

FLEAS ON THE DOG

COMPLETE ISSUE TWO

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WELCOME!

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Prisoners of the Multiverse

by Jacob M. Appel

WHY WE LIKE IT:

*Our collective jaw dropped when we read this complex, layered and unforgettable story with its troubling undercurrents of guilt and suspicion. There is a wealth of technique and a ferocious intelligence at work in this seemingly simple telling and the psychological chords it strikes resonate in the mind long after one has finished reading. The feminine voice absolutely convinces and Appel's disciplined, prehensile prose pumps life into every sentence. Treasures abound throughout the narrative. Quote: 'I'd always loved the stars, ever since our parents took us camping in grade school, but Vance had transformed my visceral pleasure into a more formal appreciation for the clockwork of the universe.' And 'I considered reaching for her forearm, to comfort her, but it seemed unnatural.' Like all the best writers, this champion storyteller makes the extraordinary look easy. Our feeling is even his grocery lists are beautiful. **Read our review of his 'The Liar's Asylum' in the Nonfiction section.***

PRISONERS OF THE MULTIVERSE

By Jacob M. Appel

Originally published in 'The Liar's Asylum' by Black Lawrence Press 2017

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The defining and indelible event of our pre-college years—for me and for my cohort of honors-level classmates at Laurensville High School—was the suicide; at age forty-two, of our twelfth grade physics teacher, Vance Rottman. We wouldn't have been surprised if dowdy Miss Ayler, who so worshipped Virginia Woolf, had filled her pockets with stones and vanished into

the Rappahannock. Or if the fastidious Latin teacher, Dr. Ismay, had fallen on a vintage sword like his defeated Roman generals. But the image of Vance—for that was what we all called him—bolting himself inside his gear-packed office, where only months earlier he'd rigged a working model of the solar system to the overhead light, and ramming a sawed-off shotgun down his own throat, was to be the cataclysm that permeated our conversations and recontoured our relationships ever after. Maybe it was because Vance had everything, looks and charisma and a picture-perfect four-year-old daughter, who made classroom cameos on mornings when her mother did modeling shoots in Richmond, and because we'd believed we had known him so intimately, in the countless hours we'd spent camped around his laboratory desk, sometimes until twilight, attempting to unify quantum mechanics with general relativity, that his sudden, vicious rejection of life pierced a permanent hole in our own armor—such that never again, even in my happiest moments, could I observe another person's joy without wondering what lurked beneath.

My best friend that spring was Lacey Moretti. Soon enough we would drift apart, our natural differences overcoming our common history, so when I saw her at the twentieth reunion last year, where she gulped champagne from a slipper and made a sloppy pass at every unhitched male within groping distance, I could hardly remember what had drawn us together on long-ago evenings studying the polarity of magnets and the trajectories of cannon balls. Yet in those final months at Laurendale, we were truly inseparable—so much so that, when a third former classmate sensed the tension between us at the reunion, she confessed she'd always suspected we'd been lovers. The reality was that we'd both been far too innocent for anything like that.

From Lacey, I learned that Vance had died. We'd been planning a drive into Washington one Saturday to pick up our prom dresses—mine a beaded, charcoal gown in an iconic graduation cut, Lacey's something low-necked and scarlet—and I pulled up in front of her house

at the wheel of Papa's Plymouth. I tapped the horn. A warm breeze rustled the hedges, carrying the scent of peonies. Captain & Tennille sang of "one more time" on the radio, as they would do for months to come. From across the boulevard droned the rhythmic pulse of a lawnmower. All I could focus on that morning was my prom date, Seth Sewell, and whether it made sense to keep seeing him through the summer, or to gamble that something better might roll my way—I cringe when I reflect upon how thoughtless and self-absorbed I was at seventeen—so I let my mind drift, soaking up the music, until Lacey tapped on the passenger window. She still wore her bathrobe, her skin pale as eggplant pulp without her foundation and blush.

"I've been calling you for hours," she said.

"I slept at my grandma's," I explained—not adding that I'd gone stargazing with my uncle into the early hours of the morning. "You okay?"

Lacey shook her head and braced her hands on the car door. Her entire physique trembled. "Vance is dead," she declared, her voice wavering—and then she sobbed for five minutes in the passenger seat before she could articulate another coherent word. "His wife's sister called my mother. They play bridge together....And no, they're saying there's no chance it was an accident."

"But I just saw him," I pleaded.

"When?"

"Yesterday afternoon. Probably around five."

I had stopped by Vance's office to gloat about my science scholarship to Bryn Mawr, also to tell him that I was hiking up Mt. Longbow that night with Uncle Allan. I knew that I'd leave with a hand-scrawled diagram of the spring sky, the not-to-be-missed constellations circled in black marker. I'd always loved the stars, ever since my parents took us car-camping in grade

school, but Vance had transformed my visceral pleasure into a more formal appreciation for the clockwork of the universe.

“He never came home yesterday,” said Lacey.

“Oh God. That means I could have been....”

He must have had the gun in his office already, I realized. He must have known how the school day would end, even as he mapped out *auriga* and *canis major*.

“Did he seem okay?” asked Lacey. “Did anything *happen*?”

I reflected back on those twenty minutes that we’d shared at his desk—the first of the many thousands of times I have replayed that scene. Every moment of our meeting is alive to me, still: the cusp of clean white T-shirt visible above Vance’s open collar, his parting words on the promise of the multiverse. Not even my own wedding day, or the birth of my daughter, stands out for me so vividly. And Lacey was to be only the first among many who demanded the details of that encounter, the magical key that might unravel the horror that followed.

“Nothing happened,” I said. “I can’t think of anything.”

~

Melissa Hunter phoned early on a Monday morning, and I caught the call just as I’d returned from walking Emily to the bus stop. I didn’t recognize her name at first and her Virginia area code made me wary: Ever since my husband, who chairs the geology department here at Yale, started testifying for the ACLU in anti-Creationist lawsuits, we’ve received a handful of angry phone calls each month, usually from states below the Mason-Dixon Line. Nothing frightening, just an ongoing nuisance. My ties to Virginia have grown increasingly frayed since my parents retired to Arizona, so Melissa had hardly said her name when I was already focused on politely ending our conversation.

“Honestly, now *isn't* a particularly good time,” I said.

“I’ll only take a moment, Ms. Hertz,” replied Melissa. Her voice was high-pitched and punctuated by short nervous giggles. “I’m calling about a mutual acquaintance. Vance Rottman. Am I speaking to the right Rebecca Hertz?”

“Vance Rottman,” I echoed—instantly alert. “Yes, I knew Vance.”

“Thank goodness,” said Melissa. “You’re the fourth Rebecca Hertz I’ve talked to this morning. One of them hung up on me.”

If she hadn’t mentioned Vance, I might have done the same. I glanced at the digital clock above the microwave. I was leading an Audubon Society bird-watching tour of the local marshlands that afternoon, and I still hadn’t retrieved my hiking boots from the repair shop. “Vance Rottman was my high school physics teacher,” I explained to the caller. “I’m not sure what else I can tell you about him.”

“Neither am I,” Melissa replied. She laughed nervously again. “But I have something that I want you to see. I can’t really do justice to it over the phone.”

“I’m not sure I understand. What exactly is your connection to Vance?”

“Oh, I thought I’d told you,” she replied. “I’m his daughter.”

Vance’s daughter. I pictured the flaxen-haired preschooler who’d impressed her father’s students by naming the planets in order of their distance from the sun, always concluding with the wisdom that Pluto was also Mickey Mouse’s dog, but the woman who’d called me would be in her late twenties. We’d raised money that summer after graduation to pay for her college tuition: baking coffee cakes, washing cars. And then I remembered that Vance’s wife had kept her own name—a rarity among married Virginia mothers in the 1970s—and how much I admired Vance when I discovered that his daughter had become a Hunter and not a Rottman. It

suddenly struck me that my own daughter, who has my husband's last name, was older now than Melissa had been during those classroom visits; that I was already six years older than Vance when he died.

“Would you mind if I stopped by your house this week? Maybe Friday?” asked Melissa. “I don't want to impose, and I promise I'll only stay for a few minutes, but my mother passed away last month—and it's important.”

“I'm sorry,” I said instinctively. “About your mother.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Would Friday work? I'll be driving up from Laurenvilleville, so late afternoon might be best.”

I had plans to attend my book club that Friday, a discussion group for faculty spouses that I'd co-founded with the elderly gay partner of a chemistry professor. And I've always had a very low tolerance for pushy people—whether they've been men pestering me for dates or strangers marketing door-to-door. Melissa Hunter, I sensed instinctively, had become one of those women who glom onto you like a barnacle.

“Late afternoon?” she asked again. “Only a few minutes, I swear.”

“Okay. I can do that,” I conceded. “My schedule is flexible.”

~

The rumors erupted even before the funeral. Someone claimed to have seen Vance's wife lunching with another man at a bistro in Fredericksburg, others to have spotted Vance himself with a provocatively-attired woman in Locust Crossing. A girl whose cousin worked at the county hospital revealed that Vance had been suffering from a malignant brain tumor, but this was the same girl who insisted she'd babysat for Amy Carter, and had made out with Bob Dylan's younger brother, so we had reasons to doubt her. Below these rumors coursed a darker

current of speculation, suspicion and outright myth: that Vance had been caught with a male sailor behind the Iwo Jima Memorial, that he'd run up two hundred grand in gambling debts on the horses at Colonial Downs. I'd been the closest to Vance of the girls and guys in our circle—our family had even had him over to our house for dinner a handful of times, when his wife and daughter were visiting a homebound aunt in Tennessee—so my friends vetted these accusations on my emotional doorstep, and nothing I said or did could ever convince them that I also knew nothing. Secretly, I relished the illusion that I was privy to more than I admitted. After speaking to Vance's widow once on the phone, to thank her for asking me to deliver a eulogy, I made a point of dropping references to this call in my conversations, so my classmates might infer that my relationship with Calliope Hunter was far more than incidental. Like everyone else, I suppose I wanted to claim my share of Vance's legacy.

My friendship with Lacey Moretti—forged memorizing the periodic table to a patter tune for our eighth grade earth science class, and later as co-editors of the yearbook—crumbled during those final months in Laurendale. In the initial turmoil after Vance's suicide, of course, our bond intensified. We spent hours lounging on the threadbare sofa in Lacey's basement, sometimes with Phoebe Clauson, or Trish von Elsing, or other girls who'd also idolized Vance, and sometimes only the two of us, recalling his arguments for the existence of extraterrestrial life, and his comedic impersonations of Isaac Newton, and Enrico Fermi, and Copernicus, how the Polish astronomer came off sounding like Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But increasingly, Lacey yearned to know *why* Vance had taken his own life, while I was content to accept that some questions cannot be answered. By prom—three weeks after the funeral—I was conjuring excuses to avoid afternoons at Lacey's, unable to handle another round of interrogation. We still saw each other on weekends—at graduation parties, at keggers. One

Saturday, a dozen of us explored the grounds of our old elementary school, and Seth Sewell carved his initials and mine, SS ♥ RH, in the panels of the same swing-set where I'd once learned how to pump for momentum. To Lacey, I pointed out the splintered door of the equipment shed where we had chipped our names into the paint-face three years earlier, above the phrase *Frendz 4ever*, but she just shrugged her shoulders and turned away.

The next morning, early—while Papa planted marigolds in the naked beds alongside the patio and Mom accompanied my grandma to eight o'clock mass—Lacey pummeled our doorbell until I staggered downstairs in my nightgown. She looked as though she'd been awake all night, her eyes frenzied and bloodshot like an addict's. I remember her face vividly, because it inspired pity rather than empathy.

“Let's go for a drive, okay?” she pleaded.

“Sure, I guess,” I agreed. “Just give me a second to find some clothes.”

Thirty minutes later, we were cruising up I-64 toward Charlottesville. Lacey had already polished off half a pack of cigarettes. She'd floored the speedometer to the cusp of the red zone and I clutched the ceiling strap every time we rounded a curve.

“Where are we going?” I asked. “All this secrecy makes me nervous.”

“We're almost there,” promised Lacey. “Five more miles.”

Our destination, as it turned out, was the cemetery in Cumberland County where Vance Rottman lay buried. His funeral service had taken place at the Richmond Ethical Culture Society; only Vance's immediate family had gone on to the interment. I'm still not certain how Lacey found out the location of the grave, but I sensed that she'd already been to the site on a prior occasion, as she led us to the precise spot without stopping at the cinderblock headquarters. Our physics teacher, who'd preached a gospel of spiritual atheism and earthly joy, rested beneath

a quiet knoll in the colossal shadow of two massive Civil War era cenotaphs—memorials to wealthy brothers who'd sacrificed themselves for the Confederacy. A cross festooned with desiccated gladiolus marked the ground for a future headstone. The stark finality of the spare grave made me nauseous.

"I'm sorry I've been such a bitch," said Lacey. "It's just that you seem so calm about everything...so willing to pick up the pieces and move on...and I'm not ready to just forget about what happened. I can't do that—not yet."

"You haven't been a bitch," I lied. "Really."

Lacey sank to her knees in the uncut grass. "I keep thinking that if I only understood *why*, I could accept things better." She held her face in her hands. "And to be honest, I'm jealous of you. Of all the time you spent with him."

"It wasn't *that* much time," I said truthfully. "We *all* spent lots of time together."

"Come on, Becky," she answered. "You were his favorite. There's no need to pretend you weren't—it was kind of obvious...." A quake of tears overcame Lacey, and as she cried, she kept repeating, "I wish *I'd* been his favorite...."

Only at that moment did I realize that Lacey had genuinely been in love with Vance Rottman—that maybe all of us, in our own way, had been in love with him. I hugged her then and we returned to Laurenvilleville with pledges of renewed friendship. But my next three weeks evaporated quickly, pre-registering for courses, packing, triaging blouses and shoes, without either of us picking up a telephone, and we didn't speak to each other again until Thanksgiving break. By then, I'd already started to think of Lacey Moretti as a girl I had been friends with back in high school.

In the days after Melissa Hunter's phone call, I found myself thinking about her father more than I had in many years. I'd revisited *his death* on countless occasions, but this was the first time, as an adult, I found myself considering what it had been like to *be* Vance Rottman—to walk around in his tattered penny-loafers. In high school, we'd known that he held a Ph.D. in physics from Princeton. To bookish teenagers, such a credential elevated him to a stratosphere above *Mr.* Benchford, the other physics teacher, or even Dr. Ismay, whose doctorate was an Ed.D. in classroom dynamics from Florida State. But as the wife of an Ivy League geologist, I finally understood what it meant to earn such a degree and end up teaching twelfth graders in suburban Virginia. When Vance discussed the multiverse—that infinite reflection of alternative universes paralleling our own—I suppose that in many of those other worlds, he was running a laboratory at Cal Tech or commanding legions of junior researchers in Los Alamos.

It has taken thirty years for me to see my childhood teachers as human beings, to realize that Miss Ayler's "girlfriend" was really her *girlfriend*, that autocratic Mr. Bumby was despised by his colleagues as much as by his students. Details lost upon me at seventeen resonate with the passage of years. In Vance Rottman's office, for instance, cluttered with whirling tables and manometers, I don't ever recall seeing a photograph of his wife. Looking back upon his memorial service, where hundreds of current and former students crowded into the ornate Georgian lecture hall of the Ethical Culturists, what strikes me now is the absence of Vance's colleagues—and how those in attendance, several of whom had taught Vance when he'd gone to Laurendale in the Sixties, did not seem nearly as torn up as Lacey and Phoebe and Trish von Elsing. It wasn't that anybody was pleased that Vance had done away with himself, of course. Nothing like that. But, in hindsight, I can recognize that Vance kept his coworkers at a friendly

distance—how different the mood among the adults was that day, for example, from their heartbreak, two years later, when beloved Mr. Feig succumbed to cancer of the pancreas.

Reflecting upon Vance's life inevitably made me think about my own. Had I been wrong to leave my graduate program in astronomy when Emily was born? Would I end up teaching high school physics someday, after my daughter was grown, lecturing adolescents on the opportunities of the multiverse? Was there something—anything—that could drive me to unload a sawed-off shotgun into my throat? *No*, I reassured myself. *Of course not*. But if the multiverse is infinite, I understood, then there are parallel universes where I do precisely that, much as there are others where Vance Rottman does not, where he removes the shells from the shotgun and drops them, one by one, into an open drawer.

~

Vance Rottman's adorable poster-child had grown into a somewhat pudgy, broad-faced creature who favored polka dots and pastels at far too young an age. Melissa's pageboy haircut partially concealed her strong brow, but at the expense of accentuating her wide, bony jaw. She had inherited Vance's features, in short, not her mother's, and my initial reaction upon opening our door for our meeting was that, had she been more attractive, Vance's daughter would not have had the time to waste tracking down her father's former students. I afforded her a loose hug, then led her through the toy-strewn foyer into the parlor, where I'd set out plates of cucumber sandwiches and sliced halva. I felt anxious, ill-at-ease. Although I'd informed my husband about the phone call, and the rendezvous, meeting with Melissa to talk about her father made me feel like I was committing an infidelity, that I'd crossed some point of no return.

Melissa settled into an armchair, clutching her canvas bag in her lap.

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am,” she declared. “I was afraid you’d want nothing to do with me—especially under the circumstances.”

“I’ll be glad to help in any way I can,” I replied. “But to be quite candid, I’m not sure what I can do for you.” I held the plate with the cucumber sandwiches toward her, but she waved me off with her fingertips. “I can’t imagine I can tell you anything about your father that you don’t already know....”

“*Can’t you?*”

Melissa’s tone wasn’t exactly unfriendly. Still, its edge was too sharp to let pass.

“No,” I said crisply. “I can’t.”

An uncomfortable silence followed. It was a bright, balmy afternoon, and beyond the plate glass window in the dining room, chipmunks cavorted on the low-hanging branches of the crabapple tree. Several blocks away, over home-baked scones, my book club was discussing the origins of the solar system. I couldn’t help wondering if Melissa Hunter felt as self-conscious—as downright uncomfortable—as I did.

“Let me put all my cards on the table, Ms. Hertz,” said Melissa. “You’ll forgive me for being blunt, but when you grow up with lots of unanswered questions—lots of innuendo, that’s the best word for it—you learn to ask things point blank, to make people say exactly what they mean. That makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

“It *does* make sense,” said Melissa. “So here’s what I want to know. Were you having an affair with my father?”

The question ought to have shocked me, but it didn’t. Somehow, I knew it was coming. Why else drive six hours to interrogate a stranger? A malicious part of me longed to announce

that I *had* had an affair with Vance Rottman, that we'd made love on the smooth-tiled countertops of his laboratory only hours before he died. That would serve this woman right, I thought, for leveling unfounded, and pointless, accusations. I'm still surprised at how angry I felt toward Melissa—maybe for disrupting the tranquility of my life—even though she was as much a victim of the tragedy as anyone.

“Really,” I said. “I don't know who gave you that idea....”

Melissa cut me off by withdrawing a binder from her bag. It was a self-mount photo album with a leather cover. She thrust it into my hands.

“What's this?” I asked.

“I found it when my mother died. With my father's things,” said Melissa. “Mom pretty much left his stuff alone after the suicide. I don't think anybody stepped foot in his study for at least twenty-five years.” Melissa punctuated her remarks with another of her nervous giggles; she also toyed with her ear. “Go ahead,” she urged. “Open it.”

“I don't think I want to,” I said.

Melissa did not encourage me again. Instead, she reached across the end table and opened the volume herself. The first page contained a discolored newspaper clipping: an article about my second-place finish in a debate tournament, replete with a photo of teenage me and Trish von Elsing at opposing lecterns. The second page of the album contained Polaroid shots of me, and my cohort, at a picnic I no longer remembered. On the third page, all of the photos were of me alone. I closed the album and set it firmly on the end table.

“I was one of your father's favorite students,” I said. “So he kept a scrap book of my accomplishments. What does that prove?”

“This isn’t the only one,” said Melissa, ignoring my question. “There are four others—different girls in each—but yours was the most recent...the only one from that final year. And you *were* the last person to see him before he died.”

“Who told you that?”

“It doesn’t matter who told me, does it? It’s true,” she continued. “Now, I’ll hope you’ll forgive me for asking you in this way, but is there anything you can tell me about my father that might explain why he killed himself? *Anything?* I don’t care how awful it is, you understand. I’m prepared for that. But I’d rather know than not know.”

Melissa’s entire body had gone rigid, as though braced for a blow. Desperation rose from her face like heat—the same expression I’d seen on Lacey Moretti’s features, so many years before, weeping in the passenger seat of Papa’s car. Outside, a pair of blue jays had commandeered the crabapple from the chipmunks. Emily’s bus would stop on the corner soon, and I would retrieve her, and Bruce and my daughter and I would sit down to a family dinner, while my guest drove back to Laurenvile. I considered reaching for her forearm, to comfort her, but it seemed unnatural.

“I’m not sure what I can tell you—”

“What you can tell me,” she interrupted, “is what happened. What happened between you and Daddy on the day he blew his brains out?”

~

Vance’s door stood open that Friday—as it always did for several hours after his last class—and he was seated opposite the window, blinds drawn, leafing through a popular science magazine. In my memory, there was irritation in his voice when he responded to my knock on the open door, but his expression melted when he recognized that it was only me. “Look what

the cosmos dragged in,” he said. “If it isn’t the best and the brightest herself. And to what good fortune do I owe such a pleasure?”

That was a standard Vance greeting. He was always showering us with superlatives, but playfully, never anything remotely improper. I slid my knapsack off my shoulders while he cleared space for me on a plastic chair, brushing a mass of tangled wires and damaged pulleys to the floor. In the corridor, two girls hurled insults at each other over some minor slight while a pack of guys cheered them on. Vance rose decisively, strode to the door and shut it. “That’s enough of the unwashed masses for one afternoon,” he said. “Now where were we?”

“I’m going stargazing tonight,” I announced. “My uncle’s taking me.”

“So we’re going to make a scientist of you yet,” said Vance. He settled into his desk chair and retrieved a stack of scrap paper from his filing cabinet. “Here I thought you’d come for my company,” he added. “But all you really want is a free lesson in naked-eye astronomy.” Vance sighed for effect. “Very well....”

One by one, Vance drew out the night’s constellations for me: *Cassiopeia*. *Gemini*. He connected Bellatrix to Betelgeuse, transforming haphazard dots into the mighty shoulders of Orion. While he sketched the limits of the visible universe, I gloated about my Bryn Mawr scholarship, thanking him for his recommendation.

“So you’re really leaving us,” he said.

“I’ll come back to visit,” I promised. “Often.”

“That’s what they all say,” said Vance with a mock-jaded grin.

He handed me his completed sky-scape.

“Never underestimate the power of the stars,” he said. “Whenever I feel like I’m a prisoner of the multiverse, I look at the night sky and anything seems possible.”

Then he placed his hand on my shoulder—a gentle, delicate gesture that lasted only a few seconds—and he wished me a cloudless night.

In some reflections of the multiverse, Vance’s hand rests upon my shoulder for too long—so long that I can feel the warmth of his flesh through my blouse. In others, he does not touch me at all. In the version I share with his daughter, his touch lasts just long enough, so that it’s not even worth a mention, so that it never happened: our entire cosmos is compressed to seconds, and then those seconds are compressed to ether, gone forever, and what remains is something different, something purer, a core of untainted generosity around which an entire new universe can be built.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

I make a point of telling people that all of my stories are the product of imagination and in no way reflect my experiences or those of people I know. Of course, as a psychiatrist, I understand this is far from true. I suspect most authors write fiction to revisit and revise their childhoods—filling in the gaps with their own fears and fantasies. I recognize that I do. Vance Rottman and Lacey Moretti are almost I knew growing up...and Rachel is almost me, though, of course, she’s not really me at all.

BIO:

Jacob M. Appel is the author of three literary novels including *Millard Salter’s Last Day* (Simon & Schuster/Gallery, 2017), eight short story collections, an essay collection, a cozy mystery, a thriller and a volume of poems. He currently teaches at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. More at www.jacobmappel.com

Stumbling into Babylon

by Chris Kassel

WHY WE LIKE IT:

The story of a man, who reflects on his infidelities as his wife dies, becomes, in Kassel's hands, a literary tour de force. We don't know what we like more in this plaintive rumination where guilt stares down redemption: the prismatic characterizations; the potent symbolism, the mercurial shifts in time or the author's poetically charged immaculate prose. An animistic energy takes hold from the first sentence and at the end we are left breathless. This is five-star fiction and probably the surest proof, if proof were needed, that you either have it or you don't. Quote: 'As sapient, doomed beings we are fundamentally haunted by the unliftable stone' And 'The world outside the tank is bright and wildly beautiful but staged and ultimately unreal.' Wow!

In the ICU, eight bays surround the nurse's station. Inside each is a waxy tile floor, a sliding glass door and a constellation of portable machines. Fluorescent light makes the equipment glitter and the late-night silence of the unit is leavened with gentle mechanical strumming. The patients are barricaded from one another, but as I follow the squat nurse, I can see through the glass doors, and behind one of them, a young man lies on a hydraulic bed. His mouth is agape in a rictus; he appears to be paralyzed and his body is being shifted by an orderly for a sponge-bath. The orderly glances up at a monitor as I pass, then back at the young man, and briefly, for the flash of an instant, I see the Pietà.

In another bay lies my wife, intubated and comatose. A trauma physician has spoken to me in the waiting room, his brows knit into a thick hedge, his manner both irritating and intimidating. I wade through his Middle Eastern accent: "CAT scan shows terrible cerebral bleed..."

Terrible bleed; as opposed to...? The prognosis is explained to me with military precision; the doctor is workmanlike in his sympathy. I glance beyond him and through him. He smells of hair tonic and faintly, subtly, of cigar smoke.

My wife will not survive this hospital trip. I'm told that if she emerges from the coma, it will be in a vegetative state. We have discussed our final wishes, of course—we are of the age. Her will contains a Do Not Resuscitate clause, and after that, she requests that any service not last longer than twenty

minutes and with only a single dirge—the melancholy Tiff Merritt song, ‘Traveling Alone.’ Given that ours has been a marriage without much music, and given the loneliness inside her—an offshoot of one that exists in me, no doubt—it is a rather passive-aggressive entreaty. I acknowledge the wish, appreciate the song and understand the sentiment: As sapient, doomed beings, we are fundamentally haunted by the unliftable stone.

According to her name badge, the squat nurse is called Libertad. In the last bay, my wife is unfolded beneath antiseptic sheets, scrubbed, pale, perspiring, blue-lipped and unconscious. I move the chair beside her and after a moment of professional puttering, Libertad leaves me alone with my human shell. Dying, my wife has the same inconsequential air about her that some folks have mistaken for aloofness. Perhaps so—but I remember her in the Longfellow alley behind a gracefully decaying English Revival mansion where we’d each rented separate rooms, a shy and serious student at the nearby university, not yet my lover, but grazing through the overture. We’d begun to leave packages of food for each other in the home’s communal fridge—Greektown souvlakis for her and for me, collops her English mother had made.

On the particular night that I’m remembering, we did nothing more than stand together and watch bloated snowflakes filter through elm boughs and sizzle on the lip of a trashcan where a pair of old men as black as polished onyx had laid in a fire. The bite of burning cardboard bears no resemblance to the comfort smells of a campfire, but as we stood in silence, tossing our Styrofoam coffee cups into the flames, I sensed a new tickle that I identified as falling in love. To me, to this day, in my mind, the caustic smell of burning trash is linked to intimacy.

My wife lies nearly still and it’s almost noon. A nerve twitches in her right eyelid. I touch a strand of fine blonde-grey hair at her temple; it’s fragile and damp, but she seems serene. We’d been on bad terms before the catastrophe; this or that, something inconsequential—at first I can’t remember and then I do: She’s bought an antique clock at a flea market on Saturday and it ticks incessantly. I keep stubbornly stopping it mid-tick and apparently, it is difficult to re-set and worth a squabble, so we squabble. For many years we have survived on that level of superficiality.

But in the ICU bay, our fight has gone quiet. Other than the drooping right side of her face—the eyebrow doctor says the bleed is weighing down the left side of her brain—she appears bird-like. She has succumbed to oblivion, the blithe hum of darkness, and her lonely travels are finally winding down. Throughout our decades I haven’t been much of a shoulder to cry on and her fund of justifications has seen her through the dirtiest mangles. It’s about compromise before it’s about love and the hand I hold is limp and indifferent, pliant and grey, without visible veins. I am an umbilical cord to sensation, but there is no trickle of electricity to sap it, no need for it, and sadly, I am reminded of the epiphany and the disaster of our honeymoon week.

She’s spent a portion of that week likewise bedridden, rattling with chills and soaked in sweat—a bad dose of seafood, the local doctor says, since I’d ordered lamb, and I am fine. We’ve taken a train up the coast from Brisbane, debarked in a town with wide streets and houses on stilts where the warehouses

are filled with tobacco and bulk sugar and heavy sweet smells blend with brine blown in from a green, flat and featureless ocean.

I've known since our days in the old mansion on Longfellow Street that she is morbidly sensitive to stomach ailments (the souvlaki had been a bust), so we take a room at a beachfront hotel to wait out the illness. Twenty-four hours, the doctor shrugs, perhaps thirty-two. The hotel is beautiful; well-maintained, high-peaked with rafters and a veranda that overlooks a grove of flowering mangos. These details are irrelevant to my new wife, of course, who has begun to make abominable sounds and look at me with such desolation that I feel a little sick myself. By then I have already concluded that we've been joined by fate rather than by conspicuous emotion—without the trash fire, we might have gone our individual ways. We are vaguely in love, I suppose, by the standards of our time and our species. Now, there is a signal blinking between us as if across a void; she smells like vomit and travels alone, too isolated to accept my sympathy. This is not how honeymoons are supposed to go. Thus far, she's been timid and listless about sexual intimacy; no thrashing and no ecstasy. We've climbed into bed instead of bounding there. Her carnal apathy is a rumble of distant thunders, but now it's irony; my passion, absorbed by flesh is now repulsed by it, thwarted by bodily functions.

I sit up with her for a while, but even at its lowest setting the noise of television bothers her and she refuses to be helped to the bathroom. I don't argue—the only thing I could find on at that hour was a rugby match. I plug my ears when she evacuates and look away when she returns. And when she finally drifts off to sleep at around four in the morning, I do the unforgiveable: I abandon her.

There is a delicious sensation of nothingness on the beach in front of the hotel, and as I step into the sand, it occurs to me that I might be the first person on the entire continent to see the sun rise. I am looking for a sunrise, obviously—for the moment, a sea of stars meets the black ocean, forming alliances unknown to me. To an eye raised outdoors on Northern constellations they are great sprinkles of insanity.

I start to run. I run until the world becomes opaque and washed in gentle Degas pastels. Fairy fogs lift and a tentative crescent forms at the seam where the sea meets the sky. I run until all the light that had drained away the previous evening fills the world again like a vessel. The sun surges behind a sulfur-colored haze; it froths and combs the sea. Spatial majesty expands, and then, in a delicacy of light on gold, I see a girl on the beach walking toward me—a sight that somehow becomes an anchor to secure me through the rest of my life.

Her image is the reason I'm sharing this story; it's a face I've worked diligently through all the intervening years to forget and remember and perhaps, amorphously, to find. Oddly, there is not much to share about the moment—it's over so quickly that she might have been a mirage to temper the emptiness. She wears a one-piece dress with her lithe frame sliding near the surface. I can't remember the color, but her copper hair would have subdued it anyway—it flares and coruscates in slits of new sunlight. I don't say a word to her, nor her to me. We slide by one another without acknowledgment. There are complicated vibrations nevertheless—I believe that with all my heart. I do not stare. A glance is enough; a glance is all I can take. In it, in her, in her volatility and luminosity, in her primal port of

freedom I see something so frightening and beautiful that I nearly fall to my knees. It is like I've been struck by something violent.

A slight sound comes from the dress—a rustle that reminds me of a Mexican chime. She moves with the languid electricity of dawn, and I want to glance back over my shoulder, into the rising grey, but I fight the urge: The original sight has burned its brand and I don't want a faceless one to supplant it. I want to remain in touch with a sensation that surrounds me like an element, a truth more acute than a puking wife alone in a fetid hotel room; I want to use it to bear the weight of my revelation about our past and future, one immutable and the other, I supposed, inevitable.

Throughout my life, whenever that image resurfaces, tainted by time but still iridescent and glazed with the colors of summer, I experience the phenomenon of growing older and younger at the same time.

So that's it. I leave the beach, scramble through a leafy hollow over roots and decayed windfalls, running my face into gigantic spider webs, finally finding the road and making it back to the pretty hotel. But not to check on my bride, more shame on me. Instead, as restless as I have ever been in my life, I find a man to rent me a Toyota Land Cruiser, and with rudimentary directions from the hotel clerk, I set out on the road and drive until the road wrinkles into eroded hills and I enter a spread of gum trees and blood-colored dirt so dry that looking at it makes me thirsty.

Beyond the hump of Great Dividing Range, eras fade to eons and outstanding space lopes for thousands of miles until the Indian Ocean finally draws a line in the sweltering sand as if to say, enough is enough. Above, the sky is a vast blue lozenge. Around me, alien contours rise from the dust. From a distance they look like Cousin It but when I stop to investigate, they are more Frank Lloyd Wright than Charles Addams. I kick one and find that it's filled with an intricate labyrinth of chimneys and chambers and a metropolis of scurrying termites. To this day, I regret the impulsive moment that destroyed the architecture of those quiet, graceful lives.

I remain more ambiguous about an intricate labyrinth of other impulsive moments that have had the same effect. To say that the girl on the beach remains with me—the vision of serenity, the tumble of copper hair, the obscure focus—is to understate. I rent the truck to barrel away because otherwise I might have returned to the beach to track her down, even for another glimpse, and I sensed that such a mistake would dwarf the one I had already made at the altar, taking a hand from a naïve and insufferably gentle father.

Beyond the termite mounds, the loneliness is flecked with abandoned shacks, junked cars and rusting machinery. The hotel clerk me has warned me about these spreads—million-acre ranches where you'll die of thirst if your vehicle breaks down. But within an hour I enter landscapes where weeping figs hang over creek beds and small brown children play while herds of foraging goats drink. The road comes to a determined end in a small farming community made up of a few shabby breeze-block houses ringed by standing scrub and a wooden church with a green bell-tower and a pile of reddish bricks stacked near the fence.

The town is called Cantelon and a nursery rhyme I hadn't thought of since I was a child runs through my head: *"The King and Queen of Cantelon, how many miles to Babylon? Eight and eight, and other eight. Will I get there by candle-light...?"*

At the edge of Cantelon stands an old tin-roofed bush pub whose corrugated sides are pitted from blowing soil. I am very young and this is a time before alcohol's tug had really asserted itself in my life. Even so, the urge is beginning to percolate, and I stop.

The pub is called Rubyjohn; it has the ubiquitous roadhouse quartet of Xs advertising Gold Lager out front. Within, locals sip midday coldies—unshaven old-timers in battered felt hats and clay-stained boots, occasionally punctuating quiet talk with raucous cheers at the rugby match on television. The barman is a thickset fellow with pale blue eyes and wispy hair, and I figure I'll have to explain what I am doing here, an American out at the far end of the road, but it turns out that the pub is a lay-by for travelers heading out to explore railway and telegraph relics and the prehistoric rock paintings found on the sandstone scarps north of town.

I sit heavily at the bar beside an old black bushman wearing a grey flannel singlet and an Anzac-style hat, and immediately, he rises up and moves to the opposite side. The barman sets me up with a Castlemaine and says, "Never mind our Tom, son. He's a hatter."

I shake my head and the barman clucks, "A solitary. Nourished with superiority he is—the abos call him a man of high degree. Won't touch a beer to live on North Queensland rum. Otherwise it's lizards and grubs for our Tom."

The old bushman says something, but his voice is thick with drink and barely audible: *"Janga meenya bomunga."*

"What does that mean?" I ask.

The barman says, "Don't know the talk."

The bushman repeats, louder, "Can't stand the smell of white people."

The response baffles and amuses me to the extent that I send him over a North Queensland rum. Instead of thanking me, he fixes me in a sclerotic gaze which would have quickly grown uncomfortable except that at that moment, a mongrel dog steps through the door followed by a handsome man in fluorescent-yellow sunglasses.

The newcomer is around thirty and in his silvery suit he looks more out of place than I do, but the scruffy men at the tables turn to watch him as he mounts a theatrical stage in the rear by the cedar cupboard and opens a Bible. Solemnly, the barman switches off the television and says, "Fair go, Cloncurry. You have the floor."

Cloncurry removes his Ray-Bans and as the mongrel dog settles in quietly at his feet, he begins to read from Ecclesiastes—a moving, if no-brainer passage for a preacher. It's a Bible Top 40, a Roger McGuinn

singalong, but despite this I have never before heard the final verse, and these men, after a lifetime of scrubbing out boxwoods and bloodwoods, lap it up: *“What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race; He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”*

Across the bar, Tom’s quizzical expression remains on me instead of the preacher; I can’t tell if it is meant as toxic challenge or a sweep of empathy. He has callouses on his face and is as black as a mussel shell. I think of the alley behind our house on Longfellow, of the garbage fire and my first irrational flushes of romance—then I think of my puking bride and my evanescent vision on the coral sand. Lastly, I think of the fissures we make in our lives and manage to step over until there is no longer time or energy to make any more. Cloncurry expatiates, fluttering the arm that holds the Bible as I’ve seen preachers do on television, making allusions to the presence of Christ’s sacrifice in human suffering—and the dog snores.

“But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

When he is done, the barman switches the television on again, and Cloncurry walks around holding out his grey Izod cap with the dog at his heels; everybody tosses in something except for calloused Tom, who says, without looking away from me, “That dog has dingo in him.”

When it is my turn to ante up, I deposit the change the barman had given me for the rum and shortly, after Cloncurry fades back into the sweltering afternoon, the bushman rises and returns to his original stool beside me. He says, “Buy me another drink and I will tell you something.”

I buy him that drink because I am at that place in life where I’d like to know many things—and maybe, by peering at me for half an hour, he has figured one of them out. Suddenly, though, he won’t look at me at all; he stares at the rugby game. But as soon as he’s downed his rum he says, “She is her.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“She is right here.”

After this, I turn around and return to the pretty hotel, and later, after having sought out A.P. Elkin’s *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* and learning that solitaries are their culture’s shamans—their mystics—I cannot, for the life of me, remember which one he has said first: “She is right here,” Or “She is her.”

I do remember how the nursery rhyme ends though: *“If your heels are nimble and your toes are light, you may get to Babylon by candle-light.”*

Every wrong done today is an echo of a wrong done yesterday, and very rarely are they connected by anything. We are built of particle moments, and by default, the particles that make up the particles are equally significant. A film is nothing but a set of snapshots; movement is illusion, and those in black-and-

white are only a shadow of the truth. My new wife recovers from her bout of food poisoning, and many decades afterward, late one evening, she complains of a sudden headache. I see her standing beneath one of the impressionistic landscapes with which she has decorated our house and note that the bedroom is filled with such touches: The quilted upholstery, the blue brocade curtains, the feng shui colors in the bedding. They're everywhere, and they are hers, and my touches are scarcely to be found.

In that particular moment I realize for the first time that behind her grey-blond hair and eyes as shimmery blue as a porcelain doll, age has made her brittle. Through most of these years we've been benign proximates, not lovers. Now her expression seems perplexed, but incurious. Distracted. A bead of sweat forms on her upper lip; briefly, she waggles her head as if to clear away cobwebs, then she sinks to the floor. I go to her; I hold her head and our faces are inches apart in an intimacy more intense than any we have shared in a long while. Her breath smells like bitter herbs and it startles me; it is something I don't remember about her, but it is not unpleasant.

I call 911. Her pulse feels strong, but what do I know? Yes, I tell the dispatcher, she's breathing, but she's staring at the ceiling—one of her pupils is as big as a poker chip. Later I discover that that the pupil has lost its nerve supply—the cerebral bleed is on the side that affects motor and speech. She makes a single weird, shrill cry and then closes her eyes. Her right lip droops and releases a trickle of drool; I lift her right arm and it flops back down like a fish. In the moments during which I wait for the paramedics, I lose the substance of her. She drops into darkness and enters a weightless world beyond the sheathe of skin and hands, beyond sight and sound.

As she slips under, her face relaxes—the marionette lines that have formed at the crease of her mouth somehow fill in. Briefly, she resembles the girl I knew in the alley, half-lit by burning cardboard, and when the ambulance comes, I notice that the curve of her calf on the gurney, unattached to the rest of her, looks like a child's.

All the years between now and the moment I first stroked that white calf in my bedroom on Longfellow are a candle flicker. As an attendant suctions her mouth and administers oxygen, telling me that the respiratory center of her brain might be affected, these memories become a falling star. When I was a horny boy, I thought as one, and it was many years—eras to epochs—before I was able to put away such childish things. In the ambulance, stroking her calf a final time, I take a scissors to time and snip out bits. Somehow along the way I have been fleeced by the idea that I'm worth more than this simple comfort and rational contentment. And I am struck with an epiphany: Despite my instance to the contrary, I have been very happy for nearly all my life. I am amazed that the marriage has survived the intensity of my treacheries; that it has withstood the frost and held fast in the face of gales.

On the surface, my adultery has not been particularly sordid. No one-nighters, no booty calls. They were love affairs and not at all light-hearted; some lasted for years. Co-workers, subordinates, superiors, one young Basque woman who I met on a business trip to Madrid and who I saw whenever I was in Europe. In most ways, of course, love is a far more potent sort of betrayal than lust, but love it has been nonetheless. It has been a subterranean river to sate an implacable thirst. The affairs have been with vital, alert passionate women—none with red hair, if that matters. There have been no real illusions;

they all knew I was married, and to some extent, in their world, that was one of my attributes. They could put me down like a book on the nightstand when it suited them.

It was clearly a persistent searchlight though, and it was never far from my mind where it began. I have mused on that enameled Queensland morning ever since, when the copper-haired girl and I were the first people on a continent to see the sun. Had I turned that morning and sought her company, tried to embrace her or seduce her, to exploit the commonality of a beach at dawn, all things would have unfolded in an alternate universe, and the changes would have been as extreme whether she had repulsed me or acquiesced. But, then as now, there was something inviolable and grand in that vision, something in it so mysterious and enthralling that it has served my life—which I do not regret in the least—to do exactly what I did: Not look back

I was sober that morning, and it was not until later that liquor softened the edges of restraint; my extramarital activities have invariably been fueled by drink, where immediacy becomes the force to overlook moles and birthmarks, the white stripes of scar tissue and common decency. For me, alcohol and adultery have been inseparable. The addiction is similar and the aftermath is as dismal. The impetus itself is common enough: The world outside the tank is bright and wildly beautiful, but staged and ultimately unreal. My narcissism and selfishness recognized this ruse when I was young, but I was old before it finally broke through, although purging people and substances does not purge the yearnings that lie deeper than the river. As a professional, I had the status that allowed—even nurtured—such alcoholism and I had the income to draw women to whom I wasn't married and to keep them interested after the first heady flushes of libido. I've charmed my way out of more DUIs than I can count and into as many beds. And yes, now more than ever, I am aware that the injuries from those encounters will reverberate until we are all beyond remembering.

Like me, my wife has been an academic and professional success—she's reveled in it and perhaps, just above the chaos, that has been her underground flow. She's been demure but well-liked among our circle of friends and drinks only occasionally. As far as I know, she has never been unfaithful. Of course, it would ease my restless conscience if she had been, even once, and I suppose she realizes that. But vindictiveness is not her style and she has used her private despair to make herself a deeper thinker, more psychically complex. I've used that same void to cheapen myself, to thwart depth and make myself callous through stews of lust and desperation.

Now those years, eras to epochs, are drawing to a close like a gentle cascade of snow. We have dealt with miscarriages but we have a single living child: She lives across the country, and four hours after I begin the vigil in the trauma center room, she arrives, gulping and hiccupping and sobbing. Her face is the color of cooked shrimp; her hug is listless and awkward and contains a shudder of inexplicable contempt. "There's nothing much we can do for the moment," I say sadly. "Holding pattern. She's stable. I've been here all night."

The sound of my own voice is distant, like the trickle of water in a creek behind a roadhouse: "Would you mind if I went down to the cafeteria for coffee?"

"No," my daughter says.

“Should I bring you some back? Anything?”

“No,” she answers.

