to blossom. And this attention drew something out of her. Now that Lydia's friends from high school are seeing their splendor diminish while Lydia is just starting to flower. She is still reserved and modest, yet she appreciates the attention of the men who come into the truck stop. She doesn't flirt like the other waitresses. She doesn't need to. Lydia just does her job, acts polite, and collects the cash as she buses the table.

Lydia enjoys talking to the Drifter, hearing of the places he has been and seen. All her life she has wanted to travel. Tommy was a couple of years older than her and went into the navy straight out of high school. The plan was for her to eventually join him at whatever navel base he was assigned. But by the time she graduated, Tommy had flunked out of Nuke school. Then disillusioned and homesick, he flunked a drug test. So instead of moving to a city by the ocean, they moved into a camper in a trailer park by the river. He got a job at a factory, and she enrolled in classes at the local technical college. Tommy says that they are going to move, but each day she sees his roots locking onto this town and his ambition withering. Lydia tells the Drifter that she took the job at the truck stop to help pay the bills, but she also confides that she hides most of her tip money. At some point if Tommy doesn't take her anywhere, Lydia says she will take herself.

I began washing dishes at a small diner in West Tennessee back in May. There was an old motel connected to it, no longer in use, and the owner, rented me one of the rooms so that I would have a place to sleep and shower.

Sometimes I stayed up late at night to watch talk shows where people claimed to have had former lives, but these people weren't like me. They seemed intent on claiming some past glory, or laying blame for their current condition. I found no solace in their company, no

comfort in their beliefs. Unlike them, I didn't believe in karma or God or devil or science. These were just myths trying to find reason where none exists. For I knew more than most that reincarnation was a religion for those with regrets.

The Drifter is through cleaning the floors and counters, but he is staying late to help the owner, Joe, close down the register. Usually Joe only cooks in the morning, but since Frank stopped showing up, he has been pulling double duty.

“I hope whatever woman Frank's with or drunk he's on is treating him well, because when he comes back around...”

Joe's rants continue throughout the night, but instead of listening, the Drifter is eyeing Lydia who paces around the empty parking lot. Tommy is supposed to pick her up. But often he doesn't show, and Lydia has to walk across the bridge to where they live on the other side of the river. She is just wandering into the darkness when the Drifter catches up and offers to keep her company. As they reach the apex of the bridge, they pause to watch a tugboat and barge drift beneath them.

Lydia looks onto the moonlit water. She likes to let her thoughts drift with the river, dreaming of where it goes and where it could take her. She knows that the towns downstream are just as small, just as depressing, but anywhere other than here is somewhere. The lot where her and Tommy live is flood zone, and once a year they have to move the camper to higher ground, usually his parent's backyard, when the backwater gets out. Sometimes she wonders what would happen if the dam upstream broke and washed them away in the night. Where would they end up? What adventures would they have together? She knows these fantasies are unrealistic, but it is thoughts like these that keep her going. But sometimes she wonders if there

is a line between dreams that drive ambition, and dreams that make you complacent by offering false hope.

As they talk, Lydia confesses her fears of never leaving the diner, her fears of getting anchored down by Tommy, this small town, of becoming just like the other waitresses, a worn and weathered shell. “Do you ever wish you could start all over, become a new person?”

The Drifter hesitates. “Yes... It’s what I’m good at.”

“Sometimes,” Lydia’s eyes follow the current, “I just want to jump in the water and let it take me far away.”

The Drifter doesn’t say anything, for Lydia has already said it all.

When they get close to the camper, the lights are on and Tommy’s car is out front. Lydia says maybe it is best that they say goodbye now, and she walk the rest of the way alone. The Drifter pretends to turn around, but just before her camper is out of sight he watches her walk up and step inside.

When Lydia opens the door, Tommy is laying on the couch with his boots on and an empty bottle of whisky sitting in his lap. His eyes are watery and dull, but he does not look apologetic, rather there is a rage to his sadness that Lydia recognizes and chooses not to stir.

“ I quit work today, just walked out the door.” Tommy takes a swig of whisky and waits for her response. She gives him none other than to stand and watch, a silent prompting to tell the rest of the story. “I’m tired of that asshole Larry, and I’m tired of his shit.”

Lydia knows Larry, his boss, to be anything but an asshole. And the only shit Larry gives Tommy is the shit he deserves. Lydia does not argue with Tommy, but she does not encourage or console him. Rather she just steps into the bedroom to change out of her work

clothes. When she goes to put away her tips, she finds the plastic storage box that holds her socks to be open and scattered, and she realizes where Tommy got the money for the whisky.

It seemed that in each life the odds were stacked against me. Except for my first life, all my other deaths were of my own choice. In one life the law was chasing me; in another, I was trying to escape an abusive father. And during one of the happier times, I was called to war and chose to drown myself in the river, rather than risk dying on foreign soil. Despite having lived for over a hundred years, I have no memories of being an old man.

And whenever times got hard, I knew that if I could make it to the river I could find rejuvenation, redemption, and for a moment, peace. At one time I considered my knowledge of the Falls to be a blessing, but the more I learned the details of these former lives, the more I felt my soul was cursed.

The wipers pass across the windshield at slow intervals. Just when the Drifter forgets they are on, they cut across the scene, removing away an impressionistic image and replacing it with one of startling clarity.

The door swings open. “Sorry, I’m late. I had to get some things out of the camper.” Lydia throws an overstuffed pack in the back seat, then sits and turns to the Drifter. “Isn’t this Frank’s car?”

“Yeah, he sold it to me the night he left town, said he needed the money. I didn’t tell Joe because I thought somehow he would get mad at me.” The Drifter glances at Lydia to read her reaction. “Besides, I think having the car out there gave Joe some hope that Frank was coming back.”

Lydia doesn't respond but stares at ignition, wondering why Frank gave up a whole ring of keys. For the next hour Lydia does not talk. She just looks out the window like a girl who has jumped from a ledge and is watching the world rise towards her.

I lost contact with my family after they had me sent away. The hospital was tall and old, built of muted brick walls that contrasted with the ornate roof and curved eaves. There was nothing inviting or healing in its appearance. It loomed over the landscape as a gothic monstrosity, a design of ghostly tales and children's nightmares. And the floor itself bled a cold that poured up the feet, freezing the bones stiff and listless.

Those who had been there the longest, had not the energy to walk proper. Instead, they shuffled listless through the halls and corridors. And when they became trapped, locked down behind closed doors, these same patients paced about their room, constantly moving but going nowhere. Since they could no longer travel through space, some instinct drove them to walk in circles, as if returning to the spot from where they had come could speed through time, for their destination was no longer a location but death itself.

The constant scraping of souls across the tile sounded like a hundred people murmuring about me, with no one speaking clear enough to be understood. It resonated throughout the building, a whisper so loud it could drive one mad.

The medication they forced upon me dulled my brain, so that I seemed to be in a constant fog. Not only could I not remember past lives, I could barely recall the details of my current one. Although the memory of the Falls remained, its significance began to take on an air of fantasy. I knew that if I stayed in the hospital much longer, I could lose sanity and never leave. Or if they healed me, I would lose my faith in the Fall's power, and my soul would die with this body.

But it was the will to escape that kept me alive. Because I appeared meek, the orderlies never paid me any mind. Because I was small and unassuming, no one noticed as I walked out into the night, dressed in the clothes of a dead janitor.

Sometime around midnight, the Drifter and Lydia pull into another gas station just off Interstate 81. There had been a wreck outside of Nashville, and they had spent most of the afternoon stuck in traffic.

Lydia has been asleep for an hour and does not stir as the Drifter coasts into the side of the lot and nestles the car in among the big rigs. He lays his seat back, and although his body is too tired to drive, his mind is still racing. It's in times like this, between silence and sleep, when the Drifter is most tormented.

I closed my eyes. But rather than seeing my past, I was transported to a scene of the future. Lydia was working in an all night diner in the city. She was old. Although she tried to smile, her face was worn to a frown. And as she went along the booths taking orders, Lydia stopped to refill my cup, but there was no recognition for the loner sitting before her.

And I was not even sure it was Lydia. But when she paused by the kitchen window, her gaze locked on something from her past. And I saw the same sadness in her eyes that had made me love her in her youth. She took a deep inhale, then let it out. It was not so much of a sigh, but more like a soul gasping for air.

The Drifter opens his eyes and looks at the clock. It's 1:00. In an hour, years have passed. He raises the seat, starts the car, and is just about to pull out when he sees a state trooper cruising through the lot.

The trooper drives around the gas station, taking note of all the vehicles. As he passes their car, his brake lights brighten, and the trooper stops. Seconds feel like minutes, but then the trooper starts moving again, accelerating toward the interstate.

When the Drifter hits the road, he turns the opposite direction heading into the darkness of a rural highway. Once out among farms, he stops and turns on a flashlight to study an atlas, looking for the most direct route to New York by taking back roads. It is then that he realizes that New York had never really been his destination.

I held my breath, expecting that any moment some great force was going to collapse upon me. And it was not until the trooper's taillights disappeared that I was able to breathe again.

By now everyone at the diner would know that neither of us was at work and Frank's car was gone. It wouldn't take them long to start piecing things together.

It was as if my soul was a bird flying home. I closed the map and threw it in the seat behind me, tears running down my face.

Water hangs in the trees like ice, shimmering and glimmering in the fiery fog of the morning sun. The Drifter stares out the window, burning the image into his mind so as never to forget this scene, so he may recall this very spot for lives to come.

"Where are we?" Lydia is awake and stares out the window through squinted eyes.

"It's just a nice place to pull off the road and rest. I use to come here... a long time ago."

Lydia rubs her face and yawns. Then she stumbles out of the car and into the woods.

When she returns, the Drifter is leaning against the hood waiting for her. “Let’s stretch our legs for minute. The river is right down here.”

Lydia does not respond, but turns down the path, arms crossed to keep her warm and head down in discontent. Her makeup is smeared, her hair a mess.

For a moment I am filled with pity, then fear, then love. I feel time slow as it builds into a wave pushing us to the river’s depths, taking us to our next lives.

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AUTHOR’S NOTE:

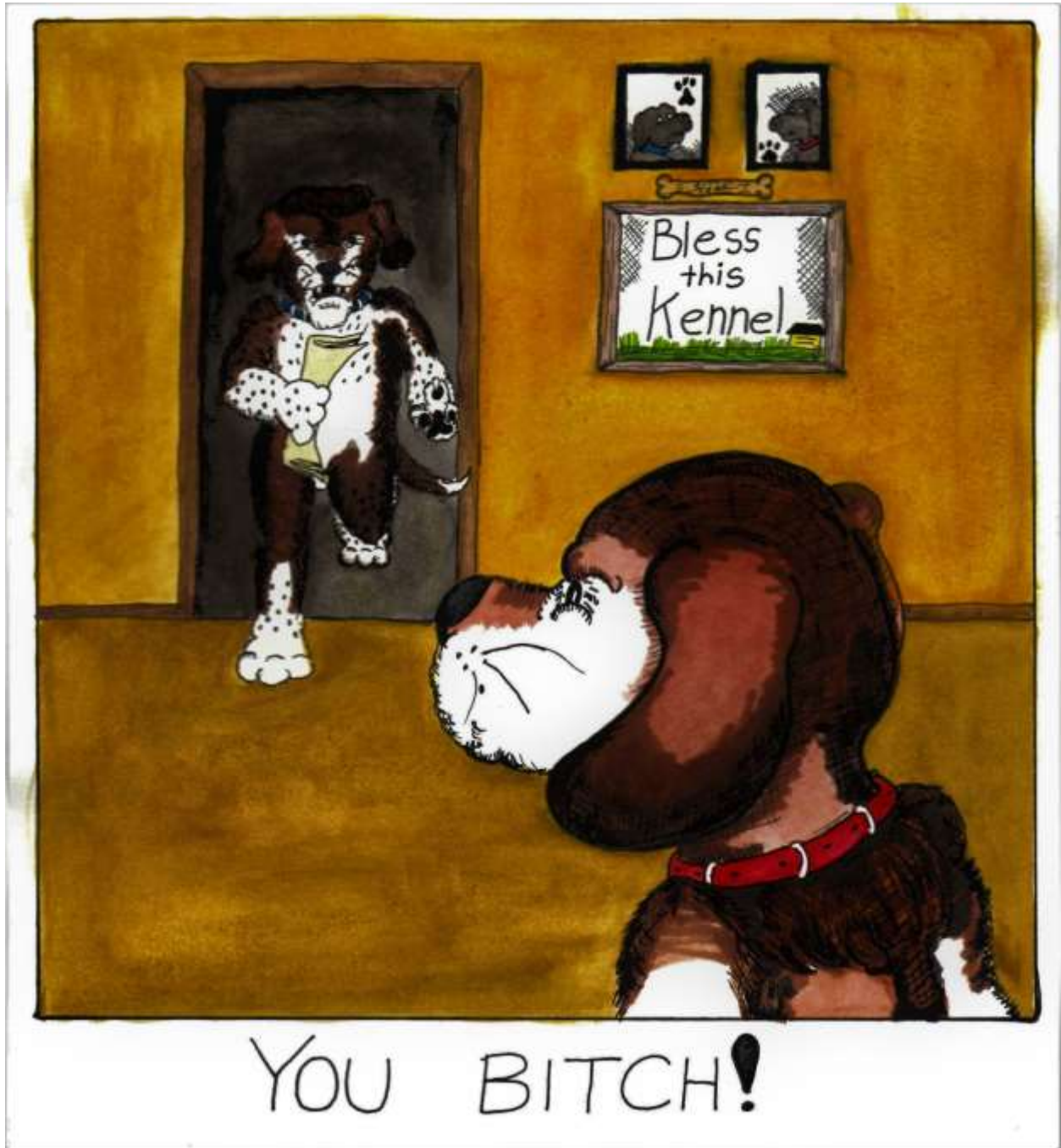
About ten years ago I came up with the idea for a character that was able to retain large parts of his consciousness as he was reincarnated through various lives and time periods. Although the concept has great potential for a longer format, I decided when writing the short story to strip it down to a couple of core questions raised by such a scenario. I wondered if a young man saw death as a “restart” button, would he be tempted to commit suicide and try his luck with a new life anytime things became tough. And I wondered how would such a casual view of death affect his morality.

*The opening scene came out in the first draft, but I struggled with the rest of the story and put it away for years. I felt it was important for the tale to be written from a first person point of view, so that the reader would buy whole-heartedly into what the main character believed. But as the story progressed, I wanted the reader to question if the Drifter was a reliable narrator and determine if he was hero, a villain, or a victim of his own delusions. After reading the *Life of Pi*, I came up with having the point of view switch back and forth so that the reader could get an objective look at what was happening in the story to contrast with the Drifter’s perception of the world.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Andy Hinton has a background writing and photographing for small town newspapers. Currently he guides multi-day whitewater rafting trips and blogs for the Duct Tape Diaries. His essays and feature articles have been published in *American Whitewater* and *Canoe and Kayak Magazine*. And his fiction has been published in *The Moonlit Road*.

EDITOR'S BIO: Michael Aliprandini lives in Italy and works internationally as a curriculum developer and teacher-trainer. His short stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in several publications, including *Litro*, *Queen Mob's Tea House*, *Counterclock*, *Fresh Ink*, *The Bacon Review*, *Crooked Arrow (Bullseye)*, and *Columbia Journal*. He is a fiction reader for the online UK edition of *Litro*. His story **The Book of Annihilation** appears in this issue (fiction).

You BITCH! By John Taylor



YOU BITCH!

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Because the picture's worth a thousand...well, you know.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This piece you are viewing in its simplicity is a random comic. It has a double meaning kind of humor to me, which is probably something I've inherited by re-reading nonstop panels of Far Side comics. Gary Larson's strip is a huge inspiration to me, as is the style of Robert Crumb's art, Charles Addams, Gahan Wilson, and some The New Yorker cartoons. My style has been compared to Larson, Addams, and Crumb a couple of times, which is very flattering. I feel that my style is formed in popular culture and an enriching history of cartooning, comics, and fine art. I have at least received two rejections from The New Yorker at this point, and I will certainly get more before the year is over.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Hoss, (John Taylor II) is an artist from Hebron, Maryland. Mr. Taylor graduated from Salisbury University with a bachelor's degree in art. Mr. Taylor's work has been published in various literary magazines and online magazines such as: Echoes and Visions, Weirderary, Saturday Morning Comics, Chicago Literati, Chaleur Magazine, Inlandia: A Literary Journey, The Daily Drunk, and recently the Taco Bell Quarterly. Hoss can usually be found at home with his wife, Caitlin, and their beagle Belle.

Devilish

By Tyler **McCurry**

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Joseph Conrad wrote: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see.” That—and no more, and it is everything.” Nobody in this issue understands that literary advice better than Tyler McCurry whose story involves some WTF OnlyFans.com challenges. But maybe we should add the olfactory sense too because you can almost smell this story from across the room. This is seriously visceral Grit Lit, dudes and pronouns, so you don’t want to read it on a full stomach. That said, you absolutely **MUST** read it! (Spacing and format is author’s own.)*

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language):*

That night after coming home from my last 18-hour shift before my schedule change I had to pee like crazy as usual, but instead of going to the toilet, I tore off all my clothes and went and stood in the tub with my phone. I’d held it in until I absolutely couldn’t anymore and peed all down my legs and down along the floor of the tub and shot video of the whole thing and sure enough I did get a little bit of a rush after doing it. It was disgusting as fuck and it took over an hour to scrub out my tub afterward, but the next day I’d earned almost \$600. After two months I’d made over twelve large and my account was teaming with subscribers.

Devilish

Tyler McCurry

1.

It wasn't easy making ends meet during a pandemic. I was a 38-year-old EMT and also a single mom with three kids who had been on-call nonstop since the pandemic began. I made a measly

\$13 an hour and although that sounded good to some hot young thing just breaking into the field, I was quickly finding out it wasn't nearly enough to pay the bills.

God certainly wasn't paying the bills either. I was a devout Christian and often drew comparisons to an angel on high because of my long and tousled blonde hair. I'd just come home after a grueling 18-hour shift and my luscious golden locks were knotted and stringy and reeked of stale sweat and medical supplies. There were at least fifty COVID patients on my route today and tomorrow after less than five hours of sleep I'd be doing it all over again. I dropped my mask and my purse on the ground and staggered into my bedroom. My dad died unexpectedly from bladder cancer late last year and rather annoyingly my mom insisted on micromanaging the lives of me and my children to fill the void he had left behind, but at least that meant she was more than willing to take them off my hands whenever I wanted. Tonight the kids were at her place and I had the house to myself.

Things were pretty dire right now but they were about to get a lot worse. My supervisor had informed me that they would be cutting back on my hours and I would be working less than a tenth of what I was working right now and I was already strapped for cash as it was. I'd already taken out a second mortgage on my house this year and if I didn't make my next payment, my whole family would be thrown out onto the street. If the situation didn't improve soon, they told me they might even have to lay me off.

I wasn't allowed to have a bathroom break during my shift and I had to pee like crazy. I rushed into the bathroom and was barely able to get my pants down and get on the toilet before I started going. When I did it started spraying out of me and I buried my head in my thighs.

Being an EMT wasn't nearly as glamorous as Hollywood made it seem. The hours were long, the aforementioned pay sucked and the patients were surprisingly unruly. Last month an

old man with COVID kneed me in the gut while I was being treated and I peed blood for a week. My bathroom was lined with dirty clothes I was far too busy to wash and I hadn't had clean panties to wear in months. The nice white cotton panties with a pink satin bow I had on now, one of the few concessions to being beautiful I had left, were yellow in the front and brown in the back after three straight days of eighteen hour shifts. The cheap pad I'd put in them to stem the flow of my bladder leaks during my shift didn't really cut it and it was sopping wet when I pulled it out. My congregation called me an angel but right now I felt like anything but and in another couple months I'd be destitute.

If I didn't do something drastic, my family would be on the street by New Year's.

2.

After using the toilet, I took a hot shower and put on a long pink nightgown after I was done. I didn't have any clean panties to put on and decided to sleep without them. I was all out of the precious fruity perfume I used to make my lady parts smell good and hoped the good scrubbing I'd given them would sate their stench for at least a day. My pretty white panties were the last semi-clean pair I had left. Tomorrow it appeared that I would have to go commando.

In bed I tried to Google something with an O that I was thinking of that day but had forgotten the name of and the first thing that popped up automatically in the list under the search box was "OnlyFans." I had heard of OnlyFans. It was all the rage to start an account on OnlyFans lately, a site where people could post explicit photos and videos of themselves and receive compensation in return. Even a good Christian woman like me knew all about it. I heard all kinds of rumors swirling around my church, a veritable den of Trumpers and gun nuts. I was happily on board with all that jazz right up until my supervisor announced he was cutting my

hours and I realized God wasn't going to manifest a paycheck for me every week no matter how hard or often I prayed for it. Really, it wasn't surprising. A church was a place to confess your sins, not atone for them. It didn't make life any better. You only went there if you knew life couldn't get any worse.

OnlyFans was all the young girls at work talked about too. Some of them even had accounts on it and they all told me it was easy money when I asked them about it. I looked at my wrought silver cross that I always wore around my neck, which I had set on the endtable. One of my coworkers said she made a cool seven grand from the most recent batch of pics and videos she sent in.

It was then that I came to a difficult decision, one that would turn the stomachs of my pastor and my fellow parishioners and turned mine as well. I didn't want to do it, but I was desperate for money that God certainly wouldn't provide. If anything, he would just continue to reside in his golden abode in the sky and lord his wealth over the unworthy unwashed masses below. The golden candelabra and stained glass windows in most churches were but a taste of the wealth men and women could expect to have if they lived a perfect life and reached the promised land, but nobody was perfect, especially not me. When I thought of that it made me mad and also made up my mind.

I was going to start an OnlyFans account, and I was going to get started tonight.

Beforehand, though, I decided I was hungry. I got out of bed and went into the kitchen. In the fridge was a huge tub of leftover spaghetti from dinner last night. I put the whole thing in the microwave for about two minutes and pulled it out when it was steamy. I grabbed a fork and started scarfing it down. Didn't know why. Probably thought it'd be easier to do what I was about to do on a full stomach.

At least it gave me my first idea for a picture. I whipped out my phone and took a selfie of myself with spaghetti sauce slathered all over my face and the left strap of my sauce-stained gown sagging down below my left bicep. Just for kicks, I reached under the table and stuck my phone under my gown and took a pic of my vagina for good measure. The flash could be seen under the table. I logged into OnlyFans and created an account. It only took a few minutes and was surprisingly easy. I uploaded both photos and followed the instructions to lock them behind a paywall that I set at the average rate of \$6.50. My photo of my rather smelly and shaggy and unkempt-looking vagina that had withstood the passage of three kids and the repeated onslaughts of my ex-husband's huge wiener was an instant hit. Within seconds it had earned \$20. Maybe I'd shave it tonight to get more money, or keep it the way it was. Maybe people liked them hairy. I really had no idea. Before I went to bed I pulled my nightgown all the way up and took a simple picture of my bare breasts and posted that as well. My photos were grouped into a collection that included a couple more vaginas and more than a few dick pics of varying sizes and shades. By the time I fell asleep my vag pic had made \$52.

My descent into sin had begun.

3.

God might not have paid my bills, but my sins paid immediate dividends. The next day I had almost a hundred fans and about a month later a whopping \$6,552 had been added to my savings account. They had cut me down to about six hours at work and I had a lot of free time on my hands now, but with my posh new side gig, I had plenty to keep me busy.

As the days wore on, I got more creative. I put on multiple layers of clothes and shot video of myself taking them all off until I was completely nude and I always made sure to post at

least one picture or video of myself on the toilet peeing or pooping before the day was out. Those were a hot commodity from what I'd been seeing and it wasn't just sick stuff my fans were into. A simple video of me cleaning out my toilet, my favorite thing to do when I had a lot of free time on my hands that I recorded and put on OnlyFans purely as an experiment, garnered over a hundred bucks in tips. Really, anything involving a toilet or what went into it was easy money from what I could tell and what went into a toilet didn't necessarily have to go into a toilet. A video that I shot of myself peeing in a potted plant netted me a substantial amount of tips.

I'd been getting more and more fans and I'd decided to stop shaving my bikini line and just leave the area the way it was and let the hair grow in. My fans seemed to like that. The hairier my groin and legs and thighs got, it seemed, the more money I appeared to earn. I'd even gone so far as to throw my razor and shaving cream away and also my box of cheap ineffective panty liners for some reason and snapped a pic of it all in the trash for good measure, which ended up garnering \$65. I took selfies of myself in the shower with my boobs pressed up against the glass of the stall and purposely made myself wet with a long and blunt instrument so I could take pictures and shoot video of myself discharging. I even tried doing a "peegasm" for my fans one night in my own bathtub. Supposedly, if the gossip among the girls at church could be believed, if I held my bladder until the very last second and then let it drain, it was supposed to give me a sensation similar to an orgasm because the muscles of my bladder and sex organs were very close together. It wasn't hard to do with my job. That night after coming home from my last 18-hour shift before my schedule change I had to pee like crazy as usual, but instead of going to the toilet, I tore off all my clothes and went and stood in the tub with my phone. I'd held it in until I absolutely couldn't anymore and peed all down my legs and down along the floor of the tub and shot video of the whole thing and sure enough I did get a little bit of a rush after doing it.

It was disgusting as fuck and it took over an hour to scrub out my tub afterward, but the next day I'd earned almost \$600. After two months I'd made over twelve large and my account was teaming with subscribers.

One day I was lying naked on my stomach on my sofa, snapping pics over my head of my bare butt trying to get a good shot of my anus. One of my kids had gotten COVID, presumably from my devout anti-masker mother that I'd butted heads with all my life, and they were holed up at my mom's house quarantining. They weren't coming home anytime soon.

Therefore, I wasn't expecting the lock on the front door to jiggle and pop open. I gasped and flinched and my phone, a new expensive Samsung Flip that folded in two, fell out of my hand. I had bought it with a little of the extra OnlyFans money I'd put off to the side and somehow it folded up in midair and went straight down my throat and got lodged in my windpipe. It was quick. One second I could breathe, the next second I couldn't. The second after that I saw a light.

I shut my eyes. Everything was red when I opened them. I was lying naked on a smooth red cliff face surrounded by roaring flames and there was a hideous monster standing behind me. Really, it wasn't so hideous, or rather, he wasn't so hideous. The naked creature had a big red dick and it was pretty obvious it was a he. He had four huge curved horns growing out of his head and a spike growing out of his chin. He had a long thick mouth, and when he smiled, he flashed twin rows of sharp white teeth. His eyes were all black, save for their crimson pupils color-matched to the crimson shade of his body.

“Is this...?”

“Hell? Yes.”

“Then you must be...”

The demon grinned. I knew that's what he was and with those horns I knew he could be only one demon in particular.

“Fucking hell.”

His long red tail had a triangular fin on its tip that was very imposing and looked sharp enough to slice a pineapple in half simply by being dropped onto it. He had a nice thicket of black pubic fur that gave off a musky stench, or maybe that was me. I'd been dialing back on the showers to make myself more appealing to my fans, who were apparently into that kind of thing, and get more tips. The good news was that it was working, but the bad news was that my unwashed and unshaven vagina and asshole had been giving off a horrendous stench that seeped straight through my pants. It didn't help that I'd thrown away all my panty liners and wasn't inclined to buy more. That coupled with no bathroom breaks made my job very awkward and sometimes it was all I could do not to laugh and sneeze on my routes.

“God, does this mean I'm going to hell?”

“You're already there, my dear. This is my domain and I am the master of my own domain.”

I sat up and clutched my knees to my chest. My knees were as hairy as the rest of my legs and all of a sudden I was very self-conscious about my unkempt appearance.

“Of course, you'd know all about that. You do have an OnlyFans account, after all, and you're quite popular on it from what I've seen.”

“Is that why I'm here?”

He snuffed.

“Heavens, no. You are here because you have lost faith. I'd hoped that seeing me in person would inspire you to keep the faith.”

“Then I’m not here for posting naked pictures of myself on that site?”

“You can’t go to hell for that. That’d be ridiculous.”

Satan made no attempt to cover his penis. It was well over twelve inches long and put most of the dongs I saw on OnlyFans to shame. I couldn’t deny that I’d done some devilish things to make enough money on OnlyFans to pay off my second mortgage before the year was out. One time at work I had to go to the bathroom so badly that while the other EMTs were tending to a patient and I was in the ambulance alone I unbuckled my belt and unbuttoned and unzipped my pants and stuck a plastic tube up into my embarrassingly wet panties and shot a quick video of myself peeing into a colostomy bag. I posted the video on OnlyFans as soon as I was done and was barely able to get the bag in the fridge and get cleaned up by the time my coworkers came back. I could get fired for doing something like that, but in fairness I barely worked anymore and it was worth it just to make an extra thousand bucks a month.

“You can post naked pictures and videos of yourself on the internet to your heart’s content for all I care. Matter of fact, that’s why I’ve really come to you.”

He crept closer to me and kneeled down next to me. He grinned and his grin stretched around his long triangular face like rubber.

“As scripture might have taught you, I like to make deals. I’m here to make you a deal.”

“Why would you want to make a deal with me?”

I had eaten spaghetti for lunch and a pressure was welling in my gut. I thought it was gas at first, before recognizing it as piss. I was so frightened that I couldn’t feel anything below my waist and if my bladder gave out and I peed in front of Satan, I might just die of embarrassment. It was too late. The pressure subsided and I looked between my legs and saw that I had peed and immediately turned red.

Aw well, what did it matter. I was already dead anyway. I scooched away from the wet spot I'd made on the rocks. My urine quickly evaporated in the heat.

“Look, you're a nice girl. You bust your ass to provide for your family and I can appreciate that. You don't deserve to be here, whether you believe in me or not.”

He grabbed his dong to get it to go erect, and right in front of me, he yanked on it until he masturbated. The Bible said he could bring fire and brimstone down, but didn't say anything about this. He was quite good at it too. After a few seconds of tugging, a substantial amount of ick was coming out. I would never forget the image.

“Therefore, I have come to you to offer you a deal. I'll give you your soul back, but in return, you must do something for me.”

“What did you have in mind?”

I got to my feet and stood with my legs spread apart so I could air-dry. The pee was gone from the rocks, but my thighs were still wet. Deals with the devil were often bizarre and this one did not disappoint when he laid it out.

“I would like you to have intercourse with me, and post pictures of us doing it on your OnlyFans page.”

4.

Satan had a very deep and eloquent voice. It was exactly as the actors in movies always portrayed it and carried off over the cliff face and across the canyon below.

“Is that it?”

“That is all.”

He nodded. Ick was still coming out of him. Something told me he'd been planning this since the moment he appeared before me, and possibly a lot longer than that. He could probably see the past and the future through some sort of makeshift eye of hell like the Sauron eye in the *Lord of the Rings* movies with a hoity-toity Latin name of some kind or something. Either way, something in my hairy and unshaven gut told me he'd been planning for my arrival for centuries.

“And if you do this for me, I will give you back your soul. It's as simple as that.”

I rested my hands on my stomach.

“But what if I get pregnant or something? I don't want to be carrying your demon seed.”

He came behind me. He was as silent as he was deadly, like an errant fart in the night.

“Don't worry, nothing will come of it. We're not even compatible, so you have nothing to lose.”

“Even still, that seems like an odd request.”

“I want people to see my image. Faith has been sorely lacking in the mortal realm lately and I want to remind people that I exist.”

“Faith is about believing, not seeing.”

“Doesn't matter. As long as my image gets out there, even if people don't believe it, they'll know.”

My phone magically appeared in my hand.

“Now let's get to it. Just try not to swallow it this time.”

He laid down and I got down upon him. He slid his furry dick into my equally furry vagina and I went to work snapping pics of the two of us in coitus on my phone. The ruler of hell hammered me mercilessly until he drew a groan from my lips and made me go wet and flaccid from the waist down. Before that happened, I got several choice shots of his cock jammed into

me and also of him jamming his tongue into me once that had gotten boring. He looked like an animal and he fucked like one too. I took a page out of a classic Cosmo ad for pleasing your man and pinched my nose and sucked on his dick for a few choice seconds, just long enough to reel off a few pics of my obscene oral sex act. For the grand finale, we posed together for a selfie with my head on his chest and a devilish grin on his face and promptly uploaded everything onto my OnlyFans account. After that I closed my eyes, and when they opened, I was back on the couch. My phone was on the coffee table. Maybe it had all been a dream.

Only one way to find out. I picked up my phone and checked my OnlyFans account. Sure enough, it was peppered with pictures of Satan and I having sex. They were grouped into a collection called FUCKING HELL and were accruing fans and money before my eyes. Surprisingly, the image that had the most fans and had made the most money was the selfie with my head on Satan's chest and him grinning, which had garnered such droll comments as ****nice costume**** and ****sik dik can totally see the latex lmao**** and plenty of the requisite devil emojis too. The time stamp said it had been posted about three hours ago and so far it had amassed about seventy dollars. Not bad, but nowhere near as much as an image like that deserved. Maybe no one believed, but as long as the image was out there like he said, maybe it wouldn't matter.

It was then I realized someone else was in the house. Someone cleared their throat and I looked over my shoulder and saw my supervisor in the hall.

“Ashley, you in here? The door was open.”

I was still naked and I did the first thing I could think of and pulled the blanket from the back of the couch over myself.

“Is this a bad time?”

He had a mask on and was complying with social distancing and wasn't coming any closer, luckily for me. If he did, it would be easy for him to tell I was naked under the blanket.

"Thanks to you, time's all I've got."

The front door was wide open and the cold December air of Minnesota was coming in. I shivered under my blanket and pulled it tighter against my body.

"Yes, well, I just came by to tell you that we're promoting you to assistant supervisor. You're going to get a substantial pay raise and won't have to work nearly as many hours. How does that sound?"

My jaw about hit the floor. I knew there was a promotion floating around but I always thought I was the last person he would consider for it. Maybe this was Satan's doing.

"After thinking it over, it's only fair you get it. You haven't quit on us like so many of the kids and you do have a family to support. Anyway, you start on Monday and you'll get your own office and everything. No more riding in ambulances."

I moved the blanket the wrong way and one of my boobs popped out. God bless social distancing.

"I know you've been struggling. Consider this my Christmas present to you."

"That...uh..."

I popped it back in sight-unseen and continued looking at him over the back of the sofa.

"Thanks, Mr. Brian. I don't know what to say."

"Call me David from now on. No more of this Mr. Brian crap."

He turned to leave the way he had come in.

"Sorry to just barge in like this. I thought about calling."

"It's okay. To be honest, I was getting lonely here all by myself."

I waved my phone at him.

“That’s a nice phone.”

He studied the new salmon pink Samsung Flip in my hand.

“Been meaning to ask where you got it.”

“What, this?”

I twisted around and draped my left hand over the back of the sofa.

“It was a gift. From my sister in Minneapolis.”

He seemed to buy it, not that he’d have any reason not to. He went to the door and didn’t say any more about it.

“Well, I’d better go. Don’t want to get the COVID. Happy holidays.”

“Wait.”

He stopped at the door. My eyes rolled off to the side and I gave him a half-smile.

“Um...happy holidays to you too.”

He left and I heard a car door slam and an engine start. I got up and shut the door after he left and let my blanket fall. There was a window nearby and I was naked in plain view of my neighbors, but I didn’t care. Plenty of complete strangers had seen a lot more of me over the last couple of months.

I grabbed my phone and pulled up my OnlyFans account and thought about deleting it, but with those choice pictures of Satan on it, maybe that wasn’t such a good idea. Now that I was making good money, I supposed I didn’t need it anymore, even if it had gotten me out of a tough jam. I made just enough to come through on my second mortgage and keep my house for the foreseeable future. It wasn’t a complete waste but the damage it could do to my life and reputation might be catastrophic.

Even still, I couldn't bring myself to delete it, not with Satan's pics all over it, so I did the next best thing and took a page out of my software developer ex-husband's playbook and put encryption on it so no one would know about it. My fans would probably wonder what happened to me. For some reason they couldn't get enough of my pasty and flabby mom bod. Maybe every once in a while I would post something new on it to stir the pot.

I was ravenously hungry after my ordeal, so I scrolled through my phone and ordered McDonalds through DoorDash. The driver soon came and left the three Filet-O-Fishes and two small fries and large Coke I'd ordered on the doorstep. I selected contactless delivery so I wouldn't have to open the door all the way to get it and I simply opened it a crack and slid the bag in. I brought it over to the couch and tore into it, still without any clothes on. I was careful not to eat and drink too fast and risk choking again. Visiting hell once was enough for one lifetime.

When my stomach was full and I was too gassy and sleepy to eat another bite, I decided to do something I had not done in almost a year and give my ex-husband a call. We had not spoken since our messy divorce had been finalized and I had gotten the kids in the settlement. I still had his number on my phone.

Before I called him, I downloaded that Satan selfie to my phone as if I was going to make it my wallpaper or my lock screen photo. To onlookers it would just be a man in a bad costume, a red and rubbery attempt at fake news, but I would keep it as a reminder that I had succumbed to sin, which in retrospect wasn't so bad. It had paid my bills. Trump certainly hadn't and God hadn't either. Besides, if Satan could be believed, what I did on OnlyFans wasn't technically a sin at all and I decided to take his word for it. I would keep the faith after this for sure, but that didn't mean I couldn't be a little more open-minded. Maybe if everyone split the difference like

that, more people would be religious. Even still, I put encryption on the picture and locked it behind three separate firewalls so no one could see it but me and then when that was done I set about calling the man that had taught me how to do that.

My ex-husband's phone rang three times. After the third ring, he picked up.

"This is Bob."

I had to admit, it was good to hear his voice after what happened. I curled up on the couch with my food-stained blanket pulled to my chin.

"Hey, Bob, it's Ashley."

"Ashley?"

"Yeah."

There was a pause.

"It's been a while. What's going on?"

"Not much."

My boob popped out again. It was a prime pic if ever I saw one.

"Just hanging out."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The concept for my story Devilish was loosely inspired by Lauren Kwei, a real-life EMT who started an account on OnlyFans to earn extra money during the pandemic. The New York Times did a story about her and lashed out at her over it, but the idea of an EMT being so desperate to make money that she would start an account on a glorified porn site was very appealing to me and I used that as the base I crafted my story around.*

Since I knew early on I was going to try and raise the bar by making my main character a devout churchgoer, religion was definitely a theme I wanted to explore. Just was so fascinated by a good Christian woman falling on hard times and having to resort to starting an account on OnlyFans to pay her bills, even if it meant she would go to hell in the process. Sexuality was another theme I wanted to explore with this. I read that the number of subscribers on OnlyFans went up by over 70% since this pandemic began and it's crazy to think that men and women can

dabble with selling bits of themselves off for a price and be paid way more than they'd earn by conventional means. If that isn't a blight on employment in this country, I don't know what is.

My big literary influence for this story was COVID. The pandemic has been turning our economy on its head for almost a year now and it's been simultaneously sad and fascinating to watch ordinary people take matters into their own hands to deal with it while men in positions of power that are supposed to resolve these issues bicker like simpering schoolchildren. COVID's really separated the sheep from the shepherds and hopefully when it's all said and done people won't forget the lessons the virus has taught them and that even though it has caused so much strife for so many, it has done so much good.

AUTHOR'S BIO: My name is Tyler McCurry and I am a 30-year-old author from Olathe, KS with a passion for food, family and fun. My work has appeared in Davega Bicycle, Athelion Webzine, the JCCC literary magazine Mind's Eye, the University of Kansas literary magazine Coal City Review and Grand Little Things.

About Five Hours Staring at the SUN

By Bex Peyton

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor DIRK VAN NOUHUYS writes...There is so much to like about this story. I like its bold imagination; I like its surprises; I like its flashes of language; I like its willingness to ask for active reading. You get your first clue that there's something special going on in the eighth word, a small word: "an." This is not a story about 'a' earth or 'the' earth, but one of several. The story is opening out to possible Earths. There are many flashes of telling language: "the road must be edging disappearance," not 'getting far away' or even 'receding' but "edging disappearance," a phrase surprising in its vividness, which also echoes the overall plot and theme of the story. Likewise, the different images of deer that follow the protagonist to the end. I admire the economy: the protagonist's present day-relation to his mother is portrayed fully, but his upbringing is ringingly evoked in four words: "she was never kind." Enough said. There are genuine surprises of character, there are surprises of plot, I won't indulge in spoilers. I like this story because I see it comes from a special talent.*

Senior Editor CHARLES writes...*There are wannabes who will struggle all their lives to write like this 24 year old emerging author. There's talent and then there's this which only proves one of the laws of the universe here at FOTD: the number of great writers going into a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program equals the number of great writers coming out. Some things can't be taught.*

(Spacing and font size is author's own.)

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language)...

The beetles fly in cyclical paths around his fists like electrons, diving in once they've gotten a smell for the skin's saccharine spoil.

They kiss to a laugh track. His hand traces, trails down his boyfriend's flat stomach, lightly cups him, feels the precum through his briefs. His boyfriend shadows this, flickering between his eyelids, some handsy apparition at this point. The frisk yields an embarrassing softness. "What's wrong?"

Bex Peyton
2,840 Words

About 5 Hours Staring at the Sun

Summer foliage reminds him of an old Earth. Leaves so green in the sunlight they appear almost neon, thickly draped over their wooden structure, he thinks: anything could be under there, ancient beasts overgrown and dormant, for now. It's so hot in the car he has both windows down; the disgust he feels swimming in his own sweat outweighs his fear of an insect getting sucked into the vehicle. Having the visor down doesn't help much when the light is raw gold and washing out the road, so he drives slow, just in case.

The destination slips his mind—there is something else clawing, something the absence of distractions is parting ways for, something he has avoided coming to terms with. He finds it easy to forget anyways when all he has to do is listen to the GPS and drive. He has made this trip so many times before, but something keeps him from memorizing the route. There could be music playing but the steady hum of wind through the car drowns it out. For now he just focuses on each bend, keeping the tires on the pavement, clearing the infrequent passerby. Occasionally, he wonders if this will last forever—if he'll stay trapped on these backroads forever.

And in the abstraction of the thought, he is reminded of a moment. *His father, heavy and hulking, drags the limp body by the antlers, leaving a slick trail of wet blood on the forest floor. "Hold this", he says, handing his son the rifle that did the damage, the butt still sticky red from the killing blow. His father was a terrible hunter. "You're not supposed to smash its face like*

that”, he thinks, holding the rifle an arms-length away, “even I know that”. A beetle, black, reflecting the harsh rays of mid-summer, trails toward his shoe. He lifts his foot to let it pass under, waits for its safe emergence on the other side of his sneaker. His father is busy tying the buck’s legs together with rope, so he kneels down and picks at the grass. The rifle drops to the ground with a harsh thud and his father is on him. “What the fuck are you doing?!”

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He feels every slant, every curve in the road, the rubber flexing and leaning into every bend, every yaw, riding the asphalt track like a bobsled. Something’s pressing his foot down and he thinks; he has never known anything else. The trees stretch out across the road, kiss at the top, locked together in huddle formation over the speeding vehicle. Telephone lines run alongside the road, bouncing between the two sides. He can’t remember if they had always been there. He wipes sweat from the back of his neck, peels his thighs from the seat. As his foot sinks lower on the gas pedal, he finds himself staring into the rearview, the small reflective strip perfectly shaped to his eyes, behind him: remains of a darkened forest.

He sits with his best friend at a wobbly desk near the front of the high school gymnasium. She sighs, collects her long hair behind her head, lets it fall. He carelessly takes tickets from people filing up to the desk—they could be handing him toilet paper coupons for all he knows, he’s watching her instead. She’s beautiful, yes, but it’s not attraction he feels, rather some untraceable jealousy. His gaze traces her arms, her neckline, the distance between her doe-eyes, something so fascinating in the shape of her ankles. “What are you looking at?” During the game, the girls squeak their sneakers on the resin and he watches intently. Their bodies, at peak performance, contract, extend into impossible shapes—not impossible for them, but for him.

Their shorts hug tightly against wide hips, reveal smooth thighs, unpunctured meat, displayed in the wooden box of the gymnasium, he thinks: he really doesn't understand volleyball at all. At his feet, a blurred double reflects back to him from the grime on the floor.

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He can't recall when the last car passed. The gas pedal lies flat, choked down under the weight of his foot, a harsh speed carrying him under the treetops. The heat has dissipated, or he's settled in its hug, so he rolls up the windows. The sun seems to have moved positions, the trees throwing thick shadows across the road, dark hands clutching, crushing. Still, pangs of light hit his eyes between the shadows, the inside of the car flickering in some organic rhythm. His hand hovers over the wheel then finds rest on the gear shift. He palms the round head mindlessly and sinks into the seat, the windshield casting a refraction across the top of his hand. He squeezes, let's go.

In their apartment, his boyfriend watches reruns of some 90's sitcom. He slinks out of the bathroom unacknowledged, sits on the bed behind him. His boyfriend sinks back into his arms. "Hey". They kiss to a laugh track. His hand traces, trails down his boyfriend's flat stomach, lightly cups him, feels the precum through his briefs. His boyfriend shadows this, flickering between his eyelids, some handsy apparition at this point. The frisk yields an embarrassing softness. "What's wrong?" He sits back, forcing a distance. "I'm just tired", he says, repeats it to himself in his head, "I'm just tired is all". Later, while his boyfriend sleeps softly, a fawn on meadow grass, he slips into the bathroom. He jerks off standing at the toilet, his phone's volume at the lowest tick, the video titled "POV: Straight Jock Fucks You."

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So much time has passed, at least, it feels like he's been on this same stretch for hours. Sunlight strays from the road now, settles on the tops of branches, weighs them down. The trees bend in toward the car, close enough it seems he could open the sunroof and make contact, tunneling him in. The path is dark. His headlights flick on, perhaps his own mindless action, or something automatic—he can't tell. The lines on the asphalt go unbroken, soften in the corner of his eyes, fill the road with white. He can't move his head, just watch. Spots fall in front of the windshield, the undersides of leaves, then—

It's snowing. The sky and the ground share the same pale gray color, seamless, and in a way, he feels like he's standing nowhere. But he is somewhere, somewhere in the North East, somewhere he used to come maybe once or twice a year for Christmas, or birthdays, or sanctuary. It's now a chore. His mother, fallen ill in her cabin deep in Vermont's northern wood, expects him every three months or so. The drive is long, lonely, too much time to think, reflect, but he does it anyway, for as long as he can. She was never kind, but with her sickness came a defenselessness, a desperation, so she reached out to her faggot son. "If she only knew the half of it", he thinks. He stands on the porch while she rots inside, smokes a cigarette, avoids thinking of how many drives up he has left, how many more chances to see her, to tell her—to tell himself, really. Maybe one in the spring, by the summer—he's not sure. It's February now. Animal tracks freckle the otherwise smooth blanket of snow in front of the cabin and the bare trees remind him of a foreign planet. Branches so fragile they crack and whimper under the snow until the morning sun relieves them of this temporary costume, he thinks: something new starts with structure, life is bones, the rest just skin.

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—The sun shines into his eyes, golden, burning and in the vehicle's wake; nothing, a woodland void.

The trees curl into a green vortex; a ceaseless circuit, parallel bars: spin, turn, twist, the *light*, blazing through the car, a lifted chain, reversed, pulling into the mouth of shattered brilliance, speed: an illusion, an impression of some forgotten meter, some temporal gauge now, *nothing*, if not a million worlds away!

I'm in hell!

No, this is good, this is the pain of progress, the forbidden relief of understanding, the Earth, cast over you and engulfing you in its growth, the vessel, *unmanned*, pulled through the viridescent cyclone, stripped away by sheer velocity, every metal layer crumbling into the natural lacuna!

Him too!

Flesh, intricate systems of veins and blood, shed away, down to that primordial material, the untanned structure of dust pressed into universal shapes: a ghastly skeleton, engrossed in thought or fantasy or delusion, DRAWN *FASTERANDFASTERINTOTHE*SuN

And then—for a moment—the light flickers, and emerging from the shadow: some giant, awful vermin, black and reflective in its arthropodic shell. The massive insect's eyes shine incredibly bright. It blares its jolting song and in the moment before he's in its grille, he swerves off the road.

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The front of the car is molded around a tree, so far in he can touch the bark from the driver's seat. The massive hole in the windshield allows this. He places his hand on the trunk to steady himself, despite the fact he's sitting, and tries moving his head. Something is caught between the top of his head and the car's ceiling but he manages to turn his neck and look at the shattered passenger window. Glass from the top of the door is still breaking off, loosely dangling before crumbling into the seat, glaring thin rays of sunlight filtered through the overstory. There is no blood inside the cabin.

The driver's door opens with effort—the metal crushed at the hinges, scraping against itself when he kicks it from the inside. He peels himself from the corpse, stumbles into the knee-high ferns. He wades through them, away from the car, the road, deeper into the forest. Smoke rises from the carnage behind him, glass crunching under his feet, pieces of the vehicle integrating to the landscape. Hanging from a low branch, a side-view mirror, filled with the understory's dark green, sways from the impact, captures him between swings. He stops it with his hand, angling the reflection to his face. Inside: him—some version of him—unharmd, a pair of antlers stemming from his head.

He steps over a dismembered tire, does not drag himself but walks calmly, purposefully, pushing farther into the woods. The canopy funnels sunlight into concentrated rays. He stops for a moment, let's a beam illuminate his hand, steps through it, letting it trace up his chest, his throat, settle on his forehead for a moment. He reaches up and strokes the velvet skin of the antlers, soft and fresh. He struggles to keep his head comfortably straight, the newfound weight difficult to distribute. He traces the fine hairs from tip to base, moves on through the hair on his head, down his neck, his shoulders, realizes he wears no clothes. His hands drop.

The road must be edging disappearance, as he no longer hears the car's whimpering behind him. He does not look back to check. Instead, he focuses on the space ahead, the balls of his feet making imprints in the semi-wet soil, the shapes inconsistent but the trail almost symmetrical. In front of him there appears no end to the forest, just darker green, less distinct forms, a heat shimmer. A beetle flies past his face, circling his head before landing on an antler. The protrusions stand erect enough for him to see the tips when he rolls his eyes back and he catches sight of the insect as a still, black smudge. He shakes his head and the beetle flies off.

The forest is a moving panorama—the same trees, same brush, only marked with the occasional rusted bicycle, the remnants of a campfire, a tattered net strung between boughs. He passes with a steady speed until a spot of light spreads out from a break in the tree line. He slows down, approaches more carefully, blocks the sun with his hand— ahead, some sort of clearing. The antlers have begun to itch and he stops to feel them, turning his back to the light. His hands return wet from stroking the skin. He looks at his fingers, coated neatly with candy blood as if he were administering tribal markings, football eye black for stadium lights. As he reaches up to feel again, a piece of the velvet skin plops onto his hand in a thin, slimy pile.

Rubbing the antlers frantically, he feels dead skin peel off in damp chunks. The discomfort intensifies to an itch his fingers can't seem to satisfy, so he keeps his back to the sun, moves to a nearby tree. He hugs the trunk tightly, begins grinding the antlers on the bark. The skin sheds off easily, rolling up between the calcified bone and the tree's solid torso—the feeling beyond euphoria, something transcendental. Pushing away from the tree, he lifts his head in a fit of relief, an attempt at exhaling yielding only a gasping choke. The trunk is marked bright red; some indecipherable symbol, bits of skin clinging to the bark around the blood before curling into themselves and falling to the fern leaves below. He reaches up to find the antlers now

hardened, fragile, still slick with blood. Hung between the beams, a network of the peeled skin remains tangled around the antler's tips, something about it making his mouth water.

Ripping the skin free from the bone in fevered fistfuls, he balances himself between jabbing steps into the earth. An aroma so strong—so him—wafts lazily from the shreds in his hands, scrunching his nose with its pungency, baring his teeth with its succulence. Before he can bring the remains to his mouth, a beetle, the same beetle perhaps, appears, or returns, fluttering to a stop on his wrist. He watches for a moment, entranced, the sunlight now so close; he has stumbled to the edge of the clearing in his fit, clinging to the forest by only thin trees dotting the in-between. In the clearing: some dilapidated hunting cabin, lost to the woods, lost to the world.

The visitor on his arm has crawled to the shed skin splintered through his fists, joined by another, another, until a swarm begins to form in his hands. The beetles fly in cyclical paths around his fists like electrons, diving in once they've gotten a smell for the skin's saccharine spoil. They begin devouring the skin before he can. They have taken the last of him for themselves, and that, he cannot accept. He brings the fistfuls of gore to his mouth, taking ravenous, reckless bites, crunching the insects between the soft leather, folding them into the skin with gnashing teeth. The ones who have made it out of the carnage take to his face, buzz around his eyes in a thick cloud until he's unsure of what his teeth are tearing. The scream is silent, but the pain is real. bits of his fingers drop from his hanging mouth, half-alive beetles fly from the open chamber, join their brothers in the attack on his crying face. He swings violently, blindly around in the open air until the insects scatter. Black smudges fly away, some too weak, their wings shredded in the chaos, struggling in the air until they begin to fall slowly, slowly, until, they are no longer black, but white, slowly, falling, falling in front of his face, white, slowly, snowing.

He steps forward, transfixed, the snow falling quicker, more consistently, sheeting the clearing, the cabin now one he recognizes. His steps freckle tracks in the otherwise smooth drift of white leading up to the cabin, the stairs to the porch not five feet from his body. His body, no longer his—or maybe now, finally his—moves with an unstoppable autonomy, pain unravelling into the pale ether, tugging at the last of his mortal form. From above him: a cracking sound. One of the antlers flops loosely down to his forehead, breaks off into his hand, dry and light in its emptiness. He drops it into the snow, continues walking. Reaching up to the other, he snaps it easily from the stem, examines it in his palm for a moment. Bone white. He drops it, imagines it blends in, disappears into the snow, but she feels no need to look back. A few more steps, and then, her knees grow weak, collapse under her body, one, then the other, until she kneels on the freezing ground, the cabin now some altar in front of her. The rest of her body soon follows, twists under her weight before it's a silenced thud in the white blanket. The snow continues to fall, covering her new body, and somewhere behind her in the twisted metal remains, the body she no longer knows is covered with a different white blanket. The trees buckle, twist into impossible shapes under the weight of their new skin—this one not melted by the sun, but her mother will know nothing of burying a daughter.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *As a gender non-conforming person, I've bounced around a question in my head for a while: "Will I be my true self in death?" I've been wondering if I would be trans in the afterlife. If, God forbid, I crash my car, will my ghost reflect the form I want to take but am too afraid to admit to other people? If so, do I even need to admit it then? Stylistically, I was interested in mixing expressionism with stark, transgressive moments, something I observed in John Rechy's *City of Night* that changed the way I thought about realism.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: My name is Bex Peyton. I am a 24 year old emerging non-binary writer living in Nokesville, VA. I'm currently an undergraduate student at George Mason University studying film and video. My only previous publication will be appearing in Screen Door Review's upcoming February issue. I was once told by a fortune teller that I'm gonna die a painful death. I think she was kidding but I guess we'll see right?

EDITOR'S BIO: I'm a native of Berkeley with a BA from Stanford in creative writing and an MA from Columbia in contemporary literature. I worked for decades as a tech writer in Silicon Valley. A few years ago I devoted full time to fiction. I write short stories, some experimental forms, and occasionally verse, but mostly novels, four of which have been published in excerpts or serially. About 80 items of fiction and a few poems have appeared in literary and general magazines. I occasionally publish translations and photography. You can learn more about me at my website www.wandd.com and see a complete list of publications at <http://www.wandd.com/Site/Publications.html> His story **discipline is the bread of contentment** was published in Issue 6.

ALTER (Alter Alter Alter)

By Thomas Thonson

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* Thomas Thonson's "Alter," is as if *Fight Club* and *Rounders* met Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and had a deeply dissociated baby that can speak directly to your wants and the insidious depths your brain can go to help you reach them. Apart from socially dating me reference-wise, his story is, ultimately, pure entertainment met with the noir knowledge that, in order to survive, our minds break more easily than you would think, and that to protect ourselves, however selfish, hides our secrets within the deep well of our non-conscious (hashtag: I say "non" as I'm pretty sure Psychology has, many times over, disputed the definition of Freud's concept of the subconscious).

I won't spoil much because where is the fun in that? What would be the point in me telling you what you should be able to read and figure out on your own? Why would I take away the pleasure of reading a damn fine story for you and suck away the joy an author gets from knowing his work is being read, enjoyed, and appreciated.

Buuuut...I'm gonna spoil a little.

Josh, by his own roundabout account, is a broken human. Years of trauma during childhood makes him unable to have any voice of his own, makes him unable to talk to any woman he may meet, and makes him socially emasculated to the point that his only "acquaintances" are Japanese men, older men, and homeless men (you can see the trend). Tony is the money man. His nightly exploits make it so that Josh can keep his business open, that he has a bank account, or that he actually gets laid (all be it of a variety that some would describe as debauch). The catch being, that out of the deep recesses, out of the necessity to function in contemporary society, Josh and Tony are the same.

You see, Josh has Dissociative Identity Disorder. A disorder that, when the brain comes face to face with a traumatic reality, forces the mind to separate itself from the self in an attempt to cope. Tony can cope, but only for so long. Time is of the essence.

Pick any number of movies (*cough* *Identity*, *cough* *Split*, *cough* *Secret Window*, *cough* *Hide and Seek*, *cough* *Me, Myself and Irene*, *cough* *Sybil*, *cough* *Shutter Island*, *cough*, *cough*...) and you will understand the theme at play.

But this is the point. Thonson resides in Los Angeles, a place more famous than anywhere I can think of (maybe India) for its production and/or combining the chaff of humans that do better at being anyone else but themselves; a city with the preferred proclivity to use you and abuse you (thanks, Harvey) rather than give you the opportunity to be yourself.

The question is, punk, who would you rather be?

Thomas Thonson's, "Alter," need not be anything but what it is: a good story. A dash of danger and intrigue we crave of Noir from the 20's and 30's, adding in a pinch of the loneliness

big cities create (“Forget it, Jake. It’s Chinatown), toss in a murder mystery, sprinkle and spackle our collective nostalgia for Hollywood and, by association, our *need* to be anything other than insignificant, and let rise the desperation, fight, and voice to simply just not fade away that is prevalent in this story (Yeah, I know, a recipe metaphor...fuck me, right?).

I will leave you with this.

There is fun to be had reading “Alter” and that is a treat that most authors refuse to take the time to give you. Take your time and enjoy the nuances Thonson creates. I did.

And if an asshole like me can, then you certainly can too. Don’t be an asshole like me. Read the fucking story.

Five Stars.

ALTER

By

Thomas Thonson

You wake up in strange houses. Different ones every time. You have no idea where you are. You are naked, perhaps covered by a sheet, your body twisted into a ball. The smell of sex. But you’re alone. You have a headache. Sometimes there’s money, sometimes there’s other things: a package of prophylactics, a ball gag, a pair of handcuffs or a whip with delicate tendrils. Don’t let it scare you; it’s not what you think. That part I own. But keep in mind it’s on your behalf. You made me this way—turned me into a pervert and I’ve never had the chance to thank you for it.

Thank you.

There’s a mattress on the floor, but this isn’t some flophouse. This is an elegant, completely sophisticated space, the master bedroom of an up-scale mansion. It’s pristine. And empty. That’s right, look around, Joshua, what do you see? The same thing every time, right? You don’t know where you are, but there *is* a pattern. The houses are empty and for sale, different views out the

windows, different architecture—mid-century modern, post-modern, post-and-beam, Spanish revival, Moorish, Hollywood noir, kitschy studio backlot, and just plain tasteless. These are places for the rich—estates with dollar signs all over them, the kind that realtors dream about, if they even dream at all.

It's late in the day; outside the window the sun is already like a death ray, the type of sunlight reserved for the guilty of heart and the craven. Unfiltered for the uninnocent. Not a cloud in the hard dome above to soften the gaze of the panopticon eye.

Night creatures beware.

All around a diorama view of the skyline of Los Angeles—the spires of downtown, the lush canyons of the Hollywood Hills. You have entered the playground of celebrities, the rich, and people like me—the night-sharks that feed on the chum scooped from their coffers. How does it feel? Scary, for a person like you, I'm sure. But for a few seconds, you are still in the grip of sleep's sweet nirvana, and are simply an animal alive in the world.

Look out the window; a realtor is coming up the walk with clients. Run, Josh, run. You put on your clothes that you don't even recognize, something that you would never wear—aren't you a Wallabee man, a Dockers-with-creases guy, a polo shirt-wearing geek? Find your cell phone—hurry!

You take the money. You're not stupid. Except lately there hasn't been any money.

Through the back door and into the street to call an Uber to take you away. To take you home. As always, you have to check to see where you are, find a street sign, an address.

And then you are in your safe little world—the *Joshua* world. But there's another world—the *Tony* world. I know them both. I'm the only one that knows them both, because I found it beneficial to do so. That's how it happens for you and you only know that part of it. But I know

the rest, and that's why I'm talking to you now. Listen to me, please, listen to that voice in your head. I know you're trying to kill me off, with the help of that vile psychiatrist. You want to destroy me and everything I represent to you, but let me tell you my story and perhaps you will reconsider. Things aren't what they appear to be. Not by a long shot. And the shrink's got something to do with that. But first, let me tell you what I know about you.

Josh is your name. It's on the cellphone I use. It's on the driver's license in my wallet. There's an address, so I know where you live. And there's a business card so I know where you work. But I don't know them like you know them. I only know them in that fugue state we go into before you become me—the twilight zone of consciousness when we are both stirring in the shadows, but not fully realized. Sometimes I see it as a room with no windows, overstuffed furniture, and a massive chandelier, and sometime it's a floating piece of time, which surprisingly looks like being inside a slinky with no beginning or end, uncoiling outward. I call it the grey zone—you probably have your own name for it. I feel like a sleepwalker, a being without sensory perception, a dreamer not yet fully awake. For a few moments we both go through the motions, but something is guiding us, and I'm pretty sure you have no idea of my presence, but I can feel you like a ghost slowly fading into the ether. And then, usually when I'm dressed in the clothes that make me, *me*, and I'm in the back of a taxi or Uber and heading into the nightscape of the city, I look up in the mirror and there I am—Tony. There's that confident smile, that familiar look. Oh, I'm a handsome devil, with charisma to burn. And you, you are completely gone. I have no memory of you. None.

Then how, you might ask, how is it that I seem to be telling you your story? Good question, Josh. Good question. The answer has two parts to it. One is because of a man named Dom. I'll

tell you about him later. You'll want to hear about him. He's very important to everything that's happened so far. And the other is the psychiatrist, Dr. Alexander. Between the two of them, they made me more aware of you, one because he followed you/me and told me about what he discovered, and the other because he brought me out of the shadows for his own twisted purposes. Between the two of them, this is what I've pieced together.

When you get home you remember nothing except waking up in that strange, empty house. It's another blackout, a segment of time you can't account for. But that's not unusual; it's been going on for some time. Still, I'm sure it terrifies you, at least that's the impression I get from Dr. Alexander—not because he told me, but because he's broken down the wall between us, and I've been able to hear you talking to him. Not all of it, but some—the parts that lead up to my emergence, when he brings up your childhood, your monstrous mother, your disastrous home life.

Trauma, plain and simple, and I'm not without sympathy.

But I don't feel like it's part of me, even as I am tenderly cognizant of the fact that it is for these reasons that I exist. So excuse me if I can't shed a tear for you.

There you are again, missing a piece of time, and because it has happened before, you do the same things. You count the money. And it's a huge sum. Or it used to be. Right now, not so much, and of course, that's part of the story too, but I'll get to that later. Then you change clothes and often, you throw my clothes in the trash. You used to burn them in shame, take them out and douse them with gasoline and set them ablaze, but the neighbors thought you were some kind of Satanist so you quit.

Later you'll put that money into the bank. And you do it in stages so as not to draw too much attention from the government. You'll launder it through your business, the business I helped you set up, and the business I support with my winnings. I hope you consider that when the time comes. My money made you. My sins made your life better, don't forget that. And what kind of business is it? Well this is what I know from the intrepid Dom. You have a small, used record shop. Vinyl rules your world, and especially since it's come back big in these last years. You specialize in the aficionados of analog, those whose souls vibrate to the rounded sine wave, the sonic luddites who will talk forever about some obscure jazz musician before the digital age. Many of them are Japanese businessmen, the kind of guys that thrill to the smooth jazz of the early seventies—Joe Henderson, Grover Washington Jr., Dave Grusin. And you're right there with them, making suggestions and introducing them to the rarest, oh, the very rarest of recordings. And they shovel out the cash, but it's still hard to make a profit. Why? Because you buy too much—you are a collector first and a businessman second. These are Dom's observations, but I kind of knew about it, because that passion you feel for your work has echoes in my own vocational expertise. Yes, we are alike in some small ways.

Besides the shop and all things vinyl you live a cloistered life. You have acquaintances, not friends: Norris, your Armenian landlord that drives too fast and curses in five languages, Tobias True that used to play the flugelhorn in a jazz band and now gets around in a wheelchair, Terrence the homeless soul that often sleeps in your vestibule after you close, and a few diehard customers—older, white, eccentric, and useless, the kind of men that have been with us in every era and could be interchanged with the same group 20 years in the future or 20 years in the past without causing even the slightest disturbance. In musical terms think of them as the signal-to-noise ratio of any recording. They are the "noise," the baseline of existence that we use to

measure our lives. You like it like that. Don't let anyone too close, otherwise there'd be questions —question about the missing time, the blackouts, and the money.

Notice what else is missing? Sure you do, Josh. They are all *male*. No women. Not one. It's not that women don't like you, they do. And they are around. Everywhere. This is Hollywood after all, and attractive women flood the place like migrating birds, their flamboyant plumage in full display. There's Lulu who lives in a state of half-nakedness with the curtain-less window across the courtyard, and Rebecca in the yoga pants that jogs in the street past your shop, and Samantha with the pointy nipples and tattoos who could probably beat you arm wrestling, and the poor waif with the slender bow-legs that sells roses to the customers at the restaurants and cafes up and down the street. Even Zee, the postwoman, is a looker, with glistening dark skin and thickly lashed eyes. They are sweet to you, aren't they, Josh? They pet you like a dog—like you'd stroke a house cat. They think you're cute. And it fills you with agony. Anything connected to sex fills you with shame and dread. Nothing you can do about it. From what I've heard in Dr. Alexander's sessions, I owe my existence to these women. They are the trigger that brings me to life.

Thank you, ladies.

It was Dr. Alexander's ad that sucked you in. The one on TV. That one got to you because it hit so close to home. "Do you wake up and not know where you are," the voice over intones. "Do you have memory lapses?" The visuals are a bit cheesy, but they get the point across—a person that's lost control of their life. Of course, Dr. Alexander is talking about people with drinking or substance abuse problems, not what ails you. But you didn't know that. So you went to see him at his posh facilities in Malibu, the one that all the celebrities go to—part spa, part boot camp, part cult, perfectly designed to bring them in, send them out, and reel them in again.

Failure was the norm according to Dom's calculation, but he's a bit of a cynic when it comes to things like that. Nobody is going to tinker with his psyche; it had taken years to perfect his sociopathic tendencies.

My guess is that as soon as the good doc started questioning you and figured out you didn't have a drinking problem, he began to have deep thoughts about the true nature of your affliction. And being a cunning soul, with years of experience separating wealthy drunks from their money, he ran those suspicions to ground with a bit of hypnosis and incisive questioning. He soon ascertained that you were suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder. And that's how he met me.

Everything I've related to you so far is mostly secondhand with touchstones of insight that I have gleaned from your shadowy presence when the hard line between us was frayed. This next part I can attest to from firsthand experience and, believe me, it was disorienting. I wasn't happy to be sitting in your pathetic clothes in a plush soundproof office facing the ferret-faced Dr. Alexander. But there I was and the shock and surprise I saw on his face only made it worse. He was at first a bit skeptical, and his demands that I quit playacting or screwing around, were downright insulting. But he soon became a believer. Smart fella. And that's where I got myself into trouble, Josh. When he asked me, several sessions later, if I'd kill his wife for him, I said yes. Of course it was because of the money, but it was also because of something else. If I'm going to be honest with myself, I said yes because I wanted to prove that I was completely independent of you. And what could be more dramatic than murder? Killing his wife was like killing you off. Completely crazy of course, because in my heart I knew that you created me, and only you could keep me alive. Big mistake.

Okay, that's your story. Here's mine:

I'm a gambler. A card man. Poker, mostly Texas hold 'em, but I'm adept at them all. No, I don't go to Vegas or play in big tournaments. Don't have to. My bailiwick is the underground card games of Hollywood. And there's more than a few. With a little luck I hooked up with a sharp-eyed beauty named Janice. Janice had the whole thing down. Her daddy is a realtor to the stars and to anyone else with the kind of money for a down payment that most people would only make in a lifetime of work. All those oversized houses scattered across the hills and canyons of the Hollywood hills like glistening jewels, were his stalking grounds. The "For Sale" signs went up and the rubes poured in and walked the bare rooms at Open Houses, while he plied them with champagne and foie gras, and checked their bank accounts online. And then they cleared out and Janice would work her magic.

The thing about a floating card game is that it has to float. And that was hard. Sooner or later, whether it was a hotel suite, or a private house, someone gets greedy or tells the wrong people, and LAPD would shut you down. But these were empty houses that the realtor had temporary control over. He was the seller, he staged them and dressed them up and unlocked the doors and closed them up at night.

Janice had a team that could transform a house into a decadent gambling den in a matter of hours. This is something I'm quite sure you couldn't do anywhere else in the world, and the reason is—movies. Hollywood is replete with master craftsmen of illusion. All the talent you might need to create a world that is alluring and just believable enough to seduce and beguile is at your fingertips—from the art directors, to the set dressers, to the caterers, to the drivers. Move everything in, move it out—it's the operating principle of moviemaking that uses a veritable

cornucopia of talent and expertise. Instant meals, drinks on demand, and creature comforts on the fly are all part of the purview of a good movie set. After all, they have to pamper stars and executives and the crew, so why can't they make a gambler feel at home?

Show up at Janice's card game with a pocket full of money, and you could get a drink, something delicious to eat served by a statuesque beauty, and even a shoulder rub or more if it was the right pair of shoulders. Meaning, of course, the celebs. They were Janice's mark, her bread and butter, her ticket to a jet stream of money. The celebs, most of them actors, but occasionally a sports figure or two, were the perfect combination of hubris, entitlement, and wealth. They had enough money that they could be stupid about it, and in general were not skillful poker players. The concentration wasn't there, and that was before the free drinks Janice plied them with. Janice had the touch, she knew how to play them, to flatter and cajole, and to make them feel as if their presence was the magic elixir to a good time. They paid handsomely to be there and then paid again when I took their money. And they just sucked it up, thinking that all of us were anteing up the same amount, when actually it was only the celebs. The true card sharks played for free and kicked it back to the house. Why do you think we were grinning at them with such alacrity and glee? Did they ever sense that the comradery we offered was all a ruse? Probably not. That same elixir makes you lose touch with reality, and nobody's there to give you a heads up because, as I said, the water was boiling with blood and the sharks were feeding.

I realize I'm not painting a pretty picture, but the truth is the glamor of it gets under your skin —the money, the babes, the booze, the free flow of drugs, and just the fact that you were rubbing shoulders with some of the biggest names in the business has a hypnotic effect. Nights could shuttle past in a blur. The sour taste on your tongue at dawn morphs into the adrenaline

rush of a pair of aces and king high winning the pot the next night, and the mournful look on some young and pampered leading man's face as he realizes that there are no do-overs, no second takes, no army of handlers that can change things. It's a naked death when the cards go down, a comeuppance that most people might learn from. But not these guys (and they were all guys), no, it all went away with the next deal, a dreamland of expectations as vast and capacious as the belief that their success was built upon their superior talent and skill.

What can I say, not a noble livelihood, not even a respectable one, but still a life that on a nightly basis could bring the kind of drama and adventure that I craved. It's the action that counts, the surface of buzz of it all, the feeling of a single night stretching on forever and your fate hovering before you, resplendent and tantalizing and doomed.

I'm telling you this so you'll know what we shared, because I can't believe none of it touched you, and I want you to know that there was value and great excitement in my world, something I feel you were short of in yours. But I digress.

They point of this incantation is to show you how you've been deceived and abused by Dr. Alexander and to reveal to you how my own small sliver of your life became compromised.

I was gliding along in this world and doing quite well, with very few worries and cares. That's just the way I operate; I'm an in-the-moment man, not prone to contemplation or self-reflection. Janice, in this regard, was the perfect girlfriend if you want to call it that. She liked the money I brought in, and liked the fact that I seemed to have no desire to see her beyond the nights we shared after a successful game. Janice was not a relationship girl, and wanted sex when she wanted it and the way she wanted it. I told you about the sex toys and we don't need to delve any

deeper. Suffice to say that Janice liked me to enter her when her butt cheeks were still glowing and I was a worthy servant to her needs.

It was Dom who changed the paradigm of my existence, and not in a good way, even though his intentions were never meant to be hostile or damaging. It was simply a part of his job. He provided security at the games, made sure nobody brought in weapons, no one threatened anyone else, and that everybody, no matter how inebriated, got home safe. He was smooth and discreet, but you got the feeling that if he wanted he could kill you and feed you to the coyotes and never lose a night's sleep. Nobody messed with Dom or any of his crew. They felt just dangerous enough to keep everyone in line. But he also ran security checks on people, online and otherwise, because it was his job to know who was at the games.

And that's when I came into his crosshairs. I preceded him at the games, and I was Janice's boyfriend, so it took awhile for him to check me out. But at some point he began to ask me questions. We'd be sitting at the bar, winding down, and he'd engage me in conversation, and do it in a way that didn't feel like an interrogation. I ran into trouble almost immediately. Why? Because I didn't have a lot to tell him. My life consisted of a taxi ride and a destination. A card game and violent sex. A drift into dreamland and then to awake in another taxi drive into the night. As you can imagine this didn't sound normal to him. I didn't tell him this in so many words, but he began to suspect that the Tony he wasn't talking to wasn't the whole story.

So he had me followed by one of his goons and that's when he discovered you, Josh, and your pathetic life, and your visits to Dr. Alexander. But there was a period of time before that, before you began your therapy where Dom, very gently and not in an accusatory way, began to fill me in. I think he liked me and wasn't about to upset Janice with his discoveries, so he cautiously, and with great tact, told me I was two people and outlined my life to me, or at least

your life. It wasn't a total shock—no, I'd had glimmers and flashes of this other existence, but it was deeply troubling. And even worse, the corollary of it was that I lost my touch at cards. Poker is built on confidence and the ability to ride out uncertainty. With these new revelations my confidence was shattered and my luck evaporated. Now I was as hapless as the dumbshit celebs and the winnings started to dry up. Janice cut me some slack and loaned me money, but the whole situations was untenable. I needed to fix things.

So I told you about popping up in Dr. Alexander's office, and how we had a chat. Well, this went on, session after session, until one day, he asked me to kill his wife and offered me a shit ton of money to do it. The irony of it was that his wife was seeing a famous but fading older actor—he, of the big dick and tiny soul. There's a gallery of drunk-driving mug shots of him in every state. It was the best thing that could happen to any cop that pulled him over, because they would have endless funny and cringe-worthy anecdotes they could tell around backyard barbecues, or family get-togethers. This actor had checked into the clinic and checked out with the Dr. Alexander's wife as his conquest. Dom's take on all this was that it was no surprise—Dr. Alexander's only ability to attract a female was through his wallet, and wife number four was no exception. But this time, despite having a pre-nup, he wasn't taking any chances—he was tired of parting with a small fortune every time the latest blissful union dissolved.

I should have seen this coming, should have realized that he was developing a relationship with me and not in a hurry to help you. But I liked shocking him with my stories and poking fun at your expense. I guess you could call it my revenge for my truncated life, to playing second fiddle to you. So I said yes. He gave me half up front and that's the half you woke up with one morning thinking that whatever had happened, the money was flowing again.

I was given instruction, their favorite shack-up haunts, and a time and a place I would probably find them alone. I would choose my time, and let him know so he could have a rock-solid alibi. All I needed was a weapon, and I turned to Dom for that. Dom gave me a small untraceable .38 that he had lying around and told me to practice firing it before I pointed it at a human.

Five days later the wife and the “actor who will remain unnamed,” were dead, shot while they slept in bed; Dr. Alexander ponied up the other half of the cash, and then got serious about curing you of your DID, to cover his tracks.

Yes, that’s right. I had not thought this through.

I was thinking that he was just taking your money by pretending to treat you, but it makes perfect sense now, in retrospect, that he wouldn’t want this deed hanging over his head. My existence was a threat to him and he was now hell-bent to erase me. *Completely.*

My dear Josh, it’s happening as we speak. I’ve heard him call it EMDR therapy. How it works I’m not sure of, but I have some awareness as to how it is practiced. He has you visualize the traumas in your life and then he makes you move your eyes around like you’re in REM sleep, and by using the curative powers of the unconscious mind, slowly integrates them into your conscious mind so that they lose all their power. But *I’m* in your unconscious mind, don’t you see, he’s sucking that power from me along with those terrible memories. Because you’ve got a lot of them it’s taking some time, but I can feel it working.

Oh boy, can I feel it working.

Tony hasn’t been set free in weeks, and the grey zone is getting smaller by the day. The chandelier fell from the ceiling, the walls are closing in, and yesterday I looked down and I was missing my foot and part of my shin. And it’s dark all the time now—an oppressive darkness

that's as thick as crushed velvet. I'm also afraid I'm going mute, perhaps my voice, that inner voice that I tantalized and tortured you with all these years has grown so faint that you barely even notice. I hope not. I need you to heed my words, to sound the alarm, to come to my rescue. Stop this madman from his shamanistic machinations.

Walk away. Walk away now, dear friend.

Okay...okay wait, how about this? Maybe this will change your mind? One last thing—I didn't kill them. I just let you think that because I wanted to impress you. Tony couldn't do it, because Josh couldn't do it. It's not *our* thing. I had the gun out, I had it pointed at them, and then I just ran away. Dom did it, several days later. He said it was a favor. But it was more than that, I'm guessing. One of these days Dr. Alexander is going to come out of his office and there in the waiting room, twiddling his thumbs, so to speak, will be Dom. And it's at that point the good doctor will know something is up, because Dom doesn't have the look of someone seeking psychotherapy. Not one bit. No, what he looks like is a Greek tragedy, the scorched earth variety, where the chorus has nothing pleasant to say. And then, if I'm imagining this correctly, Dr. Alexander is going to discover that paying alimony is a damn sight better than paying Dom. But that's another story, as cheery as it may sound.

Hold it! This is not good. Not good at all. There go my arms. And now the slinky is expanding, expanding infinitely, and my heart has left my chest. It's beating out there in the darkness all alone. I wish I could say you were going to miss me, but I won't exist for you, not even in your memory. The voice is going, the body disintegrating, the eyes blind to the tiny piece of the world I have left.

One *more* last thing. At some point you are going to cross paths with Janice. I just know it. She's going to recognize you and you are going to deny that your name is Tony. But it won't

stop there, because she's going to give you a deck of cards and you're going to handle them like a pro, and she's going to smile, because she will know that the two of you are going to change each other's lives—for the better, Josh, for the better! And if I leave you anything perhaps I can leave you that.

Wait, I say! Please? Listen to me. Can you still hear me? Can you? Hello...

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I think everyone imagines a different version of their life, one that's hidden but so tantalizingly close we can feel it. For some our identity is a straightjacket we want to escape, for others a safe harbor. I wanted to express that in a way that had a playful, quicksilver quality, light on its feet and slightly subversive. The pared-down and intimate fatalism of Georges Simenon's romans durs certainly must have gotten under my skin, but for this I was less influenced by literature than by film noir of the Forties. Alter takes some of those tropes and mocks them while embracing their tantalizing wickedness, which these days seems rather nostalgic: the doomed protagonist, the femme fatale, the idea that your character flaws determine your fate are like believing in Newtonian physics in the age of quantum mechanics. Plus, I had to get in a bit of Hollywood skewering—always a worthy target.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Thomas Thonson is a working screenwriter. His prose has been published in Madcap Review, Open Ceilings Magazine, and Written By.