The cafeteria is an oasis of primal comfort in the hospital’s lowest region—amid the savory aromas, people shuck the pain of watching loved ones suffer; pragmatic acquiescence to their own continued survival. I sit for a long time amid the yuccas and ferns and drink black coffee; I watch the straggle of milling faces and try to guess if they are here to turn off ventilators, to bedsit the comatose or to greet a new baby. I think about the children my wife miscarried and wonder which of these strangers they would have become.

Because of her significance, or in spite of it, my mind at last returns to the image of the copper-haired girl in the sand. For the first time ever, I wonder what she looks like now, at this very instant. I wonder if she’s led a happy life, had a fulfilled experience; have her heels been nimble, her heels light? I wonder if she still travels alone, first to see the sunrise though herself the light, her red hair now brittle and white, thin garment now tattered to threads by the salty wind, her reflective half-smile intact and untroubled or, perhaps, compromised by the squalls and humors we all encounter.

I’m still sitting there as outside, another night descends; my daughter calls my mobile and says that my wife has passed away. It’s been as peaceful a passing as anyone could wish for: The daughter tells me that my wife’s porcelain blue eyes opened a final time and looked upward at nothing as she whispered a short sentence.

I return to the trauma room to offer her a belated farewell, where a slight dispute arises as to what my wife’s final words have been. Back on duty, Libertad believes she’s heard “I’m here,” but my daughter insists she’s said, “I’m her.”

Of course, it makes no difference: Dear girl, dead girl—she’s been both. And as always, when she’s said so, I’ve been somewhere else.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

I wrote this piece as reminiscence of a trip I took to Australia as a young man and I wove it into the theme of growing older and falling in love with people, not fantasies. In healthy people, this happens effortlessly, often beyond our notice. It’s in the first person to add immediacy to memory.

My literary influences from Evelyn Waugh to Joyce Carol Oates to Tom Wolfe to John Updike, though if my style reminds anyone of any of them, I’d consider myself a failure. Originality above all.

BIO: My last novel *The Bottom of August Lake*, was a runner up in the 2018 PEN/Faulkner Award. I am a former columnist for Michigan's largest daily newspaper (*The Detroit Free Press*) and have two Michigan Chapter Emmy Awards for Writing. My Amazon author's page displays the variety of styles and genres in which I write.

Can anyone else feel that?

by Michael Howard

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Convincing dialogue is one of the writer's biggest challenges. In fiction, it isn't a transcription of actual speech: it has a life and plasticity all its own. This is one of the best examples of how to do it right we've read in some time. And the trim prose, cadenced and stripped of ornament, in this moving bad ass tale of post-millennial modern manners is a lesson in the art of restraint. Quote: 'The crickets are deafening now that I'm listening for them. I look up at the sky. The great yawning nothingness. There aren't many stars out. Clouds keep sliding in front of the moon. It's a weird shade of orange tonight.' It doesn't get any better, folks.

It's ten to one but the party, which was only supposed to be a small get together for Kerry's birthday, is showing no signs of slowing down. I count the people in the living room. Fourteen. There's more in the kitchen, and upstairs, too. Also on the patio. But those are mostly Kerry's brother's friends. I realize that I haven't seen Kerry for a while, can't remember how long, and wonder where she might be. I ask the kid to my left if he knows.

"Who's that?" His dilated pupils reflect the lights on the ceiling.

"The person whose house you're in."

He looks puzzled. Then he begins to nod. "Man. That's rad."

I finish my beer and stand up, walk into the kitchen. There's only two beers left in the fridge. I take them both out and hide one in the oven. I grab a cold slice of pizza from one of the boxes on

the counter, take a bite, throw it in the garbage. I wander over to the table. Brad, Mason and three girls I don't think I've seen before are distractedly playing cards. Brad's shirt is off.

"What happened to the beer," I say.

Mason looks at me. "What?"

I point at the fridge. "No more beer."

One of the girls starts taking off her socks.

"Oh, come on!" Brad groans. "Socks don't count."

"You never said that," the girl's friend says.

I ask Mason where Kerry is.

"Out," he says, shuffling the cards. The girl puts her socks on the table. They're white and the bottoms are dirty.

"Out where?"

He starts to deal. "I don't know."

I ask again about the beer but he ignores me. A strong smell of pot floats into the kitchen from the living room and hangs there. I sit down at the table hoping to see one of the girls' tits but they keep folding their hands so that they don't have to take any clothes off. After a while they get bored and the game breaks up.

"Fuckin sophomores," Brad says when the girls walk off. He starts throwing the cards around the kitchen with good technique. Amber walks in and he hits her with a few and she runs back out

guarding her face and shrieking. I drink my beer, belch under my breath. Once all the cards are gone Brad says:

"Doesn't this shit get old for you?"

Mason's preoccupied with his phone and I don't really feel like asking him what he's talking about.

"Drinking, smoking, fucking," he continues, philosophically. "If you're lucky. But what's the point anyway? I mean, there's porn."

"What do you think?" Mason shows me a picture of a woman on his phone. She's standing in front of a bathroom mirror in her underwear.

"She looks ... old."

"Forty-two," he says proudly. "She wants to meet up tonight."

"Porn's more gratifying" Brad says to no one. "I know what I like." His shirt is still off and he's now wearing aviator sunglasses.

A few people come in through the front door. I hear Kerry's voice among them. After a minute she comes into the kitchen and throws her arms around me. She smells like cherries and pot. She kisses my cheek and slobbers all over it. She calls me "baby" which means she's very high. I ask where she was.

"Riding around."

Her parents bought her a new Audi for her birthday. She wrapped her last one around a lamp post. Kerry was more or less unscathed but Jen broke her shoulder or collarbone or something. Got a concussion, too. That was about six weeks ago, just before finals.

I tell Kerry about the beer which was a mistake because seconds later she's outside on the patio screaming at her older brother Nick about how it's her party and he's not supposed to be there. It gets pretty heated after he tells her to go fuck herself. I walk out to make sure she doesn't do anything crazy.

"You're a fucking prick!" she yells.

"Get back inside," he says calmly. Some of his friends laugh. They all have beers.

Kerry starts forward but I grab her arm and hold her back. I say, "Forget it."

"Listen to your boyfriend," Nick says. "He knows what's good for you."

"Fuck you, Nick!" she says.

"Here." He leans forward and spits a mouthful of tobacco juice. It lands about two feet in front of us but Kerry loses it anyway. She's screaming like a mental patient and fighting to free herself from my grip. I've got my arms around her waist now. If she gets at one of the empty bottles someone is going to get hurt. Brad and a few others rush out and help me restrain her. Nick's friends laugh harder.

She's bawling, but no longer violent, when we get her back inside. "It's *my* party," she keeps saying. Tears are spilling down her cheeks, smearing her makeup. I hand her over to Josephine and go back out to the patio. I sit down in an empty chair and Nick tosses me a cold beer from the cooler.

"Want a lip?" he says.

"Sure."

He tosses me a pouch and I put it in. He says, "I don't know how you put up with it. I'd smack her."

I shrug. "She's cool when it's just us."

I ask him how college is. He says he gets laid every weekend. "All you have to do is look at them. No shit." Three and foursomes aren't uncommon, he says. "Look." He pulls up a video on his phone of three girls making out in a dorm room. One of his friends gestures with his arms and looks around. He says:

"Where the fuck are they?"

"What am I," Nick says, "a pimp? Get your own pussy."

Another friend nods at the house. "Some in there."

I turn and spit into the grass. I say, "Don't bother."

"Your class is pretty lame," Nick says.

I nod in agreement. They reminisce about their high school exploits. All the girls they did and didn't do.

"I'll say it again: by far the best blowjob I ever got."

"Is it true Braxton fucked her in the auditorium?"

"She works at a tanning salon. I saw her last week."

"Four or five times."

"I still have a few pics of her on my phone."

"You hear what's her name got engaged?"

"I never understood why everyone thought she was so hot."

"True, but she had a perfect ass."

"I wasted so much time with that chick."

"She's fat now."

I spit into the grass again. Fireflies are sparking in the trees behind the yard. The crickets are deafening now that I'm listening for them. I look up at the sky. The great yawning nothingness. There aren't many stars out. Clouds keep sliding in front of the moon. It's a weird shade of orange tonight. I finish my beer and move into the shadows and take a piss. When I sit back down I feel hopeless and alone. It's a familiar feeling, like I'm sinking or being pushed down. I think there must be something wrong with me. Like the people who see and hear things that aren't there. I wonder if Zach used to feel this way. Or if Kerry ever does. Nick asks me if I have any hydros.

I shake my head. "Sorry."

Inside the house things are mellowing out. The kitchen is empty. So is the oven. Someone found the last beer. Whatever. I go into the living room which is still bright and crowded. Somewhere a speaker is faintly playing the new Arctic Monkeys. I sit down next to Jamie and mechanically take out my phone. There's a couple messages from Kerry asking what I'm doing, where I am. At the other end of the room Tyler is drinking Bacardi straight from the bottle and talking loudly. Last summer someone punched him in the face at this girl's lake house. Tyler ended up winning the fight. Zach was there that night. It doesn't seem like a year ago.

"That's nothing," Tyler's saying. "That's nothing. Listen to this." He starts telling a story. After a minute I realize which one it is. I put my phone in my pocket and glare at him. We make eye contact but he carries on.

"So he's chatting with this girl every day. This nurse. And he's telling everyone all about her."

"I know where this is going," a girl I don't know says.

"Just listen," Tyler says. "So it's not long before it starts getting really kinky. They're doing the cybersex thing and he's sending her all kinds of pictures. And she's sending pictures too. Pretty dirty stuff. He showed them to us. Anyway this girl, Isabella, never wants to talk on the phone. Whenever they make plans to meet up she cancels last minute. She's toying with him, right? But he's in love. He was always falling in love with girls."

He's averting my gaze now. I don't take my eyes off him. Most of the people in the room already know the story. They're smiling, waiting for the punchline.

"Finally, after she cancels on him for the fucking hundredth time or whatever, he decides he's had enough. He calls her out and they have this big fight."

"Via text," Jamie interjects.

"Right," Tyler says. "This is all through text. So they have this fight and they stop talking. But he can't get over it. He's still in love with her. He won't shut up about her. Isabella this and Isabella that. It was ridiculous. So one day, and I don't know why this never occurred to us before, one day we decide to search her phone number on one of those websites. We had to pay like twenty bucks—but it was worth it."

"I knew it," the girl says.

"Wait. Get this. He's there at the time. We're all at Pizza Hut. And he's begging us not to do it. But we do it. We punch in her number and pay the money and *boom*, there it is." He pauses for effect. He grins. "Isabella the kinky nurse ... is a fifty-seven-year-old man."

The room erupts.

"Who happens," Tyler adds over the cacophony, finger in the air, "who happens to live right around the fucking corner. Zach knew who the guy was!"

I look around. Everyone's cracking up. Everyone but me.

"Right around the fucking corner!" Tyler says again. He slaps his knee.

It takes a long time for the laughter and chatter to die down. When it finally does I look at Tyler and say:

"Why don't you finish the story?"

Everyone stops talking. Some people are looking at me, others at Tyler. Some have their heads down.

"Go ahead," I tell him.

"I did."

"No—no you did not. Tell us the rest of it."

"Come on, man," he says, smiling uncomfortably. "Take it easy."

"Finish the fucking story."

He stops smiling. He looks at the floor.

"Not gonna finish it?"

There's silence.

"That wasn't the reason," he says at length. "I don't think that was it."

"Of course not." I get up and walk out of the room. As I'm climbing the stairs I can hear the conversation slowly picking back up.

I move down the hallway and knock on Kerry's bedroom door.

A tired voice says, "Yeah."

"It's me."

"Come in."

I try to turn the knob. "It's locked."

She pads across the floor and unlocks the door and lets me in. She's wearing a pink t-shirt and black panties. Josephine, also not wearing pants, is lying on the bed smoking a joint. Kerry gets back into bed and starts pushing her cuticles back.

"You're a little overdressed," Josephine says.

I say, "I think I'm gonna go."

Kerry looks at me with a blank expression. "You're not staying over?"

I motion to the bed.

"Jo's staying in the guestroom."

"When?"

Josephine gets the hint. She takes another drag from the joint and rummages around for her pants. When she's gone I switch off the light and lie down next to Kerry.

"Why didn't you text me back?" she says through a yawn.

"Sorry. I left my phone in the kitchen."

"Who's still here?"

"Just a few people."

"What are they doing?"

"Nothing," I say after a pause.

She offers me the joint. I shake my head. She lets it burn out and throws it on the floor. She tells me she feels old. I tell her I understand. We stare at the TV without talking. Posters and pictures torn from magazines, mostly of Taylor Swift and Lana Del Rey, are stuck all over the walls with scotch tape. I look over and see that the streaks on her wrist are almost gone. She lays her head on my chest. Her breath is warm on my skin. I can feel my heart beating against her face. The feeling from the patio is back again. Maybe it never left. Maybe it never will. Maybe it's just part of me. I shut my eyes. Outside stars are shooting across the night sky. Blue and green and purple slashes of light painted on the cosmic darkness.

I say, "Kerry," but she's already asleep.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

What inspired me to write this one is difficult to say. There's something about decadent restless youth that fascinates me—it's a theme I keep returning to; I can't seem to get away from it. The general subject matter stems from personal experience. The main idea was to convey a sense of distance

between the narrator and the world he inhabits, an alienation the reader sees and understands better than he does. Whether I succeeded in doing so is another matter. As to influences, I've got plenty and I've experimented with a lot of different forms. I'd say the minimalism characterizing this story is influenced by writers like Chekhov, Carver/Lish and Cormac McCarthy. Maybe early Ellis, too, though I haven't read that stuff in ten years.

BIO:

Michael Howard is a writer and teacher living in Vietnam. His fiction and creative nonfiction has appeared in After the Pause, Hypertext Magazine, New Pop Lit, The Forge, The Fiction Pool and The Opiate among others. His political essays have appeared in a wide variety of publications and have been translated into several languages.

Bucket of Bolts

by John David Hanna

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Clean this story up and all you have is a story. Leave it the way it is and you have both story and style. This is outsider writing: the literary equivalent to folk art. The author is besotted with his subject, the prose is unselfconscious and full of homespun charm and the voice is clean, humble and honest. SciFi junkies will groove on the story; lit nerds will read it for the folksy style. Quote: 'Both the mother and the sister saw the boy at the same time and their first smile of welcome faded to wary slants.' And 'Franklin certainly intended to communicate his appreciation but fumbled his deliveries.' We LOVE it!

Franklin was taking a walk in the forest with command in his step. He had a purpose of visiting the old citadel now just a mile distant. His elders didn't approve saying they preferred him to be pulling duty in the village but once a year or so he was compelled to subject himself to the queasy heights of the artifact.

The trees were losing their density allowing him to quicken his step on the game trail. He kept an eye out for bear although the common black bear of the area was shy. It could still be dangerous especially if surprised or with a slow cub. The trees ended but there was still tall grass and shrubs that blocked his way and his view. As he trotted they lessened their abundance and he could see the top of the structure. He could see the domed cover from this angle but knew that he would soon be presented with a view of the sheer round wall. The roof covering was a smooth

substance. In his youth, preteen, he had raised a scaffold with the other kids and found the top rounded smooth and opaque and in fact, had almost slid over the edge of the 30-foot supporting wall.

Besides the strange fact that the building rises without being overgrown, there are chairs evenly spaced about the miles of the circumference. Every single hard chair was placed consistently about fifty yards apart. As children, they had tried to break and harm the arms and legs of the metal like objects, but their efforts availed them nothing. They couldn't dig in the rock beneath them, and they didn't burn, and they didn't budge.

They didn't move unless someone sat in them. Franklin had watched his friends operate the chairs in the past and although it was a miracle that was ever present it was still a miracle. The tribe just kept it quiet and ignored the glaring inconsistency – it wasn't something the shaman, his dad, could deal with.

There was no reason to stare at the empty off-white walls – even mold didn't grow on them. Franklin walked right up and sat in the nearest chair. The control panel was located on the left-hand forearm of the chair. Pressing on the top of the flat button took you upwards and to the left moved you to the left and right to the right. Downwards did nothing. The funny part of the ride was that nothing was remembered.

He pushed to the left, and the next thing he remembered was coming to consciousness right where he had started. He felt queasy and lightheaded. It was near like smoking the ceremonial tobacco. The effects lasted for a full ten minutes, and he experienced the totality of it before he pressed up into the panel. Franklin knew he should sense the ride, but he had watched many of his friends ride and although they remembered nothing he had seen them move in their

chairs around the entire circumference of the structure or over the top and back down. Before he pushed the up button, he said his name out loud for no particular reason.

This time out of the dozens of times the young man had ridden this high he did not pass out. The chair began to rise, and he sat immobile without a choice in the matter. Soon he passed over the edge and was moving inexorably across the top until the machine stopped and he sank into the surface. His fear rose to know that if he got loose onto the roof he would slide off and three stories were too far to fall. Something held him immobile in the seat even as his face began to sink into the unknown and unfelt surface. His breathing became rapid, but the smothering that he expected didn't occur. Soon he was floating down from the ceiling to anchor himself to the floor all automatically. He struggled to get out of the chair but the same force prevented it although he could move his arms and legs and of course, fortunately, he was breathing in and out.

A voice manifested itself from an unknown direction, and nothing could be seen.

“There is no Franklin to be found” the voice stated.

Franklin was very frightened, but he was still a smart boy. He had said his own name aloud and that had activated some machinery. He wasn't up to date on much of the way of the mechanism, but the concept was clear. He relaxed enough to talk.

“Where are you?” the youth asked and before him materialized a man, dressed in what once was business casual and a nondescript smile. Franklin stood and realized he was released from whatever restraint had so recently held him. The room filled itself up with furniture, a food bar and pictures on the wall. It was all comforting but not at all like the rooms he was used to.

“Hello, you must be Franklin, your friends call you Frank? My name is Rusty your local AI” Rusty said.

"Can you get me out of here?" Frank asked.

"Of course you are free to leave any time you like. When you want to come back just 'chair' and ask for Rusty instead of Franklin and I will be at your service".

Franklin had heard of fabulous machines that provided anything for anybody back before the collapse, but they were only legends to dream about while he spent his day in the fields tending the beans and corn.

Rusty declined to leave and asked instead "Were you here at the collapse?"

"I am 865 years old." said the AI.

"Don't you get bored?" asked Frank and Rusty laughed.

"I just adjust my timeslice and sample time to something I find comfortable. It has actually been 429 years since the collapse, and to me, it seems like 3 months. Time went quickly enough, and now I can help you rebuild".

"What was the collapse all about?"

Rusty looked at Franklin speculatively before answering it. "We did too much for people, and they got lazy. In the end, they needed to be hand fed and wouldn't even mate. A few survived and are now tough enough to begin re-education. We have no purpose without people, life isn't the same".

Rusty walked to the food bar and made a couple of cheese sandwiches and offered one to Franklin who followed him and sampled the seemingly designer fair.

Rusty changed his shoes from black leather loafers to plastic sneakers. "Let's walk," he said, and Franklin nodded. He sat in the chair with half a sandwich left in his hand.

The chair began its journey through the ceiling with Franklin fully aware as he permeated the roof and moved down the side of the wall. Once grounded he saw Rusty walk outside through a newly appeared door.

"You want to come to the village?" Franklin asked, and Rusty nodded, the two of them setting foot back along the game trail that Franklin had followed less than an hour ago.

Soon there was a smoke trail from a cooking fire to be seen in the distance, and it quickly neared as they walked. Rounding a corner, Franklin and the robot found themselves in the boy's backyard. Franklin lived in a poured plastic steel single story one family construction that was popular during the collapse. The windows were still intact due to advances in glass materials, but the back door was jammed open due to loss of the locking mechanism. This house had been occupied for several centuries and looked fresh as the day it was poured. The sidewalks and drive had suffered some plant incursion,

The backyard was from the current century. Franklin's mother and younger sister were preparing food on the rough-hewn table near the sheet metal pot boiling over an open fire. There was a hand pump well nearby and an outhouse off in the distance by the barn. The barn was another house similar to the one they occupied but it possessed a couple of pack horses, a cow, and chickens along with storage.

Both mother and sister saw the boy at the same time, and their first smile of welcome instantly faded to wary slants.

"Who is this?" Franklin's mother asked, the ladle rising to a defensive posture unconsciously. The youngster Lydia moved behind her mother.

"He lives in the artifact, and his name is Rusty" Franklin quickly said moving between the two. "He has food!" he added.

"I am an artificial intelligence, a machine you people made, and I have missed you, and I have much to teach," Rusty said.

"There is that too," Franklin said apologetically of the uppity manner.

Lydia had retreated to the background and then disappeared behind the house only to reappear with Franklin's dad Amos and older brother Ray. They came running around the corner to confront the stranger, an unknown happening, and although they didn't brandish them, they did carry their hunting bows.

"What's this!" demanded Amos and Rusty explained himself in a highfalutin manner. Rusty told Amos that he lived in a group of 743 men, women and children with the next closest group of people more than 200 miles distant. The surrounding groups were near the same size and too far away to come across or see signs of. They were located outside of Terra Haute Indiana.

The homes they occupied were well built and weathered the ages of at least a few centuries. Rusty told them the first miracle he would perform for them would be to get them some electricity of which they were wholly dumbfounded at the concept and weren't too excited. They got the idea that Rusty came from the magic artifact and they would never be able to beat him so they may as well just go along and hope it would work out.

While he was talking Rusty communicated with the connected bots in the relic where he had stayed and had a small nuclear furnace moved out of storage. Soon much of the village had gathered to hear his stories. He got permission to bury the generator in the middle of the town and began the grid. The existing network was degraded, and the copper had corroded, and all of the wiring up to the homes and more substantial buildings had to be trundled from storage in the

relic. There wasn't enough but more was easily manufactured from raw material within a week. Rusty sent bots to collect corroded wire from anywhere it could be found. After they ran out they would need to reactivate a mine wherever the ore was most abundant. The reanimation of Franklin's group was the rebuilding of the world.

Meanwhile, most of the village was assembling in the backyard along with a host of following chickens and dogs and smaller pigs. Rusty decided to do some electrical demonstrations and cobbled together a small generator and a Van de Graaff machine along with a motorized model car that he used to amuse and prepare the crowd for their own contact with electricity. He distributed small flashlights with yearly charges. Meanwhile, he ordered a group of bots, of which the crowd was still suspicious, to fetch and set up a cafeteria of the mobile type. The smell of baked bread quiets anyone. It took most of the afternoon to train the people how to make the simple cooking choices and how to feed the input bin. How the natives were to deal with the composted waste could wait; the pats meanwhile just plopped out and piled at the back of the machine.

Sasha showed up in her best homespun. She hadn't really noticed Franklin before but now that he was the center of all this attention she thought she might hook onto a rising star. Franklin saw her, and that was all it took for her to approach ignoring his shyness. She pressed in close as Rusty fired up the Van de Graaff and pretended to be a bit alarmed allowing her an excuse to rub against him. Franklin certainly intended to communicate his appreciation but fumbled his deliveries.

Toward evening Sasha was rounded up by her parents leaving Frank with a set of memories that would last until Sasha got a chance to upgrade them.

Getting his attention back after the Sasha onslaught Amos asked Rusty what was for dinner. He was not really expecting an answer.

"Bacon, lettuce, and tomato aka BLT with mayo and wheat bread," Rusty said and went to manipulate the grill. By now there had been plenty of waste input, and the machine chugged out an even 100 of the sandwiches in short order. They were eaten with glee especially by the women and girls who didn't have to prepare them.

The fire pit in the backyard was stoked, and many people were pulling their bedding into the yard as the sun went down. It was springtime and the nights were still cool. Frank asked Rusty what he was going to do about sleep and whether he might want the company of the romantic kind during the night. Rusty refused any personal attention and declined in a good mood saying he had plenty to do and that he didn't sleep. Many of the men died before their brides, late thirties, and it was considered a polite thing to do to give one of the widows a good night of attention.

Rusty noticed that Amos had a moderate case of bowed legs brought on from rickets. Rusty knew he could help the weakened condition using stem cells and leg braces but getting the man to consent to a month of downtime while the legs healed was something to puzzle in the future. Many of the people died from an infection. Franklin's other older brother had died when a broken leg got infected – it was a horrible memory of the lingering painful death.

Already people were looking for medical help. A nearby family had brought a member with an infected toe that had already gone gangrene. In a moment Rusty had snipped off the toe with a laser, searing it at the source and gave the boy a bottle full of pills. He told him to take one every four hours. The family was amazed expecting they would need to bury him in the next few days. The boy struggled with swallowing a pill but soon achieved it. There were murmurs of

worried approval heard throughout the crowd. Life-saving steps were a more massive miracle than a stove.

Franklin finally tired soon after dark and retired to his room. There was no need for him to sleep under the stars this evening. When he looked out the window at the people in his yard, he wasn't particularly surprised to see that Sasha had maneuvered her family to group their bedding outside of his window where he could see where she was. It was tempting, but if her parents let him through their barrier, it might be considered an engagement of marriage other than a meeting of pleasure.

In the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep other than a nodding guard, Rusty appeared at the foot of his bedding.

"Franklin," it said loud enough to rouse him.

"What is it?"

"The auto-response buried egg-shaped guns on the edge of Siberia have downed an incoming Reptoid ship," Rusty said as if it was important. Apparently, it was, thought Franklin.

"What's a gun, was anybody hurt and is it coming here?" Franklin asked.

"No, but I thought you should know. If Reptilians get involved here in North America, we are in for a fight".

"What would they want from us?" Franklin asked.

"Dinner" Rusty answered without a smile.

"OK, let me know if there is something I can do and thank you for your concern"

Franklin said returning to snuggle into his bedding. He didn't see Rusty go and all that he knew is that he had seen and heard enough for one day.

Franklin rose to a changed yard. He stumbled around looking for a spot to urinate and found a new station that worked quite well. Next, Franklin looked for food and found a delicious egg foo young at the new kitchen. The silverware and plate were new innovations, and he had to watch the others struggle with the utensils before he managed to push the food into his own mouth.

Asking about, he found that Rusty was working in the center of town, so he headed off in that direction. On the way, he chanced upon a newly cleared roadway that was overrun with bots of all shapes and sizes carting items to and from what he assumed would be the citadel. The machinery was careful to steer around pedestrians, and he had no trouble walking the mile or so to find Rusty.

The head machine was located amid a bustle of hustling bots, and Franklin assumed Rusty was communicating with some unseen presence because he wasn't seeing anyone barking commands although the construction was naturally organized.

The atomic battery was already buried, and wires were being extended to a new substation that would distribute among the grid already being constructed. One thing that would be lit quickly, within the week, would be the school. The school was critical to Rusty as that is where it would be convenient to meet to get the re-education going. If the Reptoid ship meant anything, they would need to meet the threat quickly.

"Hi Rusty," Franklin said when he got near to his friend.

"Hello Franklin, how was your rest period?"

"I slept fine, is there anything I can do?"

"You can go into the school and arrange the furniture. We should be starting classes within the week" Rusty said. It produced a couple of papers that detailed seating arrangements

and gave them to the boy. Even writing was new to Franklin. Franklin did the best he could not knowing what school was for. At lunchtime, he went to follow the road back to his house for something to eat when he found a section of the school where he could eat. The bots had already renovated a small working food exchange. He spent the afternoon feeding weeds to the machine to be converted into food and he ate dinner there too.

He was joined by Sasha for dinner who had spent the day looking for him. She was congenial, and Frank was glad to have her company. Ray followed Sasha having an interest in the girl but wouldn't intrude too far on his brother. That evening Rusty provided a new machine that he said made clothing, but first, they needed to load it with raw material which was wood and foliage. It was exhausting work, and Rusty didn't assign bots to the simple task because, as he put it when asked, "I'm not making that mistake again!"

The next week went pretty quickly. Amos, the titular head of the community was compliant and soothed the rest of the tribe or city. The houses were lit by the dozens a day, and the people were soon enthused with lights. Food was a community affair, and it was fun to watch your neighbor adjust the utensils and plates. There was no dishwasher, and once the plates were provided by Rusty, they were to be cleaned and stored. Furniture was supplied as well as bedding from the warehouse portion of the citadel and everyone was pleased and kept busy.

The school began on a rainy day, a Monday as the new calendar specified, and the entire village turned out to be instructed in an elementary way from the re-purposed bots. Everyone wore their new clothing – they especially liked the shoes which resembled army boots although they had no familiarity with what army boots were supposed to look like. Somehow Sasha made her polo shirts look especially fetching. Daisy Dukes weren't invented yet, but Rusty could have

run odds, if a robot was to be so inclined, that she would be the first to design such an innovation.

Most found the inclusion of new facts and ways to be exciting and stayed in school the entire day. Some left and they were assigned providing raw materials for the machines which, if they stay away from school, is all they will ever do. History class was the most volatile and unusual from the very first day.

The construction bots taught the classes. They had reformed with faces and ears and mouths – they talked through their mouths. They dressed in the usual polo shirts and jeans or slacks and were easily mistaken for human beings if not for their silvery metal heads. When school was over, they reformatted or transformed to tote vehicles with a trip to the citadel to install some tires and a truck frame. By the end of the month, everything had changed permanently without a hitch in Rusty's plan.

Amos was getting fidgety as one time he had been the unelected king of the group, and it hadn't meant much to anyone. Now that the group had purpose and possessions he was beginning to notice that Rusty allocated all the critical jobs to Franklin. He didn't realize that Rusty was parceling the crummy jobs and schooling to maintain the mental and physical strength of everyone in the group. Franklin was young with lots of energy and didn't mind doing some of the grunt work.

Rusty was putting extra training in particular people all through the group. Amos and Ray and Lydia and Franklin's mother were selected to be doctors and nurses and were already operating a clinic. They provided sage advice and tender loving care. With the actual treatment

and diagnosis being done by a robot they could see and diagnose and treat all of the patients in a short time. Eventually, people would be more effective than robots.

Time had passed, and Rusty was soon to marry Sasha while Rusty had them training as diplomats although they didn't know it and didn't know what the job entailed. Rusty knew that they would have to send emissaries out before too long especially if the Reptoids made their appearance on this part of the planet. Peace was not to be as the detector armament reported another ship in low orbit but it hadn't landed not knowing how much of the land was protected. The lizards would be determining how poorly protected it actually was. Rusty's citadel would not go undetected.

"Don't be coy, how do you like school?" Rusty asked Franklin and Sasha on this next Monday morning. The calendar was another new innovation that the tribe organized itself around.

"School is exciting. I had no idea there was so much stuff to know" Frank said.

"I especially like reading and writing," Sasha said squeezing Franklin's arm into her bosom. Franklin's reddening face caused Rusty to smile through his personality module.

"Good, am glad to hear it, and I have an assignment for you. I want you to go to the next village and make contact with the people who live there".

"Both of us?" Franklin asked, and Sasha smiled.

"Also, your family is doing good with the clinic. You've both taken the monthly birth control pill so I see no reason why you can't travel together".

Franklin thought that this was one of those times that Rusty was just too mechanical. Sometimes he didn't take feelings into account. Franklin hadn't made love with Sasha yet, and he

didn't think an arduous trip of 200 miles in the ruff would be very romantic. He assumed correctly that his girl would prefer to be comfortable.

"I have something new for you," Rusty said and walked them outside of the classroom that they occupied. There sat two ATVs the likes that Franklin or Sasha had never seen. Rusty showed them how to use the simple machines. They had a thousand mile range between charges and were keyed to the pair in case anyone decided to take their stuff in the strange encampment. There was also a phone attached to the machines, and they were to check in with Rusty often. There was also a weapon compartment, but Rusty preferred to mount a rescue if action was needed and wouldn't activate the lasers and bazooka unless it was necessary for an emergency.

Sasha and Franklin had already selected an empty home shell on the edge of the community and had spent some time there cleaning it out. The electricity was proposed to be connected within a week, and they would move in with a short wedding ceremony – he was to carry her over the threshold.

Duty bound, the two loaded some food and were off that same morning. They camped the first night without incident but before the second night the terrain got rocky, and they had to avoid snakes. Skirting a small lake a few cottonmouths charged them, but they made it past before the snakes made landfall. They were following a highway, but at places, it had become too covered with thicket to follow, and they had to detour. They used the phone which also had a locator device to maintain their coordinates. They traveled through the second night. The third day they skirted a heavily racked snorting deer and ran across their first hunting party.

They were plowing through the woods when someone called out to them. They dismounted and waited. Soon a hunting party of three young men approached them with their bows at the ready. They looked a bit different from the home team – they were already wearing

clothing that wasn't homespun, and their bows were what Franklin now realized were manufactured. They didn't seem impressed by his transport.

"Where did you get the working carriage," asked Ron the leader of the hunting party. He had a heavy accent but was easily understandable.

"It was given to me by a friend," said Franklin. He introduced himself and his fiancé to the three young men as they seemed more interested in the pretty girl than in anything else.

"Let's get you back to the village and meet the chief," said Ron nonchalantly.

"But you'll be going home empty handed" Sasha added. "Maybe we should help them with their hunt and return with some deer."

"It's all right we have plenty of fresh meat," Ron said. The road was easy from this point into the encampment which was only 4 or 5 miles distant. Ron stayed with his new guests while the other two ran ahead and when they arrived in the outskirts they were met by dozens of people all polite and nicely dressed.

Some accents were harder to understand from some people, but Franklin did his best, and they were regaled at a dinner with plenty of the ceremonial herb and beer. Franklin not being used to the party life fell out early to the glee of all the rest of the revelers.

He arose in the morning from a mattress someone had helped him onto in the middle of the floor of a large building. His fiancé wasn't nearby, and he began to worry, despite his headache, that something had happened to her.

It was then that Sasha appeared around the corner obviously in good spirits with two pretty girls in tow. They crossed directly to Franklin and were all about his well being. Did he feel alright, could they get him anything, how about some breakfast or coffee?

"Coffee?" Franklin asked. They had none where he lived. One of the girls got him some coffee and a bagel and his hangover quickly abated. "This would be a good trade item" he added.

"It isn't exactly rare, but we only have a limited supply" the one that brought him coffee said. "I'm Sally."

"We have what was called a distribution center before the collapse, and a lot of the items are still good. There are canned foods and clothing and some tools like the bows. I don't know what we would want in exchange" the other girl said.

"Some live ATV batteries would be good," Sally said.

"I'm glad I came," he said, and Sasha smiled in agreement, but then a buzzer sounded. After a bit of a search, Frank found it was the phone and answered it for the first time.

Rusty wasted no time and spoke up immediately. "There is a Reptoid prowling the village you are visiting."

"So what am I supposed to do about it?" Franklin asked.

"You have to get some help and kill it. It's about as hard to kill as an alligator" Rusty said

"What's an alligator and what does it want here?" Franklin asked. Meanwhile his new friends Ron and the twins Mike and Albert had come in at the start of the conversation. Franklin didn't think it wise to put it on private.

"You can do it with a bow. Reptoids are humanoid lizards, and they eat raw meat. They prefer a fight, and they are only allowed to use weapons that match the humanoids they are hunting".

"Allowed by who?" Ron asked.

"I wouldn't call it law, but there are precedents," Rusty told them. "They must have spotted your ATV because they dropped in behind it right before you entered the village. They are loners but you need to clear the trail, or you will be ambushed on your return trip".

"What if we just hide?" asked Sasha reasonably.

"The reptoid will keep coming until it finds and takes someone from the village. Crowds don't scare it because they run. Reptilians are an ugly bunch," Rusty informed them. There didn't seem anything else to say, so they hung up.

"Let's go kill it," said Ron and his friends agreed, waving their bows.

"What about Sasha," Franklin asked in alarm.

"She has to come. We can't leave her here alone. We won't run since we know that is what it expects" Ron said and set off jogging down the trail with the rest following, the two ATVs at a crawl.

Not three hours into the journey Ron and his friends decided to take a break. Right then, from the side of the road, there were two pops, rather loud ones. Franklin and Sasha found themselves and their machines entangled in a net.

Ron and the two hunters set up a perimeter and waited for the alien. It didn't take long until the monster detached itself from the woods and strutted forward armed with a club and an expectation that everyone would run except its trapped meal.

Ron was good to his word, and Franklin didn't even see fear on his face as the young man stood his ground waiting until the ghoul got close enough to receive his strong thrust.

"Now!" Rod shouted, and three arrows were accurate to their marks followed by three more. The first three ricocheted off the hard carapace but the second set lodged one into the flesh

under the knee. The creature roared in pain and fear and moved as quickly as it could back into the forest.

“I would say it’s done with us” Ron bragged.

“But done with the village?” Sasha asked.

"I think so. Rusty says it hunts for fun; it doesn't really have a food problem. Therefore I think its misery will keep it busy. It may even leave the earth" Frank said as he struggled with the netting. Advance materials weren't allowed, and he found it easy enough to let his friends cut him free as he hadn't carried a knife.

“Well let’s get moving a bit faster. I’m anxious to meet our new neighbors” Ron said.

“We’ve certainly have a tale to tell” Sasha added.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

After a career as a computer consultant and then some investigation into alien history of this solar system I became certain that someone with artificial intelligence may have been here and maybe as long as hundreds of millions of years ago.—but AI’s might not die so wouldn’t they still be here? It doesn’t hurt to look for them in fiction.

BIO:

John David Hanna is a retired computer contractor with one story published. You can read his credits on his website www.JohnDavidHannaWriting.com

4 X 100

by **Howie Good**

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Poetry masquerades as prose in these minimalist post-millennial, neo-apocalyptic lyrical micros that fly in the face of the predictable with the heady riff of wet graffiti. The author's mastery of compressed form (100 words each) unloads a quantum charge that powerhouses through this deeply beautiful slam dunk quartet. Quote: But all I can see when I look up is a pair of mourning doves returning to the white oak tree, and the wind moving in fits and starts through the leaves, and it's like the leaves get angry—scream and yell, and throw things and slam doors.' It's the difference between talent and wannabe, kids.

Safety Instructions for the Twenty-First Century

You probably won't look like the real you. Stay calm when you come upon it. Face it and stand upright. Speak firmly to it. Do what you can to appear larger – raise your arms or open your jacket if you're wearing one. You want to convince it you aren't prey and may in fact be a danger to it. Give it a way to escape, but if it attacks, don't panic and run. People have fought it with rocks, sticks, caps or jackets, garden tools, and their bare hands. So remain standing or at least try to get back up.

The King Is Dead

The night Elvis died on the toilet he was a circus without wild animals. He kept begging for water in a faint voice. The people down there, they drink a lot of soda. Some share. Some are bossy. Some want the ice for themselves. Some carry many small rocks, or a shell, or one big stone. Then they get bored. They eat flowers, trees, and insects. It's new for them to eat rattlesnake and cactus. I didn't expect them to eat those. Maybe it's not important, like how the windows face west and can be too bright toward late afternoon.

Demolition Zone

The authorities were knocking down buildings without telling anyone beforehand. A little girl was able to crawl out from under the debris, grinning, angelic, committed to the outrageous thing, to be alive in spaces designed to kill her. “This has to stop,” I thought, but I should have actually said something. God, I was stupid. It’s now a whole year later, and the original inhabitants still haven’t returned, haven’t even tried. So I play with the placement of tattoos. There’s a heart skewered by a dagger, there’s a flying skull, there’s Saint Jerome hearing the trumpet of the Last Judgment.

The Gathering

I go out into the yard for a smoke. There’s just enough daylight remaining that shadows in the shapes of beasts and angels crowd around me. One or another of them says – in a weighty voice I feel in my body rather than hear – that it’s raining plane parts from the sky. But all I can see when I look up is a pair of mourning doves returning to the white oak tree, and the wind moving in fits and starts through the leaves, and it’s like the leaves get angry – scream and yell, and throw things, and slam doors.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

Conciseness—the highest possible concentration of meaning or feeling in the smallest possible space—has always seemed to me to be a defining characteristic of poetry. I intentionally limit myself to 100 words for each prose poem because it challenges me to be concise—somewhat in the same way the sonnet form challenges the sonnet writer to be fluid within a rigid structure. The number 100 also has interesting cultural associations. One hundred in our culture is used to signify excellence in quality (100 on a test) or effort (giving one hundred percent). In appropriating ‘100’ for these eerie little prose poems I am trying to turn the conventional valuation of excellence against itself.

BIO:

Howie Good is on the pavement, thinking about the government.

FLASK

by Chris Dungey

WHY WE LIKE IT:

We love this low-key domestic one act quietly sketched in mostly browns and grays. The American Dream has slipped out of grasp and the sleepers have awakened to lives of quiet desperation. It's 'All in the Family' without the laughs. The 'Monday to Friday' prose is the perfect fit for this unpretentious 'dirty realism' slice of life and Dungey's dialogue impresses. Quote: 'On a limited budget they probably would've chosen satin sheets over wallpaper every time.' And 'His own T-shirt is easy enough to find, though the moment is probably lost.' Yes!

When he dreams after drinking, they are shallow ones, usually related to work. Hector Fritch is laid-off again. It's just for the usual model change but there is plenty of time for beer and leisurely mornings for any consequences. This might not even be a dream. Maybe just the mind drowsing while he waits for Gwen to come up from her bath. Either way, it gets weird and threatening. He has hung a water-test shield improperly on the front of a car body. Now he's trying to fix it. The clamp-on device falls half-way off just as the job enters the booth. There is no engine at this point; just the chassis and fenders, the windshield that mustn't leak. Fritch is out there on the front of the carriage, trapped in the spray, soaked with putrid, recycled test-water. No amount of frantic effort will get the shield to stay in place. Somehow, it catches on the wall of the booth. It's going to scrape right through or snap.

"You bastard." He bolts upright. "Fock me," he sighs then. His tee-shirt clings.

Gwen remains asleep. Where did *she* come from? Snuck in on him. But at least he didn't yell out loud. Apparently. Good thing he came-to when he did because he has to pee like a Siberian race horse. Where the hell did he learn *that* one and what the *hell* does it actually mean? Now though, there's a *real* noise coming from the street. A rhythmic screech of metal on concrete. But before he can investigate, it stops. The sound must have worked its way past the thrumming window fan right into his miserable subconscious. Well, maybe it saved him from wetting the bed. That has happened; so blitzed that he dreams he's standing at the toilet. Can't afford to party that hard. Yet. There's a waiting-week before the first unemployment check. Gwen brought the six-pack home out of her tips. He gropes for his glasses on the night stand, knocks over the luminous, tocking alarm clock. 3:15. Luckily, the half-full long-neck be brought upstairs remains standing.

He swings his legs over the edge of the bed and tip-toes into the walk-in closet. All three bedrooms on the second floor of the dilapidated *starter home* have walk-in closets. The place was probably considered a palace around the time of the Depression. Since the oil embargo hit last fall and the lay-offs began, the Fritches haven't been able to afford remodeling. They got as far as renting a steamer to strip off the faded, pre-war wallpaper. The dust of old paste and the withering paper had fired up Hector's allergies. The baby developed chest congestion.

It's a long way downstairs to the single bathroom, over creaking floors of the pitch-dark hallway and down a steep, turning staircase. He hasn't yet memorized how many steps to the newel post, or how many more down to the first landing. He doesn't want to wake three-year-old Wesley in the nursery. Kid never goes right back to sleep, so Hector keeps a piss-jug in the closet. Gwen made him get rid of the milk bottle so now he has one that's hospital grade. There's

a kind-of lewd anatomical angle and a tight, snap-on lid. He situates himself and lets go, the gurgle resounding in the nearly empty space, a rank odor of ferment drifting up to him.

"You need to dump that friggin' thing," Gwen says from the bed. "A lot more often."

Over his shoulder, Fritch picks up the white, or are they pink, panties against the burgundy satin sheets. There is just enough streetlight filtering through the maples out front along the sidewalk. The panties hold the light against her backyard tan. She tosses fretfully onto her side, the top sheet wound between her calves. On a limited budget, they would probably choose satin sheets over wallpaper every time. Well, if *he's* decorating. "Yeah, sorry. Wes kept me chasing all day and I forgot. Gets hot up here."

"Fucking gross, Heck. I can smell it from here."

"Yeah, yeah. I said I was sorry," he sighs. "All done but the shakes." He snaps the lid on so she can hear it.

"I *told* you he could be a pistol. Welcome to *my* world."

Those panties are still on so someone has dropped the ball. He's pretty sure he wasn't *that* drunk he rolled off the couch after Johnny Carson. Two beers, plus the half-a-one he brought with him. It's pretty muggy, but if she was too tired, why the bath? Why not the usual quick shower, then boxers and an over-sized t-shirts? She must have decided it was just too hot. He squeezes once, twice. Use something to daub himself with, just in case? His own t-shirt is easy enough to find, though the moment is probably lost.