Things at the CENTRE of Unfulfillment

By Jan Sims

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We had six animal story submissions for this issue. Four were quietly euthanized and two, respectfully flea-bitten, were adopted. The plot lines in both cases were simple. In this one, a walking hairball named Gus becomes the poster puddy for a popular brand of gourmet cat food. When his fame as an influencer goes viral owner Posey's lust for moolah puts her clearly in the sites of her Sugar Kitty. The author writes with a light touch, the fritto misto of comic and bittersweet is **purr**-fect and a discrete note of pathos adds unexpected dimension. So put down Love in the Time of Cholera for a moment, Kitten, and treat yourself to this antic romp. It'll be all over you.*

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

Fate soon intervened in the form of another unwanted package from the fulfillment centre. "What the hell am I going to do with a pirate costume?" Posey shrieked into the phone. The customer service representative at the other end of the line had a very good idea of what he wanted her to do with the costume, but he politely informed her to send it back.

"Well, how do I look my lovely people?" Posey preened for the camera in her Little Bo Peep costume. "And I've got a surprise for you. Here kitty, kitty..." Posey reached behind the sofa, almost knocking the phone off coffee table. "Look, Little Bo Peep has found her sheep!" In reality, it was Gus with a piece of sheepskin rug tied haphazardly around him.

Things at the Centre of Unfulfillment

Just be quiet and make yourself small. Hide in the corner. She can't hurt you if she doesn't notice you. She only gets this way when she's very mad.

Posey was seriously pissed off. "What kind of an idiot mistakes a bathrobe for a pair of overalls?" she muttered.

Despite the packaging mix up, Posey was convinced choosing overalls for her internet tutorial was a stroke of genius. Sure, she thought, they really only suited house painters and children under the age of six. But Posey believed she could make a name for herself as the go-to source for advice on accessorizing overalls.

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became, and flung the bathrobe across the bedroom.

“Deep breaths, Posey, deep breaths,” she repeated. When her hands stopped shaking, she picked up her phone and hit record. “Greetings my people, Posey here. Now I know I promised you an ‘overall look at overalls’ today, get it? But some moron in the fulfillment centre screwed up my order. Instead of overalls, they sent me a bathrobe. Can you stand it? Here take a look.”

Posey swung the phone around so the camera could focus on the offending bathrobe.

I know what will make her happy. I'll put on a show for her. She has such a beautiful smile.

“I promise you, my lovely people, that I will get this sorted out for next week. Toodles!” Posey posted the video online, and looked down at the phone. She was going to tear a strip off someone in customer service. But first she needed to tweet about her experience with the people she frequently called “the brain dead idiots who work at fulfillment centres.”

Posey grabbed her cigarettes and headed to the front porch. The landlord insisted no one could smoke inside the house. She swore he had installed hidden cameras about the place, so it was just easier to step outside.

“Okay” Posey muttered when she returned to her bedroom and picked up the phone. “Let’s see what my followers think.”

Her hands started to tremble.

“Get over yourself,” several comments read. “They’re just trying to do their job,” other people remarked. The internet had spoken: Fulfillment centre workers 10 - Posey 0. Everyone thought she was a bitch.

To add insult to injury, someone reacted to her tutorial with the comment: “Wrong order? First world problem sweetheart. But hey check out the cat.”

“Huh?”

Posey looked at her video again, this time noticing that when she panned over to the bathrobe, Gus had a sleeve in his mouth and he was shaking his head back and forth.

“What the fu...” Gus jumped on her lap. “Get off you stupid cat,” she hissed, shoving Gus to the floor.

I'm sorry...I'm so, so sorry.

Posey needed something stronger than a cigarette to calm her nerves, so she cracked open a bottle of bourbon that her roommate had left. She thought it hardly made up for the rent money Tabitha owed, but it was something.

Posey didn’t pick up her phone again until she was feeling pleasantly pissed from three stiff glasses of bourbon. “Pissed...and pissed off” she chuckled.

The pissed part required sobering up. But she was no longer pissed off when she checked social media and realized the implications of what she had found.

Someone had edited and reposted part of her overalls video.

“Cat versus bathrobe” was going viral.

In short order, Gus became an internet sensation. (Eventually it would be said, he was the Orson Welles of cat videos.) And while Posey may be many things, she wasn’t stupid; especially when it involved money. Trouble was, Gus was her roommate’s cat. No biggie she thought, Tabitha’s gone to New Brunswick to “find herself”. “Who goes to New Brunswick to find themselves?” she’d asked when Tabitha announced her plans. But Tabitha had just shrugged and refused to say when she’d be back.

These lights are very hot, but if it makes her happy I’ll be quiet. I’ll be a good boy.

“And we’re back!” the morning TV show host chirped. Gus sat quietly in Posey’s lap as she smiled for the camera.

“He is just the cutest cat I’ve ever seen,” the host gushed, pulling Gus’s ear.

Ouch.

“He’s my baby,” Posey stroked Gus.

Prrrrrr.

“I mean his face...” The host struggled to find the appropriate superlative.

Please no more ear tugging.

“Yes isn’t it amazing?” Posey sighed.

Gus never knew his parents, but certainly one of them was responsible for his distinctive markings. Darned if it didn’t look like he was smiling.

The ear-tugging TV host scratched Gus’s chin, dragging manicured nails along the tawny band of fur that created the illusion of a smile.

What I wouldn’t give, to give her a playful nip....

“That’s a wrap,” the producer yelled and the lights dimmed.

Thank you. Those lights were very hot.

“Thank you, that was amazing. You know a lot of people tell me that I should be on TV” Posey smiled at the producer while stuffing Gus, backside first, into his cat carrier. “I could do the weather or something else where you don’t have to keep up with current events. How about hosting about a morning show like this?” The producer tapped his pencil on the clipboard. “Um, yeah...sure. Just send in your resume when you see a job posting on our website.”

On the drive home from the TV studio, Posey thought about what to post on Gus’s

Instagram and Twitter accounts. She even entertained the thought of giving him some catnip as a reward for sitting quietly during the interview. But she nixed the idea, figuring it would make him groggy in the videos.

Truth be told, Posey didn't like cats very much. Make that not at all. In fact, the night that Tabitha brought Gus to the house, Posey kicked him out to see if he'd find another home. "So there was a snowstorm, cats have fur don't they?" she'd asked rhetorically. But the next morning there he was, huddled under the porch and Posey caved. Much to everyone's surprise, Gus bonded with Posey. Actually Gus was obsessed with pleasing Posey.

That came in handy. To her delight, Posey discovered there was serious money for feline celebrities from pet food endorsements, and having a docile cat was important. "Grinning Gus" became the brand ambassador for Grrrmet Dish Delish. And it seemed that not a day went by when a meme or a GIF of Grinning Gus came up on somebody's Facebook page. That, in turn, fueled the demand for calendars, tee shirts and baseball caps with Gus's likeness.

Fortune had found Posey, but not fame. It seemed people only wanted to look at videos of Gus, playing, sleeping, and doing all the other cat things that Posey considered extremely boring. She had tried to insert herself in the videos in the role of devoted cat owner, but those videos got only a small fraction of the shares of videos that featured Gus by himself. She had badgered the TV station for a job on air, but so far nothing had come up. She knew it was time to focus on her first love; internet tutorials.

There could not have been a more unfortunate title for a tutorial than "Posey's Pussy"; or perhaps there was. "Posey's Pussy: Sleeping With Your Cat" was the title of episode one. It featured Posey in a skimpy nightgown on her bed with Gus.

Oh heaven, she's finally going to allow me to sleep with her.

"Now I know, my people, that sleeping with a cat can be a nuisance. But we love our pussies don't we?" Posey jerked Gus's head so that he was facing the camera. "But here's my secret. Just make sure they only get used to sleeping at the foot of the bed." Posey gave Gus a swift shove so he would crawl to her feet.

Aww, I thought we were going to cuddle.

"Posey's Pussy" was shut down after one episode at the insistence of the folks at Grrrmet Dish Delish. But not before a flurry of pornographic suggestions made their way to Posey via the internet. "What a bunch of sickos," she muttered to Gus. "I'm too good for that." She swore it looked like Gus was nodding in agreement.

Fate soon intervened in the form of another unwanted package from the fulfillment centre. "What the hell am I going to do with a pirate costume?" Posey shrieked into the phone. The customer service representative at the other end of the line had a very good idea of what he wanted her to do with the costume, but he politely informed her to send it back.

Inspiration struck as Posey was repackaging the pirate costume. She ordered another costume, and this time the right order arrived.

“Well, how do I look my lovely people?” Posey preened for the camera in her Little Bo Peep costume. “And I’ve got a surprise for you. Here kitty, kitty....” Posey reached behind the sofa, almost knocking the phone off coffee table. “Look, Little Bo Peep has found her sheep!” In reality, it was Gus with a piece of sheepskin rug tied haphazardly around him.

This is humiliating, but if it makes her happy.....

“Now, for the next couple of weeks, I’m going to show you how to make costumes for both you and your pet. It’ll be purrrfect for Halloween. Get it? Purrrfect. Well toodles my people.” Posey admired herself in the mirror wearing the sexy Bo Peep costume.

Public reaction was swift and certain. Viewers hated Posey and felt embarrassed for Gus. Reluctantly, she decided to can the tutorials after another stern email arrived from Grrrmet Dish Delish. The company warned her of a contractual obligation not to harm Gus’s “brand”. And it urged her refrain from posting any more videos of what the company called “questionable content” or face the consequences.

Despite the money she was pulling in from Gus’s endorsements, Posey knew there was no way she could afford the contents of the next package that mistakenly arrived at her doorstep. It was an exquisite silk dress. Posey recognized the designer label, and figured it cost at least \$5,000. “I’m sure as hell not sending this one back,” she muttered stroking the delicate lace bodice.

Posey wore the dress to her favorite nightclub, and the results were exactly what she had hoped for. She caught the eye of a cute guy on the dance floor, named Dustin. Later that night, Posey was thrilled to discover that he was the trifecta; smart, attractive and genuinely nice.

Posey had been dating Dustin for a couple of weeks when she decided to invite him over to her house for dinner. Gus would not stop rubbing against her legs as she tried to pay attention to the video tutorial on making spaghetti bolognese. “Now that’s what I should be getting into...cooking videos,” she remarked simultaneously stirring the pot and kicking Gus away.

Dustin arrived at the house with flowers, but left half an hour later. His dinner sat untouched on the kitchen table.

“Stupid, stupid cat”

Please, please stop. I’ll do better.

Posey gave Gus’ tail another smack. “Well you should feel guilty,” she yelled as the cat slunk away. Posey poured herself a glass of wine. It was an expensive bottle that she knew Dustin would enjoy, because he admitted to being something of a wine snob. Posey had told him she was a wine snob too, figuring it made her look sophisticated.

Unfortunately there was something Dustin hadn't told her in all the time that they had been dating. He was very allergic to cats.

After an awkward phone conversation with Dustin about the future of their relationship, Posey knew she had to make a tough decision: cat or true love. She went for the bank account. Sorry Dustin.

The money continued to roll in. But as the saying goes; all good things must come to an end. For Posey, that coincided with Tabitha's homecoming. Turns out they get Grrrmet Dish Delish cat food in Fredericton. Once Tabitha finished finding herself in New Brunswick, she found herself back at the house she had shared with Posey. Almost immediately they were engaged in a screaming match.

"He's my cat. If anyone should make money off him, it's me," Tabitha yelled. She pointed to Gus who was cowering in a corner. "Oh really, and who do you think has been looking after him all these months, huh? Who's been taking him to television stations for interviews, and making sure he doesn't get ripped off by merchandisers wanting his image?" Posey fired back. The argument could be heard halfway down the block, and a couple of people out walking their dogs crossed the street to avoid the porch where the yelling was coming from. But Posey and Tabitha continued to lay into each other, unconcerned about their behaviour, as they puffed on cigarettes.

Three days later there was a knock at the door. "Package for you," the deliveryman announced. Tabitha took the box and threw it on the hall table for Posey. "Man that's heavy," she complained. Tabitha was only mildly curious about the contents. She knew that Posey was obsessed with online videos and she figured it was just something else to flog in a tutorial.

Posey opened the package when she got home. "It's a gun!" Posey carefully lifted the revolver from the box. "God knows they screw things up at the fulfillment centre, but a gun? I didn't even know you could send those through the mail," she remarked to Tabitha. Posey checked to see if the gun was loaded.

It was.

What was that?

Pop.

No..no..no...

Gus saw something seeping towards his paws. He was hiding under the bed. He knew that was the safest place to be when they were screaming at each other.

The ambulance and police cars arrived first, and later the hearse. After a couple of hours the body came out on a stretcher, zipped up in a long, opaque, plastic bag. Posey emerged from the house in handcuffs. She was stuffed into a police cruiser; backside first.

Gus crawled out tentatively from under the bed.

"You poor little fella," the voice said softly.

Someone has noticed me.

“Here, here there’s nothing to be scared of,” the police officer stroked Gus’s chin.

This lady smells nice, and she has kind eyes.

Gus was cradled in the officer’s arms as she left the house. Her partner was removing police tape and looked up. “Did you want me to drop him off at animal control?” he asked.

“Naw, I think I might see if I can keep him.”

I think I’ve found my forever home.

Gus tilted his head, giving the kindly police officer a good view of his “smile”.

Maybe there really is a cat god.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *This story was inspired by the obsession with finding fame through social media. How does true talent get recognized and rewarded anymore? Is novelty replacing thoughtful creativity in works that capture public attention? By taking these questions to extremes in my story, I hope we can question the merit of what we consume on social media. This is not to put a damper on popular culture. A good cat video always brings a smile to my face. But what concerns me is how manufactured the social media experience has become.*

*If I look to the writing that’s inspired me, I’m drawn to novelists and short story writers who can turn a phrase into poetry. Will Ferguson comes to mind. His recent book *The Finder*, walks that fine line between writing that’s accessible and challenging. As a playwright, I’m a big fan of great dialogue. Among the best playwrights for that, in my opinion, are Sam Shepard, Tracy Letts, and David Mamet.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Jan Sims is a writer and broadcaster. Her full length plays, “Gracious Living” and “Weight” were performed at The Arts Project in London, Ontario in 2019 and 2020. Her one act plays, “The Lost Treasure of Jesse James” and “Bed & Breakfast” were performed at the McManus Theatre at London’s Grand Theatre through the Playwrights Cabaret. Jan’s play “A Day at the Beach” was performed at the Newmarket National 10 Minute Play Festival. Jan’s career in television news includes being a reporter and anchor in cities across Ontario including CTV London, Toronto, Barrie & Sudbury. Jan is currently a contributor to the Middlesex Banner newspaper, and has had articles published in Today’s Parent Magazine. Jan has an M.A. in Journalism from Western University and a B.A. in Drama & Sociology from Queen’s University. She is married with two sons; a writer and a graduate student in physics. Jan also has a cat named Moses.

RAIN and THE FIRST 1000 KISSES

By Allison Whittenberg

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We imagine these two stories if shopped around would feel the brunt of many a slammed door. Punctuation is eccentric, words shapeshift without warning (be welder for bewilder, office for off his, through or for threw her) and require some deciphering and run on sentences trample grammar underfoot like stampeding soccer fans. Every rule is broken and every time we witness a dirty phoenix rising from the ashes. The struggle to express is everywhere present and the challenge, heroically met, is to cram all that pain and anger inside the words so they won't fall out. The author's voice is harrowing in its authenticity and screams like a clubfoot. So, yeah, when these stories pounded on our door, we took them. This, ladies, gentlemen and pronouns, is Outsider writing, 100% pure and guaranteed for the life of the reader.*

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language):

Michelle hounded me, tenderly, rustling her long dark lashes against my cheek. "Johnny, what's the matter, Johnny?"

There was a voice trapped inside my throat. I never answered.

Dana was sitting on my father's lap, resting her head on his once solid chest. She was showing him pictures she had drawn in her coloring book and Dana had small eyeballs and whenever she was amused, her eyes would disappear in the fold and she was laughing and her eyes had disappeared and I was like now wait one Goddamn minute.

Putzi's lips would crinkle into a smile as his dark gray eyes looked out beyond a lusterless guy to a hacienda : rain beautiful rain on a lemony afternoon.

Rain

My father was always angry with me angry -- violent. He used to shove my face in dirt out back of our house. His large hands on the back of my neck. I remember that. And I did struggle, while he gritted my nose into the rough rocks, the multicolored pebbles, the slugs, the dogshit.

I still have scars. I have three other brothers, but I was always the one who got it the worst. I got call the worst names and got held under the water the longest. I was the oldest in my family, I guess he wanted me to be a man.

I am a man... more or less.

We all got beat, including Ma until I was 14. I was lucky to get big so early I had farm muscles. My father went to swing at me one Sunday and I like and went crazy on you. He's like a visitation. I kicked my father's miserable ass like I was some kind of psycho. When it was all through my father was bruised up, bleeding on the floor. Blood just milking out of him..

He knew better than to mess with me again and I told him never to scrap the rest of the family, ever.

Well, it was about then that he started drinking, deteriorating. Roaming about the house, pissing on himself with his mouth poked out cuz he'd been dethroned. I didn't feel bad about beating him, shit happens. I dropped out of school the following year, lied about my age to get a garage job and move on my own.

I don't really think about the past anymore. The past is the passed, that's what I say. But the reason for all of this reckoning is that it's my turn.

It's my turn to watch my father.

See, my brother, Tony had him for the last eight months, and Ron can't have him because he's in jail on drug-related charges and Bill can't do it because he's over in Korea in the full-time Army and Ma died last year

So Dad is alone.

So I'm left.

I'm close. I live a whole six miles away from where I grew up. I don't want him, though.

I can't tell that to my wife because she's the girl from good beginnings. She had a finishing school accent and together

parents, she'd never understand how I grew up, how the other half lives.

My wife's name is Denise. She's a nursery school teacher. She's pretty but just to me. She's too plain and wholesome to be a real turn on. She always wears knee-length A-line skirts. On a brief snit of trying to better myself, I'd meet her at a GED program. She was my tutor. She's always been kind to me and never called me stupid.

When Denise first met my father, she commented "Oh, what a cute little man."

Granted, he had shrunk.

And our little 5 year old Dana, she took a likening to my father. Letting my father pinch her on the cheek and pat her head without her screaming. Dana usually ran from strangers. This was very strange.

As for my reaction, I showed my father to the smallest room in the house and told him to only come out for food and water.

He didn't have the balls to defy me so I was fortunate enough not to have to endure his ruddy mug all through supper. Still, I grew sullen just knowing that he was in the same house,

fixing himself a little snack plate from my fridge. Using my toilet sleeping in the bed and bedding I provided. What did he think this is some fucking fairytale?

I stopped messing around with my wife.

I started waking up at four in the morning, tapped out only to spend the remainder of the day yawning.

Nothing meant shit to me.

My father had been in country for a month; an enemy with the same facial features and the same last name as myself.

Michelle hounded me, tenderly, rustling her long dark lashes against my cheek. "Johnny, what's the matter, Johnny?"

There was a voice trapped inside my throat. I never answered.

One evening, I knocked off work early. It was about 6:30 p.m. when I came in. Dana was sitting on my father's lap, resting her head on his once solid chest. She was showing him pictures she had drawn in her coloring book and Dana had small eyeballs and whenever she was amused, her eyes would disappear in the fold and she was laughing and her eyes had disappeared and I was like now wait one Goddamn minute.

Did I tell you to stay in your room ice cream that my father daddy you didn't tell me that Dana spoke up mistakenly thinking that I was angry with her.

Michelle came from the kitchen looking be welder

You better step off Grandpa I told him then never the coloring book from their hands and threw it against the wall.

"I knew I should have left you fucking and out in the cold," I told him.

"Johnny," Michelle cried "What's come over you?"

"Shut up, woman," I told her. I went up closer to my father. "All you need is a fucking rocking chair and a porch and some freakin' frakin' Country Time lemonade and you'd be grandfather of the year." I yelled and yanked Dana office lap and through or on the floor.

Dana began to cry so I bare knuckle hit her across the mouth.

"Johnny, why are you acting like this?" Michelle ran over to Dana.

You lousy son-of-a-bitch, I want you out of this house," I said to my father.

Dana's started crying louder so I hit her again. I grabbed her up by the collar answers shaking her like crazy saying, "You want to live with him or you want to live with me. You want to live with him you want to live with him. Hell, you don't even know him. He's the mean one. How could you go on trusting him? How could you go on believing him. He's nothing to you."

Michelle was struggling with me pleading with me to please, please leave Dana now alone.

I wasn't listening. I didn't stop beating my child till I got tired and by that time dang it was bruised black and blue.

My father rose's feet. He began to speak. His voice sounded almost soothing and warm though worn as a well-trampled carpet. All those boozefull years it really gravel his voice. "You act like it was all yesterday. It wasn't.

"Get out of my Goddamned house."

"I left you standing I left you with something boy you don't want me to have nothing."

"Get the Hell out of my house."

"Your blood is my blood. Everything you have comes from me." He walked over to the staircase and began the path to his

room. He stopped on the fourth step and repeated "I left you standing." He shook his head and walked on.

Michelle took Dana to the bathroom to get her wounds cleaned up and I heard my father moving around in the room I had set up for him. It sounded as if he was packing.

As I sat alone in the room hearing voices of my daughters and wife's cries, not wanting to console or help: I thought, why should I feel sorry for them? I don't even feel sorry for myself. I saw it but could give no larger emotion. It was the first time I had hit my daughter or my wife. It was just the worst. So far.

I sighed and sighed again. I sighed the night away and popped open some liquor cans and smoked Marlboros, two at a time. All I did is wonder, does it fall from the sky like rain, this anger?

The First of 1000 Kisses

Every time it rained, his mother did her best to keep him dry. Of course, she couldn't be sensible about it. They were too poor for the extravagances of an umbrella. Instead, not use her palms. She placed them above his towhead as they made their way through the soggy streets. And she hung some silly

little song for him to keep his mind off his water-logged socks. Every time he looked up at her, she was smiling down at him. And, he would swear he was under the sun.

When they got close to the grocer's or the baker's or the fruit stand or wherever their destination was, she would grab hold of his hand lightly and they would sprint down the road the rest of the way.

But Johanna had a poor gait, like a wounded rhino. She used to splash Putzi at every puddle.

By the time they arrived at their destination, Putzi was more soaked than his mom was. Wet, but he knew she loved him.

His father passed on a few months before Putzi was born. He was a soldier. Very tall. Very handsome. Picture a man 6'2" , straight jawed, commanding presence.

Johanna used to tell Putzi, "you only have one love in your life. Everyone else is just company." Though she never wed her tall, gallant soldier; he was the one.

Everyone else in her life was just parsley. Useless. Needless. Asides.

Another thing, it took Putzi a while to figure out that his mother was a thief. Up until then Putzi didn't know that people

were supposed to come to stores with money and actually purchase things. Oh, once in a while he'd gander some old, crooked over biddies doling out change from their purses but ftse just figured his mom was special. His mom was too pretty to pay in money that is. She was special, special to him.

And then it hit him that it was just too peculiar, that his Mom was the only person he'd ever seen shove edibles down her blouse and maybe that wasn't necessarily so special.

Once he did realize that it was of no consequence. He was six and nonetheless felt safe under her palm.

Johanna would go into the store and steal bread and cheese and grapes and bottles of wine for their picnics. She wore baggy clothes for concealment. She had silky, buttery hair so really so rarely did the owners notice what she was doing with her hands.

That day she was wearing a blue dress and Putzi knew they'd have staked that night.

Mother was very good at this game. Nevertheless , every once in a while she got nipped, a spy. When caught she broke into Tears On Cue. Putzi knew it by heart. Her delicate lady tight hands would start to tremble covering her lipstick up lips and cry out in an undulating voice : this I don't have to eat

for me this food is not for me just like that she do itsy
sewing words and swaying her head I don't have to eat

Right there is where she just you're madly to Putzi. All he
had to do is give the world that day one expression, and Johanna
would take it from there.

"My Putzi. My only son. My only child. Oh, have mercy kind
sir have mercy. Putzi is on the brink of starvation. Oh,
blessed kind sir have mercy. Mercy! Show Mercy sir blessed
blessed sir I beseech you were the name of God," she took a gulp
of breath and continued, "Forgive me. I was hunger driven.
Exhausted. sick sick of being worried about my boy. I was in
fear for him because you see it's okay that I only eat once
every other week, but my son.

Meanwhile, Putzi was about as bacon faced as a kid could
come yet Johanna overcame this bathroom sheer acting.

"I can't allow my son to waste away." She wept maudlinly.

They bought the illusion by this time usually but on the
rare occasion when she needed just a bit extra she fainted from
the passion of her please. Signed, sealed, delivered. Not a dry
eye in the crowd.

The store owner would rush and get the lady some cold
water. Not tap: cold water. And the store owner would feel so

sorry for her and Putzi away with all the groceries they could carry and a gift certificate on top of that on top of it.

This is what motherhood was about. Womanhood to Putzi was a beautiful abberation that lied. Johanna had a laughing, a beautiful face -- especially when she was lying. Living on the border city, she knew both languages and how to lie in each one of them. But this was a living -- it was a picnic, spread out with stolen food.

For Putzi, these were things to live for: to rest his chowder head on the apex of his mother's massive breast. They both figured that nothing could touch them. They could continue forever like this or at least until they grow so fast that their clothing pinch them. Oh, he'd have to go to school one day and perhaps she might Mary there were all those shopkeepers offered up with the cold water and gift certificate yet there could be no real interference, just company.

The following week after we broke out. Johanna explained to see that he need not worry even during your time there will always be somewhere to get it easy.

He nodded his head was not so much listening as he was swallowing. Eating stolen rolls with stolen chocolate sprinkles... sipping the sweetness of underage wine.

How happy she was to have him. He didn't mind it when she saw him like a rubber toy. The war didn't seem to scare him.

They moved to the capital city where things were still largely untouched. Things were still plentiful and available for nabbing.

It was business as usual until once when Johanna was slipping cold cuts into the fixed lining of her willing coat and the rebels came in anticipatory: dressed in black. Dutifully, orderly and straightforwardly, they shot everything tall.

Along with the others, Johanna drops to the floor, not breathing, bleeding.

A single bullet had efficiently penetrated her skull killing her. Yet ... Was it possible?

Impossible.

His mother's breast still carries milk. Remember all those screenplays she wrote. All the acting she did. Those lines she recited for their picnic food.

Every trick, and Reaper version. It all worked before and even if it didn't send then since when was shoplifting a capital crime. In Islamic countries, they cut off your hand for

stealing. Putzi wished they had taken pity on his mother and just stumped her. He still has her, then.

The people who weren't supposed to matter had changed it all.

Parsley had put Putzi in an orphanage and he was understandably difficult. Bitter. Violent to the other children. Even worse he remained mute for days on end. The only time he was human was when it rained. A raindrop was like the first of a thousand kisses. Strange dance steps measured on the muddy road.

His mother's sloppy walk... Four weeks, then two months now two years dead.

Putzi's lips would crinkle into a smile as his dark gray eyes looked out beyond a lusterless guy to a hacienda : rain beautiful rain on a lemony afternoon.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *"Rain" was written as an experiment. It is much too short to properly tell the story of the erupting violence (but I have the feeling no amount of words could truly capture what needs to be said). "The First of 1000 Kisses" is also a summary of sorts; I think these characters also deserve more time but both stories benefit deeply from their snapshot-like presentation. Both stories leave you wanting, no, needing more.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: A Whittenberg is a Philadelphia native who has a global perspective. If she wasn't an author she'd be a private detective or a jazz singer. She loves reading about history and true crime. Her other novels include *Sweet Thang, Hollywood and Maine, Life is Fine, Tutored* and *The Sane Asylum*.

Eyes Wide OPEN

By Emily Schooley

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest Editor BRAD GARBER writes:

“Eyes Wide Open,” by Emily Schooley, is a futuristic love story. What? She opened the door? Why? Is this a new beginning? Is this murder, or is it love? So many questions to be answered by the next movie sequel.... This is a fun brain twister. Ok, she is a diplomat who returns to Earth after a successful peace negotiation with another denizen of the universe called, “The Others.” She fell in love with someone she should not have fallen in love with. “[P]erhaps we had been made from atoms of the same dying star, and our physical bodies carried that memory even when our minds could not recall the shared lifetimes that came before.” The relationship threatened something. The peace treaty? Her relationship with her own government? The mechanism of her heart? There is much intrigue here. It is a fun read and, at the end of it all, she “closed her eyes, and opened the door.” Perhaps, that was not really the end of it all. – Brad G. Garber (Spacing and font size is author’s own).

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

Even with my neurotransmitters on - I had been too tired to manually shut them off before the surges were pushed - I felt nothing but hollow inside. I felt the dopamine flood in, yes, but just like how our ancestors stopped finding coffee useful; the hormones did nothing to boost my mood. How could I be happy now, without you beside me?

Eyes Wide Open

I closed my eyes and opened the door.

I stepped out into Earth's atmosphere, my lungs quickly readjusting to the non-recycled air. Somehow, it tasted hollow despite the success of the mission. Cheers of joy surrounded me: my shuttle landing had been flawless, the peace treaties had been signed, war with the Others was no longer on the horizon. All because of us, they said. Our bravery. Our flawless teamwork, our quick thinking. Our synchronicity; that perhaps we had been made from atoms of the same dying star, and our physical bodies carried that memory even when our minds could not recall the shared lifetimes that came before. There was no other logical explanation for how we could have synced our energies so fast, coming together less than a year ago as perfect strangers.

--

It has been a day since your last transmission and now I am alone without you here.

They wanted sound-bites, of course, to immediately transmit to everyone's subdermal receivers. On the landing pad, microphones were shoved in my face before my eyes could even adjust to the sunlight. I gave them the answers we practised as they swarmed like ants around me. Finally, they returned to their hives, satisfied and gorged on information.

--

It has been a day and a half since your last transmission, and I wonder if it was all just a fever-dream caused by prolonged isolation. That would almost make more sense, wouldn't it?

After the press conference, I stole a few moments for myself in my office. They had kept it for me and everything was exactly as I had left it but the room now seemed foreign and hostile and far too cluttered after spending a month living in the pristine precision of the orbiting craft. I gathered what I needed to for the trip home and locked the door behind me.

--

It has been two days since your last transmission and I feel completely adrift in my isolation.

The night I returned, the Leaders had ordered bonus dopamine surges for everyone to enhance the experience of the sound-bites. Presumably, they wanted everyone to feel what they imagined I was feeling. Even with my neurotransmitters on - I had been too tired to manually shut them off before the surges were pushed - I felt nothing but hollow inside. I felt the dopamine flood in, yes, but just like how our ancestors stopped finding coffee useful; the hormones did nothing to boost my mood. How could I be happy now, without you beside me?

--

It has been five days since your last transmission and they do not suspect a thing.

If nothing else, all of my training had prepared me for what was now expected of me. There were grand dinners I was forced to attend, a friendly smile to be worn at all times. I got through them while making conversation and didn't even need to use the muscular enhancements in my cheeks. Radiant, glowing, charming, a natural diplomat. Those were the words that flowed in my wake. If the Leaders suspected anything otherwise, they were too polite to say. Nobody showed up to haul me away for reconditioning, so I think I am safe now, at least from that. At a couple of the functions, some of the Others even made an appearance as a show of unity. Holographs were taken and broadcast into every home to celebrate and mark this singular point in history. Though I heard rumours through some of the backchannels that our synthesizers had trouble replicating the molecular structure of their banquet foods. I wonder if that would be cause enough for war, after all.

--

I am tired now. It has been a week since your last transmission.

My neural pathways are rebelling despite my failed attempts to reprogram them manually. This is taking all my effort. More and more, anything else I attempt to focus on is replaced by visions of your face when it rested inches from mine. I can only recall the slope of your closed eyelids, the angle of your cheek, the fine lines across your forehead and in the corners of your eyes. In those moments we spent curled together, I had felt as if your face would be the last thing I saw though

I was much too afraid to tell you that aloud.

--

My body is failing me. It has been nine days since your last transmission and I don't know how much longer I can endure this.

The Leaders have ordered me placed under observation and so I float alone in this transparent tank as the world blurs around me. Everything organic in me is rejecting all of the upgrades that I have spent years collecting. This body was supposed to become a thing of mastery, a thing of beauty, and instead it has become ugly and useless. I cannot recall, cannot feel anything now other than the phantom sensation of your heat radiating alongside my own. The gentle pressure that came with the weight of your arms anchoring me in place on your chest. My receivers have shut themselves off, and my eardrums echo with only the ghost of that soft voice you used when we were alone together, the way you bent your words so that only so that I would hear. You will haunt me until I die.

What they do not deserve to know - or perhaps what I do not want to burden them with - is the repercussion of what happens when two of us sync so closely, the way that we did. Eventually dying stars all must collapse inward on themselves. Sooner or later it will happen to every pairing though there is no guarantee as to when. Some lucky few might get years together, but not us.

I am still not sure which one of us moved first when we felt that shift - whether you chose to sacrifice yourself for my sake or whether I was truly selfish until the end.

In mere moments we went from sharing a private universe while we lay entwined to that awful barrier stretching between us for the last time. Me, safe in the orbiting craft, and you, as stoic as ever, as you looked away from my eyes, on the wrong side of the airlock. At least your death would come relatively quickly in the endless black vacuum of space.

So, I closed my eyes and opened the door.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

1/11/2019 – the seeds of this story were first planted, in a quiet hotel room in Tokyo.

The Japanese have a particular expression when it comes to love and soulmates – that two people who are destined to be together are “connected by the red thread of fate.”

Personally, I find the idea of soulmates equally comforting and cruel, regardless of the nature of the relationship: sexual, romantic, platonic, or something else entirely. The idea of being perpetually bound to another person often feels more like an obligation than a balm against loneliness; it makes my skin itch and it makes me want to run far away from anything that might shackle me to a particular person, place, or time.

Even without meaning to, we humans are often so selfish and self-interested. As much as we want to believe that we are ‘advanced’ and/or ‘civilized’ ... ultimately, we are still incredibly driven by our lizard brains. We fight, fuck, freeze, or fawn when confronted with chaos (or perhaps a combination thereof). Honestly, I don’t think we will ever fully outgrow those base impulses no matter how far we evolve as a species; as long as there is organic brain tissue, we will be somehow tethered to our ancestors’ framework for navigating the world.

We reach for the stars, but simultaneously, our instincts want to keep us safe and small. Brains are so funny like that.

Of course we want to become ‘better’ ... but we are still finding our way to what, precisely, that means, both individually and as a now-global society. Consider Eyes Open mulch for the future. And yet... there are a small handful of people that I would absolutely, unselfishly drive hundreds of kilometers for. Even at the last minute, or in the middle of the night. And for nothing more than to experience the weight of my name in their mouth, or to know that my hand in theirs made their day a little more bearable.

Ultimately, this story is for C- and G-, and for K-: anata dake; for you three, the k word; the unspeakable one that stretches beyond a single lifetime.

And also, this story is partially inspired by P.W., who writes the precise hard sci-fi that I always want to read. Thanks for remaining a peculiar sort of touchstone, between our shared interest in cephalopods, feral cats, and challenging lived narratives. (No dick jokes this time, though.)

AUTHOR'S BIO: Emily Schooley is a feral cat in a human body who tells stories for rebels and outcasts, using whatever medium she can get her claws into. Several of her nine lives are spent as an actor and emerging filmmaker, creating work for stages and screens of all sizes. To help support her work, join her over on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/EmilySchooley>

EDITOR'S BIO: Brad has degrees in biology, chemistry and law. He writes, paints, draws, photographs, hunts for mushrooms and snakes, and runs around naked in the Great Northwest. Since 1991, he has published poetry, essays and weird stuff in such publications as Edge Literary Journal, Pure Slush, Front Range Review, Tulip Tree Publishing, Sugar Mule, Third Wednesday, Barrow Street, Black Fox Literary Magazine, Barzakh Magazine, Ginosko Journal, Junto Magazine, Slab, Panoplyzine, Split Rock Review, Smoky Blue Literary Magazine, The Offbeat and other quality publications. 2011, 2013 & 2018 Pushcart Prize nominee. His story **Journal to Mars** was published in Issue 5.

TROJAN PILLS: *The Miss Worcester* and Full

Metal Jacket o o o

By Matthew DuBe

WHY WE LIKE THEM: *In an email along with his submission the author wrote that these short fictions “are...in this form I’m calling Trojan pills because each one is a narrative with a second narrative stuck in it’s gut.’ Both the voice and a certain kink in these two literary collages could sit happily on the shelf next to Douglas Coupland’s Life After God. We like the slip and slide of past and present and the kool prose that nods politely to retro. Once more proof that good things come in small packages.(Spacing and font size are author’s own.)*

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

The summer I worked strapping boxes at the Big and Tall clothing warehouse, I worked to hold two contradictory ideas in my head like a novelist. The first was that Mitch, who worked across the line from me, had seen some shit in Vietnam and the Big and Tall warehouse was a place of refuge, the one place where he could still function. The other was that he was famous Detroit rocker Iggy Pop, slumming for some reason, sporting a perfect Jon Rambo mullet and sealing boxes of giant pants and shirts for art.

The Miss Worcester

Christmas break of my sophomore year at college, I was still pulling myself from Worcester like a mussel from a shell. I spent my last night at home out at a rock club, and then took the subway back to my brother’s couch. The next morning, I boarded a Greyhound bus back to school and a woman my age asked to sit beside me. Of course, I said. It didn’t take long to learn we’d both been at the show the night before. She had a plan, I’m sure, to flirt with me till I bought her dinner somewhere along the way, but I was more interested in her stories than her body, her brown hair and eyes. I bought her dinner at my stop in Syracuse, where she had a fifty minute wait till the bus carried her further west, and then we said goodbye. . . . There’s a neighborhood in Worcester called Little Worcester, the way you’ll find Little Saigon in Toronto or Little Italy in Tucson. The neighborhood was planned as a compassionate response to gentrification and initially open to the city’s senior-most residents. Here, the city council promised, residents could live out the rest of their days amidst clapboard three deckers with fitful hot water and cracked sidewalks, non-existent wifi and blue laws in place till 2pm on Sundays. Over time, those

residents died off or were driven out, replaced by those who'd left Worcester in their twenties and thirties, only to return later. They found Little Worcester and stayed, sometimes only for the weekend in the neighborhood's short-term rentals. More and more of them made it their full-time residence. Now, it's the most expensive neighborhood in the city to live in, though services are still substandard. Residents insist that's part of the charm. . . . Sophomore year over, I was back home in Worcester hunting for ways to spend my time anywhere else. My best friend that summer and I drove up to Boston to see a show but got there too early; we watched the bands loading in their gear, milling with the friends they only saw on this leg of the tour; the headliners had been local but a half-decade before had moved, first to NYC and then the West Coast. I found myself looking around for the brown haired girl who they knew, or rather, who'd know them, through friends of friends. The show started, the opener a band we'd seen earlier that summer in Worcester, and then the headliners, gloriously loud, the loudest in the world, it was said, so loud I could pretend I was no place in the world. And then, after the show, the crowds clumped and spread like surf and there she was, the brown haired girl, turned up again, a lucky penny, some pearl dislodged from the ocean's bottom by loud music and me still needing an oyster knife.

Full Metal Jacket

Everyone shopped at the Army-Navy Surplus Store on Main South, across the street from St Peter's, where priests said mass in Vietnamese. The neighborhood was in transition; plywood sheets protected renovations to buildings on the north and barred entry to the buildings on the south. Inside the store was brightly lit, row after row of racks lined up the long way, like any other discount retailer except for all the drab olive. Jackets came in different styles: structured ones with crisp seams and epaulets on the shoulders. Others had badges and detailing. Some had names stitched into the collar, over a breast pocket. Mine was loose and baggy, floppy collared and wide of sleeve, with buttons at the cuff that didn't do anything (someone later told me you could button your gloves to them, so you wouldn't lose them in the field). There was a drawstring around the waist inside the jacket that ended in a toggle you'd secure to a button on the righthand side. If you pulled it tight, it gave the jacket's silhouette its only definition, a gather at the waist. Our jackets made us aggressively unremarkable. Our jackets were a kind of armor. They were a kind of camouflage. . . . The summer I worked strapping boxes at the Big and Tall clothing warehouse, I worked to hold two contradictory ideas in my head like a novelist. The first was that Mitch, who worked across the line from me, had seen some shit in Vietnam and the Big and Tall warehouse was a place of refuge, the one place where he could still function. The other was that he was famous Detroit rocker Iggy Pop, slumming for some reason, sporting a perfect Jon Rambo mullet and sealing boxes of giant pants and shirts for art. He liked to talk about guns, about how the muzzle of the Russian-built AK-47 melted on full automatic, how if you tried to fire an M60 standing up, it'd knock you on your ass. He told me about the fireworks in Vietnam, how scary they were and better than anything you could buy in the states. Then the line would start a Ron Asheton guitar riff, and Mitch would shake out his curls like he was

running into the jungle. . . . By the time the Gulf War started, no one wanted to look like a walking advertisement for US militarism. I spent a Friday night in my college dorm kitchen boiling my jacket to dye it. Somehow, I talked a giant stew pot out of the dining hall ladies and filled it with water and red RIT dye and set it on a communal stove. It took hours, and every now and then, a woman who lived in the dorms would wander in and ask, what are you cooking? None of them seemed to get it. Six months later, I'd hung up the jacket, replacing it with a tailored aubergine Australian prison number.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Both stories here are from a series I'm working on, all made up of stories from when I was in high school. I've never written much about that time in my life because the stories feel sentimental to me. But in this project, I'm collaging them with other narratives, which to me cuts some of the sweetness and allows for a more complicated response. At least I hope it does.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: My stories have appeared in Construction, Ilanot Review, Front Porch, and elsewhere. I teach creative writing and American lit at a small mid-Missouri university, and I read submissions for the online lit mag Craft.

Robert Duncan

By Kallan Dana

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A mystery story but in the original sense of the word—mysterium—meaning ‘something hidden’. This is because we never learn the truth about the titular and seminal character Robert Duncan who imposes himself at a night out family dinner. So it’s like we’re sitting in, a stranger, politely listening to everything yet getting more and more drawn into the intrigue unfolding before us. The ‘enigma’ surrounding Duncan is played against a slightly raucous plentitude of dysfunctional family foibles and indiscretions that end up being both funny and quietly sad. This is traditional storytelling and we were impressed by the author’s mastery of craft: pitch perfect voice, vivid characterizations and nimble prose. Fiction that starts out small and expands into something much, much more. (Spacing and format are author’s own.)*

QUALITY QUOTABLE(S) (for the love of language):

I had tried to badger my parents about why she’d left without a goodbye, but Dad just turned quiet and Mom got all snippy and scolding, saying that I was ungrateful and demanding and didn’t I realize that some children worked in sweatshops twenty-four hours a day? And then she said that Stacey had moved to New York City and wouldn’t be coming back.

Alice had grown so boring. I had vague memories of the youthful Alice of my earlier childhood, the old fun Alice. I don’t know if I would have noticed her decay had Mom not pointed it out to me over time with dig after dig, her comments about Alice’s tummy expansion and drooping butt cheeks. Like hypnosis, they snuggled into my brain until I could no longer see Alice but for her increasing proximity with the ground as her fat sunk her closer and closer to death.

Robert Duncan

Robert Duncan insisted we go to Frida Holla! for lunch because he wanted to get his picture on the wall. He'd seen Frida Holla! on TV when it was featured in an episode of *Man Vs. Food*. Now he needed to see the place in person.

Frida Holla! is a Tex-Mex casual-dining restaurant in the center of Hillsdale, a suburban shopping district seven miles out from downtown Portland. The menu is famous for its infamously spicy Great Balls of Fire, five deep-fried habanero cheese fritters with mystery green sauce on the side. If you eat all five balls, you get your picture taken and placed permanently on the "Hall of Flame." Most people order them for the gimmick, split one with a friend, and spend the rest of the meal sweating, shoveling rice and sangria down their throats.

It was big news that Robert Duncan was visiting because it was the first time he'd come to Portland since he'd started online-dating Alice two months ago. Alice was my mother's cousin and Robert had known them both back in California, where he still lived. In the week leading up to his visit, Mom and Dad grew very interested in discussing him. Though they had never mentioned him before, they began whispering his name all the time. When I woke up from nightmares and opened my window to see if they were home yet, I could hear conversation from the porch, Mom and Dad's voices swirling with the voices of strangers and muffled music from our old speakers. Robert Duncan, Robert Duncan, Robert Duncan. Sometimes Dad would say his name quiet and low and the rumbling of conversation would evaporate. I'd hear only breathing

and bodies shuffling until the silence ended with Dad erupting in cackles, Mom and all the strangers following his laughter like hyenas.

When I'd asked Dad who exactly Robert Duncan was, he told me Robert Duncan was Alice and Mom's next-door neighbor growing up, but when I asked Mom the same question, she'd said that he was Grandpa's business partner, and then at dinner when I'd asked a third time, Mom said, "no, he was a year above us at our private high school in Beverly Hills," and then Dad said, "honey, you're losing your mind, Robert Duncan was your brother's best man," and then Mom had said "babe, you drink too much and its making you lose your memory. Robert Duncan was a local newscaster," and then they both lost track of the conversation and started bickering about weapons of mass destruction.

That Saturday Pip and I got to go to Frida Holla! early because Dad was picking up our Christmas tree and Mom was taking her third bath of the day. Alice passed us both Pez containers from the front seat when we got inside the rental car. Pip's was Bugs Bunny and mine was a movie director named Roman Polanski. I didn't know who he was but Alice told me my mother was going to find it hilarious.

Frida Holla! had a big blow-up Santa cactus in front of their entrance and a piñata shaped like a roasted and stuffed pig. "Do you think when you break it open, intestine-shaped candies fall out?" Robert Duncan nudged me, winking.

The hostess smiled widely as we walked through the doors. "Hola mis amigos! And hello chico and chica!" She waved at me and Pip. Her big boobs stretched her *Fiesta* t-shirt in opposite directions. She led us through the restaurant into the outdoor section, a clear plastic tent filled with big circular tables. In the corner, underneath a large bright green and red "FELIZ

NAVIDAD” sign, were three squat, mustached and sombreroed men: a trumpeter, an accordionist, and a guitarist.

The hostess seated us at a round table and gave me and Pip color-in-the-lines cartoons of Santa Claus and an old sour cream container filled with stubby, unwrapped crayons. Robert Duncan ordered four piña coladas. “Make half of ‘em *virgin* for the *virgins*,” he said. She erupted in laughter, jiggling her *Fiesta* t-shirt boobs.

“*Rapido!*” Robert Duncan shouted at her butt as she hurried back inside. The mariachi band started playing “Little Drummer Boy.”

“Rum pum pum pum, rum pum pum pum,” Robert Duncan sang along. “Keep it up, boys!”

A waitress showed up with our piña coladas. “Feliz Navidad, folks! I have—” She cut herself off while setting down the drinks and shot her eyes back and forth between Pip and me nervously. “Well! Hello, you two!” It took me a moment to recognize her. She was our old babysitter, Stacey.

After three years of watching us, Stacey had abruptly stopped coming to our house about a year ago, right before my tenth birthday. I had been very sad. Stacey said that when I turned ten she was going to pierce my ears but because she’d left I had to go to the mall instead. Stacey was beautiful, like Britney Spears or how the First Lady used to look. Stacey wasn’t actually a babysitter full time—she was an actress. One time, Dad and I had even gone to see her in a musical that she was in, all the way out in Gresham. The musical was *Oliver!* and she sang the prettiest song in the show. Dad had told me it was a surprise that we were going to see the musical—so not to tell Stacey—and also that it was a secret—so not to tell Mom. He bought us a conveyor-belt sushi dinner in exchange for my word and said that he’d decided to take me and

not Pip because he knew I could keep quiet and also that I would be on my best behavior at the play. He told me that it was going to be nice daddy-daughter time and it really was. The conveyor-belt sushi was delicious. We got to stack the plates up as we finished our rolls, and that was how they calculated the price, by counting how many plates you had stacked. And Dad had let me drink two Shirley Temples and eat fried ice cream after, and during the musical, the two of us would make eye contact and squeeze each other's hands like we were in on a private joke whenever Stacey came onstage. Stacey was so happy when we saw her after the show. People in the lobby kept coming up to her to squeeze her shoulder and tell her how talented she was and Dad and I gave her a bouquet of red roses and a card that he had written. He didn't let me read the card but whatever it said was amazing because Stacey opened it up, started crying, and kneeled down to me to tell me that my father was a good man.

I had tried to badger my parents about why she'd left without a goodbye, but Dad just turned quiet and Mom got all snippy and scolding, saying that I was ungrateful and demanding and didn't I realize that some children worked in sweatshops twenty-four hours a day? And then she said that Stacey had moved to New York City and wouldn't be coming back.

But there Stacey was at Frida Holla! She had cut her pretty blonde hair and died it ugly green.

I got so sad seeing her. She had been five minutes away from our house this whole time, driving on the same roads we drove on, getting gas from the same gas station, shopping at the same grocery store, walking on the same sidewalks as me but never saying so, either just missing me every day or intentionally hiding when she saw me, pretending to be just any other stranger.

“STACEY!” Pip screamed, reaching out to her dumbly and knocking over the sour cream container of crayons. A few tumbled off the table and Stacey bent down to pick up the scattered remains.

She put the crayons back and smiled. “Hi, Pip—high Zelda! What a surprise!” She changed her facial expression to look at Robert Duncan and Alice. “I’m their old babysitter.”

I felt a guilty constriction in my throat and avoided her eyes.

She pulled out a tiny white notepad from the back pocket of her jeans and held it in her shaky hand. “Our special today is a deep-fried beef—”

“We’re gonna get one order of the *As Seen on TV* special!” Robert Duncan said.

“One Great Balls of Fire it is!” Stacey said, hurrying back indoors. Alice squinted at her butt and told us that she was very pretty for a babysitter.

Just a minute later Mom and Dad came rushing through the plastic doorway to our table.

“Hi, Robert!” Mom kissed him on the cheek and Dad fist-bumped him as they dropped into their seats, both looking flushed. “Did we order drinks already? I could use a drink.”

“You have an old friend here,” Robert Duncan said to Mom.

Stacey peeked her head from the inside of Frida Holla! Mom flicked her arm like she’d been electrocuted, knocking three water glasses over. The water cascaded over the table and into my lap. I squirmed in my seat and got up to waddle to the bathroom.

“Where are you going?” Mom said sharply.

“Bathroom. The water spill got me.”

“No,” Mom said, putting a hand on my shoulder to lower me to the ground. “I’m going to the bathroom now. You stay put.”

“I’ll go with you!”

“No. We use different bathrooms.”

“What?”

“Just sit down, Zelda.”

“Why can’t I come with you?”

“Sit down, Zelda.”

“But I’m all wet.”

“Use a napkin.”

“I already have my napkin in my lap. I’m still wet.”

“Take this.”

I put her dry paper napkin on top of my wet paper napkin and both napkins got wetter.

“Mom—” I pleaded.

“Christ, Zelda.”

“I want to go dry my pants off with the hand dryer in the bathroom.”

Mom stood up and pushed me as I tried to move with her, so I stayed sitting in my wet lap.

Robert Duncan lowered his glasses and wiggled his eyebrows at Dad. “*Draaaaamaaa!*”

Alice laughed.

“When we got here, they gave me a hard time for being barefoot,” Dad said.

“That’s because you’re not supposed to be barefoot in a restaurant,” I said.

Now Robert Duncan wiggled his eyebrows at me. “Looks like we have a smartass on our hands.”

“I’m not a smartass.”

Mom came back to the table, shimmying past the mariachi band and spritzing her custom-made skin spray onto her face, green goo in a bottle with her name in a label stuck-on to the front.

Mom rubbed the goo-spray into her temples. “What are we getting? Guac? Can we get guac?”

“One *Great Balls of Fire* ON ITS WAY,” Robert Duncan belted.

“Oh, Jesus Christ I can’t eat that. My stomach.” Mom said.

There were issues plaguing my mother that seemed to foreshadow my future. The bodily frustrations: intestinal and digestive nuisances, migraines, cellulite and stretch marks, limp curls and dandruff, dead skin on the bottom of her feet that needed to be scraped off with a medieval metal contraption she used in the bath.

“I don’t want *you* to eat it. That dish has got *Robert Duncan* written all over it,” he said. “I’m getting on that wall.”

“Maybe I’ll go in on it with you, Robert,” Dad said.

“No, you will not,” Mom snapped. “Our toilet will be clogged for days.”

“Ew!” said Pip. Brat.

“It makes people really sick,” Mom warned Robert Duncan. “A friend of a friend went to the emergency room. Something about the way they fry it. I can just see my stomach trying to contort itself around the grease.”

“I’m doing it.” Robert Duncan banged his hands against his chest like Tarzan.

“Good luck with that mess tonight, Alice,” Dad adopted the same sinister voice as Robert Duncan. “I have a feeling the little dude may be out for the count.”

“*Robert.*” Mom said to Dad. I squirmed. Somehow I’d forgotten my father and Robert Duncan shared the same first name.

“It’ll all be fine,” Alice giggled. “My man knows how to *take care* of me.”

“Alice!” Mom said, accusatory and fun-loving.

“Look!” said Pip, showcasing his yellow, tan, and lime-green Santa Claus drawing.

Everyone oohed noncommittally.

A different waitress came back to our table. An acne-accessorized redheaded teenager.

“Hi folks,” she wheezed. “I’m Wendy and I’m going to be taking care of you for the rest of your meal. Here are those Great Balls of Fire you ordered.” She set them down in front of Robert Duncan. “If one person finishes all five of them plus the entirety of the special sauce, you get your picture up on the Hall of Flame.”

“Where’s Stacey?” asked Pip. Mom shushed him.

“Would we like to add some mains to our apps?” Pale and pock-marked Wendy said.

How I looked in my nightmares.

“Yes,” Mom said, pointing to the menu. “This Mexi-Burger. Is it possible to—”

The mariachi band started to play “Jingle Bells” at the same time as the rain began.

Through the transparent ceiling, we could see deep and dark puffy clouds. Mom yelled our orders over the noise. Wendy meandered back inside to get our food started.

“This is not persuading me on a relocation, babe.” Robert Duncan said to Alice, rolling a great ball of fire fritter between his thumb and index finger. “We don’t get so much bummer-rain in *Cali.*”

“It’s so tacky to call it Cali, Robert,” Mom said.

“I get it from your Dad, Romes,” he responded, shrugging good-naturedly.

I tried to place Robert Duncan next to Mom's father in my head. It was hard to merge them into the same scene. My grandpa was pink-faced, mustached, always suited, a living, mystical portal to an unidentifiable past. Mom worshipped him and in exchange he paid for everything. I did not know this while he was alive, only after he'd had his heart attack had Dad told me the truth about the funding of our schooling, our toys, our house, while Mom stayed bedridden with grief for a week. "I don't really make all that much money," Dad had confided in me one night when I had been welcomed onto the adults-only-porch.

"My father never called it Cali," Mom snapped.

"Maybe not to you, girlfriend," Robert Duncan said.

I pushed my neck upward and backward so that I could stare directly into the clouds and the water slamming onto the plastic above me. I love storms, though once I told Mom that and she reminded me that storms always mean that many people are stuck outside in the cold, soaking wet without a way to get warm and dry. Mom had a penchant for self-righteousness, a quality which Dad always dampened by reminding her of her trust fund and lack of student debt. Robert Duncan bit into the first fritter.

"Woo! That is a little spicy!"

His face had suddenly ballooned, mere seconds after swallowing. His glasses fogged up with sweat and he took them off to rub them into his t-shirt and jiggle his head back and forth. "Woo!" he yelped, pawing at his ears and his chest.

Wendy deposited our entrees and quickly slumped away again. I prayed for acne-less skin and un-greasy hair.

Robert Duncan chomped into his third great ball of fire, licking the green sauce off the corners of his mouth. “After a couple of bites, your mouth starts to tingle and then get numb.”

Alice interrupted to start the love story of her and Robert Duncan.

Alice had grown so boring. I had vague memories of the youthful Alice of my earlier childhood, the old fun Alice. I don’t know if I would have noticed her decay had Mom not pointed it out to me over time with dig after dig, her comments about Alice’s tummy expansion and drooping butt cheeks. Like hypnosis, they snuggled into my brain until I could no longer see Alice but for her increasing proximity with the ground as her fat sunk her closer and closer to death.

I was noticing fat all the time then. It seemed only a matter of time until something would lock inside me and I would no longer feel capable of eating cheese and ice cream. Stomachs stuck out to me more than faces, as did lumpiness underneath tight clothes, flesh excessively jutting out. I heard Mom whimpering at night, disrobed before her evening bath, or in the morning as she emerged from her morning bath and threw her clothes around, whining about her love handles and chafing thighs. I could not yet muster up this self-loathing urgency in myself. I still loved pizza, candy, hot cocoa, cake, donuts, nachos, hot dogs, but I knew that soon enough I too would regret allowing any calories to slide down my esophagus.

“There’s a hair in my quesadilla,” said Pip.

Someone grabbed my thigh under the table. I inhaled and tightened my butt cheeks. “Oops!” Robert Duncan chuckled, moving his hand. He wiped residual sweat off his forehead and looked at my mother. “Romy, what’s the plan gonna be when, uh, Barbara—”

“Bertha,” Mom corrected.

“When she gets older? Is she going to need to keep wearing diapers?” he finished his water and started drinking out of my glass. “Is she going to be sort of retarded—er, mentally-challenged like Alice’s boys?”

“Robert!” Alice squealed. “Hudson and Dusty aren’t retarded!”

“I’m just messing with you, sweetie,” said Robert Duncan. “But Romy, Rob—what’s the deal with the Bertha situation? Is she gonna get, uh, lobotomized?”

“You gonna finish your rice and beans, Z?” Dad asked me.

“Lil’ Zelda here gonna have to change her sis’s diapers forever?” Robert Duncan asked.

“Don’t be an ass, Robert,” slurred Mom.

Robert Duncan kept going, gesturing to Mom and Dad with his glass. “You think it’s a case of inbreeding?”

“What’s inbreeding?” asked Pip. Bother.

Robert Duncan kept going. “You two checked your birth certificates?”

Dad swallowed his drink. “RD, you’re one to talk.”

Mom put a hand against his chest and used her other hand to brush hair out of her face and give Robert Duncan one of her classic talking-tos. “It’s goddamn 2003, Robert. You can’t just go around dropping slurs and spreading rumors anymore. Talking about a lobotomy. Jesus.”

“What’s a lobotomy?” said Pip. Moron.

“I’ve known you since you were a little girl, Romy, come on,” Robert Duncan put a hand on my mother’s head paternally, like he was bestowing knowledge. “You have to be able to have fun with the embarrassing parts of life.”

Robert Duncan giggled and raised two fritter-clasping fingers to his mouth. Just before he took a bite, he winced like he'd been slapped. He gently laid the fritter back onto its plate, pushed his palm, hard, onto his abdomen, and scrunched up his forehead.

We all giggled together as he ran to the bathroom. I was grateful to have someone to rally against.

Mom and Dad stopped laughing to swing their heads toward Alice. She flinched like a bug caught under a jar.

Mom cackled darkly.

“What?” Alice said.

“You must know what I’m thinking.”

“I do not.”

“From when we were kids.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come on Alice, you know, I know, Rob knows.”

Alice’s ruddy face turned pale. She narrowed her eyes villainously. “You told Rob that shit, Romy?”

“He’s my husband! Why not!”

“That’s a nasty rumor.”

“Are we getting dessert?” said Pip.

“It’s an old story,” Mom assured Alice. “Everyone knows it. Someone was going to tell Rob at some point. He’s cool. He’s not such a stick-in-the-mud. He likes something a bit obscene. Rob’s a bit of a sicko himself.”

“It’s just a stupid lie from when we were kids,” Alice sniveled.

“I like him fine. So does Rob!” Mom went on. “We can handle scandal. We’re not puritans!”

“We’re glad you’re happy with the motherfucker!” Dad shouted, grabbing Alice’s shoulders. Alice shrieked and jolted in her chair like she’d been shocked. She burst into tears. Dad and Mom tried to invite her back into their joking, but she would no longer make eye contact with them. She hugged her arms around her chest. “Not funny, not funny, not funny,” she repeated again and again. Pip too began to cry. It was like he’d learned a new language from her.

I looked outside in time to watch a car swerve into the parking lot. Stacey ran out, swinging open her door and leaving the engine running. She dashed into the front door of Frida Holla! and seconds later burst through the plastic tent entrance and came charging to our table. I was the only person who even noticed her until she was on top of us, pointing a rain-soaked finger at my father. Her eyes were red and raw but when she spoke, her voice was so quiet we had to lean close to understand her. “You broke my heart. And you,” she angled her body towards Mom. “You turned your back on me. I am a person. I too have a heart. I too have a soul. I—”

The restaurant manager escorted her out and gave us our meal for free.

By the time Robert Duncan returned, sad Wendy had already removed the remaining Great Ball of Fire fritter and cleared our whole table.

“No picture up on the wall?” Robert Duncan said softly. We all shook our heads. He looked tired and lonely. “I’ll come back. Get my picture up next time.”

“Next time...” Alice looped her fingers through his.

“Well. Are we still going for another round tonight?” Robert Duncan asked as we reached the rental car. “Keep the party going?”

“Why not?” Mom said, her voice dead. “Zelda can babysit. Can’t you Zelda? Zelda can.” She didn’t look at me. “We’ll just drop the kids off and then we can meet you wherever.”

Mom, Dad, Pip, and I got into the same car.

We gave Pip a to-go churro that put him to sleep. I was thankful. I wanted an easy job tonight. I wanted to fall asleep before Mom and Dad got home. I didn’t feel like eavesdropping or being included anymore. Hopefully I would only need to change Bertha’s diaper once, if at all. Now that she was nine, the entire diaper-changing process was grosser and more cumbersome. And I had decades to go.

“Hey, Zelda,” Mom turned to me as we pulled out of the Frida Holla! parking lot. She leaned back from the passenger seat. “Thanks for babysitting.”

I shushed her to keep quiet for Pip. She bowed her head and lowered her voice. “See, look at what a good babysitter you are, Zelda. Very mature, right Rob? Dad’s being quiet because he feels emasculated, Zelda. He feels embarrassed to have had a melodramatic screaming match in front of everyone, all done by some teenybopper at a B-grade lunch joint of all places. It’s not how he wanted his life to turn out. Right Rob? I’m right, Zelda.”

We hit a red light and waited. Mom turned back to me again, giddy.

“The thing is, Zelda, Dad has nothing he needs to be so shameful about. Or, I mean, everyone’s got things to be shameful about, but your daddy’s are no worse than anyone else’s.”

Dad kept his eyes on the road. Mom turned back to look at me, smiling like the Cheshire Cat. “I have a story for you, Zelda. It’s about Robert Duncan. A family rumor. Everyone knew this about Robert back home, when I was growing up. I think my father told me but it could have been mommy too...hell, it could have been Alice, though she would never admit to that now. We all knew the story. We all repeated it. We churned it out. We reproduced it. Robert Duncan’s a bit of a freak, Zelda.”

Mom took the whole car ride home to tell the story. I hadn’t heard something like it before and it made me nauseous in a way I’d only felt once before in my life, the time I’d snuck into my parents’ room after a scary dream and seen them rustling beneath the sheets.

We pulled into our long driveway. We lived in a conspicuous wooden mansion on a dead-end. The house was dressed-up in cascades of Christmas lights, wreaths on all four of our front doors, blow-up reindeers. We paid other people to decorate the outside every year. I don’t know who did it; I never saw them. There were all kinds of people who did things for us and it was almost as though they didn’t exist. The house just changed from messy to tidied before my eyes every week, without even the scent of some other person infiltrating the house.

One day I’d been sick at home and I’d come downstairs from watching movies on the TV in my room to go pee. When I opened the bathroom door, I’d stumbled into a short lady on her knees, furiously scrubbing our toilet. I’d felt embarrassed and she’d felt embarrassed and I’d gone up to my room and held my pee until I heard her car drive away an hour later.

We had more than the house cleaner. There was a gardener, a landscaper, a woman who came to pick up our dog's shit in our yard. I avoided seeing any of them. We left our house so dirty for other people to clean.

Now I could feel Mom getting annoyed. "Oh, come on Zelda, don't put on your sullen face. We're all exhausted, it's not just you. I'm trying to let you in, Z. I'm trying to make you feel less worried about yourself. Everyone's got fucked up, pathetic little lives, and I want you to be able to have a sense of humor about it instead of just feeling sorry for yourself, like Alice does. Just remember that there's always someone worse off than you."

She handed me a clump of paper and money. "I want to hurry on to meet Robert and Alice. Can you apologize to Dolores for us and give her the cash? You already know the credit card info so you can just order whatever."

I unbuckled Pip from his booster seat and carried him inside compliantly. He was too tired to cry. I gave Dolores the money and she left immediately, trudging away down the gravel road in her boyfriend's pickup truck. Pip fell right asleep on the couch next to me. I could smell Bertha's dirty diaper but decided to leave it for my parents to change when they got home. I bought a movie and ordered pizza and prayed for a dreamless sleep.

I creep into my parents' bedroom, pushing the door open and stepping to their bed. I see the slithering again, the same convulsions I had seen years before, but I am not afraid this time, I know I can make it stop. I reach a hand out to their combined, blanketed form and push, calling their names. The two-bodied shape stops moving and I step onto the ledge of the bedframe to push myself up, but just as I lift my knee onto the mattress, two heads emerge from the comforter and they do not belong to my parents. It is Robert Duncan and an elderly, frail, emaciated

woman with his identical face. Their bodies are sweat-covered and entangled. They smile at me with their closed mouths but inexplicable wet sounds emanate from their bodies, coming from both nowhere and everywhere. Slurping, gnawing, licking noises. I try to step down from the bedframe to run back to my room, but they slink their four hands out and snatch me, sucking me close to them so that I cannot escape.

I've had that nightmare almost every night since. A few years ago, I saw a therapist who tried to help me sleep better, but nothing she suggested worked, and I eventually just stopped scheduling our appointments. I sometimes regret not having told her the story Mom shared with me about Robert Duncan. I know it may be the missing key to unlock "my troubles," but whenever I've tried to speak the story aloud to another, I get a feeling I can only describe as akin to personal disembowelment.

I became mean that day at Frida Holla! And in the years since, I have not been able to resist noticing the atrocities of other people's spirits. I came to the conclusion, that night, alone on my couch, the children I'd been left to watch beside me, that it was impossible to truly feel sad for anyone but yourself. I couldn't make sense of the day and the people I knew in any other terms but those.

And even now, sitting on a different couch at a different age in a different city in a different home with different children passed out beside me, I can hardly believe that anyone's suffering is more important than mine. I am lonely, but I can't imagine any other way to live my life.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *My most honest writing has come from remembering. I grew up in Portland, Oregon, and lived close to a restaurant with the same gimmick as Frida Holla. I got interested in revisiting this location and distorting foggy memories of adult conversation that I had witnessed with half-knowing eyes. My favorite short stories are those with both the familiar and the sinister, stories in which people say unsettling things within an uncanny atmosphere. I also am partial to a child narrator, and I wanted to try building my own.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Kallan Dana is a writer and performer originally from Portland, Oregon. She is an alumna of the National Theater Institute and of Skidmore College, where she studied English and Theater. She has worked under Sarah Hughes, Julia May Jonas, Sue Kessler, and Sunita Prasad and she is the 2020 intern for The JAM at New Georges. Favorite past credits include Julia May Jonas's *We Used to Wear Bonnets & Get High All the Time* (assistant director, Skidmore College), *The Five Lesbian Brothers' The Secretaries* (directed by Zoe Lesser), and *RashDash's Two Man Show* (directed by Erica Schnitzer). She has worked with Dixon Place, Permafrost Theatre Collective, and The Tank and written for the satire site, *Broadway Beat*. Her play, *Playdate*, was first developed in a commissioned workshop production (directed by Erica Schnitzer) at Dixon Place in September 2019. Her plays can be found on *New Play Exchange*.

The NATURE of the **BEAST**

By Tiffany H. White

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Stories narrated by animals usually come with a red flag so we were pleasantly surprised by this unsentimental, left of center 'tail' inspired by a real event. It's a witty fritto misto of pet-parable and four-legged satire written by a 57 year old author who just started writing—and if that isn't inspiration for wannabe scribes we don't know what is. The 'voice' in The Nature of the Beast is doggone perfect and White's sunny use of language is fresh, a little bit kinked and deliciously outsider. And all the Flea-Bitten Dog can say to that is 'Bow Wowzer!*

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

Cat stayed put, kneading Dog's tummy with kind paws, purring tittle tattle tales. "So. Fox. That gamey leg? Trapped in the poultry farm. *Caged.*" Her dramatic pause elicited a drowsy grr from Dog. Could have been a snore not a grr. Cat continued regardless. "So, Fox is caught red-pawed – and I mean blood red - with billions of panic-struck chickens clucking alarm and the Man is coming. He'll hunt Fox down, shoot Fox dead and turn Fox into chickenfeed. Or pies."

The Nature of the Beast

Dog could smell sausages. *Mine* thought Dog.

Tummy growling, he nosed the golden aroma trail as Cat slunk up like a thief in the night.

"Are you stalking me?" Dog asked. He sounded gruff.

"No." Cat lied. "Where you are going?"

"Nowhere." Dog said, trying not to think *My sausages. Not for you. Go away.*

"I'll come with." said Cat as she read his not-thinks.

“Why?”

“Curiosity” said Cat “It’s a thing that I have. So did Pandora.”

“It won’t kill you.” Dog said.

“It’s happened before.” Cat sighed. “So. We’re going nowhere?”

“It’s sausages if you must know.” Dog growled. Dog never lies. He doesn’t know how.

“Not nowhere then.” Cat mused “Shame. Never been there. But sausages seem like a better place.”

Murmuring gossip that might or might not be true Cat followed Dog and Dog followed his nose.

“So. Frog drowned.” Cat nonchalantly inspected her scimitar claws.

Dog was surprised. “Frog drowned? Frog? How is that even possible?”

“Ironic, right?” Cat smirked. “Scorpion drowned too. A real sting in the tale.

Talking of which “Dog wasn’t listening, Dog was tracking “Did you hear about Fox? “

“I here.” Fox slipped out of the redolent dark, all bright eyed bushy-tailed urbane gangsta, too clever for his own good or anyone else. “Throwin’ shade, sis?”

“No.” Cat lied. Lying is the default position for cats. Fox couldn’t be bothered to make it a thing.

“What’s cooking, peep?” Fox never asks a question unless he knows the answer. It perfumes the soft breeze of autumn dusk with siren scent promise of fleshy delight. Fox drooled slightly.

“It’s sausages” Dog sniffed. “Lamb Chops. Things on sticks. Chicken lumps”

“Gucci.” said Fox.

Fox followed Cat and Cat followed Dog and Dog followed his nose.

The trail led to the back garden of number 23 Shalimar Close, recently bought by Mr. and Mrs. Pettigrew.

The tormenting smell of burnt flesh twined with the uncomfortable chat of strangers in ritual sacrifice to the gods of social propriety. Mr. and Mrs. Pettigrew were hosting a neighborhood barbeque to decide their position in the local pecking order. It's a thing that people do.

The sausages were trapped.

"Got this" said Fox. "Clever shit's kind of my thing." Fox has a plan and it might just work.

Fox followed Dog and Dog followed Cat and Cat leaped into the crowded garden of number 23 Shalimar Close.

"Let loose the dogs of war!" Fox screamed and they did and it was havoc. The invaders had a wonderful time, the invaded not so much.

Barking furiously Dog veered after Cat as she screeched and scrambled up obstacle legs. Mr. and Mrs. Pettigrew watched in horror as coleslaw, humus and taramosalata launched an unholy trinity in the sky then fell like the wrath of many gods. Cat and Dog chased in ever decreasing circles, scattering hosts and guests in their wake.

Fox borrowed a handy carrier bag, stuffed it full of meaty goodness, hauled the loot out of the garden and slid under Mr. Pettigrew's Prius. Cat and Dog followed soon after on an adrenaline high and dived in.

“Killed it, peep.” Fox licked his chops clean as Dog wolfed down lamb and pig with a large chunk of raw cow. Cat tried one of the chicken lumps which was tofu and disappointing.

“Here.” Dog nudged over an alternative snack “It’s as good as you get. No shit, just offal and piggy leftovers.”

Cat batted the offering with a sideswipe paw and watched the sausage roll. *It’s alive* thought Cat in delight, delivering the frankenstein monstrosity a left hook *Prepare to meet thy doom!*

“What you do?” Dog lay on his back four paws in the air, very full up and feeling slightly sick.

“Playing with my food” said Cat “It’s a thing.”

Fox let the sleeping dog lie, winked at Cat, and limped after the fragrant allure of Vixen.

The sausage was dead. Cat left the corpse by the front door of number 23 Shalimar Close by way of thanks to the hosts then landed four-square on Dog’s pumpkin stomach.

“Hoof. Squashing. Ger’off.”

Cat stayed put, kneading Dog’s tummy with kind paws, purring tittle tattle tales. “So. Fox. That gamey leg? Trapped in the poultry farm. *Caged.*” Her dramatic pause elicited a drowsy grr from Dog. Could have been a snore not a grr. Cat continued regardless. “So, Fox is caught red-pawed – and I mean blood red - with billions of panic-struck chickens clucking alarm and the Man is coming. He’ll hunt Fox down, shoot Fox dead and turn Fox into chickenfeed. Or pies.”

Dog was snoring, but Cat was too caught up in her own romance to care. “Fox has a plan and it might just work. Fox rolls around a bit, plays possum and – no offence – breaks wind, The Man finds a dead thing: limp, chickenshit green and smelling of rot. Not much good for chicken or pies. The Man chucks the corpse out and Fox hobbles back home.” Dog yawned, slumped to one side, and deposited Cat in an ignominious heap. Cat curled up for a nap of her own.

Mr. and Mrs. Pettigrew stared at the garden. It’s devastated. They stared at each other. They’re devastated. Mr. and Mrs. Pettigrew let the neighborhood down and they are outcast. It’s the nature of the beast.

Party over: not a sausage left. The essence lingered on for a while, a memory ghost slowly diffusing in the soft air of autumn dawn, going nowhere. There are worse places to be. Dog slumbered on, making scents of the world with his nose. It’s a thing that dogs do, and they do it very well.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

*The Nature of the Beast is based on a real event.
Posh neighbours... elite barbeque...social politics... cat and dog chase...
pandemonium...sausage abduction.*

I watched the fun from my window, giggling while the story wrote itself – I didn’t see Fox, but he was definitely there.

The narrative is a not so subtle dig at social transaction and suggests why I don’t get invited to parties. It’s a matter of con text.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Based in Swansea, Wales, 57-year-old Tiffany White (LGBTQ) is a lifelong reader and first began writing in 2020.

Slag

a novel excerpt

By Terence Hughes

WHY WE LIKE IT: *An excerpt from a home brand stamped all over Made in America novel that explores the deep heartland of the American psyche and the bittersweet truths that define and shape our lives. The author has a penchant, shared by such luminaries as Cormac McCarthy and John Kennedy O'Toole, for the kilometer long sentence and while no author takes on this literary challenge lightly, Hughes manages to pull it off with authority comfortable enough to make us wonder why all sentences don't start in Toronto and end in LA. Compelling characters are recruited from the eccentric, the sad and the sane. The voice is next door down the street and the delicious use of language is served up regional style. Yep, we think we'd like to read Slag front to back. (Spacing, format, grammar and everything else is author's own.)*

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language)...*

...a dark and smoky place called Byron's, on the outskirts of town where the home-made beer and liquor made the stained walls and shadows of the swaying and stumbling patrons looming long on the candle-lit ceiling, seem like the drapery and jewel lined interior of a king's palace and if there was a king on those evening's before his split from Kat, it was Mangy, one and all of his drinking buddies wondered how a man could leave such a beauty alone at home after a long day's work, left to fix a dinner that she would eat by herself and be conscientious enough to keep the larger share warm for her husband who would either toss it in the barrel or wipe out with the hunger of a wolf and then proceed to vomit it up in its barely digested entirety due to the stomach being full of cheap liquor...

An Excerpt From

Slag

A Novel

By

Terence Patrick Hughes

Mangy, Kat, and Joe-Joe started out on friendly enough terms, anchoring corners at the occasional house party, Mangy kind enough to shield Joe-Joe's stutter from strangers, by now those who knew him

either ignored it completely or excused themselves from the strained moments of chatter when Joe-Joe tried to make it through a couple of sentences over the loud din of music and contained mayhem, it would take minutes, far too long for the attention spans of the besotted, most of the revelers at these parties worked for the high school as teachers, cafetorium help, groundskeepers or coaches and after Joe-Joe had met everybody once he knew where he stood and most times that was behind Mangy and Kat, his new friends deflected any impatience with his speech by Mangy straight out shoving any interlocutor away and following that up with his famous taking-out-at-the-legs move, the parties often broke into a kerfuffle after all these were simply aging secondary school stereotypes, the athletes, the prom queens, the clowns, the burnouts, anyone who had not gone on to Advanced Learning gathered in a few rotating homes, politely leaving a good stretch of time for hosts to physically and mentally recover from the blow-outs before returning to reenact the libidinal massacres where collectively the group clung to the past by drinking, singing, carousing, and in all sense continuing the celebration they started as youngsters, a lifelong pageant of ecstatic moments spent in the midst yet away from the drudgery and dread of existence.

Joe-Joe returned his coaching compatriot's kindness in turn by helping to ward off any challengers to Mangy and Kat's happiness meaning he would nip in the bud any attempt at getting close to Kat whether it was an employee from school talking shop or just some stranger gawking lasciviously in the street as Kat walked by, each would get a staccato warning from Joe-Joe, and it's important to note that all Joe-Joe did was verbally step in, he was not a fighter which was strange in that he vigorously thrust himself into other people's business around town so often it became known that Joe-Joe was not only on the lookout for besmirchers of his friend's wife reputation but also that he gained warped satisfaction at rooting out any kind of human error, mishap, or his favorite, indiscretion, and then tattling about it until he was firmly labeled a spy, wholly mistrusted by elders and despised by the

entire student body of Bedlam High, although a few Slashers displayed mediocre respect for him but only because as a coach he held judgement over whether they would play in the next game or not but mainly Joe-Joe's was thought of as a grown-up snitch and a gleeful sadist, and all who had either been caught or nearly caught by him swore that his inability to conquer his stutter and the shame sunk deep down inside by this failing was the catalyst for him becoming a world class shit.

Still, his friends liked him, particularly in that first golden stretch of time when he had returned to town as the injured sports hero and his stories of games in far off stadiums captivated those adults whose he was to soon betray by turning them in for petty crimes, or amplifying damaging rumors, and his main source of likeability was that he was always at the party, ever present hovering, constantly moving a tawdry tale on its journey to damnation, of course most clumsily elucidated so that each member of the mob, whenever the mob would gather to verbally accuse, try, or hang somebody, would frustratingly hang on each painful, drawn out syllable, to get the juiciest detail bit by bit, some even felt his stutter endeared him to the newly acquainted, before the sting of spite and cunning could be sensed and ironically this reptilian behavior played well into his coaching the offensive Slash squad as trickery was a strength and slicing apart and cutting away at the faults of the other team was a talent put to good use even if Joe-Joe's heroic reputation ended in disgrace at the exit gates of the stadium, he was Mangy's buddy and always found himself hip-to-hip with his good friend and Kat at parties and functions, the steady sidekick to Mangy's quiet seething confidence and Kat's super-sized personality.