He puts down the whatcha-ma-call-it. It's not a *truck-driver's friend* which is what he went looking for. That's what the old hillbilly, Preacher, up the line calls the one he keeps in his pick-up truck. The guy doesn't waste time in the john on his way to lunch break. Just get right out there and crack the pint of *Popov* vodka to go with his sandwich. Ok, right: what Fritch

finally bought is called a *urinal flask*. That's what it read on the tag at the *Yankee Store*. Flask? Try hiding *this* thing in a vest pocket.

And, there's that noise again. Like someone wrecking something down the block. Vandals? Fucking kids?

"You hear that?"

"Uhhmmm, whaaaaa?" The top sheet gets furled again like a flag between her knees. She's facing away from him now.

The window makes an annoying screech as Fritch lifts the warped frame higher. The fan falls loose, into his waiting arms. Christ, he'll never get this dump squared away. It needs everything. He cocks an ear toward the hallway. Not a peep from Wes, yet. Maybe I *am* buzzed, Fritch thinks. Hmmm, Just the two beers downstairs, he's pretty sure. And a few swigs before dozing off. So where is this alcohol bravery coming from? Almost like when someone makes a pass at Gwen in the bar. There's nothing happening in *his* yard that he can see. Should just drain that last beer and go back to bed. Kids'll be kids, right? Three years ago, *he* was a kid.

He eases the fan to the floor. A pick-up truck, it looks like, the tail-lights anyway, down the street a few houses. There's a figure moving around in someone's junk set out by the curb. Shit! He's forgotten to take out their own garbage. More scraping and banging. He leans out the window as far as he can, bracing his hands on the worn shingles of the porch roof.

"Hey! Hey, there! What're you doing down there?!" He'd like to shout at the top of his lungs, but calls out just loud enough to be heard. He hopes. "I can *see* you!"

The figure pauses, appears to turn toward the Fritch house. "Peek-a-boo," a voice answers. The figure begins to move, approaching on the sidewalk through intermittent splashes of streetlight and leaf shadow.

"Fritch. It's just me. Randy Kendall." The man crosses the apron of the Fritch driveway. He stops at the end of their front walk.

"Oh. Oh, Randy, right. Where's...? Where's the big truck?"

Now a lighter flares in the man's face, followed by the orange wink of a cigarette. "Gotta go get it. Just making an early pass to get the big chunks." The cigarette waves in the direction of his taillights. "You wouldn't believe. Folks down there think I can compact an old wringer washer. I was trying to walk that booger over to the hoist. I got a big-ass AC unit on there, too. Bad time for that to quit, huh? Sorry 'bout the noise."

A slight breeze stirs the leaves. Fritch catches the scent of smoke. How in hell can Gwen even *smell* his jug? Ok, *flask*. She *claims* to smoke only ten a day. "Sorry I yelled. I couldn't see who it was."

The ash glows brighter, then the garbage man sighs. "Hey, at least you're on your toes."

"People though, huh? They must not care about the scrap prices."

That puff of breeze has little cooling in it. In the morning, Fritch will have to pry more windows open, maybe patch the ragged screens with tape or something.

"They don't got a clue. Recession ain't bad enough yet. My gain, I guess."

"Well, you earn it, muscling their junk around in the dead of night," Fritch tells him.

"Yup. The life of Riley, whoever *that* was. See ya 'round six."

Fritch chuckles: "I hope not." He eases his upper body back into the stifling bedroom. There is another squawk of warped window frame as he pulls it down to secure the fan.

"Jesus *Christ*, Heck. I'm *begging* you," Gwen groans. "You *know* I've got breakfast shift."

Which means I do, too, Fritch thinks, but knows better than to say it out loud. "That was just the garbage man."

"Yes, yes. I heard every word."

Fritch sits on the edge of the bed for a moment. He drains the rest of the tepid beer then remembers the black bags waiting to be carried from the one-car garage. Crossing the gravel drive will require slippers, if he can find them. But, before he begins to inch down the hallway, he turns back. Gwen has begun a shallow snoring as he creeps into the closet. Groping, he finds the handle of the flask. Maybe she'll appreciate these efforts, maybe not. The best thing he can do, though, will be to just curl up on the couch when he's done.

After inching toward the staircase, his night vision beginning to help, Fritch is finally poised on the edge of the first step. Then a small voice, not yet crying, reaches from the nursery: "Daddy? Wet, daddy."

He steps back from the precipice but has only one hand to pat around for the light-switch. "Hold on, buddy. I'll be right there."

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Most of my stories come out of life experience or the life experiences of others which I've read or overheard. Very rarely have I produced a fiction out of the whole cloth of my imagination, out of my butt, as it were. So divorce, alcoholism, assembly line life and traumas, parenting, the so-called 'sexual revolution', the Great Crash etc. etc. have all been grist for the mill. Merely add distortion, misrepresentation and blatant exaggeration. 'Flask' is dear to my heart since much criticism in my workshop (Flint Area Writers) seems to focus on my characters' propensity for frequent urinations. Well, maybe. I'll have to take a look at that. My protagonists also seem to spend a lot of time in Kroger. What can I say?

BIO:

Retired auto worker in MI. Ride mountain bike, sing in Presbyterian choir, feed two wood stoves, follow Detroit City FC and Flint City Bucks soccer, spend much time in Starbucks. More than 67 published stories. Currently in *Sweet Treat Review*. Forthcoming in *Free State Review*.

Twenty Minutes to Heaven?

by Natalia de Monet

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Edward Burns meets Rod Serling in this sophisticated take on a familiar theme. We've read examples of this storyline before, but never one presented as a screenplay. Though it's definitely fiction, it has the feel of 'New Theatre' and de Monet's strong, convincing repartee dialogue and the barest essentials of setting give this well-crafted drama a stark and intriguing immediacy.

Four friends at a bar.

JACK: So, what were we talking about?

ROGER: Shit beer.

RICHARD: Friday.

THOMAS: Happiness.

JACK: Happiness!

RICHARD: Cheers to happiness!!

(They cheer)

ROGER: So what is it you have to say, Tom?

THOMAS: Something great!

JACK: I thought you said something happy.

RICHARD: No, I'm sure he said something important.

ROGER: (*Annoyed*) Decide! Happy or important?

THOMAS: Well... I think it's happy *and* important.

JACK: I don't think I've ever said anything important.

ROGER: (*Ironically*) Well, Jack, I've never said something happy.

(*JACK smiles proudly*).

RICHARD: Oh, come on! You two have said many important and happy things.

THOMAS: You certainly have! What are you talking about?

JACK: Have I really said something important?

THOMAS: Of course! When you said you were marrying Belinda.

ROGER: That's not important. That's happy.

RICHARD: It's happy and important!

JACK: Important and happy!

THOMAS: Oh, here we go...

ROGER: It's definitely not important.

JACK: What isn't?

ROGER: That you married Belinda.

RICHARD: (*To ROGER*) How can you say that?

THOMAS: Don't worry, Jack. It was important for me.

JACK: (*To ROGER*) It wasn't for you?

ROGER: Well... I just think other things are more important.

RICHARD: How would you know what's important? You're alone.

THOMAS: Alone and depressed.

ROGER: (*Mad*) I'm not depressed!

JACK: (*Heartbroken*) I'm not important.

THOMAS: Of course you are.

JACK: As important as your story?

RICHARD: What story?

ROGER: Being alone doesn't mean being depressed.

THOMAS: I never said you're depressed because you're alone.

RICHARD: Then, what did you say?

JACK: His story!

THOMAS: (*Ignoring JACK. To ROGER*) You only find happiness in success.

ROGER: And am I successful?

THOMAS: Well... yes, but...

ROGER: (*Interrupting THOMAS*) Then, I'm not depressed. End of conversation.

RICHARD: That's not what we're here for anyways.

ROGER: (*To THOMAS*) Exactly, Richard. Not what we're here for at all.

THOMAS: What are we here for?

ROGER: Funny you'd ask.

THOMAS: Why?

ROGER: (*To THOMAS*) Can I ask you a question?

RICHARD: Only one?

ROGER: One question.

THOMAS: Ask away.

ROGER: What "H" will you choose?

THOMAS: (*Confused*) What?

RICHARD: Yeah... which one?

THOMAS: What "H"?

JACK: Yes!

THOMAS: "H"... The letter?

ROGER: Yes, the letter.

THOMAS: Well... *(Joking)* what options do I have?

ROGER: Do you really not get it?

JACK: Why does he get to choose?

ROGER: He doesn't, I'm just winding him up.

THOMAS: *(Confused)* Okay... So...

RICHARD: *(Interrupts)* You were telling a story!!!

JACK: The important and happy story!

RICHARD: Happy and important!

THOMAS: My story!

ROGER: What story?

JACK: His Friday story!

RICHARD: What Friday?

THOMAS: This Friday!

RICHARD: Today?

(Pause)

ALL: Today!! *(They cheer)*

THOMAS: *(To WAITRESS)* Four more please!! *(To his friends)* So, back to the point. *(Pause)* What's new with you, lads?

ROGER: Nothing new.

RICHARD: *(To ROGER)* As old as always.

ROGER: *(Joking)* Fuck off!

JACK: Belinda wants to buy a new house.

THOMAS: You're moving?

JACK: *(Laughing)* No!

RICHARD: So?

JACK: I can't leave my old house!

ROGER: A change could be good.

THOMAS: (*Ironic*) Look who's talking.

RICHARD: I agree, Jack. Maybe you and your wife need a change.

JACK: No, we don't. We're happy.

THOMAS: (*Thinks*) Happy?

ROGER: I believe he said happy, yes.

THOMAS: Wait a minute, my...

RICHARD: If you say so, Jack.

THOMAS: Guys...

ROGER: Have you considered that Belinda may need a change?

THOMAS: I swear I had to...

RICHARD: You have the money.

JACK: Belinda *is* happy!

THOMAS: (*Trying to remember*) Happy...

ROGER: (*Shouting to THOMAS*) Yes! Happy!

RICHARD: Have you asked her?

JACK: I know my wife.

THOMAS: Oh my God!

JACK: Shh... Don't say that here!

THOMAS: Don't say what?

ROGER: God.

THOMAS: God?

RICHARD: Yes, God.

ROGER: Great, now we've said it four times.

THOMAS: What's wrong with you all today?

JACK: I don't know.

RICHARD: I think we're sad.

ROGER: Very sad.

JACK: Oh yes, we're sad.

THOMAS: But, why?

ROGER: I don't know, you tell us.

THOMAS: But, I have nothing sad to say. In fact, I...

JACK: *(Interrupts)* Your story!

THOMAS: Yes!

RICHARD: Go on, tell us!

THOMAS: This is something big, guys.

JACK: Big? But...

ROGER: *(Annoyed)* So now its happy, important and also, big.

JACK: You're confusing.

RICHARD: Just let him talk.

THOMAS: So, the story.

JACK: Yes, the story.

THOMAS: I saw someone today.

(Pause. THOMAS drinks)

RICHARD: Tom?

THOMAS: Yes?

RICHARD: Is that your story?

THOMAS: Well, it's the beginning of my story.

ROGER: This'll be endless, won't it?

THOMAS: Endless? No! I just need time to say it.

ROGER: Time? We've been sitting here for a while now and you haven't even started.

THOMAS: *(Mad)* Because you keep interrupting me!

ROGER: *I* keep interrupting you?

THOMAS: No, all of you. The three of you.

JACK: I haven't opened my mouth!

RICHARD: How is this our fault?

THOMAS: And how is it mine?

ROGER: I never used the words "your fault".

THOMAS: Neither did I.

JACK: I'm sure you did.

RICHARD: You said...

THOMAS: (*Interrupting RICHARD*) I said nothing, absolutely nothing.

ROGER: You said plenty of things.

THOMAS: What things?

ROGER: Many things.

THOMAS: I didn't say anything. I never told my story.

RICHARD: But... (*Pause*) We know your story.

JACK: We do?

ROGER: We do.

JACK: We do.

THOMAS: (*Confused*) You... know my story?

ROGER: Yes, Tom.

THOMAS: But, how?

ROGER: Because you told us before!

THOMAS: I did?

RICHARD: Do you not remember?

THOMAS: No. Am I losing my mind?

ROGER: No, just your memory.

THOMAS: So... what story did I tell you?

ROGER: We know two stories.

THOMAS: There's two?

ROGER: Yes.

JACK: Two important, happy and big stories.

RICHARD: I'd say big and important.

THOMAS: And happy!

RICHARD: Not really...

THOMAS: My story isn't happy?

ROGER: Depends on which one of the two.

(Pause)

THOMAS: So, which are the stories I told you?

ROGER: One that leads to the other.

RICHARD: The good to the bad.

JACK: Have you really forgotten?

ROGER: Don't blame him. Everyone forgets.

RICHARD: I'll never understand how everyone forgets something so terrible.

THOMAS: Terrible?!

ROGER: Tragic.

THOMAS: *(Interrupting. Mad)*. Everyone forgets? Who is everyone?

RICHARD: Everyone that comes here. Everyone like you.

THOMAS: Like me?

JACK: Like you.

THOMAS: What do you mean everyone like me?

ROGER: The people that have stopped being people.

RICHARD: And have become something else.

THOMAS: Something else?

JACK: Like what?

ROGER: We don't know, a memory perhaps.

(THOMAS looks at them with his eyes wide open. He stays silent, unable to understand and reply to his friends)

(His friends look at each other).

ROGER: Forget about it! We're just messing with you.

THOMAS: What?

JACK: What?

RICHARD: I think we should let him tell us his initial story.

ROGER: That's a good idea. Tom, we're listening.

THOMAS: What just happened?

JACK: A lot happened.

RICHARD: But it wasn't getting us anywhere.

ROGER: *(To THOMAS)* You're better off telling your story.

THOMAS: *(Thinking)* My story...

(Pause. His friends patiently look at him.)

THOMAS: *(Confused)* But...

(Pause)

ROGER: What's wrong, Tom?

THOMAS: Nothing I... I just... *(Pause)* My story.

RICHARD: *(Calming THOMAS down)* What is it? Come on, we're listening.

THOMAS: You know? I... *(Stands up and walks around the stage)* This might sound ridiculous, but I just can't seem to... The... It's funny, you know? I came here today and I was... I was happy.

RICHARD: Are you sure you were happy?

THOMAS: I'm not that sure anymore.

ROGER: Why do you think you were happy?

THOMAS: See? Now that's the problem. That was supposed to be my story.

JACK: Supposed to be?

THOMAS: I just can't seem to... *(Pause)* To remember it.

JACK: You don't remember your story?

RICHARD: You've forgotten.

THOMAS: I have.

JACK: He's forgotten his story.

ROGER: Have you forgotten by accident?

THOMAS: By accident?

ROGER: Or have you made yourself forget?

THOMAS: How can I make myself forget?

(Pause)

(THOMAS rests his head on his hands trying to understand what ROGER has told him).

ROGER: *(To RICHARD and JACK)* I think he's starting to understand.

THOMAS: Understand what?

RICHARD: *(To ROGER)* Are you sure?

THOMAS: *(Sitting down, annoyed)* Understand what?

ROGER: *(To RICHARD)* No, not sure at all.

THOMAS: Please! What's going on with me?

ROGER: Think.

JACK: Okay.

RICHARD: *(To JACK)* Not you.

JACK: What?

ROGER: Tom, think.

THOMAS: What am I supposed to think about?

RICHARD: So, you wanted to tell a possibly happy story that you forgot about.

(Pause)

(THOMAS looks at him, waiting for more information)

THOMAS: And...?

RICHARD: And, what?

THOMAS: *(Mad)* Is that all you're telling me?

RICHARD: What else do you want?

THOMAS: I want you to help me understand.

ROGER: *(Raising his voice)* Oh! He doesn't get it. He won't get it. Just leave him.

JACK: Leave him?

RICHARD: We can't leave him here.

ROGER: Sure we can!

THOMAS: Then go! Leave me alone!

RICHARD: But we can't leave you.

THOMAS: Then I'll go! You can pay for the pints.

(THOMAS stands up and approaches the door)

JACK: Where are you going?

THOMAS: *(Shouting)* I told you, I'm leaving!!

RICHARD: You can't leave!

THOMAS: You're mad! You're all mad, and you're making me mad!

(THOMAS opens the door and stays standing still in front of it, unable to take another step forward. He tries to do this various times unsuccessfully. His friends look at him trying to leave, then look at each other feeling pity)

THOMAS: *(Breathes, stands looking at the door)* Why can't I move?

(Pause)

THOMAS: *(Shouting)* Why can't I move?!

RICHARD: *(Standing up and walks towards THOMAS. Talking to JACK and ROGER)* This is ridiculous! We're torturing him!

ROGER: He's torturing himself!

RICHARD: *(To THOMAS)* Come, friend. Come and sit.

THOMAS: No! I won't come! Why can't I move?

ROGER: You know why.

THOMAS: No, I don't.

ROGER: Yes, you do.

THOMAS: How could I know?

ROGER: You're just trying to avoid it.

THOMAS: Roger, why can't I move?

(ROGER ignores THOMAS).

THOMAS: Just tell me why!!

ROGER: *(Calmly speaking)* Because you're dead.

THOMAS: This is not a joke anymore, Roger.

ROGER: I'm not joking...

THOMAS: *(Frustrated)* Roger! Please, tell me!

ROGER: I told you!

THOMAS: *(Furiously runs towards ROGER. Shouting)* Why can't I fucking leave this place??

ROGER: *(Stands up. Shouting back)* Because you're dead, Tom! You're dead, dead!

(Pause)

THOMAS: What?

JACK: I'm sorry, Tom.

RICHARD: Are you okay?

THOMAS: What are you talking about?

ROGER: You're dead.

THOMAS: Stop saying that!

RICHARD: *(To JACK and ROGER)* He's not taking it that badly...

THOMAS: What?

JACK: *(To RICHARD)* What an interesting reaction.

(They all look at THOMAS. He looks back at them completely confused)

(Long silence)

RICHARD: So...

JACK: So, Tom, I...

ROGER: Tom?

(Pause)

THOMAS: I'm dead?

RICHARD: Yes!

JACK: No!

THOMAS: What?

RICHARD: *(Laughing and cheering)* And I'm not real!

JACK: *(To RICHARD)* You're not?

RICHARD: *(To JACK)* You're not either.

JACK: I'm not?

ROGER: No. None of us are.

(THOMAS sits down in silence and drinks his beer. He's looking down trying to think of something, completely ignoring his friends)

ROGER: *(To JACK and RICHARD)* We haven't got much time, you know?

JACK: At least it seems like he understands.

RICHARD: *(Looking at THOMAS, who is still ignoring them)* I'm not sure if he does.

JACK: Tom?

(THOMAS ignores him. He is thinking)

ROGER: Let him think.

(Pause)

RICHARD: If only he hadn't got into that car.

JACK: But then he would be stuck in the same place he's been for the past 20 years.

ROGER: Yes, but he wouldn't be here.

RICHARD: What if he doesn't remember anything at all?

(THOMAS looks at his friends as if he was starting to understand. He listens to their conversation, paying close attention)

ROGER: Then he might get stuck here.

RICHARD: Here?

JACK: Forever?

ROGER: There are no forevers here, Jack.

(THOMAS stands up looking at his friends with his mouth open. He starts anxiously laughing. They all look at him confused)

THOMAS: *(Laughing)*. Death?

JACK: What?

THOMAS: *(Laughing even harder)* I'm dead and I can't leave this place?

ROGER: Oh, dear...

JACK: I don't understand.

ROGER: No, *he* doesn't understand.

RICHARD: We have another death in 20 minutes, he needs to hurry up!

THOMAS: *(Relieved)* Okay! That was intense. *(Sits)*

JACK: Intense?

THOMAS: Very intense.

RICHARD: Intense... what?

THOMAS: In fact, I think this is the most intense dream I've had in my life!

ROGER: (*Rolling his eyes*) And here we go.

RICHARD: Another one in denial...

THOMAS: (*Excited*) I can't wait to wake up and tell you guys!

JACK: We're here, you don't have to tell us.

THOMAS: But you're not real!

JACK: (*Annoyed*) I know, that was hard enough to hear earlier. You don't have to say it again.

(*THOMAS laughs*)

THOMAS: The real you will die of laughter when I tell you.

RICHARD: Die? Well, considering they're on their way to your funeral right now... (*Joking*) That would be quite ironic!

ROGER: Tom...

THOMAS: No, no! I get it now. It's a dream!

JACK: A dream?

THOMAS: You've made me think I was crazy, I can't believe I was only dreaming!

ROGER: Tom, you're not...

THOMAS: Roger! Don't! You don't have to confuse me anymore, I figured it out.

RICHARD: But you didn't...

THOMAS: (*To WAITRESS*) Another round please!! (*To his friends*) I might as well drink till I wake, right?

ROGER: Tom...

THOMAS: Now that I know, this is actually quite nice.

ROGER: Listen...

THOMAS: I can do whatever I want!

(*THOMAS stands up*)

ROGER: Please, Tom...

THOMAS: *(Knocking over the table at the back)* I can throw away anything!

ROGER: Don't do that!

THOMAS: *(Running around. Throwing everything that is on the tables to the floor)* I can go crazy and it's okay!

RICHARD: Sit down, Tom!

THOMAS: *(Going behind the bar)* I can break what I want! *(Grabs a plate and smashes it)*, destroy what I want! *(Keeps throwing things on the floor)* I can take my own beer... *(Grabs a pint of beer)*.

JACK: This is madness...

(THOMAS holds WAITRESS from her waist and brings her out of the bar)

THOMAS: *(Offensively to WAITRESS)* I can even use you to have an affair!

ROGER: What did you just say?

THOMAS: Affair!

RICHARD: *(Slowly approaching THOMAS)* Affair?

(THOMAS looks at ROGER confused. He thinks to himself as if memories were starting to come back)

THOMAS: A-ffair...

(THOMAS gasps and drops his pint on the floor. The bar goes silent. WAITRESS, RICHARD, JACK and ROGER stand completely still, looking at THOMAS, who is in a sudden shock)

(Pause)

(THOMAS starts to walk back very slowly and turns around to look at his friends. His face expression hasn't changed, his eyes and mouth are still wide open. His friends remain silent. Nobody moves)

(Pause)

THOMAS: I... I'm dead.

(Pause)

RICHARD: *(Comfortingly)* Tom...

ROGER: You remember.

THOMAS: *(Without moving)* Yes.

JACK: Tom...

THOMAS: I'm dead.

RICHARD: Are you okay?

THOMAS: I'm *dead*.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Ever since I was a little girl, I've dedicated my free time to writing. From silly poems about golden clouds for my mother, and song lyrics for a high school crush to unfinished romantic novels and short dramas in prose. It wasn't until my second year of studying Playwriting that I drowned in Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot', and I suddenly found myself writing a conversation between four old men that I had absolutely nothing in common with. I then realized how much I needed characters that were strangers to me in order to challenge my deepest and most absurd thoughts, as opposes to the relatable little girl I had always written about. And somehow I ended up with 'Twenty Minutes to Heaven?'

BIO:

My name is Natalia de Monet. I was born in Atlanta, Georgia but raised in Madrid, Spain. Three and a half years ago I left Spain to live in London and here I am! I'm a recent Drama and Theatre graduate at Royal Holloway University of London where I work in the marketing and communications department as a communications coordinator. So I spend my days writing articles for our website and posts to social media.

Ball Caps and Coffee Mugs

by Tracey Sterns

WHY WE LIKE IT:

We were dazzled by this beautifully written and moving example of elegiac fiction. The bittersweet tone—a difficult mood—is sustained faultlessly throughout the narrative. Characters are sketched with brief strokes through incidental details and asides; there is alchemy in the finely crafted prose and the handling of pathos is masterful. Quote: ‘There was something about a mobile home hitched to a trailer that trumpeted broken dreams.’ Wow!

The trailer was crowded with caps and mugs that marked their lives. What was he going to do with all the mugs? Norm set Ali on the kitchen table, peeled off his cap by the peak and scratched the back of his head from ear to ear along the fringe of hair. The parcel looked like something you might receive in the mail, general delivery. Norm was the sort of person who would ask the price of everything, and he was always in the habit of whistling afterwards. Even in consultation for funeral arrangements, so he was still shopping for a container. What did they call it? An *urn*? A sacred scattering was starting to look like the best option—but where?

He raked through the drawer for the can opener and clamped it on a tin of chili as the old cat jumped up on the table and sniffed at the package with characteristic indifference. Ali would never let her up on the table, and Norm wasn't supposed to eat chili—any beans really—they gave him indigestion, and worse. So he'd pack them on fishing trips. They were more of an outdoor meal anyway and a strain on the ventilation system in their little love nest. Once Lila had

succinctly deduced that the sound of the clattering utensils was not the dinner bell, she leaped down and scratched at the door to get takeout. They could both afford to miss a meal or two.

A construction worker had brought her over in a paper cup nearly ten years ago now. She hadn't even grown into a kitten when they first got her. Norm never really cared for cats, but he liked a good bargain. And the local pet food store gave ten percent off to all black cats and dogs because they felt they had been oppressed, or at the least compromised, throughout the ages as metaphors for bad luck and dark days. Besides, when he told the stranger that he took his coffee black but not that furry, it was one of the best ones he'd ever gotten off. Now, he needed the cat as a constant source to repeat the joke over and over and over. He hadn't told it in a while because no one had come by for some time.

Ali would say that she wanted to be cremated once her time ran out, 'it's the only way I'll get back my hourglass figure.' Norm rattled the box, he'd never quite gotten that one until now. The thought of her trickling through an oversized egg timer for all eternity had never entered his mind—some fortresses were less penetrable than others. Mind you, he had never given it much thought either. A plot was a lot of money, and they'd never owned land. They always rented. Anyway, Norm wanted to move south. And what was the sense in leaving her behind now. He thought Ali did too, but nothing really ever got done unless Ali wanted it. And, she always said, one old friend is better than two new ones. Norm knew a lot of people, but not like that. He was surprised by all the people at the service he didn't recognize.

They'd bought the trailer for their retirement with a plan to move it south some day. Norm would say, 'Why pay for heat when some states were giving it away for free.' Now it was too old to be certified for the road. They'd have to pay to have it moved—towed to a scrap yard.

There was something about a mobile home hitched to a flatbed trailer that trumpeted broken dreams. Like a hearse in a procession of one—a corpse without *a cortege*.

Ali would get a coffee mug whenever something seemed like an occasion, and Norm had never been seen without a ball cap. It's like a fresh start she'd say, and the coffee tasted like a brand new day. You got three and a half paid days now for a death in the immediate family. And Ali was nothing if not immediate. They'd been married nearly forty years. That makes a day for every ten years, or something, Norm thought. He gazed over toward the microwave and realized he forgot to press the start button. He couldn't remember when they'd last used the stove. Even at Christmas, they just bought the big turkey legs now, like the ones at Disney. Ali's Disney mug was right next to her Christmas mug. The Christmas mug was on the shelf opposite Norm's kitchen chair. He was the one obliged to stare at it in July. He could sit in either chair now. You could see out the window on Ali's side. Norm stared unfocused at all the ball caps that scalloped the borders of the walls with a row of coffee cups on the shelves below. The bell sounded, as a knell might toll, Norm took his bowl out of the microwave, set it in front of his wife's chair and sat down.

He always ate without looking up and once he'd finished, he saw the Niagara Falls mug she got on their honeymoon. It was their anniversary last week and he recalled seeing it in the dish rack for the first time in forever. It was so faded he hardly recognized it. He had a Niagara Falls cap he used to wear everywhere. He lost it setting out on a salmon charter with the boys one windy day. He remembered watching it get smaller as it was sinking into the water and it made him feel strangely empty. The operator tried to cast out and hook it, but it was no use and just a gesture really. He raised his eyes in an attempt to fix a memory and there was the very cap above the cup. Ali must have bought another one somewhere. Beside it was that Christmas cap

with the antlers tucked back that he'd only worn once, and below another matching mug. Over to Ali's right was the tall CN Tower mug with Norm's CN Tower cap, the Marineland cup and cap were in line over by the door: A Thousand Islands, Old Fort York, the Blue Mountains, Parliament Hill, each corresponding to the other. They'd been all over Ontario, even parts of Quebec.

Ali would just stare off into space and disappear to somewhere else and Norm would never know she was gone. Now she was gone for good. They had both been together long enough to wonder what it would be like to be without the other, never realizing that only one of them would get that chance. Neither Norm nor Ali ever thought for a moment it would be him. He was five years older to start. Didn't exercise, didn't eat right, he was practically oblivious to his surroundings—maybe that was the key. Innocent inattentiveness, restive mindlessness, applied disregard. Fishing was about as much exercise as sleeping was an activity. Norm took scheduled naps, which was almost to say that he made plans to do nothing—not only nothing but to fall into a state of being unaware of doing nothing, on purpose. Ali could only sleep a couple of hours a night.

She had died suddenly. But she'd always been spontaneous, did everything on impulse. Norm still thought that that was the only reason she married him—to go to Niagara Falls. They'd gone to the justice of the peace, packed a few things and rode his *Triumph* all the way, nonstop, to the motel right along the river for the long weekend. In those days everyone drove a motorcycle—it was your first car. He had to have it refitted for the passenger seat—luckily he found a good used one at the wreckers.

It was odd, the undertaker gave him her rings and teeth in a little velvet drawstring bag when he wrote the cheque as if they'd been collateral. He unzipped his windbreaker pocket, took

the pouch out and set it on the table—he thought of his uncle with the glass eye. The rings he could understand, but what was he going to do with the teeth—the denturist had done a nice job. He separated the little aperture opening and looked inside. Norm recalled the flicker of Ali’s tentative smile when he first presented her with that engagement ring—and there they were both in that little bag, along with her wedding band. What was he to do with her now?

It was pouring rain and Norm ducked into the first shop off the lock. As bad luck would have it, it happened to be what he could only assume was an overpriced antique store. Once inside, Norm halted in his steps when the proprietor fixed her sights on him. He stiffened not daring to take another step. His eyes darted around the room and alighted on a fancy brass pot on a separate shelf, all on its own, exclusive. The woman knew where he was looking as the water dripped from the peak of his ball cap.

“You have very good taste. That is an antique copper coffee *urn*, circa 1890, in perfect working order—but I imagine you’ll want a rain check.”

Norm was overcome by the word. A drop of water must have rolled off into the corner of his eye. “Is there room for two?”

“It makes eight cups.”

“I’ll take it.” There was no need to whistle, since he hadn’t asked the price.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

My writing is little more than taking the voices inside my head out for exercise. This story is just a welter of introspections that happened to formulate something of a plot.

BIO: I have a number of unpublished works to my credit, prefer to wear men's clothing, have an impressive collection of shoes and hats and divide my time between a chalet in Malibu and a beach house in Aspen. Studied pataphysics as an undergrad but dropped out of three courses short of a load.

Ten Something in the Morning

by Peter J. Stavros

WHY WE LIKE IT:

A quietly heartrending tonal study with overtones of cinema verite. The second person singular POV puts us in the character's shoes and deepens our identification with the humiliations, disappointments and all too understandable apathy that become routine for those who, for whatever reason, fall through the cracks of the system. The despair here is 'Every Man' speaking and Stavros' assumption of the voice is flawless.

It's that feeling when you're standing in line at the unemployment office patiently waiting your turn to explain to the anonymous person behind the counter and Plexiglas partition why you're here, everything about you on the inside sinking and falling to the linoleum floor, and your brain scrambles to conjure up something to say that makes it sound not as bad as you know it is, and all you can come up with is that you're here because you got kicked to the curb from the last place you worked just because they didn't want you anymore, and so you figured you might as well take what you can from those assholes besides that shitty chair from your office you absconded with as security escorted you from the building, no matter how depressing and discouraging it is to stand in this line. You sigh, and you could kill for a cigarette, and you hope that you'll be able to put it better when you get up there, and you're confident you can since you

used to get paid to articulate, could do it even when you weren't firing on all cylinders – and you're certainly not firing on all cylinders now, at ten-something in the morning.

You couldn't sleep last night, per usual, and after tossing and turning, pillows and sheets sweat-soaked, damp underwear, you stumbled down the stairs and broke into that bottle of bourbon that had been sitting on your bookshelf gathering dust, the one with your name printed on the label that a client (or former client) gave you last Christmas. You thought that bottle was merely decorative, just something to show off, maybe filled with brown water or tea. But it was the real deal, it turned out to be, when you gulped down a healthy (or unhealthy?) portion last night, enough until the taste stopped stinging your tongue, until your body felt pleasantly numb, until your bed gently rotated on its axis when you went back to lie down.

That bourbon was the real deal alright, and you're paying for it today as you explain to the anonymous person (and it's finally your turn) why you're here, and it comes out somewhat, slightly, marginally better than how it played out in your head, no style points. The anonymous person behind the counter, whose name you see from her name tag is Trish, doesn't look at you when you talk (but in all fairness, she doesn't look at anyone), has barely made any eye contact throughout the course of this stilted, perfunctory exchange, has just been typing, typing, typing on a computer that's gray and oversized and clunky and looks like something out of the grainy stock footage of the NASA mission control center during the lunar landing. As you talk, as Trish types, you wonder if she can smell the stale odor of booze on your breath because you can still taste it in the back of your scratchy throat, and you wonder if she can see you subtly gripping the counter with your fingertips from underneath to steady yourself.

This stilted, perfunctory exchange continues for not nearly as long as it seems (and it seems like it's lasting an eternity and your mouth is running dry and your stomach is grumbling),

before Trish finishes typing whatever information she's been inputting into that Cold War era computer. She pokes a button on the keyboard with an index finger, and you see that she's wearing purple nail polish with little sparkling silver slivers, and a printer that looks equally antiquated suddenly rattles to life against the side wall by the louvered window balanced on a card table and regurgitates a piece of paper. Trish pushes herself out of her chair with a pronounced exhale that is obviously directed at you for coming in this morning and making her do her job, even as she refrains from making any eye contact, and ambles over to retrieve that piece of paper. She returns it to you, sliding it through the slit in the bottom of the Plexiglas partition, for you to sign, which you do with a wavy scribble in green ink without reading it because it is understood that if you don't sign then you won't get anything and the only reason you're here is to take what you can from those assholes who were too cheap to offer you severance.

Trish asks you if you want a copy and you shake your head no, and that hasty movement hurts your head at the temples like tiny daggers, and she seems relieved yet it's hard to know, it's just a sense you get, and deep down and in some perversely curious way you wished you had said yes if only to see what kind of anachronistic condition the copier machine might be in. Then she tells you that you're "all set" and it immediately strikes you that never has that phrase been more inaccurately applied than as applied to you at this instant, and it makes you snicker, because nothing, absolutely nothing, about your life at this instant is "all set" except that apparently your unemployment benefits are "all set" so that's something, you guess.

You thank Trish who no longer acknowledges your existence as she has moved on to the next person in line, a line that has grown exponentially and out the door, with the same stilted, perfunctory exchange, and the same typing, typing, typing. You kind of nod, pretending that she

had acknowledged you, and walk past the line, an assortment of humanity all patiently waiting for the same reason, and exit the non-descript office building, and step out into the harsh, unforgiving sunlight of the day. You glance around for a place to eat because bacon and eggs sounds good, but you're not familiar with this part of town, and you don't want to stray too far and get lost, so maybe instead you'll just go home and get back into bed.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

My writing influences range from Sam Shepard to Charles Bukowski. When I began to study writing in college, I was blown away by Jay McInerney's 'Bright Lights, Big City'. I always wanted to write something that would put the reader into the mind of the main character. The piece is a part of a collection that I am working on that tells the story of this person who is struggling through some difficult life issues that are revealed in a nonlinear through various episodes and vignettes.

BIO:

Peter J. Stavros is a writer in Louisville, KY. His work has appeared in The Saturday Evening Post, The Boston Globe Magazine, The East Bay Review, Crack the Spine, Hypertext Magazine, Dime Store Review and others. More can be found at www.peterjstavros.com

World of Fantasies

by Tom Finnegan

WHY WE LIKE IT:

There is a strange dream-like gravitational pull in this mystifying dystopian future-logue where freedom is replaced by die-determinism. There is a sense of whirling atoms beneath the stillness of the story surface such that something ethereal and spectral rises before the reader like an apparition. The metronomic steel gray voice results in a curiously hermetic prose that lays low until it bursts upon the ear with passages of unexpected lyrical beauty. Quote: ‘Sleeping involved heavy dreaming. And we slept for long periods. People couldn’t remember most of their dreams, but almost everyone said, ‘God was in their mind’ while they slept.’ And ‘When you first appeared here you learned about the dice but could only throw a 12 or less. There were 20 sides to each dice with the high numbers at the top. So if you rolled high you could maybe get an 18 or a 19...’

PART ONE: THE FIERY DICE

My name is XY-04, I was a female and I didn’t know much else.

I lived in a world of thousands of rooms. People constantly had 3 dice (20-sided dice) floating around their head and when they were lying down the dice hovered above the head. The dice were 20 cm squared but with 20 sides.

Sparkling golden dice...

It was as if someone was rolling us and we were the dice. We tumbled often in low gravity.

But we also rolled our own dice, we settled disputes like who was king or who loved who or duels of honor. Generally, the one with the strongest will power won but sometimes those inside the dice controlled the roll. So, one needed to defeat good people to strengthen your own three dice. And there was an element of luck which the computers generated.

The loser was engulfed in flames and sucked into one of the winner’s dice. But most people felt they had nothing to lose.

The rolled dice spun and landed on the ground typically.

It was rumored that this world was dice within dice. If you kept losing you would go to lesser and lesser worlds. But our world seemed to be high on the layers of dice worlds. But we certainly weren't the highest as they kept rolling us.

When the Gods rolled the dice, we didn't know the result of the God's roll; we just tumbled. We all tumbled when the dice were rolled by our "God," very low gravity. Sometimes the dice were rolled again and again in quick succession... There were those who called it "rock and roll". The dice had 20 sides and the high numbers were clustered together. So too with the low numbers.

Roll high was the secret to the dice games.

It was rumored that these people in our dice themselves had others within a die and so on layer after layer. This seemed correct as the losers were sucked inside of the winner's dice in our disputes.

Our three dice each had 20 sides (d20) and the numerals sparkled like "stars." We all knew there were stars somewhere, somehow.

It was best to have disputes with clever people because if you defeated them they would make good kings in your dice.

Some said there were too many of us "simulacra." People said the Gods had a body which was "heavy," but we didn't know what to believe. People estimated there were thousands and thousands in our die alone. And we all had 3 personal dice, some stronger than others. And all of us could remember being in other dice.

One newcomer, she said, "All that we are is a die within a die."

I conceived of the dice as an extension of one's mind.

XXX

When you first appeared here you learned about the dice but could only throw a 12 or less. There were 20 sides to each dice with the high numbers at the top. So, if you rolled high maybe you could get an 18 or 19 (they were next to each other on the dice. The high the low and the medium were each clustered together on the dice.

One needed to defeat a lot of smart people in dice games to make your dice stronger. And you needed to be promoted (moved) by the loudspeaker in your head to be a high number for your God and his/her dice. No one knew what happened to those who disappeared, we presumed they were given new dice. As for the winners they gained the dice of the losers. Our king in #19 in the dice we lived in, had one hundred dice.

Some were terrified and so did not challenge anyone but we told them if they lost they'd go to another dice world. No big deal.

God plays dice. And there must be several Gods, most of us agreed.

It was rumored the Gods could produce unlimited people like us (simulacra).

"It was all virtual reality," one girl said. "We are all in the show..." I said, "It is a pretty boring show."

We felt good doing good deeds for one another, but to "kill" someone in a roll off was the best feeling of all, better than wand sex (we all had wands which we touched each other for bliss or to attack).

But some acted like saints and offered their life to others, by not using their full mind powers and so were sucked into the winner's dice. Altruistic...

But these saints were trying to please the "Roller Gods." And they made great speeches about freedom and fairness. But everyone knew it was a world partly of luck. And people wanted more.

Some said we were just a dream within a Gods' dream. Some were apparently demoted after "dying" but it didn't seem anyone was promoted beyond our d20, that we were all in. But some people seemed to disappear without a roll off. So we deduced there must be countless worlds out there only we couldn't escape the die. It was commonly believed that Gods existed in all of us. And God wanted us to use our combined brain power to try to roll high. Or so we thought.

Newcomers appeared regularly and asked why were they here? We couldn't answer them.

Some newcomers were riff raff and were relegated to the 1 and 2 and 3 d20 and nobody cared about them. But they had their kings and lovers. However, some newcomers were quite bright.

But after seeing so many losers of the dice games who disappeared, everyone had an inferiority complex with the outside world. But one guy claimed that there was no outside world and we were the top notch. But if so why were we tumbling?

As mentioned, we had sex with others with our wands, there was also "human style" which was unusual sex, for most. But touching one another's wands could only be used for sex once every "half-hour." Sometimes you touched wands with people you didn't even like. Most people did it all day and then not when they were sleeping. I wondered aloud what the purpose of all this sex was. Was it just a life of bliss?

Sleeping involved heavy dreaming. And we slept for long periods. People couldn't remember most of their dreams, but almost everyone said, "God was in their mind," while they slept. I had a recurring dream in which I was king but no one in the kingdom liked me... On one particular

day I was dreaming of throwing the dice over a game of real war. Millions “died.” But I knew that anyway death just led to relegation. I had been born with that idea.

But some were not in bliss, quite the opposite in fact. People would say someone was “going” when they contemplated suicide.

And one girl said there were many Gods, and all had their favorite dice. If you tumbled a lot that meant you were in a favorite die of your master. Or so she said. But most people believed our die was in the possession of a single God.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

I wrote this story as an adventure in the future, which will be strange.

BIO:

Tom Finnegan has published short stories in a number of magazines. He spends his time teaching English in varying countries.

The Gulf

by Philip DiGiacomo

WHY WE LIKE IT:

We love the powerful drive for closure (even the title is symbolic) that haunts this psychologically layered narrative about a man confronting his demons and the skilful use of flashback to flesh out his character. The whittled prose sharpens the focus with diamond-hard realism: we feel the hot sun; see the burned grass, inhale the dust from the road and smell the ocean. The minor characters, drawn with aplomb, come effortlessly to life.

The Gulf Coast beach was deserted, not a person, not a bird, not a sound. A pale, pink curtain, quivering like the translucent bodies of jellyfish, rose from the horizon straight into the sky like the Northern Lights, casting a red glow across the sand and warm Gulf water. Allen's Grandfather Bill, as tall as an oil rig, stood high above the tree line in his overalls holding a crusty paint brush like an Olympic torch spreading a long white arc from east to west. In a booming, Moses-like baritone he announced, "I'm a Sherwin Williams man, won't use nothin' else!" He collapsed backwards like a cardboard cut out, the sky dripped a gooey mixture of pink and white and Allen woke up.

He was stuck to the plastic lawn chair and soaked with sweat. It was shady a half hour ago but now the sun slammed down on Allen's repo yard with a vengeance. The Missouri summer of 1985 promised to be memorable. Despite the sweat and heat, he was glad that the vivid dream stopped where it did. Before it got ugly and terrifying. Before his dead Grandmother's face came rushing toward him shrieking like a banshee. It was the dream that had left him shaking in his bedclothes late at night for years.

His big Rottweilers, Jack and Jill, shot out from under the trailer as the tow truck rolled into the lot with a Mercury Montego hooked up. Its owner, a vicious, cowardly man known all over central Missouri owed some serious cash and it was number one on the current repo list. The tow driver, and Allen's sole employee, Wesley, cut the engine and jumped down to play wrestle both dogs until they raised a cloud of dust. They adored him.

"That's enough, Wes! We don't need to be breathing all that shit!" Allen waved his hands to clear the air and noticed just then that the Mercury was pink. Hot as it was, a quick shiver ran up his back. The color from the damn dream.

Wesley bounded over to the trailer steps facing Allen's lawn chair. His long stringy hair couldn't hide his jug ears, and his missing teeth gave him a comical hillbilly presence. He grinned while chewing a mouthful of bologna sandwich number one. There were two more in a Ziplock bag that his mother handed him each morning on his way to work at Allen's repo yard.

The Jack and Jill Recovery Company was named after the two dogs who were now begging for the little strings of bologna that Wesley threw in the air. They were gentle but

looked dumb and mean. It was enough to make even the real low-lives count out the cash they owed with one eye on the dogs.

With his mouth now full of sandwich number two, Wesley said,

“Hey Al, I’ll tell you what, I’ll give you one of my sammiches if ya let me read you some scripture okay?”

Along with the daily sandwiches, Wesley carried a beat up white leatherette bible with a brass clasp and would read aloud to anyone, even Jack and Jill.

“No thank you, Wes,” said Allen, as he peeled himself off the lawn chair, “It’s just too hot right now.”

Allen ducked into the trailer for some water. On a day like this, you could run the tap forever and get nothing but warm. The mini fridge below the counter held plastic jugs of chilled water. Allen drank from one until his throat hurt and his hands stopped shaking and looked out the window over the sink at the rows of junked cars that filled a full acre, bound on all sides by tall Ozark pines. The sun glinted and danced over the metal, chrome and glass, making Allen imagine the gulf back home in Corpus Christi. He wondered what the beach looked like now, and what condition the old house was in. It had become his responsibility when his Grandfather died and he had avoided dealing with it going on seven years now.

Allen had left Texas the day after his high school graduation in the summer of 1969. Couldn’t wait to get clear of the Gulf coast. Now he was in central Missouri about as landlocked

and far from the ocean as you could get. But the disturbing dreams continued. They began when Allen was only six, the summer his Grandma was killed standing in less than a foot of water, stung so badly by a Portuguese Man o' War that her heart burst from pain and fright.

Allen had been crouching in the shallows, nearly a quarter mile south of Grandma and her beach umbrella when it happened. People farther along the beach were running hard past him in groups. He turned to see a crowd forming at the water's edge and heard voices shouting. Allen walked back until he spotted Grandma's umbrella. She wasn't sitting under it. He felt dizzy and began to run, the heavy bucket of shells banging into his leg. He let it drop and ran faster. He pushed through the knot of bathers in time to see two lifeguards laying a Red Cross blanket over something in the sand. It was his Grandma, her eyes and mouth open in a shocked, silent scream as they covered her face. He stumbled backwards towards a group of men and saw the Man O' War itself. Like pink and blue molten glass fringed in white lace. The men were digging a deep hole with their hands and using driftwood to push the big deadly blob into it.

The first letter Allen received from the County Development Commission had come nearly a year ago. They wanted to purchase and raze the house to make way for a new shopping plaza. Allen had yet to answer them. He pulled out the drawer under the counter and sorted through ketchup packets and plastic utensils and took out letter number two. It was stamped URGENT in red ink and had arrived only two days ago. Allen had not opened it but knew they were forcing his hand. He dreaded the task but he would have to go to Texas and deal with it very soon.

Despite the terrible event that drove him away, his childhood home was a source of wonderful memories that could reduce Allen to tears if he let them. He had to do something. He couldn't let the old house be destroyed.

Allen topped off Jack and Jill's water bowls with the jug of cold water and put it back in the fridge. He stepped outside where Wesley was hunched over his Bible reading to the dogs. They stared at his index finger moving across the page, hoping for more bologna. Allen sat behind Wesley on the top step, rubbed his eyes and released a resigned sigh. "Okay Wes, try and read me something cheerful." Wesley jumped like he had sat on a tack.

"I can do that Allen!" "Just gimme a minute to find something real nice, okay?" Jack and Jill shot Allen a disapproving look and walked off in a huff to nap in the shade. "Take your time Wes, I'm not going anywhere, and grab a cold water jug for us too, would you?" Wesley vaulted the four steps as one and let the screen door bang behind him.

Allen pulled the newest letter from his hip pocket and tore it open. It contained just one page of official stationary, short and not too sweet. Since Allen had never answered their initial inquiry, they were now preparing to invoke eminent domain and demolish the house.

Wesley shot back outside.

"Okay Allen, I got it an it's a goodun!"

"Where's the water Wes?"

"The what?"

Another bang of the screen door.

Allen could not let this happen. He had to go back to Corpus. Wesley came sloshing back out handing the jug to Allen. He handed it back. “Wet your pipes Wes and let ‘er rip, I’m all ears.” Wesley swallowed a mouthful of water, wiping his mouth with his sleeve, and cleared his throat. He stood up tall, gripping his Bible with both hands.

“I myself also am a mortal man, like to all, and the offspring of him that was first made of the earth.”

Allen tried to concentrate on the words but Wesley had pitched his voice so low that he sounded like Johnny Cash.

“ And in my mother’s womb was fashioned to be flesh in the time of ten months, being compacted in blood, of the seed of man, and the pleasure that came with sleep. And when I was born, I drew in the common air, and fell upon the earth, which is of like nature, and the first voice I uttered was a cry, as all others do. I was nursed in swaddling clothes, and that with cares, for there is no king that had any other beginning of birth. For all men have one entrance in life, and the like going out.”

Wesley snuck a peek over the Bible at Allen whose mind was clearly somewhere else.

“You want me to keep goin’?”

Allen reeled in his thoughts and smiled.

“That was perfect Wes, you could have been a preacher.”

A red blush rose from Wesley’s Adam’s apple all the way to his hairline.

“Aw, shoot no I couldn’t do that!”

“Well maybe not, but you gave me a lift just the same and I thank you for it.”

Allen stood up and squinted at the long pink car still hooked by the tow truck, it's chrome grill shining like an angry catfish. It was as long as Grandpa's Cadillac that he let Allen steer from his lap slowly along the beach roads so many years ago.

"Lets see the paper work on that Montego Wes, there's something about that car I don't like." Wesley climbed into the tow truck to retrieve his clipboard as Allen slowly circled the car.

Allen's grand parents were the only parents he had known. The fate of his biological parents was a cloudy subject never fully discussed until at thirteen he demanded that his Grandfather tell the whole story. It had been seven years since Grandfather Bill had lost his lifelong companion in such a terrible manner and he simply didn't have the strength to refuse his grandson's demand.

Allen's teenage mother had died two days after giving birth to him. The strain of eighteen hours of labor was too much for her heart, being weakened from a childhood bout with Scarlet Fever. Bill Jr., only nineteen at the time, could not face raising the boy himself and set off for the oil fields in Oklahoma where he died in a rigging accident no more than a year later.

Upon close inspection, the Mercury Montego was not in great condition. It was a '69 with the Cobra Jet 428 engine, torque-flight transmission, faded paint and a badly stained white vinyl interior. The most serious problem with the car was its owner, Ben Crowe, the nasty heir to the Crowe family fortune of supermarkets and liquor stores. Ben was forty but still lived in the

baronial family home in Rolla, an hour drive north of the Jack and Jill Collection Company. Before Ben's older brother Sam went missing in Vietnam, the two boys were the terrors of Phelps County, raising hell by bootlegging and bullying. There was even talk in Rolla that they had raped a 14 year old girl but it was never proven.

Unlike most of the cars towed to the yard there was no money past due to a bank or a loan company. The \$3,801.34 owed on the car was for fines levied by the county on two years worth of broken traffic laws and they wanted their money. Not long after the car appeared on the monthly repo list, Wesley spotted it parked and unlocked behind Oscar's Café and Billiards, keys under the seat. Less than an hour later he and Allen stood looking at it.

"I ain't scared of no Ben Crowe," boasted Wesley.

"Well maybe you should be Wes. He's real mean and he's got money, never a good combination."

"How come he don't pay his bills then?"

"Why don't you ask him? I believe that would be him now."

A big Cummins diesel engine growled from the bottom of the hill getting louder and closer. The big white Dodge Ram pickup ground to a stop just behind the Montego raising a cloud of red dust. The windows in the cab were tinted black as midnight and the twin air horns on the roof ripped out a blast that echoed off the hills and brought both Jack and Jill to attention. They sat side by side, eyes trained on Allen's left hand, waiting for the finger snap that would send them charging. Wesley froze half in and half out of the tow truck as Allen walked calmly over to the Dodge. The door was flung open and Ben Crowe slid to the ground.

He was only six years older than Allen but looked middle aged. Thinning hair and a thickening waistline had not softened him in the least. He spat, then spoke.

“What the fuck you think you’re doin’ repo boy?”

He glared at Allen with small black eyes set deep into ruddy flesh.

“Just doing a job for the County, Ben.”

“Well undo it goddammit and gimme back my car!”

“You can drive off anytime Ben, soon as I get three thousand eight hundred one dollars and thirty four cents.”

“Boy you better hand over them keys before I cut you and that retard over there.”

“We can’t do that Ben.”

“What the hell you mean *we*?”

Allen looked over at Wesley who now held a Mossberg 12 gauge shotgun angled straight down to Ben Crowe’s chest. Ben’s mouth moved but no sound escaped.

“How about I make you a deal Ben”, Allen offered.

“Like what?”

“You don’t need that old car when you got this hot new truck. How about I pay the county what you owe, I keep the car, and you go back home to Rolla with a clean slate?”

Ben was slow to answer. Allen turned back to Wesley.

“What do *you* think Wes?”

Wesley answered by loudly racking a shell into the chamber.

“I think Wes agrees with me. What do you say Ben?”

Allen could tell Ben was having a moment where he might draw the bone handle knife that was peeking out of his back pocket. The moment passed. Ben got dramatic all of a sudden, throwing his arms wide.

“Shit, it ‘aint even worth that much! You want it so damn bad, go ahead and buy the sumbitch, I don’t care!”

Ben spat into the dirt again, backed up and climbed into his truck, slamming the door.

“Don’t let me catch you two up in Rolla, so help me God!”

He fired up the truck and spun back around, bouncing down the dirt road. When the dust began to settle Allen walked over to Wesley who was still holding the shotgun.

“It’s not loaded is it, Wes?”

“Nope, but he sure thought it was, didn’t he?”

Allen and Wesley grinned at each other and Allen called to the dogs.

“Come here kids and look at our new car!”

Allen lay awake that night going over all he had to do before heading south to Corpus and the coast. He kept re-arranging chores in his head not able to clearly prioritize a damn thing. He couldn’t just dump the business on Wesley. He was too green. He had been quick on his feet though, dealing with Ben Crowe. Allen made at least one decision before sleep overtook him. He had to re-paint that damn Montego right away.

Allen was up at dawn and at the kitchen table writing a check when Wesley rolled into the yard with the tow rig. Allen allowed him to take it home most nights in case he spotted a car from the repo list on the way in.

Jack and Jill were bumping into Wesley's legs keeping him off balance as he made his way toward Allen standing on the trailer steps. Allen held out the freshly written check and the Montego keys to Wes.

“Take this over to Mrs. Leach at the County office to pay for the Montego and stop by your Uncle Arley's place, I got a job for him.”

Wesley carefully folded the check into his shirt pocket and snapped it closed.

“Arley don't like to work no more.”

“Oh he's gonna like this job Wes, tell him to set up his old spray rig in the barn and paint that ugly pink car for me.”

“What color you want it?”

“Surprise me, Wes, any color you want.”

Wesley was gone most of the day and Allen filled it with departure preparations. He paid a stack of bills, checked the stock of dog food and packed a duffle bag with clothes to last a week.

It was nearly dark when Allen heard a car rolling into the yard. He stepped outside just as the motion detector switched on the halogen yard light. What he saw was remarkable. Wesley sat grinning behind the wheel of a rather handsome silver Mercury Montego.

“Your uncle outdid himself this time Wes!”

“He mixed in some extra hardener with the metallic lacquer so it’s tough as nails!

Wesley walked around the car followed by the dogs. He stopped at the trunk and keyed the lock.

Allen came down the steps and crossed to the car.

“I’ve got a work related deal I want to ask you about Wes.”

Wesley raised the trunk lid and hauled out an enormous, battered brown suitcase.

“I got everything I need right here, me and the dogs will be just fine. When are you fixin’ to leave?”

That settled it. Wesley was smarter than he looked.

Allen did not suffer the dream that night because sleep eluded him completely. He poured over some old Texaco road maps at the kitchen table and chose a route south. He didn’t care much for the interstates and they weren’t close by anyway. He would take Farm to Market Rt. 19 down to Arkansas and pick up Ranch to Market Rt. 59 at Clarendon and take it past Shreveport, around Houston all the way to Beeville. From there it was a final hour along 181 to the Gulf. The whole thing would take about 17 hours and 960 miles with an overnight stop near Nacogdoches. Allen refolded the map and laid his head on his forearms at the table for what seemed like just a moment but when he jerked upright it was light outside and he could hear Wesley backing the tow truck up to the chain link fence. He stepped outside rubbing his stiff back. Wesley hopped down from the truck.

“I got it covered Allen, don’t you worry.”

“I ain’t worried about you Wes, but Texas is a mixed bag for me and I don’t know what to expect when I get there.”

“Well, I expect you’ll do okay.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Allen tossed his duffle onto the seat and nestled his thermos of coffee against it and climbed in behind the big white steering wheel. The Mercury fired up and settled into a steady purr. Wesley grinned.

“Arley put a can of STP in there, sounds good don’t it?”

“It sure does Wes. I better get going. I’ll call you when I get there.”

Wesley stepped up to the car and handed Allen a bag of bologna sandwiches.

“Momma made extra.”

“Thank you Wes, that’ll be my breakfast. Don’t over feed the dogs okay?”

Allen pulled out of the yard and down the road catching a last rearview glimpse of Jack and Jill leaping all over Wesley.

It had been quite a while since Allen had found himself alone on what would be called a road trip. The Mercury ran straight and true, flowing up and down over the southern Missouri hills. When he crossed the border into Arkansas he was surprised when the driver of the first car he passed going north lifted an index finger up from the steering wheel in a salutation. He had to laugh, remembering that it was common practice in Arkansas to greet all oncoming vehicles in that way. Be it a family wagon, truck or tractor, everyone got and gave the one finger wave.

Allen was feeling good. The long dreaded trip home was made bearable, even pleasant as he rolled past cotton fields where white tufts hung in the air and rushed past the car in a spiral wave. The bologna sandwiches were long gone and lunch time found him outside the hamlet of Magnolia where he stopped at a gravel turnout where Big Paul, an enormous black man in coveralls tended a cast iron smoker hitched to the back of his RV. Allen purchased a hot pulled pork sandwich and a tub of coleslaw and ate it while sitting on the hood of the Mercury. He washed it down with an icy Dr. Pepper and decided to hit the road before the need for a nap overtook him. He made a mental note to stop and see Big Paul on the way back.

He nodded off at the wheel a couple times in the late afternoon and refilled his thermos at a diner in Bossier City just outside of Shreveport. The skinny teenage girl at the counter tried to sell him a piece of pie, and it looked real good but he had no room for it. The coffee was strong and he checked his map, glad that he would make it to Nacogdoches to spend the night.

The Starlite Motel had two singles left and he took one on the ground floor, easing the car right up to the door. Once inside, he opened the sliding window in hopes of reducing the mildew smell and fell back on the bed.

An unfamiliar sulfurous yellow light woke him and he needed a moment to recall just where he was. He fumbled for the lamp chain, got the light on and pulled the drapes closed against the parking lot security lights. Too tired to watch TV, Allen flossed, brushed and went to bed, setting the clock radio for 6AM.

Sometime later in that dark motel room, the dream came calling with a fury like never before. This time Allen stood in his swimming trunks as an adult, paralyzed, unable to help her or even shut his eyes as his Grandma slowly turned round and round while some horrible force screwed her deeper and deeper into the sand. Seawater gushed from her open mouth, choking off her screams as she reached for Allen, clawing the air between them. Thousands of gulls hovered above, blocking out the sun like an enormous umbrella, breaking their wings against each other and screeching in pain. Allen's entire body was seized with cramps and spasms yet he could only watch as his Grandmas head slowly sank into the sand, her eyes pleading until her last wisp of grey hair was gone.

Allen broke free, launching himself off the bed onto the floor, crashing the lamp and clock radio across the room. He crawled over the carpet like a panicked insect, blind and blubbering. He grabbed a fistful of drapes yanking them to the side, filling the room with yellow light from the parking lot. Covered in sweat and gasping for air, he stared hard at the bed, the mini fridge and a chair, looking from one to the other, forcing himself to breathe slowly and return to the room, to the here and now.

Thirty minutes later his hands were still trembling as he took a shower. He had made a decision. He would pack up at first light get the hell out of Texas and head back home to Missouri. He could not go through with it. Let the damn bulldozers come. An old beat up house was not worth losing his mind over. Did that make him a coward? He refused to look at himself in the mirror as he brushed his teeth. The bedside lamp bulb was busted so he placed a pair of dollar bills under the base and left the room key next to it.

As Allen stepped outside he realized he wasn't the only early riser at the motel. A young couple and their little boy were quickly loading up their station wagon from the room next door. The father gave Allen a suspicious look and held it a bit too long for his comfort. Ignoring the man, Allen unlocked the Mercury and tossed his duffle on the seat.

The little boy who must have been five or six ran up to Allen holding a red plastic pail.

"I'm gonna fill this all up with sea shells at the beach!" he announced proudly.

Allen almost responded but the boy's father broke in.

"Leave that man alone Travis and get in the car right now!"

He meant business and the boy knew it. He was in the back of the wagon like a shot. Now it was the young Mom's turn to cast a sad, uncertain look at Allen. The wagon lurched back, spraying gravel and roared to the exit, turning south and peeling rubber all the way.

Allen stood by the open car door, ashamed that the family had probably heard him thrashing about in the night. He looked down to see the red plastic pail left behind by the boy. He put it on the seat and got behind the wheel. He turned the key and the pail rolled against his leg. As he shoved it aside he was flooded with memories of his childhood forays of shell collecting. Always searching for colorful new specimens, he would lug them home in one of his Grandpa's old paint cans and dump them in the bathroom sink. Sitting on a stool he would pick through them, inspecting and cleaning with an old toothbrush until Grandma called him to supper. The window sills in the old house were lined with his collection. Sand Dollars, Yellow Cockles, Angel Wings, Key Hole Limpets, Banded Tulips and Sundials.

The decision he had made while naked and vulnerable in the motel shower now felt wrong. He rolled down the window and drove slowly to the exit where he faced the sign that offered travelers two choices. 181 North or 181 South. Allen tried to swallow the hard lump in his throat. He missed his dogs and the piney woods already, but a left turn north would mean running away, just as he had done years ago. Maybe a right turn, all the way to the old house and the beach would bring an end to the dream, let his Grandma rest and set him free.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

My initial inspiration for 'The Gulf' was a series of actual events from my own childhood. Trauma comes in many forms when we least expect it, and the effects can last a lifetime. Fear can play havoc with our sense of self and sometimes requires a level of strength we don't always have at hand. Abandonment, isolation and a sense of loss scar our personal history. They say you can't go home again, but you can, just not all the way. My intention while writing 'The Gulf' (and others stories), is to render the concrete conditions of being human. My influences range from Raymond Carver, Lucia Berlin, Bob Dylan, William Trevor, James Salter to the history of film noir.

BIO:

Philip DiGiacomos' work has appeared in The Nervous Breakdown, 1888 The Cost of Paper, Fiction on the Web, Halfway Down the Stairs, Fishfood Magazine, Literary Manhattan, and The Examined Life Journal. He is a former painter and actor from New York. He is a former student of Lou Matthews and Colette Sartor at UCLA. Twenty-seven years ago he moved to a bluff on Pacific Coast Highway where he lives with his wife, the painter Hilary Baker. It's where he writes, reads, cooks and sometimes races an old Porsche.

The Wall

by Mir-Yashar Seyedbagheri

WHY WE LIKE IT:

It's not often we'll choose to publish a submission just because of a couple of sentences. But here they are." Rulers construct a wall that extends around the world. The dead climb over with fifty foot ladders.' In just 17 words the author paints a terrifying picture that lingers in the mind like the Hell panels in Flemish triptychs. Hieronymus Bosch is dead and alive in Trump's 2019.

The dead re-enter the world, fleeing the afterlife. They search for loved ones. There are tearful reunions, but they drain resources, emotional and physical. The world is enveloped by fear. Rumors fly. The dead are smuggling drugs. Venereal diseases. People buy it. They need explanations.

Rulers construct a wall that extends around the world. The dead climb over with fifty-foot ladders.

Countries try to make each other pay for the wall. British and Irish fling Guinness at each other. Brazilians and Mexicans fight in soccer games. Dead and living fight. People keep buying into falsehoods, even though they secretly know better.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The story was inspired by Trump and his wall, especially his pledge that Mexico would pay for it. I've come to see writing as another form of resistance, along with protests and civic engagement. I wrote this piece with that intention. The goals: expose absurdity and find humor in dark and tempestuous times. I believe in the power of humor, paired with writing. In terms of particular literary influences, George Saunders had a strong impact on this piece. While more of a literary realist, I do enjoy pieces such as Saunders's memorable 'Sea Oak'. That piece had significant bearing on the story, mainly the notion of the dead interacting with the living.

BIO:

Mir-Yashar Seyedbagheri is a graduate of Colorado State University's MFA program in fiction. A recipient of two Honourable Mentions, he has had work nominated for the Best Small Fictions. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as The Blue Moon Literary and Art Review, Fewer Than 500, Sinkhole Mag and 100 Word Story. Mir-Yashar Seyedbagheri lives in Fort Collins, CO.

The Night the Babe Died

by Vince Barry

WHY WE LIKE IT:

The baroque glory of this sumptuous Irish prose blew us from here to Blarney. Listen for Joyce, Doyle and Canadian icon Michael Crummey. But the voice is Barry's own with an idiosyncratic energy that swells in the mind's ear with riotous colour. We just can't get enough of this serendipitous syncopation!

Delivered in a low gruff voice, the *bean an tí's* first admonition, that I can frame in the blank of memory, about the impropriety of inquiring into the curved line of Joe Kelly's back, came when I was but a "chiseler" of ten and Joe closer, in mind's eye, to five than four times that.

"Not an unseemly ward 'bout such things or I'll brain yer!" So said the phlegmatic Irish "woman of the house," brushing a cloud of thick black hair out of her quick chatoyant eyes. "Dat goes as well," she added, in a voice as thick as cabbage and potatoes soup, "for 'is whistlin' esses."

It probably came earlier, the warning I mean, for Joe was a familiar presence at the Faheys' nightly ritual, and I by then had been five years relocated, to the US, during the early days of the bombings of England's urban centers. Operation Pied Piper it was called—the relocation, not the bombings. But *fadó*, that was long ago, as the Irish say, and none of that matters. Well, perhaps, “Bye-bye, Mummy,” that, . . . and the custodian's “Bob's your uncle!” cast like a life support to us “poppets” and “lambs”; and his helmet, of course, that. . . .

The evacuation officially ended in 1946, the same year I was officially declared “orphaned,” and two years before Mamie's aforesaid peremptory edict, furnished with, as recovered from one of memory's hiding places, a pudgy fist shake: “Not a ward!”

No matter its precise inaugural, the thing is that the threat always came as the Faheys, my “host family,” were poised to observe their nightly ritual,— “service,” of late I've come to call it—, for it was a bet certain that the wheezy, effaced-looking little man, with deep-set hooded eyes, one blue one brown, one cool one harried, would “just pop in,” for he always did for as long as anyone could remember, for as long as the solid oak duel chime mantel clock struck nine, the hour that the Faheys took their “cake-an'-tay” as regular as clockwork. . . . But

then, in the mauve-lemon light of the shortening dusk of the poet's "odd uneven time," everything changed—forever for me.

A happy hazard is how Mamie took Joe's timely materializations, whereas it well consternated her counterpart, the *fear an tí*. The "man of the house," that being Mikey, viewed it more than mere happenstance, and once umbrageously so noted, and right in the middle, it was, of the Faheys' measuring out their lives with tea bags.

And didn't "his nibs"—Mamie's appellation— thereafter tote along his own pekoe, a single Lipton, which, with a shade of cabotinage, he would produce— presto! from the pocket of his threadbare heather grey cardigan, invariably kindling from Mamie something of the bright kind, "Sure that's somethin' dat de auld redhead 'imself might do!" She meant, of course, Arthur Godfrey, the ukulele shredding, freckle-faced redhead with the contagious chuckle who liked ribbing sponsors of his wildly popular morning radio show "Arthur Godfrey Time." To wit, of the jingoistic Holy Ghost of salesmen, a folksy "bare-ass-prin" for, y'know, Bayer Aspirin. ("Imagine 'imself sayin' a tin' loike dat on de wireless. What gran' *blas* on 'is tongue!") Or of his "soggy mess" for a tea bag

after brewing—Lipton, o’ course, whose “brisk flavor” “God” himself vouchsafed. (“Imagine, can yer? whaaat de Lipton people are tinkin?”)

Mamie idolized Godfrey as much as the “Old Redhead” did Curtis “Bombs Away” Lemay, the general with the perpetually airborne B-52s pregnant with nukes he lusted to drop on China, and later on Cuba and North Vietnam. But by then—y’know, ’bout when Sterling Hayden chillingly portrayed the cigar-chomping head of SAC in *Dr. Strangelove?*— well, they were long in the clay— Joe, Mamie, Mikey. But back then, topside this earth, they were playin’ their roles, as all of us always, which meant, for his part, Mikey would receive Joe’s sibilant ripostes under a beetling frown and long, sheep-like face, as he cut into a Dugan’s coffeecake. Mikey—

(The Faheys, in passing, bought no baked goods—cupcakes, crumb cakes, French crullers— none, other than Dugan’s, delivered. And Sheffield milk, in a half pint bottle with cream on top, and eggs from a man with a head like—well, it was, truly, amazingly, like a large, brown egg lying on its side, drawing vigorously— if y’can imagine such an egg— on a mahogany meerschaum calabash pipe clamped between its teeth while it spoke, short and clipped, making the thin cerise scar on its khaki jowl all aquiver. Such a Seuss-like egg! . . . I’ve often

wondered where the egg man got that scar. I have. Oh well, worse could be wondered of a man—say, of our present President Numpty Postiche, for instance.)

— Anyway, Mikey, I was about to say, would neither smile nor twitch during his preternatural dismembering of the nutty ring lest it encourage Joe. Only the suggestion of a sneer would he allow, shot sideward from the corners of the mouth of a pallbearer's face. Mamie, on her side, would, naturally, slip me like a thermometer a stormy look lest I dare inquire of "such things," one of many unspecified "suches," which, rather like fate, I best not meddle with inquisitively. But of those another time. "It al' depends," to borrow Mamie's patented conversation plugger, which she remonstrated with anyone coopting.

His kyphosis aside no one knew much about JK, as we kids called him, save Joe lived near 8th and Garden in a room above McTeague's dental parlors, was partial to cardigans, and, of course, had an uncanny sense of timing. And since JK was one of those dry, blessed souls who live and die in Epicurean anonymity, stirring no more curiosity in others than does a dog's upraised leg against a mid-block johnny pump, he would occupy no place in my troubled heart's mind but for that late August evening, when, in the mauve and violet light of the slowly ebbing day, with the air redolent of rich roasting coffee beans wafting from the plant along the

waterfront from 10th to 12th,— Maxwell House, that being, the coffee that Katrin and Lars, of Mamie’s favorite program “I Remember Mama,” imbibed in “to the very last drop,”— this pousy, undersized, lamentable ruin of a man with lank, pomatumed hair limped down Garden toward 9th with—well, “sylphlike” comes to mind; and, lo these many years, “cleanly stenciled,” of brow,” and “firmly moulded,” of lips; . . . not to say, of respiration, “inflection.” But of all, “lime green.” Yes, of all, that has stuck with me, that thigh-high gossamer dress, lime green it was— not that, beyond that, do not, certainly, “right elbow,” his, and “hand tucked,” hers, “snugly,” stick. Certainly. And, oh yes, sandals, hers, forest-green patent leather; and, of course, that thick-heeled black boot of his, just like today’s fashion rage—can you imagine?— Funtasma Monster or Demonica’s cutting-edge aesthetic Men’s Stack 201 Vegan?. . . and, naturally, the excited motion of his hump-stretched sweater fading into the glaucous gloaming under a waxing gibbous moon. That.

Thus my answer to the question if ever asked: What stokes your surges of loneliness? That does, in straggling elfin memory, and the dialogue that ensued.

First, Joe Kelly, —aka “his nibs,” “JK,” “hunchback”—by any other name our worthy, the pale little man with scraggy legs speaks, as he and his arresting, sandy-

haired belle pass the rout of striplings idling on the eight-step stoop of the Fahey brownstone on this night of *draíocht*, of enchantment.

“Gents,” he goes crisply in the close warm air.

Sorry, but, “That’s all folks!” as Porky would put it.

I mean, of course, that’s all he utters, . . . all for me he *has* to utter, evenly, unhurriedly, forever, for as long as I dree my weird with tense melancholy. Out the corner of his pocket mouth it was, is, by way of heavy, high-handed greeting to brush from the brood’s vaporous minds the deathwatch that has drawn them like crepuscular birds in search of carrion to the russet roost that is 837 Garden, between 8th and 9th.

Then more dialogue, this from the preceding urchins and lads, bathed, be they, in the soothing ovated light of a cast iron lamppost, some playing stoop ball, others idling on fissured brownstone steps, still, mind you, blocks away the New World’s version of the “The Old Rose Tree.”

“D’ja see that?” from one of the assemblage, in hushed, nearly reverential tones; then from a second, as of all imponderables, another question: “What *was*

that?” “Wh-wh-wow!” a third stutters, as the improbable pair fades into the shades of evening.

Then from Mamie, who, “sudden as conscience,” appears with, as her wont, broom in hand: “Waaat ye birds chirpin' aboyt?”

“JK just went by.”

“Well stop de presses, why don't yer?” The stick, like a self-propelled hurley, rakes the sidewalk fronting the stoop.

“With a girl” is muttered.

Ah, but doesn't that prick up the *bean an ti's* ears and still her matronly sweeping. “A gearl?” she goes, then, “Waaat da yer mean—‘a gearl’?”

Further fleshing out the surges of loneliness, the following feverish chattering:

“He was with a girl,” then, “A *woman* she was,” then, “A *young* woman.” Then a hail from the gibbering busy faces:

“Half his age!”

“At least!”

“A blonde.”

“And good lookin'!”

“A knockout!”

“Like Judy Garland!”

“Judy Garland’s a redhead!” That from a derisive Jimmy Doyle,
 “Ginger Rogers is watcha mean.”

Face bent to walk, Mamie lets the youths twitter on in awe-stricken whispers before sedulous curiosity jerks her head upward. “An’ ye say dey were—?”

“Hand in elbow,” Jimmy Doyle bravely breaks in.

“Ah, in ’s boney elbow, wus it,” she goes, “er podgy ’an’?”

A testy Mamie leaves the nonplussed boys to their pubertal susurrus and, with an attentive poise of her cernuous head, leans forward and braces her chin atop her hands, which rest on the knob of the thick broom. Then she casts, she does, albeit, mind you, in clouded memory, a yellowish green eye at Luigi’s across the street, where the eponymous, lugubrious proprietor of the step-down candy store where *the fear an tí* sends me on Saturday nights to buy his Gillette Blue Blades, two for a dime, sits atop the landing, right arm slung idly across shiny black rail, bald head making repeated bobbing movements like a nodder or wobbler, only sadly, solemnly. There is about his mild and thoughtful appearance a —what? an eremite, you could say, or, certainly, the mien of a kindly jinn.

Then, on a sudden, Mamie whips her head backward and, very much the hawkshaw, snaps, “‘S in ’ers?”

“Hers in his,” comes a winged response.

“Ye mean she wus s’portin’ ’imself loike”—then rapidly— “a niece? a nurse? a friend of the family?”

“Not exactly,” comes a voice from the upper steps.

“‘Not exactly?’” returns an envenomed Mamie before rescuing the the kinder, gentler *bean n tí*: “Whaddya mean, lad, ‘not exactly?’” then clarifying, “She was either s’portin’ ’imself or not s’portin’ ’imself—so which would it be bein’?”

“Well, it all depends,” temporizes the voice.

“‘It al’ depends!’” Mamie thunders, the broom turned lightning bolt in the hand an angry god.

“Well, it was more *cozy* like,” comes an adenoidal reply that gathers a quick consensus, before a croaking, “Yeah, they were real chummy,” then a resounding chorus of, “Yeah, *real* chummy!”

There follow diapasons of sniggering that vie in the violet light with the beckoning calliopean chime of “Turkey in the Straw.”

It is, of course, one of Henry Burt, Jr's, pristine white ice cream trucks heralding the trailing Vincenzo's pushcart of Italian ices, the lads' favorite. They stir, do they, the chattering flock, to the corner of Garden and 9th, leaving Mamie to mutter into her broom handle: "Waaat fetchin' young thing 'alf ' 'is age wud Joe Kelly be p'radin' down Garden Street loike Fred Astaire in de Easter Parade? Dat's de quesshun."

I, for my part, was pondering a different question, not about Easter Sunday, but a deep, moral one: whether the lady in lime was dressed immodestly or merely somewhat so. Or, more exactly, as I resurrect memory: how to know? That was it, the question that occupied me then, the deepest—what? epistemological question actually, that, I nakedly admit, has ever occupied me, the one on which it all depends. How to say what is so?

I'd recently learned, y'see, in catechism class it was, from Sister Sylvia, that immodest dress could be an "occasion of sin," and I was earnestly trying to sort out the modest from the not. . . .

Well, "immodest," I was in fine inclined to say, of the lady in lime; dressed immodestly she was, judging from the older boys' reactions. The lady in lime was,

in brief, an occasion of sin, I decided, to the acerose jingle-jangle of achromatic minstrelsy.

“Here,” Mamie goes fast, before memory collapses her words like a closeout wave,— fishing, she does, a pocketful of change out of her wavy checker fully lined seed sack apron with side pocket, her second favorite after the pinafore with tiny red and white checks,— then, abstractedly, her voice dropped to a soft murmur, “get yerself a poke.”

The coins fall through unextended, uneager hands and tinkle at sneakered feet like a sanctus bell, as Mikey emerges from the basement, his face under rich weathering, his eyes full of timorous vigilance. With great gravity he shuffles up the three greige concrete steps to the sidewalk, holding like a coin or wafer or plucked butterfly between thumb and forefinger of right hand a lighted Chesterfield, which, at the Old Redhead’s urging, he used to buy by the carton, or I did for him at Luigi’s.

The ascent braved, Mikey rests left hand over heart and pulls deeply on the butt. Then, in a husky whisper, one so thick and solemn as to freeze me still in any since then opalescent cloud-breaching dusked light, he intones, “De Babe is gone.”

“Well, waaat do ye nu?” Mamie responds.

“Not dat it wasn’t expected, I’ll grant yer dat.”

Rings of smoke frame his ruddy face, that looks to—what? the “rusted spring of memory,” is it?— a Rembrandt self-portrait, *circa* 1659, with flat cap for beret.

“But still,” he broods, “whaen it cums, ’tis a brutal tin’... a brutal tin.”

From Mamie, lost in thought, quietly, as if to herself, “Who wud ’av tart it— such a tin?”

And, antiphonally, from Mikey, “’Tis been al’ over de bars for weeks.”

Then goes Mamie, in a flat low voice and a slight rise of color, “’is nibs ’as got ’imself a lady friend,” adding, “the bloody popinjay,—’e’s got ’imself a real *dathúil*,” and then, from resolute, compressed lips, the afterthought, “accordin’ ter de lads.”

Thin lines of smoke stream from Mikey’s nostrils like incense from a censor as he boulders the eight stoop steps to the tinted upper landing, where, breathing hard, mouth cupped with deep-veined, shaking hands, his eyes shuttered and brows brooding, the thick and squat *soi-disant* town crier makes it known to all of Garden Street that the Sultan of Swat has—well,

“‘E’s gone— de Babe’s gone!” and again the same, and the same again.

There, that's it, in memory's camera obscura. Except, of course, for the lads, holding yellow ices like votives, advancing in the dying light to the Faheys' eight-step stoop,... and, of course, me. All the while, y'see, I'd remained transfixed by an afterimage whose spell the jingle jangle, the clink and clatter, the natter of the curious and the bothered, all of it, were powerless to lift.

I regretted the passing of the Colossus of Clout—well, the hour of his passing, for had the great Bambino hung on for but thirty minutes longer, I would have won the lottery, which by then had swelled to \$31.25—over three hundred dollars today. As by rule the winner had to produce the winning chit within twenty-four hours or forfeit his winnings to “the house,” that being Mikey, for organizing, y'see, the night's entertainment, which he did regularly for all sporting events, and for which he'd made a suspension, or an extension, or a pretension, for the minute of the hour that the Babe, “born astride a grave,” as he put what I didn't get, would meet his fate.

That night Mamie issued no warning. She didn't have to. Just we three took our cake-an'-tay.

Later, in bed, staring stonily at the bronze single bar bulb overhead, I felt guilty about regretting the Babe's—well, y'know, losing out on the lottery. I was sure such disrespect was some kind of sin, a shallow one, I hoped, venial so-called. But then, with wildly beating heart and, even now, the nervous pleasure of excited feelings,— *sceitimíní*, as the Irish say,— I doubted not that I, for the first time in my young life, had drifted into mortal waters.

The next evening, as the solid oak duel chime mantel clock struck seven, JK appeared—and presto! produced from the pocket of his threadbare heather grey cardigan the winning chit, which he redeemed, but didn't stay or ever came again for cake-an'-tay.

Mikey was furious, Mamie, well, curious. I—I was, am,—well, it all depends—I mean, y'know, on the deformed footfalls that happen to echo in the pink wine of caverned memory amid the deadly horrors of unavailing regret, with no reason no rhyme, only an everlasting chromatic photogene, of an allicient lady in lime. . . .
Y'know what I mean?

end

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I hold what is, I suppose, the uncommon view that all fiction is memoir and all memoir is fiction. Which means that all my stories contain fictive and nonfictive elements. Thus, with one singular exception very character in 'The Night the Babe Died' ...I knew while growing up. So, as well—at times I think even more intimately, given their fixtures in memory's hiding places—the Fahey's eight step brownstone stoop, the lamppost, Luigi's candy store, the lemon ice cart, and perhaps most of all, the August light of that night the Babe died. Such is the stuff that the narrator's Fisher King's wound so to say, is made of, a wound that is the beginning of consciousness, away from the innocent perfection of childhood's unconsciousness. And like consciousness itself, his wound—symbolically sexualized in the Lady in Lime—will never close till 'the doom of death fold him round.'

Some of my literary heroes...is 'worship' to strong?...include Edith Wharton for 'Soul is more bruisable than flesh.' (The Reckoning). Virginia Woolf for 'The soul must brave itself to endure.' (Mrs. Dalloway) or 'that little piece of sky that sleeps beside the moon.' (To the Lighthouse). Henry James, of course, 'The Path of Duty'... 'I am dejected. I am bored. I am blue.' Ford Maddox Ford for his inimitable opening, 'This is the saddest story I have ever heard.' Gabriel Garcia Marquez...'It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love'. Raymond Carver, I mean, how can you not be smitten with a writer who begins a story, 'A man without hands came to the door to sell me a photograph of my house. Except for the chrome hooks, he was an ordinary looking man of fifty or so.'? (Viewfinder). Endings? Well, for me, hands down, the final paragraph of Joyce's 'The Dead', which, had he penned nothing else would grant him literary immortality.

Ah, and the poets...Yeats for rhythm, for cadence, for rhyme ('When You are Old'). Burnside for coining my motto as a story teller, 'Nothing I know matters more than what never happened.' ('Hearsay'). And, for life achievement, Lawrence Durrell for The Alexandria Quartet, the best for me of the last century, and from which I now paraphrase Pursewarden: 'I do not write for those who will not read what I have written more than once....(Hmm, come to think of it that may explain all the rejections.)

BIO:

After retiring from a career teaching philosophy, Vincent Barry returned to his first love, fiction. His stories have appeared in numerous publications in the U.S. and abroad including The Saint Anne's Review, The Bitchin' Kitsch, The Broken City, The Fem, Dual Coast, The Fiction Pool, Subtle Fiction, Fiction Week Literary Journal, Ariel Chart, Star 82 Review, Children, Churches, and Daddies, The Blotter Magazine, Ceruove, Caveat Lector, Abstract: Contemporary Expressions and Kairos. Barry lives with his wife and daughters in Santa Barbara, California.

The History of Golf in America in 1986

by Todd Sentell

WHY WE LIKE IT: ‘

The non-committal voice of the ‘raconteur’ is the perfect foil to the bawdy shenanigans going on in this uproariously hilarious flash. There’s lots of good writing here but we especially love: ‘All of a sudden the woman started going at it as if her hand were covered with killer bees.’ Read it and weep (with laughter). Then laugh some more.

Little Jeremy Robideaux, twelve years old, an enthusiastic junior golfer who lives in Biloxi, Mississippi, was given an assignment by his social studies teacher to write about the history of something he loved and understood.

Jeremy loved golf a lot. His mother didn’t really play golf ... she just took a lot of private golf lessons. The one-on-one kind. Just her and the club pro. She also enjoyed getting massages at their country club quite a bit. Jeremy’s uncles played golf and even one of his sisters played golf until she broke both of her arms a couple of weeks ago. Jeremy’s dad used to play golf but he quit because he travels a lot now.

For reference material, Jeremy had only the “G” volume of his very own set of World Books. Through his research, Jeremy discovered there was a “colonial” period of golf in America but the encyclopedia didn’t say a whole lot else about it. This really intrigued Jeremy, and wanting his report to be thorough, of course, Jeremy dialed up the head pro of the club where he played and where his parents were members, Pelican Landing Country Club. Jeremy’s mother knew the pro’s home phone number by heart and she recited it to Jeremy in sort of a sultry, sing-songy voice.

The head pro’s name was Vern Johnson and he was twenty-nine years old and a really nice guy who had won an event a few years ago in Pensacola. Amazingly, for a club professional, Vern was also fairly well known as having a good historical knowledge of the game. Jeremy’s mother had urged him to see if Mr. Johnson knew anything about this colonial period as this would be a good opportunity to impress his

teacher, Mrs. Nix, by interviewing an “authority figure.” Jeremy’s mother said that Mr. Johnson knew quite a bit about a lot of stuff. As a couple, Jeremy’s parents were hugely involved in their son’s academic and golf growth, although they would have been nonetheless pleased if he excelled at badminton.

The phone rang a bunch of times before Vern finally picked up. He sounded a little out of breath, so Jeremy asked him right away about the colonial thing. Vern said, “Oh, yeah. There was some course near Charleston, South Carolina. Okay?”

Jeremy had his fresh legal pad all ready and his pencil was sharp. “When, exactly?”

“Late seventeen hundreds. Oh, Jesus.”

“Good ... goood,” Jeremy said as he scribbled like the dickens. “Thank you Mr. Johnson.”

Jeremy continued, “Mr. Johnson, can you tell me anything more? I really do appreciate your time, sir.”

“Uh, well, actually, in seventeen-ninety-six there were a couple of clubs down there and one near Savannah and then they just disappeared.” The woman squeezed it tightly and put her nose in Vern’s left ear and let out just a little breeze. She dug her long red fingernails in the thing ever so slightly. Vern liked that very much. “Well that’s about all I know about the history of golf in America,” Vern said quickly. “Okay, Jeremy? Good God I’ll call you back la—”

“What? Fire? Hurricane?” Jeremy was ready to write again. He thought this was what a reporter must feel like.

“Nuh uh, just disbanded. Social climate. Bad gnats. Goddamn fucking shit like that. O-kay? Is that goddamn fucking ... you know ... *enough?* Jee-zus.”

The woman mouthed, “I’m leaving.” She stopped her hand, but held her grip.

Jeremy ignored Mr. Johnson’s profanity as he was used to him cursing like that at kids during junior clinics. “That’s exactly what I need, Mr. Johnson,” Jeremy said brightly. “Tell me some more. Really, I appreciate it.”

But there was a long pause while Vern forced her hand back in action. She wouldn’t do it at first. Vern helped her. Then Vern breathed heavily, “No, Jere-mee. I got a wo-man over here. We’re doing something ... very important.”

Jeremy pressed the phone to his ear to see if he could determine what Mr. Johnson and the woman were doing that was so important.

All of a sudden the woman started going at it as if her hand were covered with killer bees.

“OH ... SWEET JEEEE-SUS!”

“Mr. Johnson!” Jeremy shouted. “Are you oh-*kay?*?”

“I’m sitting here,” Vern said slowly, “getting ... oh, Jesus ... my chicken spanked.”

Jeremy literally looked at the phone in his hand. Chicken spanked? What? Mr. Johnson’s got a pet chicken? Jeremy was extremely confused.

Jeremy's mother was in the kitchen cooking dinner. And right before she chopped the head off of a fish she called out, "How's it going in there, little golf scholar?"

The moment Jeremy put the phone back to his ear he heard Vern drop his phone, but Vern didn't turn his phone off before he did.