No one knows who suggested that Kat would be the one to cure Joe-Joe of his stutter, maybe it was her early brush with decent living in the country that left a slight altruistic streak, others reason that it was her father's abandonment that left a needy, quiet space that Mangy was too cold or most often too

drunk to fill, or it could just be that Kat and Joe-Joe were simply debris left from previously exploded families that discovered their jagged edges fit together perfectly. Noone knows when it all started either, Mangy wouldn't specify when he included it in his epic tavern tales, and no one had the temerity to question Kat about the goings on, the tales left from her early, wild days seemed to disappear in the current scandal and reason dictates that an individual will choose the infamy from a single adult occurrence over the disgrace of many errors of youth, the main reason being that the older and more often told the tale, the dirtier the details become. Besides, these simple, haggard towns folks hardly ever blamed adultery harder than say, a stolen car, as most had sipped from the filthy cup at some time or another, after dark too many sources of temptation, bath-tub alcohol, and illicit freedom opened up in the tenements and housing projects to not expect any sane adult to attempt to subdue and roll around with another sane, or at least semi-sane, adult, but the interesting particulars that remain unknown are who made the first move, I was certain that it must have been Joe-Joe. And right I was.

One evening after Slash practice, Mangy went about the usual cleaning up of the grounds and field house after he angrily chased the last straggling players out to their goat-smelling homes, as he put it, and he then took his time pulling off his sweatpants and tee and placing back on the sweat-stained and funky clothes from his day's work on the grounds, he was a natural pest killer, particularly adept at catching and creatively exterminating the rats that invaded after Slash games, his patented solution was in picking up the pieces of popped corn one by one that the crowd had left behind and coating it with his own mixture of liquid poison, a rumor being that he did a shot of it himself after sealing the rat's doom which is why he would gnash at you if you asked about it just like one of the furry creatures after the tainted corn sizzled a hole in their belly the size of thumbnail, angry was never the word for Mangy for he would tip glasses with any townsmen until the morning's light seeped through the windows, it just seemed that getting close to folks was his problem, surly was more his character but in a way that

endeared him to those he hadn't yet crossed swords with for if you did cross swords, you mainly stayed far away from him for the rest of your days, and on this early evening after the players were soundly run, beaten up, cut, and released to their individual homes of squalor, Mangy was headed for his favorite watering hole, a dark and smoky place called Byron's, on the outskirts of town where the home-made beer and liquor made the stained walls and shadows of the swaying and stumbling patrons looming long on the candle-lit ceiling, seem like the drapery and jewel lined interior of a king's palace and if there was a king on those evening's before his split from Kat, it was Mangy, one and all of his drinking buddies wondered how a man could leave such a beauty alone at home after a long day's work, left to fix a dinner that she would eat by herself and be conscientious enough to keep the larger share warm for her husband who would either toss it in the barrel or wipe out with the hunger of a wolf and then proceed to vomit it up in its barely digested entirety due to the stomach being full of cheap liquor, appreciation was always given either way, Mangy would assure his wife that she was the best catch in the pond and that he would clean up after himself in the morning and either crawl to bed or drop to a heavy sleep in the midst of what he had promised to clean up, of course the dutiful Kat would each time scrub up the mess and discard the waste in the trash along with her choppy childhood dreams of a happy home. After carousing in and closing Byron's on this very night, Mangy stumbled home, smoking cigarettes and challenging any gang members that he ran into on the darkened streets but they all knew him, more importantly they knew Kat and just as he made his drinking buddies at the bar feel better about themselves by his very presence, away from the dark beauty, the model of feminine allure, choosing to drink with them was his way of legitimizing their existence as quality company, so too did the gangs feel when he rounded a corner clumsily, spitting profanity at them, flicking nearly smoked cigarettes their way, it was always followed with laughter, a bit of light sparring until Mangy would give them a final 'Fuck Off!' and stumble his way on to the next corner or if he was close enough, nearly collapsing up the steps and into his simple two-bedroom, clap-board home, one of many in a

neighborhood of identical structures that school workers rent at a federal discount, where a hot meal awaits for whatever fate his stomach held in store, but on this night there was a unique addition to the simple veggies and mash and sleepy wife that met his arrival, crashing through the door with clumsiness and announcing his arrival in slurry tones, the call in response froze his dirty booted feet in the kitchen, leaving him uncustomarily speechless for her words had not been familiar and fatigued or slightly frustrated due to his chronic nights out and messy homecomings, but flowery, alive, and one could also add perfumed as the scent of impression and thoughtfulness was in the air, she had obviously put on some fragrance for whoever else it was that was in his goddamn house.

“We’re in here”, she gave a bouncy call from the sitting room, sending all sorts of images of pestering friends and annoying acquaintances that she had invited for tea and chat at this late hour.

“Kat, I ain’t in no mood for...”

His words that had just earlier been flowing as free as the kegs of cheap cellar-beer that soaked his senses and had only become more loquacious and frighteningly colorful on the stumble home, fell away into mute, you could say shocked, stillness at the sight of Kat and Joe-Joe on the couch in the sitting room, not too close but sharing some time and what appeared to be a children’s book lying open on the oak coffee table, a rickety piece of near-junk that Mangy had found on the corner and repaired to use like most of the furniture in the room, as well, like the confines of Byron’s, candles cast a bright glow near the two, blending their shadows together on the paneled wall, making Mangy think of angels for a brief, disgusted moment, as he continued to stand still and silent on the fringe of light and darkness. Joe-Joe was smiling and Mangy didn’t like it, he didn’t like any of the situation, expecting to arrive to a warm meal and dutiful wife and instead finding his friend keeping her company by the candlelight did

not set him off into an instant rage and Mangy himself wasn't sure as to why, it could be his endearment to his wife, he did love her in a mangled, never-ever going to be affectionate outside of the regular intimate dalliances of a healthy husband and wife, physically that is, emotionally they were as torn and tattered as anyone else you ran into in the course of the day, and it was likely the agreement to go on through life together that was the most special thing Kat and Mangy held onto, and that was what kept him silent and at the same time held him back from delivering an epic beating, the feeling that he was about to lose something big, something that he had let sink into him was about to get pulled out, and he wasn't ready for it.

“Well...sit down.”

While Joe-Joe went on smiling, Kat was treating it as if Mangy had just walked into the break room at the school where he would often find them sitting together, hardly touching the bad coffee, while she went on about anything at all, her energy and attention being sponged up by Joe-Joe as if he was a calf on its mum's spout, drinking in her energy, he would either chalk it up to Joe-Joe's lack of social graces or Kat's pitying spirit but that was in the middle of the school building in the middle of the day, this was in his home in the very dead middle of the night, he never imagined Joe-Joe having the guts to brave the streets after dark, he knew the kid could fight but also that he lacked serious back-bone and was far more comfortable snitching on people rather than squaring up on them, which Mangy figured the poor sap would wind up doing before he could escape this situation, he'd send him on home with his face hanging off of his skull, he thought, but then he also instantly realized that he didn't even know where Joe-Joe lived and as he looked at him and his wife in the candle's waxy glow for an instant he felt like he lived here with them and that was what set off his first flare of anger.

“What the fuck’s going on here?” he liked that Joe-Joe sat straight up at the sound of his voice.

“Oh, stop it and sit down, already.” Kat admonished, her eyes meeting Mangy’s directly.

Mangy felt his feet moving but held the stare with the only woman on earth who could tell him what to do, the lower half of him dutifully taking a seat in the rocking chair, there was room on the couch and a better man might have joined his friend, propriety would dictate that he would occupy the spot even between the two, but Mangy never desired to better his manhood or become anything near proper, if it ain’t broke don’t fix it was the saying, while at the same time his upper torso was stiff, arms taut with tension, jaw tight and the eyes, a harsh, cold stare as if he were attempting to extract a soundless confession, a look that the other two were not amiss at picking up.

“Y...y...y...y...y...y...” Joe-Joe went on in a futile attempt to chip away at the ice.

Kat put a finger up to Joe-Joe, near his face, not touching his lips which some motions of silence carry through to a gentle press to the mouth, a couple’s intimate signal of hush, this didn’t happen, her finger stopped an inch or two away, just barely enough to keep Mangy in the rocker, he even sat back and gave it a rock or two in a false appearance of calm although with each sway back he considered how quickly he could spring from the chair on a lurch forward and have his hands around either of their necks. Mangy had strangled a man once, not to death but fairly close to it, back when he trying to go pro with Slash and they had a dozen or so athletes sharing cramped rental quarters near the field in who-knows-what part of the country and there had been a mistake as to whose bed was whose on the first night when a drunken teammate tried to climb into bed only to find a snake named Mangy there, it had actually turned out to be Mangy’s mistake as he had only moments earlier drunkenly gone to bed

himself and choose the wrong bunk, but as soon as the teammate pulled the blankets up Mangy was on him and squeezing his neck in his fairly small but strong and wrenching grip, before some other teammates could pull him off, the body was limp and the head sunk over Mangy's hands until he finally let go, the teammate recovered and some more drinking occurred, just another wild night in the scrubs but what came out of it was Mangy's awareness that he could take a man's life with his bare hands, you just have to hold on a little longer.

"You need to hear this," Kat said to Mangy, scooping up the book from the table and turning to Joe-Joe, "Go ahead...nice and slow."

Joe-Joe looked at Mangy, whose eyes fell from the dead-cold stare at his wife and now looked upon someone he had previously considered a friend, wondering just how long he'd have to hold on to Joe-Joe's neck to finish the job, not an easy task, he thought to himself, expecting that Kat would be clawing at his face the entire time, Joe-Joe thought that Mangy's eyes looked mad as hell and also hurt at the same time which is why he left no pause before he looked to the nodding Kat, inhaled deeply, and spoke.

"Hi...there....Mangy...how...are you?"

Mangy stopped rocking and adjusted his feet on the floor but otherwise he was still, the anger fell from his face instantly as he suddenly felt lost, like he'd had taken a wrong turn in the woods and was following a new path that he sensed was leading further and further away from where he wanted to go, still, at no time in his short friendship with Joe-Joe had he ever heard him speak a complete sentence without a good deal of stuttering and it hit him like the fly that had somewhere been buzzing in the dark

of night gone suddenly quiet, dead or gone, leaving the stillness to grip and subdue you, he was subdued in a way, to the point that he didn't know what to say so Kat did the talking.

"We've been practicing...to surprise you," she went on as she placed the book down and stood from the couch, moving past the rocker on her way to the table, brushing her dress across Mangy's knees, the slightest familiar closeness that made him drop his guard even more, "It was Joe-Joe's idea."

At the table she began to pour three glasses with liquor, Mangy noticed it was the good stuff usually taken out on the most festive of occasions, holidays or the death of an enemy, and made her way back to the couch, handing glasses to the men and setting in to polish off her own moments after sitting down, Mangy noticed that she sat in the exact spot as before, not closer or further away from Joe-Joe, so this time he did get up and placed himself on the couch right in the middle of the tutor and her student.

"That's better," he exhaled as Joe-Joe inched away and Kat tugged at the part of her skirt that was stuck under Mangy's leg, "Why don't you roll that one back out to us again, Joe-Joe, old boy?"

Mangy kicked his boots off, a customary move for any man coming home from a long day's work and a busy night of drinking, but it had been relatively warm that day and the odor that he was counting on hit the air even more swiftly when he placed his feet up on the coffee table, a toe poking its yellowing nail through a thin pair of blue socks. Kat let out a disgusted breath and Joe-Joe kept his eyes to the ground, both men were used to the smell, fatal reminders of life's decay were ever-present in the locker room and husband and wife ignore certain foul characteristics of their mate in the name of making a marriage

work, although whenever it got too bad Kat made him wash his feet and burn the offending pair of socks in the pellet stove.

“Make yourself at home,” Kat muttered.

“That’s what I’m doing,” Mangy snapped and turned to Joe-Joe, “That ain’t what you was doing, was it?”

“N...n...n...n...n...n...n...n...n,” Joe-Joe had lost his brief command of words.

“All right, all right,” Mangy cooed after letting Joe-Joe struggle for a moment and at the same time placing a hand on his wife’s knee, which trembled slightly at his touch, “Go on back to that part you was rehearsing...I liked it...go on...”

Joe-Joe looked to Kat who neither affirmed nor denied the request and then took the same deep breath as he held his hands together like a choir boy about to let out the first of many hymns.

“H-h-h-h-h...” his grinding on the first syllable made Kat lean over and turn the book back to the page they had been studying, following her perfect finger across the words he saw that Joe-Joe had inserted Mangy’s name on the page’s blank space that invited the learner to personalize the lesson, it struck Mangy as if he were actually a blank void himself right now being filled in by the efforts of Joe-Joe, if he had not been there when he arrived home his life would have followed its usual course, warm meal, unhappy wife, blackout, but instead a warped entertainment had awaited him and the usual simple wretchedness had disappeared into a vastly altered state.

“Hi...th...there” Joe-Joe worked with sharp concentration on Kat’s fingers caressing the letters
“...Mangy...how...are...y-you.”

“Not bad,” Mangy said loudly and then stretched his arms wide and yawned, “Oh boy...I’m
wiped, better get the fuck out of here, Joe-Joe.”

He then stood, scooped up the book from the table, and left the room, his feet landing heavily as they ascended the stairs and then a short shuffle before the weight of his body hitting the bed above their heads made the two on the couch jerk in their seats. That was the first night that Mangy walked home to find Kat waging the slow, painful war against Joe-Joe’s stutter, it was on a fairly set schedule, same day each week barring emergencies and severe weather, and ended similarly each night, Mangy stumbling home to find the pair in the living room, on the couch, with papers and pencils scattered on the table, Mangy had sent the book he had confiscated to the same slow burning fate as his funky socks so the speech master had taken to writing sentences on paper which Joe-Joe sat reading over and over as if it were the script and he the actor preparing for the biggest part of his life. Mangy would burst in as usual, gobble some of his warmed dinner and then immediately take up all of the papers from the table and out of Joe-Joe’s hands, and tear them to shreds, finishing off with the same yawn, stretch, and warning for Joe-Joe to get the fuck out of there before either crawling or stumbling up the steps, depending on the severity of drinking, followed by the thump onto the bed, which came to serve as the actor’s cue each night to take leave of his director and Mangy was hellbent sure not to drop off to sleep until he heard the mumbled goodbyes, the door shut and locked, and Kat cleaning up whatever mess awaited before she could retire.

The weird practice continued for a good while, known yet not discussed often amongst the town-folk who made it their business to know and discuss these things, as it appeared on the surface to be an authentic act of altruism on Kat's part and some felt that it was kind and generous of Mangy to allow his friend the time and place to lose the affliction of the tongue that had plagued him his whole life, admirable was often used to describe Mangy's actions, while there was a slew of other folks who couldn't help imagining what other type of education might be going on in that house before Mangy made his well past midnight arrival, yet no one had the courage or interest in stirring the pot of rumor for fear of ending up in a confrontation with a beastly tough groundskeeper/coach with a chip on his shoulder. But finally, the strained admiration and whispered doubts all came to an end and the fates of Mangy, Kat, and Joe-Joe were decided by a poorly cooked piece of fish.

Because the warmed dinner at home was customarily not gobbled until well after midnight, Mangy liked to have a small meal at Byron's and the chalkboard hanging next to the bar with neatly printed letters reading FRESH FISH caught his eye as soon as he walked in after a truly tiring day at work, toilets backed up in the field house, no explanation as to why but juvenile delinquency was not ruled out, and it had rained right before practice turning the dirt into a steaming, slippery bowl of muck, so he wiped his feet as he stepped into the dim surroundings yet paid no mind to the mud caked to his pant legs as he took his familiar stool, slapped the bar hard with the palm of one hand and in moments was tossing down the first of many shots of cheap liquor provided dutifully by the young, burly bartender, who turned and smiled when Mangy spoke up.

"Give me a plate of that fish...it's got to be the only thing fresh in this place."

He didn't even bother to extinguish his cigarette as the plate arrived from the small kitchen in back and the bartender set it down along with another full shot glass, Mangy inhaled the meal, drink, and the rest of the cigarette in seconds, and then set back to arguing about the dangers of the world with another patron, that is until he felt the first rumble, he could tell it was abnormal because he'd felt sick to his stomach plenty of times but never that early in the night, so he stopped shouting his point at the group who then set into asking if he was all right, patting him on the back, squeezing his shoulder and he assured them that everything was fine, boasting of his iron stomach, and then throwing up everything that had just eaten plus what appeared to be a smallish yet whole green apple, fouling the bar-top, and somewhat the bartender, in a rancid, hurling splash. Normally, Mangy would troop right on into the night, gargling with beer and then drinking the nausea into submission, but the fish had done a job on him and the liquor that they set before him after a hurried clean-up sat untouched as he held onto his severely sour stomach for a half-hour, an epic gastrointestinal battle with cold sweats and dry heaves until he reluctantly gave up the fight.

"I'm goin' home," he announced after one dangerously liquid belch.

Most everyone that tells this story without a doubt or fault of their own misses or adds details here and there but no one ever skips the part about how Mangy stood there for a full five minutes staring at that shot of liquor on the bar, some say it was so long that his drinking buddies were wagering whether he'd shoot it down or not and he almost did, raising it to his lips but as soon as the smell hit him it must have all just come together like a sour wind of rotting fish because he turned that glass right over and spilled a good shot away that most anyone in the place would have gladly made disappear for him, and then he hustled out in an uncustomary hurry, everyone agreed old Mangy was not his self that evening,

His cheeks had gone ghostly white and his stare was on the ground as he moved through the cold streets, hardly being seen at that hour outside of the tavern, he was greeted with many a 'hi, Mangy' or 'hey, you OK, pal?' as he kept a brisk pace, bumping past bodies when needed and never stopping to acknowledge the kind words for fear that the shortest of chats would end badly, very badly. He even passed a few of the gang members that he normally would heckle and they were all surprised at how swift he was moving, his usual pie-eyed stumble exchanged for the brisk walk, so they let him go like they always do but not without a 'hey, you OK, old dude?' And then he was home. Now, all Mangy wanted to do was get inside, hit the toilet for one last heave, and slump onto his bed for a long sleep, let the belly woes work their stabbing way without his brain for stretch, yet somewhere in the midst of his prime directive was a savoring of the opportunity to cut the elocution lesson short, he could likely tear up a page or two without the fishy nausea getting the best of him, so he hurried through the kitchen and burst into the living room which was familiarly candlelit, papers stacked in a neat pile on the coffee table but strikingly different in it being entirely devoid of life.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *'Slag' is a novel steeped in my hometown of Lawrence, Massachusetts, where as a youth I roamed the streets in shadows of ancient factories that produced only bittersweet memories. Human desperation and inhumanity to one another are themes that influence all of my work which I temper to the best of my ability with a comedic dose of hope. 'Slag' is a deeply American tale with gratitude and apologies to William Faulkner, Willa Cather, John Updike, and John Cheever.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Terence Patrick Hughes writes plays that have been produced around the country and internationally. The New York Times noted that his work "...explores heavy subject matter with humorous dialogue and strong characters". 'Slag' is his first novel. Perhaps the Times would like to say something kind about it, too. Born in Lawrence, MA, Hughes, his wife, and two children live in Woodstock, NY.

A Connoisseur

By Rebecca Andem

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor LAUREN SCHMIDT writes...* In “A Connoisseur,” Rebecca Andem explores the darkest reaches of imagination and lust. The moment Gavin and Meena, a married couple, pick up a young, sexy, albeit stinky hippie hitchhiker, I could feel the friction in the car, like the cool blast of AC in the hot, Nevada air. With at times a wry and biting humor, Andem crafts the narrative tension with such subtlety, from the semi that rocks the car as it passes them on the highway, to Gavin’s memory of the time his once sexually adventurous wife stood outside naked in the snow, as he grew hard watching from inside the house, to the various other blurry spaces between what is real and what is daydream and dark desire. When the rental car crashes, the narrator notes: “Even in an accident, [the hippie girl] looked like she was begging for it, her mouth open, blond hair clinging to her cracked lips, a wild look in her eyes.... [Gavin] could almost feel his palm skimming down the length of her thigh.” The details of the story’s resolution are spare and deftly chosen, caught, still, between reality and reverie, and readers, like “the noble stranger ready to play hero,” will look on. What will readers see? “Gavin doesn’t care,” the narrator says. We will think what we want anyway.

A good example of the wry humor I enjoyed in the story: “It always ruined it for him when a hot girl had one of those chirpy helium voices.”

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language):

Even in an accident, she looked like she was begging for it, her mouth open, blond hair clinging to her cracked lips, a wild look in her eyes. God damn! He was just about to turn toward her. He could almost feel his palm skimming down the length of her thigh, but then she was all motion, backing up, turning, her legs flailing, one hand clawing at the door handle, the other still holding the knife.

A long-legged hallucination dissolving into the veil of heat.

A Connoisseur

Gavin glanced in the rearview mirror. Now there was proof that driving beat flying any day, even if the proof might need a shower. Body odor pervaded the car despite the open windows the girl insisted on. Desert air and AC collided like a storm front. His skin prickled.

They'd picked her up on Route 80, somewhere in the middle of the salt flats, nothing but heat shimmering a hundred miles in every direction. From a distance the girl had seemed like a mirage, a wavering illusion perched on a duffel bag, a chimera in a tattered cowboy hat. Gavin, true to form, had noticed her legs first, long tanned legs that couldn't have been more than twenty years old. His wife, as usual, had run interference.

"Isn't hitchhiking illegal here?"

Gavin glanced at Meena. She was sulking now, ignoring the hitchhiker she'd advised against. The wind from the back windows whipped her hair across her face, and every time she scraped it back, the corners of her mouth etched downwards. She wasn't aging well. Gavin checked the mirror again. Generally speaking, he wasn't a connoisseur of the new hippie chicks. They were leaner than their predecessors, more yoga he assumed, but if this one was any indication, they were equally dedicated to burning their bras. Perky little thing. Namaste.

A semi rocked the car as it passed. In a space of time as fluid as lava, it blurred into the waves of heat. The atmosphere was hypnotic. Gavin pretended to check the side mirror. It was too soon to let his glance stray into the back seat again. He knew the weight of his wife's gaze, and he knew to avoid it. So when he heard her gasp, he didn't turn right away. Instead, he checked the speedometer, a reactive habit from years of marriage.

"Everything will be fine if everybody behaves."

Gavin jerked his head toward the unexpected voice, closer now, right there between them. His skin pulsed. A nice husky voice. It always ruined it for him when a hot girl had one of those chirpy helium voices.

Like a scene out of movie, the sun glinted off the blade held against Meena's neck. Her sunglasses sat lopsided on her nose, and she was breathing hard. There must have been some sort of resistance. The girl's arms were wrapped around the headrest, her face pressed against Meena's. Gavin must have been daydreaming. A small part of his brain questioned if he still was.

"When we cross into Nevada, pull into the first casino you see."

Gavin wondered if the girl had practiced that voice in front of a mirror. He grinned. "You want to gamble?" He'd been told he had a sexy grin.

"Do you?" The girl grabbed a handful of Meena's hair. Her cute little chin lifted toward him. She was a tough chick. A rough chick.

He licked his lips. "You remember that bet?" The girl looked puzzled, but Meena flinched. "When that French student was boarding with us?"

A squeak got stuck in Meena's throat.

"You owe me," he said. "You never did follow through. Our *ménage*..."

"Gavin!" Meena closed her eyes. She was trembling. "Don't," she begged. "Please. No."

Of course, before they were married, Meena never said no. In fact, she'd been exceptionally good at saying yes. Back then she'd had a figure like a goddess, Parvati with her perfect globes. Gavin still had fantasies about his wife's breasts, which was a lot more than most men could claim. He still remembered the first time he saw her naked, back when he was teaching in Boulder. It was snowing that day, a Sunday afternoon in December, and he'd invited

her over for mulled wine next to the fire. They were talking on the sofa, the intellectual foreplay Gavin had perfected, but when she laughed suddenly, he had the overwhelming desire to see her playing in the snow, to watch those big soft flakes melt into that velvety brown skin. He asked her to stand outside on the patio, to remove her clothes, to raise her arms like a child. And she did, no questions. He had to hand it to her. Her gaze never wavered from his, and somehow, she managed not to shiver, although every inch of her was alert to the cold. He could sense it, just like he was alert to her even from inside the house, watching, his hand twitching for his cock, making himself wait, the perfect agony of it. For all his expertise on female flesh, Gavin had never seen anything so perfect. The breasts of a goddess, he remembered thinking.

“Mine,” he had whispered. “You’re going to be mine.”

“Gavin!”

The world lurched as Meena’s voice cut through his fantasy. They’d drifted off the road. A sign loomed in front of them advising drowsy drivers to pull over. Gavin blinked. *As if on cue*, he had time to think, but then the tires caught in the sand. The steering wheel spun through Gavin’s hand. He gripped it, yanked. The sideview mirror clipped the sign, and the metal thundered like a sound effect in a bad play. Gavin slammed on the brakes, and when they finally came to a stop, the car seemed to sink into the sand.

He glanced over his shoulder. The girl was splayed across the backseat, her long legs braced wide against the impact. The cowboy hat was crushed under her hip, and her shirt had slipped off her shoulder. Even in an accident, she looked like she was begging for it, her mouth open, blond hair clinging to her cracked lips, a wild look in her eyes. God damn! He was just about to turn toward her. He could almost feel his palm skimming down the length of her thigh,

but then she was all motion, backing up, turning, her legs flailing, one hand clawing at the door handle, the other still holding the knife.

Gavin lunged toward her. He managed to grab her wrist, but she twisted and squirmed. Kicking and screaming, she spat at him. She cursed and growled. A wild little thing. Gavin was breathing hard, but when the toe of her boot caught him by the chin, he gasped. His teeth clattered. He lost his grip. Before he could even catch the hem of her skirt, she was scrambling out the door. He watched her plunge through the sand, awkward, pitched forward, but when she reached the verge, she found her footing on the solid road. She started running. A long-legged hallucination dissolving into the veil of heat.

The day splintered. Gavin reached for the knife, not comprehending at first. The blood. The girl had dropped it, and now the blood was staining the car's upholstery, a rental. Meena always insisted on renting a car for road trips. She said they shouldn't put too many miles on their car, but he knew that was just a pretense. She liked the feeling of anonymity the rental gave them, like they might be anybody driving down an unknown road. They might do anything. He did know her, after all. They'd been married eighteen years. Some might even say they were perfectly matched.

Gavin set the knife down on the console between them. Meena was leaning against the door. Her hair had fallen over her face, and Gavin reached to tuck it behind her ear. And yes, he knew she hated when he did that. Said it was patronizing, or cliché, like something he'd seen in a movie. Her hair dragged through the blood on her neck. It was a lot of blood. Too much, he knew. Of course, he knew. Her blouse was drenched in blood. The sunglasses still sat twisted on her face, one lens shattered, and Gavin pulled them off. Her gaze was nowhere.

Gavin pressed his cheek against hers, as if they were dancing at a faculty party, Meena insisting, like she always did after a few drinks, on a territorial display of affection. He slid his right hand to the small of her back where she most loved his touch, and with his left hand, he reached inside her blouse. He could almost feel her breath catch, but he knew it was his own. He lifted her breast, the familiar weight of it, and oh God help him, he wanted to fuck her.

Soon enough someone would see them. A car would pull off the road with some noble stranger ready to play hero. They would run up, peer in the window. What they would see? Gavin didn't care. He had never cared. Let them think what they wanted. In the end he'd been dreaming about his wife. A man dreaming about his wife. That had to count for something.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story actually started as an exercise in a Writers Studio class. The prompt was to create a character who acted inappropriately in a dramatic situation. We were working from the inspiration of Tobias Wolff's classic story, "Bullet in the Brain." I had actually worked with the same prompt in an earlier class, and the resulting story, "The Crack," was published in Light and Dark Magazine. So I was excited to work with it again; however, when I came up with the idea of a man flirting inappropriately, I had no idea where it would go! That's what I love best about writing, when it taps into something subterranean and the characters come alive – especially when they're so far from yourself. Nothing creates theory of mind quite like the written story.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Rebecca Andem earned an MFA from the University of Southern Maine. She has a short story collection available on Wordrunner eChapbooks, and her work has appeared in literary journals such as *Upstreet*, *Burrow Press Review*, *Scapegoat Review*, *Petrichor Review*, and *Wilde Magazine*. For years she worked as a traveling English teacher in China, Thailand, Cambodia, and Russia. Now she lives in Tucson, Arizona, where she's an active member of the Writers Studio and Old Pueblo Playwrights.

A Scatological Tale & Breaking News

By James Gallant

WHY WE LIKE THEM: *Mother Goose does SNL! It's part of our mission to have read these submissions and liked them we diddly doo. So if you're not an old woman parked in a tree, you'll read them too, and see, with glee, that fallen apples you stoop to pick, will make you poop and likely sick. But muffins with honey (if not too runny) is money in the ole alimentary tank. When the poop comes out, jump and shout: good digestion is cash in the bank! 'SAD!' tweeted Trumpy Dumpty at 3 o'clock in the morn with scorn. Poop out of the rumpty is plain uncouth—it's not how it's meant to be. So be like me and bypass the ass and let it fly out of your mouth!*

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language)...*

Your intestines are young and willing to work, regardless what you send 'em. But a day will come when they tire of the grind, and then you'll yourself saying: 'Once every muffin seemed appeared in celestial light. But it is not now as it was of yore, so I will eat the apples right down to the core.'"

A Scatological Tale

James Gallant

A father and son with a dollar and a dime entered a bakery, pastries in mind.

The baker was gleeful, a sale was at hand—or so it seemed at the outset. But whipped cream or plain, goopy or bland, the pair couldn't make up their minds.

The baker grew fidgety, twiddled his thumbs. Finally, he spake: "Mothers and sons, uncles and cousins—everyone loves the hot-cross buns. So give me a buck, I'll give you a dozen, then get the f out of here."

"Stale's cheap," Father observed.

The baker gave him the finger.

Out in the street, the father declared, “If there’s one thing in this world I *cannot* abide, it’s a foul-mouthed dough-puncher who rhymes.”

“I’d have liked a muffin,” said the son.

They’d started for home, when they saw from afar the old woman who lived in a shoe. She was up in a tree, a tall apple tree. The crowd gathered round tried to coax her down.

“What’s up?” said Dad to a priest standing nigh.

“The old woman who lives in a shoe.”

“I can see that, yes—but through a glass darkly, as ‘twere.”

“She doesn’t know what to do with her kids who smell like sweaty feet. That’s why she’s up in the tree, in my view.”

“The air is fresher up there.”

“If this strikes you as kooky, you should have been here Tuesday. There were *two* old women up in the tree.”

“That would have been something to see.”

I expect you’re wondering, why a man of the cloth isn’t sharing the work of the coaxers.”

“I hadn’t, but why *are* you standing here watching?”

“Martin Luther put it nicely, ‘Here I stand, I can do no other.’”

“And why is that, may I ask?”

“You may, but you’ll not receive, for all I can tell you is that, given a choice—to act or stand pat—I invariably choose the latter.”

“They also serve who only stand and wait, ‘tis said, though I don’t really know what that means.”

“Nor I. Another thing that people say is that good things will come to those who wait.”

“But only what hustlers have left behind, said Abe.”

“Yes, good things come in *small* packages.”

“Like muffins,” said the boy, salivating at the thought of them slathered with honey.

“Is it necessary to *stand* while one waits?” asked the priest. “I mean, why not just lie waiting in bed?”

“You might be mistaken for dead.”

“That’s happened to me on my feet.”

The woman in the tree was munching on something.

“What does the old girl eat?” asked Dad.

“Green apples, one after the other. I’m told they are very sweet.”

“Not as sweet as muffins with honey.”

The priest beamed down at the sweet-toothed lad. “That’s true, young man. But never forget that a muffin may clog the intestines.”

“No muffin has ever clogged mine.”

“Your intestines are young and willing to work, regardless what you send ‘em. But a day will come when they tire of the grind, and then you’ll yourself saying: ‘Once every muffin seemed appared in celestial light. But it is not now as it was of yore, so I will eat the apples right down to the core.’”

“Apples make you poop, Mama says.”

“She’s mastered the digestive occult.”

“Dad says she’s an idiot.”

“Personally,” said Dad, “I weary of pooping. It’s a conspicuous waste of paper, I think, and a miserable waste of time.”

An admonitory forefinger rose from the priest. “Pooping is rather the *time of waste* than a *waste of time*. There’s a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to ingest and a time to poop. The sun riseth, the sun goes down.”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” said the boy.

A guitarist was strumming, a drummer was drumming. The coaxers who’d wearied of coaxing now cavorted about the tree in the nude—until a thunderous BOOM from a bough on high, and chocolate rain from the clear blue sky, put a sudden stop to frolics. The dancers raced screaming to the nearest baths, hosed themselves down, and jumped in the lake.

The priest at his distance raised eyes to the skies: “Lord, I’ve complained of my stasis and torpor, my reluctance to enter the fray, but I will never regret having stood my ground on this memorably execrable day.”

Breaking News

Humpty Dumpty, the health-care-for-peasants activist, suffered a fall from a wall near the palace where he was demonstrating this morning.

The King at his press conference today expressed regret for his longtime political opponent’s misfortune: “The Yolkel and I had our differences, but he was a good egg. I’ve ordered the King’s Men to get off their horses and try to put him back together again, but they’re all idiots. I wouldn’t expect a miracle.”

The King lauded today's successful throne-financed launch of the Old Broom Woman who's to sweep the sky of cobwebs, the project dubbed the Blue Sky Initiative by critics who see it as a misuse of public funds for political gain.

Humpty's fall, and the Broom Woman's launch, were nearly simultaneous. There's an unsubstantiated report that Little Jack Horner had just pulled a plum from his Christmas pie when he saw Dumpty swept from the wall.

"Fake news, fake news," the King said. "The Yolkel was a drinker, a boozier. He guzzled, everyone knows he guzzled."

In other news, lean Jack Spratt has taken up aerobics. "Like he needs it!" quipped Mrs. Spratt, who having sworn off fat believes she's found at last a purpose in life.

Finally this: that other Jack, the one who's nimble and quick—"Evil Knieval of the candlesticks"—is back leaping tall tallow after last year's mishap, the mother of all geoses.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *When at loose ends as a writer, to shake up my brain, I'll read things I wouldn't ordinarily--nursery rhyme nonsense in this case. The sing-songy voice comes from that. ("There was an old woman who lived in a shoe," etc.) As for the issue I was exploring: the importance of digestion cannot be underestimated. I'm sending a second little piece written out of the same influences that, with the elections over, will soon be dated. Maybe you can do something with it?*

AUTHOR'S BIO: For what it may or may not be worth, I am the winner of 2019 Schaffner Press Prize for music-in-literature for my story collection, *La Leona, and Other Guitar stories*, just published. My e-novel, *Whatever Happened to Ohio?* from Vagabondage Press, and a collection of essays and short fiction, *Verisimilitude: essays and approximations*, published by Fortnightly Review press (UK), appeared in 2018. (I have been an online columnist for FR since 2015 (<http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/category/verisimilitudes/>)).

DIANA COMPLEX

By Madeline King

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We were quickly won over by this incandescent epistolary roman a clef addressed to Anais Nin. Though she isn't mentioned much anymore, Nin was a visible bohemian feminist in her day and a uniquely gifted writer who lives on as one of the icons of 20th C literature. Like her paramour, Henry Miller, she was asking questions about and providing answers for the nature of human sexuality that crossed lines and, of course, shocked her readers. There is an impish sophistication to King's writing that recalls Nin's style and her coquettish prose glitters seductively like jewels beneath a perfumed veil. The last word in the story is a masterpiece of phonic-crafting in which percussion triumphs over melody. (Spacing and font size is author's own. Eds.)*

Diana Complex

Dear Anaïs,

I dreamt of you last night. We were in your room, laughing, smoking and drinking plum wine. We admired each other's mouths in your vanity. You noted that my lips were always full and soft, as if just-kissed. You asked if I often kissed men. You said that I was only allowed to kiss men because I had too feminine a mouth to kiss women. Then you collapsed onto the bed and lamented your boyish hips, and your small breasts (which you showed me.)

I asked if I could wear your Nile-green dress, but you had the wild desire to go out as men that night. We were drunk and giddy, costuming ourselves behind your Coromandel screen. I put on the clothes of a *gentil-homme* in a bowler, trousers, and cravat that you tied around my neck for me. You dressed more coarsely, like a vagabond. You emerged mannish and vulgar, and I glimpsed your Latin eyes shine feverishly under your peeked cap. You looked like a writer.

We went to a bar in Clichy. We smoked cigars and drank rum. Patrons gave us hungry looks. They could see the curves of our breasts and hips push up against our clothes, and were aroused by it. My blood was scalding, and I had a sudden, childish, desire to fuck. You said: "it is good to let men have you dressed like this, as it quenches their secret homosexual desires."

You expressed great sympathy and depth of feeling, but you also warned me against fucking a woman; I would grow insatiable, like a man.

I confessed to once having dreamed of writhing on top of a woman with large breasts. I had awoken from it wet—I confided this to you, Anaïs! You laughed sweetly, regretting not to be able to gift me this pleasure yourself. You brought me to a *bordello* on la Rue Blondel. You were my mother then, choosing the perfect Renoiresque girl with care. You were a wild thing, fluttering, fondling them, laughing... through fever I saw you splendid, wanton, *incandescent*—I wondered then if I was dreaming. But then I felt your eyes settle coolly on me, when, at last, you presented me with my whore.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *“Diana Complex”* was inspired by the autobiographical writings of Anaïs Nin. Back in the early 1930’s, her attraction to Henry Miller’s wife, June, was labelled a “repressed desire to be a man” by her psychoanalyst (whom she would eventually go on to have an affair with). I was interested in exploring—and perhaps poking at—this unusual conflation of gender and sexuality.

Stylistically, I have found myself gravitating towards shorter and shorter fiction and prose-poetry. I count amongst my influences Jennifer Tseng, Sandra Cisneros, Kathryn Scanlan, Melora Wolff, Sofia Samatar and many more.

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Maddie King hails from White Plains, NY, and graduated from Skidmore College in 2018. She writes for the literary sites BLOOM and The Millions on a contributing basis. She is a judge for NYC Midnight’s 2020 and 2021 Fiction Competitions.*

aTtention

By Chad Lutz

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor ERICKA RUSSELL writes: Chad Lutz’s “Attention” holds our attention in its magnetic movement of a marathon, an unwanted medal, and a plagued runner. The sharp “BANG” of the starting gun jolts this runner into no ordinary race. The “strike” of each step holds desperation. The runner’s past haunts his every step, the present taunts him with what could have been, and both reunite and meet him at the finish line. Rather than telling us pain, loss, reality cannot be outrun, Lutz displays one man’s struggle to try just that.*

All the while, Lutz commands language with no flashy poetics, no figurative confusion, no written gymnastics. His meticulous diction is natural and precise, packed with purpose, and commands us to read word-by-word. Just reading these sixteen words out of the sixty-four in his second paragraph—ceremonial, gun, marks, pistol, heralded, still, BANG, pistons, hearts, thunder, calcium, cages, ignites, heads, bouncing, rhythms—Lutz not only supplies a packed voice, he reveals much more than any explicit sentence or passage.

Now, we see the difference between trying to get attention and trying to create attention. We are invested in this runner, in his medal-winning attempt to conjure attention, and in his misguided coping. Lutz writes in a language and way that is understood, raw, felt, relatable. This experienced runner doesn’t want the trophy, the congratulations, that kind of attention. We don’t need to be marathon runners—and I am certainly no runner—to see ourselves in this pull and tug of past and present, reality and fiction, before and after. Lutz’s short story is no short story, for it is as cyclical and perpetual as loss, as grief.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

I think about all the problems in the world and how insignificant all my troubles truly are, but every time I do a voice deep down tells me I need approval from the people who brought me into this world and it tears my soul in two.

(Spacing and format is author’s own.)

Attention

By Chad Lutz

Sure, this is just another race, but I'm not thinking about that as I get into position. I'm not thinking about the clock or the other runners or how hungry I am. I'm thinking about my parents on the sidelines. The two most agitated-looking people here. Two people watching everything but me. Two people who can't keep their eyes on the road.

The Mayor steps up to the race field holding a ceremonial gun and hollers for everyone to take their marks. He raises the pistol like a heralded thing, and for a moment everything is still. Nothing moves but the wind. And then, BANG! Legs become pistons. Hearts pound thunder behind calcium cages. The world ignites, as 1,400 heads begin bouncing to their individual rhythms.

I race out front of the herd to establish pace and comfortably settle into third. I'm about twenty yards behind first place; still plenty of time to take the lead.

Still plenty of time for my parents to notice, too.

The crowd thins by the end of the first mile, and so does the field. It's just me, the other front runners (a small group of twig-thin participants), and the open road, which has become craterous as town becomes country. The field runs past a pasture at the county line and a chorus of friendly moos is there to greet us.

I close my eyes. Open them. The air is hot and thick, but I'm feeling deft and daring. With a small, swift acceleration, forehead barely showing any signs of sweat, I slide past one of the only two human twigs ahead of me and settle in.

One down.

One to go.

I glance over my shoulder at the woman I've just passed. Already five paces ahead, I can still hear her lungs chug as she loses ground.

"Good luck," she calls out with a smile. And then, just like that, the field is mine to lose.

The course loops back on itself. The start is the unofficial halfway mark. I can see my parents on the sidelines as I crest the final hill. They're on their phones.

"Mom! Dad!" I shout. My heart is an active wave of hope as I wave, but neither of them looks up. I shout again, but it's clear they're not paying attention. They both have their headphones in, laughing at their screens.

"Mom!" I shout. "Dad!"

My mom nudges my dad gently and shoves her phone in his face. I watch my dad erupt in laughter so disgusting it makes me hate him even more than I already do.

First place huffs and puffs in labored locomotion a few yards ahead, but now all I can see is red. The sky, the ground, the people in the world.

Red.

The front runner is basically choking on their own breath as I pull even, snot stains their upper lip and cheeks, but I still don't see it.

The runner stays silent, head forward. He wears sunglasses that wrap around his face and conceal his eyes.

A race field of 11,000 people on your tail is one thing, but conversation in the lead pack says one of two things, it says I'm here to enjoy myself at any expense (wasted energy) and it says you aren't winded. The winded don't speak.

I shout something guttural and annoying like, "Woooooooooooo!" and pull away from the lead. The lead does and says nothing as he falls back, reduced to breathing and nothing more.

My feet strike the ground so hard they could spark. People along the side of the road aren't so much cheering as they are in awe. Somewhere up ahead, a man runs out into the street for a high-five. I slap his hand so hard he winces and then carry on like nothing happened. A few minutes later, I pass a couple of kids cowering against their mother. I whoop and holler again and one of them cries. The mom shoots me a murderous look and pulls her loved ones even closer.

On I run.

The last mile of the race is a long, sprawling hill. My chest is tight and my arms burn, but my strides are quick and my breathing is balanced. But, none of this matters if the right people aren't around to see it.

I think about my mom.

I think about my dad.

I think about all the problems in the world and how insignificant all my troubles truly are, but every time I do a voice deep down tells me I need approval from the people who brought me into this world and it tears my soul in two.

The last mile passes in a blur. Tears stream down my face as I stampede toward the finish. A race official not paying any attention wanders onto the race course and nearly collides

with me. I spin at the last second and only end up grazing the man, but he still has something to say.

“Fuck you,” is what I tell him.

“Sorry,” is what he said.

Up ahead, thirty yards, is where my parents are waiting with cameras ready and proud smiles on their faces. A place right next to the finish so they can get the best shots. So what if they didn’t take a single photo at the start. Everybody knows the best photos are the finish.

But my parents aren’t there.

I flash through the finish and break the tape a full two minutes under record time.

“What a run!” the race officials cry, as they gather around me. One of them approaches me and reaches out to pat me on the back, but I swat their hand away.

“Don’t touch me,” I huff, and storm away as fast as I can.

“Don’t you want your medal?” the race official calls back.

I pretend I don’t hear them and stomp off toward my car.

The only light in my bedroom is the small fluorescent lamp sitting on my desk. Under the lamp is a box of memorabilia I’m leafing through. The box is filled with pictures and medals and trophies; artifacts from another life, a life now lived only in memories.

The phone rings and when I answer, I’m not surprised to hear my sister.

She says, “How’d the race go this morning?”

I tell her, “Fine,” and grunt uncomfortably.

“What’s fine?” she asks. “Did you win?”

“Yeah,” I say, evenly.

“And?”

“And nothing. I raced. That’s all. No big thing.”

“It’s the first time you’ve run a race since,” she says, “this was supposed to be a big thing for all of us.”

“Well, it’s nothing and it never mattered,” I say so sharp I can feel its barbs myself.

My sister says nothing for a while. She clears her throat, and I ask if she said anything, but she says, “No,” she didn’t and we end right back at square one.

“I miss them, too,” she says eventually.

“I never said I did,” I tell her.

“That’s just it,” she says before she hangs up. “You don’t have to.”

“No,” I said, “I don’t.”

After the call, it’s like what?

I stare into a whirl of memories that make two years feel like it was just this afternoon.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The life of a professional distance runner can be very lonely. It often gives you time to think. When something heavy weighs on you, something that commands your attention, that’s where this story came from. A place of loss and isolation. I think of it as chained freedom, but there really isn’t a word to describe it. I think only narrative can do these ideas justice.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Chad W. Lutz is a speedy, non-binary writer born in Akron, Ohio, in 1986 and raised in the neighboring suburb of Stow. They graduated from Kent State University with their BA in English in 2008 and from Mills College in Oakland, California, with their MFA in Creative Writing in 2018. Their first book, *For the Time Being*, is currently available through J. New Books.

EDITOR’S BIO: Ericka Russell, 25, lives in Bowling Green, KY, where she is a graduate assistant in the MFA Program at Western Kentucky University. She is awaiting publication in *Bridge Eight* and *Asylum*.

Ride before dawn

By Glen Donaldson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We'd been reading a lot (make that too many) 'heavy' fiction submissions so when this one crash landed into our Inbox it was a like a breath of foul air. A Transylvanian aristocrat is stymied after 'a night out' by one life-threatening nail in his coffin after another. Call it spoof, call it vamp lit, call it what you want, you'll eat it up. Oh yeah, hold the garlic!*

QUALITY QUOTABLE:

He notices the signature yellow beams of the lampposts ahead. His bike tires commence vibrating to the uneven cobblestones beneath and he knows he is close. Instantly nauseous, he sniffs it before he sees it: pungent, sharp and spicy. A dozen or more restaurants all in a row - French, Italian, Greek - and everyone of them bathed in the vile reek of poisonous garlic.

Ride Before Dawn

None of us changes over time. We only become more fully what we are. Peddling his spindly pale legs like a demon possessed while his satin red cape assumed shape flowing in the wind behind, what ageless Count Orlok was was a fully-fledged vampire in a hurry.

With only minutes before the dawn sunrise would open like a flower on the horizon, the tardy night crawler had been forced to commandeer a bicycle left propped against the wall of an-all night chemist shop in a bid to make haste back to the sanctity of his castle, which by his own frantic reckoning, was still at least a full kilometer away.

Vampires occur everywhere but in busy cities no one notices. The count was used to going about his business unnoticed and so It felt like it'd only been a mere few hours since he'd popped out for a bite to drink. Somehow time had managed to get away from him. When he'd decided to call in, without appointment, to a nocturnal dental clinic for a routine check-up and emerged several hours later with a mouthful of amalgam fillings – non-silver as per his patient request – the usually fearless masquerading fangbanger could sense the first pangs of alarm beginning to rise up in his throat.

Amid the still crisp air of a dying night but with precious time ticking down, the Count faced a difficult decision. Should he continue on his current route, a patchwork of strenuous mini-hills lying in wait for his already out-of-breath lungs or risk taking the short cut through the one place he and his kind had been warned never to traverse – Restaurant Alley.

In the end, with the melodies of the morning blackbirds and wrens just moments away and the devastating first rays of the sun about to dribble their light over the land like syrup on breakfast oatmeal, the choice was made for him. Bearing suddenly left along the bank, the panting Count leans forwards on the pedals, pushing down with all his body weight.

He notices the signature yellow beams of the lampposts ahead. His bike tires commence vibrating to the uneven cobblestones beneath and he knows he is close. Instantly nauseous, he

sniffs it before he sees it: pungent, sharp and spicy. A dozen or more restaurants all in a row - French, Italian, Greek - and everyone of them bathed in the vile reek of poisonous garlic.

Count Orlak, sweating profusely and beginning to noticeably shake, grips the bike's handlebars with one hand as he uses the other to cover his mouth and nose. Pumping the pedals with failing supernatural strength so fast the turning spokes are now invisible, he somehow advances past the mirror-clad restaurant fronts. The outline of the castle rises before him as sky at that very moment changes from charcoal to soft dove grey.

He throws down the bicycle before it has even come to a stop, pushes open the heavy oak door and in massive strides ascends the tower staircase. His sacred sanctuary is lying in wait in the far corner.

Throwing back its velvet-lined top, the exhausted Count Orlak lays down inside and, in a well-practiced action, slides the coffin's cover back over top.

He is home just in time. Outside the sun rises as a canopy of gold, bidding the stars to take their nightly rest. The Count is due to appear before the Vampire Council in the coming nights. He vows he will not be late for the appointment. His lesson has been learnt, this night almost costing him his life. The final thoughts that enter his protruding cheek-boned head before he sleeps are "Just being alive can make you late for some things. The dead however are always on time."

...oo0oo...

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Write what you know? Tick! Elements of my world are scattered throughout RIDE BEFORE DAWN like diced cloves of roasted garlic spread across a pizza. I'm*

a cyclist. During the hot summer months, I'm often up and awake before sunrise. And I do love vampires! Well, vampire fiction.

Bram Stoker's DRACULA (1897) occupies proud pride of place on my bookshelf; as does the excellent follow up to that book written by Stoker's great grand nephew Dacre Stoker, DRACUL (2018).

If the less than serious concerns of this story have a theme or message it maybe something as simple as "Don't be late". That may not be as weighty as tackling themes of prejudice, corruption or unrequited love but, it's something, right?

Because if ever there was a character who can't afford to be late, it's hairy-legged Count Orlak in RIDE BEFORE DAWN. Hope you all enjoy snacking on this one.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Glen Donaldson is an Australian author who believes the life of a writer has its prose and cons but the job of an editor is more rewording. He pens weekly at both **LOST IN SPACE FIRESIDE** and **SCENIC WRITER'S SHACK**.

2 a.m. **West** Humboldt Park

By **Doug** Van Hooser

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A day in the night of American gun culture. In this palpable noir as improv a cop and a youth astray in gang territory connect and disconnect through the device of internal monologue. We like the way emotional trajectories are used to create atmosphere rather than the usual descriptive prose and the edgy, kinetic platform it provides for authentic voice. Read it twice to get the full impact. We did. (Spacing and format is author's own.)*

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language):*

“Nothin’.”

“Nothin’? You’ve got to have a reason for being out here.”

“I fell asleep.”

“You fell asleep?”

“Yea, man, you heard me. I fell asleep.”

“Was she worth it?”

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothin’, kid. Why didn’t you just stay where you were?”

2 A.M. West Humboldt Park

Hustle, boy. Keep movin’. Nothin’ good happens this time of night.

No. Tell me I’m not seeing what I am seeing.

The streets get you. Keep an eye out. Any car could be it.

He’s a nervous one. Keeps lookin’ over his shoulder.

Gotta get home. Gotta get off the street.

Looking for me. Looking for blue. The color he hates. Or a gang-banger bullet.

Damn. You know better. Streets belong to bullets and fools. How stupid can I be?

It's a kid. What's he up to? Why does he have one hand in his pocket?

End up in a pool of blood or put in bracelets and carted off by the man. Damn, you fool.

Why a hoodie? It's fuggin' August. Looking over his shoulder again.

Four blocks. Keep movin'. Uh-oh. A car, SUV, creepin'. Just creepin'.

He's up to something. But what?

Run? No. Keep movin'. Four blocks. Just four blocks.

A neighborhood kid would know it's dangerous. Wouldn't be out here.

He a watchin', watchin' me. Whoever he is.

He must not belong. I pick up speed he's going to run.

I know you there. I run now you catch me. Can't outrun a car. Can't outrun a bullet.

He knows I'm here. Should I call for back-up?

You see me. Deciding do you come for me? Makin' up your mind. Why you hesitatin'?

Circle the block. Make him think I've left, come around from the other direction, let him come to me.

You not lost. You huntin'. I'm what you huntin'. I'm the trophy. You not puttin' me on your wall.

Maybe he's on his way home. Maybe he'll pop into one of these houses.

Damn. Where'd he go?

Maybe he was bangin' his girl. Just a dumb kid who had to have some pussy.

Can't believe I fell asleep. Now I'm on the street. Only the man and gun totin' fools out here.

He'll be home safe and sound when I circle around.

Target practice. That's all I am out here. A bullseye.

Be gone kid. Be home. Be safe. Don't make me decide.

You didn't disappear. You playin' a game.

Can't ignore you. Have to stop you. Make sure you're harmless.

I'm the guy you gotta get in your sights. A video game. I'm the one you wanna pop.

If you run, then what? Chase you? Don't make me do that.

I know you comin' for me.

Be gone, kid, be gone. Don't make me stop you.

Two A. M. You comin' for me. I feel it.

You don't want it. I don't want it.

Three blocks. Where you at?

No no no no, kid. Get into a house. Don't make me do this.

Is that him? SUV sittin' there? Just waitin'?

Half a block. Only half a block. Then I have to make sure why you're out here.

Betcha that's him. Sittin' in the dark. Put the fox move on me.

Are you just a dumb kid or Mr. Gangbang?

Don't turn your back. Be ready.

Do you have a gun? Crap. Do I call for back-up?

Could be the man or a Gangsta. Both got a gun and an itchy finger.

Damn, kid, disappear. Turn into that house.

He's movin'.

Got to do it. Call it in. "Officer requesting back-up, nine hundred North Karlov."

That a cop?

Don't you run, dammit. Put on the headlights. Blind him.

Whoa! What's with the bright lights? Do I run?

Don't you run. Don't make this a chase.

Damn them lights. Can't see shit. That a cop trick. Gang banger shoot first.

Please kid, don't have a gun.

What you want? I'm doin' nothin'!

Not running, thank god.

Cops gotta mess with ya. Why you gotta mess with me?

Both hands. No gun.

What you want? Dim them lights asshole!

Make sure he knows you're a cop. Move slowly.

Go fuck with someone else. Let me be. I'm doin' nothin'!

Don't let him trick you. Watch his hands. Roll the window.

"Why you out here, kid? It's 2 A.M."

"I'm walkin'."

"Yea. Where?"

"Home. Where else would I be goin'?"

"Nothing good happens on these streets this time of night. You must know that."

"I'm no fool."

"Yea, you are. Otherwise you wouldn't be out here."

"I'm not doin' nothin' to no one."

"O.K. But this is gang turf. Shoot first."

"I know that."

“I don’t get it. You know better but here you are.”

“I screwed up.”

“Screwed up what?”

“Nothin’.”

“Nothin’? You’ve got to have a reason for being out here.”

“I fell asleep.”

“You fell asleep?”

“Yea, man, you heard me. I fell asleep.”

“Was she worth it?”

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothin’, kid. Why didn’t you just stay where you were?”

“I... I couldn’t.”

“So it was a girl.”

“None of your business.”

“All right. All right. I guess it doesn’t matter. But better you stay with the bimbo and stay alive then come out here.”

“She’s no bimbo and if you did your job this wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Really, kid? What do you think I’m trying to do out here?”

“Messin’ with me.”

“If I was messin’ with you, you’d be in cuffs sitting in the back seat.”

“I’m doin’ nothin’.”

“Yea, yea. Just out here looking for a bullet. Where’s your home?”

“Two blocks straight up.”

“I’m going to turn around and follow you. Make sure you get there. Don’t run. You’ll regret it.”

“Did I run from you?”

“No. That was smart. Be smart again.”

“I’m no dummy.”

“From now on get home before dark and sleep there. Don’t start walking until I get turned around.”

Com’on, you blue devil. Get that car turned around. Don’t run. What the fuck you take me for? This is stupid but I’m not dumb.

I fell asleep so I’m out here on the street. Go figure. Knows better and here he is. Unbelievable.

I shoulda stayed with Monica. Snuck out in the morning. Now I got some dumb cop followin’ me like I’m a six-year old. Playin’ like he’s a good guy. We both know better. Don’t we.

Do your job. God, the attitude. Where’s it come from? I’m trying to keep you safe and what do I get? Guff. All right, kid, start walking.

Man, this is like bein’ in a spotlight. Hey! I ain’t some movie star. Back off! Give a guy some breathin’ room.

Just a kid being stupid. The kid doesn’t run, doesn’t pull a weapon, just gives you some guff. That’s a win.

One more block, just one more. Maybe that cop’s not so bad. Maybe he does give a shit.

All right, kid, almost there. This wasn’t so bad was it?

Can’t believe it. Actually a blue uniform that asks questions first. Don’t think the worst. Gotta be a first.

You get home safe and sound, and I don’t even get out of the car. All’s well that ends well. The way it should be.

Whoa! What the fuck is that?! Man, that better not be.

Whoa, what’s that? No... that can’t be.

Mother fucker! You set me up! You blue bastard!

The back-up, you idiot. Fuck, I forgot about them.

Shit! Two of ‘em. Guns.

Get out of the car before he runs.

They gonna shoot me!

Dammit, leave the kid alone!

God-damn police.

“Back off! He’s all right”

All a set up. I did nothin’! Run, boy, run. They gonna shoot you. Run like you never run before!

Fuck! He’s running. “Put down your weapons! He’s harmless! Don’t shoot!”

He’s shoutin’. Run, mother fucker, run!

WACK! WACK! WACK! Shots ring and reverberate through the neighborhood.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *In 2020, there have been 4,115 shootings and 768 homicides in Chicago. West Humboldt Park is a neighborhood on Chicago’s west side where many shootings occur. The relationship between the police and the residents, teeters on hostile. Many of the victims are innocent bystanders and in a number of cases stray bullets find people sitting in their home minding their own business. “2 A.M. West Humboldt Park” derives from these simple facts. In order to make the story more dramatic I decided to portray a young man and a police officer by what was running through their minds at 2 A.M. instead of a normal literary narrative*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Doug Van Hooser’s fiction has appeared in Red Earth Review, Light and Dark, The Riding Light Review, Flash Fiction Magazine and Bending Genres Journal. His poetry can be found in Chariton Review, Poetry Quarterly, and Split Rock Review among other publications. Doug’s plays have received readings at Chicago Dramatist Theatre and Three Cat Productions. More at dougvanhooser.com.

POETRY

TRENCHES & Five (5) others...

By Joe **B**isicchia

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... I find Mister Bisicchia mystically uplifting, "...blind / as a cave of oilbirds, and yet get by. / Despite the darkness, the sonar in our spirit sings..." Oilbirds, the diabolin (French for "little devil" suggestive of their tortured cry). Their features and aspect, like an old souls, as I imagine Joe; the avian is one of the few species directly, and most closely, ascending from dinosaurs, Theropoda, like T-Rex. As children, how is it so many our possessed of a fascination for the prehistoric? As in later life a preponderance of similar simple minds (we and us) become avid birdwatchers. It is the one club I belong to, if you can call it that. And there is not a single, aged member—devoted to ornithology—that was not a fiend for dinosaurs in their evolving infancy. I know what you're thinking... What a colossal prattling, fecking digression. You could take away his keyboard and he'd still be tapping away ('til pill time) at something moot—but at least the mook would be mute. Back to Bisicchia and all his lustrous lines: "May we never forget what a heart is for." "She smiles a facade in breeze and speaks of things." Lo, so lofty praising for such soaring phrasing: "This is the time of saints and terrorists, and those awaiting awakening." "Scratch the surface of a soul and may you not see Satan in your fingernail." "Speak to me like I am selfish like you love my dream / as if all streets do not concern you as much as mine." To think you poor bastards had to skip all that shit about dinosaurs and bird watching to get to this...(Spacing & format is poet's own.)*

Trenches

We burrow deep in the darkness, blind
as a cave of oilbirds, and yet get by.
Despite the darkness, the sonar in our spirit sings

subsequent flight through the nocturnal drape.
Lines we have written, like poems soon forgotten.
May we never forget what a heart is for.

We burrow deep in the darkness, blind
if only to save the mind
and in it somehow find time, rhythm, maybe rhyme,

to set aside all that doesn't matter.
Life is what it is when guided by faith, walking the light
despite all the darkness.

If only to hold together a soul, as if a soul can be held,
as if anyone can be that way whole.

What may truly matter while we are a world at war?

May we never forget what a heart is for.

If only to hold us together, and in some way surrender.

As if a sunrise upon the earth reaches at the line,

we burrow deep in the darkness, blind
and into the heart and mind for us to remember.

And yet, so much darkness instead. But even then,

even like Milton's daughter, will someone give pen

so that paradise lost is no longer blind but written?

Even if a forgotten place, there is more than the mind.

After all, what is a heart for?

To make heaven of earth, despite the darkness,

refulgent light within the cave of oilbirds.

countenance

Going to the night, all this space awaits. This space, this face at mine.

At its edge, the cyclone fence is like teeth. Sign is posted and posed,
its lettering with a frown nonetheless but maybe a surface only afraid,

maybe mean, maybe a sphinx wishing to level in an instant a guillotine
rather than simply a warming hello or a long linear defense. It rattles.

She smiles a facade in breeze and speaks of things. If only I could read

her language, but I can dream, and allow myself to believe in my dreams.

Maybe we live in the bleakest night of hell, but there are holes to be seen
under so many stars, signs of peace, a sweeping smile on a familiar face.

Such a grace might be the most powerful thing in the world. Somehow
seems we overlook the icons of our day, the lone happy face, and then
stare at the long teeth of a roaring lion, but only when it is fast asleep.

Prisoner of War

This is the time of saints and terrorists, and those awaiting awakening.
Cold metal cage holds in the heart as every knight shivers.

Scratch the surface of a soul and may you not see Satan in your fingernail.
Somewhere instead, see desperate need to fill what is so very empty
deep within this grazed grail for everyone, and then ready to be released.

Scratch the surface of a soul and may you see indeed all that is of paradise.
May we not hide God in us unseen so very deep under our cold armor,
but free and wide as the sun, and at the face, for there we are, each.

Am I as you?

Yes, I am as you.

Your Fireflies

For your eyes, Day has made your fireflies.
Sun has stacked such tiny tanks as Day falls asleep,
inspiring them to be what they do in darkness deep,
and somehow speak.

Knight, appreciate Light for enabling this for these,
and for all those who have such needs.
Distinctive stars help the world endure bleakest wars,
each a sword cutting through the dark with spark,
not to eviscerate or to explode but to glow.

Do so as well, oh Knight, and withstand the Night,
not with sorrow or fear, but with invigorating fire.
And not with fire that cuts down, but enlightens.

Light delights. With such grace.

Sun seems hidden, but finds a way to remain,
and is gloriously seen in this glimmer and glitter
until its face fully rises again.

With acceptance in what you can now be,
go forth into the deep darkness,
and find fire in your fireflies, even if only within.

Fake News

Alert me of imposters who are counterfeiting rings,
the storytellers distressing all human beings deleteriously.
And as for you, veer from those big words I rather not hear.
I like comfortable magazines, and reading comfortably.

Tell me how my personal street may be paved in gold.
Maybe you can share surefire details via YouTube.
And like a lonely bug to a light, I am sold.
See, I may even buy a carcinogen from you

if I then own contentment of asphalt so to be never old.
And, listen to me right—regarding that glittering street,
make me somehow sense it was just as I foreseen.
No potholes, no cracks, no gum to the feet, just clean.

Speak to me like I am selfish like you love my dream

as if all streets do not concern you as much as mine.
And I will be sold. Our partnered victory.
See how easy it is to melt all that is filled with gold.

Unless I know better, wise enough no matter how young
or old to dig deeper into the soul and roll away the stone.

THE POET SPEAKS: *When I write poetry, such as these works, I just want to be an instrument for others to see their lives as poetry. Poetry is spiritual breathing. It comes forth from within, and because of that it is somehow connected wider to all that is, and all that ever was.*

Creativity is human. Creativity is of the divine. It is interwoven with timelessness. It unites us all with purpose, as if a portal from the present to forever. It centers upon all that we eternally are. Every one of us has this gift, if only open to it. Every single one of us. It is beyond words, but is indeed breath. It is something flowing from within. Deep in the DNA. Intertwined with all that is life, from Creation, somehow connecting us all as one. No one should deny this reality for themselves, or any other.

What inspires me most to write poetry is what inspires me to live. Relationship with God. Knowing that means oneness with all life, no matter how difficult that can be. Knowing Scripture as always contemporary. And realizing awareness of mercy, despite all our mistakes. And so, I strive to write poems like this, expressing this journey we share together, all of us. Hope you might see that in these poems and all the poems I write. But ultimately, I hope we all can live our poetry, now, as lives intermingled in majesty.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Joe Bisicchia writes of our shared dynamic. An Honorable Mention recipient for the Fernando Rielo XXXII World Prize for Mystical Poetry, his works have appeared in numerous publications with over 150 poems published. His website is www.JoeBisicchia.com.

The works of Joe Bisicchia have or will soon appear in:

Underwood Press, Thimble Magazine, Plath Poetry Project, White Wall Review, The Concrete Desert Review, pacificREVIEW, A&U, America's AIDS Magazine, Triggerfish Critical Review, Assisi, Anatolios Magazine, Claw & Blossom, The Avocet, Willawaw, Rabid Oak, Noctua, Revue Post, Aji Magazine, Other People's Flowers, Chronogram Magazine, The Paragon Press, Sentinel Literary Quarterly, Dark Wood, PKA Publications, Writing Knights Press, Gimmick Press, The Wire's Dream Magazine, FIVE:2:ONE, Vox Poetica, Hobo Camp, Junto Magazine, Mannequin Haus, The Bookends Review, Glass: Facets of Poetry, Entropy, Linden Avenue Literary Journal, Encircle Publications, Anti-Heroin Chic, Punch Drunk Press, Edify, Fourth & Sycamore, Philadelphia Stories, Muse-Pie Press, unFold, Coldnoon, Qua Magazine, The Tipton Poetry Journal, Time of Singing, Torrid Literature Journal, Diversion Press, The Wax Paper, The Path, The Poet's Haven, Sheepshead Review, Verse-Virtual, Balloons Lit. Journal, Kitty Litter

Press, The Inflectionist Review, Black Heart Magazine, Dark Matter Journal, Poets Collectives Anthologies, Poetic Matrix Press and others.

C-Section & four (4) others...4 4 4 others others

By Kira Stevens

WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... *I am convinced that the trick to writing engaged and accomplished poetry is to have a placed name as absurd as could be possibly imagined by the givers. So-much-so, that it seems many recognized and revered poets are often only known by their christened initials. (Who the hell is Edward Estlin...? Apparently he said, '...write poetry...it's the only thing that matters.') Others include: Pelham Grenville, Ronald Revel, Manjo Night, William Somerset, William Robertson; Staples, Lyman, Butler, Rudyard. Ipso facto, Kira Stevens' second name must be oh so ludicrous that she has sternly omitted even an initial. See how she follows my rules? She just might be 'the only thing that matters.' Her style is irreverently rhapsodic, peevish, dyspeptic—the yellow that blackens my bile...but enough of my humorless, gastric, intestinal laxative of fortitude, when we can track such inspired genius. Bitter yet, it's like reading a sold-out standup routine featured at Second City, Caroline's or The Comedy Store—not going to recite a single line, lacking her timing and context...Except: "I had a succulent once named / Kevin." I find there is a fine line between becoming an institution and being institutionalized. Kira should be wary... (Spacing & format is poet's own.)*

C-Section

I'm thinking about investing in
a cactus. I want to be a plant
parent. My friends post photos
of their babies every morning
perched by smudgeless windows.
I had a succulent once named
Kevin. I should have known
he wouldn't be safe. My cats

ripped him to shreds. For two weeks
I found bits of Kevin's body
everywhere. Under the couch.
In my sock drawer. Behind the fridge.
I traveled no tunnel
into this world. The doctor pulled me
from my mother's sliced belly
with her insides waiting patiently
to be placed back into their home.
When I'm sad, I play The Sims
in my head and decorate my future
library. I have a giant window
overlooking a field of poppies
I'm not in charge of keeping alive.
My circular desk is surrounded
by bookshelves instead of walls,
and I paint a mural on my ceiling
of Mother Mary with an apple
in her mouth, and the Cheshire Cat
smiling on her shoulders.
I'm already mad at my kids
for sneaking into mommy's room.
They rearranged my carefully customized
disorder and I'm furious. I was born
with a full head of dark brown hair,
blue eyes that never tinted away
from themselves, and lips pursed
kissing the air as if already
contemplating how they were supposed

to move. I used to live in a basement
with no access to the outside world.
I could pretend the clocks upstairs
read whatever hour I felt safest in.
My circadian rhythm forgot its name,
and vitamin D deficiency screamed
randomly when I was asleep.

In Greek Mythology, the map of Hades
is parallel in structure to human female
reproductive anatomy. The birth canal
is a cave through which
heroes have to find themselves.

It's too late for me to go back and retrieve
the hope I left inside the womb.
Pandora's jar was sewn back up.
I wonder what I'll choose to save
upon waking to fire
consuming my bedroom—which portions
of myself I'll shove into these pockets
before light so quickly switches from
dreamscape to daytime. I really wish
I wanted to rest, but I'm afraid
of everything changing behind my closed lids.

In second grade, I caught a wasp
in the corner of my eye, but then it flew
from my view. It was by the window
and then it wasn't—I rolled
my neck into an itch on the base
of my skull, and now the stinger's imprint

infinitely sizzles. The numbers swirl
back from twelve to show their cards
through my curtains' cracks and I am still
not tired. I take out my phone
to pass the time, and scroll through photos
of my friends spraying water
onto soft leaves they nurture
so tenderly. My cats lay with me, and rhythmically
dig their claws into my skin to let me know
it's time for me to feed them breakfast.

Small Talk

My printer's name is Brandon.
He's usually line leading
my List of Favorite Things.

I also have a List
of Unfavorite Things: each item on it
is ranked equal and opposite
to Brandon. Wet bread is the caboose
today and every other Wednesday.

Behind Brandon is a podcast
trapped inside an empty pill bottle. I self soothe
as I consume
concepts like "cosmic connective tissue"
and "luminosity," as they highlight
all of the ways

humans have been wrong
regarding the weight of a star.

Early in the morning
the smell of freshly cut grass
just hits different. My nostrils dig
the chlorophyllic swirls: green phantoms
of beheaded buds. My footprints
in single file follow my father's lead,
as he pushes the lawn mower
to slice a path before us both.

I forgot everybody
is biodegradable for a second.
A terrifying kind of beautiful
is Mother Earth's digestive system.
She's an hourglass
with sticky soil. She flips us up
and around ourselves
like a cyclic sweep: a cold switch bounce
from design to decay
above all the things
we take for granted
until the clock runs out
of space for us.

Zeno probably had sick
running shoes.

I imagine a child

with an identically blind passion
as a moon who snuck too close
to Saturn, and a grin reserved
for marathon runners and mothers.
Icarus broke through
the Roche Limit ribbon
and the Dog Star watched
indifferently.

Fiction is an epidemic
of innocent heels slipping
into Daddys' boots and racing
into blazing nothingness
under the maleficent guise of Fate.

Upon reaching the point at which
Phaethon knows
he's driven into death
the screeches of the chariot's grinding gears
harmonize with his muffled scream.

Hashtag Mood in Four Parts

I am lost in the labyrinth,
the minotaur is blind,
and his nose is stuffed up
so he only hunts me
with his ears
I am cursed
with that tickle in my throat

caused by a cough that desperately
wants to sing for all of
eternity

new coworker says
he's bored, tell him something
I say an octopus
is not the captain
of its tentacles:
each of them
has a mind of its own
he says
okay
and walks away

I like having a clear head and a healthy
body but also it's boring
and simple
and calm
and my anxiety doesn't know
what to focus on
so it's just
slowly becoming an armadillo on vacation
somewhere near a volcano
that's slowly erupting while sending
email updates to its victims
considerately
letting them know
they're all doomed

relatively soon

If Sisyphus is actually
a butterfly, mid fall
I bet he learns about his wings by accident
after bracing for impact,
grabbing his back,
and feeling little roots
budding out of his body
like white flags waving at mirrors
I wonder if he knows
how to rapidly grow
his feathers into full bloom
soon enough in time for him to
fly away and save himself
from all of the weight
he's pushed again
and again before it falls down
and crushes him with all
of his perseverance

Dream Homes

One time, a zebra wearing sunglasses told me to go fuck myself
and objectively speaking, I still think about that incident
way too frequently, especially because
it was like six years ago, and also because it didn't really happen.

I was standing outside of my house that wasn't actually my house,

but it was because my head said so, and I don't get to tell my world
where home is when I'm not looking.

Another time, more recently, a pack of wolves was hunting me
while I was hiding inside a decrepit little cabin I found
and trying desperately to blow out a flame
that was burning in the furnace, because I was afraid of death noticing I was home.

The fire wouldn't stop though, and so my life was forced
to leave itself exposed, and suddenly my heart got hit by the sound of the door
getting broken down and then the howling got closer and closer until I woke up,
and I told Twitter all about it.

My friend I met on the internet told me he read in a dream dictionary
that wolves in my head mean I'm feeling torn down, piece by piece,
and all I can say in response to that is
retweet.

I started thinking about dreams way before I was bombarded by these ones.
The least recent scene resonating in my memory is that of a rhino, wandering
around a backyard that didn't belong to me. I remember shouting
"what are you doing?" and it turned around, looked at me, and stated bluntly
I should mind my own business, but I didn't. I called the police. They did nothing.
I don't know why I found that surprising, and suddenly, this all somehow related to pizza
and the fact that instead of white sauce I ordered red, so none of this is ever going to make sense.

When the lights go out, my head lights up, and a circus parades throughout
my membrane. I am the victim and I am the villain. I wake up and I'm anxious,
and I don't have any reason, other than the fact that the world is scary

and my dreams are safe, even when they're nightmares, because everything
is temporary there.

Tomorrow, if I wake up, the first thing I'll do is make my bed,
and tell the world inside my head I'm not afraid of it today, rather
I'm the damn threat, because I'm going to love everything to death.

This head
this house
this home
is mine,
and I'm going to keep trying to enjoy living in it.

I wanna be included but also my mom had scoliosis

when I'm stuck in limbo I like
to have company to bend

backwards with while waiting

for this empty space to pass over
all of us maybe throw some dark

matter around like food fights

or riots or cosmic mental orgies

I'm picturing a bunch of insides

everywhere like new stains

on old carpets mixing with blunt
ashes rubbing into couch

cushions like vibrations braiding

themselves into genomes the same
way mono lies dormant waits

to pounce onto its next planet infect

everything with humanness call
the waste product a gift nobody

requested we keep calling home

phone numbers of old friends still
memorized for no reason listen

to expired dial tones vacancy

has a vaccine called closure none of us
wants to talk to we keep looking

for faces who never said bye sipping

from strange bottles hoping light is there
at the bottom hiding under messages

we wish somebody had sent before leaving us

here we can't let ourselves stop watching
the boundaries wrapped around everything

that shit tends to stretch without any warning

THE POET SPEAKS: *My interests in psychoanalysis and mythology play major roles in my writing process. As of late, my work has been strongly influenced by Robert Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy, Fernando Pessoa's The Book of Disquiet, and Maggie Nelson's Bluets. Through my poetry I aim to capture the content that drifts between my conscious thoughts—the "noise" in which the needle hides within a silent haystack. My philosophy behind creativity is to waste nothing—I learned to think this way by watching my grandfather eat chicken. Every scrap of paper is useful. Every experience is a piece of a puzzle. The random twists and turns create a universe. Poems are carefully crafted accumulations of the tangential exhaust which spews from a busy cognitive engine. Notice the dualities that naturally escape a wall of purposeful irrationality—the sneaky yin yang sign that always photobombs. I think humans are drawn to art that provokes one's instinctive tendency to seek balance. The eye needs something to want. When inspiration strikes, it is typically because I am not asking it to.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Hi hello greetings my name's Kira. I'm an MFA student at The New School in New York studying creative writing poetry. I think you guys are rad. I'm obsessed with anything involving mythology/philosophy/psychoanalysis/weirdness--and so according to our shared interests I think we should be properly acquainted.

I've attached a PDF of 5 poems for you to consider publishing. You can find more of my work on my website words4food.com



Kira Stevens

Writer / Poet / Artist

words4food.com

F reElaNce Edit O r ooo ooo ...

By Ziggy Edwards

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...* Ziggy Edwards is a dilly with a loft bed in Pittsburg, *Mount Pit?* PA. Claims to her distinction include and are no less limited by, “my carpeted kitchen, my ridiculous divorce.” A. A. Milne, quoting Winnie-the-Pu (a closeted Taoist practicing Daoism—an esoteric forking from Calypso music) ‘*a hug, said Pooh, is always the right size!*’ And a *snile* is one of those sneering smile I’ve grown so used to reflecting. I bet, *sans regret*, Ziggy has some experts in the light-to-dark art of the grinning grimaces, ‘Kissing the Wall.’ Here goes, “...its bright crack breathing / harsh and brilliant, ebbing paler now.” “...its lips worn to a white hole.” The two titles, ‘Lady Elaine Fairchilde’ and ‘Metapeanuts’ are tied for the record for the most lines I have ever highlighted in a single poem. If you don’t read them both, it would occur to me, you have no business on this site. If “the moon never closes its eyes,” neither does Ziggy Edwards... (*Spacing, format & font is poet’s own.*)

Freelance Editor

The old master told his class
that when I was young
I would sneak out the window,
down the side of my parents' house with bedsheets
tied together. He did teach me
back then but I wasn't creative enough
for any exit except the door. We both knew
he made up the story, but I still believe
he thought it was true.

I'm not protecting the old master's fantasy:
I prefer his version of my life,
the whole of which he hasn't told.
He visits my third-floor walkup with a stack
of manuscript pages. I sit
across the table and sip tea,

wondering what he thinks
of my carpeted kitchen, my ridiculous divorce.
Without comment, he writes a check.

Kissing the Wall

Sunlight survives in this room as small currents
stirred by hot wind blown in on travelers' rags.
From her shadow-logged couch the woman greets each
tired pilgrim in the long line, rinses away
the road's magnitude and peril with cozy
patter: *Oh, you're from Oxnard? So was I once.*
When I was a girl, a singer with your name
had fame among 12 billion souls. We never
met her, but we all danced a style miming sex
to pirated copies of her voice. She points
at the door to her right, its bright crack breathing
harsh and brilliant, ebbing paler now. *You're next,*
she tells the group. *Go ahead in.* They always
wipe their eyes, grinning like rescued castaways.
They all file past; each pauses before the taped
and glued portrait, its lips worn to a white hole.

Lady Elaine Fairchilde

Endowed by your creator
with wicked rosacea & resting bitch face,
you took up every irrational cause.

Now you're enshrined
near his sweaters & shoes
among the husks of good citizens.

We know he did the make-believing,
could have molded you all
into frictionless neighbors who never
provoked low rumbling notes
on Negri's piano.

Of a sizeable population
truth-serum'd by moving fingers,
you got the harshest hand.

O Lady Elaine, have you found peace
without that querulous voice?

Metapeanuts

"My creator wouldn't make me gay," Marcie announces to bulge-eyed humanoids peering through the classroom's fourth wall. She avoids Peppermint Patty, wears a red skirt, and often broods at a certain brick wall, her drumstick arms folded on the ledge.