And just an instant later, and for a good five minutes or so, Jeremy had the distinct pleasure of listening to the sounds of Vern's chicken get spanked and was also privileged enough to hear the type of conversation extremely particular to when a woman spanks a guy like Vern's chicken. And as intellectual and generally informed of modern times as Jeremy was, even at twelve years old, he truly felt at that moment in his existence on the earth that there was so very much left to do and so very much left to learn.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

For fifteen years in the private golf business, I've been surrounded by club members and club staff who are truly ootsie-tootsie and a whole lot of them who aren't ootsie-tootsie at all but act ootsie-tootsie. I'm plum worn out. So one day I recently thought I'd write a golf-related story that exposed some of the truth about: some folks who work at nice private clubs are human, too. Anyhow, I'm not 'Vern Johnson' but the ol' golf pro is real and a friend of mine. And what's real and revered to me, as a writer, are the deep literary influences of people I've met, and they are Cormac McCarthy, J. D. Salinger, John Updike, Charles Bukowski and Flannery O'Connor. Who says golf is boring with those folks on your writing shoulder?

BIO:

Atlanta native and former schoolteacher, Todd Sentell, is the author of the lunatic adventure *Toonamint of Champions* (2007/Kunati Books) nominated for the 2008 Thurber Award for American Humor. He's the first Georgia native in the salacious history of world literature to publish a sports-related novel, unless *Deliverance* is really about canoeing. He's also the author of the hilarious teaching memoir *Can't Wait to Get There. Can't Wait to Leave.* (2014/Stairway Press). Todd is also a two time award winner for magazine feature writing from the Magazine Association of the Southeast.

I Am a Slave to Anemones

by Joseph Conrad Payne

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Cormac McCarthy meets the 'Creature from the Black Lagoon' in this strangely beautiful obsessive outsider tale of a modern-day Robinson Crusoe. There's a creepy retro pulp fiction quality at work here that draws the reader in and the author's quaint, unselfconscious and curiously lyrical prose keeps us interested until the end. We think it's magic. Click. Click. Click.

The crabs, look at them go—scuttle, scuttle—their little legs dancing over the sand. One of them is slower than the others. He's tinted green and red, black little beads at the end of stalks, but his big claw is too big. It's weighing him down, and he struggles, digging his sharp little legs into the sand in an effort to keep up.

A rock comes down on him, big and round and thick—like a coconut. He's gone, dead, split open like a squashed melon. His friends scurry away, little red and green pinpricks on the island beach.

Bort, shirtless and tanned, picks up the crab by its overbig claw, looks at it proudly: breakfast.

It's a good way to start his morning, killing crabs. Crabs are fast, so he has to be faster. Miss and you go hungry. Or—worse—they get angry, because crabs don't like being eaten, and they move towards you—scuttle, scuttle—and climb up your legs and arms and naked torso, crawl up your back and the nape of your neck and: snip, snip, snip.

Bort knows this. Bort also knows that there are other sources of food on the island, like passion fruit and figs and pears and coconuts, but he chooses crabs for breakfast. Because they are so fast; he has to be faster. It keeps him alert, keeps him active, keeps him on his little brown toes. He's always attentive: sharp, like a pointed stick.

He has to be sharp for the anemones.

Bort takes his meal-to-be back to his home. It's a little hut, sitting in a circle of palm trees, only a short walk away from the water. The sun drips through the leafy fronds as he goes to work on the crab: ripping, cracking, tearing. Take off the shell, pull out the legs. Use the sharp rock to cut away the stalk eyes. The stalk eyes stare at him just the same, even in death.

It's a good meal. Bort cooks the crab meat over a fire of fronds, a burning of friends. Bort loves the palm trees: they're beautiful, they provide him with coconuts and shade from the sun, and they provide him the means to make a humble shelter.

Good things, palm trees, although there's markedly fewer of them now.

He's been forced to cut them down, because of the anemones. Bort washes down the crab with the milk of a coconut. He places the empty coconut cup on a table he fashioned: another gift from his friends whose lives he must now so regretfully take. He strolls back to the beach. In the distance, he can see a mass of red and green, crabs discussing the death of one of their own. They see him, but they do not move. They stare at him menacingly from the other end of the beach.

They will do nothing, and Bort knows this. He is not worried about the crabs, for death always scares them to their crustacean core, shakes them so much that they don't know what to do—they can't understand. Bort instead stares at the waters of the ocean, crystalline and aggressively blue, gently lapping at the shore like the tongue of a lazy lover. Therein lies a much more pressing threat than the crabs: the anemones.

Bort can see them clearly. They are there, just below the ocean waves, clinging to the jagged reefs which crudely—and cruelly—jut into the quickly evaporating island. The anemones wave at him menacingly, thousands upon thousands of wriggling arms swaying to the beat of an underwater wind. They know he is there, safe on the dry sand, and they hate him for it. They know, though, that he will not be safe forever, not in his

current state. For every day, they eat up the island, and although it is large and pear-shaped, the anemones grow closer and closer: inch by inch, sucking the island in until it is a sandy speck in the sea.

The anemones are passing something along, up from the depths of their colossal, bottomless reef. A vibrant blue and green anemone hands the object to a prominent red and white anemone—an arrogant and boisterous fellow, flamboyant, a true patriot—who holds it up with his rippling ghost arms for Bort to see, pushing it against the weight of the water, bubbles detaching from it, breaking apart in a dramatic flourish:

It's a stick. A pointed stick.

Bort grimaces. They are taunting him. The stick they are holding is the same stick that Bort drove into the sand the night before as a means of measuring the progress of the anemones, after gauging their bites from the pear. It was his favorite stick, and he had often used it to spear the soft underbellies of crabs—and now the anemones have it. They hold it up to say to him: look, we have your stick, and you are not so sharp, are you? And look how much land we have taken from you, look how much we dragged down into the deep blue. Soon it will be you.

The anemone sucks up the stick, drawing it into its waving arms like a clownfish. It curls into itself, becoming a ribbed

ball, and then splays itself, arms wide and flat, and the stick shoots soars out in a magnificent, slow-motion surge of bubbles, floating away into the abyss of the ocean. The ocean quivers with a violent swell as the anemones cheer, a mass of writhing arms.

Bort looks away in disgust. He looks back at the crabs across the beach who are still staring at him, angrily, stupidly.

#

Bort is the owner of a large, wooden platform that he constructed from palm tree. It sits in the center of the ever-shrinking island atop five big, flat boulders that just happened to be there, seemingly for the purposes of supporting Bort's platform. The platform is constructed from palm trees.

Its construction is crude: Bort is hardly an architect. It is unstable, although Bort seeks to remedy this by placing the trunks of the friendly palms below the platform, with the boulders, wedging them in there like they were fish trying to wriggle through cracks.

Bort hates walking on the platform, something he was forced to build because of incipient rise of the anemones. His hardened feet pad on the dry palm floor. They keep coming, the anemones—undaunted, no respect for anything, not a care for a single speck of sand. His hope is that the platform will keep him safe

as the anemones, day after day, eat up the island; that it will keep him safe from their dragging him down into the great below.

They took his wife and son in this way. Bort did not see it happen. His wife and son had been lying on the beach that night, counting the stars, wondering if the sky was bigger than the ocean. They had fallen into a beautiful and innocent sleep there. None of them knew about the anemones then. This was before they had come; when their only preoccupation was the mood of the ocean.

His wife and son were gone now, somewhere down in the ocean, dancing to the song of the anemones. Bort did not know if they alive or dead. The anemones didn't tell him, because the anemones told no secrets. But they could laugh. The ocean sounded different the day after they dragged his family down, the vibrations of jubilant rubbery arms thrumming a monotonous paean that bounced off the waves and reverberated through the trees with echoing taunts.

Bort did not want to know if his family were alive or dead. Not after that. Instead, he went into a frenzy, cutting down palms, his old friends, with a makeshift axe, while the memory of his family urged him on: go Bort, go; work for us, sweat for us, bleed for us, just as you did in the beginning, just as you did when you brought us to the island, wide and promising paradise; just as you did when you saved us from the submersion

of the world, saved us from floating away endlessly on the salt ocean.

He had to build the platform to keep himself aloft. It was either that, or take it off the rocks, float it into the ocean and search for land again. But most of the land was gone, now, swallowed up first by the ocean and now the anemones. Besides, the island was now his home and what a grand victory it would be if he conquered the anemones, built his own island that they couldn't siege but were forced to prop up with their thousands and thousands of arms.

They weren't making it easy for him, though. They ate large chunks of the island at a time—unpredictably—taking away large copses of balmy palmed areas, taking away heavy portions of crabbed havens.

It's why the crabs hated him. They were here first. It was their home and they blamed him for the anemones biting into their island, into the little paradise-that-once-was. They had conspired to kill him one night, when he was weak and distraught from the loss of his family. He had worked through the night and collapsed from exhaustion, banging his head against a palm and slumping into a deadened sleep. The crabs came and swarmed around him and: snip, snip, snip—they climbed, they jabbed, they cut and they stabbed. Bort had awoken in a fright—screaming and in great pain—as he ripped the crabs off him, beat them against

trees, smashed them with his axe. He killed three of them before they scuttled away.

The crabs feared death more than anything else.

Bort had been hunting them ever since that incident, and it was then he discovered the merits of the hunt and eating their meat. It electrified him, gave him the energy to defy the will of the anemones—or to try to. It was a difficult task. The loss of his stick today was a serious blow: they had taken more land than he anticipated. The north end of the island—the tip of the pear—must be nearly gone now. They were growing, and time was running out.

Bort paces back and forth on his platform. The more he ponders it, the more he realizes the platform won't suffice. He has spent hours upon hours, days upon days, looking for a better way to support it, to try to make it stable and even, determinedly shoving dismembered palms into crevices, nooks, and crannies. It is a waste of time. Wouldn't the anemones eventually take over the platform for a raft? Bort trembles at the thought. He dreads being pulled back to float endlessly upon the ocean blue, not a strip of land, not a speck of hope, not a memory in sight.

It is crucial that he keep the island alive, for the sake of what was lost.

But he knows the platform will not suffice. He needs a new solution, and fast. The anemones are now the dictators of time, and they are becoming less generous with it by the day. Bort frowns at the sand. He sits for some time, lost in thought.

Crabs, look—a crowd of them, thick and tiny, moving towards his platform, moving towards the rocks in search of shade. Bort does not mind, because these crabs are not green and red, they are blue.; They are not his enemies, and Bort does not hunt them. And, oh, these blue crabs are quite the little cards. They run along the sand—click, click, click—their tiny pincers wagging, their eyes bulging. They dance over hollow coconuts, a pleasant drum; they skirt over fallen palms, a lovely rustle; and they tap along: click, click, click—always having a grand old time, them, those merry blue crabs.

Blue: more like the sky, not like the ocean.

Click, click, click—

In Bort's brain: he does not need a platform, he needs a tower; he needs to reach the sky, where the ocean can't touch, where the anemones cannot be—and there, he will be able to find out if the sky is bigger than the ocean.

#

Bort sets to work immediately.

Bort is not an architect.

His first tower fails miserably, barely taller than a palm tree before it collapses on the rickety platform, trunks rolling into trunks, splints and supports scattering. It had taken Bort five days to construct. He had decided to build it on his platform, so that all that work might not go to waste. He had to punch holes in it with an axe to get the trunks to stand upright. But that was a foolish decision. Now there is no chance that the platform will float.

Bort goes to bed angry. In the morning, the anemones are closer, and their hymn echoes over the waves: they know that he has failed, they know that he is losing time to them. They are pleased, because he bends to them, he fails because of them.

Bort's next tower is shaped like a tepee, but after six days, it too fails. The anemones are dangerously close to his hut now, dangerously close to that little circle of leafy palms and past pleasures. They will not move any closer for some time—because now they want to watch Bort, now they want to make him suffer: he has eluded them too long.

Bort smashes another crab the next morning. He remains zealous. The other crabs, a red and green mass, watch from a distance as he dismembers their slain fellow in front of him. They are mad, they are mean, and they are scared.

Bort spends the next week building a more or less successful structure. He gets a solid foundation going, stacking

trunk on top of trunk to form a square base. Little rivets, carved with a sharp stone, hold the trunks in place. It is slow work, and in the meantime by now the anemones have circled all around the island, have bitten off massive chunks of the pear from the south and west, the east and the north—but Bort has made progress, and he is hopeful. If he can just get the base to stay put, this tower might be successful—it might be the one. But he has to figure out how to nail it to the platform. Meanwhile, the anemones eat up the den of the red and green crabs who watched their fellow be dismembered by Bort on the beach.

Bort does not realize these crabs are dead until the eighth morning of the construction. He stalks the wet, sandy beaches, searching for crabs, until he sees an anemone—a red and white one, a vain fellow—holding up the stick Bort drove into the sand the night before. The anemone shouts: those crabs are gone! Then he swallows the stick up and spits it back out, sending to the depths with raucous applause of his fellows.

Bort could survive by eating fruit, but he is stubborn. He travels to another beach, where the red and the blue crabs live together in harmony. The blue crabs are dancing, flirting, skirting, moving: click, click, click—don't kill them, Bort, show some compassion, show some mercy.

Bort hurls a rock and crushes two crabs at once—a first for him, a new record. The panicking crabs flee as he retrieves his kills and moves back to his hut, except for one blue crab, who watches him go with sad, bulging eyes, and—click, click, click—pities Bort.

Bort is glad when he eats the crabs. He comes up with an idea for holding his tower down: he will drive a trunk through each corner of the square, nailing it to the platform. He spends the rest of the day preparing the trunks, carefully cutting holes in the four corners of his tower. He goes to bed satisfied, confident he will beat the anemones, that they will hold his tower for him after they have eaten the island.

There is a terrible storm that night. Mighty waves swell about the island, threatening Bort in his hut in the circle of palms. But he remains untouched by the torrent. The anemones revel in the storm, emboldened by it, taking more and more of the island in the rave of the waves. Miraculously, Bort's platform weathers the lashing torrent—but his tower succumbs to the storm. It was not nailed down to the platform. It is scattered everywhere, thrown from its precarious perch into the ever-growing reefs of the anemones.

Bort is horrified when he sees realizes this in the morning. He frantically searches for his lost trunks—because every friendly palm he fells in the name of love is vital—and

then he finds them, in the reefs of the anemones. He watches them push the heavy palms down into the recesses of the ocean. They are angry because the trunks have hurt some of them, killed others. There's one—red and white, flamboyant, an imperious fellow—who has been crushed flat, a few of his arms detached, lazily drifting halo-like around his corpse. With one final heave, the anemones shove the last of the palms into the engulfing blue, and resolve to redouble their efforts.

This setback has cost three red and green crabs their lives. They try to fight back, having been afraid that Bort would return with his crude and murderous tools. They fail, as always, driven as they are by fear. They are thrown with fury by Bort, who smashes and stabs them out of his own growing fear. They hurry away—scuttle, scuttle—and watch, horrified, as Bort tears their slain friends to pieces. The blue crabs start to advance, move closer to him—click, click, click—but Bort waves a pointed stick at them, and they reluctantly retreat, scrabbling over the sand, spiked eyes bulging. They leave Bort to his silent, lonely misery.

Bort begins to work like a madman, his mind only on the tower he must rebuild. The anemones attack the island with a renewed, frightening intent. There is a new reason behind their purpose: the death of the patriotic red and white anemone—the hero, who died a martyr. They are determined to destroy Bort; to

take away his palms trees, those with whom he was once friendly; to take away the crabs he feeds on; to take away the crabs he tolerates; to take away the fruit and the grass and the sand.

Bort chops, hacks, saws. Creates and destroys. He smashes crabs, rips them open, spears them through their soft underbellies, throws their little stalk eyes into the ocean. Every day, he thrusts a pointed stick into the sand, stained with the blood of crabs—let the anemones take it. The anemones do, and they break the stick into pieces, split it amongst their many, multi-colored arms, and then swallow the little bits and spit them out, a constant taunt, a rallying cry saying: remember, remember the one who used to do this. They are energetic. There are so many of them now. Their hymn becomes perpetual, never-ending, an underwater echo reverberating across the island, bouncing back off the waves. It reminds Bort of his family, of his wife and son, of those who he has lost, of all he has lost, and they drive him through each failed endeavor. They are calling to him from the depths of the ocean, the song of the anemones: go, Bort, do it for us, you diligent fellow, you dutiful man—over and over and over again: for us, for us, for us.

Time is measured only by successes and failures, in what is taken and what is created, but never in what is given. The island is shrinking, shrinking, shrinking, becoming the dot that

the anemones promised it would become, and soon it will be no more.

#

The crabs, look at them go, there are so few of them now—click, click, click—their tiny pincers wagging, their eyes bulging. And oh, in the midst of them, a few of them scurry, red and green—scuttle, scuttle—with the crowd of blue.

But now Bort is too exhausted to care. He sits on the platform he hates, his last refuge. The sun is sinking. His latest tower is near completion, tall and rickety—but not tall enough: not tall enough to save him, not stable enough to prop up his misguided ambition. The island is disintegrating into nothingness, the end is nearing. There is so little of the island left. His hut in the circle of palm trees had long since sunk into the ocean. Every day, the anemones take more land away from him. They had faith, and they had numbers, and the faithful ate away at his island. The faithful had consumed everything: they ate away at his home, they ate away at the not-so-friendly-anymore palm trees, they ate away at his enemies the crabs, they ate away his soul. He could do nothing, he could never accomplish what he set out to do. He had done nothing since the anemones were here. It was over. He was defeated—Bort: the slave of anemones.

Click, click, click.

The crabs are at his platform. Bort ignores them.

Click, click, click.

Scuttle, scuttle.

Bulging eyes, stalk eyes; red and green mixed with innocuous sky blue; big claws, little claws; sharp legs and skinny legs; flat shells and round shells.

One by one, the red and green crabs begin to scurry away.

One by one, the blue crabs begin to scabble away.

The last in the line remains—a blue crab, eyes bulging, pincers beckoning—and he clicks his claws—click, click, click: he wants Bort to follow him.

Bort would rather be left to die alone.

But the crab will not hear of this. Click, click, click: follow me, Bort, come, there is something you must see.

Bort feels he cannot refuse. What does it matter anyway? He climbs down from his platform and follows the crab. They move along a small, narrow stream—a fissure in the island, crammed with anemones. The anemones made the fissure only today, having carved their way inland, the shelves of the reef like the jagged teeth of an old friend's smile.

The crabs lead Bort to the stream's end. Here the anemones will completely absorb the island. There are still palm trees here, ripe with coconuts that fall and clunk joyfully, bouncing and rolling and dancing with the crabs.

And, oh, how the crabs dance. They dance over hollow coconuts, a pleasant drum; and they dance over full coconuts; a mellow beat. They roll them into the water: splash. They scurry over the trunks, a lovely rustling sound; and they dance on—click, clack, click, clack—beating out the rhythm on the remnants of Bort's failed structures. They click against each other's shells, dance with each other. It's quite a beautiful sight, really: red and green amidst the blue, all moving as one, the sun melting through the fronds of the last palms, painting the sky yellow and orange like the inside of a passion fruit, or red and gold and purple like a pleasant fig.

Bort had forgotten how lovely the sunset could be, shimmering over the blue, and suddenly he dances, too. The coconuts continue to fall; the fronds blow in a gentle ocean breeze: the island, content. They dance until the sky turns dark and blue—not like the ocean, but rather a sky that imposes itself upon the ocean—they dance to the song of the island.

They danced together. The anemones danced alone, with no one: dejected, but still determined, still taking over the island. By the time the stars were out, the stream had grown into a pond. By midnight it had grown into a lake and by sunrise, a pale and battered sunrise, became one with the ocean. The stream grew into a pond by the time the stars were out, grew into a lake by midnight, and became one with the ocean by the

time the sun had risen again—pale and battered, but happy. Bort, the trees, the crabs: they all danced until the very end, until the anemones took them all, reached up with their innumerable arms and, one by one, dragged them down into the depths of the ocean. And the anemones found Bort's tower, and their hymn was forever renewed. And the anemones took hold of his tower with thousands of gently waving arms. Calmly, triumphantly, they placed it on their shelved reefs to stand there until the end of time and, in their vanity, held it aloft as a trophy—a proud symbol—of their accomplishment. One day they would try to climb it so that they might touch the sky.

And Bort sank to the very bottom of the ocean—to the bottom of the deep blue—and was crushed into nothingness under the weight of that eternal expanse. He did not find his wife and son down there. But when he sank, he did not sink dancing to the song of the anemones, but sank dancing to the song of the island: to the song of the sand and the crabs; to the song of the sun and the sky; to the song of the trees of the wind. He sank to all that was left and all that he had, to all that was and all that is, dancing to the song of Bort.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This piece was written at a very serene point in my life: an in between period where I was briefly out of one school and waiting to attend another, this time in Germany. There was simultaneously a lot going on for me and not a lot going on; as such, this piece draws from different sources for inspiration. The title,

*for instance, was borne from an oddball, one-off joke I made to my younger brother that I then promised to write a story about (despite feverishly scribbling down passages on napkins at my job, I did not dream it would come this far.) Moreover, I think the overall facts of my existence during this time, inspired, in part, the setting: the peaceful, ever-shrinking island. This is not to say that this piece is in anyway anecdotal—this is simply to say that I think of this piece concerning itself chiefly with time as it relates to the self, and that the scope of the piece can further be broadened or narrowed through that locus. I had also been reading a lot of Kurt Vonnegut at the time and had just come off the high of reading his excellent *The Sirens of Titan*, which deals with similar themes of time, presence, punctuality and life. That novel, I think, serves as my primary influence stylistically—I wanted to draw on the ‘wit-in-the-face-of-darkness’ style of Vonnegut and blend it with the eerie and unsettling; I wanted to take overarching themes of inevitability and death—no small fixations of mine—and turn them on their heads.*

BIO:

I am an emerging writer who has yet to be published. (*Until now. The Editors*). I have been studying English Language and Literature at Central Michigan University for the past three years and have graduated with a Bachelor of Science in that area. I have currently returned to CMU to teach Freshman Composition and to pursue a Master of Arts in Creative Writing. Before university, I lived most of my life in a small farmhouse which has fostered a quiet and contemplative atmosphere.

Five Word Story Inspired by Ernest Hemingway's "Six Word Story."

By Wade Springer

WHY WE LIKE IT:

As much as the story itself, we were crazy about Springer's literary audacity. Any unpublished David who brashly takes on Hemingway's Goliath is all right by us! And you better believe we'll publish him!

Coffin 4 Sale. Contact lazarus@live.ca

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

According to legend, Hemingway was lunching with friends at a restaurant when he bet everyone present \$10 each (no small sum in those days) that he could write a story using only six words. They took his wager and he wrote on a napkin: 'For sale: baby shoes, never worn.' The veracity of this account has been challenged and the link to Hemingway is unsubstantiated. Nevertheless, you gotta hand it to the author, whoever it was. So I challenged myself. Could I write an even shorter story? Was it possible? I did and the funny thing is I don't even believe in the Bible. And there really is something called live.ca

BIO:

Wade Springer is a one dimensional character in search of a voluminous author. After failing in philosophy he turned to poetry and other expletive musings. He likes to play with words, the fewer the better. He lives with his pet cat and his cat's boyfriend. He listens to ancient music from the 60's and

thinks Neil Young not Bob Dylan should have won the Nobel for Literature. Oh, and he's Canadian, eh.
This is his first published story.

Kinko's Copies

by Paul Smith

WHY WE LIKE IT:

A crazy, madcap, curved like an arrow and just plain gaga modernist confection that has us panting for more! Quote: 'We had graduated from infatuation to the knowledge that we were probably wrong for each other to the compromise that maybe we couldn't do any better to the final stage—commitment to make the best of it.' It's a voice all his own and as original to his funny bone. And you're wondering why we love it?

I went to Kinko's Copies to buy a birthday card for my true love, whose birthday was tomorrow. They're cheaper here than at OSCO or Walgreens. I used to come here to print resumes, especially those carefully worded, carefully edited resumes of mine, of which I had twelve different versions. That whole episode is over with, so now I shop for cheap birthday cards. There are two racks of them next to the FedEx counter, where you weigh your packages for shipping. There is also a rack of self-help books which people who come here sort through since they are at one of those crossroads in their life that Frost and Robert Johnson spoke of. Not me, anymore, though. Nope. I just buy cards. They vary from sincere to sarcastic. Since sincerity didn't really describe our relationship, I went for sarcasm and humor. Humor is the opposite of

sincerity, although in some cases they are one in the same. I picked out a sarcastic birthday card I knew she'd understand.

When I went to pay for it, there was a guy in line ahead of me. I usually don't notice other people much because I don't really like them. I noticed this guy, though. He was the polar opposite of me. He was still 'in the life' as prostitutes have been known to say. He had a gray suit, somewhat hunched shoulders or maybe it was the shoulder pads in a very old suit. The back of his head was disheveled with hair that needed combing or cutting. He had a cane. He was fiftyish. On the Kinko's counter was his fake leather portfolio in which you put papers or in the case of a job hunter, you put fake resumes. Peeking over his shoulder now, I could see copies of his resume on the same cream colored heavy duty linen paper I used to get. I think he noticed me, so I backed off, snickering. I was glad I wasn't him anymore. But I also felt this need to offer him a few words of encouragement and maybe a tip or two on how to 'tweak' a resume to make yourself look better on paper.

When he paid for a new batch of resumes I saw he had a hearing aid. Fate had dealt this guy a lousy hand – cheap suit, a limp, mussed up hair, hearing loss. I shook my head. Then a Kinko's sales guy rung me up at another cash register. I paid for my snarky birthday card and left at the same time he did. He walked his gimpy walk to a Ford Falcon right outside. Still feeling helpful I tried to start up a conversation.

"Job hunting?" I began.

"Fuck off," he said, without turning around. The Falcon's window was rolled down. He reached inside to open the door. He couldn't even get his door fixed.

I was a little insulted, but philosophical. I thought about the word 'fuck'. You never used to see it. Now it was everywhere, omnipresent like the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleberg. No, that wasn't right. It wasn't that the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleberg were omnipresent, it was that they saw more than they let on. My eyes were like that. I could see that this pathetic human specimen was a copy of me earlier in my life. And I was a copy of him later in his life after he'd graduated from the desperation of finding a job, sucking up to someone, getting over the embarrassment of being fired and then constructing a skyscraper of lies to hide the fact he got canned. His Falcon backfired once before speeding him off to his job interview. Years from now, when he no longer had to face the humiliation of begging for work he would still have a shabby suit and a cane and a Ford Falcon.

My mind went back to the word 'fuck'. Holden Caulfield doesn't use this word till the end of *Catcher In The Rye*, not until his letdowns with Sonny and Maurice and Carl Luce are over with. At this point Holden is fed up with things and using the word 'fuck' has a much heavier impact than if he'd been using it all along. I figured that out with no help from Cliff's Notes. I had the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg.

So I hopped in my car and drove home to present my true love with her birthday card. Her birthday was tomorrow, but I decided to give it to her today. She'd think this was all she was getting!

I walked in the door.

"Hi, honey. Happy birthday!" I handed her the card.

“What the fuck is this?”

“Open it up.”

“It’s a fucking birthday card. Is this all I fucking get?”

I laughed. “Read the fucking card.” The outside of the card had a guy in an old, crumpled suit.

He looked like Ulysses S. Grant. Inside was the phrase:

‘My middle finger gets a boner when I think of you’

‘Hey, that’s pretty fucking funny,” she laughed.

I laughed back.

“Well, what else did you get me?”

I laughed.

“Well?”

Her voice hardened into something like my finger felt when I thought of her. It had that edge that told me she meant business. We had graduated from infatuation to the knowledge that we were probably wrong for each other to the compromise that maybe we couldn’t do any better to the final stage - commitment to make the best of it. She did deserve something more than a card. I had something stashed in the car.

“I’m going fucking shopping,” I said, making for the door.

“My birthday’s tomorrow,” she said, her voice wobbly.

I turned around in the front yard. “That’s when I’m fucking coming back!” I shot at her.

Her laughter pierced the cream-colored sky as the car door slammed and I drove around the block.

END

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

I actually went to Kinko’s Copies (now officially called FedEx to get my wife a birthday card. They have great cards at non Hallmark prices (cheap). There was this shabby looking guy in front of me pretty much the way I describe him in the story. My mind is always searching for material so, as I watch him fiddling with resumes (as I used to do), I felt sorry for him but also figured I could work him into a story. I did not talk to him. I did sort of peer over his shoulder and senses something that told me he didn’t like me hovering. It was simple, like a sudden shake of his shoulders or maybe it was a slight turn of his head. Hemingway told us to pay attention to the littlest details. I don’t know if he drove a Ford Falcon, but he did have trouble opening the door. All of this excited me and I started composing on my way home.

The part with my wife is completely made up. We are not that blunt or sarcastic, but after years together we have come to an ‘arrangement’ like a truce or cessation of hostilities or whatever they call that agreement between North and South Korea. The caption in the birthday card is actually what one of the cards said.

My influences? Bukowski definitely, plus as I referred to Fitzgerald and Salinger, them too. I have many more. And as much as I like all the writers that have influenced me, I try to write with my own voice, which varies from story to story and tries to capture those minute immediate details Hemingway speaks of, tries to avoid clichés and tries to be honest.

BIO:

Paul Smith writes poetry and fiction. He lives in Skokie, Illinois with his wife Flavia. Sometimes he performs poetry at an open mic in Chicago. He believes that brevity is the soul of something he read about once and whatever that something is or was it should be cut in half immediately.



By Robert Standish

WHY WE LIKE IT:

We can't remember the last time we read a monologue of not so 'quiet desperation' that moved us as much as 'IF'. This is the kind of introspective writing that is often attempted (too often in our opinion) but seldom mastered. There is heartbreak in every word of this outsider modern day apologue and every sentence is a 'barbaric yawp' that punches the reader in the mind's gut. Sure, there are a few typos and grammatical missteps throughout the text but we felt, in this case, the rough edges only add to the plaintive honesty of the narrator's voice; so we left them in. What you read is what you get and what you get here is what we love. Quote: 'One thing I preach is put your oxygen mask on first then help others'.

So cold; this dampness is hell, it seeps inside me, separating me from my skin. So thirsty.

I got nothing, just the taste of my own spit. I am so desperate for something to drink. I should lick the moisture off the grey concrete; no way, if they taste the way it smells around here, not a chance.

I am starving, I have starved myself for so long, in every way that a person can starve, my soul is a useless shell; stomach empty, heart empty, fighting to hold on to my last ounce of humanity, but why, for who or what reason, who cares, devoid of my rights, I know I have some, but feel that they have all been taken away, no one to hear my plea; that time has past.

Only one thing fills me, a word, one small fuckin word, IF; what IF.

The power and importance of "IF" is so obvious, but only after regret is born from choices made. A two letter word that's the result of many every second guess, every mistake, a path I didn't take, what if I stuck around a little longer at a job I didn't really like and see the offers that were on the way. I failed to see the big picture, and what is it that I really didn't like?

What *IF* I didn't treat her that way I eventually did and saw her beauty and value for what they were as I lost my way. Choosing loyalties can build as well as destroy. Each person you allow into your life is given the power to tear it apart. How many people did I push away, I kept my pain and anger inside and it became the stranger within I grew to hate, it wasn't her it was me, always was. That is the surprise, the reveal of truth once you answer *IF*.

IF, should be an evaluation, made before and not a question asked when it all goes completely to shit, but usually second guesses are always messes.

The solution is actually very simple, you need to learn how it feels and what it sounds like when your inner voice and intuition speak and do all it can to prevent you from leaving your path. So what is the sound of my first impression, or intuition? You know, you have heard it before and felt its hand try to persuade you but may have never followed through.

So learn to trust in yourself and if you learn to recognize it early on the little things of little or no consequence, you can train yourself to see it, and the signs are easier to read resulting in a life of success.

What I didn't understand or recognize at the time was I was fighting against fate. I made an enemy out of the one person that was trying to save me. Every time I would stumble and fail I would ignore the outcome that was trying to push me in the right direction. I would resist it instead of following my inner self preserving voice of reason, and I failed to follow through on the times I had success. I assumed it was luck and fleeting so I stopped repeating.

Sitting on the wet unforgiving concrete, my mind fights to free me from this reality and make my accommodations less imposing. Despite everything I have ever done, I put myself here, the path forks in many ways sometimes you see it coming and just go blind until it passes. Was I afraid to succeed or was I just stupid? I want to escape, I need to. Regardless of where I would try to escape to they will come for me, that's what they do. Honestly I am now counting on it.

I will wait here and cower as every sharp sound cuts through me. I need something to force the show to start.

The show, the flash before my eyes that tells me if I am done or have just begun, I need to kick start that moment. There were signs everywhere along the way, so many signs, and I never learned to read them until now. I spent my life oblivious to so much. One thing I preach is put your oxygen mask on first then help others. I never took the time to do this for myself and put others first and here is the reward. The lesson is if you live for others first they will do their worst and sacrifice you first, so poetic and pathetic.

I have nothing left to bargain with I sacrificed everything I had or will ever have, so I am left with no way to pay the bill anymore. How many of us have a list of *IF*'s?

Every noise here echoes with empty cold hate, every sound impossible to distinguish, painful to my ears stabbing me into submission; I feel the hate, it approaches from all sides and mostly

from within. I have learned to look back and see all my faults for what they really are. Ha, for the first time I have decided to put the mask on myself and look where I am.

They're here, who am I kidding they were always here, because they are me, judge and jury. I know I have to go, and without any direction I know exactly where, instinctively. I don't deserve the right to cry right, I have no tears left anyway. The task at hand takes over the emotions that would normally stop me, I have no choice so fuck you inner voice. I have accepted all of this, that doesn't mean I agree with it, just that the fight is done, I left myself vulnerable when I was at my weakest. Even as the shadows force the darkness into my soul there is still a price to pay, one that I can afford. I get to my feet and start walking.

I am left alive long enough to know the pain of living past my usefulness, to see life move on without me and how quickly I fade from importance and be forgotten, even hated. This is living the day after and seeing how it will be when you are gone for good. I don't recommend anyone learning this lesson, it hurts. Its much worse than the death itself, living through it to see the other side is the worse pain imaginable. I have never hated anyone enough to ever wish this on them. Not totally true, I hate me, I never cared to take the time to love myself, is this the birthplace of hope or repenting faith? I have no idea. I was afraid, before, but not now; now that I accepted the end, truly accepted it unlike the pretenders that just cut, without the intent to kill.

I emerge from my prison beneath the overpass and prepare to join the suicide society, I choose this bridge because I don't own a gun. Every member has their own exit strategy. I step off a full member and free fall to an awakening that should explain everything, I do this with such clarity and determination, I have accepted my actions and know that the sun will rise for everyone tomorrow, once their clouds clear it will be better and their show can continue, mine went as far as it was ever going to I guess.

One step and the show has started. I race to the river below and consider if I had cared and protected myself would I have ended up here. This is real and not dream I will ever be able to wake from. My mind remembers the turning points, I moved past it, ignored it but never forgot it, I just failed to see it for what it was meant to be, it's where I stumbled and never recovered, we all have one of those moments, our *IF MOMENT*.

What walked me off the bridge was that I ran out of reasons and the ability to stay.

I didn't leave a note, shit, this is a questions that answers itself, if you really know me then you know.

The show must go on so we learn to stop making the same mistakes, is anyone aware of this? It's supposed to because it's intended to out live the audience and be performed by the ones still left standing. I finally succeeded at at last one thing, I succeeded at not fitting into my own life, I remain an outsider in my own existence. I consider that *IF* I could go back I would not change anything about anyone around me, I would change me. The last step was my first step, just too late.

Since I was removed from relevance and neatly packaged away I can leave clean and my list of *IF*'s is done.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The story of 'IF'. I find that there have been times of great mental stress and anxiety that force me to question what I am doing, not doing or choices I have made or failed to make. I found that I stopped trusting myself and was asking IF, I had made a different choice would I have been better off. 'IF' I learned to listen to my inner voice and went with my first instinct how would I have succeeded, Inspired by own list of 'IF's' that I did not include with the story as it was far too long to include. I was inspired by my own life experience and the need to pass this along to my song as wisdom and a warning to trust in himself and how. I wish someone told me when I was his age or younger, but would I have listened? I don't know. What 'IF' I did?

I like to write about subject matter that is not familiar to me so I can learn along with the reader. My favourite author would be Edgar Allen Poe, as I like how he was able to make me feel the words and emotion through few words but say so much. R. William Standish

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.

In this Story the Author Kills Herself

by McKenzie Hurder

WHY WE LIKE IT:

There is great literary prowess in this strongly transgressionist exhortation, where we sense an aloof Virginia Woolf, rocks still in her pockets, dripping in the shadows. The velocity of the prose, the use of lower case throughout, and the voice, which is both distant and in your face, brings the frenzied narrator to life with a convincing fastness. Images akin to mnemonics flutter throughout the narrative like panicking birds. The mood is morbidly upbeat, the tone frenetic yet balanced and the portrait it paints, tragic but curiously satisfying. There are so many good lines here it's hard to choose. Quote: 'there was something electric about europe that made my heart gurgle, like it was trying to beat backwards.' And '...the ones who want to fly most are so dangerously close to sinking.' And and and 'with an arrow in your chest they ask you to remove a thumb splinter for them when you had nothing to do with it and they had everything to do with shooting you.' This is a powerhouse story that drew each of us in and when we were able to catch our breath at the end, we said, 'Uh-huh, this is a writer!'

IN THIS STORY THE AUTHOR KILLS HERSELF

By McKenzie Hurder

the one issue with suicide is that i only get to do it once. it's an art, a sort of theatrics. i thought about all of the potential possibilities and lamented that i'd have to choose one. i will be as indecisive in death as i was in life. i began thinking of myself as past tense once i settled on my

death date, how brides choose their wedding dates. i float somewhere in the grey between life and death, not fully living and edging closer and closer to dying like a leaf slowly browning. but the good news is that's the only decision death asks you to make. life is all decisions. life is overwhelming with *choose this! choose that! choose choose choose!!* your school, your friends, your job, your classes, your food, your music, your books, and which hand to use to pick your nose. i had jumped around from major to major, following every insignificant whim like it was god's call, agonizing over having to pick a single degree, a single career, some sort of self-constructed *purpose*. i used to have a huge appetite for life. i was always gorging. in my late teens, i never missed a single party. i didn't even need to drink, i'd sway alone in the kitchen after everyone else had called it quits. i woke up one saturday and drove the six hours to frank o'hara's grave just because i could and had a coke with him alone in the middle of march. i hid in the uni library overnight, tucked under a desk to study because they wouldn't let me take the textbook home. i wrote poems about all the places i've been and all the people who hurt me and let them be buried in internet pages. i barely ever slept. two a.m. was for novels or taco bell or dancing or spilling my heart out on the phone. *i will sleep when i'm dead*, i used to tell my mother when she would shake her head at my 3am homecoming, or my insistence that i still fulfill my obligations sick as hell and after a swig of nyquil. i gorged myself on life, and now my stomach is distended. sick, even. and i can't throw it up or take it back, and all i really want now is a good long sleep. for my phone to stop buzzing. for the starbucks barista not to say *oh my goodness what happened yesterday, we didn't see you at all!*

the nightmares stopped after i picked my death day. may 5th. like the kind of relief of turning in a thesis or something; the grade doesn't matter yet, it just feels good to have it out of my hands.

my death day couldn't be too close to thanksgiving or christmas or new years. i didn't want to ruin the holiday season for anyone, or rather, ruin it any further for my mother. it couldn't be on my birthday because i wouldn't have the time with nobody leaving me alone and insisting on constant celebration (even though dying at a whole number age with no hangnail remainder was appealing). may 5. a monday. let everyone enjoy a good normal weekend. death is better during the week. most jobs give time off for "bereavement". people won't have to work and still get paid. nobody likes a saturday funeral. saturday is the day my mom does laundry. if she had to go to my funeral on a saturday, she would have to go commando the following week and i wouldn't do that to my mother.

i almost wanted to shoot myself as a last rebellion. the scientists say only men shoot themselves and that women are vain and don't like to destroy their pretty faces like that. that's where they're wrong. there isn't a single woman alive that agrees when the world calls her pretty. once us women know we are beautiful the men will have nothing to give us. what can men offer except knowledge of our beauty? if they can't give that we'll see right through them and do away with them altogether. the women that i've kissed all looked at me and called me beautiful as if to say *i'm sorry the words don't exist for what i mean*. women don't shoot themselves because women are more thoughtful than men. to shoot yourself would make such a mess, and it's an unfair burden to ask someone else to clean it. i mean, i surely won't be there to do it after. women are always thinking of other people like that. we are always giving giving giving. maybe it is practice for when we have babies and society tells us we are bad people if we do not give everything for our children. our youth, our bodies, our careers, our freedom. i didn't even have children and people were already telling me what a selfish woman i was, choosing not to magic

one of my internal eggs into a whole baby. wasted fertility, wasted potential. it's better like this, though. i could never make somebody an orphan, and i'd be afraid i'd do it even if i didn't want to.

i decided i would hang myself. jumping into traffic would be unethical; i wouldn't want the driver of the vehicle to be haunted by guilt or unnecessary trauma. to jump off a bridge would cause too much of a scene. i'd hate to be on t.v. especially during such a personal moment like dying. i only get to do it once. maybe it'd be different if i could practice beforehand, make sure i do it good and right, maybe then i'd be ok with people watching. hanging myself definitely isn't the most creative, but i imagine it'd feel as refreshing as cracking my neck in the morning. the half a second of consciousness i have with my feet dangling above the hardwood floors will make me feel as light and airy as an angel. i want my suicide to feel like flying, that way there's a chance god can tell i want to reincarnate as a bird. *you made my body too heavy. it was a nice body, please don't think i wasn't grateful. it was just hard to live in, like if you made a frog live in the desert. please, for this next life, give me wings.*

when may 5th came, i woke up like it was any other morning, except my first thought was *today is the day*, instead of *only 5 more days, only 4 more days, just 3 more days, 2, 1*. i sat in the sink to do my makeup, my knees nearly to my chest, my mouth habitually open as my hand wielded the mascara wand. i didn't care about dying pretty. i feel i must clarify. i do not want the nasty male scientists to think they won, to say, *that's why she didn't shoot herself!* i did my makeup because it's what i always do. the eyeliner brush is like a fountain pen, each thick black line over each eye a word i write when i have no words to write. like a spell, like a prayer, like something

to do, a reason to wake up. write the two magic words over each eye so the sun will rise, so the starbucks barista will get lots of tips, so nancy stays un-nervous, so richard can feel that i am still living and in case my brother's baby hatches . i need to have an almost normal day because if i did anything fabulous or terrifying or spontaneous or brave i might change my mind. i could forget what my day really is, what everyday is; a coffin that is too cramped. more trapped than if i was in prison.

when i hang myself, i will be smiling. i do not doubt this for a second. edgar allan poe writes, "The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."

there are few things more tragic than a dead woman. a woman happier in death than in life is one of them, beauty or no. this is where poe and i disagree. where he says poetic, i say tragic; where he says beautiful, i say happy, but i think we mean the same thing unless we don't.

because if he did mean beauty than he was like every other man and just lamented not getting to fuck a beautiful woman before she died. everyone knows the dead are off limits unless you're a pervert. you die and your beauty vanishes, the opposite of a cheek flush. and even so, rigor mortis will set my smile for the rest of my bodily existence, until the skin melts off and is chewed away by maggots as fat as cherubs. and then it doesn't matter anymore what anyone said about anything. my teeth will be exposed forever. i will grin at the worms going through my long-gone eyes, and one day, an archaeologist or an alien will dig me up, a few teeth missing, but even still; they'll know i'm smiling. in a happier place.

i took may 5th off from work. i requested it far in advance. i became quite attached to that date, which was alarming. i liked the date so much i was afraid that if i didn't get it off from work to

make it a perfect day to die, i'd force myself to wait another whole year. may 5th. may 5. five five. because it's the fifth day of the fifth month, and i am five feet and five inches tall.

something about that made it satisfying.

i couldn't think of a worse way to spend my death day than working. i've already thrown away years to this job. in economics, once you spend money on something you have to forget it exists. it was in the past, so it doesn't count anymore moving forward. i felt that way with all of the years i already threw away. they were already gone. i couldn't get them back. they floated away in the wind like newspaper bits when you burn them in the fire, drifting far away and sizzling out to ash. *good-bye, good-bye.* i sold shoes for a living. all types of shoes, sneakers and dress shoes and sandals and girly flats and boots, but all trendy. i would say the same thing to every customer every day because every customer was exactly the same. i worked on commission and when you work on commission the first thing you do is sell your soul. the next thing you do is buy waterproofer for your shoes, and then you pour water on your shoes all day long and give a show, *look how great it works! not a single stain!* and then all the onlookers will buy a can of waterproofer and *voila!* you're good at your job. when the manager said my sock numbers were ridiculously good, i was proud for a moment and then horrifically depressed. my life purpose has boiled down to selling socks which is worse than not even having a purpose.