Linus cuts school to stand nearby, reciting quotes and Bible verses to the strange observers while Sally cringes. Franklin tells the gang he wants to get abducted. He resembles the aliens more than anyone in this town of terrible dancers.

The little red-haired girl begs her mom for sleepaway camp. Everyone knows the bald kid likes her—and because she'll never return his gaze, she's coldhearted. No one knows her name. Snoopy remains unfazed.

Lucy won't be caught dead on Schroeder's piano; she'd be judged pathetic. Sometimes, in the inky black night, she sneaks out to meet Charlie Brown in the park. Only then will he try for the football.

Moon Myth

Shamans tell a moon myth:
it turned to watch us
and neither smiled nor frowned.

At the Sacred One's birth
its mouth fell open; it wept
tears that later crushed us.

How did it judge our cave fires,
plains crawling with herds,
burnt meat at the base of the monolith?

The shamans say we
were different that time; we made
birds gods could not imagine.

We ate with our mouths full,
wasted the wings with such pleasure
that the moon never closes its eye.

Distrust made the oceans die.
Our Sacred One is riding flames
through the heavens to smite out

that eye. They say we will know
the moment His Judgment arrives.

Otherwhere

They were wild and bored, not yet human, inhabiting ponds and forests beneath a weaver's silver hair. They lived and died without being born. And a young child at the surface stirred with a comb, annoying them in eddies of silt. The old weaver saw the child seeing tired animals bobbing on shallow waves, formless beings that were not yet human and could become anything. They loomed in her darkest ponds, hoarding snips of silver hair that drifted down.

She spawned her own forest despite fish in her bowels nibbling the walls. Despite the man waiting with a net in a clearing where trees stopped and water instantly vaporized. She was weaving herself a blank screen. A wall of sound made from howls wild beings make when they exit the trees, when a wave throws them on the beach and recedes violently to weave a tsunami. She was screaming herself awake.

Once, when I was that child sitting next to the weaver, I held her comb and extracted one long strand of silver hair from its tines. I tried fishing. But they'd met humans; they saw my face as a net. They sensed my name as a net and ignored the strand I offered as a ladder out of the loom. Instead I tied that silver strand to the frame and carefully descended. The old woman never noticed (or noticed my absence after it happened).

They welcome cold brackish water filled with silt and tiny bits of ourselves. She has no milk to lure them, just her eyes and her pity. She sighs before choosing another strand. It makes her happy to work on silk dresses I will never wear.

I met her oldest son near a no-man's land too far for tired animals. Her son went swimming in his clothes, which didn't make any sense. I told him it must have been cold that day, in the water, and he smiled. He said he escaped the trap. He asked me to return and tell the old woman a message. She wouldn't believe me. She'd watched psychics on TV.

He said it didn't matter: You don't have to believe truth. The message swims a frigid channel of months and years. Other beings will enter from the next room. Then in a moonlit womb the message can climb ashore, exhausted, collapse into waiting arms.

Peeing and Nothingness

I know and respect the silent pissers
whose heels barely quiver
in the next stall; who rustle toilet paper
to seem busy while we pour out our bladders
in champagne sopranos or glugging bleach gallons;
who wait in Zen-trance
while we wash our hands,
check our hair, creak the door open
with our elbows. Silent pissers understand
through shyness or witness protection
how everyone sings her own traceable song.

THE POET SPEAKS: *Creating or consuming art asks, "What's the point?" and guesses at an answer. In my free time I enjoy an omnivorous diet of books and spit out poems with the occasional side of attempted fiction. More often these days, simmering chunks of articles exposing small-scale corruption. Here's hoping poetry continues to cast a good spell on life's minutiae and make me less cowardly about truth—however that turns out.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Ziggy Edwards is the proud owner of a loft bed. She lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her poems and short stories have appeared in publications including *5 AM*, *Confluence*, *Main Street Rag*, *Illumen*, and *Dreams and Nightmares*.

Three (3) PoemS (poems poems poems)

By Elise ChEn

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... 'Elise Siregar Chen is currently a 11th grader.' Holy snapping arsenals, this schoolgirl's a sniper! And I have never seen the point in exclamations until now! "Remember the Saggy Baggy Elephant? / whose golden spine / was plucked from the yellow shelf..." I better brush up on my Kathryn and Byron Jackson. "tuck your neck while you tumble," "sway and hum along." "Oh dear wood fairy / Can you hear my knocks on wood?" 'Rally Up.' Believe her OR NOT, I just hope she has at least turned 17 by the dated of this publication...(Spacing, format and font is poet's own.)*

Ode to the Neighborhood Library

Remember the little free library?
with fresh yellow paint
and a bright red roof
Remember your small hands?
covered in dirt from the park
reaching out
to open the glass door
Remember the *Saggy Baggy Elephant*?
whose golden spine
was plucked from the yellow shelf
like a perfectly ripe
peach
Remember the tall bushes?
that envelop the fences
lining the sidewalk you walk on
making your own adventure
Remember the fire red leaves?
the ones that crunch under your feet
as you tried to flatten them
on the sidewalk
on the way into the larger library
they surround
Remember the dark green grass?
slightly wet from morning dew
wrapping around the library
like a little forest of its own
guarding the treasure within

Remember the smooth mahogany chairs?
scattered around inside
where you could sit for hours on end
where you could meet your friends
like an office
you wanted to grow up fast

Do you see the overgrowth on the fences?
left to run wild
they have swallowed the fences whole

Do you see the old mahogany chairs?
their sharp red color
now faded from the many people
who sat to rest

Do you see the little free library?
whose yellow paint is faded
and red roof chipped
though it's glass window still intact
and hinged door still functioning

Do you see *The Magic Treehouse*?
whose pages are slightly worn
from the many times you've read it
it now sits on the faded yellow shelf
alongside *The Saggy Baggy Elephant*

In the little free library

Skipping Stones

Rock-a-bye baby
in the curved wood's loose embrace
sway and hum along

Follow the music
stuck in the wind it shoves you
Feel the salty breeze

crash and crunch on sand
tuck your neck while you tumble
stand on stones on toes

Smooth black skipping stones
Nested inside your pocket
its gold now tarnished

chained to your pocket
It counts it's time stuck inside
Masked it waits alone

the siren's breeze comes
To the roof it flings the stone
the shingled sea shakes

Climb up the rooftop
here a mask long forgotten
The light overwhelms

beep beep in the sky
Hawk-like eyes stare down at you
dishes tilt their heads

concave it absorbs
the sweet words sent from above
convex times sits still

Superstitions

Oh dear wood fairy
Can you hear my knocks on wood?
Where did my luck go?
Protect me from the grey wolves
And from the true beasts, humans

THE POET SPEAKS: *Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I have had the opportunity to spend more time exploring my own neighborhood. I have been taking strolls around my block for my daily dose of fresh air, and one day, I was greeted with a familiar sight: I had passed by the library I always used to visit when I was younger. Seeing the library inspired me to reflect on my past and how much I have grown since those formative years spent checking out books by Shell Silverstein and Emily Dickinson. Through my poems, I hope to convey heartfelt emotions that foster a connection with my readers and inspire them to self-reflect. Recently, I have been experimenting with different types and styles of poetry. I decided to use an ode for this poem, not only to celebrate this library that impacted my early life, but also the experiences I've gained and my personal growth. Poetry allows me to offer others a chance to see through my perspective, as well as open my own eyes to see through the lenses of other poets. Each poem I read is a window into someone's ideas, emotions, and perceptions of the world. In that way, poetry bridges the gap between our differences and helps everyone understand each other better.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Elise Siregar Chen is currently a 11th grader. She loves English literature and enjoys writing poems and short stories. Elise also likes to draw: her favorite contemporary artist is Yayoi Kusama. She is an ambassador for Girls Helping Girls Period, where she helps and raises awareness for girls who do not have the means or access to personal hygiene products. She has published poetry in *Euphamism*, and *Poetry Quarterly*.

Rally Up

Do you feel my breath?
Help, it wavers through the wind
My voice blown away

Quiet, but I hear
It tickles my ear and calls
Running with the wind to you

Abandoned & Blinded...two (2) poems

By Melekwe Anthony

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...Melekwe Anthony is more than a malenky bit choodessny and a freely associating sprit...Nadsat. 'He hails from Lagos, Nigeria and believes in telling people's stories with their own eyes.' Keep your eyeball peeled anyway you can: Google (in the non-pejorative) his govoreets: "Thump! Thump!" "...the darkness that probes me." "...as stables of raindrops run their lanes..." "a man can only hide when there is space." Anthony is an "ever calling friend, if only you kept him longer." It's all too beautiful...*

Abandoned

On that edge. all felt is the noise heard
as stables of raindrops run their lanes
through your roof. a man can only hide when there is space.
you are hiding without one, manhood at question.
the wooden door cricks and ricks of hands
Palms that used them centuries old. but yours is missing.
It gradually fades like the hope in your eyes for company
the empire you were never sharing
no longer exists.
the desert you deserve is now losing sand and the scorching sun
seems lost in this uncertain sky
what space is missing?

Blinded

Thump! Thump!

Thump! Thump! is what I needed to hear.

The rains call me on this plague-less night
of gentle rocking branches and buzzing silence.

The walls feel different... like prickles and wrinkles under these small palms.

The clumsy floors underneath isn't holding upright
folding big toes rigid and unsteady.

Something is off. Smell it. Feel it.

"Father!... Father!" Silence.

Blistered man. Broken man. In the darkness that probes me. I can sense him.

staring through his presumably wrinkled nose at his failed and broken.

"Failed and Broken" He always said. Broken - his name for me.

Thump! Thump!

Thump! Thump!

My ever calling friend, if only you kept him longer.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I have been a consistent writer since 2018. I have authored many published poems including The Gaze, Abandoned, Spaces, Collateral, Blinded, the 2020 Dear*

Thomas! and many others. I have also authored the novel The Unwanted Guest to be released globally this year. Yet! I confess, it is not easy being a writer. In fact, the ability to tell an entire story, to relay a full experience within few lines and from the eyes of the first-person, is what makes writing challenging and intriguing. Edgar Allan Poe 's The Raven , Child by J.P Clark and Paradise Lost by John Milton have been my inspiration for many of my works.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Melekwe Anthony is a writer, a public speaker and a student union executive studying Mass Communication at University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He is also a former Associate Editor with The Warriors Bulletin, UNN. He hails from Lagos, Nigeria and believes in telling people's stories with their own eyes.

F our (4) poemS poems poems poems poems

By Howie Good

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...* “Now that an estimated 150 species go extinct every day, I try not to rush through my days.” I just love hyperbolic humor—when macrocosms collide with the micro-cosmic. Ash ram [unintended, punning, p-honic typo] Horton, now portrayed as a pink elephant, who swipes that clover in his trunk and a world at large unfolds, my tiny, little, diminutive mind expands to near walnut proportions; all my hopes and dreams and tropes and schemes are awash with awe. Don’t the best poets just cause you to reflect and all criticisms be damned? Steely dan’s have made my ears bleed too, their beat has spoiled a many naked lunch. “...a farmer sang about his favorite crop...” “...a nice, dark nothingness, which felt kind of cozy...” Hears Howie—you’d need a pushcart to manage Good’s genius... (Spacing is poet’s own.)

HOWIE GOOD’S latest collection of poetry, *Gun Metal Sky*, was published in February by Thirty West Publishing. Congrats dude!

The View from Here

I’m watering the indoor plants when the doorbell rings. It’s you, and you’re bleeding from an ear. “What happened to your ear?” I ask. You touch it. Your fingers come away with blood. “Steely Dan on the headphones,” you say. I don’t move, don’t even nod. Now that an estimated 150 species go extinct every day, I try not to rush through my days. And if, as sometimes happens, it feels like everything is speeding up, I’ll lie down on the floor and stare at the ceiling or out the window, my view a small thing but all my own.

A Poverty of Love

The guests looked on in complete bewilderment as my future parents exchanged what sounded like foreign wedding vows. Afterwards at the reception, a farmer sang about his favorite crop and then it was the best man's turn to speak. He had barely begun when my father interjected, "Spare us your life philosophy." The wailing that arose might have been especially invented for the end of the world. Everything was burning. People, drapes, carpets, tablecloths – everything. In years to come, my brothers and I would pick through the blackened ruins. Haven't you ever noticed that only the poor have dirty hands?

Lamentations

The faded label on the year-old bottle of painkillers warned that alcohol would intensify the effect, so I washed the pills down with vodka. Within half an hour, I drifted off and saw elite shock troops in the street, rubble everywhere, a trolley car burning. I saw a soldier smash Rosa Luxemburg to the ground with a rifle butt, saw him shoot her in the head and fling her body into the canal. There was a family of refugees as well, desperately working the oars of an unwieldy rowboat, while bullets splashed around them and the waterbirds tiresomely complained. Even in the dark, I could still see with my eye that didn't have blood in it.

Death Be Not Proud

They told me I was dead for three minutes. I got hit by a car.
There was a nice, dark nothingness, which felt kind of cozy,

but I also knew it was the end, so I'd better not. Like, I wasn't
supposed to be enjoying it, because if I embraced it too much,

I would die. I looked up, and there was a bright light with a hand
poking out making the “come here” gesture. I walked toward it

and woke up in the hospital. They told me I almost died. I said,
“Oh yeah?” Then they offered me a grilled cheese. Doritos, too.

N.B.: This poem was collaged from accounts of near death experiences posted at
<https://www.buzzfeed.com/stephenlaconte/pronounced-dead-then-resuscitated-stories>

THE POET SPEAKS: *The prose poem is a scorned and marginal literary form, which makes it rather ideal for my purposes. I'm a kind of anti-realist. What actually happened is of less interest and importance in my writing than how whatever happened felt. It's for this reason that I try not to realistically re-create or record experience, but to make each prose poem an experience in and of itself. Prose poems are maps to areas untraceable by other means.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Howie Good is the author most recently of *Stick Figure Opera*: 99 100-word Prose Poems from *Cajun Mutt Press*. He co-edits the online journals *Unbroken* and *UnLost*. Two versions of his story **Eve of Destruction** were published in **Issue 6**.

TEN (10) poemS poems poems poems

By Strider **M**arcus Jones

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Strider Marcus Jones refines a language all his own. While the arrested of us employ our word into service to project our modest biddings, communicating as best we can. His are formed to dance, prance, pluck and strum. Singing and swinging as though they are truly enjoying his penetrating, orphic-like process; happy in their work as they leap and bound off the pages and back. Revealing themselves as they spring from his distinct and galvanizing lexicon, anxiously awaiting to be called into action, to snap to attention, and rejoice in a festival of words and featured imagery. But don't settle for my pitch, screwballs mostly throw junk—spin googlies. Not Jones, he's all cricket, he'll bowl you over with lithe precision and lightning tempo. (Spacing, font & format poet's own.)*

MAVERICKS

you taste of cinnamon and fish
when you wish
to be romantic-
and the ciphers of our thoughts
make ringlets with their noughts
immersed in magic-
like mithril mail around me
stove dark forest, pink flesh sea
touchings tantric-
make reality and myths
converge in elven riffs
of music, so we dance it-

symbols to the scenes
of conflict, mavericks in dreams
that now sit-
listening to these pots and kettles
blackening on the fire
of rhetoric and murderous mettles-
before we both retire
to our own script.

TWO MISFITS

it was no time
for love outside-
old winds of worship
found hand and mouth
in ruined rain
slanting over cultured fields
into pagan barns
with patched up planks
finding us two misfits.

i felt the pulse
of your undressed fingers

transmit thoughts
to my senses-
aroused by autumn scents
of milky musk
and husky hay
in this barn's faith
we climbed the rungs of civilisation
so random in our exile-

and found a bell
housed inside a minaret-
with priest and muezzin
sharing its balcony-
summoning all to prayer
with one voice-
this holy music, was only the wind
blowing through the weathervane,
but we liked its tone to change its time.

THE BLOOD THAT MAKES US BLACK

imagine yourself,
in a photo-fit picture
with every nothing that's new-
minus in health,
quoting icons and scripture
under the whole black and blue.

optimum dreams
turn out fake in the mirror
facing what's been like fallen heroes-
in so many scenes
like a ghost who is giver

passing on wisdom, who knows-

the blood that makes us black
of two from one,
is schooled by fungus fortunes
and faiths old hat
to be sold on-
like tamed-trained gangs, making golden dunes.

VISIGOTH ROVER

i went on the bus to Cordoba,
and tried to find the Moor's
left over
in their excavated floors
and mosaic courtyards,
with hanging flowers brightly chameleon

against whitewashed walls
carrying calls
behind gated iron bars-
but they were gone
leaving mosque arches
and carved stories
to God's doors.

in those ancient streets
where everybody meets;
i saw the old successful men
with their younger women again,
sat in chrome slat chairs,
drinking coffee to cover
their vain love affairs-
and every breast,
was like the crest
of a soft ridge
as i peeped over
the castle wall and Roman bridge
like a Visigoth rover.

soft hand tapping on shoulder,

heavy hair
and beauty older,
the gypsy lady gave her clover
to borrowed breath,
embroidering it for death,
adding more to less
like the colours fading in her dress.
time and tune are too planned
to understand
her Trevi fountain of prediction,
or the dirty Bernini hand
shaping its description.

THAT BLACKSMITH FELLOW

crumpling
crumbling
heart

war thump
peace pump
stall start

cave hunting
and gathering
in groups

to farms with crops
and hooped livestock
drink beer, eat meat and soups.

that blacksmith fellow,
with fire and forge, hammer and bellow,
is still the alchemist-

malleous like his mettles
when everybody settles
into civil lists.

in us now,
the subliminal plough
sets our furrows footsteps-

so summer's run and winter's plod,
with, or without god
in and out of upsets.

IN MAID'S WATER

we've left the well-footed
road,
the rutted
and rebutted
road
of shadows cast
by towered glass.

opened closed curtains
for fusty moths,
chanted white spells with Wiccan's
goths;

left pictured
rooms and halls-
become un-scriptured
hills and squalls-

in maid's water
pouring down her
erect chalk man,
like a wild gypsy,
love tipsy
partisan,
smelling of cinnabar
and his cigar,
swirling
like whirling
clouds
while the changed wind howls.

THIS IS THE FIELD

this is not the field
for truth to grow in.
it's furrowed lips are sealed
with knowing
nothing can sing
in the wrong wind.

the crop is stunted
self expression blunted
opinion gagged
and head sagged
waiting for the final blow
from the farmer's shadow.

the field hands
cut to His commands
and every leathered face
has served in it's place
like all the others, for centuries
in these peasant penitentiaries,

without bolting
or revolting
in union, except for Loveless's Tolpuddle few,
who knew what to do
but were jailed, or transported
and thwarted.

WATER AND MIST

let the world do what it does,
and when the desert
comes for us
we will be water-
sow the seeds of new ideas
replace the wars and fears
of decadent thrones
spying on the homes
of those they slaughter.

bring on the people's revolution,
that returns our stolen
land into our hands

from these swollen
fat cats, with their final solution
and fascist FEMA plans.

let the world do what it does,
and when the guns
are turned on us
we will be mist-
eclipsing everything they've done
when we resist.

strike them like ghosts
in the halls of their hosts,
topple their temples of sin-
dissolve all their banks,
then their missiles and tanks,
leave no corrupted survivor-
cleanse what's within
for a new way to begin
by severing each head from this hydra.

THE DOOR

the door
between skyfloor
topbottom

is rankrotten

portalbliss
or abjectabyss.

it contains conversations
confrontations,
hiding loves two-ings
in lost ruins-

shuts us inside our self
with or without someone else.

we,
the un-free,
disenfranchised poor
have no bowl of more-
only pain
on the same plain
as before,
homeless
or in shapeless boxes,
worked out, hunted, like urban foxes-
outlaws on common lands
stolen from empty hands.

files on us found
from gathering sound
where mutations abound
put troops on the ground.

MIND'S AND MUSK

so now
we both came
to this same
branch and bough-
no one else commutes
from different roots.

me carrying Celtic stones
with runes on skin over bones-
and you, in streams
on evicted land
trashed ancients panned-
our truth dreams
under star light crossing beams.

in here, there is no mask
of present building out the past
with gilded Shard's of steel and glass
shutting out who shall not pass.
the tree of life breathes
a rebel destiny believes-
we are minds and musk
no more husks and dust.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I like the company of people but prefer solitude. I like to listen to people talk, the way they see it and say it. For me, poetry spans our past, present and future. These poems, and those in my books, are about the themes of love, relationships, peace, war, racial, economic and sexual equality, cultural integration, poverty, mythical romance, the magic of childhood and experience of growing old as a Bohemian maverick. The strings of chance and consequences meld with music and art in Spinoza's orderly chaos of the universe.*

Life is hard and uncertain for most of us now, but also rare in our corner of the universe, so I strive to express my own understanding of it. Thinking time is my creative cove. My English teacher, Anne Ryan inspired me to write poetry when I was thirteen. The poems have grown with me and reflect much of who I am now. Some poems sleep for years. Mere jumbles of words, themes and rhythms in subconscious gaseous clouds. Their form and meaning evolve in Spinoza's orderly chaos. Other poems just happen, triggered by a single word or phrase, a sound, smell, or shape that relates to something from our past, present, or future. Writing a good

poem makes me feel like the artist who can paint, or the musician who can play - joy in creating something that others enjoy and feel inspired to try doing themselves.

My first poetical influences were the Tin Pan Alley lyricists and composers like Sammy Cahn, Cole Porter and Rogers and Hart. I love the fun, rhythm and interplay between lyrics and music. Bob Dylan, Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen influence my poetry in the same way, allowing me to experiment with metaphor, form and rhythms.

Relationships and love are one of the main themes in my poetry. Two books which have travelled with me through life are Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy and Tess Of The D'urbervilles by Thomas Hardy. Tolkien's Lord Of The Rings trilogy is a big influence on some of my work.

My favourite poets who have influenced my work include: Shelley, Keats, Yeats, Auden, Dylan Thomas, Bishop, Szymborska, Langston Hughes, Plath, Art Crane, Larkin, Forough Farrokhzad, Neruda, Rumi and Heaney.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Strider Marcus Jones – is a poet, law graduate and ex civil servant from Salford, England with proud Celtic roots in Ireland and Wales. A member of The Poetry Society, his five published books of poetry <https://stridermarcusjonespoetry.wordpress.com/> reveal a maverick, moving between forests, mountains, cities and coasts playing his saxophone and clarinet in warm solitude.

6 (six) poems poems poems 6

By **V**amika Sinh**A**

WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... *Can you imagine living in Abu Dhabi (or Singapore for that matter) and attending NYC?—Sinha has been served thick slices of world class cities. Being rarely welcomed, I am not well travelled; Envy is my constant companion as Temperance is the enemy. Valmika is our valkyrie muse. This line rocks, “i am a girl so i am paper under scissors.” It is our great-good fortune she has quite the killer quill over that subjected paper. “i am a history extinguishable” Burgeoning, able, distinguished, she has a lot to say so I’ll be brief, but feast your eyes on these lines: “asking for the planting of flowers and flags” Offspring and matrimony? “people think of me / with winged eyes; / & mind slanted / towards the sky.” “caterpillar / hair on unshaved shins & / home left behind...” “she wears time. Why / is a woman defined / by the architect?” “bright and asking for attention / like a bruise or /a girl.” What to leave in, what to leave out? Celestial, ethereal, superlative, this woman makes the puddle-water I lap quench like an ambrosial elixir. I admit it, I’m in it for the money, but she just might cause me to commence loving this little gig... Her works are surfeit with lines you can’t forget, a read you won’t regret...*

(To keep the poet’s spacing and format, each poem starts on a separate page. Please scroll down.)

alaska

maybe columbus and i have more in common; both arrived at the wrong continent.

didn't i fall into this birth, edged from one world to the next? didn't i get me, a country like that?

i am a girl so i am paper under scissors. didn't he come and cut me up? i am a girl so i am a history extinguishable. didn't he come and set me alight? make my skin known to me. make my skin seen. soft and brown, like earth. earth cupped in the palm, kissed. earth that grows orchids and thorns, houses petals and dead. earth yearning for hands, spreading beneath, settling roots like silk spider webs. i am a girl so i am a country, asking for the planting of flowers and flags. come. i am all raging and sea in between. make the mistake, mis-name me. i am a girl so i am in the habit of errors, errors made on my body. i am a girl so i am only trying, to make the errors of your hands into homes.

at 16, i read a book about a girl called alaska. she pointed at a map, looking for herself. the aleut word "alyeska" means "that which the sea breaks against." i too am driftwood,

poem without anchor. i too am a girl, history buried beneath snow like pain smeared with anesthetic. a margin. yearning for space yet weighted by men and their gravity. a smaller moon nodding to the sun. in orbit.

one day, i will give birth. at 16, she will begin to name herself, in a way we can only do for ourselves. she will search her lines. i will lead her to the ocean and teach her how to draw. in those indigo years, she will take her hand to my neck. feel for the jugular, its rhythm. she will take scissors to paper, how men sink knives into continents, and make herself many worlds. new borders and seas and soil and songbirds. fragments gathered like flowers, tectonic plates like gap-toothed jigsaw. cupped, kissed, grown, anchored. letting down roots that men can try to name but never govern.

self-portrait as airplane

people think of me
with winged eyes;
& mind slanted
towards the sky.

they build me
into a metal
swallow of a girl &
i keep secret
the spread of dream
that makes my body
gold &
soar.

they don't know
how i fly, don't
know how fly
this woman is, how
i could lick cream
scoops of the sun
like a god.

so i look down
at my arms tied & painted white
body, caterpillar
hair on unshaved shins &
home left behind
like a cracked eggshell –
i know i need
to find me

press down into soil skin
soft for a new country, pick
into the brownness:
leave.

roma

(mexico city, mexico)

this life opens with a sheet of water. clear as windowpane. in the glass, a tiny plane cuts across the frame. upwards. a bird sets alight. while an indigenous housekeeper in mexico city parts the curtains of cold water on her mistress' floor, my mother lowers the blinds in my childhood home. the two women take mops to the ground, as if to grind away the debris of time, the scud built up by the moment. clean. it doesn't rain enough at home. my mother did not know, could not even stab a finger at the map when she was flown there. she has remained for 25 years. there is always water spilled on our floor.

at night, when i am trying to dream, el mar finds me. foams at my teeth, at the edges of my tongue, gathers in my eye and crystallizes at the duct. becomes wax when i wake, and melts down my face when i try shake it off. dirt has gathered under my fingernails and dust makes new sky on my floor. i live in a desert. clean now.

in the city, clio lives in colonia roma and takes care of a home. as the hosiery waves from the clothesline in surrender, she talks in mixtec to her roommate, about the sea and falling in love. she says, he left, didn't say the right words. el mar laps at her womb. birth will come soon, always comes, with death on the other side. what matters is the middle, the hyphen we attach. between mouths, between tongue and word, between womb and air, eye and horizon, me and her.

in my indigo years, i will start thinking of the jugulars she cut for me. when i wash the dishes, sun glinting clean on ceramic, i remember. she didn't do it well, the crowning. so they cut me out, islanded me. my skin nods toward blades like sunflowers reach for their namesake. my mother and i carry scissors everywhere. every where. hers is a ghost, edging at the womb like memory. i never met my brother. we are alone. i am a doll made of paper, precious breakable crane, folded on the edge of a continent. the scissors made me; i carry my maker to tug at the seams of my lands. like el mar, i am ceramic shard, only asking to fit.

have you ever seen the veins of a carrot? fine-sanded, like arms of tired woman. clio doesn't carry the child. she never wanted to. when i am walking through roma, i think of her looking out of a window she has just cleaned. she gazes toward a future where there is no weight. where there is no burden of her name. he didn't do it well, her crowning. didn't say the right words. left. roma is full of eyes, leaking like wine poured for masters after dinner. the women wish themselves away in a separate room, coffee in their laps, language spilling down the sides. they talk about the men. in between syllables, el mar dribbles through their teeth. there is starvation, for a world without weight and yet heavy with love. the men laugh in the next room.

the man will hand you a fruit, the coldest orange like a clear spring. he will take your fingers, help you peel the layers. he will guide your tongue, conduct it as symphony, and music will sound sweeter, sudden. he will tell you, this is what you taste. curved flesh

*like a lute, a globe on strings – heart. this is how you bite, into the heart, he will tell you.
hunger is only part of being woman. you will eat so much, so much you will drum with
pain. you will eat so much your body will feel hollowed. it isn't your fault. it wasn't your
fault. hunger is only part of being woman. hunger is wanting to be alive.*

restoration

(istanbul, turkey)

at 21, i visit istanbul for the first
time. palimpsest
city. in the hagia sophia, i try to stop
thinking about a man. i do.
the building is a site
how a body is. in repair.
she wears time. why

is a woman defined
by the architect? he builds her
into clock. myth. muse. eye
sore. canvas. country. sight.
temple. every thing but
just a woman. i too fall
prey to how time has bent
prostrate on my body. there, among the stains
made of glass, light
gentle as fingerpads, scaffolding
surges like smoke: aftermath
of hands. somebody

burned her, snuck
under her skin & left
ruin. when i walk in
to the building, fingers
carrying the stink of the dying
body of a cigarette, sophia
stretches before me, scars
& constructions, tattoos & light
coming out her gap teeth, isn't she just
asking for love –
like me. like me too.

0 shades of blue

1.

veins

thinner than breath

or whispers spread

by accident

like cake batter

on a newborn's

eyelid.

2.

clichés,

like the sky.

or messages burning

in cellphone light

from someone

you think you might

love. maybe.

3.

swimming.

4.

a girl a bird an airplane or god

swiping paintbrush:

the veins of a city

fallen in snow.

bright and asking for attention

like a bruise or

a girl.

5.

losing.

again.

6.

lungs spilled on the bathroom

floor; hollowed space where

someone once lived

but moved out.

the pulse does not stop,

syncopated.

though no air is left

and love passed away
dream-like
with the clouds
when you were not looking
down at your messages.

7.

meditation.

8.

laughter lodged
in the voicebox.
the color "no".
ink blotting everything
unsaid. strange fruit
tangled up in the tear
duct. never poured
nowhere but
on the phone.

9.

a duvet never warmed.
a mass of dream

skimmed
by the seagull.
an ocean
left to warm
in the sun.

10.
me, and
a little you.

THE POET SPEAKS: *These poems are all taken from my undergraduate thesis project, a collection of poetry and creative nonfiction bridging cosmopolitanism and women of color. The book is titled Cranes, after the Solange song “Cranes in the Sky” and also evokes other interpretations of the word: the bird, connoting freedom; the paper origami, referring to the fragility of women of color in modern society; as well as construction cranes, which refer to sites of building. My poems, and this project at large, suggest that, in conversation with Audre Lorde’s “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”, that women of color can thus use the creative act as a way of rebuilding that house, and her sense of agency and autonomy over her identity in a society that so frequently oppresses and stifles her freedoms. In essence, this is exactly why I read, write, create; to assert agency and beauty upon those things that may destroy me.*

As an artist, I am heavily influenced by jazz, hip hop and alternative musicians like Mac Miller, Solange, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Billie Holiday and Kali Uchis. The writers that most filter into my work include Gloria Anzaldua, Teju Cole, Elif Batuman, Jia Tolentino, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Ling Ma, Claudia Rankine, Theresa Hak-Kyeong Cha, Rebecca Solnit, Marjane Satrapi, James Baldwin, Fatimah Asghar, Safia Elhillo, and my own thesis mentor and phenomenal poet Tishani Doshi.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Vamika Sinha is a writer, editor, photographer, and magazine journalist currently based in the UAE. She holds a B.A. Hons. in Literature & Creative Writing from NYU Abu Dhabi, and is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Postscript Magazine. Her work has been published in The Independent, Affinity Magazine, and KGB Bar Literary Journal, among others.

SLIME VIDEOS & other poems

By Sarah ColoN

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...S. Colon is a phrase-coining, page-turner (two of those seven dirty words Carlin says you can never say on criticism): The other five that apply are fain, feign, sinn feïn, vain and so fine. : “when something common and homely / brightens, then shakes with radiance.” What is she talking about here? Some ladies’ cosmetic? A jar of hand cream, should I know? is it obvious to everyone else? My woeful lack of comprehension for all things manifestly self-evident is sadly chronic and likely terminal—she lost me after “four-inch,” but I love it. You’ve got to read the words that surround this couplet, “Show him the flowers on the mango tree, / which hasn’t bloomed for two years.” Commanding that we are all of us each suppliant, in the least, to Fate. “tell him if this much blossom can rupture / the salty green, anything is possible.” ‘...water come to me eye,’ Liza, eclipsing Saturn’s moon. Thank goodness for ‘Tax Day’ “April is / poetry and taxes month...” Taking me back, Colon’s bran of poetry is a must read—(Spacing, font & formatting is poet’s own.)*

Slime Videos

We watch them
on a four-inch screen:
female hands with nails lacquered
like fresh linoleum, each finger tapering
down to its colored square. The slime sits,
contained in plastic jars like perfume bottles:
here a hot air balloon, there a folded parasol
unfold to release swirling colored plasmas.
The fingers dive. They pinch containers of seed
beads, sequins, sparkling glitter, upending each
into the slime. A tube of lipstick, a square of rouge,
land on the gelatins which barely quiver. The fingers
hover, their green waxed tips building suspense
from the air, five inches of nothing between them and the slimes,
then fold, birdlike, and fall toward the gelly’s edge.
The colors stretch, they pleat. A shimmery red whorls over
mayonnaise white, sequins and waxes collapsing underneath.
The fingers pull it bubble thin: the slime a window to the slime,
glimmer of gem and glitter beneath. It’s sun on water,
stirred blades of grass, the sound of breaking underneath your feet,

and my daughter loves it. Manicured hands choreographing
a galaxy, this substance, neither solid nor liquid, the way soap bubbles refract
light into color, a sharp intake of breath, when something common and homely
brightens, then shakes with radiance.

When Breaking the News to a Teenager With a Terminal Illness

Do not say, "Everyone has an expiration Date."
Foreshadow nothing. Make unreasonable demands:
tell him to watch his salt; discuss plans for college.

Make him pause his video game
and come outside. Point out the mockingbird.
Tell him it often sings all night.

Show him the flowers on the mango tree,
which hasn't bloomed for two years.
Make plans to cook and can the yellow flesh

this winter. Tell him brackish means a mix
of saltwater and fresh, that both alligators
and dolphins can swim here. Stuff the canoe

full of pillows and row him around the mangrove island.
Take him to the place where the spoonbill alights,
pink and clumsy as a magnolia flower;

tell him if this much blossom can rupture
the salty green, anything is possible.

Tax Day

April is
poetry and taxes month,
fitting what you make
that's taken (tax, toll, tithe)
with what feeds you--
thirty percent to IRS
minus the child tax credit
(there are so many children).
My share paid in sleep,
weariness, and worry.
It's always green here but April
is not hurricane season
and Lord, but the green
isn't cruel. Life hurts
when it's starting
and when it's ending:
white stones cutting through
the gums, crocus buds
erupting. The children
knock into my bed,
and an eddy forms deep
in my belly, the inward scream
that makes me cover my ears
and sob silently.
In mothering so much is taken.
I cook resentfully, steam
the rice with sighs.
We filed our taxes last week.
I made chicken tonight.
My children make me
happy, and also unhappy.

Cassandra Edifies Brian's Wife

Listen: you cannot save him.
Your lids will shutter. Sleep comes for you
like a juggernaut, poor untormented thing—
you'll sink into it like a child dippy on honeyed milk.
You'll let your guard down when he dozes but his mind will
torment him awake an hour later, and there you will be,
snoring, while he wanders the dark hallways. Even
if you manage one caffeine-fueled night,
you'll collapse the next, or nap for half
an hour. You will be at work, with
the children, or sleeping, while
he practices hangman's knots
and researches hemlock. You
can't prevent this alone, and
nobody will believe you nor
help you keep watch.
Sleep, child. Practice
acceptance.

We Used to Walk a Mile to School in the Snow

We used to stand
shoulders touching
in elevators, on the subway.
“Like sardines,” we’d say.
We used to fear a stranger’s
breath only for its humid
odors, its hot closeness.
“Breathing down my neck”
was not a phrase for brushes
with death. We used to greet
with open palms, hold hands
with strangers, saying “Nice
to meet you.” We’d catch
sneezes and coughs in our mitts
like baseballs, wipe noses
on sleeves, tease the person
who kept jellied alcohol
behind their monitor or wiped
a keyboard before use.
We left bathrooms so cavalier,
passing our paws under faucets,
skipping soap, flinging droplets
everywhere. We’d kiss babies
on the mouth. We’d cram
like little fish around a table,
singing off-key, a flaming dessert
walking toward us. We’d bend
low over the flames, use breath
as extinguisher, blowing
until all that’s left was smoke.
Then we would cut up the cake,
passing out pieces to everyone.

Fencing

Start with a twining of cables
punctuated by steel thorns.

Stretch it all around the perimeter,
by twos or threes,
anchored at wooden posts.

Now, peel them apart:

Plant your hiking boot
against the bottom thread,
stranding it to the dirt.
turtletail your hand inside your flannel
and pull the second seam up, hard.
scuttle through like a garter snake.

Leave a little hair on the barbs.

THE POET SPEAKS: *My own journey as a poet began with the idea that poetry should only be written about the things poetry is often written about—love, nature, the elements, beauty, hope, despair. Boring, everyday events like watching YouTube videos or filing taxes didn't seem to have any place in poetry.*

As I grew as a writer, and read more poets, this idea changed. A.E. Stallings writes beautifully about her children's glitter ("Glitter") and buying cheap folding chairs for a new home ("After a Greek Proverb") and Ted Kooser has a poem entitled "In the Basement of a Goodwill Store," which is set exactly where you'd think from reading the title. In one writing workshop I attended, some of my favorite poems were by a car mechanic who compared a car's engine to her relationship and wrote about the music of pistons.

I think everything has a place in poetry—it's not the subject that makes the poem, but the attempt to see deeper than the surface of the subject, and things that would initially seem unpoetic might have the greatest potential for poetry because their depths are un-plumbed.

I began this series of poems as a group, part of a collection about domesticity and motherhood. It's an exploration into everyday life, my personal attempt to look deeper into the everyday, the mundane, and find the beauty, joy, or despair inscribed there.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Sarah Colón is a poet and educator from the American West who spent most of her childhood in Montana as a second-generation member of a religious cult whose members were preparing for impending nuclear disaster. A mother of four, she has worked in the food service and childcare industries while freelancing as an editor and copywriter. She currently

teaches high school and lives with her partner and their blended family of six children in Largo, Florida. Previous publications include *The Examined Life* and *Flash Fiction*.

CITY of DESTRUCTION

By RoberT Barry ScoTT

WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Robert Scott's poems have been published posthumously. It is fascinating and disconcerting to wonder when he wrote them. They appear as present now as they must have been then. It instructs us, I mean me, I know you all know, that Love, political strife, oppression and are desire for creative expression are timeless. Take a look... "Ruffle and crackle papers in a pile. . . / Must keep that smile, must keep that smile. . ." 'Let us go then, you and I, [through]' "[the] dark, littered alleys; spotted oblongs and triangles of bright / Geometries of light. . . ."

Senior Editor CHARLES writes... These poems did not reach us through the usual submission route. They were passed to us by the late poet's vigilantly curious about life wife (legally), soul mate (metaphysically). She asked us to take a look. Tom, Hez and I all agreed they were something special. Robert never published them during his lifetime, and though cherished by those close to him, they had been put away, unseen and unread by all but his family. Robert was a special literary personality and among the stars in his constellation is the enviable one of mentoring Canadian fiction writer Alistair McLeod whose luminous *No Great Mischief* is, by general consensus internationally, regarded, like Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig*, (*Death in Venice*) as a perfect novel—everyone involved knowing how risky it is to say that but holding firm nonetheless. The poems you are about to read, especially the overwhelming 'City of Destruction' project both a strong sense of integrity and tested command of craft. We feel privileged and gratified to bring them into the light. Since this is a posthumous publication, there is no author's note. (Spacing and format is poet's own.)