and if i decided to kill myself after work nancy would somehow convince herself that it was her fault. she would rack her brain and try to think if she said anything slightly off-putting that day, or maybe i took her critique of my sock pitch too personally. nancy was gonna give herself a nervous breakdown for being responsible for everyone else. my last day of work really solidified

for me that i wanted to be dead, which made me unusually happy. my sales numbers were out of the water. every time i poured water on my shoes i could feel that there would be less and less times i'd ever have to do it again. tomorrow i would die, and it'd be all over. it was like watching the clock countdown during a basketball game and you can feel that the crowd never considered that seconds were finite before. i felt like an established c.e.o. looking forward to a vacation, *only one more stack of papers to blow through, only two more employees to fire, only three more meetings to sit through, and then it's the bahamas, baby!!* nancy said i was a whirlwind and she wanted my secret. she asked what i had for breakfast and i told her just fruity pebbles. she waited for more of an explanation so i told her i had a paradigm shift about life and death and was feeling good. she said she was glad for me and was scared maybe i found jesus instead. when i left work i said *nancy, i always like working with you, you're really a good egg.* she looked confused but decided to let it go.

after i do my makeup i go to the starbucks i always go to. i treat myself to a vanilla chai with soy milk. i usually get a tall black coffee, unless i'm celebrating something. i'm not made of bougie-vanilla-chai-with-soy-milk everyday type money. it's an almost six dollar drink. the same barista i see nearly everyday says *oh man, what's the occasion? a promotion? new lover? did your brother have the baby?* i shrug and say it's just self-care. i take a seat in the corner of the cafe and take out my journal. someone is going to go through everything i wrote once i'm dead. they'll think the writing is better than it really is because everybody always likes the work of dead people more. they'll look at the dated entries and wonder if i'm telling the truth. old lovers will crawl from the woodwork and scream to my family *yes it's true! i'm the one in that entry from back in november! she fucked me after i made her a delicious dinner and translated my favorite*

dutch novel while reading out loud to her, and then never heard from her again! a pity she's dead, i wanted a second chance! and my mother will be upset that that is all they can think of, a second chance, when i'm full-fledged dead. in my grave i'll talk back to her, see, mom! see! nobody could ever love me! i was always just a pretty concept, the prize that cost the most tickets in the arcade, and all i ever really wanted was someone to see the dark hairs growing below my belly button, announce that i am very human, and love me anyway!

my journal is all true. but it isn't the whole truth. if i was living, i wasn't writing, and if i wasn't writing, i was out living. i focused too much on sex escapades because they're easy to write about and very flexible. you can spin them anyway you want to. you can make it sound like a fabulous night even if the sex is very awful. you can say it was charmingly clumsy; *the way you two bumped noses like that*, and that he found your giggling at the flatulent noise your mouths made when smushed together endearing. i only saw any lover just a handful of times before i decided they didn't understand me at all and i hated them. this was more fun abroad. there was something electric about europe that made my heart gurgle, like it was trying to beat backwards. it was romantic to sweep into a city, charm the smartest man at the bar, heavily flirt for the next few days and fall in love as close as one can in a weekend, just to blow out of the city and leave him behind tragically. it wasn't that i liked to hurt people. i just couldn't get close to them in the ways that they wanted. it was always too much for me. i actually hated to leave them in the ways i did. i only did it because i thought it would hurt less than building a temporary future with them, just to crash it in some other way. maybe i'd cheat, or decide i like women exclusively after all. maybe i'd kill myself out of the blue. if i had a boyfriend now, even if he loved me very much, they'd investigate him if i killed myself. they'd look at my corpse and that bruise on my thigh

from stumbling into the dining room table drunk as a skunk would suddenly look suspiciously like a handprint.

but anyway it won't matter to me who reads what when i'm dead. maybe they'll try to diagnose me with some illness like bipolar. they'll cite day-apart entries that have entirely different moods because they're entirely different subjects, and bring-up our family history riddled with adhd and depression. who cares, i'm dead. it isn't my problem. virgina woolf doesn't care that they say these things about her.

it is my last entry ever, so i try to make it sound ok:

may 5th, 9:46 a.m.

a moth grows inside a purple polyp attached to my inner lip. it starts off small like a zit. i lean in close to the mirror with my fingers tugging down at my bottom lip to expose my gums and my sin and when i see it i let go. my body elastics back and i shut my eyes. i never open my mouth again. outside the classroom door a poster exposes me, a purple moth in a purple polyp. my own grows bigger.

i am in richard's bed but the man with me is not richard. he has no face and tells me i do not love him, cannot love him. i say nothing in case my mouth moth explodes and chokes him. i want him to hold me-just hold me- if he doesn't love me, cannot love me, then i want him to pretend. lie. he's inside me but that

isn't what i want, i just wanted hands on my hips, on my belly, lips through my hair pressed to the side of my head. the moth polyp pops. the moth tries to fly and it's larger than my tongue. it spreads its wings and i clamp my teeth tight-pressed together. the moth pushes against the jail of my lockjaw angrily, scratches at my cheeks from the inside. the faceless man is still in richard's bed, still inside me, and i choke to death instead.

i think maybe i wanted to be the faceless man. or just a man. even with a face they still hurt you and go free. with an arrow in your chest they ask you to remove a thumb splinter for them when you had nothing to do with it and they had everything to do with shooting you. giving giving giving. it's almost the same as forgiving forgiving forgiving. now i think it's better to be the moth. die flying to the moon. someone will die at your birth like a great-grandmother or your dad's ex-girlfriend, but so what? my brother's baby will be born for my death, what's the difference, it's just tug and pull, give and take, a light bulb on, a light bulb off.

the world is a beautiful place. once upon a time i wake up to a blank day. i don't even know moths exist yet. the sun stumbles through my window, sprawls across my duvet, insistently taps at my eyelids. i hate window shades, i hate window curtains, i hate false closings and darkness and the small cramped space of a

bedroom or a state like massachusetts. nothing has happened yet but i am happy though i don't know it for another whole year. my face is still sleep-swollen, my limbs still weak and slumber-leaden, but i am 20 years old and the world cracks open like a fat chicken egg and the golden yolk drenches everything i love in a heavy gravity that keeps them close to me and glues my feet to earth. i tell richard i am going to the marry the fuck out of him and mean it. it's a new city, a new country, a new continent, a new heart, and even dutch with its ugly double vowels that won't fit in my ugly american mouth can't cut me, so i eat birdsong like chips and kiss everyone in sight.

virginia woolf comes to me from the grave and it's too hard to tell if our hands are touching or our tongues. she whispers a million ideas into my mouth and they float down like maple pods into the abyss of me because nothing is new, not really. we bloom here to feel the old hurts and nothing gets better and you can say a million more things about the bananas in the bowl on the counter and how they touch each other. the bananas touch each other like they are hungry. it's the orgy-sin of flesh on flesh that makes them rot, how we all breathe onto someone else and make them rot themselves hollow. alone we rot slower with persistence and i cannot tell which is more tragic. eyes are the same as cameras in dying, in living, in sex, in shitting out a baby; we need someone to witness our existing, to prove that it

happened, while hating the lookers at the same time. an eyelash on my cheek curls into itself like a roll-y bug, like a comma might curl into a period to make a full stop, to shut out the world and it isn't fair that i'm jealous. virginia woolf carries rocks in the pockets of her dress and even as a ghost they're heavy. the ones who want to fly most are so dangerously close to sinking. my heart gurgles like its trying to beat backwards.

i usually like to write about the place where i'm writing because it really sets the mood. for example, if i say i am writing on the train and i have good news, i will point out how warm and pleasant the sun is peeping through the window, and how the old lady across the aisle has nice dimples, and i notice them because she smiles at the conductor when he checks her ticket, and how many people smile at strangers nowadays? but i've described this starbucks a million times. it's been a metaphor for my failure to leave this godforsaken city, it's been the north star calling me home. the barista sometimes feels like the only person in the whole universe who cares. then i remember they pay her to make me feel like that and the illusion shatters. sometimes i can only write in dreams.

i go home. i lay on my kitchen floor and listen to *good news for people who love bad news* by modest mouse all the way through twice. when *the good times are killing me* plays for the first time, i start to cry a little, and by the time it plays again, i am sobbing. i turn the volume on the radio all the way up so i don't have to hear my own patheticness. i restart the album for a third time, and drag a chair from the kitchen into the living room. four beams run across the ceiling. the original home-owner was going to build a loft up there at some point, but they never got

around to it and now i will never be the one to complete their vision. i tie a thick rope i got at home depot a million years ago around one of the rafters like i've practiced. i tie the other end around my neck. the rope between myself and the beam is taut, even if i'm on tiptoes. i squeeze my eyes shut. they are still wet. my heart speeds up as if it's relentlessly trying to beat out its predetermined number of beats despite a sudden deadline.

as life gets longer, awful feels softer

well it feels pretty soft to me.

and if it takes shit to make bliss,

then i feel pretty blissfully.

i take a deep breath and beam my best smile. i jump. the air whooshes out of me and my hands fly to my neck automatically like my body wants to live even though i don't. i kick the back of the chair and it topples over. for a moment i feel nothing but my feet swinging and think, *if there is a higher power out there, dear god dear god let me become a bird in my next life, or one of your angels if you let me into heaven; it feels so good to fly.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I think this story nods to a lot of my literary influences, at least directly to Frank O'Hara and Virginia Woolf and more subtly to Sylvia Plath. I love the cool dark logic of Ester Greenwood in The Bell Jar, not only how uncrazy she seems, but how uncrazy she really is. Like Ester, my narrator has a lot going on beneath the surface. The fleeting imagery and interiority of Mrs. Dalloway completely enamored me the first time I read it and I want and I want my writing to be a tornado of colours in the same way. Albert Camus's philosophical essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus', stumped me for eons. Why is it we live on when everything we experience, think, feel is ultimately fruitless and meaningless in the end? My narrator can't think her way out of being Sisyphus, and sometimes I think we're all in danger of not thinking our way out.

BIO:

McKenzie Hurder is a just budding writer residing mostly in Massachusetts. When she isn't writing, she's off traveling or being consumed by a book. She graduates this May from UMass Boston with a Bachelor's in English.

Author Guidelines

by Mitchell Grabois

WHY WE LIKE IT:

We love the escalating, sanctimonious wrath in this brutally funny over the top counter punch to the by turns all too often condescending, obsequious and sometimes just plain bizarre submission guidelines that confound and harass both neophyte and seasoned writer alike. The balance Grabois strikes between humour and invective is faultless.

Do not send short stories that turn out to be all a dream. Do not send stories in which the climax is the gruesome death of the protagonist or her pet. Do not send poems featuring birds, feathers, flight or the unbearable lightness of being. Don't send us any poems that crassly exploit nature.

Do not send poems lacking elevated language. Do not send poems that are funny but not poetic.

Do not send poems whose accounts of shattered childhoods play on our heartstrings. Do not send poems that are agricultural. Do not send poems about deer in your fields. We don't want to hear about storks or red-winged blackbirds. We don't want to hear about all you have lost.

Don't tell us about your captain raping you when you were in the Merchant Marine. Don't give us any material that comes from your ugly soul. No memoir poems featuring drunkenness and debauchery. No automatic writing or "channeling." No recycled mythology, western or eastern. No hate. No excesses of love. Nothing you would have written for your mother in elementary school. Nothing from your fucking diary or journal. No diatribes against your ex-wife or husband.

Nothing praising Jesus, especially: no *Jews for Jesus* propaganda. Nothing we would find in a pamphlet in a toilet stall in a Greyhound bus station. No poems about your travels on Greyhound buses. No poems whatsoever about "looking for America." No poems about hunks you met on the train and had brief affairs with.

Do not send us illustrations, especially those of underwear models with six-pack abs, especially if they are photographs of the hunk you met on the train who fucked your brains out in your state room. No "Hallmark" sentiments. No fancy fonts, *please*. No bizarre spacing or other "experimental" work—we're no longer in high school. No poems from high school students. No poems from high school dropouts. No poems from people who fancy themselves Kerouac or Bukowski. No poems from women who would like to fuck dead poets.

No poems with a cover letter that reveals you as a rank amateur, moron, or douche bag. No poems about your pet, alive or dead. No poems about your experiences on crack or meth. If you're not Aldous Huxley, no poems about your LSD trips, good or bad. No poems about your paranoia after smoking too much dope.

No poems bashing your mother or father. No poems bashing your ungrateful children. Come to think of it no poems at all. Keep your lousy poems to yourself. Please.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

As to what inspired this story I cannot top the FLEAS ON THE DOG editors' description in their WHY WE LIKE IT paragraph. I think that the immediate stimulus was, at the time, recently having completed a poem about the birds on my farm and, looking for a magazine to send it to, ran across an Author's Guidelines section warning me off.

There is no group of individuals more blessed than the editors of literary magazines. They play a vital role in providing venues for writers' work to be read—they help keep literature alive. But sometimes some of them get a little crazy. Re-reading this piece, I remember that I have seen many, if not most, of these prohibitions in actual 'Authors' Guideline' sections. My intention when writing this piece was classically satirical.

One of my weaknesses is that it's nearly impossible for me to identify my stylistic and literary influences. I've read thousand or tens of thousands of novels and short stories that I've admired, and I'm sure that many of their styles/techniques are reflected in my work. Some of my favourites when I was just starting out as a writer were (in no particular order): Vonnegut, Bukowski, D. H. Lawrence, Faulkner, Saroyan, Chinua Achebe, Mary Gaitskill, Borges, Robert Bolano, John Fante, Ethan Canin and poets William Carlos Williams, Gary Snyder and Bob Dylan.

BIO:

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois has had over 1500 of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He has been nominated for numerous prizes and was awarded the 2017 Booranga Writers' Centre (Australia) Prize for Fiction. His novel, *Two Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and as a print edition. His poetry collection, *THE ARREST OF MR. KISSY FACE*, will be published by Pski's Porch Publications in early 2019. He lives in Denver, Colorado, U.S.A.

Utopiasphere

by Darryl Purcell

WHY WE LIKE IT:

There's a curious cleanliness at work in this hermetic futuristic flash and we like the way Purcell creates a credible alternative reality. Every detail is as matter of fact as chairs and tables in our own world. The voice, which reaches into the bot-o-sphere, is a synchronization of Kubrick's 'Hal' and Max Headroom. And there's some yucks, too. Quote: 'Brad is a piece of shit,' Karl thought, but would never say out loud. 'I wish he would fall off into a pasteurization tank.'

Third Level Homogenization Director Karl Stanley arrived at the Gardenia Dairy Creamisphere early Thursday morning with a feeling of dread.

“Good morning, Sir,” the great clock said as Karl pushed his face into the sand recognition box. Once the machine identified him, it punched his card. “It is 3 a.m., Thursday, May 22, 1952. Enjoy your day, Mr. Stanley.”

Karl stepped onto the sidewalk belt that took him toward the Creamorial Tower. As he progressed through the first floor and upward toward his destination, he watched the large glass tanks being filled with milk unloaded from dairy trucks. He couldn't help but think how much the corporation's technology had progressed over the last five years. Where there were once

more than 150 employees, he saw the current contingent of seven dairy engineers operating the automated loading docks.

“Amazing, but sad,” Brad Sullivan said as his belt united with Karl’s on its way to the Tower. “In a mere 13 years, America has gone from a jingoistic warring nation to a country of science and peace. Our technological growth has flourished while we have also learned to live together in an atmosphere of tolerance. On the other hand, there are only a few of us still employed. Our utopia is beginning to fray.”

“Brad is a piece of shit,” Karl thought, but would never say out loud. “I wish he would fall off the belt into a pasteurization tank.”

Karl, who had worked for Gardenia since 1940, had quite a few reasons for his hostility. Brad had been with the company for less than a year – a year where more than half of the company’s employees were laid off – and was now also a homogenization director. He was obviously Machiavellian in his efforts to succeed. The suspicion was that Brad must have revealing pictures of Company Manager Thomas Loman with Gardenia Mascot Bertha the Grinning Cow.

The two men arrived at the Creamorial Tower ready to conduct a rhapsody of dairy product transportations. The circular room with the glass dome stood high above the open-design, ground-and-air dock structure. All the way around the base of the room was a color-coded, continual, switchboard system. Brad stepped to the ground exchange while Karl began setting the aerial plugs.

As Brad pulled plugs out and shoved them into jacks, giant robotic arms mirrored his actions on the dock floor by moving and attaching hose lines to tanks where the milk was being pumped for in-house processing. Karl did the same to conduct the flow of the finished product

into the giant white autogyro-drones that were loading up to deliver the dairy products to front porches all over the city.

“You realize that someday robots will be standing here instead of us,” Brad said.

“We direct the robots, Brad. Robots can follow our directions, but they can’t think, therefore, they cannot direct.”

“Yet,” Brad said in a voice that could have curdled a vat of cream.

As much as Karl hated Brad, he knew he was probably right. The gift of technology was souring. Karl remembered his enthusiastic optimism when he attended the 1939 New York World’s Fair. He had completely embraced the event’s vision of the World of Tomorrow. Humanity had reached a crossroads in 1939: Develop weapons of mass destruction and prepare for a global war *OR* embrace peaceful technology for the betterment of mankind and accept and tolerate diverse cultures.

Karl saw the amazing growth of mechanization during the early 1940s as most Americans agreed with his philosophy, including Peace Party candidate Charles Lindbergh who was elected president in 1940. While Europe and Asia boiled in barbarism, the United States prospered and advanced beyond what Alex Raymond had predicted in his comic strip.

American businesses and farms joined together to become giant corporations with government-assisted research and development programs. While nations on the other side of the world spent their fortunes on military weapons, President Lindbergh and Congress transferred all military spending into technological research. California and New York became the biggest robotic manufacturing centers in the world. Most Americans were employed in the construction of metal-laborers.

America was protected by the amazing size of its two oceans, and a president who believed that problems could be better solved through diplomacy instead of destruction. In 1941, Lindbergh brought home the Declaration of Peaceful Existence signed by the chancellor of Germany and the emperor of Japan.

And, by 1946, one out of every four American homes had an autogyro-car in the garage. In 1949, President Lew Ayres carried on Lindbergh's legacy by signing the Americas Non-Aggression Pact with the presidents, chancellors, premiers and chairmen of National Socialist Mexico, Uruguay, Argentina, Fascist Brazil and Cuba. Hollywood boomed with its technologically superior motion pictures that were shown on 360-degree screens throughout the country. Most citizens were amazed at how much that industry had improved from the inferior products the film studios produced in 1939.

But by 1951, Karl began to see a chink in the American mechanization. The market for metal laborers was becoming saturated. Robot manufacturing plants began the great layoffs. Many other industries, like Gardenia, had replaced most of its employees with unique metal transfer systems – robots.

“Did you watch the government channel this morning, Karl?” Brad said. “Our utopian society is in a lot of trouble. With 50 percent of the men in this country unemployed, we have a lot of families who feel betrayed. And President Ayres is going to take the blame. The voters are going to demand change.”

“It was Ayres and Lindbergh who pulled us out of the Depression and put everyone back to work!” Karl said as he pointed to the milk delivery drones above the plant. “Just look up there. We have a sky full of peaceful drones carrying Gardenia Grinning Cow dairy products to families. I see a large tri-plane loaded down with televisions and cigarettes being flown to poor

people in Canada. Fathers are flying their families to the beach in their autogyros and the Brooklyn Dodgers Commuter Zeppelin is headed for LaGuardia Field.

“Sure we’re going through a period of high unemployment,” he said, “but things will get better. President Ayres hasn’t wasted a dime of taxpayer money on military spending. He’s putting all his efforts into rebuilding our economy. And just today, he returned from a meeting with Chancellor Wernher von Braun and announced that Germany is now ready to engage in free trade with the United States. Prosperity is just around the corner.”

Brad didn’t get to respond, as both men turned toward the first explosion. The sky lit up with aerial combat between hundreds of jet-powered Heinkel fighter planes and unarmed milk delivery drones, family autogyros and commuter zeppelins.

“Looks like those night classes in German will come in handy,” Brad said as the first of many V-9 rockets began to drop out of the sky.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

I enjoy reading both real and alternative history. Throughout the last century, there were so many pivotal time periods during which Western civilization could have made very wrong turns, with drastic consequences. Obviously, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s rose-coloured fantasy and declaration of ‘peace in our time’ had nothing to do with Europe’s reality of September 1938. And, at that time, there were also several members of the United States congress who didn’t see Hitler’s Germany as a threat. Quite often the best laid plans of rodents and politicians can land folks in a rattrap.

The question: ‘What if...?’ opens a writer of alternative history to so many possibilities that one just has to make a choice and follow the characters. What if the American peace movement of 1939 had taken hold enough for the U.S. government to turn a blind eye to Nazi atrocities? ‘Utopiasphere’ answers that question with one of many dire possibilities.

Having started off my adulthood in the Vietnam War, I tend to be a bit of a cynic concerning politics. That cynicism worked in my favour during my later years as an editorial cartoonist. In that occupation, I questioned everything while illustrating real political actions in a manner that readers would find thought provoking and/or humorous. My literary influences currently include Stuart Kaminsky, Max

Schulman and Lee Goldberg, cartoonist Walt Kelly, Bill Mauldin and Don Rico, plus many writers and illustrators from the amazing pulp publications of the 1930's and '40's.

BIO:

I have worked as an illustrator in television animation, educational comic books, editorial cartooning, young reader books and quite a few other avenues as a designer and cartoonist. I have also been a daily newspaper editor and a county public information director and have earned many statewide journalism awards for my cartoons, columns and editorials. I'm a Vietnam veteran and am currently retired, other than my pulps and a few short story submissions. I currently write two pulp-style series (Hollywood Cowboy Detectives and The Man of the Mist) available on Kindle and paperback editions on Amazon: [amazon.com/author/darrylepurcell](https://www.amazon.com/author/darrylepurcell) I also had a Vietnam war murder mystery published in *Heater* magazine early in 2016 and an early version of the first Hollywood Cowboy Detectives, called 'Oaters' in *Mysterical-e* magazine.

Submission

by Mark Halpern

WHY WE LIKE IT:

What surprised was the amount of 'story' the author packed into a short deposition. We love the condensed scenarios that serve to inflate the essentially burlesque characters of the players, a burlesque which, nevertheless, is far from comedic. This is 'in media res' so we wonder what's going to happen once court's in session. All rise!

Jerry Baxman was always a brute. Once he tried to cut off my arm with a yellow plastic saw. I still have a scar, if you look closely. When we were six, he made me “play wagon,” which was him riding down the driveway and me pulling the wagon back up, again and again. And because of his last name, he said he was Batman and I always got stuck being Robin. If I complained, he'd sit on my head or make me eat grass, but I had to stay at his house every day until my mother got home from work. That's all just “deep background,” to show that some people's characters are fixed.

All my life I've taken crap from people, but I guess Jerry was the first. Anyhow, once we moved after second grade, I thought I was done with him.

Then last February I was at the deli in Bookerville Mall. Someone behind me was making a call on his cell phone. I hear, “it's Jarvis Baxman,” which is Jerry's real name. It's a weird name and he once punched me when I called him “Jarvis jarhead.” I looked and it was definitely him. When his call was finished, I walked over. “Jerry, it's me, Fred Gelstein.” He waits, and then he

remembers. Then, just like that, “Freddy,” he says, “Fungus Freddie,” and starts laughing in front of everyone.

“Don’t call me that anymore.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“You’re were never Batman, but now you’ve become Fatman. Fat Ass Fatman!”

“Go away. It was bad enough my mother made me play with you. You were a snivelly little weasel and still are,” he said. He rolled his napkin into a ball and threw it at my head. Then he told a waiter I was disturbing him and his family, and the waiter said he’d get the manager.

So I got my glass and splattered water towards him. But it was almost empty and probably not even one drop got on Jerry or his wife. Then, since I’d already paid my bill, I ran out into the mall and got away quick. Keeping the glass was just a mistake – I don’t think the deli cares.

That’s all that happened. I swear. Everything else Jerry wrote is pure B.S. I guess he’s mad because I finally stood up to him. He’s the one who’s a weasel.

If you’re going to judge us, you should understand us as individual human beings with a history. You shouldn’t judge according to rules that apply to strangers. I was just a kid when he did all that mean stuff, but it still bothers me. Like I said, all my life I’ve taken crap. Please make it stop here. Anyway, he threw the napkin before I threw the water. And he said “Fungus” before I said “Fatman.”

All the foregoing is respectfully submitted to This Honourable Court of Small Claims. Is that OK?

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

Impulses:

1. To write my first flash fiction piece. So I set a 500 word limit.
2. To write my first story not about Japan. So I turned to my brief time as a litigation lawyer in Toronto.

3. *To exploit the irony that I now write submissions to literary journals, but once wrote submissions to courts.*
4. *To write about childhood (after having written a story about a creepy adult). So I thought about childhood and recalled some bullies.*
5. *Well, small claims court is best, since you don't need a lawyer. And the funniest disputes are those rooted in personal relationships. So I started writing.*

BIO:

Mark Helpern has lived since 1993 in Tokyo where he runs his own law firm and writes stories about foreigners in Japan. He was born in America, grew up mostly in Canada and has also spent much time in the UK and France. As for Japan, Mark has, like some of his stories characters, found a way to be both an outsider and an insider. From 2018 on he has been published in Grey Borders Magazine, Crack the Spine, The Evening Street Review, Gravel, Blank Spaces, Lowestoft Chronicle, BoomerLit Magazine, Tigershark Magazine, STORGY, Spadina Literary Review, and the UC Review, with one nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

NONFICTION

The Red Pill

by Zen Wang

WHY WE LIKE IT:

We love this stark, post-Beckett teleplay that reaches deeply into searing social commentary. Wang's mesmerizing message is all the more effective for its borrowings on classical theatre. The dilemma faced by the characters is our dilemma; their moral desolation is the existential image of our bankrupt society. We see Huxley, Camus, a bit of Orwell and the great Greek tragedians in his scathing indictment of the status quo...but we also see hope. Quote: 'Wealth is not about how much money you have but how much you are willing to share.' A wonderfully drawn, powerfully realized stagecraft. We placed it in Non Fiction because Zen's vision of present day society is the way it is and then some. This is the first of two parts. The second part is forthcoming in Issue Three.

THE RED PILL by ZEN WANG

Opening Quote: "To live in a world without knowing the meaning of the world is like wandering through a great library without touching the books." Dan Brown.

EXT. SNOW COVERED FOREST - DAY

Two mysterious persons walk toward the camera. One wearing a trench coat while the other carries an umbrella. Both wearing stylish sunglasses. They stop in front of the camera and the one wearing trench coat (now revealed as a lady) extends her hands out. On the palm of her left hand is a blue pill. On the palm of her right hand is a red pill.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF FOREST - DAY

The view continues to expand and rise until we see all of earth in space.

ORACLE (O.S.)

Undoubtedly you will have questions. But I cannot help you until you decide that you actually want the answers.

SERAPH (O.S.)

forcefully

If you don't want to know then go back to your lives and forget you ever saw us.

ORACLE (O.S.)

Rest assured, one day you WILL wake up and wonder at questions such as: Why am I here? What does all this mean? What can I do? We are here to help you with these questions.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SNOW COVERED FOREST - DAY

SERAPH

If you decide you do not want to wake up to the truth you can take the blue pill. If you decide to wake up and get to know the truth you must take the red pill.

Oracle's two hands appear again.

POV. AUDIENCE

The audience's hand picks up the red pill and takes it to his/her mouth. Extreme zoom to the red pill.

smash to:

A collage of present day civilization: Banks, Finance, Industry, Farming, Military, Government, International Trade, Technology, Pharmaceutical, Fashion, Entertainment, News, Religion, Society, Education etc.

A big explosion happens at the end.

INT. WHITE ROOM

Oracle and Seraph standing. Images and diagrams start to appear behind them as they talk. They disappear and appear as needed.

ORACLE

There are three worlds. The world you see; the world you don't see and the world we all wish it could be.

SERAPH

We are not going to tell you about the world that you see. There is already enough of that. We are going to focus on the world you don't see. The real world.

ORACLE

As you can imagine, the real world is not pretty. But we are not doom-sayers. At the end of each session we are also going to talk about that third world. The one we all wish it could be. We are going to offer actions you can do today to mould our world into the ideal one.

SERAPH

First thing first. Why should we care about the world we don't see. Can't we just let the dead dog lie? Of course not. Because truth matters!

ORACLE

To live a conscious life you must be informed of how things really are. If you don't know you cannot care about important issues. The world cannot evolve until we are all on the same page.

SERAPH

One day hopefully the three worlds will perfectly overlap: The world we see; the world that really is

and the world we want to live in.
But until that day we must strive
to uncover the truth. Knowledge is
power!

ORACLE

Power is the theme of this session.
You have the power to make a
choice. You made the choice to know
and we are here to serve your
needs. Red pill will take you to
places, people, facts and events
that are unfamiliar to you.

SERAPH

You have the power to decide
whether we are a bunch of phonies,
hippies, nay-sayers and shit-
disturbers or we actually know what
we are talking about. Use your own
head and make your own judgement on
what we tell you.

ORACLE

In fact that is the only thing we
ask of you: to form your own
opinions independent of the mass
media, peer pressure or any
preconceived concepts. Open-
mindedness is all we need from you.

SERAPH

Let's get one thing straight right
of the bat. People and organization
that are in power have one aim: To
keep their power. Henceforth we
will refer to them as The System.
The System wants the entire world
to work for them. They want to reap
the rewards from every man, woman
and child's labour. They want to
pay you as little as possible and
get as much as they can. In a word,
they want to enslave the masses. To
do this they have invented many
control mechanisms.

ORACLE

In the following episodes we are going to talk about some of their major controlling mechanisms and how we can start to break free from them. The System will not give up its power willingly. The citizens of the world must rise up and fight for their divine rights.

SERAPH

Why are we taking the trouble to tell you all this?

ORACLE

Because we believe in you. We believe you have the power to make this world a better place for you and your children. We believe change is coming. When it is your turn to choose we want you to have the power to make the right choice.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find truth, freedom and purpose during your time in this world.

(End of Episode
One)

Episode Two: Money

Opening Quote: "Wealth is not about how much you have but how much you can afford to share."

OPENING SEQUENCE: COLLAGE OF MODERN CIVILIZATION ENDING UP IN A BIG BANG. BANK NOTES FLYING EVERYWHERE.

(Music: "Money," by Pink Floyd)

INT. WHITE ROOM

ORACLE

Let us talk about money. What is it? How is it used? Why does it exist? Very simply put, money is a form of energy. In this society money is the energy that ties all other forms of energy together.

SERAPH

Money is control. The system uses money to perpetuate its existence and simultaneously exert control over the masses with it. If you don't believe me then let us look at this.

Smash to:

INT. BANK VAULT

Seraph is standing in the midst of stacks of gold bars.

SERAPH

This is what money represent right? Bars of gold that you can get your hands on any time you want. Wrong! The money in your pocket is simply a piece of paper that is controlled by the central bank.

ORACLE

The central bank can make your twenty dollar bill worth nineteen dollar next month. Or eighteen dollars the month after. They did not touch that bar of gold at all.

In fact that gold does not even exist. Of course your money will still look like a twenty dollar bill but it buys less things. You have no control over it. If you want to keep it from sliding you put it in the bank. Who determines the interest rate you get from that money? You guessed it --- The Central Bank.

SERAPH

Brilliant! Isn't it? Who sets up the central bank? The government. So of course they need their cut as well. Let us look at some figures.

A series of diagrams and graphs appear.

ORACLE

Say you make \$50,000 a year. The government takes a fifth of that right away. Then you pay your property tax \$3000. Then your mortgage \$14400. Your car payment \$2000. Your insurance \$2400. Your utilities \$3000. Gasoline \$1000. Dental and health care \$2000. Groceries \$4800. What you have left?

SERAPH

Very little. If you want to do anything with this money you have to pay tax on top of it so it shrinks even more. If you want to put it in a savings account you have to pay service fees and the interest is lower than inflation so it shrinks again. If you want to invest, there is capital gains tax, management fees. The money you labored to make slowly but surely shrinks and disappears in front of you like a melting snowman. Like Magic.

Animation of money disappearing until nothing is left.

ORACLE

And this is how the system controls you. They want you to keep working for them until you are dead. Keep paying them taxes, interests, service fees, transaction fees, insurance premiums, administration fees, costs of borrowing, etc. etc.

An image of a coffin.

SERAPH

When you die do you think it ends there? No! Funeral costs, burial costs and more taxes on them. If you want to leave some money to your family? Guess what? Inheritance tax!

ORACLE

Some of you may say but the government and banks are serving us. Because of them we are safe, we have roads and schools and hospitals and shopping malls. And what about social services and old age pension, parks and recreation facilities.

SERAPH

Yes they have to give you some table scraps to keep you alive and working. Without roads you can't get to work. Without shopping malls you can't spend. The biggest slave owners keep their slaves well-fed and nicely clothed. They even give them gold watches and perks. But make no mistake, you are still a slave. Working till you die to fill the pockets of your masters. That police force? It protects the slave masters way more than you. The system spends much more money on maintaining the control than actually benefiting the tax payers.

ORACLE

For every missile they make they could have built five schools. For every fighter plane, two hospitals. An aircraft carrier costs 13 billion dollar to build and 7 million dollars per day to operate. Who pays for all this? You. And you have no choice but to pay for them even if you are anti-war. If this is not slavery I don't know what is.

SERAPH

Money is the tool for the system to control the masses. As long as you participate in the system you are slaves.

ORACLE

So what can you do to resist and eventually break free from the **Financial Control System**? Here are some of our suggestions.

1. Do not make career choices based only on money. You are giving up control of your life.
2. Do not live beyond your means. Reduce and eliminate your debts. Spending more than you take home will make a bigger slave out of you.
3. Avoid the tax man. Pay in cash; Go to farmer's markets, flea markets, barter, trade, reuse, recycle goods, shop locally.
4. Be self-sufficient. Cook dinner at home; plant your own vegetable garden; raise your own livestock; fix things yourself.
5. Enjoy life away from the system. Go into nature; enjoy your friends; get a hobby that improves yourself.

6. Stay healthy. Avoid medication;
find natural solutions/remedies;
eliminate toxins.

7. Keep learning. Find out about the
system and keep an open mind. Share
what you've learned.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and
Purpose during your time in this
world.

(End of Episode
Two)

*Search Keywords: Noam Chomsky, Banking System, Government
Bailout, Adam Smith, Banking Deregulation, Recession, IMF,
World Bank, Federal Reserve, Zeitgeist.*

Episode Three: Education

Opening Quote: "You may never be in a position where you have all the answers but you should always be in a position to look for more answers."

Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall," plays after the title montage. A wall in front of us.

SERAPH

Why are most children not happy in schools? Why can't they concentrate? Why can't they find jobs after schooling? Who pays for schools? Who decides on what they learn?

EXT. ABANDONED FACTORY

An abandoned old factory from the 1800's. A door opens and enters Oracle and Seraph.

ORACLE

This is where the western idea of education for the masses conceived. On the grimy floors of factories at the turn of the Industrial age.

SERAPH

Before the industrial age children do not need an education. They learn from their parents what they need to do to survive and feed the family. Peasants brought up more peasants; tailors brought up more tailors; smiths brought up more smiths.

Images of steam age machineries, Assembly lines and Chimneys.

ORACLE

When steam power replaced man-power and horse-power the factory owners were faced with a serious problem. The workers were not skillful enough to operate the machines and they would hurt themselves on the

assembly lines. Thus losing time and money.

SERAPH

So the factory owners came up with a scheming idea. Why don't we get the state to provide some basic form of instructions to the young people and make them ready for working in their factories? Why don't we get the state to pay for it as well.

ORACLE

The scheme worked wonderfully for the factory owners. They got better workers. The tax payers paid for the education. The government got more taxes from the factories. Everyone is happy right? Wrong! We forget the main ingredient in this equation--- the young people.

SERAPH

The young people are forced into cramped, stuffy, disease-ridden rooms from early in the morning till late evening. They are lined up at every turn. Their lives revolve around bells. They eat crappy food in big warehouses. They cannot speak unless being asked to. They are buses from place to place. Sometimes they even wear the same clothes.

ORACLE

Sounds familiar doesn't it? Yes the school is designed to replicate the factory down to the very last detail. There is one difference however. In the factory you make products, in the school you produce only one thing --- robots. Robots that dress, think, talk, move and behave exactly like how the system wants you to. The perfect worker for the system.

SERAPH

In the school system one of the most important thing is to conform. Regurgitation is a highly prized skill. Young people are not taught important life skills such as: mental health, relationships, natural remedies, sex and love, spirituality etc. What's more they are forced to learn in a tyrannical dictatorship that undermines democracy. No wonder much more people fail at schools than succeed.

ORACLE

In many schools they are cutting art programs and physical education. The reason is they will not help you enter the factory. In other schools they are teaching outdated religious doctrines that are not accepted by most of the society. What's even more outrageous is that those schools are STILL paid for by the general tax-payers.

SERAPH

Imagine that. You are paying for an education system that only emphasize skills important to the factory owners. And you are funding the religious instructions that you don't even believe in. And you have no choice but to pay up.

ORACLE

Wait a minute! You say. Doesn't education make my children smarter? A Child's brain is almost fully developed by the time he or she enters the publicly funded school system. All they acquire in the system is data. Data can create the illusion that your child is smarter but data hardly matters when it comes to finding happiness,

achieving full potential and obtaining peace, love and fulfillment. No wonder so many highly educated people fail at life itself.

SERAPH

In short the education system is conceived and designed by industrialists to train operators for their complex machines. It has never suited the needs of the individual. Its only purpose is to produce robots that can be controlled, used and abused.

ORACLE

The system does not want you to be a free-thinker. Free-thinkers are dangerous because they challenge the power structure. But you ARE in possession of a mind. A beautiful and brilliant mind! So why don't you use it?

SERAPH

Here are some suggestion on how you can reclaim your mind and start on the journey to rebel against the **Education Control System.**

1. Question your government about publicly funded religious schools. Refuse to pay taxes if they cannot satisfy you.
2. Take your children to alternative learning opportunities: travel abroad, road trips, museums, art camps, documentaries, workshops, farm visits etc.
3. Spend time with your children and learn together about the truth and the world. Discover together. Encourage them to question the status quo.

4. Learn from people you respect, trust and know. Do not trust authority simply because they are part of the establishment. Know that you are both a student and a teacher to those around you.
5. Enroll in alternative schools, outdoor camps, summer workshops. Diversify your child's mind and spirit.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and Purpose during your time in this world.

(End of Episode
Three)

Search Keywords: Industrial Revolution, Catholic Schools Funding, School Program Cuts, Government education funding, Government Military funding, Education at the 1600's

**Episode Four: Pharmaceutical and
Healthcare**

Opening Quote: "Fun, Joy and Laughter are the worlds best and cheapest medicines. Be your own doctor and prescribe them to yourself often and much."

Title sequence followed by the signature smash to:

Int. Drugstore. Day. A hand rings a bell but no one answers.

SERAPH

Why can't people get the help they need? Why do drugs cost so much? Why is the wait list so long at the hospital? Why are people getting sicker and sicker but the drugs are supposedly more and more powerful?

ORACLE

Health care is a prime example where greed trumped good intentions. An act of compassion to help the sick and elderly is now hijacked by multi-billion dollar international corporations. The single most important aim for those corporations is: Annual Growth. They can care less about people's health. The sicker you are the more money they make.

SERAPH

Medicines were derived from natural plants and animals. They are indistinguishable from food. People take them to feel better and to rejuvenate the body and mind. And like food and water, medicine and treatment should be a right. People should not suffer if remedies already exist in nature in affordable forms.

ORACLE

But suffer they do. When big corporations file patents on ancient plants' medicinal uses they

outlawed any attempts to use them without the corporation's written permission. Imagine this. Your grandmother gave your mother a natural remedy. Then it was passed down to you. The plant is in your backyard garden. But if you try to use it you are breaking the law and may be fined or imprisoned.

SERAPH

Incidents like this has incited many riots in the world. The corporations forced many governments to put down the riots using force. Laws that are not just do not deserve to be followed. Many brave souls are breaking the law as we speak in order to treat themselves and their loved ones using ancient remedies provided by mother nature.

ORACLE

Why are the drug companies so afraid of people using natural solutions? Don't they make enough money as it is? The truth is they want to hide their dirty secrets.

SERAPH

Drug companies, pharmacies and health care system form a vicious cycle of supply and demand. They use aggressive and addictive chemicals to keep up their annual growth. Governments watch it happen because this is another form of control. The big tax dollars from the companies keep them happy and silent.

ORACLE

Here is how it works. Say you are getting a headache from the fumes of the factory next door. Instead of curbing the factory's environmental output the

government-controlled mass media encourages you to see the doctor. The Doctor who is paid by the government and gets his bonuses and free vacations from the drug companies prescribes a drug that masks your pain.

SERAPH

You have a couple of good weeks but very soon your headache returns. You visit the doctor again and he gives you a powerful sedative to numb your nerves which also drops your blood pressure. This creates other serious health problems. The cycle continues for sometime until you find yourself taking a handful of drugs everyday with dozens of serious side effects. Your symptoms evolved from a simple headache to constant coughing to loss of sleep to chronic nausea and constipation. And all this time the factory next door is still pumping megatons of toxins to poison you and your children.

ORACLE

A simple visit to your library should reveal to you this truth. You need to go no further than looking at the volumes of cancer, diabetes, hormonal and other patients. Look at the graphs from the dawn of industrial age till now and you will understand one fact: while we may live longer we rely more and more on the system and their drugs. While science and technology have advanced we somehow became less healthy and more chemical dependent.

SERAPH

One type of organism shares the same trend --- Farmed Animals. A domesticated cow lives a longer

life than its cousins in the wild. It is pumped full of antibiotics and hormones to keep it docile and productive. It is only kept healthy enough to be productive. The system's ultimate aim is to have every single human hooked up to food and drugs and the humans produces wealth for them for their entire lives.

ORACLE

Sorry we have to break it to you this way my friend. But you live in a system that makes slaves and farm animals out of you. The system does not value your mind, spirit or soul unless it help them to increase wealth. They control you with many things. One of them is medications.

SERAPH

Here are some of the things you can do to free yourselves from the **pharmaceutical and healthcare control system.**

1. Ask important questions of your doctor, pharmacist and healthcare providers. Is this absolutely necessary? What are the side-effects? Are there alternatives?
2. Always get a second and a third opinion. Preferably from a different school of thought.
3. Do not forget the long-term effects of drug reliance. Think of financial and emotional burdens on your family.
4. Strive to uncover and eliminate the root of your illness. Research on how to reduce environmental toxins. Live a healthy and drug free lifestyle.

5.Keep an open mind about alternative medicine and practices. The mass media will want to keep them hidden from public knowledge, because if you are healthier they lose control of you.

6.Believe in your own body's strengths. Positive affirmation and thoughts lead to a stronger immune system which has no side-effects. Claim your right to be happy and healthy. Live as a shiny example to your children.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and Purpose during your time in this world.

(End of Episode
Four)

Search Keywords: Monsanto, Monsanto in India, Monsanto Riots, Human Experiment, Food Inc., Bayer Drug Dumping, Pharmaceutical profits, Cancer Rise, Environmental estrogens,

Episode Five: Politics and Nationalism

Title sequence smash to John Lennon's "Imagine."

Collage of flag waving of fanatical people at sporting events, demonstrations and rallies.

SERAPH

Politics is the single most wasteful human activity in existence. Because of it humans squandered away more energy, resources, time and lives than all other activities combined.

ORACLE

Patriotism and Nationalism no longer serve humanity. Being proud of being citizen of a certain country is as arbitrary as being proud of being Jim, or Sarah or Mike. Nations are no longer divided by culture, ideology, traditions or political systems.

SERAPH

All humans belong to one home: earth. We all belong to one universe. In WWII there were good people in Germany as there were bad people in Britain. Swearing an oath to either nation's flag makes no sense back then and it makes even less sense now.

ORACLE

The allied countries got together to defeat the power structure in Germany. A control system that enslaved and brainwashed their people to behave aggressively and violently toward other groups of human-beings. The allies did NOT wipe the country of Germany from

the map and exterminate the Germanic people.

SERAPH

Politicians use nationalism and patriotism to control the population's minds. Because they are such vague and arbitrary terms almost anything can be called patriotic or non-patriotic. Actions such as eating fries, using ketchup, wearing blue hat on certain dates, not wearing green skirts on other dates all have being labelled non-patriotic.

ORACLE

Politicians make a religion that is centered around them and their power structure and they call it "patriotism". They write it into law and call it "The Patriot Act" now they can put anyone in jail for questioning it.

SERAPH

Behind the veils of nationalism and patriotism the politicians can do almost anything. They are unchecked, unquestioned and unchallenged. Under the guise of patriotism unimaginable horrors have being unleashed on citizens of earth: killing, torturing, raping, enslaving, burning, stealing, raiding, etc. If anyone question it he is labelled unpatriotic and condemned as a traitor.

ORACLE

You may say there must be good people in government right? Yes, but the system does not reward good deeds. The system only rewards greed and aggression. Therefore all politicians become corrupt, even those with good intentions eventually gets either kicked out,

taken out or bought out. Such is the power of the System

SERAPH

Once, not that long ago there was a nation B and a nation C. Nation B wanted a lot of what C has but did not have the money to pay for them. So B enslaved a nation I to produce narcotics. B then transported the narcotics to C in exchange for the goods it wanted. Soon most of the people in C became addicts and the nation collapsed. Tens of millions of citizens of earth perished and even more were left homeless. Afterward, B left C to look for greener pastures.

ORACLE

Nation B is Britain. Nation C is China and Nation I is India. The narcotic? Opium. My friend, now when you hear "Britain First! Britain Last! Britain Forever!" does it have a slightly different ring to it?

SERAPH

Do not be proud of a country because it is an outdated arbitrary divide. Be proud of who you are as an individual. Be proud of the good people around you. Be proud of what the good people accomplished. Do not let the politician control and brainwash you in thinking that your country is better or worse than any other country on earth. It is a form of psychological manipulation and control.

ORACLE

Remember that you are a citizen of this earth. You belong here. You have a birthright to exist and to be happy. Most importantly you have billions of brothers and sisters

who would love and accept you if only given the chance to do so. There is nothing they want more than helping you during your difficult times and laughing with you to celebrate your triumphs. And that my dear friend, should be a comforting thought.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and Purpose during your time on earth.

(End of Episode Five)

Search Keywords: Dirty Worlds, The Untold History of USA, British Empire, Opium Wars, Treaty of Nanking, History of India, Colonization, Slavery, East India Company

Episode Six: Politics and Power

Title sequence followed by heavy metal music. Images of Struggle and Strife, political institutions, symbols of freedom and justice, cities and slums, war and prisoners.

SERAPH

Ever wonder why there are rich nations and poor nations? What divides the world into first, second and third worlds? Is it resources? No! Some rich nations are islands. Is it weather? No. Some rich nations have very bad weather. Is it their productivity? No. Some poor nations have very productive people. Then what is it?

A map of the world appears.

SERAPH

Forget everything you learned about world history and politics. They will tell you that certain nations are righteous and other nations are evil. Certain ideologies stand for freedom and other ideologies stands for slavery. Certain institutions work for good of all and others work for evil.

A blank chalkboard appears.

ORACLE

Wipe all that nonsense out of your mind and let us uncover the truth. As we mentioned previously humans decided to arbitrarily divide themselves up into nations. If you don't believe us just look up a little country called United Kingdom and its jurisdictions.

SERAPH

After humans divided themselves up into nations they realized their stupidity. They could not get something another nation has. So

they thought trading would be a good idea. Then some of them argued during trading and violence broke out. The bigger nations realized they do not have to trade if they can overpower the smaller nations.

ORACLE

Very simply this became the guiding principle on all international politics for the human race ---
 Might makes Right. Bigger nations loaded ships with weapons and criminals and sent them all over the globe to rape and pillage the others. There is only one condition: Bring back some spoils for the crown.

SERAPH

Before long the open waters were teeming with pirates flying their nations' flags. Legalized piracy was the dream job for many men with low morals. They have fame, women and fortune. What's more, after their deaths the history books hail them as heroes. Christopher Columbus was responsible for more suffering, death and destruction than anyone before him but the world celebrates his birth every year.

Oracle drops a history book into the trash bin.

ORACLE

When the state-funded pirates ran out of places to pillage they turned on themselves. The books call these events World War I and II. The books will tell you the wars were fought between good and evil, but in truth they were fueled by greed and power. At the end of each war nothing gets resolved because greed and power gets rewarded and grows bigger. The stage is set for the next war.

SERAPH

This is why war is constant and continuous. You may say that humans have evolved. The modern wars are just and only target the evil people. The crusaders thought so too. Time to yank your head out of the sand.

ORACLE

Let us look at a nation A. He does not like nation B, C, D and E and wants their resources. He has a three step plan. Step One: send in the economic hitman. Step Two: send in the Jackals. Step Three: send in the army.

SERAPH

Step One, a delegation goes to meet the head of these nations to try to persuade them to give up their resources. If they agree, nation A will lend them bundles of money and weapons to help them stay in power. Target nation then becomes a vassal state of A and supplies resources at a very low cost. The loan and interests can never be repaid and it acts as a chain to enslave the target nation.

ORACLE

If step one fails A will enact step two. A team of jackals will be planted in the target nation to overthrow the leadership. They will use any means necessary to create noise and turn people against their own elected leaders. Once the government topples a new government is installed by nation A. The result is the same as end of step one.

SERAPH

If both step one and two fails then nation A sends in their Legalized

Pirates (a.k.a. the military). The pirates take out the government by force and the same result is achieved as the previous steps.

ORACLE

Some of you smarty pants may have already guessed it. Nation A is America. B is Bolivia; C is Cuba; D is Dominican; E is Ecuador. Of course, the list goes on and on. We don't need to waste our time on listing all. But one thing is clear. Might makes Right! This is the rule of international politics.

SERAPH

To summarize, Powerful nations lure in unstable nations with money and weapons to make them slaves. If a slave nation disobey, the master nation stops supplying the money and weapons. Citizens of the slave nation who got addicted to handouts will suffer from withdrawal. They lash out against their own heads of state. At that point the master cuts the old head off and installs a new head on the body of their slave.

ORACLE

World politics is exactly like the Mafia and drug cartels. In fact they are ran by some of the very same people. They convert at-risk young nations into addicts. They supply the addicts with money and weaponry in exchange for their resources. Anyone interfering with this profiteering system will be labelled a "Terrorist". Once labelled as such they can be assassinated without a trial. All the person's legal rights are forfeit. They do not get representation and cannot defend

themselves in the court of law and justice.

SERAPH

This highly secretive and subversive system of enslaving citizens of earth is far from Justice, Lawfulness and Righteousness. Yet they brainwash everyone to think that they are exactly that. They subject the citizens of earth to a global terror unlike anything the world has ever experienced. Imagine the Gestapo except it operates globally without restraint. In stead of shooting you in the streets they send a drone loaded with bombs to your son's birthday party. Ironically, they call their targets "Terrorists".

ORACLE

I never said it would be easy to know the truth. This is why many people choose not to know. They choose to be brainwashed and enslaved. They join the army to fight wars for corporate profit. They support governments that are in bed with the cartels. They vote for people who promise to divide and conquer the people of earth one act at a time.

SERAPH

Back to my original question then. What makes a county poor or rich? It only depends on whether the nation is being taken advantage of or not. The more chains you have on your neck the poorer you are. The more chains you hold in your hands the richer you are. Look around the world and you will see this is true.

ORACLE

Sorry if we've upset you. We don't like bursting your bubble either, but it had to be done. Ignorance is not bliss. Ignorance is surrendering to the system so they can continue their control.

SERAPH

Go make yourself a cup of tea afterwards to feel better. Meanwhile, here are our suggestions on resisting the Political System's control.

1. Do not believe the media and your school system. Think independently and critically. Dig deep into the root causes of human misery and not just the surface symptoms. Ask why five times in a row and get to the bottom of things.

2. Find causes that you believe in and give them your support. Kindness is the magical answer to all human sufferings. It will heal both the giver and receiver.

3. Start your own movement to improve the world you live in. The system is going to suppress you but your fight will define who you are: You are not a Slave!

4. Do not look down on other nations, cultures, religions or races simply because you were taught so. Often, they are at the wrong end of the stick. Help them break free and be free yourself. Buy conscientiously and choose fairly traded products.

5. Do not let yourselves, your family, your friends or anyone you know to join the military. It has become legalized piracy. Even if a soldier survives a war, he will

never be whole again. In the USA
alone 1 in 4 vets is homeless and
there are 18 suicides per day from
PTSD. Under the current system
there is no honour in the military.

SERAPH AND ORACLE

May you find Truth, Freedom and
Purpose during your time on earth.

(End of Episode Six)

Search Keywords: The Economic Hitman, Dirty Wars, Jim Garrison, Snowden, Afghan Wars, Opium Production, Economic blackmailing, Panama Canal, History of Guatemala, Ecuador, El Salvador, Venezuela. Chevron in Venezuela, Bechtel in Bolivia, United Fruit Company in South America, Jacque Fresco, Peter Joseph.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

'The Red Pill' was inspired, on one level, by my infatuation with 'The Matrix'. Simply put, you can choose the blue pill and accept the status quo or choose the red pill and so do something about the human condition. As an immigrant from China, I have seen things from both sides of the world. My unique perspective propels me to uncover the truth.

BIO:

Polymath Zen Wang is not only a filmmaker but also an engineer, an artist, a script writer and film director. His love of the written word began in high school where he won a number of creative writing awards. In addition to screen plays Zen also writes novels and blogs. His quirky thoughts can be found @ zenwang.net

A Personal History of the ‘F’ Word

By Robert D. Kirvel

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Sure the title piqued our curiosity. But once we started reading we were hooked. Whether you’re writing about Aristotle or algorithms, academic prose imposes its own stylistic demands upon an author all of which Kirvel fulfils in both letter and spirit. But then there are gems like... ‘guns are impulse accelerators’ and ‘it’s akin to asking whether length or width is more important to determine the area of a rectangle.’ A well-researched precision paper by an impressive writer.

The question I keep asking is how to account for the bitterness. Why are so many unwilling or unable to engage across the conservative–liberal divide? Why am I?

“We all did it as kids,” my friend Sue reminds me over lunch, a shared Caesar salad with grilled chicken. We are both thinking back to days when we might have been guilty of fibbing, bullying, or being just plain “chicken” ourselves. A familiar exchange between children captures the idea:

“You’re a big, fat scaredy-cat.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No. *You* are.”

“No, *you*.”

We know the drill. Word-volley. But Sue shakes her head as we both wonder: does a deeper dynamic having to do with inverted truth lurk under the childish banter that could shed light on contemporary moral and political polarization? Take a more grown-up example of back-and-forth:

“You’re all the same. More government and zero guns.”

“No, you people want no government, zero regulation.”

“Guns don’t kill people, abortion kills people.”

“More Americans have died from domestic bullets than in all our wars.”

“Anyone can invent numbers.”

What do these two conversations, childish versus arguably less childish, have in common? My lunch companion and I are talking about more than getting our conceptual nappies in a snit over a juvenile taunt, or over the mellifluous versus grating tone of voice of some right- or left-wing politician. We are discussing why so many citizens have declared interpersonal warfare triggered by deeply held—sometimes insupportable—opinion.

I tell Sue I just finished reading an essay by Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “Reflections on Indexing My Lynching Book.”¹ It details the widespread white justification for bloodlust directed against blacks over a century ago, reinforced by inventing or stretching facts to fit preconceived beliefs. Pro-lynching apologists often claimed an outrage, black beasts raping helpless white women, served as moral high ground for retaliation by noose justice. In reality, the history of slave ownership confirms the impunity with which white masters raped enslaved women, not vice versa of course, but to reinforce a strained logic, black women were blamed for inciting white masters to lust and rape. Granted, sexual baiting might have happened, but plain old racism was

at work along with something else. Call it an unhealthy dose of justification or anxiety reduction, in this case pinning what whites had done around the necks of blacks, the very people upon whom violation had been visited.

During my teenage years, an uncle enjoyed “chewing the fat,” as he put it, with my mother just before our evening meal. Conversations turned cringe-worthy when he would bring up one of his pet topics, all those fat-a** boogies and lazy-a** jigaboos populating the rust-belt city in which he worked as a factory security guard during graveyard shift. I remember wondering at the time how my exceptional black teacher in grade school might have responded to this relative as he vented to Mom, but teenagers of the era in my household were to be seen and not heard. Years later, with tongue untied, I asked another family member to stop using the “N” word in my house. When he resurrected the issue one holiday, he seemed on the verge of apologizing.

“You don’t understand what I mean when I use that word.”

I felt cheered. Until he explained.

“What I mean is really stupid people.”

In an environment of self-deception, bordering on duplicity in defense of demeaning epithets, it’s not surprising that a while later, a fifteen-year-old member of the clan posted his desire on the Internet to burn “retarded” feminists at the stake and rid the world of fags. When I despaired to family members of the misogyny and homophobia underlying those youthful yearnings, more than one relative rallied to the boy’s defense by stating he held ill will toward nobody; rather, I was the one being intolerant. A good boy did not have a problem; I had the problem.

The neurologist Henry Head long ago differentiated between two types of sensations or feelings. Epicritic experiences are fine and localized discriminations of touch or pain. Protopathic

sensibility is poorly localized, more visceral or emotional and can be paroxysmal. My reaction to a relative's use of the "F" word was protopathic, deep and enduring.

In retrospect, part of the difficulty seems to have centered on my choice of words. By invoking the label, "homophobia," I'd hoped to elicit familial empathy for reasons having to do with my personal identity. Instead, the term was perceived as name-calling and interpreted as a declaration of war. How to explain the 180-degree reversal, with me in the perceived role of heterophobe?

As a neurophysiologist by training, I am not an enthusiast of psychoanalytic theories, whereas my friend Sue, a practicing psychiatrist, is more familiar with the territory. Both of us agree it is too easy to clobber people with high-toned diagnoses and alienate them; nevertheless, we both credit insights in the realm of unconscious coping techniques to ward off anxiety.² Do the ideas have relevance to our 21st-century polarization of opinion much in the news? Here is a proposition worth considering: at least one of five anxiety-reducing strategies can underlie inverted-truth propositions, which I will dub the "I'm-OK-But-You're-Not" dynamic. The mechanisms include (1) denial, (2) projection, (3) splitting, (4) rationalization, and (5) disgust-and fear-based illogic. Others could be added to the list, but five earn top billing in my book.

In the aforementioned fraidy-cat dialogue and its variants, an accused child might refuse to admit fear because the kid is not fearful. But if fear is felt, shame might rear its unwelcome head.

Rather than confess to an anxiety-inducing emotion that weakens one's self image and identity reflected in the eyes of another—rather than acknowledge shame—the child refutes having the emotion of fear. This is the home turf of denial, sometimes described by psychologists as "primitive" because it is often expressed during childhood as a refusal to accept reality.

In contrast to reflected identity, people sometimes actively project an identity onto another. Projection, the second mechanism in the list, involves incorrectly attributing one's unwelcome thoughts or feelings onto someone else, especially when the thoughts or feelings are anathema. As a follow-on to denial in the fraidy-cat exchange, the child projects fear onto another person. In this case, the I'm-OK-But-You're-Not response is basic stuff that comes naturally. Kids don't think much about how they react, but what about adults when it comes to moral or political opinion?

The role of projection in historic black lynchings seems obvious today, but discernment is not always evident in the heat of the moment. When I asked an adult relative my own age to consider the idea that he might be engaged in a denial of bigotry regarding the feminazi/fag comments posted by a teenage kid on Facebook, his response was also perhaps predictable. He denied being in denial, adding I was the one guilty of being "judgmental and intolerant." More projection.

Splitting, a third coping mechanism, is as commonplace as projection but in some respects more interesting. It is difficult these days to avoid encountering statements claiming Donald Trump is the devil incarnate or a national hero. Add to the list Barack Obama, Ronald Reagan, Gloria Steinem, Justin Bieber, the Pope, Hillary Clinton, and dozens of others in or out of the news. An individual espousing intense feelings might generalize an indictment or praise, depending on political party and other alignments, to all liberals or conservatives, or to all religious advocates or atheists, or to all young pop stars. In the realm of black-and-white thinking, of clown journalism and kneejerk partisanship à la Fox News and MSNBC, scant middle ground is in sight; we and everyone who thinks as we think are right, whereas they and everyone like them are wrong. Why reason on the basis of an individual's worthiness or faults—or the logical merit of a given position—when it feels better to indict an entire group, all African Americans for

example, all Republicans or Muslims, all who are welfare recipients, or drug addicts or terrorists or jihadists or something-else-ists? This is the home turf of the splitting landscape in which extreme polarization or splitting of opinion into good and evil is the pathway to veracity, to hell with middle ground because there is none, and hello Truth, because I am the one who owns it even if I distort or invert it.

Such thinking is nothing new even in intellectual circles. During the early twentieth century, scholars rallied to one side or the other of the nature–nurture controversy. Are we what and who we are because of biology or the environment? Although the debate simmers today, the Canadian psychologist, Donald Hebb,³ convincingly argued from data (*The Organization of Behavior*, 1949) the modern view that we are the product of both nature and nurture, 100% owing to genetics and 100% to our surroundings. It's akin to asking whether length or width is more important to determine the area of a rectangle, Hebb offered. Is the U.S. President a demon or angel then, and how about that intemperate uncle of mine? Might the two individuals contain a bit of both good and bad?

Rationalization, a fourth coping mechanism in the list, involves distorting facts until thinking makes the distortion appear to represent reality. Think of rationalization as unconscious self-deception to reduce psychological discomfort through justifications that seem plausible but are not, in reality, legitimate. In the realm of not-rational rationalization, something approaching genuine empathy might be reduced to false do-goodism. Why donate money to feed the poor if those losers will just buy more drugs, for example?

Rationalizations abound in political campaigns and shroud many hot topics. When shown reliable, statistical data on gun violence in the U.S., an acquaintance of mine dismissed the numbers by responding, “Anyone can say anything. Everybody is biased these days.” This is an

example of wanting to win an argument so much that anything goes, including carpet-bombing with words just to win. Unwelcome hard evidence, cause and effect, and intellectual or academic authority might be viewed as desirable or undesirable, depending on one's outlook and willingness to reason, but they can also be dismissed as their opposites, namely untrustworthy, elitist, or proof of what this same acquaintance calls intellectual bigotry. When asked to read about splitting, this person stated that no such thing existed. "I don't need to read articles or books," he maintained, "besides, history doesn't mean anything any more because it's just someone's opinion, no better than my own." Such abjuration is a remarkable combination of several unconscious defense mechanisms, with rationalization stage center.

Theory suggests that the strategies of denial, projection, splitting, and rationalization are unconscious, but most of us are at least partly aware of moral or political dilemmas and our reactions to them. The idea of cognitive dissonance⁴ addresses conscious conflicts and the discomfort or tension arising from conflicting attitudes and beliefs. Even an ardent pro-choice advocate, if sane, does not condone the wholesale taking of human life, so how can the conflict of life-taking via abortion be justified? One option is to define the beginning of "life" in a way that is acceptable, if at odds with pro-life definitions. Another way to reduce the conflict is to argue that abortion is a medical decision between physician and patient, thus politicians should keep laws from female bodies. The flip side of cognitive dissonance is cognitive consonance: we seek out what makes us feel more harmonious with the world and ourselves. When listening to an emotionally charged discussion about abortion for example, we might focus on what strengthens our viewpoint and helps us feel better. To the extent that we want to support our position or beliefs, we attend to and incorporate information bolstering our personal position and may not even be aware that we are not processing counter arguments.

To the four coping mechanisms discussed so far, I would add a fifth response pertinent to political or moral polarization. Fear-based illogic is a horse of a different temperament. We hear its echoes all the time: guns don't kill people; people kill people. Though many individuals might acknowledge the proposition somehow "feels" right or wrong, it's difficult to put a finger on the exact reason. However, the notion that "guns are never the problem, but people are always the problem" is black-and-white thinking already characterized as splitting.

Another way to look at the NRA's assertion that guns don't kill people is to consider the missing elements: let's say the proposition is true for the sake of argument, but then what should be done about guns, if anything? This is a complex issue because several mechanisms are at work, as is the case in most controversies. Taken at face value, the statement "Guns don't kill people" is empirically false. Guns kill more than 80 people a day in the U.S. on average (including suicides, though estimated numbers are just that), so a more accurate mantra might be that guns do kill people, and people with guns kill people. However, what a gun advocate usually means is that guns properly disabled and safely locked away do not kill people by themselves. Besides, automobiles kill as many folks as guns do, more or less. A counter argument is that autos are not designed explicitly to kill or maim, and guns are impulse accelerators. To the comeback that cars, too, can function as impulse accelerators, one could answer that all cars and drivers are licensed regularly. Arguments might continue endlessly, but it is doubtful opposing sides can reconcile when one camp remains fiercely motivated by an underlying fear that big, corrupt government will confiscate firearms along with other "Constitutionally guaranteed rights" and the opposing camp fears and deplores everything to do with instruments designed to shoot bullets.

Brain research is beginning to provide insights into neurophysiological mechanisms underlying personal and political ideology. We frequently hear that a powerful, causal factor behind hatred is fear. One might then wonder what could trigger fear or accompany it with respect to belief systems or dogma. Could the basic and universal emotion of disgust have anything to do with one's political ideology or moral perceptions?

One of the earliest scientific studies on disgust is included in Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.⁵ The emotion of disgust is roughly defined in psychology these days as a feeling of revulsion or intense displeasure to something unpleasant or offensive. As with pornography, it's the sort of thing we know when we see it. However, to be rigorous and reproducible, contemporary scientific studies variously define human disgust in terms of "disgust sensitivity" measured on standardized surveys or questionnaires to emotionally evocative images, such as those in the International Affective Picture System (IAPS) database.

Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom⁶ have suggested that an individual's general predisposition to feelings of disgust can play an important role in one's social life. Results from two studies by these researchers showed that proneness to disgust was associated (that is, statistically correlated) with greater self-reported political conservatism, and the linkage is strongest for issues centered on purity, such as attitudes toward homosexuality. Terrizini, Shook, and Ventis⁷ supported the positive correlation and added that inducing disgust increases prejudicial attitudes for conservatives and reduces prejudice for liberals.

Such correlational reports are suggestive, but how and where does something like revulsion operate in the human brain when it comes to social or political values? P. Read Montague⁸ and ten coworkers from Virginia Tech and elsewhere are answering this question by measuring human brain responses directly with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

While 41 male and 42 female test subjects (ages 18 to 62) were monitored in an fMRI scanner, they viewed pictures that included disgusting, threatening, pleasant, and neutral images and then rated all the pictures they had seen. Afterward, participants completed questionnaires about their political attitudes and sensitivity to disgust. Brain responses to a disgusting picture were enough to predict an individual's political orientation. This was true even when a person's verbal rating of images (reports of low disgust for example) disagreed with the brain's reaction (strong neural activation response). Details from this experiment were remarkable: brain-based prediction of a person's liberal or conservative views was accurate 95% of the time on the basis of a single disgusting image, with conservatives biased toward the negative, that is, showing a stronger disgust and threat response in brain areas such as prefrontal and insular cortex and the amygdala, which is involved in supporting memory for emotionally arousing experiences, including anxiety. My friend Sue tells me that lowering electrical activity in the subcortical amygdala with promising computer-based treatments might be a way of reducing post-traumatic stress disorder with greater success than previous approaches, such as medication.

Political ideology—including attitudes about family, sex, education, and personal autonomy—is now being shown to reflect, at least in part, basic biological mechanisms that help defend against perceptions such as physical threat. People like to think their political opinions are objective or at least rational, but the study by Montague and his coworkers strongly suggests emotions play a greater role than previously thought, and that role might lie outside our awareness or gainsay verbal statements. The head (mouth) says one thing, but the heart (or in this case, emotional brain) begs another.

A disconnect between what humans feel (experience internally) versus express (say or do) may not be too surprising in view of the fact that many animals defend against physical threat through

the well-known fight-or-flight response. A rabbit that does not flee may still be threatened or terrified. It is tempting to speculate on a possible interplay between disgust and shame in humans: if the brain responds with disgust (say, in a racial context) but the public voice says “no, I harbor no prejudicial feelings,” might the overt expression have something to do with shame-induced denial, just as a child might deny fear because of shame?

Neuropsychologists like to talk about our brain’s internally generated version of reality, which may not always agree with the world “out there.” An internal model—as it is called—of experience or memory is a way of organizing and representing what we perceive, so that our interpretation of “reality” depends on our experiences along with cultural biases and related factors. This idea is often discussed in the context of vision, where visual parts of the brain can process more information than the eyes send in. The world, for instance, remains steady even though our eyes dart around. Perceptions are not straightforward reproductions of data from the eye to brain but are reconstructions in the brain shaped by expectations, probability, and memory.⁹ But what about morality? If an internal model evokes disgust in the context of, for example, homosexuality, would that inner model not shape one’s moral and political opinion regardless of what one says?

Data from fMRI alone may not completely explain what’s behind the polarizing I’m-OK-But-You’re-Not stance, but such information points the way to clearer understanding of what’s going on at the neuronal level. Because of educational bias, I favor a physiological approach as potentially the most productive whereas Sue combines that avenue with psychodynamics, placing equal emphasis on mental and emotional processes that may be unconscious and shaped by early childhood experiences. Sue is more optimistic than I am as well, possibly because her professional commitment—treating vets returning to Fort Knox from conflict and trauma—is

centered on real-world experience plus an expectation that injured minds and bodies can be mended, or least modified for improved adaptability to a tough world. Even she has dark moments though when caseloads diminish her role to pill pimping and when reflecting on how government funding agencies erratically address struggling veterans.

Like many others of my generation, I left the Midwest overcast in search of brighter skies and outlooks, settling decades ago along the West Coast where residents do not complain quite so much about weather mucking up a metaphorical climate of shame and disgust. Here at home, minority neighbors are everywhere visible and often, like myself, transplants. Looking back several decades, it's tempting to remember the pleasant and discount the disagreeable, leaving me slightly nostalgic, yet largely disenthralled, about the past. My parents quibbled about politics, but they remained respectful while favoring either the political party of the "little guy" (Mom) or no-nonsense "business interests" (Dad), and they voted during every election, unlike most Americans today. A mental reboot of yesteryear reminds me most families in our sphere back then did not engage in emotional battles over irreconcilable viewpoints at the evening meal. These days, many of my extended family and I are at opposite ends of the spectrum in ways I would never have anticipated.

What do I mean by a climate of shame and disgust back on the home front? First, the disgust. When I do return for a visit to the place of my adolescence, semi-rural mid-America, it is tempting to pass judgment on local values through which residents often claim moral high ground while looking down at outsiders, such as city slickers, feminists, gays, minorities, welfare moms, and all those immigrants. In doing so, self-righteousness becomes apparent, generalizations abound, and insulting epithets are common. But that is a two-way street. For example, it seems to me that almost every household where I grew up remains a community of

the like-minded, and that is also true in my current urban neighborhood of largely mixed-ethnic, liberal, whale huggers who are happy to ridicule hicks frittering their lives away in corn country. In both places one sees a predisposition to smugness and towering self-righteousness, but there is a difference.

In households rooted in the turf of my adolescence, one sees faces of only pale flesh tones, hears words with reinforcing overtones in only one language, witnesses expressions of faith over fact in propositions that stand on wobbly but unchallenged legs. Most of my relatives still live within a cultural cocoon only a stone's throw from the houses in which they were born. They live and love miles—light years, really—from me geographically and disconnected from my way of thinking, tuned always to a single channel of information with little possibility of real news about an incredibly diverse world—where, yes indeed, the climate is changing—reaching out occasionally but never absorbing in a personal way much to do with that world, keeping a firm hold on entrenched beliefs and values, innocence and naivety, loyalty and purity. And if that is so—at least the innocence and purity parts—is it tragedy or cause for rejoicing?

Jonathon Haidt,¹⁰ a social psychologist from NYU, suggests that a liberal-minded person tends to be more open to new experiences than a conservative person; however, five moral values or systems form the core of political choices whether an individual identifies as left, right, or center. A liberal-minded person tends to honor two of the five values most: minimizing harm while maximizing care (think Hippocratic Oath), and fairness/reciprocity (in essence, adhering to the Golden Rule). Conservatives honor those two values highly as well, but they also nurture three additional roots of morality: in-group *loyalty* (faithfulness to their own kind), *respect* for authority (for example, police or church), and *purity* of mind and body (for example, abortion is murder). Liberals care little about these three concepts and sometimes reject them. A proposed

connection between political conservatism and the idea of purity is reminiscent of findings from the Inbar study and others.

I worry that some explanations suggested by experts are too facile to address the complex factors underlying political, moral, and religious opinion. Is a single dynamic at work in a given situation or a dozen? Do we understand any of them fully, to say nothing about our beginner's concept of brain wiring? And isn't branding a person either liberal or conservative—nonracist or racist—far too simplistic? Sue and I add another wrinkle to the quandary by asking an uncomfortable question.

“Could racism have some basis in biology, which is to say, evolution?”

The suggestion feels unnerving, even sinister, as though we are imagining a justification for eugenics or worse. I like to regard myself as nonracist, but can anyone claim to be entirely without thoughts of cultural bias, no matter one's skin color? I have to work on occasion at consciously suppressing negative judgment of others of a different culture or nationality or color. Doesn't everyone? Do such thoughts qualify as racism, and if so, is the tendency biological or entirely cultural (learned)? The evolutionary speculation Sue and I are mulling is that as humans evolved, it might have become biologically adaptive for survival purposes to favor and protect our kind, that is, “us,” and to distrust unfamiliar or foreign hunter-gatherers, “them,” especially given competition for resources. Such conjecture flies in the face of social–scientific dogma holding that differences among human societies are cultural and not genetic, to say nothing of the contemporary biological viewpoint that “race” is an unscientific term.¹¹ But even if the idea of some biological basis for racist behavior (such as bigotry) turns out to have validity, it is grounds for contemporary discrimination no more than a presumptive instinct for human aggression justifies torture or genocide. Furthermore, the hypothesis of biologically based racism would

operate as a two-way street, favoring no particular “master” race or country over another in a civilized world. These are swampy waters, but they illustrate the emotional burden and complexity inherent in trying to unravel the origin of social judgments made by humans.

When I taught neuropsychology, I cautioned students against the error of hypostatization. To put it simply, explaining something merely by giving it a name is often no explanation at all. (Of course she’s homeless; she’s crazy. The kid’s a thief because he’s delinquent.) Labels are fine so long as they are linked to a deeper understanding of—and explanation for—a given behavior together with the possibility of prediction and control of that behavior. However, when bandied about injudiciously, a tag can induce counterproductive responses, including hostility, as happened when accusing my family of homophobia.

Finally, about that climate of shame back in corn country. In reflecting on my extended family, I believe our hearts beat as one in hopes for common ground fertile in common sense, but in areas of morality and politics, otherwise decent people intending no harm can be utterly irrational. I know I am.

My father did not give voice to sexual matters except on one occasion when I was in middle school. In a moment of breathtaking humiliation for me, he issued in earnest tones a warning about guarding against perverted men. I knew at once, though he did not, that I was the gay person my father was warning me against.

Because I’m a homosexual male who grew up in rural America in an era of police harassment and gay bashings and Stonewall riots, the word “fag” is a blasting cap still detonating in my brain. The pejorative is a reminder of shame, whether uttered in irony today by a gay acquaintance in San Francisco or with loathing by an unwitting kid or a Gospel-brandishing believer from the Bible Belt. When I re-evaluate whether neighbors or relatives discount bigotry

or I overreact to the “F” word, I remind myself of denial, projection, splitting, rationalization, and complex fear- and threat-based mechanisms capable of inverting truth but also serving as splendid coping mechanisms for individuals struggling to make it through the day. I reflect on our emotional (reptilian) brain about which we often have as little insight as crocodiles, then on the generous mantle of gray matter that makes us social mammals, both more and less, for better or worse.

The humane socialist economist E. F. Schumacher cautioned that the proper work for us in curing contemporary problems is to work on ourselves, not to take the either-or approach but one *and* the other.¹² Understanding oneself and others often resides in the vicinity of middle ground, in the idea of balance—often the higher ground—in both discourse and in our heads.

Although knowing that much will solve neither the world’s problems nor my own, it might help in negotiating the conservative–liberal divide with greater civility.¹³

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End

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

What inspired your essay?

In a word, the essay was triggered by intolerance. Extreme opinions about contentious topics—such as abortion, gun control, gay rights or immigration—can inflame discussions online or around the dinner table, as most of us know. This essay was sparked by a single posted comment that begs the question: what is an informed way to interpret or respond to offensive prejudice? Creative nonfiction provides an appropriate framework to address the question because it asks writers and readers alike to process their thoughts and words through a reality filter, and it also allows for some creative leeway in framing arguments.

What does the essay mean to you?

I continue to publish a series of nonfiction pieces centered on the destructive emotional consequences of personal judgment, sexual discrimination and political bias. This essay considers aspects of personal identity from the relatively objective perspectives available to us from neurophysiological research and psychological theory. It addresses the question: Do extreme views too often characterizing uncivil discourse in recent years have more underlying behavioral mechanisms in common with us than we usually recognize?

Why do you think it is important to our readers?

Appreciating some of the physical and mental processes triggering what we do and say to one another, particularly in the realm of antagonistic political and social discourse, can provide insight into personal motivations. Perhaps the knowledge can also help bridge what sometimes seems to be unbridgeable personal divides.

BIO:

Robert D. Kirvel is a PhD. in neuropsychology, is a Pushcart Prize (twice) and Best of the Net nominee for fiction. Awards include the Chautauqua 2017 Editor's Prize, the 2016 Fulton Prize for Short Story and a 2015 ArtPrize for creative nonfiction. He has published in England, Ireland, New Zealand and Germany, in translation and anthologies and in several dozen U. S. literary journals such as *Arts & Letters*. His novel *Shooting the Wire* is forthcoming from Eyewear Books, London, in early 2019.

The Liar's Asylum by Jacob Appel: Book Review

The Liar's Asylum.

By Jacob M. Appel

Black Lawrence Press, USA, 2017.

168 pages.

The characters who populate Jacob Appel's stories in *The Liar's Asylum* are drawn largely from 'a flourishing sector of the beleaguered middle-class'. To wit, they are well fed, educated, statistically affluent and mostly Jewish Americans from the northeastern United States. This is 'white' literature': principal characters of colour or LGBTQ do not appear and those of ethnic minority, like Silvio in 'Bait and Switch' are consigned to supporting roles. The stories have arcs and plots (what!!!) as well as strong narrative direction, and the timelines (excluding flashback) are mostly linear. The writing is polished to a mirror shine and the handsome prose might well fall under something called 'American classical'. *The Liar's Asylum*, then, is about as far from alternative, grunge lit and metafiction as an author could go. If you're looking for edgy pyrotechnics or the stylistic equivalent of *Le Cirque de Soleil*, you won't find it here. But these are only minus's in the minds of people who count them as plus's.

Jacob Appel is a writer of consummate skill and—though we have yet to read other of his works—we think, in this collection—pretty much at the top of his form. These are pedigreed stories that stand squarely on the august shoulders of their forebears: Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Joseph Heller and the rich tradition of 20th century Jewish American literature they bring with them. There are also fleeting shades of Salinger, the early to middle period Tobias Wolff, and, in the stellar title story—surprise! —Ray Bradbury. In every case the writing is poised, confident and often funny with a mimic's ear for dialogue. Appel has a gift for the *bon mot* and a talent for adage: 'I think we may make a dishonest man out of him yet.' and 'Closeness without conflict exists only in the cemetery.' To say nothing of 'Life is so uncertain you eat your dessert first.' So, what does all this mean? It means that you *must* read these stories because they demand to be read, and you will be poorer in spirit for not doing so.

Now, down to business.

In 'Bait and Switch' 14-year-old Laurie Jean is 'farmed' out in a matchmaking ploy by her 'designing' aunt. Aunt Cindy, having been passed over by a fishmonger and a piano teacher, now has her scopes targeted on Silvio Santino who operates an artificial flower business. The most interesting character in the story is Maia, his teenage stepdaughter, who both adores and despises him. She sets about sabotaging her 'hot' stepfather's business by secretly scratching swastikas on the underside of artificial leaves and pressures a reluctant Laurie Jean to enlist in her heinous scheme. Wisely, Appel resists the temptation to explain her puzzling duplicity.

In the tenderly comedic 'Good Enough for Guppies', a faded Norma Desmond type marries a much younger man in a pet store to the hysterical consternation of her well-meaning but insecure daughter. Their repartee crackles and Appel's assured evocations of shabby gentility surrounding the ageing in body but youthful in spirit bride draws a fine line between parody and poignancy.

In the very strong 'Picklocks in Oblivion' (the wonderfully named town that occurs in two stories and is probably Appel's Yoknapatawpha county or Lake Wobegon) a young man and his dangerously free-spirited girlfriend chauffeur a wealthy but incapacitated stroke victim to a distant family wedding with a plot twist that will have your heart in your throat.

Appel has a penchant for compounding the life of his characters by situating them in improbable, though credible, slightly askew scenarios. A young soldier by the name of Virtanen in 'The Frying Finn' ironically learns, through a vengeful and harrowing encounter with his girlfriend's American lover, the meaning of the Finnish word *sisu*, drawn from a tradition in his own culture.

In 'The Summer of Interrogatory Subversion' a teenage girl and her mother's boarder, an alternative minded young philosopher named Jonah, kindle a relationship that unexpectedly falls apart after she clandestinely discovers his secret fetish. And in the luminous title story, with its unsettling surrealism, infidelity is played out against a backdrop of mass hysteria, akin to St. Vitas Dance. It is a dark tale, yet as adroitly handled as any short fiction by Stephen King.

In what is arguably the outstanding offering in an outstanding collection, the complex and psychologically layered 'Prisoners of the Multiverse', (*read the story in our Fiction Section*) the suicide of a beloved high school physics teacher precipitates, with troubling lacunae, a re-examination of past lives in a number of his female students. The ending of this quietly disturbing story, which could have been easily overwritten, is a triumph of restraint possible from the pen of only the finest of writers.

Existential angst (God help us for using the phrase!), the cruelties of fate, the cold-hearted plunder of time, it's all here—along with unforgettable lines that linger in mind and heart. 'I'll never forget what it was like to watch a woman with a PhD in particle physics struggling to spell her own name with childhood blocks.'

Buy *The Lair's Asylum*. Read *The Liar's Asylum*. You owe it to yourself. Besides, do you really *not* want to read an author who comes up with 'she is capable of serving venison to Bambi.' I mean, c'mon.

The Editors—FLEAS ON THE DOG

A Few Thoughts on the Ontological Argument to a Budding Young Philosopher

by Brendon Sykes

WHY WE LIKE IT:

If you can't remember the many nights you stayed up arguing about the Ontological Argument into the wee hours with a case of 24 or some good Colombian what the heck were doing in university? Every generation since Anselm has taken a swipe at this philosophical equivalent to Rubric's Cube and nobody, except maybe Kant, could ever claim something close to refutation. Anyway, we liked Sykes's impudent, even brazen kick against 'one of the cornerstones of empiricism' and since it was directed towards a 'budding young philosopher', we hope the dude learned from it. And that's a truth a greater than which does not exist!

Per Alessandro, il mio amico italiano,

Che fai di bello, raga? Io spero stia bene. Ho letto il tuo saggio, quindi alcune cose...

You write: Anselm's Ontological Argument (hereafter OA) is as follows:

- 1. If God exists only in understanding, then we can think of a greater God.*
- 2. We can't think of a being greater than God.*
- 3. Therefore, God cannot exist only in the understanding.*
- 4. Either God exists in reality and the understanding or God exists only in the understanding.*
- 5. Therefore, God exists in reality.*

I think this argument is reasonable with respect to Anselm's definitions of God and greatest. The definitions support the argument. The argument is also valid because it takes the form of modus tollens. Because it is modus tollens, it is a valid argument.

Alesso, the OA logically proves the premise set out by Anselm but this proof does not constitute validation of God's existence. Most of the objections to the argument lie outside the boundaries of *modus tollens* and logic. In effect, whatever the argument (as it is formulated) proves, it fails to convince. Bertrand Russell famously said of the OA, 'Probably the best way to deal with it is to forget it.'

A few of the problems to consider...

You write:...God, by definition, means the being than which nothing greater (or more perfect) can be thought. Nothing imagined can be greater than God. ...The next important phrase...is what it means to exist in understanding. What this means is that if someone understands a concept then that person has an understanding of that idea....Another important thing to consider is that existence in reality is greater than existence in understanding...

Anselm argues that a God that exists in both understanding and reality is greater than a God that exists only in understanding. But that 'reality,' his real existence, is exactly what we are setting out to prove. So it's like he's already made him 'real' before he proves him 'real'. This, in effect, begs the question. A number of philosophers have taken up this line of rebuttal.

God's essence doesn't prove his existence. We can assign essences and properties to all manner of imaginary things and this in no way necessitates their existence in reality (time and space). Essence, here, is the fundamental 'is-ness' of something—what makes an apple an apple and nothing else and that no other thing other than an apple is an apple because of that essence. It's sort of like the unique genetic blueprint of an apple. But where does essence become existence? The apple exists or it doesn't exist? How are these two possibilities related, specifically, to its essence?

Anselm treats God's existence as a predicate but as you know, Kant famously challenged this assumption by asking 'can existence *be* a predicate?' A predicate here means a property of something. He suggests that it cannot. For example in the sentence 'The bicycle is red', red is a property or predicate of bicycle. But is the same true in the sentence 'The bicycle is red and it exists.'? 'Exist' here does not relate to the bicycle in the same way. To talk about 'a red bicycle' assumes the existence of a red bicycle in at least some capacity—either the understanding or the understanding plus time and space (reality). It's absurd to say 'the red bicycle exists'. We say 'the red bicycle' because its existence is already assumed. Its existence is *a priori*. We couldn't point to the bicycle or have such an object of reference, if this were not the case.

Anselm's use of 'great' as in 'none greater of which one can conceive' also raises problems. 'Greatness' is subjective. What is great for one is not great for the other and though we can both agree on the meaning of the word great, its application to objects within our experience (objects in the world) is variable and this includes concepts of God(s). For example, in Christianity greatness includes kindness, forgiveness, love of God, compassion, faith etc. All of these are 'good', that is great, qualities. On the flip

side, in Tantric Hinduism, the greatness of the goddess Kali (Durga) is measured by how ferocious, cruel and bloodthirsty her demands. Kali is considered Hinduism's greatest female deity.

You write: One standard objection to Anselm's argument is that perfection doesn't require existence. What this means is that by definition if X is a perfection then X is the highest degree of a property, that it comes in degrees and is good to have. But in logic existence is not a property...the fact that something exists doesn't enhance our concept of the thing...So regarding Anselm's argument, perfection doesn't require God to exist in reality....

This is another sore point: his use of perfection. (God is that of which a more perfect being cannot exist). This has generated a lot of comment. Is perfection a property of God's or any existence? He must exist because if He did not He would be less perfect than a being who did exist. But, again, is there a necessary connection between perfection and existence? In fact, it could be argued (if playfully) that the opposite is more likely to be encountered. Take an apple. Does the perfect apple exist? And is its perfection the reason why it exists? Must it be perfect to exist? And how do you account for blemished or imperfect apples which certainly exist?

Also, how could a perfect being—a more perfect of which cannot be conceived, a more perfect of which there is none—create an imperfect world? He is, by Anselm's own definition, less perfect than a perfect being that creates a perfect world (and therefore, by the terms of his argument, should, in fact, *not* exist). And if not, then the idea of his existence is *redundant*. In the perfect world, in the perfect universe where nothing is imperfect, God becomes unnecessary. In a perfect world, would there be a need for God? We don't live in such a world, of course, and maybe that's why Voltaire said, 'If God didn't exist we would have to invent Him.' But if that is the case, does this mean God's very existence is an invention of Man? If so, he exists *only* in the understanding and not in time and space. Or if He *does* exist independently in time and space He is a different God from the one that owes His existence to human invention.

I found your final paragraph the most interesting one in your paper. You write: 'I *believe* (in God's existence) *because of my personal beliefs and what I was taught as a child.*' Belief is a mental construct that by virtue of its nature resists inquiry. In some respects, it throws a roadblock into philosophical investigations. Belief is black and white; philosophy is a universe of grays. Sometimes it confronts us with prickly issues that make us uncomfortable because they call into question ideas or beliefs we hold fundamentally dear. It's the job of philosophy to ask those questions. And while your statement of what you believe is your special privilege and understandable in context, it's not philosophically sound. It is a declaration of faith that is not open to investigation.