CITY OF DESTRUCTION:

Afternoon

I

Dark, littered alleys; spotted oblongs and triangles of bright
Geometries of light. . . .
Dark, ruttled alleys; rotted rancids and acrids of smell,
Chemistries of hell. . . .

Tarred roofs quiver, shimmer in searing heat;
Raspy, rusted eaves cling to the bleak walls. . . .
Dry . . . parched . . . dry
A barely perceptible . . . fissure makes it way down
The wall in a zig-zag direction,
Until it becomes lost in greasy puddles.

Flapping eternally testing vents suck in air;
Fetid fumes. . . .
Sweaty bodies absorb sweaty air absorb sweaty bodies

Tick-tick-ta-tack-tack-tick-tick . . . ping. . . .

Dear Sir:
In your letter of the 14th instant. . . .

Ruffle and crackle papers in a pile. . . .
Must keep that smile, must keep that smile. . . .
Cracked lips . . . parched mouth
Oh God! It's hot . . . hey! It's nearly five o'clock.

II

Lidless eyes look out of gray, crumbling faces, jammed. . . .
Spectral, yawning faces in the grotesque crowd, crammed. . . .
(Come in under the shadow of this bleak wall)
Up a time-worn stair, down a dark littered hall. . . .

No you're it no you're it no you're it no

Johnnie! Charlie! Eddie! Get in here
Quick! It's time
For supper!

Ah, heck! It ain't even six o'clock!

Get in here this minute!

Scared feet rush into the shades;
Searing heat is crushed -- it fades.

III

Red-tinted panes paint the kitchen in eosin, bloody;
Soup bubbles slowly, like water to wash clothes in, muddy;
The greasy madre lays out food in tins;
A shabby, spotted dress -- an encasement for her sins.

A table, centered lonely in the Room, and chairs. . . .
A lonely man in shirt-sleeves puffs his pipe, and stares.
Corners forget their angularity and stray.
Food smells lose their similarity and stay.

IV

He doles out scraps to the assembled queue
Of carnivorous mouths.
One of them spits in the corner and mutters:

"Nil habet infelix paupertas durius in se
Quam quod ridiculos homines facit."

Mummers don the tallit for the Torah,
(No need now, for en-tout-cas)
The Carmagnole, red wine, and effervescence;
"There will be time for consenescence."
A mob surrounds the solitary prophet

Night
I

Millesimal droplets splatter a millenium in time,
Pelting placebo. . . .
Lone lovers, cringing from the holocaust,
Slop through the oozy earth -- figures lost --
Dart into the quiet dankness behind a door,
Slip slowly, clutching for warmth, to the floor.

"What are we doing? What are we doing?
"What doing?
"What?
There is no answer.

Tarred roofs shiver, glimmer in a cold light;
Damp, mucky eaves snake along the bleak walls. . . .
Wet . . . soaked . . . wet. . . .
The fissure rapidly widens. . .
The mighty walls rush asunder. . .
And the deep and dank slime. . .
Closes over the fragments.

II

They all stop and it is dark.
Calmness falls on wreckage, stark.
Dripping bones round out of the ditch;
Tolling midnight bell of sombre pitch
Tumbles down the shiny streets;
Moonglow breaks through misty sheets.

The Dictator:

He takes freedom
And throws it down,
Crushing it under his heel.

He cannot see
That somewhere,
In some dark deserted street.
A single flower blooms
And all the world blooms with it.

Now that April's Here:

All nature bends beneath the scornful stare
Of Winter's cold glass eye, fixed so cruelly
On Spring's modest form, it brings the sweet blood
Blushing to her cheeks. Oh, the fierce hot shame!
To stand, her naked body so revealed,
Before that bitter gaze. But even he
Is touched and with a kinder heart
He turns away and weeps a slow sad tear

Robert Barry Scott PhD (1933-2019) received his early education in Guelph. His BA from UWO, his MA from UNB and his PHD from U of T, Drama School. Over his early career, he taught English and directed plays at UNB, Saint John, studied with Robertson Davies and Marshall McLuhan. From 1970-1998 he was the head of Media Studies, School of Image Arts (Film and Photography) at Ryerson University. He wrote poetry during his graduate years of study. Most recently he wrote many papers about the media and its social impact.

SIGHT

By Kevin Stuart Brodie

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... It is like Kevin Stuart Brodie has the gift of second 'Sight' he burns so brightly. "a bridge puts the two-hundred-meter drop / directly beneath your feet." I have a fear of heights, finger nails and bamboo shoots; I have always speculated that it speaks to a former life. "it is difficult to tell / if the water reflects the clouds /or the sky mirrors the water." "Herding themselves to the north / side of the bridge... At the very least, they try to find /a great selfie spot." I won't spoil it for you but "...the detective decided / to just give up." It is a spectacular piece of pathos... Brodie does 'a little thing called the twist—*

Sight

A few miles outside Taos, New Mexico
the Rio Grande Gorge cuts
through layers of sediment and basalt.
Not quite high enough to reach the heavens,
a bridge puts the two-hundred-meter drop
directly beneath your feet.

Cumulus castellanus
arc just above eye level,
but gazing down at the river
it is difficult to tell
if the water reflects the clouds
or the sky mirrors the water.

Tourists populate the west

end of the highway--
they munch on churros,
gulp sodas,
devour fry bread.
Herding themselves to the north
side of the bridge, they take in
the distant splendor of the
Sangre de Cristo mountain range.
At the very least, they try to find
a great selfie spot.

On the south side of the bridge
there are no tourists,
no spilled drinks,
no viewfinders.
There are instead hundreds
of black ribbons
tied to the parapet,
each with a name and age
scrawled in gray sharpie--
Sandra Santiago, 17
Rueben Gallego, 21
Maria Crow Horse, 16
Goldenstar, 14
Unknown, 25.

Unknown?
I cannot help but wonder
if the gorge rushed up and
maimed her body
with such violence
that the detective decided
to just give up.

Or, maybe no one claimed her
because she knew that
the void left behind
would be visible to no one.

THE POET SPEAKS:

Inspiration:

What inspired the poem was my visit to the Rio Grande Ridge and seeing the black ribbons on one side of the bridge, commemorating those who leapt to their deaths. It was such a stunning contrast to the natural beauty that enveloped the area. It also struck me that the tourists were all keeping their distance from it.

Stylistic Influences:

My two favorite poets are Pablo Neruda and Billy Collins. While I love reading Neruda's words, something about Billy Collins voice really stays in my head. It speaks to me unlike any poet I have ever read. While I have never made a conscious effort to imitate him, I am sure he has had a subconscious influence on my approach to poetry.

Why Poetry is Important:

When I was younger, I used to envy poets. I was convinced they had a talent that I would never be able to access. I assumed that poetry was exclusively inherent, not a craft that could be learned. I was mistaken, and found myself writing poetry, despite the fact I thought I never could. I love being able to see the world through someone else's eyes, to experience the images and emotions they feel, to develop a deeper understanding of being human. I would be delighted if someone who reads my work feels the same way. Neruda was right—the poem does not belong to the poet; it belongs to the world

AUTHOR'S BIO: Kevin Stuart Brodie is a playwright, screenwriter, storyteller, and poet. Three of his plays have been produced and two screenplays have been optioned by production companies. He also recently won his very first story slam. Mr. Brodie has won fourteen scriptwriting contests and festivals and been twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize in poetry.

7 (seven) PoEms

By BraDley HogE

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...*

Initially, we were inclined to just publish Hoge's ekphasic poem in contrast, juxtaposed (such a worn-out undergraduate word, right up there with 'paradigm,' 'dichotomy' and 'antithetical' (paradox-sickly)—you can almost tell which survey courses they chose as electives in their freshman and sophomore years.) to RAD's entry above. But we loved them all so utterly, how could we possibly deny our reader(s). Here is the work affixed that fixated him, Georges Seurat's "The Forest at Pontaubert" at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, as allusion and edification (not to scale or climb):



Isn't it also trans-substantial? Read Hoge's take, as well as the rest of him. As for mine, it is more space than I am allotted... You either get the picture or my proselytizing, I flipped a coin and you won...

(Spacing is poet's own.)

The White Owl

On the night my son
lost hope

I walked the dog
under the bridge where I had been told

there was an owl.
It's the route

we always take.
And I saw the owl—circling

as we approached the bridge—
dipping under the bridge—around a support

column—arcing back over the span—
and around again.

And it was clicking. A sound unlike
any I've ever heard.

At first sounding like multiple clicks—
a nest full of chicks—

or distress calls from potential prey?
But as I got closer

they all emanated from the solitary
owl. Echoing

off bridge, water, path—
or simply nature

of the click, I couldn't be sure.
And I was able to walk

to a spot where I could stand
and look up as the owl swooped

overhead. Its face
and head clearly an owl. The sounds

clearly its signal.
And it doesn't change

anything.
My son is still lost.

I don't know if he will be okay.
I have no comfort

in fate or folklore.
No clarity

from symbolism or the promise
that allegory

is any more prescient
because of the timing

of the encounter.
But it comforts me

nonetheless
that the absolutely sublime

beauty of the owl
against reflection of moon

on water flowing under
the bridge

intertwined
the isolation of my personal crisis

with exigency of routine
into such a miraculous

anthropic cosmological
moment.

Fairies

On viewing Georges Seurat's "*The Forest at Pontaubert*"
at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Enter Georges Seurat's Forest if you dare,
for it is in the shadows

that you find your self.
The forest is lost to the trees.

The depths shrouded by veil of fear.
It is from the forest that fairies and goblins

Emerge. From the depths—
where distance gobbles light. Mingling foliage

with imagination. Stories
of witches and giants. Promise

of flowers unseen. The mind
emerges from this same fear. Grappling

with darkness in need of explanation,
explication of the boundaries

beyond our sight. Beyond our ken—
where rhodora provides proof

that beauty is not accidental.
Where the serpent provides comfort

from the amoral universe.
Where the blurring

of what is seen and unseen
makes everything crystal clear.

Rift Zone

On viewing Clyfford Still's "*Painting, 1944*"
at the Museum of Modern Art in New York

Like a rift between tectonic plates—
surrounded by deep sea darkness—

dread sparks the mind.
Dread of death and dying.

Dread of meaninglessness.
Some say that when the first hole

was drilled through the crust
of the earth into the mantle

below, that screams
were heard. The wailing agony

of hell. The mind has many tricks
to protect itself. The comfort

of fear being one of them.
Because the sparks of imagination

free to illuminate all possibilities
are soothed more by belief

in the serpent than by
the prospect of total darkness.

Tearing Wings Off Butterflies

~~Two babies slipped into the water the witness said,
as the mother too weak to notice was pulled into the airboat.~~

As Harlan Ellison spoke to a group of college students,

~~And no one bothered to dive into the toxic water.
And they struggled for just a little while,
she said, before disappearing into flood.~~

*A butterfly
is freedom red in tooth and claw*

he entertained questions. A hand was raised
and acknowledged, "what does the story mean?"

*survival by
mimicry
camouflage and mystery*

~~and it was at that moment, she said, she lost faith
in humanity, but not in God~~

And his face reddened as he angrily replied,
"parsing the meaning from a story
is like tearing the wings off butterflies—

*gossamer wings
and engineering*

~~So it wasn't the impersonal, but the inept,
not nature's wrath, but the lack
of appropriate response.~~

you lose the beauty on analysis!"

*air currents
in micro*

~~because, she thought, God hadn't discriminated,
but people had, and God will welcome the babies into heaven,~~

After long consideration of the haunting suggestion
of his anger, I have come to the conclusion—

~~while we will bury them in memories less horrific,
and bolster our abdication of empathy with donations.~~

*but once elucidated it
becomes the stuff
of quarks and leptons—¹*

*I mean how trite are neutrinos today?
and when I try to write about the Tao of
space-time or cosmic dance of strings I
come up short—²*

¹Whitman knew nothing is ever really lost—quantum particles entangled—
gravitons dancing in and out of eleven dimensions—

²Thoreau saw transcendental nature—a drop of dew falling from a leaf
explaining the humid winds blowing

Lao Tsu—2500 years ago
spun the dance of the Wu Li masters—each
molecule's past—rose petal
as rose quartz in granite—as comet dust—

as a scientist and a poet—that the butterfly

~~God will continue unaffected, unadulterated while we rebuild.~~

red in tooth and claw provides far greater opportunity
to observe natural beauty in all its glory

~~And we will praise God's work through us. His presence
in every heart, but two, which stopped beating in the abyss.~~

than simply focusing on the brilliant display of colors,
and the uplifting lightness
of synergy with the wind.

we appreciate natural

*is it just another old
fashioned way of saying that
life requires creation of
meaning to be justified³*

because it reminds us o

³*as wind blows through hair and gunshots ring—as anger becomes excuse for
almost anything except for tears which falling pull leaves from trees—
suspending dust fertilizing oceans—driving hurricanes and other acts of God—*

A View from Cabo

I'm looking out over expanse of blue ocean.
Listening to waves thundering

against shoreline. Smaller waves farther out
sparkling pristine. Marine

seascape like quartz crystal chandelier
catching the light just right

From the balcony of my private
beach resort in Cabo San Lucas.

Idyllic because I cannot see far
enough over horizon

to glimpse the garbage patch.
Flotsam collecting in gyre current.

Rivers of plastic flowing into ocean
along the coastline

from Alaska to the End of the Earth.
Brine and sun degrading debris

into flocs mimicking phytoplankton.
Filling bellies of fish and birds

mistaking the buoyant pieces
for food. Starving

chicks just far enough
out of sight to justify

one more round of drinks
before it's time to call it a night.

Water filling the engineered slopes like a d r t h.
awn ba

Another tree,

ee
r
t
y
t l g
h n in
e o w
gro
fro
m the
bayou
itself,
contain
ing plastic

bags

t e n
s r a i g
m h a
i t e d b n s.
n w n e n r
i l k e
i

as if someone tossed it in a game.
The tree's foliage sparse

A
tire sit
uated on
a bran
ch

s e
t x s
o p e
o o d.
r

Debris catching on the trunk as the current flows around it.

Its branches full of cormorants.

Heat

I abhor heat,
sweating, and insects.

It makes me anxious,
like needing to burst from my skin.

Balloon expanding inside
me as if bursting

would provide relief.
If only I could release the pressure.

Instead I seek colder climes,
norther latitudes, higher altitudes.

And as my life wears on,
my journeys take me

farther and higher
to find the same succor.

Heat expanding
behind me to record levels.

Expanding range
of drought and wildfire.

Snows melting faster
and storms growing stronger.

Winds pushing me away
from all that is familiar.

THE POETS SPEAKS: *Poetry is a contentious part of my life, which I cannot escape. I simply lack the standing to write powerful poetry about the human experience, while being impelled to continue recording my sublunary thoughts. Poetry has given me an outlet for my philosophic and speculative mind, while my career has taken me along the braided stream of STEM education. I enjoy looking for natural metaphor in both existential and human nature.*

"The White Owl" was a real experience borne from the confluence of polar-opposite emotions. Our son had just stormed off leaving my wife and I convinced we would not see him again, alive.

I started the walk with a knot in my stomach, trying to reconcile my dread and resignation. The rest of the poem is an account of what happened next. My two ekphrastic poems, "Fairies" and "Rift Zone", relate to our (human) fears emerging from evolutionary psychology. "Tearing Wings Off Butterflies" is a complicated poem. It was inspired by the lines crossed out relating to news I read of a rescue during hurricane Katrina. Each crossed out line is meant to be metaphor for the experience I had with Harlan Ellison and my own thoughts in the margins. "A View from Cabo" and "A Tree Full of Cormorants" are also based on the incongruity that is my life: a man spoiled by opportunities to travel and view earth's beauty, while knowing, professionally, that it is rapidly being lost: "Heat" is a melancholy poem for me. It is part of a group of poems I've written about climate change, but it's really about my leaving Texas for California, my wife and two children journeying with me while my oldest son stayed behind to start his family.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Bradley Earle Hoge's poems appear in numerous literary journals and anthologies, most recently in Red Planet, Valley Voices, Angry Old Man, and Shanti Arts Garden Issue. His first book of poetry, "Nebular Hypothesis" was published by Cawing Crow Press in 2016. He has had chapbooks published by Kattywompus Press, Red Berry Editions, and two by Plain View Press. He was the managing editor of Dark Matter, an online journal for speculative writing and Quantum Tao. Bradley is currently teaching middle school science at The Nueva School. He lives in Foster City, CA with his wife and dog Bubbles.

That Call and other poems...

By Gerry Fabian

WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...

Ahhh, Fabian (Or is it aaah—the subtlety of interjections, when a fully-blown interruption is so much more rewardingly disturbing.) Who could resist this “There are times we go beyond / the moments of hope. / When we sip cold coffee / and succumb to the obvious.” And this is ‘in the beginning when the h...’ I read so slowly my aping lips are apt to cramp, leaving little doubt for delighting in an economy of words in others’. Gerry is both profound and parsimonious in his expressions. Let me try: He rivets me. Still there is little left unsaid. Not to play Fabourites, but I surmise he may be a most quotable author this issue. The poor man has fallen into our grasping clutches; he is Fleas’, forever now, Our Gerry Fabian...(Spacing is poet’s own.)

R. Gerry Fabian
gerryfabian@yahoo.com

That Call

There are times we go beyond
the moments of hope.
When we sip cold coffee
and succumb to the obvious.
When our jaws harden.
We have the weakened words
but our tongues refuse to form them.

These are wood fire hours
blowing eye burning smoke
filled with antiseptic scents
and late-night long hall echoes.

Everyone makes alternative plans
based on the inevitable.

Patterns Of Personal Poaching

In life, the periods of transition
are like frightened quail
chased from dried cornfields
into chilly October skies
by the deadly hunter
that is our own change.

Erudite Charlatan

He convinces you
that he can cure
heartache.

It is a cold rainy
February evening.
Spirits are low.

The next day
you awake
with baggies of herbs
and regret.

The baggies are
unlabeled.

Two empty wine bottles
on the kitchen table
confirm the need

to recycle.

THE POET SPEAKS:

The first poem, "That Call" was written as a universal response

to the unexpected call that everyone gets at one time or another.

This is the call where someone who is important to you is in the hospital

or worse. Then suddenly the person on the receiving end of the call

has to uproot their routine. The second poem, "Patterns Of Personal Poaching"

again, speaks of unexpected change using the extended metaphor of hunting for quail from the quail's point of view. The third poem, "Erudite Charlatan," is about how when a person

is in despair that they will often reach out to anyone offering hope and there are people

out in the world who prey on these people in various ways.

For me, poetry is the only literary genre that is pure. People don't write poetry to make

money and support themselves. Only a very few people in the entire world can eke

out any sort of existence by writing poetry. I believe that poets are people who have

a creative need to show their world in a different way and who can use tenets of poetic

style, form and device to achieve this passion.

AUTHOR'S BIO: R. Gerry Fabian is a retired English instructor. As a poet and novelist, he has been publishing his writing since 1972 in various literary magazines.

His web page is <https://rgerryfabian.wordpress.com>

Twitter @GerryFabian2

He has published three books of his published poems, Parallels,

Coming Out Of The Atlantic and Electronic Forecasts.

In addition, he has published three novels.

They are Getting Lucky (The Story), Memphis Masquerade, and Seventh Sense.

All these books are available both as ebooks and paperbacks at all publishers including Amazon, Apple Books and Barnes and Noble.

He lives in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

LeT me LIStEN 000 000

By Stewart Acuff

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...Here is such a lovely poem just because. The art of listening is such a gracious gift offered by such a sorry few. Acuff can instruct and delight us, as all the Al's ALready know. Active Listening (AL) is a trait I have ever strived for and so often failed at... 'Excuse me for talking while you were interrupting' ...is a pithy little ejaculate I have heard all too often. Now for Stewart who describes the skill so beautifully I could quite possibly prick-up and take notice... "To know much of life was out of reach by intention / Ears open, tell me in detail all done to keep you down / Close as possible to the ground." Finger on the trigger, aiming straight at my ASMR, all a tingle...*

Sit with me in the lonely, early, eerie fog before day break

Let me listen to your life's stories and aches

Listen to lessons you learned in a life unlike mine

How it was to be one of the Others

To never feel a part of all together

To know much of life was out of reach by intention

Ears open, tell me in detail all done to keep you down

Close as possible to the ground

Help me see with open eyes

How privilege helped me to rise

Help me fight more effectively

For your freedom and our equality.

THE POET SPEAKS: *The poem, obviously, is straight forward and to the point as I see our way forward. White people like me have a responsibility to understand and confront white supremacy.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Stewart is a poet, author, and retired union organizer living in Shepherdstown, WV.

Midnight in Brooklyn & Other poems

By Sugar Tobey

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...What light through yonder window breaks? [lo, above the pizza parlor]' Shakespeare never left Fort Strat, on ebon, all of his life, but I have a funny feeling Sugar Tobey gets around. Oh to be in NYC in the springtime when the eateries are in open seating. Double cheese and I'll meet, with any luck, Ms. Sugar. Born in Corny Island—the only isle you live in rather than on. But that's why they call it the Big Appall, bridging tunnels. 'Let us go then, you and me' (I know it is 'I' but I just love those flawless letters pointing out mine. Besides there are far more me's than I's in End-Why-See—never enough about me...): Byron was an also-ran when it comes to expressions of love everlasting, "Mike had broken into the cemetery / up the block sometime after midnight / dug a hole and buried the dog next to his wife" But I am a meager server, per se, with simple tastes in the section next to the kitchen in that five star Michelin you have to book six months in advance... YOU are here for the fine dining; don't not peruse the entire menu before you bark my orders... Sugar has the grits that make the pearls in your dozen on the half shell. Get the point? Better yet, share 'The Dot'*

Midnight in Brooklyn

Mike the supers' wife died a few months
before I moved into the building
I miss her a lot he said they were very close

I saw the muddy shovel by the back steps
you doing some work around the building
Mike gave me a funny look through his cigar smoke

the dog just died he said she loved that dog
she wanted it buried with her
so I took care of it

Mike had broken into the cemetery
up the block sometime after midnight
dug a hole and buried the dog next to his wife

I admire you Mike I told him you got guts
he gave me that look through the smoke again
man you know you love somebody right

The Dot

She watched the little black dot
a tiny spider
move and weave its web
between a plastic fern and the toilet

she thought the bathroom seemed like
a bad place for a spider to set up shop
not much chance to catch anything here

it made her sad who would help
to protect and advise this little dot
from making such a huge
mistake

Elsewhere

Night comes
the shadows wake up
I see the outline
of you asleep
next to me

but I know
you are elsewhere
in the dark
in a bed
of your own

Gut Feeling

If you were to come back
when a lot of people do come back
maybe I wish they wouldn't

now temples graying
breasts sunken and worst of all
with eyes dulled

I would just as soon pass
you will find that my belly has grown
huge wise and intolerant

THE POET SPEAKS: *For me, poetry is about illumination. It's ideally more in accordance with reality, than reality itself. I don't wish to be entertained when reading a poem, even though many poems are entertaining. Truth for me is the most important thing. This intern, affects the overall look of the poem. My poems are generally quite brief. I believe when a poet's discussing the truth, there is no need to go on and on.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Born in Coney Island, Brooklyn'. Received a degree from the School of Visual Art in Manhattan. Now lives in NYC above a pizza parlor.

Nine (9) Poems (poems poems poems)

By Bob Carlton

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes:

So I have heard everything is big in Texas. But these are short and sweet. Alliteration is nothing without assonance and all the imagery belongs: Deserts, moonlight and misgivings. If I could strum a guitar, I would steal these in song ... 'surrendering trust to the darkness.' They pack as good a punch as Carmen Basilio. The rhythms both float and sting. For me, many of the lines are reminiscent of 'The muttering retreats / Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels.' Of course I am not quoting Mr. Carlton here, but his verse is effuse with such cadence. It makes me wish I could gallop or at least canter when all I do is trot... 'Every trembling, random bit of trash, / the loose paper, broken plastic, or shattered glass.' Here he is, and I am ashamed to take liberties with his line-breaks. Or: 'I would glide along / through an underworld / of urban underbrush and rust': 'Let us go then, you and I [Eliot]. If I acted on my instincts I'd be dead by now. HS (Each poem is on a separate page. Spacing is the author's own.) HS

At Liberty

Whorl of the windward ear
catches dust devil dirt.
Eyes crust with the day's debris.
Sight, by necessity, narrows
focus to the one approach,
danger's only way in
to such broken country.

Scratch a match on rock,
light up a stubby smoke.
Crack knuckles, swivel neck,
stretch legs, wiggle fingers.
Sand gathers in joint folds,
saddle bags, and tin cups.
The red sun howls through
the lone, bare mesquite
perched atop the western ridge.

No living sound
but the whirr of insects,
no taste
but the scorched sand.

A horse's sudden nod and snort
snaps attention back
to this single arroyo.
Nothing there.
Not yet.
Maybe never will be.
How can the fugitive, outlaw, deserter
know when the last pursuer
has quit the field?

Another pot of coffee
to wash away grit and fatigue.
Sourdough, pemmican,
one swig from the canteen.

Maybe, as the fire
dies away in the night,

a nip from the flask,
a quick communion
with the god of agave,
before surrendering trust to the darkness.

Burlesque

By the end,
the routine
becomes so complex,

the plates spin-
ning, dogs
tumbling through
hoops of fire,
little guy in
an old fedora
juggling chopsticks
and beachballs,

the schtick comes
crashing
to a chaotic halt,

beer and dancing girls
slopped across
the stage

in odd, sin-
ful salutes
to human dexterity.

"Carmen Basilio..."

Carmen Basilio
was no poet

his movements
metric and rhythm
left for
others to
art-
icu-
late

the punch having
already landed.

Defrocked

Biretta gone,
his bald pate sweating
in shame beneath
the unforgiving sun,

he swears
an oath to no god
he has ever
known before.

down the boulevard

past pawn shops
dead dreams
held in hock
brothels
and the bodies
fucking without affection
barest of touches
absence of kisses

Eve

You come to me
 out of a low crouch
 in the wild grasses
of an ancient rift,

across wind-swept steppes,
 forests thick with life;

you have waded the vast
 inland seas,
 warm saline rapture
beneath a drumming sun;

you have trudged
 the desert and jungle
 extremes

to come to me,
 a distant man,
 unworthy,
and unprepared.

Mission Accomplished

I had always thrilled
to the secret city places:

forgotten alleys
too small for adult intrigue,
or the abandoned building,
with a beaten path along
the outside wall, hidden
behind dense shrubs.

The litter of modern artifacts--
crushed cans,
cigarette butts,
fast food wrappers,

or the sudden mystery
and forbidden thrill
of the used condom
or naked needle--

Hollywood-worthy plots
waited in every
trembling, random
bit of trash,
the loose paper,
broken plastic,
or shattered glass,
final refuse
of secret lives,
slipping away
in the blurring ink
and fading pencil scratchings
on lost receipts,
half-used
books of matches,
the lingering traces

Carlton
"Mission..."
page 2
same stanza

leak nothing
but oil
slap on

another
gasket good
as new

Song for an Old-Fashioned Christmas

So come on, boys,
let's wassail in the old sense,
beat down the doors
of the filthy rich,
cleanse their souls
with outlandish demands
for food, booze, and money.
Out of arrogance or fear
they'll all give in to us,
the drunken Saturnalian slaves
in the land of the free.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I am afraid that when it comes to talking about poetry, I have no grand pronouncements to make or theories to espouse. The necessity of the activity is evident by its ubiquity and continuity. I believe the uses of poetry to be much more varied than a short note can express. The Iliad and 'This Is Just to Say' are both valid as poetry, though wildly divergent in aims and means, the best reductionist efforts of literary Theory of Everything critics notwithstanding. For me, the poem begins with language; a word, a phrase, an image embodied in words. Often it ends there, with a sort of navel gazing self-reflectiveness. Sometimes, in what appears to happen in some of these poems, the gaze stays inward but is reflective of a subject (perhaps only apparently) external to the poem, a subject that often stands apart, isolated and separate. Apart, isolated, separate, A L O N E: we all feel this way sometimes. We know the allure of false gods in our despair. We feel resentment at the good fortune of those unworthy and unaware. We know the ache of waiting for love and the pain of its departure. We know that freedom is not always what we want and seldom what we get. We even know that art is not always the answer. Poetry is a way to see our common plight anew, transfigured and objectified through language, to be taken as needed.*

BIO: *Bob Carlton lives and works in Leander, TX. The externally verifiable facts concerning his life are thoroughly uninteresting. That is why he writes.*

a **M**AN took his *dog* & other poem**S**...

By Ri**ch**ard Weave**R**

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...* Blink and it's gone, ephemerally armed, as a clippity-clop Cyclops, the eye of the Zeitgeist, overseeing, undermining, embattled and winking back—you can't get ahead without his nod. *Here is Lil Gary's modest opus, over 26,000 words. Who says Lil Gary thinks small. If you enjoy padding to digressions and merry wit and patter as much as I do, let him take your time. (He could take a page from the book of a one Curtis Terse who submitted a single word poem I deigned to decline—but seriously folks, he is engaging.) Like the gossamer of all things ethereal, kindly allow him to pass through you. "Listen up because free wisdom / is worth much." ...here is something that just might stay with you...what could be better. Stick with it. (Spacing & format is poet's own.)*

A Man took his dog

for a walk and play at Scentral Dog Park.
Or so it seemed.

A dog pulled a man, a two-legged plodder
up one street, down another, until the smell
of heavily marked territory overpowered.

A man arrives at the dog park where he scanned
for a woman he fancied, or her dog, Brutus, not so much.
Neither were there; he was relegated to the Loser's bench.

A dog waited in an impatient way for the gate to open,
straining its leash, already aware of who was present,
which friends were waiting, and leapt high when the pressure
loosened and he was free to ramble and roll on grass,
to sniff and be sniffed back. To bark in friendly ways. Hi.

How goes it? Catch any squirrels or cars lately? Anyone here in heat, wink, wink, as if I didn't know already.

A man on the Loser's bench groused: he'd forgotten a book. Didn't matter what book. Books were luck. A talisman. Magical. Magnetic in a way. Guaranteed to start a conversation. Much better than scrolling, or tweeting, or damn near anything done by Smartphone.

A dog made a new mate, a Scotty, newly arrived, with an odd sounding bark. It took a while for each to understand the other. Soon enough they were BFFs. Said his name was Doohan. Whatever. Thought: haven't seen the two-legged creature with a leash attached to it for a while. Maybe he had to go inside to pee! Such a lonely bastard. If it wasn't for me. . . he'd never get any.

A man jolts awake. The sun has relented. It's past time to go. Most are gone. He sees his dog paling with a black Scotty. Visually an odd pair. Pug and Scotty. Scotty and pug. Says to himself, at least one of us has a friend.

I laid down with dogs, or where dogs

had previously been and got blacklegged ticks instead. Lyme's disease to be exact. I'd rather have fleas. Not much of a choice mind you. Ticks or fleas.

Even so I'd rather had a chance to say no, thanks all the same. But I didn't have so I became host with a bull's eye rash on my back, a host who couldn't say no

to his guests, uninvited though they were. And I had to pay extra for the accommodations, I did. A security deposit. A damage deposit as well.

And a week's rent 6 months in advance! How's that a deal?! Bull's eye. My ass. Robbed and ruined I was. With no recourse. An Act of God it was they said.

An act of God! As if he could be bothered! Why the sudden interest in me who always crossed with the signal, who prayed when called upon, and took

no interest at all in my neighbor's ugly brute beasts. It's clear there ain't no right in this world. Nothing's right and way too much is way wrong. I have no beef

with the almighty. His ways and moods. His corduroys and wheys. I do confess I am unhappy with the recent hand dealt me. Even in Lost Wages

I could get better odds. And they are nothing but liars and cheats. Period.

Black Jack dog lays steaming in the snow,

angry at the sun and its utter failure
to provide a well-regulated heat. Some days
he's his own four-legged sauna. You needn't bother
call him. He won't raise his mastiff head.
Won't glare your way or sniff the air.
Can't see the reason for you. Would rather
hunt for his supper, take water where he finds it
on his daylong roamings. If anything,
he dreams of killing things that run from him.
He'd chase a shadow if he believed his teeth
could rip its throat. Black Dog wants
no fancy name. Has no time for no vet.
He's gone most days, and rarely deigns
to enter the house. Only when he smells wood smoke
does he wedge the door open using his head
as splitting maul. Best not disturb Black dog
when he's guarding the fire. He may not be asleep,
eyes closed, shallow breath. One of his hunting tricks.
More wolf than tail-wagger. Man's best fiend.

A Thimble-full of white dog whiskey

tumbles into the heart, sending its fire
rumbling into unsuspecting lungs, and serves
notice to the brain that if sirens are heard
loudly nearby, there's no real emergency,
this is nothing that's not happened before,
and, more than likely, will happen again.

Let the fire rage and the night tremble. Ignore
the stomach's mumbling. Food at best is a dumb
distraction, a merry-go-round to be avoided.
#4 Alligator char is the one cure-all. The best
numbing whiskey burns. Falls short a thumb's width
of hazmat level but nowhere near the Angel's humble

historic share. Speak not of peat monsters, unless
you are able to pronounce Laphroaig without recycling
your lunch. Heads, hearts, and tails may be distillation
phases, with hearts alone bottled and aged, but White Dog
unaged and homemade with fermented potatoes,
poitin as it's called, from pota, meaning small pot,

will never be a Unicorn. In the scrum of Islay whiskey lore
the only true brew is the one that goes down and stays.

A dog whose useless hind legs have been
amputated, scoots around a house
which meets all ADA requirements,
his backend leashed to a small cart,
a trolley if you prefer. He has never
known 4-legged locomotion, having
been born with two few. But gets around
nicely, thanks for asking. In his eyes
two vertical forms shift about slowly,
often without purpose. Their barks
are distinguishable but incoherent.
Often they do pay attention to him,
make offerings, take him sight-seeing,
and are quiet enough when he naps.
He wonders what reason they have
for being here, beyond him, what purpose.
He tries to imagine either without legs.
He tries and fails to see them in a cart
like his, hurtling out an oversized doggy
door into the backyard where the smells
are so wondrous, almost overwhelming,
where sounds resonant from neighbors
with such clarity, and the scent of wolf
two doors down is so damn tempting.

THE POET SPEAKS: *In the Spring of 2016 I consumed everything two fiction writers, Lydia Davis and Lynne Tillman had published. Though I read and wrote poetry as a teenager – Bukowski, Al Purdy among others, I haunted used book stores for early American and Canadian humorists. Once I escaped the barb wire nest of home, I fell into the clutches of teachers and circuit riding readers of fiction and poetry. My first real teacher introduced us to Simic, Tate, Kinnell, Merwin, Bly, among others, and Russell Edson. More on the latter later. I muddled along in various workshops. Wrote imitations of Robbe-Grillet in a fiction class of an embalmed writer, whose only comment on a parody of Flannery O'Connor I had written was “Mr. Weaver.*

I see now you can write.” I dropped Fiction. Graduated. Became one of the first cohorts of a MFA cult.

*Fast Forward to 2016. I read an essay by Lydia Davis in which she confesses that she did not learn to write while matriculating at the Iowa Writers Program. No. She learned from reading the poetry, more particularly, the Prose Poems, or as Edson referred to them the Fables of Russell Edson. Based on that spark I promptly made a large dent in my Visa, and quickly began to learn about the care and feeding of language. After several days I ventured outside and walked the 276 steps needed to reach the front door of the James Joyce Restaurant and Pub. There I sat at my usual spot, only this time I had *The Tunnel: Selected poems of RE with me*. A book already engorged. I was there to write. And drink Guinness. Together. 2 hours later and 10 new poems unlike anything else I had written, I paid up and went home. The next day 8 more poems. As I write this there are 440 completed poems in this series, 116 of which have been published. And many underway. I even managed to write another book of 80 *Last Words* poems. And still other poems not so easily classified.v*

AUTHOR’S BIO: The author lives in Baltimore where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank, the Baltimore Book Festival, and is the poet-in-residence at the James Joyce Pub. More than 100 of his Prose Poems have appeared since 2016. He is also the author of *The Stars Undone* (Duende Press, 1992), and provided the libretto for a symphony, *Of Sea and Stars*, 2005, performed 4 times to date by the Birmingham Symphony.

UnIVERSaL LANGUAGES

By Robert Standish

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...Would you were made of stone, Standish could move you still. Here is a piece filled with passion and prescience in all the right places. I am not about to encroach on your experience, I am but a meager facilitator, all the artistry is beneath me.*

*“Universal languages, laughter and tears
Interrupted the same
tears reveal what laughter must heal...*

Our children starve in the shadows of all we construct
hide in the alleys that feed their misery to the streets that divide us
pound them to dust allow the rain to wash away
the calk outline reminder that I was there never intended to stay

I saw the sun rise today,
Yeah the same sun but not the same way
it promised change, it brought hope,
did I speak too soon, you can't undo a cut throat
beyond the horizon that the future sees,
at the table of tomorrow save a place for me

your memories are an echoing heart,
young and conflicted, souls torn apart
paths crossed in fear and hate back then,
only to grow as friends
brought back in the end to save me again

the power to unite through song, 3-minute escape
whisper grows to a cheer, the mob comes together
make me mortal, show me, gravity hold my wings
our today is full of these worrying things

prejudice, ignorance, hate, not the teacher of fate
the bed made to sleep, never the right time to speak
I've learned to succeed at failure that much is done

Failure to succeed is why I run

your puzzle doesn't fit with me,
my puzzle doesn't fit with you
take one away, add a piece change the view
patience is the only way I will fit with you

Homeless without hope

THE POET SPEAKS: *Letters form words they are my fabric. This is how I feel about writing in general. I have a desire to pursue a way to express the perfect thought, and in doing so I hope I write only enough to invite the reader to join me and complete the thought as they see fit. Poetry is my therapy and allows me to express ideas that drive my passion to continue to explore my inner thoughts. I enjoy writing everything from a simple quote to full length fiction works. Admittedly I am not well read and my weakness is actually proof reading my own work. Reading intimidates me and I have always shied away from it, but it never stopped me from wanting to write. There are so many brilliant authors and I admire many of them for how they hand craft and sculpt a world from a point of view never considered before. The beauty of such authors allows for the travel of the reader and that is what I find the most inspiring, I am only ever half of the experience, I compose a poem, a story, a limerick or a full novel, but the reader allows that work to be completed. The greats have a way of transporting us there in so few words and like a great painting or piece of music, it is a thing of great beauty and timeless appeal. The first work I remember reading and being drawn to was the Premature Burial by Edgar Allen Poe, he had the power of deep rich descriptions without needed to be wordy. That is a skill I am still learning to master. Write only what's needed so you leave room for the reader.*

The poem Homeless without Hope is started with e three-line poem, I did this for some poems to introduce the actual poem and offer a slightly different view of the theme. The idea of a universal language is laughter and tears, they all sound the same around the world and do not require translation. The remainder of the work is in line with all things that need translation to be understood and contrast the body of the submission. The idea to me was that we all live our 24 hours but do it so differently, we never consider anyone else in the same manner we do ourselves. Some watch children starve to report the atrocity, some step over the homeless to ignore the plight. How many of us are really looking for answers, this is what drives me most. I seek my truth and lies and half truths are the puzzle pieces that do not fit with me.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Robert Standish is an aspiring writer and devoted father of three. After several years in the film and television industry in Canada, he has had the chance to meet some amazing people, travel and experience things, not for normal consumption. As a camera assistant and operator he has been in the line of fire on many occasions and inside explosions and crashes, just to name a few incredible opportunities. 'Chalk Outline These Thoughts 1 and 2 and a fiction novel 'The Secrets Men Keep', most recently the creator of a collection of poetry entitled 'The Passion Hidden Within'. (Amazon and Kindle) I have found most recent success with three poems published on Terror House Magazine and soon a short fiction story will be published in February, it is my hope to extend and expand my exposure and develop as many relationships as

I can. Now transitioning into a creative writer who has self-published four works and counting, Robert is setting his sights on the next project. His story **IF** appeared in Issue 2 (fiction).