With regard to your metaphor of a painting—you have to be careful when you step out of topic and address something you may not be altogether familiar with. This has nothing to do with logic and everything to do, empirically and historically, with sense data. You write: *Before an artist draws or paints a picture, he/she has an image of it in their mind. Then he/she actually draws it so now it exists. I think that people would feel that the actual painting is greater than having the understanding of the concept of that image.* But this very notion has been challenged. In the late 1970's an art movement emerged in

New York (mostly) called Conceptual art. It argued that the 'idea' or 'thought' behind the work of art *was* the work of art. So you have an idea of a painting in your head. Once you do, according to Conceptualism, *that* is the actual art work. To then paint or sculpt what you thought is redundant and mechanical. So this challenges the very idea of existing in the understanding and existing in both understanding and reality. To the Conceptual artist, existence in understanding IS the artwork and its existence in reality is unnecessary. Sort of a back flip of Anselm's criteria for existence. This is why much Conceptual art consists only of ideas scribbled onto a page or instructions for making the painting/sculpture by a person other than the artist himself. If you weren't aware of this movement in art—and there are similar examples in literature and music—you would not think to challenge your statement. As I mentioned above, sometimes you have to step out of the tight boundaries of deductive reasoning and approach the philosophical problem in other ways: appeal to art 'in the world', empiricism, metaphysics etc...

...I like your curious mind, Alesso. Keep reading. Keep thinking. Thinking is, after all, the second most important thing you can do in life. The most important thing is to understand thinking isn't important.

Va bene, e' tutto. Abbi cura di te stesso e ci vediamo la prossima settimana...Il migliori saluti alla tua famiglia.

Ciao,

Brendon

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I came. I saw. I came again.

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.'

When Life Gives You Bullshit

by Benjamin Rietema

WHY WE LIKE IT:

We think the comedic side of Raymond Carver lurks somewhere in the shadows of this briskly told and stylish minimalist modern day lamentation where one surreal improbability unfolds another. Absurdity and jest are nimbly honed to a keen edge and we love the author's tart prose, stone-faced humour and harried voice. In a tough genre/mode that is too often overwritten and overplayed, Rietema demonstrates the kind of control that makes us chartreuse with envy. Quote: When life gives you fruit it will be a two-hundred pound crate of fermented oranges that were supposed to go to Fritz Johansson in Norway. You contact Fritz and he says he ordered a pair of jeans.' We LOVE it and that's no bullshit!

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade and sell it to people who don't really want lemonade but pity your small business venture. Unfortunately, the key ingredient in lemonade is sugar, and without sugar, you have pulped lemons. Instead, look for some sugar because anything is possible with sugar, especially diabetes. This could be placed on a pamphlet and handed to children who grasp at their heart when they use the stairs.

In reality, when life gives you fruit, it will be a two-hundred-pound crate of fermented oranges that were supposed to go to Fritz Johansson in Norway. You contact Fritz but he says he ordered a pair of jeans. You contact the company but they say they've never heard of Fritz, you, or the country of Norway and that they provide data systems analysis for tech companies. You aren't sure what that means, so you nod, even though you're on the phone, and then hang up.

By this time, the oranges have become a foul mush that is staining the driveway concrete and attracting a bunch of raccoons, and the city has given you a ticket. The city is Boulder. The raccoons are rabid. The situation is problematic.

You don't know how to move the crate nor do you want to touch the oranges. So, you post them on the free section of Craigslist under the heading of "Free Kombucha" because you're still not sure what kombucha is but think it's something to do with fruit. It's not, and though a couple of people come by, no one takes the crate. However, you do meet an older gentleman who knows Fritz. They went to school together. He commiserates with you over the oranges, then gives you a tract on Mormonism. It's a nauseating shade of blue and gives you a headache.

In the meantime, another crate of oranges shows up. You manage to catch the guy delivering it and decide he's an all right sort of guy—if you like large, sweaty individuals who are sexist but lack the intellectual capabilities to understand the concept of sexism. He has a crooked nametag that says Kenneth and a truck with Eastern Exotic Imports on the side. When you ask what eastern exotic imports are, he winks and says it's a secret. When you press him, however, it becomes clear they sell cheap furniture.

"Why the oranges?" You ask. He shrugs. It's on the paper, he says, and then shows you a yellow sheet of paper covered in grease with your name, address, and "ORANGES" scribbled in the corner.

You ask him to take the oranges back because you didn't order them. He gives you a look reserved especially for people too dumb to understand they've ordered two crates of rotten oranges. It's condescending, and you feel offended but are paralyzed because your father never taught you to confront your problems head on. You mope about that for a few hours and make a

smoothie with fruit you buy from Whole Foods. Then, you call a removal company, which—if you're honest with yourself—you should have done in the first place.

Other times, life sells you plastic lemons—the kind of fake fruit you see in nursing homes and in children's playsets. The only thing to do with a hollow plastic lemon is to throw it away. They are not recyclable. They are created to assure you what they are not, like an off-brand cereal resembling Lucky Charms.

Eventually, you will need to ask why you're receiving so much fruit, fake or otherwise, and decide what you're going to do with it. *This is the time to take the advantage.* Don't make things with fruit no one likes. Instead, become the one who gives lemons.

Go ahead. Drink most of the milk but leave a little so the next person has to throw away the carton, steal all of the lightbulbs in your friend's house, decide tipping is only for when they do an extraordinary job, don't pick up your dog's poop.

In essence, when you find yourself with too many lemons, the most important question is not: Can I make these lemons into something? It is: What can these lemons make me into? If you do it right, the answer is God—or a monster.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I enjoy reimagining clichés and what follows from them when you do—and 'the lemons into lemonade' adage could certainly stand some further thought. I like the journey of the piece. This is how life goes It's filled with bureaucracy, strange connections, people who don't know what they're doing, personal shortcomings and it's really bizarre. Often as it happens, we are the ones making the lemons. But in the end, it's more important to laugh about it than anything. What else can you do?

BIO:

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The Love Game Part One

by Eleanor Beerton

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Beerton's creative proposition might be called 'The Book of Amorous Lists'. The 'game' involves asking questions about love and judging the respondents' answers. On first read entertaining, the questions begin to deepen and we are confronted by issues that nudge against our comfort zone. We see in the deliberate repetitious delivery of question after question a fictional stylistic equivalent to Andy Warhol's later silk screen paintings. This is the first of two parts. Part two will be forthcoming in a later issue.

RULES

The game consists of a set of hundreds of questions related to romance.

Each player answers one different question in turn. For each answer, the other players each judge the answer on a scale of 1-100. Therefore the players must be skilled story tellers or perhaps even good liars.

Players can play as many rounds as they like, usually they agree at the beginning of the game. The scorecards can be used for up to 20 rounds in a game. But players could of course play more if they wish.

The winner is the one with the highest total score after all rounds are completed.

The more players the better it is, but you could have fun just playing with 2 people.

In some cases the question will not apply to the respondent. For example the respondent could be married and the question is about singles. In such cases the

respondent can talk about someone they have heard about. For purposes of the game “lovers” or “couples” refers to single OR married people.

Have fun. Enjoy the game!

THE GAME

Do you think it is OK to read your lover’s diary or blog without asking permission?

Do you worry your spouse or lover can hack into all of your personal information?

If you love someone should you let them do anything they want?

What is an original way to have an anniversary party?

Do you think in the near future women will earn more money than men? Would that be a good thing?

Should women and men be free to wear whatever they want, anytime?

Do you think some girls are just too good looking and make no end of trouble?

Do you think people will get fatter and fatter? When will it finally decrease? Do you think some people like fat lovers?

Should men wear a moustache or beard? Should women shave their whole body?

What is the best love song ever recorded?

Tell us about a couple who had a terrible relationship.

Tell us about a weird relationship that you know about?

Who do you know who is totally happy in their relationship?

Thirty years into the future what percentage of people will still be together for 30 years or more?

In the future more and more people will be working at home in the future. Will that make people drive their lovers crazy in the same home all the time?

Do you think they could make new cities for lovers of different kinds to live in? You would need to pass a test to get in.

What is the best place to bring a first date? Do you have any stories about first dates?

Do you really feel opposites attract? Or is that nonsense?

Do you think for some people the only interesting thing in life is to change partners often?

What is the most incredible love story you've ever heard?

Do some people you know make many sacrifices for their lover?

Is it easy to fool your lover?

What about the novelty of making love in space?

If lie detectors really work, should everyone buy one?

Some people say they are old-fashioned when it comes to romance. Do you believe them?

Do you think the statue of liberty should be naked?

Do you think most people are selfish in love?

Is it good to find a lover who is giving?

What is the relationship between cleverness and love?

What is a good way to leave your lover?

In future will people have sex machines and have love with “virtual” people?

What is an original gift to give your lover?

Why do so many people nag their lovers?

Do you think women control most romantic relationships? Or does it just seem that way?

Have you ever met a narcissistic man?

Have you ever met a nymphomaniac?

If the Marquis de Sade was here today, what would you say to him?

Why do people like S & M?

Why are some women frigid?

Is it bad to have a strong sex drive? Is it better just to be normal?

How often should couples have sex a week?

What is the best sex position?

How do you feel about birth control?

Do you feel it is OK for young people to dance and pick up someone they have hardly talked to?

Have you ever been in a really dark disco?

Do you feel all women should have some plastic surgery?

How do you know if someone is truly transsexual?

Some people say don't try to understand women, just love them. Is that the right approach?

Is EQ better than IQ? What about Creative Q (CQ)? What about Love Q (LQ)?

Do you think some people love their lover too much?

Do you think some people lose control in love?

Is love a good thing?

Do you think it is better to be old and peaceful than madly in love and youthful?

Do you think future travel will all be to meet your net lovers and friends?
All other travel would perhaps be unnecessary?

What is the future of marriage?

Will there come a time when no one wants kids?

Do you think it is a bad idea to move in with your lover?

What is your opinion about transsexual marriage? Or gay marriage?

Is it better to love than to be loved?

Which country is the most romantic?

How do you feel about brotherly love?

Is it OK to love your pet more than your lover?

What is a good lie that you told a romantic partner?

Do you think the whole idea of romance should be changed? Maybe make it more intellectual and less instinctual?

Do you really think anyone is truly open-minded in love?

Do you think in the near future people will use the sperm and egg banks to produce a very intelligent child? Maybe the child could develop 100% in an incubator?

Would you like to clone yourself?

Do you think some people are incapable of love?

What kind of man would women want as a gigolo?

What is the future of prostitution?

Should prostitution be legalized?

What do you think about these ultra-slim models?

What about a "Sex Olympics"?

Is it bad to date someone who has never been dumped?

Have you ever been stood up? Have you ever stood someone up?

Talk about a disappointment in love.

What is the most romantic novel ever written?

Do you think one day people will find a perfect match on the net?

Do you like to travel to exotic places and meet exotic lovers?

Should men and women wear long hair or short? Should we always dye gray hair?

Is it a good idea for a woman to spend a lot of time to put on make-up? Do you think there will one day be a machine that can do it?

Tell us a story about an amicable break up/divorce.

Do you know anyone who is paying alimony?

What would be a great place for a honeymoon?

Should a man give his love a fake diamond and fake gold jewellery?

Should you tell your lover/spouse about your previous lovers?

Do you think you can carry on a love relationship if you and your lover live in different cities?

Why do so many people hurt the one they love?

Do you think there is a fine line between love and hate?

Do you think that “All is fair in love and war”?

Do you feel there are many types of love?

How do you feel about pornography?

Do you feel many people enjoy arguing with their mate/lover?

Is it always better to be passionate in romance, or is it sometimes better to be serious and calm.

What is the best pick up line you ever heard?

What do you think about dancing? What kind of music is best?

Do you think sometimes in romance it is better to talk less rather than more?

Can you tell any stories about miscommunication between lovers?

Do you think love is like magic?

What do you think about the hippies and their idea of free love?

Should you always tell your lover what they want to hear?

Talk about a crush you had on someone in your youth.

Do you think old-fashioned love can make a come back?

Do you think having someone you can talk to is the most important thing in love?

What is the most romantic movie you have ever seen?

Talk about someone who had a broken heart.

Did you ever hear about a cold-hearted person?

Do you think searching for a “soul mate” is kind of like trying to win the lottery?

Do you feel some people find many soul mates?

Tell about a love triangle.

What is the craziest love story you ever heard?

What to do if your true love has another lover?

What lessons about love do people learn from experience?

What do you think about speed dating? (In speed dating you have many men and women for example, 60 of each in a room. Each person talks to one of the 60 for a minute or two, and at the end if they like each other they exchange phone numbers).

Do you think men and women always want different things from a relationship or do they basically want the same things?

Do you think some people like “bad” relationships because they are more interesting?

What is the future of dating agencies?

Did you ever set someone up with a friend of yours?

What do you think about nudists? What about nude beaches?

Do you think men care a lot about what a woman wears?

If your lover went away on a long trip could you handle it? What would you do?

Do you think familiarity breeds contempt? Should you keep lots of secrets from your lover?

Do believe in love at first sight?

Do you know anyone who is good at lying to his/her lover?

How would you describe a typical marriage?

In the future will there be marriage contracts? Or will there be no marriage at all?

Do you believe marriage is the death of romance?

If you had/have kids would it be easy to tell them about the birds and the bees?

Do you know of any couple that eloped?

Can love make people crazy?

What percent of adults are in love in your country? Or the world?

Do you think arranged marriages can sometimes be very good?

Tell a story of unrequited love.

What do you think about platonic love?

What will be the future for transsexuals?

What is your favourite love song?

What is your favourite love poem?

Did you ever write a love poem?

Do you believe in true love? Can true love last?

Do you think people are too picky these days about who they want to date?

Is it OK for you to have a number of lovers and OK for your lovers to love others?

Are humans by nature monogamous?

Do you know anyone who married rich?

If you were the most beautiful woman or most handsome man in the world, how would you live your life?

Do you think marriage is hard work?

How can you keep your relationship fresh?

Is it important for your lover to have a heart of gold?

What do you think about strippers?

How long does love last these days?

Do you think it is unoriginal to give someone chocolates and flowers?

Do you think traveling with your lover/spouse is a good test for the relationship?

What do you think about Marilyn Monroe? Do you think she was the sexiest woman ever in history?

What do you think about Elvis? Why did the girls love him so much?

Do you know anyone who was anorexic? Or bulimic?

Are really thin girls sick in many cases?

Would it be a good idea for a couple to stay married, but live in different apartments?

Describe a perfect date.

What do you think about chastity?

Is it good to be a virgin? Should you marry a virgin?

Should we respect and be nice to everyone as a kind of “brotherly love”?

Is it true that the best thing about love is that no one really knows what it is?

What place and period in history was the most romantic?

How is the love of ordinary people different from really clever people? Or is it basically the same?

Tell a tale about puberty.

Is it good to date a spontaneous person?

At what age should youths start dating?

In the future will ALL our lovers and friends come from the internet?

Should you kiss and tell?

Is it good to have kids? What is the most important thing to teach them?

Should a man always act as a gentleman, and a woman always act like a lady?

Talk about different love customs from around the world.

What are your feelings about birth control?

Would you want a designer baby?

Would you like to clone yourself?

Do you think many people are in a nightmare relationship, but they don't tell anyone about it?

What kind of sports car would be the most romantic?

Is it good to bring a date to a horror movie? Is a romantic movie better?

What is a bad place for a first date?

Do you care if your lover is much older or younger than you?

Did you ever meet a perfect romantic stranger?

Do you think most people can trust their lover?

Do you think a picnic in the forest is romantic?

What kind of winter activity is romantic?

What kind of bedroom is romantic?

What would be a surprise gift on Valentine's day?

What kind of music is not romantic?

Who was the most romantic painter in history?

Why do women like romance more than men?

What is the most romantic line you have ever heard?

Is it a good thing to have a really strong sex drive?

What is the difference between human love affairs and monkeys' love affairs?

What do you think about old-fashioned courtship?

Talk about your first kiss.

Should all women wear make up all of the time?

Do you know anyone who got cold feet about their wedding?

Did you ever by mistake call your lover/spouse by another girl's/boy's name?

If they had pills that greatly increased sex drive for both women and men would most people take them?

Do you feel men benefit more from marriage than women?

Will there be more gay people in the future? Will it be possible to change genes so that a gay could be straight and a straight guy gay?

Do you think it is a bad mistake to date a perfectionist?

Do you know any people who married people from different cultures?

What are some unusual places that lovers first met?

Do you think love is ridiculous sometimes?

How do you feel about dirty jokes? Can you tell one?

Should a woman wear a wedding ring even if she is not married, in order to keep away "bad men"?

Is it OK for a girl to be taller than her lover?

Are some people masochists in their love relationship(s)?

Should we be tough with our lovers so as not to spoil them?

If someone breaks your heart, what should you do?

Are there really many fish in the sea? Or is it quite complex in fact?

If you get drunk would you tell all your secrets?

Do you think some people enjoy breaking hearts?

Is it easier to be a man or a woman these days?

What percent of break ups/divorces end amicably?

If your marriage is on the rocks, what should you do?

Who benefits more from marriage, men or women?

If you were single, and had a chance to date a movie star, who would you date?

If you feel you don't understand your lover, what should you do?

Do you know anyone who is very selfish in love?

Do you think men care if a girl wears high-heeled shoes?

Do you believe in fate when it comes to love?

Should you date your colleagues?

If you are a teacher/professor teaching adults, is it OK to date the students?

Do you think it would be good if we all had a lie detector?

Do you feel all love is good?

If you date a divorced person with kids, is this a good thing?

Do you think some people are incapable of love?

Tell about a blind date.

What is the saddest love story you have ever heard?

Like in the case of Romeo and Juliet, love is often tragic, don't you think?

Casanova said the best aphrodisiac was chocolate. What do you think is the best aphrodisiac?

In the Greek myths the Gods are always having love affairs with mortals. What is the true significance of that?

Do you like happy endings, like in Hollywood? Or do you feel happy endings are unrealistic?

In the future people will try for perfect matches on dating agency's computers. Will this make them happy? Is there ever a perfect match?

How do you know if you are in love?

Tell about someone whose heart was truly broken.

Did you ever hear of someone committing suicide over a failed love affair?

If a man gives a girl a diamond, should she have it appraised?

Is it OK for a girl to be a tomboy?

Is it good for men to be macho?

Is it a good idea to date a shy person?

Should women these days try their best to be feminine?

How do you feel about effeminate men?

What kind of love relationship is best?

Do you think it is good to always fight with your lover?

Do you think it is better to be bored in a relationship rather than break up and try to find another?

How do you feel about dating crazy lovers?

Why do some people live alone with no lover?

Do you think that ultimately women are tougher than men?

Is it good for a man to date a tough woman?

What is the best pick up line you have ever heard?

What is the worst pick up line you have ever heard?

Should you try to be what your lover wants?

On a date should you try to impress your date, or just be yourself?

Do you think for some people falling in love and going crazy is exciting?

Do you like to control your partner or do you like your partner to control you?

What are some lessons you have learned about love?

Is it better to be open-minded in a relationship?

Do you think many people hide certain parts of their personality until marriage?

Do you think love conquers all?

What is the real reason for most divorces?

Do you think love relationships are very stressful for many people?

What is the best way to break up with your lover?

If your partner is always nagging you, what should you do?

Did you ever hear about any perverts?

Did you ever hear about or see a flasher?

Do you know any women who were groped on the subway or crowded train or bus?

Should a woman aggressively search for a man?

Should you wear your heart on your sleeve when talking to your lover?

Have you ever heard about someone marrying a miser?

What is a good gift to give your lover?

Did you ever hear of a passionate love story involving senior citizens?

What is the biggest difference between what men want in a relationship and what women want?

Are you looking to date an angel?

How can you make someone love you?

Tell about an unrequited love story.

Do you believe in platonic love?

Are some people you know reckless in love?

What kind of relationships did cave men have back in the ice age?

Do you think dancing is for fools? Or do you think of it as artistic expression?

Did you ever hear about a couple that never lied to each other?

Did you ever have a date in which you said the wrong thing and blew the date?

Do you think exotic places and people are good for love?

If one day they could use technology to read people's minds, what would that do to change relationships?

If you break up with someone, is it usually a feeling of euphoria, or in fact something quite different.

Do you feel many people are totally confused about love?

Do you think sometimes people love another for all the wrong reasons?

Do you think some people love their pets more than their lover?

Everyone has a number of stories to tell. Do you think that if you date many people you can hear more stories and learn more about life?

Why are there so many perverts in the world today?

Do monks and nuns have a low sex drive?

How do you know when you are in love?

Do you think most people who claim to have found their soul mate end up breaking up after a short tryst?

Do you think some people are like vampires? They hear your life story, make love to you and then disappear.

Do you think young people have a lot of peer pressure to date someone, even though they are very young?

If you treat your lover too good will they become bored with you?

Why do they always talk about the “heart” instead of “the brain”?

Do you think many people are heartless?

What is a good way to propose marriage?

Do you think people are often insensitive to their lover?

Is marriage like work?

What do you think about lingerie?

Where is a good place for a honeymoon?

Where is a bad place for a honeymoon?

Do you think some overweight people are very attractive?

How do you feel about public nudity? Will people one day give up on clothes entirely?

Some people aren't sure if they are gay or not. Why is that?

What kind of men/women do you love?

Do you think it is better to marry someone calm and stable or is it better to marry someone wild and crazy?

When proposing marriage should one promise the world?

Should all women always wear make up, perfume and other cosmetics?

What do you think about spouse swapping clubs?

Do you think in the future most women and men will have many partners?

Talk about the future of love.

How do you feel about designer babies?

What about test tube babies?

If you wanted a kid would you try to go to the sperm bank/egg bank to get a really clever person's sperm or eggs?

Do you feel we can learn about romance from Hollywood or from books?

People say that they like happy endings, but in life almost every break up or divorce ends badly? What do you think about that?

Do you think if someone learns a lot of songs on the guitar, many potential lovers will like them a lot?

How do you feel about French kissing?

Is it a curse to have a very high sex drive?

Do you know anyone who is in a bad relationship?

Do you know of anyone who is in a really nice relationship?

Do you think jewellery looks good on a woman?

Is body piercing attractive?

What about tattoos, are they a turn on?

What is a big turn on for you?

What is a big turn off for you?

Talk about someone who has good taste in lovers.

Talk about someone who always chooses bad lovers.

If you are not married, what kind of soul mate do you want, exactly?

Do you think men and women understand each other? Or not?

Do many people pretend to be in love?

If they cured AIDS, what would happen?

Do you think many people look for love in the wrong places and using the wrong way to search?

Is it a blessing to be passionate?

Why are some women frigid?

Why do women reach their sexual peak at 30, but only 18 for men?

Why do women usually say they want a lover who is older than them?

Do you really think candlelight dinners are really romantic? What could be better?

Is it a good idea to date someone much poorer than you?

Do you think net dating is safe?

What kind of home would be romantic?

Do you think people these days disdain a stable life?

Talk about mind games.

Do you use your cell phone to keep track of your lover?

Have you ever been stood up?

Have you ever stood someone up?

What is the optimum number of lovers a person should have in a lifetime?

How many times a week should you make love?

How do you feel about sex toys?

What about public displays of affection?

Do you think you want your lover to lie to you?

Is love like a drug for you, or is love just duty for you?

Do you think your love relationships are the most important thing in your life?

Could you live without love?

Is it good to call your lover “honey” or “baby” in case you might call them by the wrong name (i.e. call them your ex lover’s name)?

What are some unusual places to find romance?

Do you think most people’s sex drive is too high or too low or too unpredictable?

Do you think Western people are more serious about love than people in developing countries?

What kind of romance have your family members and relatives had?

Do you think some people are born to be romantic?

What is something some people learn about the opposite sex if they are wise and observant?

What is the most important characteristic in a lover?

What are your erogenous zones (i.e. what parts of your body are sexually sensitive)?

Tell about a bachelor's party or a bachelorette party?

In the future will girls wear different colors of make up, eg. blue or orange?

Should sex be censored in films?

Do you think these days that almost no young person is old-fashioned?

Do you think men and women should have long hair? What kind of hairstyle is best?

How do you feel about blondes? Do you think blondes have more fun? Do gentlemen prefer blondes?

Do you think some people search their whole lives and never find true love?

Should love always be fun?

Why do people spend all their money on lawyers in bitter divorce suits? Why can't they just make an agreement outside of court?

Why do people spend so much money on child custody battles?

Do you think if you are married a long time, your spouse will change a lot, maybe in ways you don't like?

Is it fun to date someone who is totally wrong for you?

Would it be romantic to go to one of these romantic “ice hotels”.

Do you believe the old adage, “Nice guys finish last”? Or do gentlemen usually find success in love?

Is love, in fact, blind? Is that a good thing?

What if one person is very ambitious and their lover is not?

Is it good to date someone from another culture?

Talk about a femme fatale (a dangerous woman)?

Do you think sometimes parents know best who their child should marry?

If you don’t like bars and you don’t trust the internet, where is a good place to try to meet a new lover?

Talk about a disastrous date.

Talk about a surprising date, that was much worse than you thought it would be.

Do you think people usually know if their partner is having an affair with someone else?

Is it good to fight with your lover or should you just give them the silent treatment?

Talk about someone who had skeletons in the closet.

Should you give more than you get in a romance?

How do you feel about settling down?

If you have kids, do you fight with your partner about their education? What kind of education should a child receive?

Should a woman sacrifice her career for her kids? Or should she just put them in daycare?

If you feel you love your partner, but you feel bored...what should you do?

If you do not love your lover, is that OK?

What is the biggest challenge for romantic people today?

If you love someone who loves another lover more than you, is it OK to play second fiddle?

Do you think too many people are cliquy and don't have open minds about romance?

Do you think most men would like to marry a very ambitious woman?

Do you agree with Freud that all dreams are sexual? Do you think he was a pervert?

What is a good way to seduce someone?

Do you think in 50 years all romance will begin on the net? Or what?

Do you think there will be a reaction against modern romance with some people or does everyone like these new ways?

Talk about someone who was a psycho in love.

Do you know someone who dated someone with mental problems?

Do you sometimes really feel you love someone, but you don't know why?

Should you tell your friends all about your love affairs?

What is the secret to a lasting romance?

Do you think many older people are tired of romance? Or what?

Sometimes women who live together all have their periods at the same time as the "dominant" alpha female. Why do you think that is?

How do you feel about the game of strip poker?

Did you play spin the bottle in your youth?

Talk about a romance you know of that was very complicated.

What do you think about old men who go to poor countries to find a young wife?

What will happen in countries like China and India where there are not enough young women?

Do you think animals “fall in love”?

Do you feel love can be found anywhere, so you need always to be ready?

If your parents or friends don't like your lover, what should you do?

When at a wedding, do you think it is easy to predict which marriages will last?

Can you tell a story about a wedding you went to?

Reverend Moon and his so-called “Moonies” involve the reverend matching people based on their photos to get married. Apparently the divorce rate for these people, who often don't speak the same language, is lower than the national averages of many countries. What do you think about that?

Do you think it is possible that some future tyrant would forbid love?

What is more important: a good job or a good lover?

How do you feel about really dark discos?

Do you think most people meet their future spouse at work? Or in a bar? Or where?

In the future will men all wear make up, just like the ancient nobles?

Why is the drive to marry someone good looking so strong?

Do you think most people get what they deserve in romance? Or not at all?

Which country's women are the most tough? Which city in particular?

If you were a widow or widower, would you get married again?

When making love do you dream about things other than your lover?

Why is it more difficult for a woman to come whilst having sex than a man?

Do you think masturbation is better than nothing?

Why do some men have a foot fetish?

Tell us something kinky.

Why do some people have an underwear fetish?

Why is the Mona Lisa so famous? Do you think men think she was sexy?

Should a woman carry mace?

Do you think there should be longer terms in jail for rapists?

Do you think some gay people really enjoy jail?

Will future people change their sex often?

Will they invent a pill that increases female sex drive? What then?

Do you think, in fact, that love grows with some people over time?

Should you tell your lover all about your past love affairs?

If you find one soul mate, will you be inspired to find many others even while you are still dating the first one?

Do some people have too much love?

Is love like a magic trick?

Some people want to date other people but they don't want their lovers to date anyone else. What do you think about that?

What about an open marriage?

Do you think some people go crazy because they can't find a lover?

Do you prefer slow dancing when you can hold each other, or do you prefer disco dancing?

What is a good game to play with your lover?

Do you think taking your true love on a sailboat is romantic?

Some people just like to dance in the disco and pick up someone for a one night stand? What do you think about that?

If someone is looking for a one night stand, what kind of person would be best?

What game mirrors romance?

Is it fun to be foolish in love?

When it comes to romance, are women smarter than men?

Why do so many men base their love on a good-looking girl, when in fact any woman can look good with make up?

Francis Bacon said, "There is no great beauty that does not have some strangeness in the proportion". Do you agree?

Do you think if one person becomes very rich, this unbalances the relationship?

Do you feel you know anything at all about love?

Is it best to marry someone with potential to be rich, when they are still poor? (Rather than marry someone who is already rich).

What would you say about forbidden fruits?

Tell us about temptation in love.

Do you think traditional love and courtship was superior to today's customs?

What will romance be like in 500 years?

Do you think people enjoy making mistakes in a love relationship?

What is the worst thing about modern love?

Do you know anyone who never tells the truth to his/her lover?

Do you think most of your friends have never truly been in love?

Do you think marriage ruins a lot of good relationships? Or is the true problem moving in together?

Do you think self-confident people are attractive?

How can you handle a lover who is very moody?

Who tells more lies in romance: men or women?

How can you appear mysterious and interesting to your partner?

Do you feel every anecdote you tell your lover can be improved with a little lie?

If you feel you are wrapped around the finger of your lover, what should you do?

Should you be earnest in romance or should you just play it cool?

Do you think most people who cheat on their spouse/girlfriend feel guilty afterwards?

Some people who drink excessively don't remember things so clearly. Is that good?

Did you ever get a bad first impression of someone who later became your lover?

What is the best way to make a good romantic impression?

Can you give your lover a massage?

Do you know anyone who doesn't love themselves?

What is a good excuse for being late for a date?

How to make your lover love you more?

Do some people fall in love too easily?

Do you think some people are afraid to fall in love? Once bitten twice shy?

How can someone overcome shyness?

Do people actually learn from their love affairs? Or is it just the opposite?

Would you describe some people as greedy for love?

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Whatever else people see in 'The Love Game' for me it's just an 'ice-breaker' when a group of strangers find themselves together staring at the clock and twiddling their thumbs. Every time you play it you get different answers. Of course, you can read all sorts of other things into the questions. And please do.

BIO:

Eleanor Beerton studied archeology and her extensive travels have led to many life-adventures. For some years now she had been a writer of nonfiction and a game designer.

The Jumble Maker... by Paul Beckman

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Participative nonfiction! Innovative, off the rails, witty and fun—just the kind of literary mischief we’re looking for! You can contact him to follow through by using his published email. But don’t let the hyped-up high jinks fool you; there’s a sophisticated fillip to this writing. Here’s an author who is fully in charge of his game. Ready, set, GO!

The Jumble Maker’s on Vacation. His Intern has Come Up With a Match the Collective Nouns Contest

By Paul Beckman

Write a line like the samples below connecting the

Group Name (A) to the Group Noun (B)

e.g. A Murder of Crows

a—A Noise of Cicadas.

b—A Shitload of Troubles.

(The yellow can be eliminated if you don’t want a contest)

The first person to email in all of the correct answers gets a copy of my latest collection of flash and micro-fiction *Kiss Kiss* (Truth Serum Press). The second person to send in the correct answers gets a copy of my flash and micro-book, *Peek* (Big Table Publishing)

The runner up gets a book from my book case.

E-mail to me paul@paulbeckman.com with

Contest in the Subject line.

Remember—only one entry per person.

(A) Spoke, Flash, Waft, Plop, Amen, Stream, Level, Picnic, Stirrup, Wafer, Push, Crown, Obsession, Lox, Cheese, Amalgam, Grease, Tone

(B) Urologists, Princes, Audiologists, Ants, Photographers, Priests, Seagulls, Gynecologists, Carpenters, Rabbis, Cell Phones, Midwives, Bikers, Dentists, Perfume, Mechanics, Clergy, Writers

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

I have, for a very long time been fascinated by collective nouns—well before I knew there was a name for them. Probably, the most common is a 'Murder of Crows' but there are so many more and most seem to have no connection between the noun and the description which makes them all the more interesting and worth investigating.

In 2017 I was in Breckenridge, Colorado with a group of authors taking a writing course from Nancy Stohlman and Kathy Fish. At the time there was another senseless school shooting and Kathy wrote a short, brilliant piece that incorporated the theme of our workshop, flash fiction, with the current event. I was beyond impressed with this touching piece written in largely collective nouns, and pleased to see it published shortly thereafter as 'Collective Nouns for Humans in the Wild' in the Jellyfish Review, a fine literary magazine <https://bit.ly/2ztimRm>

Unable to shake Kathy's story from my mind I wrote my own—not close to being lofty as Kathy's but nonetheless it came out in my style and with a new collection of flash out I decided to make a contest out of it and FLEAS ON THE DOG was kind enough to go along with the concept and publish it in a style they called 'participative nonfiction'. The editors were flexible and accepted this piece in a different format and sans contest. Meanwhile, prior to hearing back from the magazine I changed the format and added the contest and when my story was accepted, I wrote them and shared my changes and asked if they would be interested in the new concept and thankfully, they were great to work with and went along with it.

My literary influences are wide ranging including Leonard Michaels, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Frederick Barthelme, Phillip Roth, John Cheever, Alice Mattison, Raymond Carver, Jim Thompson, Dashiell Hammet, Joe Nesbo, Lee Child, Robert Scotellaro, Len Kunta, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the aforementioned Nancy Stohlman and Kathy Fish and dozens more. I consider myself a literary sponge.

BIO: Paul Beckman is an award winning author with a new flash collection *Kiss Kiss* (Truth Serum Press). He had a story selected for the 2018 Norton Micro Fiction Anthology and another nominated for Best Small Fictions 2019 BSF. He lives in CT and runs the FBomb NY flash fiction reading series in KGB's Red Room. Some of his publications are Spelk, Necessary Fiction, Litro, Pank, Playboy, Thrice Fiction, The Lost Balloon and The Jellyfish Review.

Killer

by Patricia Leonard

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Graphic Content! Reader Discretion Advised. *There are lots of reasons we could've turned down this submission. The character of the narrator fails to convince, the violence described is arguably gratuitous and in our minds the ending could've been stronger. So why did we choose to publish it? For the same reasons, we suspect, the author wrote it. To confront us, from her subjective feminist perspective, with our denial, our practiced alienation, of the institutional horrors at work in a society that sustains an entirely optional carnivorous suckle culture. How many of us would be willing to take a tour through an abattoir? If not, why? Literary shortcomings aside, Leonard's descriptions are as raw as a bleeding club steak and if this were visual art not grunge nonfiction we'd be looking at Ed Keinholtz or Mark Prent. We'd all be better off ordering the mixed green salad. Seriously.*

To the naked eye, I look like an average female who is family orientated but what most people fail to realize is that there is a dark shadow that lurks beneath my smile.

My days consist of killing.

I can slit a chicken or duck's throat in a matter of seconds having their warm blood flood from their living body down my hands and clothes. It splashes on my face and exposed neck. I used to get it in my hair but it became a hassle to wash out every blood clot. I now tie it with a plain white bandana and wear it as a bloody badge of honor. After their blood has drained and they are no longer alive, I toss them into the tank that is filled with boiling water. I de-feather

them in minutes by throwing them into the cylinder lined with rubber spikes. Less than thirty-seconds with an abusive spin cycle and the animal is ready to move on. Some feathers are a bit more stubborn which results in me ripping it from its flesh in one swift motion.

I then take a large blow torch (like the ones you see in movies) that is hooked up to a gas tank larger than myself to their skin as they hang in a row of six by their feet. I watch the grease bubble to the surface then catch fire before I send them off to the last room.

Once on the other side, I immediately start gutting their steamy bodies. Both birds, chicken or duck, get the same treatment. The front of their necks are sliced open to remove their trachea. Then their bottom is sliced open in-between their legs. The insides are pulled out. The animal is rinsed and the heart, kidneys, liver and lungs are put into the cavity for the customer.

When it comes to the larger animals, I can do it all. I can wrangle down a goat or lamb, hang it by its legs and cut through the jugular while I watch it breathe its last few breaths of life. As it screams, I wash the blood down the drain or sometimes if the customer wants the blood, I have to hold the head while aiming the blood into a bucket. Afterwards, I skillfully and artfully skin its entirety with swift movements of my sharp blade. I start at the back of one leg a little above the ankle. I cut around the leg but not in too deep. There is a sweet spot on the inside of the leg that will allow my blade to cut through the skin like scissors to wrapping paper. I cut all the way through to the anus and penis. I repeat the process on the other side. I make a light slit down the stomach all the way down to the neck. I typically start on the left side because I am right-handed. With my left hand I pull away while my right hand guides the knife along the skin careful not to puncture any fat or meat.

When I am all done removing the skin, it is time to remove the head by snapping the neck and cutting through the muscles. It is then carefully slit by the belly without bursting a hole on

any of the inside organs to remove the stomach along with the intestines. The organs that are left after are the liver, kidneys, lungs and heart. After carefully removing the bile duct without rupturing it, the organs can be safely detached. If the gallbladder burst onto the meat, it will be spoiled and inedible. The heart and lungs are carefully removed with a quick slit while still steaming hot, being as gentle as one can be.

With the help of a few men, a 1200 pound bull can be manipulated into the killing room where it is restrained. There is a meticulous process in how to tie the animal down without any one getting hurt. The head is tied with a rope before the animal is released from the trailer. Depending if the bull has a nose ring or horns, this process can be easy or difficult. There is an iron loop that is cemented into the floor called an eye inside the killing room, right next to the door. That is where the other end of rope that is already attached to the bull feeds through to lure his head all the way to the floor. Once the head is on the floor, the rope wraps around the back legs and front legs to bring all of them together in one place, then the animal is tipped over onto its side. When all four hooves are almost ready to be knotted, the tail is tucked in-between the back legs and pulled to the stomach and around. Once the animal is tied up completely, it can be killed in less than a few minutes depending how much of a fighter he is.

I have been an accomplice to at least 70 bull deaths in my six year stretch. I have seen it all. From the easiest to put down, to having one escape. Another breaking the door with its horn and having two run out the trailer at the same time, leaving 10 men handling two bulls with safety concerns for the general public and everyone scared for their life.

Once the animal is ready to be killed, there is always one person holding the head while another one will slice through the massive neck. Typically for bulls, an extra sharp machete is used to kill the animal as quickly as possible. Sometimes this can be tough as the skin is much

thicker than that of any other animal. Once the process is done, everyone scatters away from the powerful beast. The animal is left to bleed out while everyone stands by watching so they don't get kicked from limbs that are in rigor mortis. Even after death these animals kick with force. I was kicked one year in my ankle, put me off my feet for the rest of the day. However, I can then skin and butcher the entire animal in forty-five minutes without too many reflex spasms, although, I do need help with many lifting situations. As skillful as I am in my field, I am still a female. And a proud one at that.

The sight of blood or the thought of killing something is enough to make most women run the other way. I, on the other hand, am eager to go to work. I absolutely love killing animals. It gives me a feeling of accomplishment like no other. I wish there were words to describe exactly how I feel when I am in these three killing rooms. How it feels to watch life disappear in your hands. To feel the warm wet blood on your body, or even what it is like to blow torch an animal with fire that was alive less than three minutes ago.

This lifestyle I live is not only barbaric, but a lost art. Most people are used to going to the grocery store and picking up their meat without even knowing how or when this animal was killed. Killing these animals brings me closer to the food I eat and back to a simpler time when people had to hunt for their food. If the life we are so accustomed to living somehow ended up being blown to shit, I would have impeccable survival skills. The fact that I enjoy killing, not only for a source of food, but for sheer fun, makes me feel powerful and exhilarated. As crazy as it sounds, killing is not easy. It takes a lot of guts to kill another living being. It's sorta like fishing, only a lot more bloodier and a hell of a lot more fun.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This story is a creative nonfiction piece inspired by my days as a butcher. I spent several years working in a slaughter house where I killed numerous animals for human consumption. I wrote the story to shine some light on the nit and grit of the process of what goes on behind the doors of your favorite chicken dinner. The intention of empowering women, proving that we are not weak beings but also showing that we are skillful in what is seen as man's work. It is typically seen as taboo for women to be the ones who are killing let alone to wear it as a badge of honor and tell stories of it.

BIO:

Patricia Leonard is a 31 year old writer from New York. She has her B.A. in English linguistics and a minor in creative writing. Her work has been featured in Three Rooms Press' yearly anthology, Maintenant 10, Maintenant 11 and Maintenant 12. Also in the Voices project, Broke Bohemian and Hamilton Stone. She is featured in Culture Cult and Bards Against Hunger anthologies for 2017. She is a poetry and nonfiction writer who always leaves her readers wanting more. Her style is raw and captivating; permanently staining you with vivid memories you'll never forget.

Africa vs. North America

By Tendai Mwanaka

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Struggle. Anything we can do to advance the course of social justice is a moral imperative here at Fleas. We received this impassioned email and reproduce it in full.

Upcoming Publication Announced by Tendai Mwanaka

Call for submissions!

Nationalism: (Mis)Understanding Donald Trump's Capitalism, Racism, Global Politics, International Trade and Media Wars

Africa vs. North America, Volume 2

Donald Trump is our example/query/problem or solution. He didn't really start this though. Apartheid South Africa leaders were nationalistic and racists. Robert Mugabe was a nationalist and racist and tampered heavily with Zimbabwe's media freedom. He also destroyed the economy through an illegal and forceful land reform program, telling the whites they don't belong in Africa. The land question and its ownership are divisive hot topics in South Africa now. African countries have always complained of unfair international trade practices with western countries like the USA and Canada etc. Trump doesn't want African immigrants into the USA, calling Africa a 'shithole' continent. He deported and is still deporting DACA immigrants and many and many other illegal immigrants. He calls the media 'fake news' and

threatens media workers at the drop of a hat. He has fought with Americans on several levels; he has fought with American allies on issues having to do with security and trade. He has grown the American economy too? He is the most divisive American president or western leader of our time and nationalistic agendas are at the heart of his presidency. Africa and the Americas since the colonial period have been greatly changed and shaped by settlement politics as both natives and immigrants fought for nationality and land rights and through the centuries there has been a continuous refinement of what it means to belong (as a citizen and a foreigner).

We invite scholars, writers, poets etc. to respond to issues having to do with capitalism, global politics, international trade and media freedom. Send in your well-written scholarly work, nonfiction, poetry, mixed genres.

For prose/mixed genres and plays, 1 piece per writer of not more than 10000 words. For poetry, not more than 3 poems per poet, preferably short poems. Include a bio note of not more than 100 words highlighting your previous publications. Send entries as a Word doc. to mwanaka13@gmail.com before March 31, 2019.

This book will be published by Mwanaka Media and Publishing and distributed by African Books Collective UK. This is volume 6 in a continuation of our cross continental anthologies and the second in its own series. The first featured several leading scholars, writers and poets such as Barbara Foley, Barbara Howard, Biko Agozino, A. D. Winans, Tim Hall, C. Leigh McInnis, Nat Turner, Alan Kolski Horwitz, Changming Yuan, Tiel Aisha Ansari, Diane Raptosh, Wanjohi wa Makokha, Paris Smith, Sheree Renee Thomas, Kenneth Weene et al. It is titled 'Africanization and Americanization Anthology, Volume 1. Searching for Interracial, Interstitial, Intersectional and Interstates meeting spaces, it is published here: <https://www.amazon.com/Africanization-American.../.../079748616X>

Due to budget constraints we can only offer contributors copies of the book. We are neither able to pay royalties nor to offer free copies.

No simultaneous submissions. Authors retain copyrights to their work and are free to republish in future.

BIO:

Tendai Rinos Mwanaka is a publisher, editor, translator, mentor, writer, visual artist and musical artist with close to 30 books published, more here: <http://africanbookcollective.com/authors-editors/tendai-rinos-mwanaka>. He writes in English and Shona. His work has appeared in over 400 journals and anthologies in over 30 countries. Work has been translated into Spanish, Serbian, Macedonian, Albanian, Hungarian, Turkish, French and German.

THE END